

REVIEWS

THE UNCERTAIN AND MULTIPLE WORLD OF EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY – REFLECTIONS AFTER THE IEATA CONFERENCE IN PERU: ‘LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY: MULTIPLICITY AS A HEALING PATHWAY THROUGH EXPRESSIVE ARTS’, LIMA, PERU 10–14 AUGUST 2011

Reviewed by Martin Zavala¹

The Conference included a variety of plenary meetings, workshops, discussion panels and artistic presentations, where participants engaged with expressive arts therapists and other presenters from nearly twenty countries. The day before the Conference, visits were paid to three institutions engaged in the promotion of artistic experiences from a perspective of social change. Each one of these experiences was conducted in the poor and marginalized outskirts of Lima. There was also a meeting between the expressive arts and traditional Andean culture at the end of the Conference, in the city of Ollantaytambo, Cusco.

Several months have passed since the Conference, and the ripples are still being felt from the splash it made. We would like to take a moment to present a few ideas regarding our work in the field of expressive arts therapy, in relation to the focus of the Conference: multiplicity and uncertainty.

The Conference was held outside of North America for the first time, acting as an invitation to examine artistic and therapeutic practice in a different light. This very well could have led us to reflect, here in the Southern Hemisphere, on the approaches that guide the practice of this discipline in the Northern Hemisphere (and from a western point of view). We also recognize that for us, as Latin Americans, it was also a chance to examine and recognize ourselves on and from the perspective of our own continent.

This invitation placed us firmly in the midst of multiplicity, something that is not always so easy to do. At the same time, this invitation, due to its implicit

1. Martin Zavala is a teacher at Terapia de ArtesExpresivas Peru -TAE Peru and a Clinical Psychologist at Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. www.taeperu.org

2. We would like to express our acknowledgement of and appreciation for the complete trust and openness that the ICATA demonstrated towards TAE Peru when asking us to make proposals in the organization of the Conference, ranging from the theme of the Conference to the activities held at the end of the event, not to mention the selection of the main keynote speakers, as well as the workshops and readings. We are grateful for the trust shown in giving us this responsibility, and we deeply value the experience of promoting an honest and direct dialogue during the organization process.

nature, might not have been engaged with by all the participants. However, it will never be too late for the reflections that may arise as a result of that invitation. This article is an effort to continue elaborating on the lessons learned.

First it should be noted that a conference places an emphasis on that which is considered important at a given moment. TAE Peru received an invitation from the IEATA to co-organize this conference,² and thus it emphasized that which it considered important to its work with the arts and their therapeutic quality at that point in time. The selection of a theme for a conference naturally means that there are certain other ideas that must be set aside. This does not imply that these are any less valuable or important. The theme is what one chooses to share and discuss at a specific moment.

The Conference proposed a meeting between different realities. Our goal was for the experiences lived during the Conference to provide an opportunity to open up to multiplicity and the meeting between different cultures, an encounter that took the form of a seed before a harvest. After all, fruits and blossoms do not occur at the beginning of the growth process; they are part of a natural cycle. What each person is able to harvest from this experience will thus be the result of a process of 'personal germination'.

This meeting called for participants to reflect on living with uncertainty, and on multiplicity as an opportunity for health and well-being. What is it like to live with uncertainty? What does it mean to submit to the uncertain? Is living with uncertainty the same as living without certainties? Without clinging to foundational beliefs? Is this possible? How can we recognize the health potential that comes with multiplicity? How can we accept the presence of multiplicity, avoiding the impulse to construct our understanding of the world around categories?

The Conference did not seek to reflect on both themes in a familiar artistic context. Instead, it invited us to think about how they can help us to live healthfully, even in those moments when we are not 'making' art, especially in the hard times in which we are currently living, both locally and around the world.

It may be said that this was also an invitation to *live* multiplicity and uncertainty through our experience at the Conference, in a Latin American country such as Peru.

As remarked upon at the beginning of the Conference, Peru, like many Latin American countries, has a history of ancestral wisdom and conquest and conflict, a history that has marked our coexistence as citizens and one that calls for constant change and acceptance. It is also a country where the 'other' is a far cry from being considered oneself, where the (vast) minorities are not accepted because they are 'different': multiple. It is a country where laws are systematically broken and disrespect for peoples' beliefs and values is most often expressed by the very people obligated to ensure compliance with them. This reality frequently overwhelms us with contradictions, because we, the citizens of Peru, so often tolerate the breaking of laws, while at other times demanding compliance. In Peru, then, we yearn for certainties in our social coexistence and live with uncertainty because these certainties are not fulfilled and we cannot affirm them. A tremendous paradox.

