

## Oriana Fox & AND Festival

### Live Art Therapy: This Workshop Will Change Your Life For The Better!

27-28 July 2012

6 Participants: Kate Baird, Harriet Fleuriot, Scarlett Lassof, Alister Lownie, Lorena Rivero de Beer and Lena Simic

Tucked away in the idyllic setting of Grizedale Forest, Cumbria, this workshop examined the relationship between live art and therapy. It entailed looking to performance for solutions to personal problems as well as to assess the relevance of therapy as a creative goal. Participants were asked to choose one particular issue to focus on and together we would generate ways to combat it. Some of us tried to find resolution; others resisted the limitations of existing definitions of therapy and the very notion of 'before' and 'after'. On the final day of the workshop Oriana's mother Angela Monti Fox, who is a trained psychotherapist, provided her professional perspective via individual, 30-minute skype therapy sessions with each artist.

#### Day 1

We drew pictures that represented our identities. We talked about where we were coming from as well as our expectations and hopes. In pairs we experimented with phototherapy, taking turns playing the photographer/therapist and the subject/client. We shared our images, a meal and a room in a hostel.

#### Day 2

We did performance lectures incorporating the images taken the day before. We got feedback. Several of us contested the idea that we needed to change. We each had a brief, one-to-one psychotherapy session over skype. We went on a silent walk in the forest and tried out some primal scream therapy.

BEFORE



Harriet didn't know what to do.

AFTER



Harriet took an uncertain leap.

BEFORE



Alister was in touch with his sensitive side.

AFTER



Alister got acquainted with his inner man-dog.

BEFORE



Scarlett hid her problems in the closet.



(She wished she could free herself from them entirely.)

AFTER



Scarlett learned to bring her problems out in the open and they all shared a lovely spot of tea.

## Oriana's thoughts on the workshop:

After the ice-breaker activities which I had hoped would get the group to open up to each other, I shared that if I were a participant in this workshop, the issue I would have liked to focus on for myself would be my people-pleasing tendencies. Whilst being a people-pleaser doesn't seem to be the heaviest of problems or even necessarily always negative, it is one of my biggest hurdles because it prevents me from actually knowing what it is I want for myself. Many of my day-to-day choices and big life decisions could be made by consensus instead of by my gut or my thinking if I allow this habit to get out of hand. In a situation such as this workshop where I was the leader, this had serious repercussions; being a little too sensitive to the dynamics of the group I was a bit too accommodating and not assertive enough, leaving the participants feeling at times that they were without sufficient guidance. Add to this the fact that I didn't see myself as an expert imparting wisdom onto participants – I wanted to facilitate these artists' explorations and I hoped to learn some tips from them too. The result, I believe, was that I came off as flaky. In the end, even though I was not a participant and instead the leader, I found that the most profound lesson I got from the workshop was indeed that being a people-pleaser can backfire. It certainly did in this case.

In aiming the 2-days toward *resolution* instead of, for example, *discovery* I was actually making the workshop's *raison d'être* my own desire to please. If I could help these artists to resolve an issue, clearly I will have succeeded at pleasing them – results! I realise now that on some level I set myself up to fail. Much to my chagrin, the participants seemed quite critical of the notion of resolution, some even openly objected to having to pin down their focus to one issue, arguing that this oversimplified the reality of their life circumstances. Lena commented on the notion of 'Before' and 'After', which was the premise of the phototherapy exercise (and the mainstream makeover formula), as being capitalist and superficial. Some participants also seemed surprised that the workshop focused so heavily on their individual problems, arguing that live art can be therapeutic for more than just the practitioners. While I agree with this, I think the promotional and preparation materials as well as the application itself should have served to foreground this emphasis.

