Aesthetic Systems of Participatory Painting: Communicating in Third Space and mental wellbeing in Tonga

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Abstract

This thesis builds upon Homi Bhabha’s concept of Third Space\(^1\) to frame social connection and self-determination in a socially-engaged collaborative painting practice. Developed in the Polynesian kingdom of Tonga with On the Spot Arts Initiative (OTS) and involving diverse groups including patients from the Vaiola Hospital Psychiatric Ward, this research offers a new approach to collaborative painting and provides a framework to support mental health and wellbeing. I have theorised this methodology and titled it the Aesthetic System of Participatory Painting (ASOPP). Integrating mental health and contemporary art frameworks, this hybrid model promotes individual autonomy and critical thinking by supporting both harmony and difference, creating a generative space.

This research argues that by expanding modernist, individualised aesthetic systems to accommodate a social application, ASOPP projects provide opportunities for local communities to critique social structures and self-represent. This can assist in empowering participants and destabilising pre-established cultural hierarchies that hold power and often determine cultural standards.

ASOPP has also informed the accompanying documentary video used to account for the research, providing an accessible research outcome and an opportunity to self-represent for collaborative partners and participants.

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\(^1\) Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1994).
Declaration

This is to certify that

i. the thesis comprises only my original work towards the MFA except where indicated in the Acknowledgements,

ii. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

iii. the thesis is less than 20,000 words in length, exclusive of images, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed

This research project has been approved by the Human Rights Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of Melbourne. Ethics ID no. 1544318.1
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Documentary details

Please view documentary prior to reading thesis. Link and password are available here:


1. Vātaulua: Communicating in Third Space

   Password: Vataulua1
Introduction

For seventeen years I have been investigating how painting can influence human relations outside of a gallery setting. My projects during this time have involved travel determined by strangers to source subject matter for painting, I have also explored ethical values while constructing sculptural paintings in derelict dwellings.

More recently, I have been working within community mental health contexts, developing a system of collaborative painting that challenges the promotion of individualism and consequential commodification of painting. I have theorised this system as the Aesthetic System of Participatory Painting (ASOPP) through its application in the Tongan project Vātaulua, and as the subject of this thesis and accompanying documentary film. ASOPP is a composite system of painting that I have developed over the past ten years, it consumes interiors of temporary and permanent architectural structures.

I have used the ASOPP methodology in three major projects. They each involved upwards of two hundred participants and have been designed to support social interaction and aesthetic experience. Within ASOPP participants paint without restrictions of subject matter, painting on an individual panel that sits alongside surrounding panels in an immersive painting. Various relationships have been fostered within ASOPP projects; aesthetically, interpersonally and with the self. The thesis examines the relational process that evolved during the use of ASOPP in Tonga, examining the conditions that enabled these relationships and how the process relates to mental health.
This practice-led research is comprised of three documents: the collaborative site-specific artwork, the documentary video which will be made publically available online and/or accessible through the Vātaulua producers On the Spot Arts Initiative (OTS) and the written thesis that will be made available to project participants through OTS. The collaborative art project and subsequent documentary film identify an interconnected web of associations, providing a representation of these relationships to partners and audiences in Tonga. The film is also used to account for the project in Tonga, which acts in support of this research.

The kingdom of Tonga consists of over one hundred and seventy islands in the South Pacific. I have travelled to the main island, Tongatapu on three separate occasions; in April and June 2015 and June 2016. My travels enabled me to meet collaborators, conduct preliminary workshops, facilitate the research project and to discuss the documentary with collaborators. I then filmed more content to account for this feedback.

This research asks the following questions:
What is the system of painting that the artist/researcher has been developing; what are some of the benefits in relation to mental health, the use of contemporary painting and this model; how can this model of collaborative painting have cultural and social relevance in Tonga, how can it be transformed and how can it be documented?
A. The development of the aesthetic system

I have directed and facilitated groups in all of the ASOPP projects discussed in this thesis and partnered with Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) in their production. ASOPP projects in New Zealand, Australia and Tonga have manifested precisely because of my experience working in both a range of non-clinical mental health settings and as a practicing visual artist. This combination of experience has supported a sense of trust imparted in me from partnering organisations. I feel that this diverse experience has given me insight into creative, social and therapeutic methods of engagement when working with diverse populations. As ASOPP projects are framed as contemporary art, I primarily interact with participants through the lens of being a visual artist. ASOPP projects and workshops have been initiated eleven times in New Zealand, Australia and Tonga. This research sits at the intersection of contemporary art and mental health and attempts to resolve tensions that separate the two disciplines.

Significant projects in the development of ASOPP will be described in this thesis as a contextual introduction to the research: *Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre* (LU420), exhibited at the Blue Oyster Gallery in Dunedin, New Zealand, 2007; *Geonaut*, exhibited in a public space in Footscray, Victoria, Australia as part of the Big West Festival, 2013 and the research project, *Vātaulua*, created in Nuku’alofa, Tonga, 2015. Understanding the lineage of ASOPP contextualises its current form and supports the enquiry into its transformation in Tonga and beyond.

Within the following explanations of LU420 and Geonaut, the research traces the
efforts to alleviate social exclusion and to empower through providing avenues for social connection and dialogue. The implementation of therapeutic strategies through participation in the arts, rather than through a mental health lens, is a key feature within each of these projects. Alongside the development of the painting method has been an ongoing exploration of approaches to documentation. Each of the projects had accompanying video documentation made by filmmakers and the artist/researcher. The documentaries have been created to challenge stigma and discrimination, to create a lasting document and to extend the story-telling potential of the painting process.

Figure A.1. Adam Douglass in collaboration with the 420 Centre, Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre, Blue Oyster Gallery, 2007. Photo: Dillon Ryan

*Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2007*

*LU420* (fig. A.1) was a site-specific painting project involving members of the 420 Centre, an activity centre for people recovering from mental illness. Run by Pact Otago, the 420 Centre hosted my first collaborative painting coordinated to have a public outcome. An expressed issue that negatively affected many members of the 420 Centre was social isolation, an inability to connect with people outside of the mental health sector and consequential stigma and discrimination. Over an eight-month period, artists from the wider Dunedin community attended the centre and
worked alongside members on the project. LU420 was a cohesive fusion of colours and shapes, consuming all of the walls and part of the ceiling of the gallery; it consisted of approximately eight hundred square panels. On completion, the project covered the entirety of the Blue Oyster Gallery interior, including part of the ceiling.

LU420 was intended to have collective ownership and was eventually gifted to significant community institutions including the public hospital and library (fig. A.2). The Blue Oyster Gallery is a government-funded artist run space with a board that collectively decide on projects addressing an array of contemporary concerns. Exhibiting here gave the project a critical context. Having experienced the work within this context enabled a confidence to explore this method outside of the

Figure A.2. Adam Douglass in collaboration with the 420 Centre, Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre. permanent installation, Dunedin Public Hospital, 2007.
traditional gallery space.

Producer Katrina Jones and camera operator Sally Williams traced the development of the project, producing a documentary video called *The Mural*. The documentary attempted to humanise mental ill health by focusing on the relationships between service users and artists from the wider community, with service users sharing their stories. *LU420* proved empowering for clients of the 420 Centre throughout its development and participants were proud to see the project presented in a gallery context and housed permanently in significant public locations. Concluding *LU420* it was decided that by creating a project disassociated with cultural institutions in an accessible, relatable environment, the model could reach broader populations and engage new ideas related to site. Since *LU420*, projects have enveloped curved interior spaces and used triangular composite forms to allow for cohesion in these contorted environments. These curves extend the poetics of space, resembling caves or galaxies.

**Geonaut, 2013**

*Geonaut* (fig. A.3) was a temporary structure involving a geodesic dome that was positioned in Footscray, Victoria, Australia. It housed an immersive, collaborative painting that engaged approximately two hundred people associated with diverse community groups in its production. A program of cohealth, Barkly Arts produced the project and it was presented as part of the Big West Festival. Barkly Arts and I
engaged participants through our networks, the following communities were represented: Indigenous elders, asylum seekers, newly arrived refugees, a women’s prison group, four mental health programs including a youth program and prevention and recovery centre, an African women’s group, a craft circle and open workshops at a local restaurant, Lentil as Anything. The project was erected for four days. Two thousand one hundred people visited.

Compared to Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre, Geonaut involved a large range of diverse groups. An association with a particular social issue was not important and perceived stigma associated with mental illness diminished for some participants.
“We loved feeling connected with other groups and communities”2 said one participant who accessed the project through a mental health service. Another stated that “each of us nothing [sic], but when we get together we can create something amazing.”3 From a painting perspective, incorporating diverse groups from various cultural backgrounds with different levels of creative experience resulted in fantastic aesthetic and communicative potential, empowering participants through a focus on strengths and abilities as opposed to disabilities.

Twelve eight-week closed workshops were facilitated throughout Melbourne’s Western suburbs in the lead up to the presentation of the work. Open workshops were being run every Saturday at Footscray’s Lentil as Anything. During workshops people painted on recycled billboard skins. Two layers of recycled billboard skins lined the dome, one as a support and a layer made of small triangular panels. At the conclusion of these workshops, groups came together to continue to develop the project at Footscray Community Arts Centre.

*Geonaut* was an obvious development of *LU420*; it located collaboration within a significant public space and disregarded the need to be associated with a fine art context. As shown in figure A.4. *Geonaut* featured a large blue wall through which audiences would enter to reach the interior of a dome.

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2 “*Geonaut,*” YouTube video, 6:06, posted by “Adam Douglass” September 15, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zw8f8bvKoNw

3 Ibid. 5:02.
Figure A.4. Adam Douglass in collaboration with Barkly Arts, Geonaut, Nicholson Street, Footscray, 2013.

Geonaut draws inspiration from Lucio Fontana’s vision of a space-aged art;⁴ an art which considered space as a dominant creative medium. Fontana lived during a time of early space exploration and had hopes about humanity’s advancement into the cosmos. In his final interview Fontana said, “Man must free himself completely from the earth, only then will the direction he will take in the future become clear.”⁵ Unlike Fontana’s hope filled holes that expose the potentiality of space, the dome was consumed in a collective consciousness, reminiscent of the kaleidoscopic finale of

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Stanley Kubrick’s *2001 A Space Odyssey,* suggesting internal explorations of language rather than emptiness and vastness.

A documentary video was also produced to catalogue *Geonaut.* Filming begun three weeks prior to the presentation of *Geonaut* resulting in minimal footage of the project’s development. The seven-minute documentary focused on explaining the process and system of painting, describing the parameters of the project through conversations, animation and limited video footage. Consistent with the project’s ethos was a lack of acknowledgement of any individual’s marginalised circumstance. This narrative limitation was intended to empower those who participated. Within the credits, partnering organisations were noted.

An attempt to reassemble *Geonaut* in a permanent location proved difficult in comparison to *LU420. LU420* was a composite structure using square panels on primarily flat walls; it was easy to relocate sections of the project. The *Geonaut* system, however, was curved and required the struts of the dome in order for it to be installed. The billboard skins that the project was painted onto were not durable and when the project was de-installed, panels stuck together in storage and the paintings became damaged. In addition to issues of conservation, the initial structure took two days to install, requiring forklifts to maneuver weights needed to secure the temporary structure. Installation was expensive and the project required security at night, adding extra costs and in turn limiting the project to only four days.

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6 *2001: A Space Odyssey,* directed by Stanley Kubrick and written by Arthur C. Clarke (MGM, 1968), DVD.
B. Chapter synopsis

The second half of this introduction will briefly outline the chapters of the thesis. This first chapter examines Vātaulua, investigating how the ASOPP system translated to a Tongan context. The chapter examines my position as an artist researcher, featuring participant feedback as well as first hand observations and an examination of the documentary video. The ASOPP methodology related to cultural values of collective collaboration and a prioritisation of socio-spatial relations were afforded over time-based measurements. Spatial prioritisation was made explicit in the documentary video, in which the narrative structure disregarded a time-based format in favour of rhythm and an exploration of relationships.