This is the scenario with which the participants were greeted. Conflict and opportunity in coexistence, side by side. A fitting scenario in which to ponder our current condition as promoters or facilitators of health spaces.

On the other hand, the scenario was also quite fitting for this reflection because it is a context in which the traditional arts are still alive and well,

and have a great deal to contribute, along with the ancestral wisdom of our native peoples. We sought out the opportunity to grow closer to them – not to emulate them and convert their practices into our own, but to learn to breathe together.

We feel it was a difficult task to combine these voices and bring them together in the context of a conference. Yet it was a valuable opportunity at the same time. This was the motivation behind the choice of the pre-conferences,³ the multiplicity of the workshops, conferences or talks, and the brief but intense experience in Cusco at the end of the Conference. We sought to provide an opportunity to form a rapprochement with different viewpoints and experiences that may nourish our own practices and our field.

We believe this experience gave each one of the participants the opportunity to reflect on his or her own suppositions about certain cultural and aesthetic aspects, about his or her notion of health and the practice of the therapeutic. At the same time, it was an opportunity to think about our practice as promoters of health through the arts. This may include opening up reflections on the way in which we are accustomed to working therapeutically, and how we relate to the conflict and the resources of the people with whom we work.

We also succeeded in reflecting on the 'western' emphasis of our therapeutic practice with the arts. This of course also means assuming that the practice of expressive arts therapy in a country such as Peru, in a Latin American context, arises from a therapeutic – and oftentimes aesthetic – approach that is predominantly western in nature. As a result, we must assume that expressive arts therapy, even in Latin America, is being conducted by people with a particular and minority 'status' (for many, privileged). It is also an invitation to think about and recognize how the multiple voices present at the Conference share a position in society from which we conduct our practice. All of this, once again, places us in a scenario where conflict and opportunity may engage in dialogue.

Uncertainty and multiplicity are present in the expressive arts; they inhabit them, constitute them. We could even say that both of them *are* the arts.

Art, from the perspective of the practice of expressive arts therapy, is manifested from a profound truth. It is in this way that it manages to find its own path, a path where we are at once witnesses to and actors in that which is being manifested. Expressive arts therapy invites us to a meeting with our essence, our soul, with the vitality and pain contained therein, to an encounter with that which the arts have succeeded in manifesting and shaping.

The experience of the Conference can help us recognize the essence of our practice. Recognize that there is one and, at the same time, there are many ways of conducting it. Recognize the essence of our practice from the perspective of a meeting with another person, with other people, with an 'other', with our surroundings, with geography, with ancient history and the recent past. To achieve this, we call on the truth that each practice harbours; we appeal to the truth contained in art. Thus, our meeting will be a meeting with our own essence, with our very selves.

This Conference has been an invitation to imagine new possibilities in a new setting. The challenge lies in ensuring that what we have imagined will continue to be enriched with new meetings in the workplace where each one of the participants is active or would like to be active. It is in this way that the practice of expressive arts therapy will continue to nourish itself, becoming healthier and increasingly multiple. It is in this way that it will grow closer to uncertainty, and for this very reason, closer to its essence.

3. The pre-conferences involved participating in workshops led by people and institutions engaged in making art with full therapeutic potential in the marginalized, poor outskirts of the city. We shared the experience of the Great March of Giant Puppets, the Museo Itinerante por la Memoria/Travelling Museum of Memory, and the work of the Colectivo Arte por la Memoria/Art Collective for Memory, along with Mrs Julia Castillo and her *burlap - arpillera* - tapestries.

1. Jenna Carine Ashton is a Ph.D. candidate in Art History and Visual Studies, The University of Manchester. Her ongoing public engagement project 'Colour/Chroma' – inspired by Derek Jarman's text *Chroma* (1993) – explores discourses surrounding colour in art and science, and sensory perception. Jenna attended the conference Colour My Well-Being, delivering a paper introducing Colour/Chroma and discussing Jarman's film *Blue* (1993) as an audio-visual project responding to his encroaching blindness from AIDS-related complications.

COLOUR MY WELL-BEING: APPLIED ARTS AND HEALTH CONFERENCE, THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON, 19–20 APRIL 2012: AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE EXPLORING COLOUR WITHIN APPLIED ARTS, HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Reviewed by Jenna Carine Ashton¹

The Colour My Well-Being conference is the most recent in a series of Applied Arts and Health conferences hosted by The University of Northampton since 2007. Bringing together an international community to discuss the role of colour in arts and health, the conference provided a forum for sharing and debating practices and scholarly research within a rapidly growing interdisciplinary field of arts in healthcare. Conducted across two full days, the conference offered a wide range of lectures, workshops and seminars from an international assembly of artists, academics, curators and healthcare practitioners. Keynote speakers included cyborg-artist Neil Harbisson, Dr Helen Carruthers (The University of Manchester), and Dr Andreas Edelmann (Institute for Medical Psychological Diagnosis, Switzerland).

