

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**In what ways has professional identity affected your arts practice?**

**Dr. Chrissie Tiller**

The first thing I need to say in response to this question is: I am not an art therapist. One half of my professional life is now spent running the MA in Participatory and Community Arts at Goldsmiths. For the rest of my time I identify myself as an advisor, consultant, trainer and practitioner using arts methodologies in other contexts. The reason the invitation to be part of this panel fascinated me was because, in many ways, what I do is not so dissimilar from the role of the art therapist; enabling growth and change through engagement with art. I am also aware that, especially outside the UK, the boundaries between what I call participatory arts and arts therapy are increasingly blurred. So how have my professional identity and my practice informed each other? Why do I call my work participatory art? And what is it in my individual history, education, training and professional context that has informed the way I identify myself? Being part of this panel provided me with a unique opportunity to interrogate all these questions.

Much of my work, other than running the MA, takes place in international and intercultural contexts. I found myself embarking on this journey after being awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 1990 to look at the contribution arts and culture were making to

this period of massive political, economic and social change in Central and Eastern Europe. Over the past twenty years I've ended up spending a good deal of my time in this region as well as increasingly working across the rest of Europe, Palestine, Uganda and Japan. Working trans-nationally and at the inter-cultural crossroads of arts, creativity and socially engagement is at the core of my sense of who I am both as a professional and a person: the outsider looking in, enabling those within to look out. Through facilitating creative opportunities for the groups and communities I work with I hope to enable them to take a fresh look at themselves and discover new ways of moving forward.

I have sometimes said, when asked to explain how I got into working in inter-cultural contexts, that my life has often felt like one long inter-cultural conversation. Born to Irish and Polish/Lithuanian parents, I grew up as a Catholic in a Protestant city, was a first generation working class girl at University, married a Romanian Jew I met there and ended up living as a Northerner in the South of England and a woman in a household with three men (husband and sons). Engagement with the arts was pivotal to creating, and challenging, this sense of cultural identity. When my grandfather proposed to my grandmother he called himself a "poor Polish artist". He clearly felt it sounded romantic: especially, for some reason, the correlation between artist and poor. In Leeds, where his family eventually settled, he made his living as a glassblower.

Being a "real" artist was out of the question for a young immigrant but, developing his skills through the apprenticeship system, he became a skilled artisan. What spare income he had with 8 children, was spent on introducing them to music lessons, theatre and museum visits and developing voracious appetites for reading. Art and cultural activities, music in particular, including opera, became a central focus of their lives; so much so that my father dreamt of being a professional pianist before the realities of earning a living and World War II took over his options.

My own professional choices were inevitably informed by these cultural realities. Living with this on-going passion and hunger to engage with art, as audience or creator, imbued me with a strong sense that culture was something much more than an add-on. At the same time, despite successive post-war Labour governments and the growth of feminism, constraints of class and gender continued to feel like real barriers.

Of course things were shifting. Higher Education, in any field, had been beyond the hopes or expectations of both my parents. The 1944 Education Act, however, ensured we, post-war working class children, had access not only to free secondary education but also to university and the professional career paths this might offer. Oddly enough, it was being a pupil at a convent grammar school that first made me feel a more creative professional life might be an option. Despite some of the nuns making it clear they placed little hope in us "scholarship girls", others provided inspirational models of independent thought and autonomy. We were encouraged to make our own theatre, write poetry, take part in debating societies and perform in our own reviews. However, when I hinted, at a careers' meeting, that I might like to work in theatre, film or television the only response was that I might learn to type and apply to be an archivist at the BBC. Theatre training was still something best left to upper middle class girls who wouldn't need to earn an income once they had graduated.

A strong sense of filial duty and responsibility and a need to make my own way in the world was probably what led me to finally consider teaching as the most attainable option. At the same time, hedging my bets as much as I could, I decided not to go into teacher training but to study English (Language and Literature) at Newcastle University.