The second chapter examines ASOPP within a contemporary art context and its methodology in relation to participatory painting models and principles of self-determination. ASOPP blurs the differences within the categories of participatory art that art historian Claire Bishop and academic Grant Kester have identified as the ethical\textsuperscript{7} and spectacle\textsuperscript{8} in a format of collaborative painting. By striving for both aesthetic harmony and autonomous views, Bishop and Kester’s positions merge together to become a hybrid format that critiques cultural values with utopian ambitions. This chapter explores the turn to community in contemporary art and argues that a participatory painting model with relations to modernist aesthetics can destabilise cultural hierarchies that measure artistic achievement against a modernist scale.

\textsuperscript{7} Grant Kester, \textit{Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 112.
\textsuperscript{8} Claire Bishop, \textit{Artificial Hells}, (London Eng, Brooklyn NY, Verso 2012).
ASOPP’s relationship to mental health is the subject of the third chapter. The third chapter examines the relationship of ASOPP to art therapy and psychosocial models, arguing that ASOPP extends group phenomenological and interpersonal frameworks by facilitating social connection, individual autonomy and encouraging critical thinking through the guise of art making. The consideration of collaborative art making in a mental health context can reduce power structures via a shared activity, promoting dialogue, critique, autonomy and collective solidarity for underserved populations.

The ASOPP system is explained in relationship to the concept of Third Space within the fourth chapter. Third Space provides a theoretical framework through which to comprehend the collaborative painting system as an interactive matrix in support of the development of relationships and communication. This space of direct and indirect communication provides opportunities to develop culture by generating hybrid interpretations of disparate perspectives, including mental health frameworks and participatory art.
Chapter one: Vātaulua

1.A. The Tongan social political context

A natural extension of Geonaut was to trial the Aesthetic System of Participatory Painting (ASOPP) model in a new socio-cultural context. I have been developing a relationship with the Tongan arts organisation On the Spot Arts Initiative (OTS) since August 2014. We were connected through a mutual friend based in Tonga, who introduced me to OTS director Ebonie Maka-Fifita via email. During March 2015, I visited Nuku’alofa, Tonga to facilitate preliminary workshops for a larger project to begin in June 2015. For the purpose of contextualising this research, a brief introduction to the social fabric of Tonga is required.

The first missionaries arrived in Tonga from London in 1797. Since then Christianity has played a major role in Tongan culture, influencing beliefs, social practices and economic contributions. In 2010 the Kingdom of Tonga experienced a democratic transition that saw the balance of power shift from a hereditary monarchy to the people.

Tongan values are changing. This is identified in the 2011 Tongan cultural mapping report, “The increasing avoidance/ignorance of traditional ties is contributing to the fragmentation of traditional Tongan ties and networks.” This is most obvious

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11 Johansson Fua et al., Cultural Mapping, 14.
through the perception of politics where nobles’ representatives in parliament support nobles, while people’s representatives support the people: The report explains the consequences of changing values:

Tongan identity is [...] changing, with studies demonstrating a shift away from old practices of traditional values. Economic and political pressures have impacted on cultural identity, although at present it is difficult to fully grasp the extent of actual changes and their effects, and to predict how Tonga will look in the future.

This change in cultural values and identity was quickly identified within Vātaulua, the choices of subject matter painted by participants were unexpected by many Tongans who witnessed the development of the project. Much of the work was disassociated from traditional patterns and forms.

1.B. The Tongan mental health context

Tonga has one psychiatric facility, the Vaiola Hospital Psychiatric Ward, located on the most densely populated island of Tongatapu. A mental health act was introduced to Tonga in 2003 and is consistent with the United Nations Charter for Human Rights. Human rights are not always considered however. In Tonga for instance, it is concerning that many patients being transferred to Vaiola Hospital from outer islands are detained in a prison in the northern islands of Vava’u.

Compared with World Health Organisation (WHO) standards, funding for mental health services in Tonga is very low, around 1% of the Ministry of Health’s total

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12 Ibid., 14.
13 Ibid., 21.
expenditure. The review claims that it is expected that most of the funding is spent on treating patients while in the psychiatric ward rather than at a primary care level, consistent with other low and middle income countries. It is also expected that the majority of funding is spent on pharmacology rather than psychosocial care. In 2015, WHO recommended an increase in primary care and psychosocial services stating that this reallocation of funds “can improve outcomes and efficiencies of the health system.”

Outpatient clinic attendance is dramatically affected by stigma and the loss of continuity in outpatient care has resulted in several homicides, reinforcing stigma directed at people experiencing mental illness. As a result, head psychiatrist Dr Mapa Puloka has felt compelled to disguise the outpatient clinic to resemble a general health clinic in order to make this service more broadly accessible.

The Vaiola Hospital Psychiatric Ward’s occupational therapist and head psychiatrist were immediately interested in Vātaulua because it provided an avenue for patients to express themselves, connect with the wider community and it did not require any financial contribution.

OTS have a good relationship with a broad range of community organisations

\[\text{\cite{16}}\text{ Anna Rodney, et al., } The Kingdom of Tonga Health System Review 5, vol. 6. (World Health Organisation, 2015), 127.\]
\[\text{\cite{17}}\text{ Rodney et al., The Kingdom, 127.}\]
\[\text{\cite{18}}\text{ Ibid., 128.}\]
\[\text{\cite{19}}\text{ Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\cite{20}}\text{ Nielsen et al., “Va’a fakalelei ‘atamai,” 184.}\]
\[\text{\cite{21}}\text{ Ibid.}\]
including the staff at the Vaiola Hospital Psychiatric Ward. OTS had been intent on connecting with the ward for some time, however no opportunity or accessible framework of collaboration had been presented. They were curious about the ASOPP approach as a means of connecting with the ward.

The term mālie—translating in English to beauty or harmony—has a strong relation to health in Tonga, specifically relating to holistic wellbeing. Sino, atamai mo e laumālie (body, brain and spirit) set the foundations for life for Tongan people. Spiritual dimensions—and to a lesser degree social connection and service—are generally associated with health. Because of these belief systems related to spirituality and harmony, improvising collectively to create a cohesive form appeared to resonate for many Tongans. These principles guide the ASOPP process.

1.C. Tongan Arts

Around the Tongan capital Nuku’alofa, four socially focused arts collectives are dedicated to progressing Tongan culture with varying approaches to community engagement. My partners in Vātaulua, OTS, are interested in inclusivity and making the arts accessible. Vātaulua collaborators Seleka International Arts Society (Seleka) create a space for outsiders to get together and express themselves freely. Other groups such as Icon and Filitoni did not collaborate consistently; they did however support the project. Icon are a Christian group who aim to connect young people with

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24 Ibid.
God through theatre, dance and film. Filitonu on the other hand share health related messages via music and theatre.

The OTS Facebook page explains the organisational purpose as such: “We SHOWCASE & CELEBRATE the ARTS as a DYNAMIC means to empower CULTURE & CREATIVITY. [sic]”25 Primary supporters and members of OTS—including their board which is comprised of Tongan artists—curate exhibitions, facilitate workshops and write and stage plays and performances. The organisation works with all members of the community and collaborates with international artists. While OTS receives partial government funding, private sponsorship and donations, these funds are minimal, making it difficult for OTS staff to make a living on the income generated.

One of Seleka’s primary aims is to enrich the lives of young people through the arts.26 They do this by meeting in the evenings, painting and drinking kava.27 Seleka collaborates with other arts programs in dance, theatre and visual art. The group often challenge Tongan conventions by dressing in untidy paint covered clothes and appointing swearwords as nicknames. Despite Seleka making revenue through the sale of artwork and commissioned murals, they consistently struggle for financial autonomy.

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27 The roots of the kava plant get used to produce a drink called ‘kava’ with anesthetic, sedative and euphoria properties drunk through-out Polynesian cultures.
1.D. Authorship and the artist as a foreign facilitator

Throughout the course of this project it has been important to maintain an honest and transparent relationship with OTS in relation to primary motivations and funding. This felt all the more necessary when considering that none of the individuals or partnering organisations were being financially compensated for their work. Research funding from the University of Melbourne supported my living expenses, materials, food that was sometimes provided for volunteers, opening expenses and some wages for skilled labour. All purchased materials for the research project were donated to OTS and Seleka at the conclusion of the project.

Although collaboration informs the outcome of the paintings within the ASOPP projects, it is apparent that there is a consistent visual style across each of the projects that I have initiated (both in and away from Tonga). It is this overall aesthetic style that implicates my role as an author. The understanding of an individual author within the context of an ASOPP collaboration is reliant upon collective improvisation, which results in a shared creative authorship. The role of the artist working in social projects is multi-faceted. As well as being the ASOPP designer, social coordinator and collaborating artist, there is an essential value in recognising my role—the artist-social-coordinator—as a non-expert. In his ‘handbook’ for socially engaged artists, Pablo Helguera states that the artist can provide “frameworks on which experiences can form and sometimes be directed and channeled to generate new insights around a particular issue.” Further to this, Grant Kester believes that “the work of art trains us

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for social interaction that we aren’t yet prepared for in real life.” My role in ASOPP projects transforms throughout the development of each individual project. Where I start the project as an instigator, once it is underway my position changes to more of a conversational bridge between artwork(s) and participant(s). As the project develops further I perceive myself to be a contributing artist collaborating alongside participants. I use a variety of methods to support social and aesthetic engagement and communication, resulting in a style that is consistent within all of the ASOPP projects (as discussed in chapter four).

In Tonga, I was mindful of my position as a white male, and was conscious of the potential implications surrounding this fact. At various times, I felt uncomfortable in sharing my own creative ideas that have developed primarily through a western cultural lineage with people who have rich artistic traditions. This research questions the value of adapting an ‘external creative model’ dislocated from local culture. Although I was cautious, I tried not to let my concerns affect the workshops I facilitated. Post-colonial theorist, Linda Tuhiwai Smith highlights some of these ethical research concerns:

> It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations.\(^2\)


Palangi\textsuperscript{31} are perceived by many Tongans to have more power than them. This often leads to fractured relationships within the population. Tongan artist Tevita Latu informed me that numerous Tongans he knows are shy when talking to palangi. Latu said that Tongan people observe palangi interacting with Tongan hierarchies as equals and this can generate feelings of unease. Tongan people are taught and conditioned to respect these hierarchies and to acknowledge their social position. Regularly, palangi show little respect for these hierarchies. Latu explained to me that some Tongans might feel uncomfortable in my presence due to my being a palangi in a position of power (as a teacher/facilitator) and/or based on communication difficulties due to language differences.

During April 2015, I arrived in Tonga to what felt like a warm welcome, my purpose was to facilitate painting workshops over two days that could be developed into a larger project. I was there to connect with partners and potential artists and to assess whether there was interest in engaging in a project. Creative partners were able to assess my abilities, personality and whether I would be a suitable collaborator. When I became directly aware of the established creative activities of the Tongan people, I questioned my role. I quickly learned that people attending my workshops were interested in learning new creative strategies. On conclusion of the preliminary workshops, I learned that people appreciated that I did not dictate knowledge, instead I encouraged self-reflection and improvisation.

\textsuperscript{31} Palangi is a term used throughout Polynesia to describe white or European people.
1.E. Vātaulua: a new space

Vātaulua was located in a derelict house that has been restored to become the OTS art space. The project was developed over the course of eighteen months via online correspondence between Maka-Fifita and I. Painting took place between June and August 2015. The project engaged over two hundred and fifty people during its creation. Vātaulua consisted of two rooms and a hallway consumed in triangular cardboard panels and a secret room that involved people drawing directly on its walls, floors and ceilings throughout the duration of the project being exhibited. In order to access the painted rooms, audiences would walk through a black structure that blocked the outside light from entering (fig. 1.1). This black structure fulfilled three major roles: it was a transitional space used to enter a new environment providing an opportunity to see the project with a fresh perspective and it prevented external light from entering the project, reinforcing the feeling that an individual was slightly dislocated from the influence of time and conventional reality. The structure shares metaphoric and symbolic associations with the void, a concept that has universally symbolic significance related to emptiness, darkness, space, death, transition, the afterlife and potentiality.

