Textiles and Place Conference, Manchester School of Art (2018)

'Can art save us and what makes it different to therapy?'

A presentation by Katie Smith and Kate Genever



Abstract:

Working predominantly in stitch, Smith & Genever develop text-based artworks which respond to experiences of working with marginalised communities. Work is often co-created and always process led. By recognising and promoting stitch as an act of creative meaning making and resistance against the chaos of life, the pair use sewing as a non- threatening way to create safe spaces for people to explore tricky stuff and to 'power up.' This approach allows a connection at a deeply emotional level, which is mirrored in the resulting artworks, from banners and quilts to capes and jackets. The pair believe that art is a serious business and that alongside the creation of work that is authentic, powerful, and relevant, it can provide routes and opportunities for personal growth and the building of resilience.

Smith &Genever are currently beginning work on an ACE funded research and making project in an inpatient unit for young people with acute mental health issues; it asks the question 'Can art save us?' In collaboration with the unit's art psychotherapist, the project has been developed to exist in a space where the disciplines of art and therapy can co-habit. The ambition of the project is to encourage deep reflection on practice whilst providing opportunities for the young people, and the staff and carers who support them, to explore internal and external dialogues through making. They

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propose a literal response to the statement: 'Textiles through its practice and familiar materiality acts as a means to create dialogue' by engaging the experts in the conference room in a facilitated conversation. Their intention is to interrogate the power of making within the context of mental health by considering the question 'can art save us, and what makes it different to therapy?'

Our presentation used an autoethnographic approach to share our work and thinking in progress. We were keen to communicate that unlike the majority of research presented at the conference ours was embedded in the unknown (this was reflected in the T-Shirts we wore whilst presenting).

Script:

KG: Hello. Thank you for welcoming us, we have really enjoyed listening and being part of the last 2 days.

We are Katie Smith and Kate Genever. We are artists and work collaboratively as Smith-Genever. We have made these T shirts specially for our presentation. What you see behind us is a rolling collection of some of our work made with many people in many settings and across many sites. They share what people said to us or wanted to sew after a conversation, period of engagement, or active work. Importantly, we increasingly see these conversations and discussions as the work itself.

KS: We work predominantly in stitch, developing text-based artworks which respond to experiences of working with marginalised communities. By recognising and promoting stitch as an act of creative meaning making and resistance against the chaos of life, we use sewing as a non- threatening way to create safe spaces for people to explore tricky stuff and to 'power up.' This approach allows a connection at deeply emotional level, which is mirrored in the resulting artworks, from banners and quilts to capes and jackets. We believe art is a serious business and that alongside the creation of work that is authentic, powerful, and relevant, it can provide routes and opportunities for personal growth and the building of resilience.

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We are currently funded by the Arts Council England to work in partnership with an art psychotherapist and alongside clinical, teaching, and auxiliary staff and young people at an inpatient mental health unit: Ash Villa in Lincolnshire. The title of the project is: *No one's coming to save you.*

The following is an email conversation we undertook for this event.

KG: When I stand in Ash Villa alongside those kids, with you and the staff I feel a sadness. The weight of life hangs heavy, and I often think due to the enormity of the traumas and hurt and any attempt at art and scale is pointless. If I'm honest, all of our efforts hold an inadequate truth. *No one's coming to save you,* is a good name; it makes me feel sad, the young people at Ash Villa make me feel sad, sewing makes me feel sad, though it is a poetic sadness that makes my fears bearable, and I suppose drives the work we do. When you think about the title 'No one's coming to save you' do you think, like me – yes, no-one is coming, but art is… maybe?

KS: I've been trying to pin down what it is I feel when we're at Ash Villa, because I'm not sure it's sadness. There's always an undercurrent; a restlessness and tension bubbling below the surface but this seems to be held within the space and dissipates once we start to stitch. I feel protected and enjoy the respite from the noise of world that our stitching sessions provide. I feel the comfort of the secure environment too but I'm also a little unnerved by it because it's so far removed from 'real' life. Thinking about it, it's odd that I'm unnerved by this detachment because surely this is what stitching provides? The act of making helps me to create a space to reflect, process, and deal with the tricky stuff of life whilst simultaneously taking time out from it. Maybe this is how I understand 'no-one's coming to save you, but art is.' For me it's about creating a secure, protected, and comfortable space both physically and mentally that allows me to care for myself. Do you think that the challenge for us at Ash Villa is to encourage the kids to create these spaces for themselves?

KG: I also recognise that detached yet active space, I'm sure the people we are presenting to get it too? Stitching or crochet creates a space for me to let things come. It often feels like that moment in between sleep and wake when your brain is

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not totally on, but it offers a great calmness and clarity. I suppose it also a similar feeling when I walk a dog. I think it's that stuff that Ingold talks about, Morphogenesis, which *"places the maker from the outset as a participant in amongst a world of active materials. Rather than Hylomorphism, when a practitioner imposes forms internal to the mind upon a material world."* I agree that Ash Villa feels like a place outside of 'real' life and I suppose while we continue to disconnect from it, it will always be directed by those in power who know best. Again, it's the difference between hylomorphism and morphogenesis processes.

