

Arebyte Gallery talk by Vanessa Bartlett

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Intro:

- I am a curator and academic researcher based at UNSW Art & Design in Sydney.
- I'm very happy to have been invited to give this talk at a moment when I just happened to be visiting London, so thank you Tine and Nimrod for inviting me.
- I am going to talk about my most recent exhibition project *Group Therapy: Mental Distress in a digital age*.
- I am going to try and address specifically to two of the words that stood out for me in the framing of this talk and in Zoe's exhibition. They are the words 'ethics' and 'emotion'.
- These are not traditionally words that would be associated with curatorial practice, but in a contemporary interdisciplinary context, where art, science and technology are increasingly merging together, these works increasingly are becoming a matter for curatorial concern.
- I'm also going to try to reflect design, art and technological innovation overlap within my curatorial practice, as this is obviously an important conceptual theme behind Zoe's exhibition.

Intro to Group Therapy:

Between September 2013 and March 2015 I worked in collaboration with FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) Liverpool UK on the curation of a major exhibition about the relationship between technology and mental health. *Group Therapy: Mental Distress in a digital age* presented a diverse collection of artworks, research and design innovation exploring connections between mental health and the values, political conditions, and technologies that structure our lives. It sought to frame mental health not as a problem that affects a small cohort of people living on the fringes of society, but as a social issue that plays a part in all of our lives.

As a researcher and a curator I position this approach to the topic of mental health in line with a critique of the medical model of mental illness, most widely popularized by anti-psychiatrist R D Laing and reinforced in more contemporary movements such as critical psychiatry (Bracken et al, 2012) and neurodiversity (Mcgee, 2012). What these movements have in common is that they situate the problem of mental illness not simply in biological, brain-based factors, but in the highly structured set of rules that we use to determine so-called rational behavior. As R D Laing put it in his 1967 book *The Politics of Experience*:

‘What we call ‘normal’ is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on

experience... It is radically estranged from the structure of being'. (Laing, 1967).

The influence of these ideas is gradually gaining traction in arts practice particularly in the UK, as evidenced in the emergence of several high profile arts festivals and projects. These include *Anxiety Festival* organized by the Mental Health Foundation, which explored how 'the problem of anxiety has become a driving force in all of our lives' (Anxiety Arts Festival, 2014). What is deeply galvanizing for me about this approach to mental health in the arts is that it affords the opportunity to move beyond traditional notions of the therapeutic value of the artworks for disadvantaged or non-normative groups (as evidenced in discourses such as socially engaged practice (Kester, 2004). Instead it raises the opportunity to consider how contemporary social and political constructs impact on everybody's mental health more broadly.

Group Therapy: Mental Distress in a Digital Age brought together 14 artists working with a variety of disparate practices. It responds to an emerging nexus between pioneering artists' research using technology (Loke et al., 2013; Khut, 2007) and digital innovation in psychotherapy and healthcare (Newman, 2004). The convergence of technology as a driving force in all of these disciplines marks it as one of the major forces that is shaping our approach to mental health in 2015.

Aims and intentions of the Group Therapy exhibition:

To unpack the content of the exhibition, I am going to give you a few examples of the curatorial objectives that drove the show and how this determined the selection of the works.

To approach mental health from a political perspective

- This is evidenced for example by the inclusion of Dora Garcia's *The Deviant Majority: From Basaglia to Brazil* a film about radical alternatives to psychiatry that arose in response to the political foment of the 1960s.
- The film featured an interview with mental health activist Carmen Roll, who was part of the Socialist Patients Collective, a group of activists who linked madness to the social relations created by capitalism.
- The artist made this piece in part as a response to the legacy of **Franco Basaglia**, an Italian psychiatrist who pioneered *Democratic Psychiatry*, an Italian movement that sought reform in the psychiatric system.
- Served to demonstrate a history of political opposition to mainstream psychiatry, in the hope of framing the issue of mental health as something that is politically rather than bio-medically determined.

To encourage the viewers to reflect on their own mental health in the gallery space

- For example George Khut's *The Heart Library*, used a bio-feedback interface to encourage viewers to reflect on their own embodied state.
- Viewers lie down on a bed, link themselves up to a heart rate monitor and look at a screen above them, which projects an image of their own body. If their heart rate is going quickly then the colours on the screen will be red to reflect that anxiety. If the heart is beating slowly the colour will be a soft, blue-green glow.
- The aim is to make the user feel more aware of the dynamics of their own body, noticing how levels of anxiety can fluctuate and how by controlling their own breathing they can become calmer and in control of their physical state.
- The artist has used this technology in clinical practice to help manage pain and anxiety in young children about to undergo painful medical procedures, so it demonstrates the overlap between art and medical science.
- The inclusion of this kind work helped shift the focus on representation of the symptoms of mental anxiety and emotional distress as pathological other to a bodily experience that we all have in common.

To reflect on the relationship between technology and mental health

- As mentioned above, technological innovation is becoming increasingly important in clinical care.

- To evidence this I included apps such as *Doc Ready*, which helps to prepare young people for their first visit to the doctor to talk about their mental health. These apps were paired with an ECT machine, which I included as a way of underlining the fact that we have been using technology to try to build better brains since the 1700s.
- As well as these archival and instrumental tools, the exhibition sought to reflect the more innovative intersections of art, technology and mental health through projects such as *Labyrinth Psychotica* by Jennifer Kanary Nikolov(a).
- This work is an artist's PhD project that it is often used in clinical settings to educate psychiatrists about what psychosis might be like. The work uses directional speakers and LED technology to create an experience that could feel a bit like psychosis.
- As views navigate this environment they find themselves subject to all of the anxiety, disorientation and emotional distress that is part of the experience of psychosis. Therefore it helps to underline the capacity that we all have for psychotic thinking.

Ethics and emotion

- I mentioned at the start that I was keen to say something about the words 'ethics' and 'emotion' and how they relate to my practice as a curator
- Although this exhibition was not a work of 'speculative design' as such, we sought to engineer emotive experiences that could create an insight into emotional distress.
- *Labyrinth Psychotica* created a speculative scenario where users could experience what psychosis might be like. The ethical question

around this is obviously is it okay to potentially engineer distressing situations if this has the positive outcome of helping people understand the problem of mental health more clearly? How far should I allow my role to become curator as caretaker for audiences?

- Art has a unique roll to play in terms of making issues around brain health politically resonant and emotionally alive in a way that is not necessarily articulated through pure science practice.
- In my research what I am beginning to think about is how in audience experience working through emotional challenge can lead to the biggest breakthroughs in terms of understanding and I think it is on these terms that we should push the ethical limits of what art and design practice might try to achieve.