The painting workshops took place during preparations for the coronation of the Tongan King, Tupou VI. This meant that some people were unable to participate. The official groups involved included OTS, Seleka, Vaiola Hospital Psychiatric Ward, Ahopanilolo Technical Institute, Women and Children Crisis Centre and Open Workshops held at the OTS Artspace.
Painting took place between three locations: OTS, Seleka and the Vaiola Psychiatric Ward. Cardboard, that would be later installed in the house, was identified as a practical medium to paint on because of its free abundance. In order to involve the groups, both the panels painted by patients of the psychiatric ward and Seleka were transferred to wooden supporting sheets the size of doors and transported to their respective sites. Each sheet would have approximately one hundred triangle panels, with the longest edge being around thirty centimetres. Due to the Seleka artists having had previous painting experience, their work maintained a certain cohesion overall. The psychiatric ward panels were transported to the ward every painting workshop, once a week, for seven weeks. This modular component made the project more
accessible. Art sessions would run for approximately ninety minutes at the psychiatric ward and involve between fifteen and thirty participants during any one session.

Maka-Fifita and I would consistently attend these workshops, removing, distributing and stapling panels to the wooden sheets and sometimes painting with the group. The allocated sections would be completed before we would leave the ward. While there, I would quickly paint between four or five of the panels at the ward to ensure that some connections between panels were being made. Many of the artists at the ward had little experience painting and painted a diverse array of subject matter including Christian symbols, Tongan flags, flowers, abstract patterns, shapes, and traditional Tongan designs. A large proportion of participants painted in a loose style reminiscent of abstract expressionism with what appeared to be partial compositional considerations.

One participant was initially apprehensive to get involved and painted a monochromatic colour different from the established base colour. After encouragement by artist and co-facilitator Maka-Fifita, he had a boost of confidence that led him to passionately paint three to four monochromatic images each week. These paintings appeared to have no relationship to surrounding panels. There were very considered individuals who displayed patience, and appeared to consider relationships of colours and shapes. Two artists in particular displayed refined skills and appeared to take their work very seriously. The desire to paint appeared obvious at the ward because participants consistently attended workshops and would be waiting for us to arrive. Approximately seventy percent of those in attendance at the
ward participated in workshops at any one time. While there, some participants would often paint over the black silhouettes that were used as structural elements. These would require repainting or repositioning to maintain the aesthetic order in the project.

About fifteen participants from the ward attended the exhibition opening. Hospital staff provided transportation and participated in the opening kava circle. Overall feedback was that participants from the ward were very impressed with the project and were happy to be at the opening, which was the first time that many participants had seen their work in context with the other groups and the first time that many had met other artists.

Following the public exhibition of Vātaulua—which was installed for five weeks concluding its opening—Maka-Fifita had planned to install different sections of the project in a variety of community settings. Unfortunately, when the project was de-installed, panels were relocated to a container for storage. The container had a leak and the majority of the panels were damaged.

In June 2016, I travelled back to Tonga. During this trip I learned that both OTS and Seleka had been exploring aspects of ASOPP processes to engage communities. After my departure in 2015, OTS continued work on the project, finding hidden areas in the artspace to paint with various villagers from around the island of Tongatapu. Maka-Fifita explained that having a collaborative painting framework was useful for OTS. Previously they had made collaborative visual arts projects but without a sense of
aesthetic resolution, or else resolution was at the expense of painting over another participant’s work. Seleka informed me that they had been using the preliminary workshop method to introduce painting to inexperienced artists. Both groups asked if they could experiment with the method to work in schools and other settings. I agreed and encouraged both groups to develop the methods further. I was also encouraged by both groups and the staff from the psychiatric ward to come back to Tonga to facilitate a larger project and was invited to be a Tongan arts champion for OTS, for which I felt honoured.

Three project participants from the psychiatric ward have visited Seleka on three occasions, watching the group painting, sharing their experiences of painting and attending an exhibition opening. One participant from the psychiatric ward has become a volunteer gardener at OTS, a fact he proudly declares when talking to various local people around town. OTS had never worked in the ward prior to Vātaulua and dialogue has been ongoing regarding future projects; funding however has been a limiting factor.

1.F. Participant feedback

Witnessing that sea of ideas was the focal point of excitement for me. 32

While many participants remarked that they were surprised by the lack of traditional imagery within the project, Latu—the co-founder of the Seleka art collective—was happy to see people detaching from traditional aesthetics. His personal rationale was

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32 Tevita Latu, excerpt interview with Adam Douglass, Video, Nuku’alofa, Tonga, August 7, 2015.
that traditional styles restrict artistic and personal growth. As he has reflected, “people weren’t attached to a staged form of ideas like the kupesi. That interested me a lot, I seen less of that…[the kupesi] it is our national identity. I’m glad that kupesi did not appear so much. For it not appearing we could see more authenticity in the people's work.”

OTS theatre director and Vātaulua technician Steev Maka was curious as to why Tongan people did not paint traditional patterns. Maka said in an interview with documentary filmmaker Cameron Sugden that “Vātaulua marked a point of evolution

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33 Kupesi is the design matt used to print patterns on Tapu cloth.
34 Latu, interview.
in Tongan culture.”\textsuperscript{35} The idea of cultural evolution is important for many Tongan artists including Selek and Maka-Fifita. Maka-Fifita identified OTS’ values by sharing an inspiring passage stating that “culture is never finished and our identity is something that lies ahead of us.”\textsuperscript{36} In preparation for \textit{Vātaulua}, Maka-Fifita and I talked enthusiastically about how the \textit{kupesi} may inform the content of the project. We learnt that there were many reasons as to why \textit{Vātaulua} remained somewhat detached from traditional techniques. Maka-Fifita identified that improvisation, colour and collaboration stimulated playfulness that directed participants away from traditional imagery.

A general understanding of \textit{kupesi} is determined by the use of mainly ochre and earth colours, whereas the colours that are consistent across \textit{Vātaulua} are more expansive and appear to encourage play and a different approach to techniques. In comparison with the lack of \textit{kupesi} in \textit{Vātaulua}, aboriginal Australian elders painted traditional designs when working on the \textit{Geonaut} project.

Participants from the psychiatric ward who were comfortable being interviewed all expressed how proud they were of it. Descriptive words like, ‘excellent’ and ‘beautiful’ were commonly used to describe the end result. One person described it as \textit{masani}: a Tongan word that translates loosely to a radiant, pure beauty.

\textit{Vātaulua} artist Mele Palu has experience growing up in Tonga and Australia. She was volunteering for the Ministry of Health while I was in Tonga. In an interview with

\textsuperscript{35} Steev Maka, interview by Cameron Sugden, video, Nuku’alofa, Tonga, September 5, 2015.
\textsuperscript{36} Ebonie Maka-Fifita, interview by Adam Douglass, video, Nuku’alofa, Tonga, August 7, 2015.
Sugden concluding the project she explained how the project gave her and her children insight into identity when she said that “The kids were excited to keep coming back because they were meeting other children. Here they were mixing with local children who spoke Tongan fluently; they were free and comfortable in their Tongan identity. They liked that. Over time they became more experimental with their art and evolved. As I watched my children painting I get wondering what was in their minds.”

1.G. Dissensus and difference

Within my ASOPP projects, many participants have shown consideration for others and have remained polite during their interactions. Participants have talked about the collective environment in which people collaborate as influencing potential self-censorship; some say the music played can influence what they paint. A level of self-consciousness can arise when making art around other people who may be perceived to be vulnerable to provocative material. I have observed these patterns consistently. Most involved in previous ASOPP projects painted abstract designs with an abundance of colour and/or optimistic imagery.

Some participants felt vulnerable in a collective creative environment; insecurities and comparisons of ability can be disabling in a collective project. I observed an inexperienced painter Sioni (real name withheld) overcoming insecurities by engaging in the aesthetic experience of Vātaulua. Sioni—who is a member of Tongan parliament—joined a Saturday painting workshop with his partner and completed one

37 Mele Palu, interview by Cameron Sugden, Video, Nuku’alofa, Tonga, September 5, 2015.
painting of a series of dots on a monochrome background using his fingers to apply the paint. He acknowledged feeling self-conscious in relation to painting within the group saying that he had never painted before and didn’t have much understanding of what he was doing and how it would fit in. When he had completed his panel and repositioned it in its original location on the wall he said that he instantly understood the aesthetic structure of the artwork and immediately found it beautiful. He said that he was excited to see how the forms would develop around his artwork and that he would continue painting on the project in the future. Sioni experienced a sense of detachment from vulnerabilities and felt a connection to a wider body when engaging his panel with the broader artwork.

Thousands of panels have been painted in ASOPP projects. Most participants do not take advantage of the opportunity to share literal opinions, preferring to connect and escape into a world of abstract possibilities influenced by preliminary workshops promoting a musicality of form (as discussed in chapter four). Many participants have challenged pictorial conventions by consciously and unconsciously using unorthodox colours and techniques, choosing to liberate themselves from the structures in place to support unity. As projects develop and participants feel more comfortable, dissenting views and opinions appear. Sometimes provocations around personal values in relation to creative output can trigger confrontational imagery.

Seleka have carved out their own position in Tonga because of their disengagement with Tongan social order; many members come from broken homes and homelessness, and through shared views and experiences have chosen to challenge
accepted values. Within the group they have strong bonds but are perceived to be disrespectful by many Tongans. It took time for members of Seleka to position themselves critically within Vātaulua and for their social and political stance to become clear to me. Over time and through gentle prompts these individuals became key figures in the transformation of Vātaulua into a space of critical communication.

Figure 1.3. Details, Adam Douglass in collaboration with On the Spot Arts Initiative, Vātaulua, Nuku’alofa, Tonga, 2015.

One week out from the project’s completion I observed painted penises on a Seleka panel (fig. 1.3). I presented this finding to the group, which triggered laughter at the Seleka fāle38. The panel was located above the silhouette of Latu’s head and included six tiny penises and a penis made of flowers. With ninety percent of the project completed, this and three subsequent responses from an Australian expatriate woman featuring stylised vaginas (fig. 1.3) and two stylised breasts plus a controversial panel stating, ‘safe sex wear a condom’ (fig. 1.4) were the only obviously provocative images noticed within Vātaulua.

38 Fāle means house.
Latu explained that Seleka had adjusted their style within Vātaulua and had been painting in a manner that was not conventional for them. I asked what this meant and why they had done this. Latu replied that he thought I wanted them to blend in with Vātaulua, to try and make it cohesive. The Seleka group also thought it appropriate to be polite because of the communities involved. Latu had assumed that because of the initial workshops (painting to music) and a discussion I had with him around the facilitator’s role as a conduit, Seleka should aim for harmony within their images. I explained to Seleka that I had anticipated them painting freely without restriction. It was my belief that the most exciting potential for collaboration came from diverse perspectives, and I anticipated some potentially provocative material from them. I mentioned that I was surprised by the conservative nature of their painting. This statement provoked a wry smile from Latu. We both admitted to being surprised by Seleka conforming to niceties, and I acknowledged some ambiguity in my description of the project. I have often talked about the unification of the image and the lack of restrictions of subject simultaneously while discussing the project. I asked: if given
the opportunity, would Seleka paint the same way again? Latu said no. At this point, Seleka member FM took responsibility for the penises that had been drawn on the panels. Everybody laughed. FM recalled a conversation in which we talked about Seleka’s inclusion in the project. I asked FM what sort of images represent Seleka and what images are not included in the project. He said that he remembered this conversation while painting, and it was this recollection that led to his painting the penises. A discussion then arose around forms of democracy and the need for antagonists within a democratic process. The following night I brought a new selection of panels up to Seleka.