I attended the conference as a speaking delegate, delivering a paper on the relationship between colour, memory, sensory impairment and illness. The event presented an excellent opportunity to share my research on colour with new audiences, and with researchers and practitioners from other arts and science fields. My subject area (Art History and Visual Studies) obviously engages with discourses on colour, but Colour My Well-Being offered a variety of perspectives on this area of sensory experience, linking the visual with the emotive, the psychological and the bodily. Significantly, the conference highlighted the numerous narratives people have of colour experience – reaffirming my interpretation of colour as a subjective concept, one which is shaped by certain myths and storytelling. Colour is a linguistic and cultural construct – no 'blue' is the same for everyone; we have this mass of association which we attached to our understanding and interpretation of colour. The so-called 'rational' science behind colour also needs to be communicated – we all, literally, do not *perceive* the same 'blue'. The conference was brilliant at attempting to present these two seemingly opposing positions of colour in arts and colour in science. The space 'in-between', that of healthcare, enabled varying perspectives on colour to be debated.

The three different approaches and theories of the keynotes revealed the complexity and tension within such debates. Dr Helen Carruthers (The University of Manchester) suggested a methodology by which to measure the mood of individuals via colour, and Dr Andreas Edelmann (Institute for Medical Psychological Diagnosis, Switzerland) presented research on the psychology of colours. Both interesting approaches for arts and health practitioners; however, their arguments and assumptions of colour perception were somewhat tested in light of the wonderfully engaging and enlightening first keynote from 'sonochromatic cyborg' artist Neil Harbisson. Neil discussed his Achromatopsia, a condition that only allows him to see in shades of black and white, and his 'reading' of colour via the sonic. As an individual who has a completely different experience of colour both perceptually and linguistically, Neil challenged delegates to reconsider how the sensory is discussed and understood. Likewise, Synaesthesia was later discussed in a seminar by



synaesthetic artist Jane Mills, again raising the issue of how we presume categories of colour description or experience.

Importantly, the conference attracted an international audience, enabling connections to be made between and with individuals further afield; it created an opportunity for dialogue. I met practitioners from Europe and beyond who have been creatively working in the field of colour for a long time, offering a new angle on how Art History and Visual Studies may engage with colour – through practice and application, as well as through the written, academic word. For applied arts practitioners an international audience also confirms their practice has meaning and significance beyond a local agenda.

I attended workshops in all the three of the conference themes – Living With or Without Colour, Therapy and Design. Sessions explored colour and neurology; colour as a trigger within therapy; colour in room and environment design; uses of colour in arts education. The workshops offered fascinating discussion on the formation of colour association, and how colour begins to emerge as a metaphor for other issues. Significantly, I think the workshops emphasized that colour association is not simply cultural, but is highly personal. Its uses or relevance in therapy, not necessarily as a means by which to ‘treat’ a patient, but its role in trauma and pleasure, was very illuminating. Colour in design perhaps required further discussion; I think there is an assumption that design and art students should have a ‘natural’ understanding of colour properties, but I think this is too simplistic. Art and design students are as equally susceptible (if not more so) of falling into the trap of making ‘colour assumptions’. I also think the conference would have benefitted from a science speaker (either from neuroscience or chemistry), to offer another perspective on colour perception which can help to differentiate between colour-as-culture and language, and colour-as-science, and examine in more detail where the two overlap.

Personal stories, projects and new innovative ideas were shared throughout the event. Towards the end of the conference, groups discussed how we could develop creative ways of sharing research and building upon the contacts we had made, with the idea of creating an ‘Arts for Well-Being Laboratory’, which would exist as a virtual and literal meeting place for the sharing of research on

colour. Key strands of the Arts for Well-Being Lab would consider the processes and methodologies of the creative act; the importance of site-specific work; contexts of trauma; methods of evaluating 'impact' and the influence upon policy; historical studies of applied arts in healthcare.

As a researcher and educator within Art History and Visual Studies, *Colour My Well-Being* offered an excellent and rather unique opportunity to discuss colour – something which is perhaps too often treated as an aside within academic discourse. Concluding comments from the conference suggest that there is still a great deal more written and applied-practice research to be undertaken in order to understand the full extent of how colour can, and is being used within healthcare – 'health', including categories of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, occupational, social and community health. Another event such as *Colour My Well-Being* would be very welcomed by arts and health practitioners for continuing such debates.