In fact, one of the questions I had asked applicants to answer was what particular problem do they want to address during the workshop. Relatively few of the applicants offered up a candid response to this question; 4 out of the 6 participants wrote about intellectual and artistic 'problems'. Therefore I knew it would be a challenge to get them to open up and I hoped my own willingness to talk about personal matters as well as the one-to-one phototherapy sessions would succeed where the cold black and white text of the online call for applicants had failed. One of the main criticisms of 'therapy' as a motivation for or function of art is that it leads to work that is *too* personal, narcissistic and therefore apolitical. The objection to focusing on a personal problem by at least two or three of the participants was therefore also guided by these

conceits. On day 2, for example, Alister commented that the workshop premise seemed to be that "we each have issues to be fixed, therefore we are broken". Lorena followed this up by talking about Marx's dialectic and that in order to achieve 'wellbeing'/contentment you must either be A) fighting to change the world or 2) in denial and living in a delusional, fantasy world.

I really appreciated when on Day 1 Lorena said she had a problem with the word 'therapy' and that she wanted to clarify its meaning. At that point I had misunderstood her to mean that for her therapy is "a way of understanding how people are affected by social structures". I didn't get her to elucidate this until Day 2 when she said she did not think that's what therapy meant, but she wished it did. I agree that this new definition is appealing because it makes the therapeutic automatically political. But what does a therapeutic treatment based on this principle look like and how does it work? I would venture that it could definitely take the form of live art.

Be that as it may, I still wasn't able to cure what ailed these participants, (and in some cases I still have no idea what their problem is!) adamant as so many of them were, that society needed changing, not them. Granted, the responsibility wasn't all mine. When they came back from their phototherapy jaunts and showed their images, half of them completely perplexed me; I still had no idea what issue they had decided to address or what methods they might have imagined could move them from the 'Before' image to the 'After'. Therefore, I asked them each to devise a 'performance lecture' utilising the images and explaining their transformation. I thought this would serve to illuminate both the problems and possible courses of actions or means towards a solution. If they each could act in their lecture as if they had achieved the 'After' (the preferred state of being, that is, having resolved their issue) if they could fake it, then perhaps they'd be a step closer to making it happen, whether the solution resided in their psyches, behaviours or externally in the world around them. My contention was that this exercise would generate actual methods that we could then put into practice towards the end of the workshop and beyond. That was the idea, but boy was I underestimating the defiance of this group, or maybe I just don't know how to account for the wills of others, the creativity of artists, or how elusive change can be.

If I had the chance to do this workshop all over again, there are many things I would change, but first and foremost, I would act against my tendency to please others and instead be much more directive. I would also plan to do more doing and making activities, leaving less time for the cerebral and the academic, which dominated this particular incarnation. As a result of DIY9, my mother and I are planning to collaborate on a longer workshop that will aim to help live artists *discover* what is already therapeutic and reparative about their own work. With a new and improved leadership style, I will also urge participants to try out new approaches that might be uncomfortable or foreign and take risks that might end up not solving the problem, but at least will give the feeling that we were all pushed one way or another to try something different.

## The participants' thoughts on the workshop:

### Scarlett:

"I am still having trouble with talking about my problems just in daily life, but I do want to get more therapy, and the workshop definitely made me consider using performance for more personal things."

"I never expected the skype therapy session to make me think so deeply about myself and my beliefs."

"I think working one on one with a partner for the before/after photos was therapeutic in itself. The way we talked through our issues was performative, it was in a philosophical and art context, as it was a task but still like having a private talk, and somehow it was more useful being strangers for this exercise."

### Lorena:

"Thinking about my dreams and past memories in the context of live art therapy made me on the one hand remember the feeling and experience of my own analysis that I finished three and a half years ago, and on the other hand left me feeling a certain freedom and excitement about what therapy can be in that context."

"I felt confused by the lack of structure and what felt like a lack of information, but somehow that aspect of the workshop was the very thing that encouraged me to find my own meanings, the latter feeling quite challenging and similar to my experience of psychoanalysis. I was also quite intrigued by Oriana's relationship with her mother and what it means and does to the workshop to include her in such a fundamental role; somehow as the one who holds meaning."