Figure 1.5. Detail, Adam Douglass in collaboration with On the Spot Arts Initiative, Vātaulua, Nuku’alofa, Tonga, 2015.

I was excited in anticipation of what the members of Seleka might paint. Four days later, about ten panels were delivered to OTS. My initial reaction to the paintings was one of surprise, with a paralleled feeling of unease around what my collaborators at OTS might say. One panel featured a tank with a penis in place of the barrel, shooting
semen (fig. 1.4). Other panels featured skulls, Wild-Style graffiti lettering and abstract forms. One panel in particular stimulated discussion; it featured the statement ‘Join Tongan Polisi Tamate’ (fig. 1.5) which Latu translated to ‘Join Tongan Killer Cops’. This panel related to an incident from 2012 in which two Tongan police officers assaulted and killed a New Zealand police officer in custody.\(^{39}\) Extra motivation for painting this panel may have come from Latu’s experience in police custody when he was beaten over the course of eight days. His arrest related to his support for the Tongan Pro-Democracy Movement, culminating in the majority of central Nuku’alofa being burnt down during riots in 2006. The recent panels painted by Seleka members intrigued OTS. I suggested that the ‘Polisi Tamate’ panel might spark an interesting discussion. At this point Maka-Fifita started considering her response, to help develop dialogue. She later painted a panel divided into multiple parts which included a variety of comments such as: ‘Mate Ma’a Tonga’ (die for Tonga), ‘Kihe Lelei Taha’ (strive for the best) ‘Ki he Lele’ (until they flee/run) ‘Ita Ha’ (angry why) ‘PINE toko’ (don't give up, stick it out, carry on brother) and ‘LO2’, an abbreviation of Lotu (prayer, pray or religion, also resembling the slang acronym ‘LOL’ meaning ‘laugh out loud’) (fig 1.5).

1.H. Vātaulua: Communicating in Third Space

As introduced earlier, a documentary video has been created for each of the immersive ASOPP projects. The theme of the Vātaulua documentary revolves around relationships and the role of the arts in Tonga. Confidentiality in a mental health

setting, gaining insight into decolonising methodologies and a deeper consideration for my collaborators helped clarify the themes. The video was designed as an accessible research outcome for project participants and may be of use to collaborative partners in Tonga. The Vātaulua documentary is an extension of the painting project. Like the painting, the documentary highlights the relationships between a range of people, with attempts to contextualise the connection between paintings and participants. I have consistently sought clarification and consent in relation to the representation of participants and for the project at large and have welcomed new contributions to the narrative structure. I travelled to Tonga one year after completion of the project to discuss and show developments; those involved said they were impressed with the direction and representation of participants, explaining that they were happy to be involved.

Hûfanga 'Okusitino Mãhina is a Tongan scholar who highlights the difference in time and space measurement, management and understanding between the West and Polynesia when he explains that:

The past has stood the test of time and space, and it must therefore be placed in front of people as a guidance in the present, and because the future has yet to happen, it must be placed to the back of or behind people in the present, where both past and future are symmetrically negotiated in the process. In the West, however, the past, present, and future are lineally structured, with future and past placed in the front and back of people in the present, in a singular, technoteleological, and evolutionary manner.\(^\text{40}\)

In order to represent an accurate account of the Vātaulua project, it was necessary to consider the management of time in its presentation. By considering a documentation

and representation of social space rather than time, the documentary was able to capture more nuances of the Vātaulua experience. To my understanding, this treatment suggested a more aligned approach to a Polynesian engagement with space and time. Artist and writer John Berger supports this approach to narration and has informed my understanding of the inadequacies of time-defined narratives when he has said that “It is no longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time, for today we are too aware of what cuts across the storyline laterally, of the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities.”

Although Vātaulua was subjected to time restrictions within its creation, in its essence, Vātaulua is an assessment of space; there are numerous interactions within architectural, social and internal subjective space. The research presents multiple modes of representation accounting for an understanding of what happened throughout the development of the project. A dedication to the development of characters and their relationships—rather than interviews about participant’s experiences of the project—provides a context for interpreting the artwork. Similar to the projection of social consciousness that the painting embodies in its process and presentation, the documentary reflects an interpretation of relationships back to participants. It also plays an ancillary role in promoting the work of these artists. Together, the thesis and video support an understanding of the space defined by the interactions in and around Vātaulua, more than they do to explain and justify participant involvement.

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As a text, the documentary promotes ethical research practices when working in low-income countries. Almost one year after the project had concluded, I travelled back to Tonga with a draft of the documentary. In keeping with the project at large, the video allowed for collaborative input from participants in regard to their representation and the narrative structure. Participants involved in the documentary viewed it and made suggestions about narrative possibilities, the use of certain locations and other elements that they felt would contribute to a more cohesive text. This process allowed people to self-represent and consider what footage could be shot and located in various parts. This process was consistent with the ASOPP model and would ultimately project a more accurate version of events than my singular position would allow. After this process I was able to edit the documentary with greater insight and made a point of continuing this dialogue until the documentary was complete. The final outcome of the documentary aims to connect themes and characters by rhythm and relationships rather than through an adherence to a linear format.

1.1. Conclusion

Since its first incarnation in Dunedin, one of the primary limitations of ASOPP has been the shorter duration of projects. This practical factor tends to restrict participant engagement and augments participants’ creative progression. Over an eight-month period, LU420 was continually engaging with mental health service users. Participants became more involved in the process as their styles developed. It also saw them become more socially comfortable in the creative environment as they were consistently exposed to wider community artists. This longer duration enabled participants to develop ideas further and it welcomed more people into direct
dialogue, consistent with the project’s primary objectives. If Vātaulua’s duration had of been longer, an important question to ask would be: would patients have engaged after their discharge from the psychiatric ward and would outpatients living in the community eventually have participated in the project’s making?

Beauty and harmony have a significant relationship to wellbeing for Tongan people and many related to the project as beautiful (although the style of art making was new for many Tongans). Because projects are intended to support self-determination and change, dialogue is an intended outcome. Within Vātaulua the cultural relationship to harmony prevented some people from engaging in artistic activity as they might otherwise; it took a conversation around creative values for some participants to paint in an unrestricted manner. At this point political content was actively produced. I am curious to see whether the Vātaulua documentary will enable and inspire future participants to share unfiltered views. A key reflection gained from Vātaulua was the importance of engaging participants with the confidence to be provocative enough to enable robust conversation. Compared to previous ASOPP projects, Vātaulua featured the most contentious and challenging subjects to date; these opinions were compelling for some audience members and participants, and led to the generating of new conversation.

Vātaulua was an accessible format for the Tongan participants overall, with people readily engaging off the back of pre-existing relationships with project partners OTS.

My relationship with OTS was vital for effective communication with participants who did not speak English and who expressed some discomfort around me. Since my last visit to Tonga, I have been invited back to develop another project and been made a ‘representative’ of OTS.
Chapter two: Painting with the people: power and painting

Despite well-meaning models of western community painting which I will discuss, creative restrictions and perceived limits of participants restrict the social and aesthetic potential of painting. These models are largely limited by a desire for artistic autonomy, disrespect for the untrained artists’ ability and an overall lack of aesthetic ambition. This chapter explores the nature of these challenges and considers potential solutions to social painting practices in the form of the Aesthetic System of Participatory Painting (ASOPP), discussed in-depth in chapter four. ASOPP as an aesthetic system is dependent upon diverse styles and perspectives. Aesthetic systems can be strategies used to engage participants and audiences to consider ideas and opinions that are often overlooked.

2.A. Commodity and community

ASOPP is necessarily ambiguous, ultimately democratic and inevitably political in relation to the social function of art. ASOPP engages in a critique of authorship, collaboration and individualism through associations with contemporary art and mental health frameworks. Painting has engaged the imagination of audiences for thousands of years. In the twentieth and twenty-first century however it has continuously fallen victim to increased commodification, struggling to maintain its integrity as a necessary artistic medium.\(^{43}\) Even otherwise denoted ‘outsider’ styles—such as street art and graffiti—have become highly commercialised and decorative,

losing a once revolutionary edge.\textsuperscript{44} The commodification of art and its processes is made all the more possible by an increased adherence to individual authorship, which Kester states was initially a means to break free “from the dark cavern of communal illusion.”\textsuperscript{45} Grant Kester traces the development of authorship, explaining that the modern European artist struggled for “progressive individualism against a stultifying conformity and consensus imposed, variously, by the salon, bourgeois consumerism, political propaganda and eventually the history of modernism itself.”\textsuperscript{46} The identity of the artistic author has become complicated because the major trajectory of modernism concerns the slow erosion of conscious authorship by using unorthodox techniques such as automatic drawing, montage and the splattering of paint.\textsuperscript{47} Kester states that the erosion of the artistic author in favour of collaboration supports a transcendence from “the snares of negation and self-interest”\textsuperscript{48} associated with individualism.

This thesis argues that not only can people benefit socially from making art together, but painting within communities can enable nuances within contemporary culture to open up; these opportunities are often unavailable to an individual artist restricted by cultural conditioning. When different cultures intersect and interact, new ideas can be stimulated and provoked in the form of hybrid concepts, which in turn supports mobilisation within a culture.\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{45} Kester, \textit{The One}, 3.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{48} Kester, \textit{Conversation Pieces}, 112.

\textsuperscript{49} Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, 56.
2.B. Purpose through participation

Participatory art commonly referred to as socially engaged art or social practice has developed as a strategy to re-engage audiences outside of the conventional observational position as spectator. Clare Bishop describes participatory art in her historical critique of the practice in her book *Artificial Hells* when she states that:

The artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a ‘viewer’ or ‘beholder’, is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant.\(^50\)

In the twentieth and twenty first centuries participatory art has had relations to socio-political activism and community empowerment, a contrast to arts institutions that have previously favoured modernist object oriented works over social engagement.\(^51\) Kester advocates for a dialogic, egalitarian approach to participatory art that forces a reevaluation of the principles of critical art. Kester’s challenge takes form as an art that “substitutes listening for an addiction to a statement.”\(^52\) Marnie Badham states that institutions have embraced participatory art to reorientate their agenda, as a means of justifying their social purpose.\(^53\) This relationship to institutions has meant that a lot of contemporary participatory art in a western visual arts tradition has ties to art world institutions. Consequently, because of the relationships to art institutions—such as museums, galleries and art schools—and a tendency to conform to their requirements,

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\(^50\) Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2.
\(^51\) Marnie Badham, “Turn to Community: Exploring the political and relational in the arts,” *Journal of Arts and Communities* 5, no. 2-3 (2013): 101.
\(^53\) Badham, “Turn to Community,” 93 -104.
social relevance and critical and political impact can be subdued and disqualified.  

Community and individual self-determination and the ability of communities to self-represent can be affected when artists attempt to cater to an institutions’ agenda.  

Black American artists in the 1920’s accentuated the need to work for their communities when challenging racist agendas during the Harlem Renaissance. At this time, W.E.B. Du Bois, a sociologist, civil rights activist and theatre supporter founded the Crisis Group of Artists and Writers. This group have been described by Remi Omodele as “generally bold, blunt and relentless in their denunciation of racism.”

Du Bois argued that the plays created during this period should be “by us, for us, about us and near us.” In a 1926 Crisis editorial Du Bois noted that “If a man writes a ... good play, he is lucky if he earns first class postage upon it. Of-course he may sell it commercially to some producer on Broadway, but in that case, it would not be a Negro play or if it is a Negro play it will not be about the kind of Negro you and I know or want to know [...] A Negro play that will interest us and depict our life [...] can not be sold to the ordinary theatrical producer.”

