

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Trust the process and press on: Art Therapy and the shared experience of co-editing a film.

Kate Rothwell and Emer Douglas

This film was made following a presentation given by Kate Rothwell, Art Psychotherapist, and her long-term private client Peter on 8th December 2012 at the Saturday Forensic Forum (SFF), which is a monthly meeting to discuss psychotherapy with complex patients in difficult settings. For further information see link to website below.

During the talk a recording was made with Peters consent. The main speakers are Kate, Peter, Peter's sister and Pamela Windham, Forensic Psychoanalyst and SFF convener. Emer was not present in the audience.

Peter and Kate selected images to show the audience at the forum but Kate then added further images to the video to link in with the recorded narrative. Kate and Peter had previously made videos of his work in action to help him better appreciate his own art making process in the art therapy sessions. During the four years they had been working together Peter used the process of recording videos to explain and further understand the impact of his acquired global brain injury on his life.

Kate invited Emer, another Art Psychotherapist, to help edit the film with the original intention to share the recording of the talk but while listening to the recording we realized that this was a much bigger project. The film intentionally reflects the disjointed nature of Peter's brain injury but we only get to hear about the cause of the injury, and the context of the presentation in the forum, towards the end of the video. This was a deliberate ploy. We purposefully held back from explaining the cause of Peter's global brain injury to let the story unfold as he told it. This was necessary in order not to give the listener the conclusion prior to hearing the impact and effect of his brain injury on his experiences in art therapy. It was important for us to share what it was like in therapy and communicate how difficult it was to hold on to the fragments of narrative without have any sense of the whole.

What began as a simple editing exercise became a much greater task. It was very difficult to listen to as Peter would jump from topic to topic and sometimes came across in a very grandiose and egocentric way. We struggled to edit the audio and in order to edit appropriately we had to repeatedly listen to fragments, during which thinking became harder. It was easy to lose a true sense of the person that was hidden under, what Kate calls, Peter's sermons, lectures and excursions into outer space. It quickly became apparent that in order to give a true representation of Peter's experience we would have to pull the threads out of a rambling narrative to make sense of them. It was very disjointed and hard to stay with, which we felt reflected his and Kate's experience. Emer had to be strict about what was included and hold the boundaries to keep Peter and Kate safe from the listeners judgments while constantly tethering it back to Earth, as we can hear Kate do for Peter in the audio. We experienced moments of excitement when it would come together - carefully finding him - the true him and what he was trying to share that his injury was inhibiting.

When Emer listened to one of the early films, Kate deliberately held back from explaining the context so that Emer could get a feel of the session. This was an exercise in how important it is for Kate to hold on to the thinking function in the midst of the therapy as Peter's short-term memory eliminates his ability to hold in mind any of the work. There was something very cathartic about this process, essentially for Kate to

better understand the impact of the therapy on Peter, and for Emer to better understand what was required in her role as co-editor to create a piece of work.

The experience of making this piece of work was intense and had to be done over time because it often felt overwhelming. This mirrored Kate's original experience in the therapy, so we came to realize that the process of making this film replicated the therapeutic process and working this way was extremely useful, offering a new objectivity and perspective to the work in its entirety.

The editing process enhanced our ability to make connections and enabled us to think together in such a way that something new was created. Just as Kate had to provide the thinking function for Peter, Emer in turn had to provide it for Kate. Emer was objective, on the outside looking in, and slowly we began to make sense of what we were holding and the fragments we were hearing. The piece became about three stages of major change during Peter's time in Art Therapy. The editors had to consider what they were trying to say about the Art Therapy process and trust that the message was worth hearing. Digital media has allowed us to translate the therapy in an ethical, appropriate way - as we can't share a session but we can share the process. Until it was finished, we had to stay with the unknown while attempting to find a true narrative. We had an ethical responsibility to Peter, protecting him so he didn't come across in a way that would distance the listener.

The impact of the presentation on the therapy has been largely positive for Peter as he strongly felt he needed to tell his story and to show how he has developed an artist's identity through art making. His art therapy work has changed significantly to become more integrated, and he was happy to have sold a couple of pieces of his artwork on the day. Following the talk Peter and his sister viewed the film and made a few alterations including Peter adding the postscript in memory of his late wife. It is difficult for Peter to remember the presentation, or what was said, so the film is an important record for him. If anything he has come to value the therapeutic relationship even more as he now feels heard and understood beyond the therapy.

In spite of his devastating injury he has found a voice through his artwork and it was through the therapy that this has been able to happen. A negative impact is that he is aware something positive happened for him but can't sustain the memory to reflect back and recall his feelings. This can leave him feeling lonely and isolated having had a transitory, life affirming and validating experience through the talk that he is now unable to access. It is for Kate to remind him of his feelings and the effect his art had on others.

Overall, it was a traumatic and haunting experience going over and over the film during the editing when we kept being put in touch with his trauma. This is an important aspect to remember in editing films and using this medium, as it is different from a weekly session where time can dilute the experience. The editing process continually reawakens the material held in the film keeping it live but also re connecting to the original experience in the trauma. This made the process highly distressing and also unbearable at times, as we got in touch with the traumas that he no longer connected with. This is more apparent in the material we chose to edit out.

This edited out material reflects on all the people around Peter and impacts on everyone who comes in touch with him, therefore editing the film was also an interesting process as we cannot edit his life.

We hope you will watch our film and find it as interesting as we did editing it.

<http://saturdayforensicforum.com/>