

# Dancing the personal and political: A participant's response to a workshop and forum led by Petra Koppers

*Ann-maree Ellis*

*Petra Koppers, community dance artist and activist from the USA recently led a workshop in Melbourne that was hosted by the Cultural Development Network and Ausdance. Here, Ann-maree provides this response from the perspective of being a participant. Ann-maree studied Community Development in 1995, working most recently in a men's crisis accommodation service that allowed her to run (and play in) a number of community arts projects. She is studying the Graduate Diploma in Creative Art Therapies at the Melbourne Institute for Experiential & Creative Art Therapies (MIECAT) and practices and teaches a dance form called Contact Improvisation.*



**Petra Koppers at workshop**

I was very excited when I heard that Ausdance and the Cultural Development Network had arranged for Petra Koppers to give a presentation and workshop at Dancehouse. In 2005 Petra was the first person to undertake the Caroline Plummer Fellowship in Community Dance at Otago University, New Zealand. A 6-month Fellowship, it is open to anyone with a vision for using dance "in more and more positive ways to help us embrace the diversity and difference that makes our world so fantastic". This was the hope of Caroline Plummer who died of cancer in 2003 at 24, and who is honoured with the establishment of this Fellowship.

I was excited because I have my own fantasies about being paid to work with dance in community in a certain beautiful city in New Zealand. And I was excited to hear about how Petra worked with dance. Petra's visit was timely too, as I'm considering how to integrate my background in Community Development (CD) with my dance practice and my current studies in creative art therapies (MIECAT). I was thus very interested to hear her articulate a framework for her own practice of Community Art.

Community Cultural Development (CCD) seems an obvious framework to contain perspectives gained from CD, creative dance and art therapy. I have wondered however about the acceptance of art therapy approaches within a CCD context. Community artists frequently assert that their community arts work is not therapy, and I absolutely respect and agree with the importance of such a statement. However I often suspect a rejection of art therapy, despite the fact that most all artists agree that art is therapeutic.

Petra too was very clear that her work is political not therapy, so I was interested in this. She also defined her work as a communal or collaborative undertaking; about process rather than product; and a challenge to mainstream notions of dance, not defined in the same terms as professional/mainstream dance.

Much of Petra's work is in connection with disability culture. In this respect I readily understand the political nature of her work. It is about challenging the social construction of disability as a problem for the individual, whereby the individual is seen as a problem to be fixed in order to fit into society. Petra's politics fits with a social model of disability, which analyses how attitudes and structural issues (institutionalised attitudes and physical architecture) create disability through alienation. Her community arts work is about a politics of identity. It is not a about therapy in a conventional sense of fixing or curing the individual.

She is interested in the visibility of disability in her art projects and the exploration of lives-as-lived, mediating social and environmental contexts. Examples she mentioned briefly from her collaborative art explorations included outdoor work

in both natural and urban landscapes; the use of video camera as interactive creative tool; and exploration of landscape and themes such as through the 'tracks' or imprints made by wheelchairs or walking sticks for example, and the 'scars' and markings on one's body and in nature.

Projects such as 'Tracks' and 'Scars' were ongoing explorations over the space of one or two years or more. These projects were for artists with disabilities, and all artists involved in the workshops were paid in acknowledgement of their creative labour. Petra pointed out that they don't seek any form of welfare funding. Her own involvement and facilitation of projects was funded through her university position, although it wasn't clear what other funding sources supported the projects.



**Story Telling and Dance making with felt made by Petra 1.**

There was some discussion about arts funding however, as part of the day was utilised to collect responses to the Australia Council's scoping study on CCD. As Petra argued, it is necessary to challenge funding bodies to provide access to arts funding for a broader base, and challenge narrow conceptions of what dance is and the way dance is viewed.

Examples of how performance or presentation is approached in Petra's projects included the use of photography and video, presented as video-poems or photo-poems. There wasn't necessarily a live performance outcome from the projects. One project utilised interactive video installation of dancers. The possibilities for how work is presented, emerges through the projects and is in the control of all of the artists. Photography and video have been used not to document the projects, but as further tools of creative expression alongside dance and other mediums.

One of Petra's interests is in having 'audiences' actively involved in the process rather than being

passively entertained with a 'product'. The New Zealand project involved a presentation at the Dunedin Art Museum in which the audience gathered in a circle and participated in finding movements together, in an active movement-based retelling of stories collected through the project, as they were shared.

