

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Marginal Frames

Douglas Gill

Abstract

How space gets occupied is inevitably bound up with cultural politics. For example: in psychiatry different states of mind are seen as states of health that need to be treated, whereas in the public gallery different states of mind are seen as the creative forces that generate the artwork. A question we must therefore ask ourselves is, in the realms of art, does mental illness actually exist?

In this talk I wish to address some of the cultural issues around mental illness and draw on my experiences of the community arts movement, squatting, R D Laing, the Philadelphia Association, therapeutic households and social phenomenology. Here the arts are seen as ordinary in the 'everydayness' of their experience and practice. It was this ethos between 1988 - 2010 that informed my work with Studio Upstairs in developing a therapeutic arts community.

Keywords

Therapeutic arts, phenomenology, R D Laing, mental illness, art, culture

Introduction

When I saw the conference title I thought ... this is me! this is me! and not only that but this was precisely the work I had been engaged in from the outset with Studio Upstairs the title 'Finding Spaces, Making Places:

Exploring Social and Cultural Space in Contemporary Art Therapy Practice' - was just that!

The title Marginal Frames I first used for a talk given to the Dutch Art Therapy Association in 2014, a talk about the Therapeutic Arts Community model as developed with Studio Upstairs. The Marginal Frames theme continues here where only fragments of thoughts and ideas can be presented within the allotted time. This theme originated from thinking about how both the arts and psychoanalysis inhabit territory of the unacceptable, where the unconscious inevitably has a minority voice for the individual and society. The challenge for me has been how can something seemingly so remote be articulated or brought into language and communicated to others?



(fig.1) Doorway Installation

This structure of a full-sized door frame I made sometime ago and wanted to use again as a device in framing some of these fragments and ideas. A structure that satisfies my own artistic interests in working with a form that could appear in the public gallery, and with the conference title I am given license to combine a performance art piece with a paper presentation.

Here I ask myself if I can take the risk of allowing my unconscious to come into play in public. To quote the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan 'language is unconscious', in other words our subject is always on display. The dramatist Peter Brook in a lecture to psychoanalysts asked the question: why is the unconscious in psychoanalysis seen as something to be feared, when the unconscious is not only imperative but continually drawn on by the creative artist in the production of their work? As Art Therapists are we not involved in the aesthetics of this dichotomy between art and psychoanalysis most of the time?

Needless to say there is a strong theatrical element to this presentation, very much 'work in progress' which I trust will open up a greater field of enquiry for myself as well as those who witness it.

(exit)

scene 1

A Burning Match

(tin placed on table and box of matches taken out)

Art therapy brought psychoanalysis to the arts. Since my psychotherapy training with the Philadelphia Association I have become increasingly drawn to bringing the arts to psychoanalysis. The dialogue between the arts and psychotherapy is so rich that often it is difficult to disentangle one from the other. Even a clinical presentation - the transition from the consulting room to a listening audience or published text - I would argue is art. The Philadelphia Association introduced me to continental philosophy and the phenomenological approach to the therapeutic discourse, a philosophy which

also gave me a greater understanding of the creative arts. Where philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas were studied alongside Freud and post Freudian psychoanalysis.



(fig.2) Personal Flame

I first used this doorway as an exercise in a psychotherapy training programme. I asked each trainee in turn to take a moment and sit behind the curtain, when they were ready to make an appearance through the doorway, strike a match and tell their life story until the flame burnt out. (*demonstration*) It took some minutes before a trainee came forward for the exercise. Momentum was gained and everyone spoke of events and relationships that

had made a major impact on their lives. Experiences which as a result had brought them to their personal therapy and eventual training.

The burning match was a very condensed depiction of each individual's life, the essence of which made very clear how no one is off the hook, especially the hook of human suffering. Even though we cannot help who we are or where we come from there is such a resistance to showing ourselves, and a training where therapeutic communities have a strong focus was no exception. How paradoxical wanting a place to belong and yet fearing to be seen.

So often what we love about the arts and artists is the way that they reveal to us the vulnerability of the human condition.

(exit)

scene 2

Family (*with 3 teddy bears under one arm*)



(fig.3) Three Boys

This is a bit embarrassing as I have decided to come out! Come out with the fact that I have three sons each of whom with a different mother! Embarrassing because at times this has aroused envy in men and feelings of abuse in women. But I feel wronged on both counts as I had never planned my life this way despite undergoing long periods of intense psychoanalysis.

My eldest son (*sitting 1st teddy bear on table*) didn't live with me until after he left school. He has a younger sister with another father with whom his mother and he lived. And that father has an older son elsewhere with another mother. My second son (*sitting 2nd teddy bear on table*) lived with me throughout, but sadly as a small boy lost his mother/my wife after she died. He always maintained a strong relationship with his elder brother and that elder brother's mother.

My youngest son (*sitting 3rd teddy bear on table*) lived with me, his mother and my second son, but he also has three older brothers by another father. That father has a younger daughter and son with yet another mother.

Whilst the parents of all these children have their differences and are no longer together, the children do manage somehow to get on with each other and with their parents!

