

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Collective Body Mapping Ritual

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Abstract

This paper introduces and describes a collective body mapping ritual presented as part of the Goldsmiths International Art Therapy Conference. The following reflections on the unfolding of the ritual were distilled from a series of conversations between Christina, Annette, Sue and Penny that took place immediately after the conference, and in the ensuing weeks and months. The article has been co-written by all four – a process that echoed the collective sharing and making of meaning that took place among participants in the ritual circle.

Keywords

Body mapping, landscape, ritual, collective body, mark making, feminine embodiment

Body Mapping

Body mapping is an ancient human practice and has been part of creative explorations in psychotherapy for a long time. It involves being traced around one's body and using symbols and words to mark different places of emotional, physical and social significance. In 2002, Body Mapping was

developed into a formal methodology for therapy and research in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its legacy in South Africa (Morgan 2002, Solomon 2008). Currently, a small but growing number of psychotherapists, artists and researchers across the globe use variations of this approach with people of all ages, abilities, gender and backgrounds (Gastaldo, Magalhães, Carrasco & Davy, 2011, Lummis 2015).

The Collective Body Mapping Ritual takes the individual mapping further onto a large round canvas on which a group of people come together to sense, feel and see themselves in their shared human form. In a series of ritual cycles participants enter a sacred space in which to move, find their place and be traced in relationship to each other. As each person's outline is honoured with creative markings a collective bodily landscape emerges and invites playful exploration of its mystery.

The Ritual was originally conceived by visual artist, Emma Scott, and dance movement psychotherapists Annette Schwalbe and Christina Greenland. It is site specific, seasonal and uses materials found in nature. It embraces a feminine approach to embodiment, which considers cyclical experiences of birthing and dying to be central to finding greater joy, meaning and connection in our human bodily being.

For this year's Goldsmiths International Art Therapy Conference, Annette and Christina joined hands with fellow dance movement psychotherapists Sue Curtis and Penny Best to hold a Collective Body Mapping Ritual that responded to the theme of Finding Spaces, Making Places. With Sue being a lecturer on the Goldsmiths MA Dance Movement Psychotherapy (DMP) programme and Penny a keynote speaker at the conference, this joint contribution marked part of the first significant collaboration between the Art Therapy and Dance Movement Psychotherapy departments at Goldsmiths College. As four DMPs the invitation to find a space, to make a place amongst Art Therapists felt groundbreaking and was met with enthusiasm, creativity and respect.

Preparing the Ground

The collective body mapping ritual takes place in a dance studio situated within part of an old church building, on the edge of the campus grounds. A quiet, white space with light coming in from above, it holds the expectant sense of preparation. Ritual elements need to be gathered, detritus tidied away and the studio transformed with blankets and candles and cushions into a ritual space.

“I was very mindful that these ‘pickings’ were going to somehow provide a frame and connect us to the earth/ground of the session.” – Reflection by Sue

An hour before the session three of us walked the Goldsmiths grounds, picking leaves and petals from the many bushes and trees that border the surrounding streets and alleyways. As I scoop them up, I am mindful of their shapes, textures and colours and how they will create and adorn a shoreline for the large, circular canvas we have carefully cut and laid out in the studio.

This process of gathering from the campus grounds connects and embeds me in the conference theme as I remind myself we are making a place within the studio; a canvas space within which participants will move and be drawn around, creating together a new landscape.

Guarding the Space

Participants start to enter and we direct them gently, mostly nonverbally, to take off their shoes, discard belongings and find a cushion. We receive them in, rather than monitoring or checking whether they have signed up to the limited list, the list which protects the ritual nature of the space.

“I feel pulled towards becoming a guard at the edge of a precious space, as if determining who will get access to the watering well, to this nourishing ritual?” – Reflection by Penny

A sense of pressure rises as I sit waiting to begin, holding the quiet circle space as still more expectant participants arrive. Some understand and leave quietly disappointed. Annette begins introductions as Christina stands to protect the circle from others coming in. I feel the need to reinforce the protection of the ritual space, stand and walk around the circle towards the door. I am uncertain this is acceptable and yet feel pulled to create a stronger border, a firmer edge, a clear frame of who is in the circle, in the ritual, and who cannot join at this time.