Badham argues that the ‘turn to community’ is one approach to political impetus within the arts. Disassociating from art institutions, connecting with communities and working for communities can support a more effective social outcome and a more accurate representation of culture than compromising values to conform to

54 Ibid., 101.  
55 Remi Omodele, “‘For Us, About Us, Near Us and By Us’: American women playwrights and the making of NAACP-Du Bois’s Edutainment Agenda,” Women’s History Review 11, no.1. (2002), 55.  
56 Ibid., 55.  
57 Ibid.  
58 Badham, “Turn to Community,” 93 -104.
Although there is no need to justify social art making against the hierarchies of other cultural milieu, this thesis examines how a critique of ASOPP is advantageous to an understanding of its broader relationship to culture. Kester states that “In order to actually initiate change”, it is necessary to “accept some level of engagement with extant institutions and policies…” 59 Art making with communities can bring people together, potentially influencing engagement in social structures and policy, while enacting both subtle and obvious subversive acts. An artist can adopt motivations of the social sector for the betterment of society, but can also problematise and enhance tensions to provoke reflection. 60

Art making with communities has proven difficult for critics and some art professionals to take seriously. Sean Cubitt discusses the complexities of participatory art and some of the challenges central to its critique when he highlights that “The problem with art undertaken in the public sphere, with its faint aura of social therapy and social work, is that though it may develop expressive powers in participants, we are always reluctant to tear down the fragile unity of the self that is being expressed.” 61 This research argues that critique is important and can support participatory practices to be taken seriously.

59 Grant Kester, The One and the Many, 45.
60 Helguera, Education for Socially Engaged Art, 35.
61 Sean Cubitt, “Public/Media/Arts,” In Dickson (ed.) Art with People, 100; Bishop, Artificial Hells, 189.
The consideration of art as social work may have influenced Bishop’s claims that community mural painting was dated by the 1970s.\textsuperscript{62} The counterculture inspired community artists and muralists of the 1960s eventually conformed to funders’ guidelines in order to maintain their practice. Owen Kelly argued that by the 1980s “a liberating self-determination through which groups of people could gain, or regain some degree of control in their lives” developed to periodic employment through state agencies and the carrying out of jobs that supported a dwindling social infrastructure.”\textsuperscript{63} It is interesting to consider whether community arts’ current popularity will be affected in this contemporary era by adapting to art institutions’ requirements.

2.C. The polarities of participatory art and the hybridity of the Aesthetic System of Participatory Painting

When working with communities, integrating the possibility of dissent into a creative framework is key for an accurate representation and critique of culture. FM made this clear in the previous chapter when he painted penises, he felt that paintings of penises contributed to a more realistic account of Seleka, like Seleka the penises represent a form of dissent of widely promoted conservative values. Values that some Selekarians believe legitimise the hierarchical structure and consequential disparity. This dissent created a little discomfort for some audiences, but promoted laughter and empowerment for others. ASOPP implements the possibility of dissonance with ambitions of aesthetic harmony by integrating modernist painting and wellbeing

\textsuperscript{62} Bishop, Artificial Hells, 185.
\textsuperscript{63} Owen Kelly, Community Art and the State: Storming the Citadels, (Comedia Publishing Group 1984), 54.
frameworks, which actively undermine the polarised approaches to participatory art determined by Kester and Bishop.

Kim Charnley states that Kester and Bishop’s polar perspectives are the foundation of the political in collaborative art. Kester argues for ethical collaboration, stating, “I’ve always felt that the power of art rested in its ability to evoke utopian possibilities.” Kester believes that ethical reflection is a necessary component of collaborative art and the artist must overcome their privileged status to initiate equal dialogue with ‘non-art’ participants. This dialogue with ‘non-art’ participants is what Kester believes is the political ground of participation; ethical consideration is important in avoiding the risk of “colonising them under the aegis of art.”

Bishop argues for the use of critique to shed light on certain inherent issues, stating that an explicit appraisal is most useful in participatory practice. Bishop believes that art based on relations that maintain their tensions is better than art seeking consensus because it reflects society more accurately. Bishop challenges a trend of art criticism to assess collaborative practices by ethical rather than aesthetic measures, assessing success in relation to the egalitarian form of inter-subjective interaction provoked by the work, instead of evaluating it as art. Bishop supports tensions and more
established aesthetic traditions, like “an object, image, story, film even a spectacle.”

What is more, she attempts to deny the inclusion of ethical consideration by submitting to what Charnley believes is the naturalisation of the “economic power and social prestige associated with the arts.” Kester on the other hand relates the autonomy of the artist with inequality and provokes the artist to seek redemption through what Charnley identifies as “ethical reflection and consensual dialogue.”

ASOPP blurs the differences within the categories of participatory art that Bishop and Kester have identified as the ethical/dialogic and spectacle/critique as a hybrid format of participation. The potential for both dissonance and harmonious ambitions are integral components to the ASOPP process. Ironically, ASOPP uses principles of object oriented modernist painting to merge the seemingly opposing positions. Through a collective process of anonymous improvised painting, participants communicate indirectly. The space of communication is less restricted by the social anxieties of direct communication and engagement. Dialogue and spectacle are engaged through an immersion in aesthetic harmony and dialogic fluidity that swings between points of discomfort and idealism. Through an ambivalence that is generated when problematic polarities are made explicit, beliefs and perceptions may be transformed.

71 Ibid., 284.
72 Charnley, “Dissensus and the politics,” 49.
73 Ibid.
2.D. Forms of collaboration in participatory painting

Four approaches to participatory painting are presented here to contextualise the ASOPP methodology. Three approaches have been identified that are used to create aesthetically refined artworks and one example is presented that promotes autonomous creative engagement. The examples that support aesthetic engagement tend to de-emphasise self-determination and provide limited scope for cultural critique. On the contrary, the example that supports self-determination and cultural critique provides limited aesthetic order and may be inaccessible to audiences seeking aesthetic engagement. The limitations of these participatory painting models highlight the strengths and relevance of the ASOPP methodology.

The first example uses a format that prioritises aesthetic order and restricts free expression. Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn (Haas and Hahn) are Dutch artists who have been internationally recognised for their paintings created in the favelas of Brazil. Their paintings feature brightly coloured abstract forms that envelop entire urban blocks in locations that are perceived as dangerous and stigmatised. As Urhahn has said, “Our projects bring hope, positivity, beauty, job opportunities and stability... You know, we are actually offering quite a nice package.” Haas and Hahn employ local communities to help complete their ambitious projects, with many residents

74 “The historical and generic term favela is derogatory and those who live in communities described by others as favelas refer to them themselves using the more neutral morro (hill) – since many of them are situated on the steep hillsides unsuitable for commercial developments. Favela translates to ‘slum’ or ‘shanty town’. Claire Williams, Ghettourism and Voyeurism, or Challenging Stereotypes and Raising Consciousness? Literary and Non-literary Forays into the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro”, Bulletin of Latin American Research 27, no. 4 (2008): 484.

expressing an increased sense of hope and pride in their community due to the beautification of a derelict environment. This hope and pride can translate into economic developments; the international media that often accompany the artists to promote the projects stimulate an increase in local tourism.\textsuperscript{76}

The social consequences of Haas and Hahn’s interventions are complex and difficult to measure. The tourism that is promoted within the Rio de Janeiro \textit{favelas} attract \textit{gringos} [white people] interested in ‘ghettourism’ ‘reality tourism’ ‘adventurism’ and ‘voluntourism’. As Claire Williams notes, the gaze of tourists may be “consciously or unconsciously voyeuristic and imply exploitation of the people and/or place visited,” particularly when organisers receive profits and communities within the \textit{favela} may receive little benefit.\textsuperscript{77} Art tourism can suggest a similar voyeuristic motivation, but with the potential of an alternative agenda for visiting the \textit{favelas} that may indirectly raise the awareness of issues affecting people within these communities.

Haas and Hahn state that their “creative process is open, collaborative, and community driven.”\textsuperscript{78} The documentary \textit{Challenge the Obvious}\textsuperscript{79} suggests local people appear to have limited influences in the design of these projects and are forced to live with a European modernist sensibility. Haas and Hahn could be seen as re-enacting a colonial occupation by projecting a modernist aesthetic into communities

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Williams, Ghettourism and Voyeurism, 486.
\textsuperscript{78} "About \textit{Favela Painting Foundation by Haas and Hahn}, accessed March 23, 2017, \url{http://www.favelapainting.com/about/}
\textsuperscript{79} “Challenge the Obvious – episode one: A day in the Life of Haas & Hahn (NL),” \textit{Vimeo} video, posted by Hub Footwear, September 18, 2012, \url{https://vimeo.com/49689881}
that have been marginalised by a system that depends on them being disenfranchised. These projects potentially highlight the community’s marginalised position.

During 2012, Haas and Hahn completed one of their largest mural projects using their geometric abstract designs over several blocks in North Philadelphia in the United States of America. Philadelphia has a long history of community mural painting. Between 1984 and July 2016 almost four thousand murals were created through the city’s mural arts program. Consistently in Philadelphia, murals exist to promote wholesome values and to beautify the city; the second example I will discuss takes up the wholesome, beautification model in outdoor public space.

The promotion of ‘wholesome’ values does not critique social inadequacies; it reinforces established power relations by encouraging acceptance, resilience and conformity, acting as a cost-effective community management plan. Despite efforts to influence populations, many locals love the artist designed and directed murals, due to the colour, optimism and process. The integration of diverse community members including ex-convicts into their creation can facilitate feelings of connection and purpose between participants.\(^{80}\) The murals also successfully slow down the proliferation of graffiti within the city, which is a primary ambition of the council who help fund the murals.\(^{81}\) The Philadelphia murals have consistently promoted Christian values and feature prominent local or national icons emphasising what Owen Kelly describes as “the dominant values of the state, and the consensus which it


\(^{81}\) Ibid.
is engaged in fostering.”82 This approach may feel patronising for people seeking a less idealised and more critical representation of society.

The Philadelphia murals have not historically represented the artistic talent within the city and some local artists feel disrespected by their government for continually funding the program. In 1999 a group of Philadelphia artists called the Heretical Society highlighted what many artists feel in relation to the promotion of community arts and murals. They have stated that “The Mural Arts Program, originally concieved [sic] to combat graffiti, is more destructive than the supposed malady it seeks to correct. Littering the inner city with bad paintings as a cure for urban blight is the aesthetic equivalent of ameilorating [sic] insomnia with crack cocaine.”83

Although the murals conform to funder’s guidelines, since 2013 some murals have begun to facilitate provocative discussion featuring more socially conscious subjects.84 Developments in provocation suggest greater artistic license or a refocus from funding bodies, which leads to more purposeful creative actions for artist leaders and the community. This research argues for participant autonomy within participatory painting practice and little evidence is accounted for autonomous participation in Philadelphia.

82 Kelly, Community Art, 73.
A popular drawing exercise in art schools, music festivals and community settings is the third example of collaborative community painting that intends to aesthetically engage audiences through formal artistic strategies. It involves providing drawing and painting instruments and encouraging a creative free-for-all on large walls or large sheets of paper. Artists will then draw over the created images to order or resolve the activity, making it easier to digest. The American artist Brett Cook has adopted this method. He encourages a range of community participants to paint collaboratively between pre-existing lines and contours of a portrait featuring a respected local who has contributed to community healing. He then paints over their work to in Cook’s words “immortalise the contributions of many to bring out the spirit of the person in the portrait.” He claims this process is therapeutic and contributes to community healing; various articles including ‘Brett Cook’s Portrait Series Aims to Heal Oakland’ and participants featured in his YouTube videos appear to support this assertion. It is suggested that Cook’s presence and personality is warm and positive and his intent is altruistic. The ability to feel safe and to connect with Cook may contribute to feelings of creative input and healing for project participants. If project participants did not perceive Cook to have the abilities to ‘bring out the spirit’ in the portrait, or did not trust him, people may feel uncomfortable.

If Cooks approach to painting were introduced to people who relate to being marginalised, feelings could easily transpire into disempowerment due to participant

87 Ibid.
efforts being painted over. In a community development context, this process appears to disrespect contributions and employs an exploitative strategy to access what appears to be unpaid labour.

