

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

## Welcome Speech

### Conference Organiser

#### Dr Sally Skaife

Welcome to this International Art Therapy Conference: Finding a Voice, Making a Mark. First of all I would like to introduce the conference organising committee – Stand Up! Robin Tipple, Chris Brown, Kevin Jones, Jill Westwood, Lesley Morris, Susan Rudnik, Lisa Sewell, Diana Velada, Dean Reddick, Sandra Marcantuono, Susan Williams, Barbara Allen, Vivienne Rose. There are also others who are not here but have been working behind the scenes and will be working tirelessly during the conference.

This is us, and who are you? Well, there are 26 countries represented here from 6 continents, so I am pleased to say that this is a truly international conference!

So, what inspired us to create this conference?

It was the desire to bring art therapists, and others involved in similar work, who work with **different** client groups in **different** contexts, using **different** theoretical models in **different** countries, together.

Together we are strong.

That is not to say that we are all going to agree by any means! The idea is that the conference gives us an arena in which to become aware of our similarities and differences and to understand what determines these. Through this process we develop.

So why the title for this conference, 'Finding a Voice, Making your Mark: Defining Art Therapy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century'? I'll start with the last bit first – defining art therapy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

When I started out in the profession, many years ago, I was frequently asked 'What actually is art therapy?' and the question always gave me this 'stumped for words' feeling. Whatever I said in response, I always felt was inadequate. Nowadays, I am asked it less often as most people have heard about art therapy and assume they know what it is. However, I think that it is important that we keep asking the question.

The attempt to define art therapy though is, of course, an impossible one. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we could not expect there to be one answer, but nevertheless we are justifiably called upon to tell clients and other health professionals what we do. To develop ourselves as a profession, we also need collective statements; we need to avoid fragmentation into multiple, competing practices. We are faced then with a contradiction: Art Therapy is indefinable because every client and context is unique, but we have to try. Let us embrace the contradiction!

The problem is that the increasing marketization of health and social care has resulted in the need for non-ambiguous statements to describe our work, and particular kinds of evidence to prove its effectiveness that can seem antithetical to what we do. It seems more than ever important, then, that we keep asking the question about what art therapy is, and in that process

we keep our practice alive and responsive to the particular client in his/her particular context. This is what we will be doing at this conference.

Starting the process of thinking about who we are and where we are going will be kicked off by our two keynote speakers, Tessa Dalley from Britain and Lynn Kapitan from the USA who will be talking to us about their view of the challenges that face art therapists on either side of the Atlantic.

The panel presentations that begin each day are particularly focussed to try to address the determinants of our practice, the Tuesday panel looking at context in terms of place and client group, the Wednesday panel at the significance on practice of the professional identity of the practitioner and lastly on the Thursday, how theoretical ideas shape our practice. Each panel member will describe aspects of their practice and we will attempt to learn from the similarities and differences.

The paper presentations on the afternoons of Tuesday and Wednesday, rather than reflecting the organising committee's attempts to tease out the determinants of practice, represent what the profession has put forward, what **you** are concerned about and thinking about, and it has been fascinating to see what this is. We decided to group these papers randomly as a representation of a way of thinking of art therapy practice, that is, not as techniques applied to different client diagnoses, but as particular examples of thinking and practice.

The art exhibition, which is outside here in the Whitehead foyer and in the Kingsway corridor, also represents what you the delegates have wanted to show.

Now to the first part of the title of the conference 'Finding a Voice, Making your Mark'. This is the conference organisers response to the 'what is art therapy' question; it attempts to put the voice or mark of the client at the forefront of the therapy, that is, in contrast to an idea of art therapy as about a particular technique that will suit a specifically defined client group – the

commodification mode of art therapy frequently thrust upon us, and one which is actually in direct opposition to the idea of the individual as only who they are through their relationship with others. It is a shift of power away from knowledgeable health professionals towards the interests of clients.

Of course, in order for the voice or mark of the clients to be meaningful, there needs to be a receptive and responsive audience – this is the reflective aspect of the client themselves, the therapist and the therapeutic field. We have attempted to shape the conference as a mirror of this idea of practice. In this conference we will all be speakers, makers and audience. To do this we have fore-grounded art-making and experiential groups. The idea is, firstly, that the ideas and clinical practice that we hear about in the various presentations is processed through art-making and talking in the groups; secondly, the personal experience of being at the conference, as a whole, can be explored and documented visually; lastly, the experience of being in the groups will give us the opportunity to be involved in the process of shaping our identity through our engagement with one another. This developing process will be one which we will perform, be able to see representation of, and be able to reflect on, together, in the Conference Art Therapy Large Group.

Lastly, I would like to mention the exhibition, which you will all have had at least a glimpse of already in getting here. It has been very exciting seeing this coming together and I think that there will be an interesting visual and verbal dialogue at the conference with the images that you, the delegates (and us the organisers), have put forward to be exhibited.

Thank you and I hope the conference will be a great experience for you. I will now hand over to Dr Andy Gilroy to introduce our two keynote speakers.