I decide to usher those for whom there is now no space outside, outside the studio door, to create a wall between the ritual space which has begun and the discussion. I feel clear and firm and state that I am containing when it is suggested I am excluding. I feel conflicted and for a moment pulled away from the precious ritual space behind the door. I gesture clearly and stand the ground and, very disappointed, the travellers leave.

Afterwards I feel uncomfortable at rejecting someone because we wanted to have a precious space and then it strikes me that what we had embodied and re-enacted was the theme of the conference: Finding spaces Making places: exploring social and contemporary themes. The conference was exploring 'social, cultural, and political' issues of space, the 'convicted and contested' spaces and places. In addition, on the university grounds a camp was set up and exhibitions which provoked experience and dissuasion about the dispossessed, the homeless, the stateless, the powerless - refugees, migrants, those with nowhere to call home.

I had experienced an edge, an uncomfortable edge where I had become unwittingly (and necessarily) the border guard, the one who decides yes or no; who gets access to the water well, to the nourishing ritual? By taking up the challenge of creating a safe space for a wonderful collective body mapping experience within the limited confines of a conference setting we were also enacting the inequality of opportunity globally, nationally, locally. It was almost as if I had taken up the position of the rich part of town wanting to

have its special artistic experiences and could only do so if there were no outsiders who might not appreciate the significance or who might create a nuisance.

It brought up strongly for me the concept of 'otherness' and what interplay there is with 'other' in all of our arts therapies and related therapeutic ventures. How do we create a safe enough space without in some way offering containment that in essence might require a border, an edge? How pliable is the space? The place? It was essential to have the contained space in order for there to be an extraordinary relational experience with a group of strangers to each other. To have deep connections be made and felt. Strangely, in order for the depth of connection to happen there needed to be some exclusivity, some definition of focus, of space. A precious space with a liminal nature was created because there was a threshold.



Stepping into Place

As the ritual begins we are gathered at the edge of a large circular canvas on

the ground. We stand and through conscious movement we connect with breath, bone, muscle and sensation to set up camp within. Through walking we reinforce the container and establish the border – a powerful collective act.

“The sound of these women pacing round took my breath away. It was like delineating this space, tracing or marking, laying down something, like cutting something into the landscape that owned the space.” –
Reflection by Sue

Standing at the shoreline I am aware of all the feet and the path trodden to arrive at this point in time. Silently we stand across from each other, sensing the moment. The stories contained within the women's bodies before me fill me with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety that these first steps would mark such a sacred beginning.

We turn and meditatively walk the circumference of the canvas' shoreline, marking this shared space and finding our places. The sound of footsteps catches my breath and my body is filled with their reverberating gentleness. Footsteps echo through my being and I am momentarily transported to a vast landscape, cocooned within a group of women treading an ancient path. The studio floor has disappeared and in its place I imagine soil and desert, mountains and valleys brushing against the skin of my feet. The collective sense of mystery, of women tracing and outlining what is to come without the knowledge of quite how it will reveal itself.

We walk on, circling the petals and leaves and I feel a quiver in the core of my being that something powerful and extraordinary is about to take place, that will be shaped by the lives and sharing of these women present. Steps are intentional, deliberate and without words or prompting find a common rhythm.

In seemingly timeless motion we arrive back at our starting point and turn to face each other. We have journeyed back to our place, our space on the shoreline, mindful and full of the path to get there that we have encountered

together.

Slowly we bend to scoop up some of the leaves and petals found at the shoreline and together we cast them onto the canvas, and the air is filled with pinks and greens that flutter and shoot across the space, before finding their settling place on the canvas. Now there is a landscape before me, a wonderful, rich, fertile cascade of life at the centre of us all.

We have announced our arrival, heralded our coming, joined together and wait expectantly for what is to be created together.

The action and pattern of casting leaves is felt by one participant to be a blessing.



Coming into Being

In her own time, each woman steps onto the canvas and in amongst the leaves and petals, finds a place and makes a space to inhabit. Onto this map her body outline is traced and one by one, as each woman's shape is brought into being, our collective landscape emerges.