Contrasting the power dynamic of instrumentalising participation, the Merry Pranksters—a group of like-minded individuals from California—encouraged a creative free-for-all while painting their bus. The painted bus became a symbol for anti-establishment and counter cultures of the 1960s, during a time of unease and revolt. Led by Ken Kesey in 1964—author of the significant 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*—the Merry Pranksters famously travelled on their chaotically painted bus across America spreading the word of liberation through psychedelic experience. The Merry Pranksters drove through a nation divided by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. The all-consuming painting on their bus is an example of inclusive collaborative painting that disregards conventional aesthetic rules.

Tom Wolfe discussed the painting of the bus in his 1968 book *The Electric Kool-aid Acid Test* when he wrote that “… everybody (was) pitching in in a frenzy of primary colours, yellows, oranges, blues, reds, was sloppy as hell, except for the parts that Roy Seburn did, which were nice manic mandalas. Well, it was sloppy, but one thing you had to say for it; it was freaking lurid.”88 The collaborative painting displayed a form of frivolous rebellion to cultural norms and artistic seriousness. The process

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brought people together and appeared to support a sense of shared ownership.

Consistent with this came a haphazard approach to painting that merged different styles and ignored aesthetic order. Theirs was a style focused on process, freedom, spontaneity and expression and one that connected with broader societal values of the time. The art on the bus was inspired by, but did not explicitly resemble, the hallucinations consistent with a psychedelic experience. The painting represented psychedelic experience precisely because it let go of the limitations of convention; it was playful in its disregard of fine art and aesthetic rules. This sensibility was reflected in the lives of those involved. Their desire was to promote freedom through free and creative self-expression, however the scope of this desire was limited in its appeal to a privileged white sector of society. The group were free to adopt the slogan “tune in, turn on and drop out” made famous by Timothy Leary in an apathetic revolution. However, this freedom was not accessible to minority populations who struggled for basic human rights.

2.E. Improvisation and rules of autonomy

The story of the Merry Pranksters emphasises that the promotion of freedom in creative activity encourages individuality, self-expression and self-exploration. Author, critic and co-founder of the literary group Oulipo, Raymond Queneau, stated that freedom without direction can lead to slavery by impulsivity when he wrote “The sort of inspiration that consists in blindly obeying every impulse is in reality a kind of slavery. The classic writer who composes his tragedy by observing a certain

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number of rules that he knows is freer than the poet who writes whatever comes into his head, and who is a slave to other rules that he doesn’t see.”

The restricted improvisational approach to the resolution of form that Queneau is advocating is similar to the aesthetic system that governs ASOPP projects. Participants in ASOPP collaborations have some but few creative restrictions placed upon them. As a result, the promotion of free-expression encourages passages of dissent, aesthetic exploration and socio-cultural critique in a digestible, accessible manner.

2.F. Conclusion

A significant problem facing socially engaged painting is the striving for aesthetic engagement when participants lack autonomy and consequently have limited scope to share their views. Throughout this research, no other participatory painting models have been discovered that promote self-determination with an aesthetically engaged outcome to an equal level of ASOPP. The approach framed by ASOPP offers solutions to problems readily confronted by participatory painting practices. The painting process that is discussed throughout this thesis is an aesthetic system dependent upon diverse people and content produced. Key components that distinguish ASOPP from other collaborative mural models include: the ordering principles to facilitate cohesion, a lack of a predefined outcome, the promotion of autonomy within the collective and a lack of restrictions around subject matter which enables cultural critique.

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90 Ibid., 36.
In addition to extending participatory painting practices, the ASOPP model problematises Bishop and Kester’s polarising views of the importance of spectacle or ethical collaboration. It does so by providing a scaffold that facilitates ethical collaboration, spectacle and cultural critique within a mental health framework.
Chapter three: Connection and communication: art and mental health

This thesis argues that the Aesthetic System of Participatory Painting (ASOPP) values both ethics and spectacle and can extend mental health frameworks. It can do this by supporting social connection, self-determination, critique and presence through aesthetic experience. The third chapter of this thesis will explore the mental health context of ASOPP. It does so by relating the project to psychosocial and art therapy models, examining how the use of certain frameworks can support a participant. To understand how the model relates to a mental health context, the research contextualises therapeutic models and relevant social policy. Over the past ten years ASOPP has consistently involved people at various stages of recovery from mental ill health. These individuals and other participating underserved populations are frequently categorised as marginalised and vulnerable to mental health challenges.  

The world over, one of the primary consequences of accessing a mental health service is a vulnerability to stigma and discrimination. This chapter investigates these challenges in relation to social inclusion and social connection.

I have refrained from exploring art therapy in relation to ASOPP for a long time, due to the connotations of the term ‘therapy’. This term suggests an individual’s need for help with psychological functioning and is all too often disempowering in the recovery process. A significant motivation of ASOPP is to empower individuals and

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groups to increase autonomy and cultural representation through providing avenues for direct and indirect communication. This chapter argues that the ASOPP model can provide relief and insight for a participant through: an engagement with the senses, relationally through social connection and intellectually through an exploration of concepts. In ASOPP projects, artworks are framed as both sensory experience and as conceptual exercises. Aesthetics alone can be defined as seductive and merely spectacle,\(^93\) drawing associations with marketing and advertising. The promotion of an engagement in concepts can empower by encouraging critical thinking and assertive communication. To reinforce the dedication to artistic and conceptual engagement, psychological scales have not been introduced in this research because measuring distress and effect would transfer the focus of an art project to a mental health activity. Knowledge related to mental health has been gained instead via literature reviews, individual participation and interviews conducted on conclusion of the project.

3.A. The absolute and the elusive

The concept is real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.\(^94\)

This thesis examines ASOPP projects as artworks that support conceptual and emotive exploration, with a function to provide therapeutic benefits. Helen Payne is a researcher and dance psychotherapist who defines art therapy as a means to communicate and to express emotions. She believes that “The common ground for all

\(^93\) Bishop, Artificial Hells, 27.

arts therapies includes the focus on non-verbal communication and creative processes together with the facilitation of a trusting, safe environment within which people can acknowledge and express strong emotions.”

The ASOPP model can work to extend the meaning of Payne’s statement beyond the expression of “strong emotions” to include concepts as well. The term ‘concept’ suggests informed and uninformed opinions and facts and implies that the artist can have a multidimensional experience that transcends the expression of their feelings alone. Both concepts and feelings “convey evaluative information;” feelings are experiential—in the present—and concepts are conceptual—absolute and consistent. This can equate to concepts having more social purchase than a feeling, due to a reduced vulnerability when it comes to manipulation and exploitation of shared content. Concepts become social where feelings are personal.

Participants do not consciously attend ASOPP projects for therapeutic purposes, but generally for social and creative reasons. For people with lived experiences of mental ill health, a consistent fear is that therapeutic painting or drawing can lead to what David Maclagan refers to as an “imaginary ambush, in which their relaxation will be taken analytical advantage of and used to pathologise them.” In art therapy,

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97 Deuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, 22.
pathologising images can manifest when the therapist has limited or no experience of art making. Art therapist Diane Waller explains that “images have a social and cultural context;” colour, form and subject all have different symbolic meanings and associations depending on the context of the artist’s interests. She explains, “the artist is less likely to search for signs of mental illness.” This is true in opposition to a therapist or the broader population who would have limited artistic experience, due to an artist’s broader understanding of conceptual and cultural contexts. This non-diagnostic approach to discourse on conceptual, contextual and aesthetic relationships is empowering. In the case of ASOPP, it has been my understanding of both psychosocial mental health frameworks and contemporary art that has led to its specific development.

3.B. Group Art Therapy and ASOPP

ASOPP encapsulates numerous therapeutic techniques in a group setting. Nonverbal communication through art making can assist in relationship building through informal and safe communication. A social identity may be strengthened by a sense of solidarity and comfort within a group. This experience can help to overcome stigma and discriminatory beliefs that affect one’s understanding of their own identity. Aesthetic outcomes of focused art making support reflection of self and

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100 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 52.
others and an understanding of artistic identity, which has the potential to strengthen what Geoffrey Thompson explains as “emotional and cognitive processing by infusing with them.”

Discussion and introspective prompts are usually facilitated throughout and/or concluding an art making session, in order to process the relative intentions of the group. A wide variety of creative strategies and exercises are used to engage participants during group settings and vary depending on the purpose of the exercise.

ASOPP projects relate mostly to the principles of phenomenological and interpersonal art therapy. Phenomenology is a humanistic lens for an art therapist to look through. There are multiple interpretations of phenomenology, with Edmund Hussurl’s position relating to ASOPP where it encapsulates a broader meaning of “a method of investigating and describing phenomena as experienced within human consciousness.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty expanded on this meaning to describe the phenomenologist’s characteristics when he stated that:

The attitude of the phenomenologist, therefore, is not the attitude of the technician, with a bag of tools and methods, anxious to repair a poorly operating machine. Nor is it the attitude of the social planner, who has at his control the methods for straightening out the problems of social existence. Rather it is an attitude of wonder, of quiet inquisitive respect as one attempts to meet the world, to open a dialogue, to put himself in a position where the world will disclose itself to him in all its mystery and complexity.

Conversations are directed towards concepts, personal values, aesthetics and the

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105 Waller, Group Interactive Art Therapy.
relationship to other works within the composite artwork, rather than to personal struggles. While making and considering art, I have observed that focusing discussion on concepts and individual values rather than emotive associations can create a sense of emotional clarity within the participant. This can in turn support considered responses and a deeper analysis of artistic content. This type of detachment has its roots in mindfulness meditation practices and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), whereby a participant can diffuse from their emotional self and generate acceptance for the reality of the situation.\textsuperscript{108}

This conversational approach aligns with the well-regarded social psychological principle: “I learn what I believe when I hear myself speak.”\textsuperscript{109} Art therapists who adopt phenomenological frameworks often perceive that their role is as a ‘guide.’\textsuperscript{110} Many art therapists disregard the title of therapist all together due to so-called claims to expertise and the possessing of power over clients.\textsuperscript{111} As I have stated earlier, my role within the ASOPP projects is as an artist who initiates frameworks, these frameworks draw upon my understanding of mental health recovery. Although I have some experience working with people affected by trauma, I do not attempt to explore trauma through my work. I will often listen to a participant where appropriate and refer a participant to an appropriate social and/or psychological support network.

\textsuperscript{108} Russ Harris, \textit{The Happiness Trap} (Trumpeter Books, Boston Massachusetts, 2008).
ASOPP also relates to interpersonal art therapy. Once participants are comfortable in a given setting, I attempt to blend into the background and paint alongside everybody else. I am, however, aware that my presence is consistently felt; participants often ask for my advice in relation to relational and aesthetic conundrums. While in conversation, the occasional participant has framed the project as my own to which I explain that it is dependent upon everybody’s contribution. The interpersonal art therapist, as Waller sees it, facilitates interpersonal exchanges as a “fellow traveler on the journey of life.” Participants learn from each other and the facilitator, who models useful group behaviour. This approach is aligned with psychologist Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, wherein “the leader as a facilitator of interpersonal transactions is neither passive nor claims the centre stage but will be both observer and reflector of what is going on in the group.” The interpersonal leader role models behaviour by being open, displaying a willingness to change and takes risks, drifting increasingly into the background as the group develops.

I have decided to not integrate visual themes into ASOPP projects, as they can be restrictive and controlling. Gerry McNeilly is an art psychotherapist who highlights some problems when using themes during art therapy: either they can appear didactic and can lead to group dependence on the therapist or they can potentially open unexpected powerful feelings too quickly, in turn limiting a group’s development.

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112 Waller, *Group Interactive*, 43.
Of non-directive approaches, McNeilly points out that “themes on the whole are more subtle in their development, and may be stronger and more dynamic as their emergence has not been through a direct demand.”