My current partner - who lost her husband in 2000 - has four sons and six grandchildren, one of whom lent me this teddy bear (*waving in air*). This child's father was very keen for his children to know what they should call me. In other words he wanted to know what my position is in the family. He and his family live with his mother - my partner - and from time to time witness us all playing together with the children in various rooms of the house. Whilst we are all quite happy with the situation and enjoy each other's company, the question lingers - probably for us all - what is my position within the family?

All of the above is what Social Historians call a melded or blended family.

According to Government Statistics 1940 - 1970 was the most 'stable time' for families ever recorded in Britain over the past 300 years. Since then there has been a rapid increase in the annual divorce rate and a continual decrease in marriage. The numbers of divorces continued to increase each year until 2013 when 48% of marriages ended in divorce. Since 2013 there has been a steady annual decline in the number of divorces but this has also been in line with the continuing decline in the number of marriages.

I am sure like everyone else in the field the melded/blended family has become a more everyday occurrence in my practice, and statistics predict that this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future. When working with someone who has grown up or parented in such a family, a greater complexity of therapeutic considerations open up when formulating the 'oedipal' struggles and triangulations of this particular social environment. Where is home when multiple parents and siblings are living in different dwellings? In an environment where different children are growing up with parents living in different places then what is regarded as home naturally becomes a more complex place or places to live. Questions such as what is meant by leaving home also become more complex.

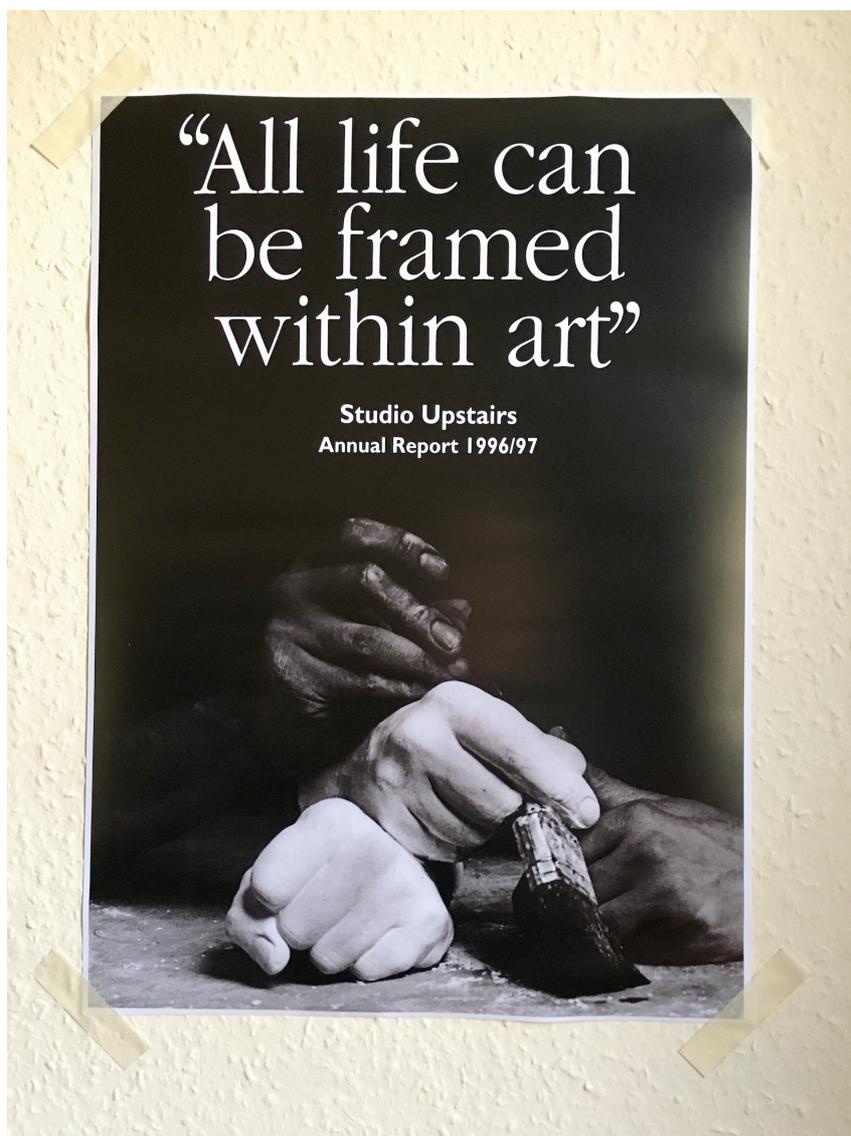
As any therapist knows marriage and the nuclear family are no guarantee of a safe haven and yet are still seen as something to be aimed for and sustained. With such a traditional institution how difficult then for someone coming from a melded family not to suffer being seen as broken or coming from a failed family environment. We see the melded family as emotionally challenging, forgetting how much more challenging the nuclear family can sometimes be. And given that the family is the first social environment we inhabit I firmly believe that those - in particular the children - who have managed to negotiate a greater social diversity in the melded family, have the opportunity of developing a greater social potential in our increasingly diverse society. I am arguing that far from disadvantaged these groupings can be and often are beneficial groupings for us all.