Being at Newcastle in the '70s was a revelation. My tutors included people like radical Leeds poet Tony Harrison, my fellow students Wilko Johnson, a pair of Marxist merchant seamen and American activists. Art, protest, politics and radicalism were part of the rich mix. As was theatre like Plater's *Close the Coalhouse Door*, dealing with the realities of life at the pit face. Being introduced to Raymond Williams' claim in *Culture and Society* that "Culture is ordinary" enabled me to finally contextualise my own

cultural reality. A post-graduate option to train in Drama in Education offered the possibility to work alongside one of the pioneers of creative learning in schools, Dorothy Heathcote. I was offered a new notion of artist as teacher and co-creator with her pupils or community participants. It finally seemed possible that somewhere at the interface of teaching, making and facilitating the artistic creativity of others, a professional pathway might come into existence.

One actor husband, two sons and several years of teaching Drama and Theatre Studies later, I decided to undertake further post-graduate training. Being back at the Central School of Speech and Drama in the early '80s felt almost as heady as Newcastle had a decade earlier. This was London and the GLC, under Ken Livingstone's leadership, had embraced socially engaged arts and cultural activity as part of their political platform. Setting up an integrated deaf and hearing Theatre in Education company might have meant encountering the harsh realities of the Arts Council funding system but events such as the GLC Jobs for Change gigs and Rock against Racism concerts made it clear an alternative existed. Familiarising oneself with whatever government or local authority initiative was current was part of the initiation. In those days (under a Tory Government), it meant coming to terms with the Enterprise Allowance Scheme. Set up to get people off the unemployment register, it became a gift for young theatre makers, musicians and visual artists. Not only were we able to claim unemployment benefit but allowed to earn £50 a week on top: Arts Council funding might still be directed to the large institutions but we were finally being paid to make art in collaborative contexts.

Since then, creating work in the UK, across Europe and beyond, I've discovered this capacity for "ducking and diving" and re-thinking what I call my practice to be as valuable as any other professional skills. Over the past 25 years, I have written funding applications for projects I've called Art and Social Change, Art and Engagement, Art and Participation. I've spoken at conferences about the contribution of the arts to the Creative Industries, the Creative Economies and/or Cross-Sectoral Partnerships. I have

delivered papers on Drama for Empowerment, Theatre for Citizenship, Arts for Intercultural Dialogue and run workshops with Drama Teachers in Ramallah, Health Service Managers in Bradford and theatre makers in Belgrade that often involved the same activities but a different narrative.

I haven't done this out of cynicism but I have learned not to care what government or funding bodies want to call what we do: as long as they provide me, and those I work with, the possibility of doing it. What I care passionately about is the contribution that engagement with the arts can and do make to the quality of people's lives. And everyone's right to engage with/participate in arts and cultural activities whether they are in a school, a prison, a hospital, a community centre or a refugee camp in Lebanon.

Having the opportunity to work with artists from many different cultures committed to this same expediency and pragmatism within their arts practice has been pivotal. The first time I went to work in Central and Eastern Europe (Krakow, Poland and 1981) it felt like a kind of homecoming. Being part of the first Solidarnosc marches, where it seemed artists, workers and intellectuals had come together to take over the streets and challenge the status quo, I felt part of something that reflected my values.

Going back there ten years later, as part of my Churchill Fellowship, post the coming down of the wall, and the chaos that followed, it seemed participation in the arts and culture had to be part of enabling young people to confront their constantly shifting social, political and economic situation. Professionally, being part of that shift enabled me to take on a new role. Having found myself always working slightly sideways to the mainstream in the UK, working in this intercultural setting allowed me to rid myself of the inhibitions of class, gender and social background that had often felt so overwhelming. I was able to trust the qualities and skills I brought to my work as being of value in themselves: to know that my invitation to the table was unconnected with whom or what

I might represent. As an “outsider”, I found myself invited in as one who could bring insight from another cultural context into the conversation: entrusted with what Shakespeare suggests is the primary role of theatre; “to hold the mirror up to nature”.

Returning from what were then called Poland, the Soviet Union and the Czech Republic, I worked with Jenny Harris at the National Theatre Education Department. One of the radical community theatre makers of the ‘70s, Jenny was bent on re-thinking the meaning of learning, outreach and audience development in a major public arts institution. Together we initiated and ran two programmes across Central and Eastern Europe: Seeding a Network, a job-shadowing programme for change leaders in the arts and Branching Out, a follow-up for artists working with young people across the same region. Partnerships with the European Cultural Foundation, the King Baudouin Foundation and the Open Society Fund, in their work in the same region, convinced me of the vital role that participatory arts could, and were, playing in encouraging inter-cultural understanding and contributing to social change.

