

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Singapore – London, Intersubjective Discoveries: An Intercultural Experience Between Two Art Therapy Training Programmes Using An Art-Based Approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the reflection on artwork created by four educators, of two postgraduate art psychotherapy training programmes from two distinct cultural and geographic parts of the world, the UK and Singapore, during an overseas student trip. This trip was part of a partnership activity between institutions to develop an intercultural experience between staff and students of both places. A research frame was conceived to support the aims of the encounter to raise awareness of intercultural issues and themes to inform the teaching and learning -and- the theory and practice of art therapy in the contexts of Singapore and London. The purposeful image reflection led to dialogue relating to training practices and pedagogy, intercultural awareness and insight, and ways to enhance a sustaining collaborative relationship between the two programmes. The student trip was rich and holds great possibility for further investigation into culture and, indeed, into finding spaces and making places. Through images we will present some reflections and insights, including the directions for this exploratory research project.

Keywords

Art therapy, training, intersubjectivity, intercultural, Singapore, London

Introduction

Contemporary art psychotherapy practice requires the therapist to consider their culture and how this may impact the therapeutic encounter. Best practices, ethics and a self-reflective stance, as related to providing effective, meaningful and informed therapy, are first established within one's training. This allows the training therapist to develop their sensitivity to others, gain an understanding of difference and how best to engage with their clients in culturally responsive ways. A purposeful student cultural exchange further enhances this and allows focused dialogue, and in this case, an interaction with visual components at the forefront, heightening the experience overall. This project between the postgraduate art therapy programmes arose from the partnership between LASALLE College of Arts in Singapore and Goldsmiths, University of London in the UK. The partnership began in 2012 for the validation of degree programmes at LASALLE, and to support the development of academic activities between the two institutions.

Our aim for this endeavour is to raise awareness of intercultural experiences, issues and themes to inform the teaching and learning - and - theory and practice of art therapy in the contexts of Singapore and London. The focus of this presentation is the first stage of the research based on a week-long visit of 15 students and 2 staff from the MA Art Therapy at LASALLE to the MA Art Psychotherapy, Goldsmiths, London; 22- 29 June 2015.

The week was structured around a series of meetings with staff and students, off-site visits to museums and galleries (Wellcome Collection, Museum of the Mind, Foundling Museum, Freud Museum, where artwork of Goldsmiths staff was on exhibition), and to a range of settings where art therapists work. Goldsmiths staff and students were involved in accompanying the group in various combinations and immersing themselves in the experiences together. Two facilitated art-based workshops were provided in the MA Art Psychotherapy studios. These were designed to establish connections, share and explore our experiences of art therapy training and practice, and to review the experience of the week through art-making; this process served to anchor the various shared experiences and exchanges.

The first workshop was an introduction between all participants (staff/students), making art responses and discussing impressions and aims for the visit. The concluding workshop reviewed our experiences through further development of art responses and discussion. At the conclusion participants were invited to contribute images and words from these sessions. Art is at the core of art therapy practice. As such, we all need to engage in making art (Moon, 2003). The staff involved in the workshops are now in a process of reflecting on their experiences and art-making with the aim to distil the issues and discussion towards a thematic analysis.

In this process we have found it useful to consider the definition of relevant terminologies. These include; culture, intercultural and cross-cultural. *Cambridge English Dictionary* states that culture is, 'the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time.' This might also be thought of as a constructed and socialized process. Also, it is generally accepted that intercultural means to focus on "sharing of meanings" between cultures, whereas cross-cultural means to focus on comparisons between cultures. These differences are nuanced and somewhat fluid. With this in mind we have aligned ourselves with an intersubjective approach to this inquiry. Focusing on how we understand ourselves and others in an interactive dynamic process of becoming and using art-making to consider our experiences with curiosity and respect.

For the purposes and limitations of this presentation we have chosen to focus on our individual experiences as educators during the visit and to reflect on the art pieces we made within the workshops. Taking this 'letter box' approach we hope to open up views towards some beginning intersubjective discoveries. The question that drives this section is: how do art therapy educators respond to a purposeful cultural exchange? We are each going to share and reflect on our personal viewpoints and then draw together some of the themes and directions for further development.

