

Reflections on ‘The art of critical conversations’: A patchwork of responses in images and text

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with Anonymous, Kerry Coombs-Valeontis, Di McClaughlin, Joy Paton, Asha Zappa and various artists¹

Abstract

This article is a patchwork of reflections from some of the participants at the 2017 ANZATA/ ACATA conference session ‘The art of critical conversations’. The session arose from my participation in the roundtable of Australian art therapists who met with Karen Pence in early 2017 and the questions it provoked. I wondered what might emerge if as a small group, we opened up a space for critical conversations, making art and talking about the social political discourses of art/s therapies? Through the art of critical conversations, participants in this interactive conference session explored some of the complexities alive in the shared conference experience. What emerged as being significant in the moment, and was processed through art-making, was the censoring by the conference committee of Keynote Speaker Robert Landy’s self-portrait after Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man*. The art of critical conversations emerged as a social action enabling multiple views and voices to be seen and heard.

Key words

Art/s therapy, critical conversation, patchwork, social action, bricolage.

Introduction

This morning I awoke from a dream, disturbed and curious... and then on later reflection delighted. In the dream I sit at my sewing machine, a beige Janome electric pedalled kind – not the old Singer treadle on which I first learned to sew. Next to me my colleague sits at hers – like mine it is electric, beige – it seems we are in our office on the university campus. My spool of pink thread has broken, and I am frustrated with myself. How can I even begin if my thread breaks so soon after I start? I glance across at my colleague – her spool full of black thread, I hear the smooth whir of her machine as she feeds the fabric through. It seems we are both sewing our ANZATA/ACATA conference papers for the ANZJAT special edition. Her co-author stands behind her, their quiet voices informing the seamless flow of fabric under the needle. My heart racing, I look in my sewing box, seeking a new spool of thread, a strong spool, one that can hold the fabrics together – artworks and pieces of text – piled next to my machine. I look into my container of cotton spools: they are messy, some threads unspooled and tied in with others so that pinks, blacks, whites, greens and yellows will need sorting before I can find one with which to rethread my machine. It seems I haven’t

sorted them lately, as if I just threw them in the last time I finished with them. Anxiously I wonder, have I forgotten how to sew? Maybe I have, or at the very least I haven’t attended to this sewing box for a while. Then a spool catches my eye, it is full of different colours each in differing proportions – deep blue, black, white, yellow, orange, red, green, yellow, purple – they are each separate and yet somehow they ended up on this spool. It is the right spool, I know that it will hold strong, with each colour somehow threading through my machine, not a hindrance. I take it out and place it on the spool holder and begin to thread my machine.

In waking life, I rarely sew. My old Janome is quiet among the sheets and towels in my linen cupboard. Like my sewing machine, in recent years as I retrained as an art therapist and established my clinical practice, I have been quiet as a published academic writer (Camden Pratt various 2003–2011, co-authored 2004–2014). My skills are rusty. I am anxious to honour those who participated in ‘my’ interactive conference session in good faith and who gave permission for me to use their images, and those who sent me text. Led by my dream and its knowing that the multi-coloured thread is right and strong, I come to this academic page. Yes, the multi-voiced patchworked text is still unusual

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