5 things **Harriet** got out of the workshop:

- Confidence in myself as an artist, through presenting myself in a space where I identify myself to others as an artist
- More understanding of the individual experience of going through therapy
- Lovely contact with other artists working in different and diverse ways from me
- Potential ideas and avenues to further explore or think about
- Some time to just sit and think while we were there!

### Harriet:

"I didn't ever really consider the dynamic of group therapy enough, and how collaborating with each other on our individual and personal therapeutic process could be rewarding and helpful. By seeing someone think out the way they might like to perform or create something, you become their audience, you go on the journey with them, learning lessons that you can apply to your own journey and it's a really lovely feeling knowing that you have helped facilitate them. And where there is a mutual exchange, where someone returns that facilitation back to you, can really bring a new perspective to the work that you intend to create, like a mini performance in itself."



Scarlett delivering her performance lecture.



Lorena performing the animal, roaring



Lorena being the animal, listening.

5 things **Lena** got out of the workshop:

- forest
- insights about myself (through therapy session)
- new people
- new techniques
- singing trees

And 2 more things she never expected:

- found myself drawing like I did as a child
- learnt some Scottish dancing

**Lena:**

“I feel that there is subversion of the term 'therapy' when used in combination with 'live art'.”

“I realized that there are other paths to explore... my issue was around whether I should continue working on certain strand of my performance practice. I came to realize that there are different methods/ways how to work on it... so for example, through music and popular culture figures (like Kurt Cobain) and I would have never came to him if it wasn't for Grizedale Forest in Lake District.”

“I loved the skype therapy session! Angela was brilliant and so well prepared; an amazing experience! I discovered some things about me I never knew before...”

“The workshop was inspiring!”

**Kate:**

“I came away thinking a lot about therapy and my own personal relationship with it. I particularly enjoyed the time spent with Oriana's mum and creating our images outside in the hills.”

**Alister:**

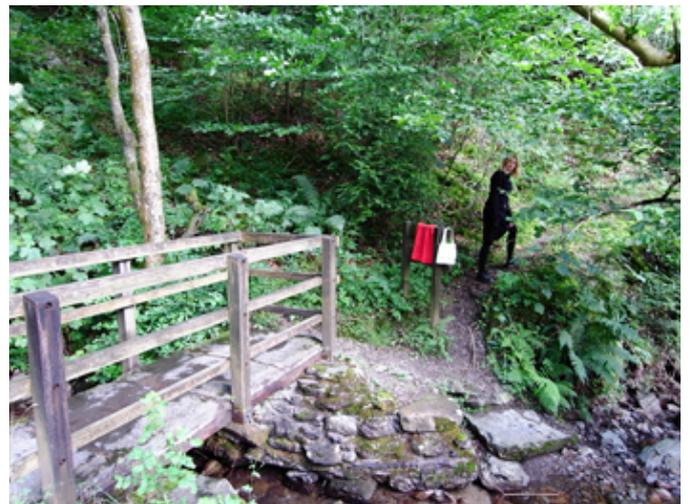
“The therapy session was really interesting: I didn't know what to expect from that experience, and I enjoyed the chance to talk to somebody so keen to open up the past in a short time and so unafraid of doing so! We also managed a really good balance of talking about me and my past, and about my work and performance ethics.”



Lena's identity drawing.



This is Lena before: What's the issue? What's the problem? She is unsure about crossing the bridge. Bridge is a metaphor, can you get onto the other side, all that...



This is Lena after: Has 'the after' been achieved? No, we are still in those moments we skipped. We haven't arrived at the moment after, the after.



Kate before.

Last word from the therapist, Angela Monti Fox:

All of the participants were interested in their own inner motivations and clearly this "introspective ability" informs their work. All were eager to interpret their dream(s) and I had the clear impression that this was not just due to the fact that they had been asked to record their dreams prior to the workshop. Having read each participant's application materials, I was able to relate the meaning of the dreams to their work; and in each case the participants validated this. Clearly the artists' work is a way of resolving unconscious issues, whether that is the intention of the artist or not.