Art Reflection: Programme Leader (LASALLE, Singapore)

The 1st day of our coming together, within the art therapy room, I embraced the invitation to explore the art spaces, the art materials and then of finding a workplace that would be conducive to creating art. Typically, I assume a rather calculated and reserved stance to engaging in art making with students given my role and awareness of the perceived power differential, and to remain consciously aware of the complex cultural dynamics of a leader within a Singapore, if not Asian, context.

Within this foreign yet familiar space, my first impressions were sensorial, more specifically, the smells of the art materials (paints, pastels and so on) and the studio, the visuals such as the art materials themselves and the evidence, traces and residue of an active creative engagement, and then the auditory, most striking was the piercing intrusion of a siren from the neighbourhood, something that is rarely heard in a well contained, organized and systematic Singapore. This stimulated a reflection on what is heard in Singapore as I often comment on the fact that it is difficult to find a quiet place given the fast pace and driven society. What came to mind are the sounds of progress, construction and rapid development. I then wondered how our hosts, in a land of long established practice steeped with history, would receive us as we establish a relatively new, emerging and evolving concept of art therapy and mental health profession in Asia. Would they be highly critical or would they be open, welcoming and embracing of their peers? I return to the moment.

Although enticed by the range of colourful materials available, I gravitated to the neutral tones of masking tape, butcher paper, pencil shavings and a small cardboard box. I happened upon some dice and collected these with my materials making associations to chance, intent and life.

I poured white glue over each dice and then purposefully rolled each through the pencil shavings (Fig 1a). Associations to the complexity of life, chance, impressions and of collecting 'things' along the way were the intention. Putting these aside to dry, I picked up the rectangular-shaped cardboard box

and began to reinforce the torn edges with masking tape. The label on the box indicated that this was sent to the Goldsmiths Art Psychotherapy department and that it had contained art materials, most likely shipped in from afar, possibly even from Asia; more associations. Once dried, the shavings encrusted dice were gently placed in the cardboard box and left aside for part 2 of the workshop, scheduled four days later (Fig 1b).



Fig 1a: *Attractions*, variable dimensions, plastic dice, pencil shavings, white glue



Fig 1b: *Containment* (with *Attractions*), 18"x6"x6", cardboard box

Part 2 involved a period of quiet and reflective consideration of the assembled objects created earlier. This led to the temporary removal of the dice while the box was cut in half, re-assembled, cut, reassembled, cut and reassembled again resulting in a multi-layered box within a box within a box. The dice were placed back inside completing the artwork (Fig 2).

As someone who has lived in three distinct countries, there have been many moves into, out of, and around. Again, associations to boxes, movement, change and containment surface and are quite suggestive of the experience of escorting 15 postgraduate students from one side of the world. I became consciously aware of place, space, difference and similarity, as well as the richness of co-experience and exchange with the importance of maintaining a part of the self while sharing another part with others including strangers and students. I found the student interest in my artwork intriguing as well as their line of inquiry.



Fig 2: *Exchange*, 6"x6"x12", cardboard box, masking tape, dice, pencil shavings, white glue

The impact of such an experience impresses us with new insights, understanding and perspective. We cannot help but impart others with parts of ourself, and then parts of themselves on us. This trip was not by chance, but strategically designed to promote an intercultural experience and exchange.

Art Reflection: Lecturer, Clinical Placement Coordinator (LASALLE, Singapore)

The most emotive highlight for me was the trip to The Foundling Museum and learning the history of The Foundling Hospital through a past exhibition themed “Threads of Feeling”. Back at the St James Annex at Goldsmiths with staff and students from both colleges for a review session on our final day, I began working on an art response. I found a large carton of scraps of yarn, and bits and bobs of pieces that did not seem to belong anywhere else, located by a window. The spot highly resonated with me, and I quickly grounded myself in my chosen spot. It was my first time in the space, as I had missed the introductory one on the first day due to my arrival schedule into London. This window spot on ground level gave me a glimpse of the outside - a real treat, considering our own art therapy studio space in Singapore is enclosed and located on the fourth level without a view.

