

# ‘The art therapist is present’: Embedding arts therapy practice and education in the praxis of contemporary art

Joy Paton and Sheridan Linnell

with Yi Cao, Elise Fenn, Carrie Fraser, Georgia Freebody, Robert Hulland, Laura Kent, Nadia Ye-Rang Lee, Patricia Lim, Phillipa Montier, Nicola Slack, Rosemary Tennent

*Western Sydney University*

## Abstract

This paper explores the significance of contemporary art for the theory and practice of art therapy. It highlights the importance of the insights and practices of contemporary art for the education and training of (visual) arts therapists, providing an example from the core curriculum of the Master of Art Therapy at Western Sydney University, Australia. In collaboration with student participants, we present some of the artwork emanating from students’ major art-based projects in the unit of study ‘Integrating Arts and Therapy’.

## Keywords

Contemporary art, art therapy training, postmodernism, diversity, social justice.

## Introduction

In this paper we argue that an engagement with contemporary art enhances the practice of (visual) arts therapists and is an important element in the education of art therapy trainees. Contemporary art is here located amidst the critical social forces that emerged prominently from the late 1960s. These provided a strong social, political and cultural critique of the (Western) mainstream ‘modernist’ traditions that hitherto had provided the institutional, ideological and discursive ‘glue’ of social integration. Collectively, voices associated with the (contested) idea of ‘postmodernism’ have provided ongoing social critiques that remain relevant for us today and therefore relevant to our clients and the context of therapy. The ‘real world’ relevance of education and training at Western Sydney University animates learning and teaching programs across the institution. This is no less true of the Master of Art Therapy, which encourages social awareness and includes an emphasis on contemporary art in the core curriculum through the ‘Integrating Arts and Therapy’ unit of study. Examples from students’ major artwork projects demonstrate the ways in which they have used forms of contemporary art to engage with the interface of art and therapy.

## Our philosophy

The overall philosophy informing arts therapy education at Western is one that perceives arts therapy as a practice of social justice. An engagement with contemporary art facilitates such a perspective because it dialogues directly with social and cultural issues. In this way, contemporary art serves as a vehicle for crossing boundaries between the intrapersonal, interpersonal and the collective dimensions of art therapy practice (Linnell, Perry, Pretorius, & Westwood, in press 2018). Furthermore, contemporary art sensitises people to diversity and challenges the binary of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. Having some sensitivity to the importance of ‘activism’ and social justice (Newton, 2011) is a necessary feature of the art therapist. In some ways, all therapy is a form of activism, involving both personal and social transformation. Too often, though, that transformation inadvertently reiterates or creates forms of selfhood that reinforce dominant social and cultural interests (Rose, 1999).

These concerns are exemplified in the way individuals are currently expected to become flexible, self-reliant, resilient, reflexive and creative ‘lifelong learners’ and portfolio workers in order to respond to the demands of a deregulated, casualised and destabilised neoliberal economy of work (Bansel, 2007). (This is pertinent not only

# anzjat

AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARTS THERAPY

## Editorial team

**Chief Editor** Sheridan Linnell

**Co-Editors** Stacey Bush, Catherine Camden Pratt, Deborah Green

**Arts Editor and Editorial Assistant** Vic Šegedin

**Journal Coordinator** Rigel Sorzano

**Copy Editors / Proofreaders** Marie Shannon and Margo White

## Peer review

The editorial team wishes to thank all peer reviewers who have generously contributed their time and expertise to the peer review of this edition of *ANZJAT*.

*ANZJAT* is a peer-reviewed journal and as such all accepted submissions are reviewed by peer reviewers well-versed and respected in the subject of the submission. Full length articles 5, 9, 10, 15, 22 and 24 in edition one, and full length articles 11, 12, 16, 17 and 25 in edition two were double anonymously peer-reviewed.

Published by the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association  
ACN 072 954 388  
PO Box 303, Glebe, NSW 2037, Australia  
[www.anzacata.org](http://www.anzacata.org)

© Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association, 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Opinions of contributors are not necessarily those of the publisher. The publisher makes no representation or warranty that the information contained in articles is accurate, nor accepts liability or responsibility for any action arising out of information contained in this journal.

ISSN: 1833-9948

**Design and production** Vic Šegedin

**Printing** Tender Print, Geelong, VIC, Australia