3.C. Social connection, social inclusion and surprising policy decisions

Ongoing changes in the mental health system internationally have not addressed the need for human connection, but the health benefits of relationships are widely documented. Pro-social human behaviours improve wellbeing and have been vital for primate survival and brain development throughout evolution. Strong positive social connections generally provide greater influence on health than lifestyle factors such as exercise, smoking or diet. As Teresa Seeman and Bruce McEwen outline, “The extent and the quality of human social bonds influences various health-related factors, including positive affect, self-esteem, morbidity, longevity, recovery and risk for mental illness.” Social support helps people to adapt to cognitive and emotional assessments of important external stimuli, resulting in what Seeman and McEwen explain as “decreasing the odds for frequent negative emotional states and exaggerated physiological stress responses.”

116 Ibid., 213.
121 Ibid., 4124; Seeman and McEwan. “Impact of social.”
A recent paradigm shift in the mental health sector in Victoria, Australia sees group programs decommissioned in favour of individual service packages encouraging autonomy and individual resilience.\(^{122}\) This change has been positive for some but means that many vulnerable individuals are lacking social connection and being left behind in an ever-changing mental health system.\(^{123}\) The involvement of diverse communities in ASOPP projects has a strong relationship to forms of social connection and its close proximity to the complex term ‘social inclusion,’ commonly associated with politics and policy throughout the first decade of the 2000’s.\(^{124}\) Social policy and reform advocate David Cappo defines social exclusion as “the process of being shut out from the social, economic, political and cultural systems which contribute to the integration of a person into community.”\(^{125}\) On the contrary, Cappo defines a socially inclusive society as a “society where all people feel valued, their differences are respected, their basic needs are met so they can live in dignity.” He goes on to explain that “To achieve social inclusion, issues such as poor health, increasing crime rates, increasing problem drug use, poverty and decreased social cohesion must be addressed in an interrelated manner.”\(^{126}\)

A 2013 review of international literature on the subject of social inclusion by Nicola

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\(^{124}\) Ibid., 71.


Wright and Theodore Sticky highlights the contentious nature of the issue and its current background position in the discussion of mental health policy. Arguments have been made around the labelling of ‘excluded’ and the phrase ‘in need of being included,’ suggesting a further stigmatisation of those with mental health challenges. This unequal relationship reinforces disparity and it ignores those who do not want to be included. Social exclusion is an unavoidable consequence of clinical diagnosis. The review states that limited empirical and theoretical work undertaken to understand the relationship of social inclusion and mental health has been a barrier to any useful models. Rather than emphasising participation in activities, the review suggests that “clinicians should focus their efforts on promoting individuals rights, supporting mental health service users into meaningful employment and working in ways which reduce health inequalities.” This approach marks a shift in priorities related to mental health, to an emphasis on human rights highlighting a change from efforts relating to a ‘need to belong.’

A significant development in the analysis of exclusion and inclusion has been the acknowledgement of economic inequality, particularly in high-income countries. In Wright and Stickley’s literature review, a point was made explicit that supports the assertion: economic inequality mitigates against social inclusion. Inclusion is a naïve expectation when there are, as Wright and Stickly explain, “massive economic,

127 Wright and Stickly, “Concepts of social inclusion,” 79.
129 Wright and Stickly, “Concepts of social inclusion,” 79.
130 Ibid., 79.
133 Wright and Stickly, “Concepts of social inclusion,” 72.
commercial and political forces at play that keep sections of our society effectively excluded.”Michael Marmot identifies unfairness clearly in his 2010 review of health inequality stating that, by sharing wealth resources and opportunities, “People would see improved well-being, better mental health and less disability, their children would flourish, and they would live in sustainable, cohesive communities.”

A 2010 paper by Enric Novella examines the ‘hyper-inclusive’ model of the psychiatric asylum of days gone by and the current level of exclusion experienced by many mental health service users in western societies. This exclusion is understood to be a result of de-institutionalisation and a promotion of the normalisation of mental illness. In other words, society’s awareness of how mental illness can affect us all and the accessing of services by a broad population has further isolated and caused potential ‘overt exclusion’ of people who are affected by severe mental disorders. Novella states that a probable consequence of the further decommissioning of long-term mental health group services in favour of short-term and treatment-centred modes of intervention may be the maintenance or the future creation of new institutions that, this time, will be beyond the reach and control of psychiatry. One day these new institutions may be even more difficult to reform than the old asylum system was.

3.D. Conclusion

As outlined above, mental wellbeing is dependent upon numerous factors. Although

134 Ibid., 73.
135 Marmot, Fair Society, 3.
137 Novella, “Mental health care,” 425.
general awareness of mental health is greater than ever, the economic divide is
consequentially leaving more people disenfranchised, frustrated and discriminated
against. Social connection is a means of building solidarity, understanding and
enabling change within communities. This thesis has argued that the ASOPP method
of art making is a therapeutic space of play, communication and connection.
Concurrent to this it is a means of validating and prompting opinions and values
within a collective environment, supporting critical thinking, self-determination and
autonomy.
Chapter four: Communication in Third Space

This chapter examines how the Aesthetic System of Participatory Painting (ASOPP) functions and its theoretical framework: Third Space.

4.A. Preliminary workshops

Preliminary workshops are designed for each ASOPP project to provide basic insight into abstract painting ideologies. They are intended to promote confidence in participants and to encourage acceptance and excitement of diverse styles. Prior to commencement of a project, potential participants are shown examples of completed works. They are also given a simple explanation and are informed of the lack of restriction around themes. The focus is on exploring the potential of painting without a predefined outcome.

Music is played throughout the process of creation and during preliminary workshops. The workshops are designed to encourage consideration of colour and shape as musical form, associating an emotive value with different techniques, colours and textures. Considering painting as visual music can support an understanding of improvisation, design and aesthetics and can potentially unify the subsequent artwork. Concluding the musicality of form exercise in the workshop, photographs are taken of participants posing freely; the photographs are transformed into silhouettes that are structurally important to the final outcomes and provide greater narrative possibilities. Participants are directly involved in the coordination and rendering of these forms. Western music has been played during this exercise in all of the ASOPP projects.
4.B. The aesthetic system of participatory painting

Figure 4.1. Adam Douglass in collaboration with On the Spot Arts Initiative, Vātaulu, Nuku’alofa, Tonga, 2015.

ASOPP projects are composite systems, consisting of hundreds of small triangular or square panels that consume entire interiors of rooms or temporary structures. Panels consist mostly of recycled materials made from plywood, billboard skins and cardboard and are arranged and fixed to supporting structures including walls, timber and fabric. After the panels have been attached to the supports, participants will vote on two colours used to paint and unify the surface of the panels (fig. 4.1). The use of this two-colour system was a new development implemented in Tonga. Previously, only one colour was used to cover panels. It has been found that the two-colour system provides greater contrast within the immersive image, enabling dynamic optical movement throughout the environment. I commit to painting the entire ground
of the artwork in a manner that guides a viewer’s eyes rhythmically through the interior of a room or structure to prepare for the collaborative painting. This use of base colour(s) supports cohesion within the resulting painting.

Figure 4.2. Adam Douglass in collaboration with On the Spot Arts Initiative, Vātaulua, Nuku’alofa, Tonga, 2015.

After completion of the ground coat, silhouettes are projected and painted over the top. These silhouettes fulfil three fundamental roles: they formally link individual panels together (their forms vary in size of often a hundred or more panels); they create compositional space to combat a painting becoming potentially cluttered and busy and they provide recognisable shapes to suggest a narrative within the otherwise improvisational, stream of consciousness painting.
The silhouettes in ASOPP paintings are altered photographs of participants posing in any way they chose. This simplifying and masking technique allows individual participants to maintain a greater sense of anonymity. This element is central when working with people who do not necessarily wish to be recognised due to real and perceived stigma. The relationships between silhouettes help to create an array of narrative possibilities within the project. Paint and brushes are provided; however, participants are welcome to use other mediums to communicate or play on their panels.

While painting in the group, I am aware that I hold a position of power, however much I attempt to transfer it. I paint with everybody else and sometimes after workshop hours. As a means of restricting my voice and opinion, I avoid representational painting, choosing instead to paint in gradients and assist overall cohesion through the connecting of panels. The painting of gradients is a stylistic devise used to promote illusionistic space, where the impression of space is magnified and the definition of form is accentuated. Gradients are strategically located to add weight to certain areas and help to support a well-balanced image. Some participants paint gradients but most will disregard this convention in favour of form and a playful exploration of paint.

Participants are aware that when a panel has been taken from the wall, the surrounding panels must remain until the panel is brought back. This ensures that participants can choose how to interact with adjacent panels. A completed panel or a work in progress is unavailable to choose. Artworks are not signed and when possible,
artist’s names are documented and presented with the exhibition or publication, however sometimes it is difficult to document all participants.

In my experience, the use of small panels in these projects promotes a greater sense of autonomy when painting collaboratively within large groups. While co-facilitating a workshop for Geonaut at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre—a maximum-security women’s prison in Deer Park, Victoria, Australia—authorities advised that scissors and pins were prohibited, due to their potential to be used as weapons. Pins had been used to hold billboard skin panels in place, it was decided that we would not cut the allocated section into small panels consistent with the rest of the project. As a result of this alteration, more expansive sections were provided for the group to paint on. The first workshop resulted in greater tensions and an argument erupted when two participants attempted to paint in the same area. One person eventually left the room. Due to the larger area for painting, one participant responded to the silhouettes by painting a large cartoonish horse head as a black silhouette with a white mane (fig. 4.3.) The silhouette remained in the project and continuously stands out as an area that feels disconnected based on factors of its increased size, silhouette style, colour and placement. The following week, this section was cut down to the usual smaller sized triangular panels and labelled on the backside to assist with placement. Some participants were initially annoyed that the section was cut up, but once an explanation was offered, there was a greater sense of ease across the experiences of the group.
As a project artist, I strive for subjective, formal resolution within the painting system; I find that many other participants take to this role also. This intent reflects a modernist desire for transcendence that is expanded to be a compromising form of collective improvisation. The seeking of pictorial structures creates a point of aesthetic order and engagement and enables an increased aesthetic experience. Slobodan Marković describes aesthetic experience as a “fascination with an aesthetic object (high arousal and attention), appraisal of the symbolic reality of an object (high cognitive engagement), and a strong feeling of unity with the object of aesthetic fascination and aesthetic appraisal.”138 Considering collective communication as a

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form of aesthetic experience can allow for a more emotionally detached reading of individual works and their relationships to each other. This can support an open space for learning and an opportunity to grasp the complications of language through a diverse range of worldviews.

4.C. Framing Vātaulua as Third Space

During an email conversation prior to the Tongan project, On the Spot Arts Initiative (OTS) director Ebonie Maka-Fifita invited the academic Sione Tuitahi to contribute to its naming. He developed the word Vātaulua, meaning “two spaces, two groups, collaborating or working together in a dynamic, evolving and enriching relationship.” Tuitahi’s reference of two spaces within the meaning of Vātaulua relates to the project’s theoretical framework: Third Space. This thesis takes Third Space to be a space of indirect communication that materialises as a collaborative painting. ‘First space’ signifies an artist or self and ‘second space’ represents the collaborators or any others involved. Rather than participants initiating conversation between each other, the focus is here on collaboration vis-à-vis the artwork (or Third Space). This Third Space aims to facilitate a shift in the physical and interpersonal dynamics of the project, and becomes a means of more indirect communication. Third Space also relates to this thesis in that it announces the merging of a contemporary art model with a mental health framework, in turn creating a new hybrid form generating a dialogic, aesthetic model of knowledge production.

139 Sione Tuitahi email correspondence with Ebonie Maka-Fifita, May 2015.
140 ‘Other’ is used in context of this thesis as a counterpoint to the ‘self.’
Edward Soja states that Third Space “demands looking beyond the binary categories of first and second spaces of the physical and social”\textsuperscript{141} and is a “flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances and meanings.”\textsuperscript{142} Soja and philosopher Homi Bhabha’s explanations of Third Space inform the use of the term as it is framed within this thesis.