Slowly and repetitively wrapping a found shell with pipe cleaners and thread eventually took the shape of a ball. The moments felt contemplative and I was absorbed in my own thoughts amidst the buzzing energy around me. The hand-held size kept it compact and contained, but pierced with a dessert fork, another found object from across the room, it became hardly bite-size. I recall Jill’s comment about the ball being a mouthful. Indeed, it was and very aptly embodying the experiences that week on the trip! From the start, I knew I wanted anything I created to travel back with me, and perhaps too consciously kept it to a manageable size. The fork, however, completely changed the perspective on size. A few were curious where I found the fork and if I had brought it with me. It was amusing to me, as though I had discovered a treasure from the unknown and less journeyed parts of the studio. I must say that that last minute find, the “forgotten fork”, heightened

my reflections tremendously and added on the layers of my reflections (Fig 3). That fork in those last moments definitely gave a brand new spin to my reflections, a true treasure!



Fig 3: *Untitled*, 6" x 2.5" x 2.5", found objects

A few meters away, I noticed Jill had a found object too – a bird nest. I was reminded of a weaver bird's nest I kept in my own work space back in Singapore (Fig 4). The nests of this particular avian species, the baya weaver or locally known as *tempua*, is native to tropical Asia. Their woven nests are elaborately constructed by males, while the approving females later join in to complete them, focusing on the interiors - the nesting chamber, in preparation for breeding. In this respect, the gender roles of this bird species uncannily drew parallels to human gender roles still existing in Asian-Singapore society

at least. This led me to further reflect on the intersection between gender roles and therapeutic or supervisory relationships.



Fig 4: *Tempua nest*, digital photograph

My ball of yarn, as my own “threads of feelings”, and the woven quality of nests led me to further reflect on first homes for hatchlings as a metaphor to how art therapy training programmes serve as delicate holding environments

leading to art therapy qualifications enabling professional practice. You may see this as a birth; a beginning, or a rebirth depending on your cultural orientation. This andragogical space for adult learners is imbued with sensitivities needing a constant dialogue for interculturality in our work as therapists, supervisors and academics. This exchange and partnership between two institutions, between London-Singapore, became that lived experience grounding both trainees and staff to begin a brand new dialogue.

Art Reflection: Programme Convenor (Goldsmiths, UK)