(exit)

scene 3

Studio Upstairs (*A2 Poster taped on wall*)

This is a 1996 Studio Upstairs annual report, precisely 20 year ago, which may simply be seen as history and belonging to its time. But I do think, as this conference title suggests, it has a great deal of relevance to the art therapy profession today.



(fig. 4) Having Been There

'All life can be framed within art' is a slogan that was frequently used in our publicity. The original artwork of this front cover hung over the entrance to the studio for several years.

This slogan was challenged by my supervisor saying that not all life can be framed within art! While this can be argued, it was more important to put out the message that this was a studio where the potential of any part of life could be expressed and framed without censorship. In this Studio there was no prohibition, anyone entering it had the opportunity of giving form to any of their experience. This then is the 'frame of art'. Coming from the arts I am very taken by frames, which seems to me to be at odds with so called 'boundaries' in therapy. Boundaries are prohibitions creating the image of guards at a perimeter that one cannot go beyond. The frame on the other hand is a contained space that also makes reference to what is outside the frame, whereas a boundary will always be at the limit. The Annual Reports were also a means of promoting the Studio containing information and photographs about the nature of the work that included forthcoming events. (*showing inner contents to audience*)

Quotes from 1996 annual report:

'Studio Upstairs is a place where people have the liberty to think and speak - aesthetically, emotionally, socially - and to remain silent if they wish. It is a place where madness is seen as ordinary through the extraordinariness of art.'

'Studio Upstairs is informed by the work of psychiatrist Dr. R D Laing, founder of The Philadelphia Association who in the 1960s developed therapeutic households. Ideas that influenced our founders who also believe that art only exists in a public place in that it needs a social context to come alive. Studio Upstairs maintains this ideal by holding regular public performances and exhibitions where the work stands up in its own right as art and not therapy or psychosis.'

Quote from Philadelphia Association website:

'Since setting up Kingsley Hall in 1965, the Philadelphia Association has run more than twenty community houses which have offered asylum and hospitality to those who sought them. The experience of 50 years has demonstrated that personal crises or seemingly inescapable distress and confusion, as well as experiences of 'stuckness' with intractable 'problems', may for many people best be negotiated in such therapeutic households.

Philadelphia Association houses are open to people suffering serious mental and emotional stress who come together to address the ways in which their difficulties manifest themselves in everyday living.'

The practice of Studio Upstairs was often misunderstood by art therapists who tended to identify it with the Edward Adamson model. I can remember having quite heated discussions with art therapists who were convinced they were doing the same as Studio Upstairs in the hospital, when of course the hospital environment produces a completely different mind set from the one experienced by entering a therapeutic arts community. More recently, as this mode of practice became more established, so Studio Upstairs was described as an 'open studio', which I was initially asked to talk about here today. However, how can I talk about the 'open studio' when to my mind the studio is already open?

The word 'studio' comes from the Latin 'studium' which translates as 'zeal', 'painstaking applications'. The word studio normally applies to the place where work is produced, in its origins the word is in fact more concerned with human experience, and of course no studio is without human experience.

A major interest of my work has been to make both the arts and psychotherapy more accessible and everyday, for these practices to be more intrinsic to culture than allied with health. Engaging in the arts or therapy is often quite ordinary, in that what is said and how marks are made etc. are of a natural order as they seemingly come out of the blue. So in reflecting on what is contained within the frame, the frame of the consulting room, the studio or the gallery, so the work becomes extraordinary. Both the creative arts and psychosis have always dwelt at the edges of society and it is at these margins

that they thrive, because they are intrinsic to culture. It is therefore society's task to make sense of their existence: a difficult proposition when both come under such scrutiny in institutions where their relevance is dependent on an imposed audit culture invested in measurable outcomes.

How important then that there exists a social environment where there are no demands being made or pressures to produce, rather a place to dwell and become more at home with oneself in the company of others. Somewhere where the struggle of producing art can give form to and begin to make sense of experience and not be judged for it. Creating work that is seen by others, touches the unconscious of others, is thought about, valued and given meaning. A place that provides an opportunity for the individual to move from personal and cultural isolation to a social being in the relatedness of others.

In psychoanalysis the self is a notoriously complex notion whereas the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas sees the self in relation to others, with the other always there before ourselves. We exist because of the other, thereby our very existence is dependent on the other. The therapeutic arts community does not maintain a prescribed formulation of community, as community is already diversified, generated by the actual relationships of those within the community.

Biography

Douglas Gill was originally a performance artist and art therapist before co-founding Studio Upstairs in 1998. He has a private psychoanalytic psychotherapy practice in London and Bristol, and is a teacher and supervisor on psychotherapy training programmes. He is a member of The Philadelphia Association, The Site for Contemporary Psychoanalysis, The College of Psychoanalysts and registered with UKCP, HCPC, BAAT.