“As I watched people step in, waiting to draw around them, I was struck by a sense of excitement that there would be a time when somehow everybody would be represented but that also I didn’t know what that would look like.” – Reflection by Annette

It is this excitement and anticipation of what might come, this waiting for human form to manifest, that creates the ritual energy in the second round of the Collective Body Mapping Ritual. Women around the circle and women stepping into the circle all fall into a slow and attentive pace of witnessing and moving. Every woman knows that new territory is being charted and new form is being shaped. As a result, each step and gesture takes on a sacred feel: a toe touching the paper and finding hold right next to the outline of another woman already traced; a hand gently brushing petals and leaves aside to make a clearing for the whole body to lie down; the sound of skin brushing over paper as one woman stretches out; the exhale of another as her body yields into the ground where she has come to rest.

In what looks like a group garden now the co-holders of the ritual come to tend to and mark the outline of the women on the ground. A gentle touch and whisper declares her arrival. In this moment the one touching and the one touched both feel the impact of human contact and receive a sense of the other’s being right there and then. The quiver of fear jumps over skin borders in the same way as the warmth of muscles relaxing spreads from one body world to another. The place of contact becomes the starting point for the crayon to trace around the woman now held in care and awe.

The outline of each woman is co-created. It is not just a simple reflection or solitary imprint. The bodyline rather is a story line of what has been encountered, experienced, thought of and reacted to by both women in the time that it takes to complete the crayon’s path around her body. Some of it is visible in the density of colour, the double take of line or little openings where hair had spread and got over and under the hand of the woman guiding the crayon. Bigger gaps appear where pre-existing outlines of other women are

met and not crossed. Some of it is not visible but felt in the rhythm of the tracing, the pauses, the movements of the woman tracing, her body following her hand holding the crayon. When beginning and end of the line have finally met the tending woman bids farewell and joins again the outer circle of witnesses.

Now comes the moment in which the new shape is revealed. The woman on the ground gradually lifts, sits and stands up and with each shift more of her outline comes into vision. Her vision and that of the others, too. It is a moment of suspension, of abated breath: 'a silent feeling' is how one of us calls it. It reminds me of the moment after a baby has been born and all wait for the first unaided breath, the first cry clearly announcing its presence in this world. The presence of the body outline on the canvas can evoke a strong emotional response. Does it look as expected? Does it look like me and you? How does it relate to others who are on paper, too? And in that meeting and overlapping of lines, what shows and what doesn't?

In the closing exchange at the end of this round we share poignant moments and what they mean to us. I remember the rain and thunder which had started half way through this round. I had just witnessed one woman settle on the ground, turning around, stretching out on her back and opening her arms wide. She was the only woman lying face up. With her hands she had scooped up some leaves and petals and thrown them into the air. Falling back down, one petal had landed on the centre of her forehead. It was then that the heavens opened and rain drops started to drum onto the tin roof above us. She remembers it as a blessing, I remember it as spirit coming in. Others experienced it as watering the planted.

This is the moment that I always wait for and never know how and when it comes. When it does – and it always does in some unexpected way or another - it changes the collective body mapping from a creative exploration to an experience of the sacred. For me, this is what makes it a ritual in which I feel met by 'the other' in flesh and in spirit.





Honouring one another

Each woman takes a handful of soil as it is passed around the circle and places it within the body outlines of another, to honour them. Through this network of relationships, the giving and receiving of gifts, our collective landscape evolves.

“I remember feeling called to place the soil on this mover’s womb area and feeling the wetness of the soil, something so organic, and the sense of weight as I used my body to push down and imprint the map.” –

Reflection by Christina

In the second phase of the ritual it is this sense of feeling called, of following one’s impulse, desire, image or sensation, abandoning for a moment the logical and the rational, that allows each woman to trust her bodies’ wisdom to honour another. Each woman takes a risk, both as she steps onto the canvas with her handful of earth to care for another and as she witnesses another caring for her. It is deeply relational, spontaneous and immersive. In this way, honouring another gives form to a myriad of human experiences, from the playful to the restorative.

At the beginning of this phase, the bowl of soil is passed from woman to woman, making its slow journey through our hands around the map. In this ritual act we share a resource; the earth. The air feels laden with anticipation and solemnity as we prepare yet again to move into the unknown together. Echoed in the circling of the bowl, is a sense of carving down, deeper and deeper into the ground.