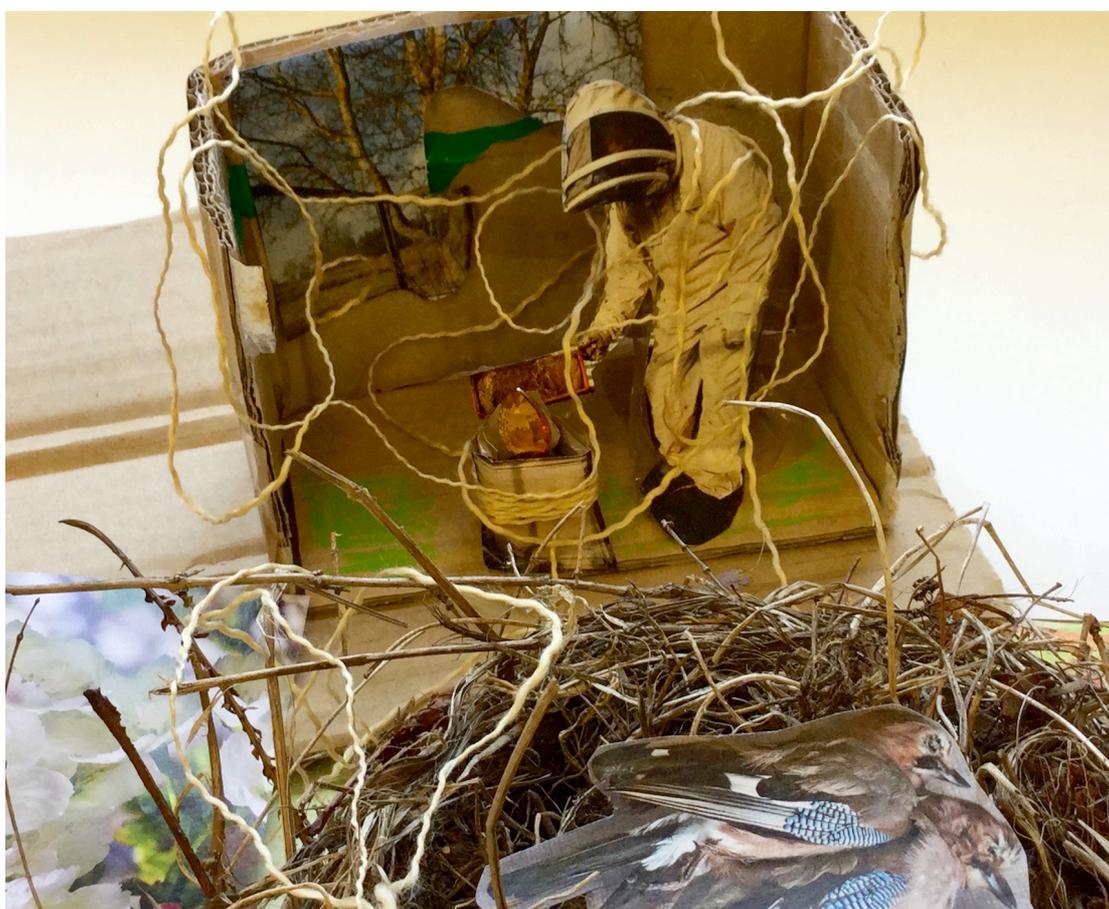


Fig 5: *Bee-keeper assemblage - detail*, 4" x 10" x 12", cardboard, paper, string, nest material

A great deal of background preparation went into setting up and coordinating the activities and off site visits. This intensity is reflected in my choice of the image of a bee-keeper (Fig 5). The week was one of the busiest of the academic year. The final week of teaching and for many GS students the end of their training experience. On the first day, before the LASALLE group

arrived, I facilitated an emotional and meaningful review with the Goldsmiths students of their exhibition. In the afternoon a group of 7 Goldsmiths students, Lesley and I welcomed the LASALLE group, which included Ron and 15 LASALLE students into our studio spaces.

Altogether there were 25 of us and the atmosphere was a mixture of excited anticipation and cautious self-consciousness. The noisy sirens of New Cross Road blared intermittently, something we have become accustomed to, but now this seemed even more intrusive with visitors present. While opening and closing windows to get a balance between air flow and noise; Lesley and I found ourselves drawing Ron's attention to the attractive wild flower strip outside the window, a border between the studio and the busy road outside (Fig 6). Having visited Singapore several times I was aware of the differences in climate and our institution buildings. London's, grey, rundown, cool, rainy-ness. Singapore's colourful, well-kept, light, hot-ness. We spoke enthusiastically of the community garden culture in London and the different zones of wealth, poverty, class and ethnic cultures these gardens traversed. Perhaps this was a symbolic liminal space between our different contexts and expectations?



Fig 6: *Wild flower border*, digital photograph

We heard that some students had experienced difficulty with visas and one wasn't able to come. This made us aware of the unseen individual experiences of effort and privilege between those who had been able to come and those who had not.

I had made my picture of a bee-keeper into a miniature 3D theatre. I was thinking about busy honey bees on the trail for flowers. The bee-keeper tending to the hive filled with the jewel of honey and being dressed in protective garments to prevent getting stung.



Fig 7: *The Group Shot*, digital photograph

We came together again on the Friday and began with the LASALLE photo ritual (Fig 7), something the group had been doing throughout their visit. Laughter and activity ensued as the banner was unraveled and we all lined up. Going outside was suggested by the enlivened LASALLE students but I found myself steering us to stay in the 'containment' of the studio.

In this session I returned to the bee-keeper miniature theatre and developed it further (Fig 8a). On my way to the session I'd found a nest on the pavement. I painted a colourful background for the objects. I placed a picture of three dead birds in the nest. Goldsmiths students reflected on references to the life cycle

and made links to the end of year and students leaving. I'd found a Chinese horse character seal and I put it on the front of the nest, symbolic of our exploratory connections. There was also an image of a Goldsmiths art studio from around 1950s. I thought of the history of Goldsmiths and of us making its history now, and about the interweaving of a nest, our connections and relationships (Fig 8b).