In my own practice and research, drawing on this privileged position of the artist as both outsider and insider, in all kinds of different contexts, figures increasingly large. There have been times I have questioned it. Wondering whether I should really be the person working with projects in Balkans after the NATO wars, in Palestine as they re-thought the school curriculum, with young Ugandan ex-child soldiers or artists from Belarus facing disturbing political change. I have learned that real partnership with those who are part of these communities is essential: and that any interventions must be offered with humility and respect. But I have also learned that in entering the space and offering people the opportunity to reflect creatively on their own situation, the outside facilitator has the possibility to create a particular kind of safety.

Using participatory theatre-making techniques and working with metaphor, we can create an opening for things to be voiced that might not be possible in more formal sharing situations. In ex-Yugoslavia, for example, a theatre workshop based on the

themes in King Lear offered participants the chance to speak about the repercussions of dividing a country in a way they had felt unable to do in other contexts. In Gulu, North Uganda, Hamlet's decision to leave his country or stay and fight injustice resonated with young theatre-makers in a way we could never have anticipated. As outsiders we are also often in a unique position to validate the work people are already doing, as we were with local artists doing amazing work with young people in Gaza and Hebron.

Working with artists for whom participation and social engagement was, of necessity, central to their practice steered me to thinking about training. Not in terms of art-form skills but in offering artists ways to move beyond those skills to working with non-artists (if there is such a thing?) and initiating projects engaged directly with participants facing the realities of life in difficult economic, social or political contexts. This thinking around the wider role of the artist in society eventually led to my setting up a European-wide programme: Transmission. Funded originally by the Directorate for Labour (DGV) it set out to examine what kinds of support was available to those choosing to work outside the mainstream and what kinds of training/post-graduate education they might need to flourish in these settings.

The MA at Goldsmiths was one of the results of this action research. Bringing the practice into the academy meant beginning to think about the nature of this work in a more theoretical context. It meant spending time reading people like Dewey and Kolb on experiential learning, discovering the work of Schön on the reflective practitioner, Csikszentmihalyi on creativity, Polanyi on notions of tacit knowledge. It meant re-visiting theatre practitioners such as Augusto Boal and Bertolt Brecht whose work was committed to social change. It also led to a slow recognition that trying things out "on the floor", testing out ideas by the doing of them, being open to the contributions of others, taking risks, making mistakes and learning from them are not only central to performing arts practice but essential tools for the participatory practitioner.

The capacity for this practice to encourage young artists to think differently about their role in the world has made me a passionate advocate for arts students being given the

opportunity to make work that is socially, politically and purposefully engaged within their initial training. Not only so that they have the ability to respond to the rapidly changing societies and diverse communities they will find themselves working in once they have left the conservatoire/art school/university but as a meaningful career path.

Making the choice to "just" be an artist was always going to be too much of a leap given my cultural and social background. Finding my professional identity within participatory arts practice has enabled me to discover ways to work as a cultural operator that I have found rewarding and fulfilling. Not only have I been able to work with people from other cultures and countries, I have been able to be part of their lives and they part of mine in a deeper way than if I'd been working with colleagues in almost any other sector. Perhaps it has something to do with our need to share stories, create things together or the fact that all of us find ourselves inside and outside our own cultures in a particular kind of way? Whatever it is, it has offered me a life that feels uniquely privileged.

## **Biography**

Chrissie Tiller works as a practitioner, researcher, facilitator and trainer in the arts and culture, business and charity sectors alongside her role as Director of the MA in Participatory and Community Arts at Goldsmiths, London University. Following a Churchill Fellowship to explore the wider impact of the arts in economic, social and political change in Central and Eastern Europe, her work has focused on the role of arts and creativity within societal change and inter-cultural dialogue. She works extensively in Central, Southern & Eastern Europe, the EU, Turkey, Palestine, Uganda and Japan. Current and recent projects include working with the European Cultural Foundation on Generation, intergenerational conversations between women in the cultural sector, developing guidelines for arts organisations on freedom of expression for Free Word and exploring the role of Values in the workplace for the Ministries of Labour, Culture and Education in Finland.