In this project of ours I'm interested in how the sewing space offers equality across the patients, us, and the team. The staff are more than modelling, they are also self-soothing. I suppose it's like Sister Corita Kent says: "*The mind can be a noisy and cluttered place that can drown out the heart. To put your conscious and critical brain on hold can allow creativity to seep in unfettered."* This makes me wonder, rather than getting people to create a space to make, (which feels like a very rational decision; an outside of yourself decision), are we in fact, through our approach, 'letting creativity come,' letting feeling in maybe? I wonder, is this part of the not knowing stuff, sitting with not knowing and surrendering to the moment? Being morphogenic perhaps?

KS: This makes me think about some of the things that Ash Villa's art psychotherapist has reflected on through this project and shared with us. She's talked about experiencing a 'levelling' and a 'togetherness' which she says is difficult to achieve within the day-to-day constraints and protocols of the unit. She describes us as a collective, (artists, staff, and young people) with a variety of skills and experiences 'working in the unknown' without the expectation of a predetermined, perfect end result. I think this has been particularly hard for the teaching staff who aren't used to a process-led, open-ended way of working; they are used to working towards an end result with a set of measurable steps to get there. Not knowing what 'it' looks like or how long it might take us to get there can be scary, as can being a participant in the group. Maybe then, there's a letting go that needs to happen in order to let creativity come? A vulnerability that brings authenticity. We are all laying ourselves bare, transforming our thoughts and feelings into something tangible for all to see.

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Maybe it's the stuff that Rozika Parker talks about, describing the handmade, personal product as a 'form of thought.' She writes '*the embroiderer holds in her hands a coherent object which exists outside in the world and in her head […] she sees a positive reflection of herself in her work and importantly, in the reception of her work by others.'* Are we making the invisible, visible?

KG: Ha, that's nice. Like being able to see ghosts, which is like that amazing sewn box we saw in the Whitworth Collection from 300 odd years ago where the young bride-to-be stitched stories of powerful-no-mess-women from legends and the bible onto her dowry. At the time people would have been able to read the images and meaning clearly. No words needed. It was clear she was going to kick ass, which brings to mind the idea that we just need to be able to tap into all of the 'language' in play in order to see or hear properly.

KS: I think that stitching's ability to make the invisible visible provides us with an extra layer of communication. Tapping into the 'language' of stitch can sometimes be the only way to instigate difficult conversations or to reveal uncomfortable truths. I'm thinking specifically about some of the complex issues we've encountered through the kids' using materials in both a constructive and destructive way and our responses to each. The dichotomy is that in order for the kids to stitch new meanings and understandings to 'save themselves' we have to provide them with tools and materials that they could potentially use to harm themselves. It's a risk that requires careful management, but like we often say, we have to keep turning up; this work is too important to give up on.

KG: Yes, turning up, being resilient to all of their choices is what I have taken from this week and the difficult session. I am reminded of my own resilience or sometimes lack of it; both professionally and personally. This project has resilience at its centre. For me, this relates to all areas: the delivery of new ideas and work in new settings; being a stable force with unstable participants; modelling as well as demonstrating; supporting new partners with new approaches and new issues that arise; standing here in front of this audience; being a working artist in the new world order of funders' demands; asking for less funds but making more happen…. Resilience then, of course relates to that risk you talk of, but also the risk of being wrong; of risking failure, risking by asking and by putting yourself out there by being

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vulnerable, by presenting at a conference and saying that ‘not knowing’ is ok. Risk is what we do all the time if we are brave enough to try, to look, to consider, to think again. The genius of risk and resilience then, is doing stuff, looking at stuff, trying stuff in a non-habitual way.

KS: I think there’s also something about risk being messy and uncontrollable and building space into the work for the challenges, wrong turns, and failures to be seen. I think that our stitching becomes more powerful when we embrace the uncertainty and chaos we experience when working in challenging settings; we can’t tidy it up or present something polished. I guess like the cape we made our intention is to speak the ‘truth without varnish’ and to do that, we definitely need to build resilience in ourselves.

KG: I like that we now have risk, messy, uncontrollable, and not knowing in our articulation of the work, although often, what we show doesn’t look like this; it looks finished and well made. Often, I think our banners and the work we do with people and partners, for organisations and through funding is hopelessly inadequate in the bigger scheme of things. Yet it is honest and has started or catalysed many great and memorable conversations. That’s why I’m interested in trying to make new work at Ash Villa alongside everyone that captures conversations, feelings, risk, mess, the layers of language and looking; the rough as well as the smooth. God knows whether it will work!

KS: I think that working in this way is what Brene Brown is talking about when she writes about ‘leaning into discomfort’ and having the courage to be curious; she recognises it as a powerful process that requires tenacity. I think this is what we aspire to do and that her words are a powerful place to leave this conversation:

‘Embracing the vulnerability it takes to rise up from a fall and grow stronger makes us a little dangerous. People who don’t stay down after they fall or are tripped are often trouble makers. Hard to control. Which is the best kind of dangerous possible. They are the artists, innovators and change makers.’

Thank you for listening to us.

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