Fig 8a: *Bee-keeper assemblage* - view from above, 4" x 10" x 12", cardboard, paper, string, nest material



Fig 8b: *Bee-keeper assemblage* - view from front, 4" x 10" x 12", cardboard, paper, string, nest material

Art Reflection: Placement Coordinator (Goldsmiths, UK)



Fig 9: *House*, 12" x 10" x 8", paper, tissue paper, paint, brushes

I wake on a typical chilly rainy summer day and imagine the stark contrast between damp grey London, and colourful hot Singapore, and I wish the sun had provided a conduit between these places. I feel problematically British, anxious about my cultural ignorance and worried about exposing myself, yet wanting to be open to this new experience.

The art studio is buzzing with expectation and nervousness. We are asked to choose from a selection of magazine images to which we add words, and thereby introduce ourselves to the group. I offer words about vulnerability, anxiety, and synchronicity, which accord with anticipatory and hopeful words offered by the group, with the exception of one Goldsmiths student. His chosen image is of a man falling from the sky, and he talks to his experience

of failure, and falling through undefined space, of being 'cut loose', and not knowing what will happen next. The man's voice is bold and poignant amidst our tentative interactions, and seemed to plunge into the heart of the unspoken. I wonder how this direct and personal account of failing might impact on this group.

We move into groups of mixed LASALLE and Goldsmiths students and tutors, with the aim of making art that expresses our experiences of coming together in this context. My thoughts are on being with my group, and I think about the experience of being away from home. I construct a carefully measured house-shaped box out of white cartridge paper, with a pitched roof-lid. I use clean lines, crisp folds and measured cuts, sticking the pieces together purposefully. In contrast, I paint the outside in messy patches of watery colours that disperse and merge. I am inspired by the wild flower garden outside the studio window; a nurtured wild boundary between the inside educational/art space, and the noisy, animated and alerting life on the street beyond.

Symbolic images of home occupied my thoughts in relation to two other pieces of work in which I was currently engaged. The first was making a silver and copper house-shaped reliquary in response to my mother's death. The making process involved learning how to create the conditions under which disparate metals would fuse, making and remaking until I achieved a casket that held together, and spoke to my feeling. The second was a talk with colleagues for a homelessness charitable event, in which we thought about art therapy with people who were often outside of the boundaries of family, community, and services, therapy that happened in the 'margins'.

We come back together to share our artwork and experience. My box is recognised by the group as reminiscent of an Eastern temple, and I wonder what the 'temple' might represent in this context (Fig 9). I talk about my affinity with the wild flowers, and my enjoyment of their aesthetic. The dialogue between inside and outside, physical and metaphysical boundaries, and the spaces between, seemed consequential to my experience of coming together in this group.

In the final workshop the group share their experiences of the intervening days in London. A Goldsmiths student relates a peculiar incident in which a mouse fell from a shop awning, and died on the pavement. I was similarly surprised by a LASALLE student's description of an exhibition of instruments for preventing female masturbation, viewed from behind a curtain. The group shared an emotional experience of being in a beautiful garden at the hospice that engendered reflection upon personal loss. I thought again about the small bed of flowers outside the studios as a symbolic, mediating space between us. Some of the places the group visited were familiar to me, others were unknown, and I had a sense of 'looking behind the curtain', perhaps catching a glimpse of a different imaginative reality.

Returning to my group and artwork, I developed the inside of my box using pictures of external spaces, the outside inside. Paintbrushes became rafters bearing coloured tissue strips that spilled out from the inside. I am confronted by an art object that I feel is contrived, and wonder if I have unconsciously responded to the affirming notion of Temple that the group ascribed to my box, reaching for an easy resolution. My recollections of sharing our images in the group are imbued with the personal journeys that the artwork contained for the group members, of ripples radiating across the still surface of a pond that encompasses and connects us.

Thematic reflections

Through sharing our reflections, we have begun to gather a pool of themes that ripple both to and from the personal, the programme and the social and political dimensions. We have identified the following points for consideration.