The Third Space of communications relates to Bhabha’s concept of ‘Third Space’. Bhabha states that “by exploring Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.”\textsuperscript{143} Bhabha describes interactions and communication with others as spatial relationships, explaining that “the production of meaning requires that […] two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space.”\textsuperscript{144} The combination of two places cannot form in and of itself a conscious concept or a new entity. Further, he explains that “What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation […] The meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other.”\textsuperscript{145} In a cultural context, this may indicate that “the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity.”\textsuperscript{146} ASOPP extends Bhabha’s perspective of “international

\textsuperscript{141} Elizabeth Birr Moje et al.,” Working toward third space in content area literacy: An examination of everyday funds of knowledge and Discourse,” \textit{Reading Research Quarterly} 39, no. 1 (2004): 42.


\textsuperscript{143} Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, 56.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 53.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 53.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 56.
“culture” as a representation of social consciousness in art making.

The physical distance established between participants when they are working on different aspects of an ASOPP project can help to support an empathic reading of finished art works. In a 2011 study, Jordan Potash and Rainbow Ho claimed that when responding to an artwork creatively, participants saw an overwhelming advantage in understanding artists’ experience, allowing participants “reflective distance to either explore initial reactions or to further transform them into meaningful responses.” This form of interaction proved positive for Fokai—a patient at the Vaiola Hospital Psychiatric Ward from the Vātaulua project—who acknowledged stigma and discrimination as a debilitating factor. “Everyone was proud. I think it is great. The project makes us look like we have morality and artists needed what was in our mind.”

Similar to the collaborative painting model, the documentary video locates a ‘first space’ in my role as the filmmaker and editor. Beyond this, the narrative structure is informed (and often vetoed) by the participants who are in ‘second space’, with the documentary itself existing as the ‘third space’.

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148 Ibid., 80.
149 Fokai (not real name) From Vātaulua video interview at Vaiola Hospital Psychiatric ward Tonga, August 2015.
4.D. The Interactive Matrix

The interactive matrix (fig. 3.1.) illustrates the difference between ASOPP and the commonly referenced triangular art therapy model, illustrated above by Joy Schaverien. In the triangular model, the artwork is a catalyst for discussion and therapeutic encounter with a therapist. In this instance, power is located with the therapist who supports the interaction.

In the ASOPP system and interactive matrix, inter-subjective activity is taking place between a large range of people who are helping to assimilate phenomena and adjust to social and environmental conditions. A body or self (first person) paints from their geographic and/or cultural location (‘first space’), which is then interpreted by other
bodies (‘second space’). The ‘other bodies’ read the artwork and potentially contribute to discussion by communicating in the form of painting, from the position of another geographical and cultural location. The artwork becomes an interactive matrix categorised as Third Space: a physically, emotionally and intellectually constructed hybrid space of language and communication. By engaging with a range of peers—as opposed to a single therapist—participants may experience a far greater sense of equality within the exchange, leading to increased feelings of empowerment.

Each of the three previously mentioned projects realised using the ASOPP methodology have proven accessible due to an ever-present input of stimuli. A participant can choose to respond to a neighbouring panel through literal or aesthetic means and will often come to witness their own work being responded to in these same ways. Even during periods of vulnerable mental states and difficulties of thinking, people have engaged in ASOPP collaborations. This can be contributed to an overall ease of participation, a readily available array of entry points and feelings of emotional wellbeing as a result of a safe space being promoted by the facilitator.

4.E. Harmony and dissent

Overarching themes of ASOPP revolve around the promotion of social connection, individual autonomy, the potential of the creative collective and a subsequent dissensus within a democratic process. Collaborative improvisation creates opportunities for unravelling unknown aesthetic potential and entropy due to the unpredictability of human personality.\(^{150}\) Surprises that come with collaboration can

\(^{150}\) Danah Henriksen and Punya Mishra, “Between Structure and Improvisation: A Conversation on Creativity as a Social and Collaborative Behaviour with Dr Keith Sawyer,” *TechTrends* 61, no.1
allow for personal growth and new creative considerations. A lack of rules can limit creativity and lead to a process grounded in nonsense.

ASOPP projects are immersive and nature-like in that they engage peripheral vision. Aesthetic resolution is determined by fluent eye movement in the immersive space, this is made possible by a repetition of pictorial techniques, forms and colours. Rudolf Arnheim writes about the striving for a balanced composition in image making as a popular ambition. It is this ambition that allows people to continue to find spiritual connection in the task of relating to the ‘striving for equilibrium’ in all aspects of life. As he explains it, “in a balanced composition all such factors as shape, direction, and location are determined in such a way that no change seems possible, and the whole assumes the character of ‘necessity’ in all its parts. An unbalanced composition looks accidental, transitory, and therefore invalid.”

Within ASOPP projects, rules are created to support the possibility of a balanced composition, which are shaped to converge the social and aesthetic, promoting inter-subjective communication and individual autonomy. In my experience facilitating


153 Ibid., 2007.
155 Ibid., 20.
ASOPP projects, cohesion is not easily achieved in a collaborative context. Particularly when up to thirty people are painting at a given time, compositional awareness from some participants and consensus from many is required. Where this is not always present within the pool of participants, it involves myself or a like-minded individual working after hours to paint in between panels, consciously leaving certain panels that have the potential to provoke discussion.

The research identifies that consistently different personality types and levels of creative experience conform to different pictorial roles. Some people paint connecting panels, while some disregard surrounding panels. It must be noted that participants may generally take on one predominant role but often move between roles; the relationships that are developed within projects plus external conscious and unconscious influences will inform different approaches to collaboration. In this respect, the atmosphere created by the facilitator plays a significant role when it comes to supporting final outcomes.

It is through processes of dissent and rebellion that truly surprising outcomes can occur. Dissent can take form as didactic comments, as satire in the form of a statement, or abstract paintings that are consciously or unconsciously unrelated to surrounding panels. Dissent in ASOPP projects can relate to personal protest against limitations imposed by the facilitator, the group culture, family and/or governing bodies et al. Participants that aim for pictorial unity are forced to extend themselves when dissensus occurs, and they often face compositional, intellectual and ethical challenges. Within the dichotomy of dissensus and consensus, unexpected learning
curves and new dialogue can transpire. Bishop advocates for this form of dissensus, outlining dissent as a moral position able to provoke transformation, when she writes:

I believe in the continued value of disruption, with all its philosophical anti-humanism, as a form of resistance to instrumental rationality and as a source of transformation. Without artistic gestures that shuttle between sense and nonsense, that recalibrate our perception, that allow multiple interpretations, that factor the problem of documentation/presentation into each project, and that have a life beyond an immediate social goal, we are left with pleasantly innocuous art. Not non-art, just bland art – and art that easily compensates for inadequate government policies.\textsuperscript{156}

This research supports the benefits of dissensus in a collaborative context. ASOPP requires dissent and difference in order to present an interpretation of social truths in its ambitions of documenting forms of social consciousness. Interestingly, when counter positions merge, new creative forms and ideas emerge. This hybridity can relate to the individual via an understanding of the term ‘cognitive dissonance’.

Author Yuval Hariri makes clear the importance of cognitive dissonance in the development of culture, when he states that:

\begin{quote}
a human being who belongs to any particular culture must hold contradictory beliefs and be driven by incompatible values. It’s such an essential feature of any culture that it even has a name: cognitive dissonance, often considered a failure of the human psyche. In fact, it is a vital asset. Had people been unable to maintain contradictory beliefs and values, it would have been impossible to maintain any human culture. So, paradoxically, cognitive dissonance enables both change and stability.\textsuperscript{157}
\end{quote}

\textbf{4.F. Conclusion}

Considering ASOPP as Third Space enables an understanding of the cultural development and personal growth possibilities through indirect communication.

When provoked, participants have felt empowered to reflect and share personal views through this form of communication. When disparate concepts clash and merge, culture can be mobilised and new understandings can be formed. ASOPP is a hybridisation of mental health and contemporary art frameworks. ASOPP is a new framework that can empower mental health service user’s due to a disassociation from mental illness and can destabilise cultural hierarchies who determine the elite by modernist standards.
Conclusions

My use of Homi Bhabha’s Third Space supported this research to understand the merging and clashing of different perspectives through the process of painting in Vātaulua and its documentary video. Third Space also assists to communicate the hybrid form when merging mental health and contemporary art models, helping frame the Aesthetic System of Participatory Painting (ASOPP). ASOPP is a new model of participatory painting that contradicts the binary positions of socially engaged arts practice articulated by Grant Kester and Claire Bishop. Kester’s dedication to the ethical158 and Bishop’s support of the spectacle159 are unified within this model. ASOPP values and supports; participation, ethics, critique and aesthetic experience, leading to inter-subjective awareness, communication, critical thinking, dissensus and social connection.

This thesis has identified societal beliefs and policy as significant factors affecting recovery from mental ill health. ASOPP provided an avenue for meaningful social connection through collective collaboration and indirect communication that encouraged individuals to reflect and practice assertion. Collaboration has been playfully facilitated through painting in relation to an individual’s values. By connecting with a format that is aligned with psychosocial and art therapy frameworks and not directly associated with mental illness, mental health service users have engaged in projects and felt less stigmatised.

158 Kester, Conversation Pieces
159 Bishop, Artificial Hells
ASOPP has presented disparate perspectives as digestible immersive forms, documenting an aspect of social consciousness. Painting has taken place individually, within communities and friendship circles. ASOPP has not dictated predefined outcomes, instead promoting both congruence and dissent through improvisation to generate new understandings of difference. The dedication to improvisation within this aesthetic system extends current established participatory frameworks.

Similar to *Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre* (2007) and *Geonaut* (2013), *Vātaulua* and the ASOPP model proved accessible for participants and audiences in Tonga. It was a new creative method for people to work with, complementing the community cultural development ambitions of project partners On the Spot Arts Initiative (OTS). The project related to cultural values of beauty, harmony and collaboration, providing an opportunity for locals and patients of the psychiatric ward to engage in the arts. Patients had their creative voices seen as part of the wider community and relationships were formed between the psychiatric ward and arts programs.

The methodology was transformed in Tonga. *Vātaulua* was the first ASOPP project using two colours to support aesthetic cohesion, *Vātaulua* was located in a house for the first time and cardboard had not been used as a ground to paint on previously. The language used and approach to facilitating developed in Tonga due to an increased awareness of the influence of my cultural background as a white male from Aotearoa, New Zealand. Examining principles of decolonisation and empowerment supported this awareness. Some provocative imagery was a result of the values directed
conversation proving useful to promote broader community dialogue. Vātaulua collaborators, OTS and Seleka have continued using strategies that were shared in the project and consequentially these processes may develop further.

The ASOPP methodology was partially transferable to the video documentary Vātaulua: Communicating in Third Space. The video is a series of various interviews and scenes from the project, collated rhythmically, with the influence of project participants. The video represents the relationships between artworks, project participants, and events that took place during my stay in Tonga.

This research project has encouraged me to continue developing this methodology. Time restrictions limited the potential engagement for mental health service users living in the community. More time would also support personal styles and opinions to develop, providing opportunities for increasingly complex aesthetic forms and dialogue. Collaborators in Tonga suggested Tongan classical music to be played during preliminary workshops rather than western music, proposing that by listening to Tongan music participants may have felt more empowered and encouraged to use Tongan imagery.

The ASOPP methodology can provide psychosocial benefits through its promotion of autonomy within the collective, supporting self-determination, social connection, free expression and aesthetic experience. ASOPP projects are an opportunity for local communities to critique social structures and self-represent. This can assist in destabilising pre-established hierarchies that hold power and often determine cultural
standards. By expanding modernist, individualised aesthetic systems to accommodate a social application, ASOPP as an adaptable methodology has the ability to generate continued discourse around the issues affecting participants.
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