With my small mound of soil and a certainty that surprises me I am first to step in. I move directly to her outline, the one whom I shall honour. As I mark her body there is such tenderness in me and yet it touches something raw within and I tremble. I come out and others come in, each with their unique way of offering. Some are sure, others tentative, some scatter or drop the soil while others sculpt or press. All is witnessed and all body outlines are seen and touched in this way.

Our map changes. A spine emerges, another's hair is drawn in, the roundness of a breast is emphasised. Absorbing the whole of this textured visual landscape in its creation, I see hills, forests, valleys and rivers. My urge to dive in and explore is visceral.

Now, in the closing of this round we share what we have seen, thought and felt. In a voice rich with emotion, the woman whose body I have honoured, speaks of past pain felt in that part of her body which I had been drawn to attend to. With gratitude she speaks of feeling more healed through my action. Hearing this touches me deeply and her gift to me is that, like the deepening of a sigh as the last bit of air escapes, I relax a little further into my body's wisdom and the power beyond it.





Holding the Whole

Together we lift, turn and mould our map eventually returning it to the ground. As it lies in the centre of our circle, a mound of paper, leaves and earth, the ritual echoes within us.

“I still see a hint of the circle at that moment, in the petals and the leaves that are left of the original shoreline and for me it evokes a sense of, oh look, we’ve been here! It’s like a trace, the remnants of something magical that has happened and now it is over but we’ve left a mark.” – Reflection by Christina

At the heart of the ritual’s closing phase is ‘collective action’, through which the group as a whole comes into focus. Where a sense of ‘I’ and then ‘you’, were prominent, now a sense of ‘us’ takes centre stage. Emphasised by the map’s changing structure and impermanence, the ritual is ending and we begin to wonder about what has happened and what will we take from it.

Together we release the map from where it is fastened to the ground. As we lift and circle it between us our world turns, exposing to each a new

perspective. We drum the canvas up and down, now fast, now slow. It beats against the air, making loud its presence, exhaling and inhaling, vibrating and enlivening. We wash the bodies as organic matter tumbles from their outlines towards the centre. Heavy earth threatens to come crashing through the canvas. It feels perilous and I am fully awake.

Moving closer together we fold our map up, over and down onto the ground. Our creation, like a womb, contracts. Paper crunches and body outlines collide as we too become physically connected. We mould it with our hands and feet, leaning in, reaching out, shaping, pressing, treading. Now it lies between us wrinkled and brown, like the afterbirth.

We return to where the shoreline was and sitting amongst what is left of the dispersed leaves and petals, we witness our map in silence for a while. In our speaking we share a sense of loss and a desire to hold sacred what has been. But what has been? I wonder to myself. What was birthed in me and in others? Actions, images, thoughts and emotions, rich with meaning have been expressed, witnessed and felt. I feel nourished, grateful and connected to these woman, but above all I feel a sense of awe and without analysis or deconstruction, for me it is the mystery that prevails.





Closure

At the closing of the ritual a group decision needs to be made about what to do with the map. There is a thought about burning it in the communal conference fire and in doing so becoming part of the larger collective community but the rain makes this impossible. So we agree that Sue will place it in her compost, thus returning it to the earth. Some months later she shares that it is well embedded into her compost, fertilizing it with such richness of emotion and experience. It feels precious.







Ending Anecdote

After the ritual ends, Annette and Christina seek out the tents set up on the campus greens. This improvised and ever changing camp is part of the Participatory Art Installation spanning the whole duration of the conference. In

the rain today it is quiet and devoid of people. Christina and Annette decide to retreat to one of the tents which is decorated with golden material and lined with soft fabrics inside. It feels homely and the perfect place to reflect upon the experience of the collective body mapping ritual. They spend over an hour in this place, for some of it Penny joins to add her thoughts. Before leaving, they write a thank you note to the tent's creator.

Later that day, Sue is in a group reflecting on the ending of the Participatory Art Installation. Suddenly, two women enter the room, beaming excitedly and holding a letter exclaiming 'look what someone has left in our tent. How lovely they have thanked us for their time spent there!'

From the sacred space of the ritual to the communal space of the tented camp, a place has been made, inhabited and honoured. Human contact has been made across the divide. The Ritual is complete!

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