What interested me as she spoke in more depth about the New Zealand project was noticing the tangible parallels and similarities with the art therapy processes I'm studying. Particularly as Petra was very clear about her work not being therapy, it underlined for me the therapeutic nature and potential of creative arts processes. Of course it also reflected Petra's way of being in the creative relationships, and it also reflects the particular approach taught through MIECAT.

An example of similar process was in the story of an image she showed. The theme for the project explored how myths of landscape function in people's lives. Part of Petra's conception involved working with the residents of a hospice for people living with advanced stage cancer; people with very limited mobility and in the end stages of their lives, and some who also died during the time of the project. The main aspect of her work at the hospice involved collecting stories. She asked questions like: 'Who was your first storyteller? What stories did they tell? Where was your first home? What does home look like, smell like, feel like, taste like? What are the place names?'



**Story Telling and dance making 2.**

One woman spoke to Petra about the Otago Peninsula, a place she would not again visit but that was rich with memories. Petra later visited the Otago Peninsula and collected things from the beach, which spoke to the stories of those memories. She then made a photograph of the woman's hands, cupped together with fingers outstretched, echoing

the elongated and bulging outcrop of land surrounded by sea. Her aged hands cradled some small and precious looking object, perhaps something found on the beach by Petra. The rich, altered colours of the photo were akin to landscape colours and were chosen by the woman in her collaboration with Petra.

This was a very beautiful image, needing no explanation to convey a sense of the richness of story held embodied, and offered forth in gesture. What a beautiful gift back to this woman, in homage to life remembered, to home and belonging, to time and the continuing present. I've no doubt the richness and sensitivity of the image owes much to Petra's way of being with her storytellers. Often her time at the hospice, she explained, was simply spent sitting with people in silence, being present to the simple act of breathing together.

This reminded me of the art therapy approach I'm studying. In addition to the obvious use of art modes as a medium of exploration, as Petra spoke I was aware of the similar use of *phenomenological questions* (to describe actual and particular experience); the importance and attention given to the *inter-subjective, collaborative relationship*; and the attention given to *embodied experiencing*.

Petra's creation of the photograph in this example is similar to the MIECAT therapist offering a creative response to the person's story in art therapy. The creative art response in the art therapy context is seen to offer a sense of companionship, of having been listened to, been present with. It also offers a greatly expanded possibility for communication and understanding to occur through sensory, intuitive and imaginative means, in contrast to primarily talking-based therapies.

This approach to therapy values creative art processes for their therapeutic or healing potential, but also values art for its poetic rendering of feeling-sensing worlds that can't be reduced to verbally communicable statements. Art always allows and suggests the possibility of something more than what is already known.

The explicit aim of the MIECAT art therapy approach is to facilitate the development of personal meanings through attention to one's own experience. Meaning is not fixed, it is always approximate. The intention of the therapist is to help facilitate a creative process whereby the individual can develop understandings about their own life experiences in their own terms. In the MIECAT view it is this understanding of experience

and validation of personal meaning that allows the possibility of personal change. Creative arts are used to assist the focusing of attention and expand the possibilities for meaning.

I think we can say the same thing about community arts and their role in social change. Certainly in relation to Petra's projects that challenge social definitions of disability and also dance, you could say that creative arts help focus attention and expand possibilities for meaning at the level of culture. In both approaches there is a concern with questions of identity.

In hearing about Petra's approach it was easier for me to see how readily therapeutic processes can be applied within CCD practices. This seems particularly valuable to me given CCD is often employed in settings where personal change and cultural change are equally desired, such as in prisons, or around issues related to drug use, body image and mental health for example.

Obviously a central practice of both the art therapist and CCD practitioner is with processes and ways of being that facilitate creativity. Entering the creative space involves a stepping in to the unknown. Our various art forms and practices have trained us in the art of surrender to and trust of the unknown, and provide the grounding and containment within which to work with the possibilities we find.

Whether our aims are social or personal, therapeutic or political, I think the creative art therapist and CCD practitioner share the understanding that participation in creative arts offers meaningful ways of being in the world, and that collaborative processes offer powerful and respectful ways of being with others.



**Group Discussion**