The relationship between our institutions and the **wider contextual issues** related to colonialism and post-colonialism is an area for study. The possible resonances, differences and tensions between the position of being hosts and that of being visitors and awareness of the particular **cultures of the programmes**. Goldsmiths looking more within, emphasizing experiential learning through group systems and fewer assignments. LASALLE looking

more outwardly into communities and taking action and with more assignments. The cultural differences to learning through experiential group processes is evident. The importance of contemplative contribution in Singaporean culture, where pausing to consider thoughts before sharing these openly with others are dependent on gender, familiarity and rank (within a hierarchical system) are part of the social norm. The relative establishment of the profession, employment and art therapy services in UK compared to Singapore and the dynamics arising from these positions are all areas for consideration. The interface and meeting of **Western and Eastern perspectives** on psychotherapy, aesthetics and mental health is a complex theme that warrants exploration from our different viewpoints.

The transformative potential of art-making in building relationships and understanding is embodied in this project. This provided us with a platform to explore and engage in meaningful dialogue on multiple levels. Our educator's art making revealed themes related to creating, exploring and nurturing, protective spaces and possible links to dynamics related to **gender and the profession**. Also the making of talismanic objects for holding, remembering and fostering sensitive, intimate, emotional relationships.

The **developments arising from the experience** have been most evident in the LASALLE programme in several ways. LASALLE students expressed an interest in developing an e-platform with Goldsmiths students to share research ideas. Further overseas trips are being planned on the model of this one. Changes in the curriculum have been made which include taking students out into Singapore as part of thinking about their context and local communities during the first year orientation process. This contrasts the developments within the Goldsmiths programme as the impact of the visit has not yielded such tangible effects. However, through this process at Goldsmiths we are seeing ourselves through others eyes and have an opportunity to look beyond our usual field of vision and appreciate the position and developments of the profession in the UK. This contrast would be an area for further exploration.

Future directions

Our direction is towards mutuality, where we will continue to share our experiences to understand each other and to inform the teaching and learning - and - theory and practice of art therapy in the contexts of Singapore and London. We plan to write up this stage as an article. We aim to continue to synthesize our experiences and bring in the students as co-researchers into furthering our potential intersubjective discoveries.

Note:

Countries represented by LASALLE during the trip: Singapore, Canada, South Africa, France, Indonesia, New Zealand, UK, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines.
Countries represented by Goldsmiths during the trip: UK, South Africa, Poland, Taiwan, Japan.

Biographies

Ronald Lay

Ronald Lay leads the first and only postgraduate art psychotherapy training in Southeast Asia. He is a registered, board-certified art therapist across several countries (Singapore, USA, Canada) with over 23 years of mental health service. He has initiated several innovative arts projects and provides consultation to various national/international organizations including The Red Pencil. Ronald presents internationally on forensic mental health, older adults, wellness and development of arts therapy in Asia.

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Lesley Morris

Lesley is a Lecturer and Placement Coordinator on the MA Art Psychotherapy, and HCPC registered Art Psychotherapist with a primary interest in Parent-infant, Child and Adolescent Mental Health. Lesley is a practicing artist who exhibits as part of 'the unconscious group' of artists and educators on the staff team of the MA Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths. Her research interests include the Art Therapy Large Group, and art based research into the unconscious.

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Emylia Safian

Emylia is a Lecturer on the MA Art Therapy Programme. She is an alumna of the programme in its pioneering cohort of 2006. She leads the Human Development & Clinical Theory module and initiates clinical placement coordination and enhancement for the programme. Her research interests include integrative mind/body sciences for an encompassing approach in capitalising human development, as well as the phenomena of dynamic social-ecological systems of groups.

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Jill Westwood

Dr Jill Westwood is an HCPC registered Art Psychotherapist and Programme Convenor of the MA Art Psychotherapy, Goldsmiths. From a background in fine art she has worked as an art psychotherapist in adult psychiatry (NHS) and in art therapy education, including a period in Australia 1995-2008. Her research interests encompass art therapy education, the transformative potential of art in relationships and art based approaches.

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