



Toward an Understanding of the Fundamental Healing and Therapeutic Qualities of Art

Michael Franklin*

Taylor Siemon*

Abstract

This paper addresses questions of how and why art is therapeutic. Core principles from the art therapy literature are cited as a way to clarify how art, which includes expressive engagement with processes, materials, and products, can be a complete and primary therapy for people seeking to confront and relieve their suffering. Special attention is devoted to Edith Kramer's ideas on art as therapy and sublimation.

Key words: art as therapy, Edith Kramer

Introduction

One overarching question that drives the focus of this paper is how does experimentation with art materials and art processes offer a continuum of therapeutic and healing outcomes for people across the developmental and cultural spectrum? There are many reasons to consider which would help to explain these results. For example, according to Allen¹ internal transformation through art results by maintaining sustained efforts of immersion in charged emotional material, over time, which eventually becomes the subject matter for completed works of art. It is this continued immersion in the creative process that cultivates inner resources known as ego strengths² as well as the flow state.³ Csikszentmihalyi,³ as well as many artists, describe flow as a condition of effortless engagement devoted to an outcome with specific, definable

goals. As these goals are achieved, immediate feedback is obtained from the process itself, reinforcing the fact that persistence yields desirable, even pleasurable, results. Similar to the artist's personality, Csikszentmihalyi³ addressed the autotelic personality as one where there is complete reward in doing an act that initiates the flow experience. Additionally, Csikszentmihalyi clarifies how happiness is related to the capacity to absorb oneself in what one is doing.⁴ The result of these sustained efforts over time is an accumulation of inner resources⁵ that are uniquely forged in the fires of creative work. For example, the art process teaches tolerance of ambiguity and management of frustrations as ideas are considered over time, edited, and manifested into various compositional possibilities. Through sustained creative investigation, visual symbolic material is eventually contained in honest unified compositions⁶ known as "formed expression" that communicates

* Graduate Art Therapy Program, Naropa University, Denver, Colorado, United States of America

degrees of artistic intention to a wider audience.²

There are other reasons to consider why art is healing and therapeutic. The following brief outline explicates other considerations for the therapeutic and healing potentials of art:

1. Art allows for hidden internal experiences to be seen outwardly. This reification or concretization of inner experience allows for inner emotional states to be known and outwardly contemplated.

According to Langer,⁷ art enables one to objectify subjective experiences, and subjectify objective experiences within a unique framework for imaginal freedom.⁸

Also, according to Kramer,² art fosters a sense of mastery as yet to be seen conflicts are re-experienced, formed, concretized, viewed, and re-authored.

2. Art is a way to edit old behavioral patterns and build, repair, and rehearse new behaviors. This new perspective fosters innovative views of a novel, emerging self-image.⁹ Furthermore, these older behavioral patterns along with harsh inner critical messages can be confronted and reworked through art.

3. Art is a way to make unconscious material pre-conscious so that it is manifest, yet still veiled by symbol and metaphor.¹⁰

Art therefore allows for symbolic metaphoric communication and dialogue with emotionally rich material. Thus, art is a way to send oneself, as well as others, messages.¹¹ It is a method that gives one permission to think out loud, as well as engage in an internal self-dialogue.⁸

Art also invites one to participate in the content of the creative process, such as Wallas' stages of preparation, incubation, illumination and elaboration¹² as well as active and receptive states¹³ of doing/manifesting and reflecting.⁸

4. Art initiates a process of subtle and overt forms of decision-making. Art therefore is evidence of an assertive act¹⁴ that requires cognitive, affective, and somatic layers of choice-making. The whole person, including both hemispheres of the brain, is en-

gaged in the art process.¹⁵

5. Art functions as a holding environment and transitional space¹⁶ that bridges internal and external realities thereby holding, within the language of art, the widest spectrum of human affect.¹⁷

Langer¹⁸ builds on these five therapeutic qualities of art by describing the drive to find accurate esthetic language for feelings. For Langer,⁷ art was a practice of giving feeling to form. In fact, Langer¹⁸ considered art the most accurate language for human emotion, as its primary function is to articulate feelings through form. In part, this drive is satisfied when truthful lines, shapes, colors, and textures, known as the elements of design, are utilized to contain and express human emotion. These elements serve as the fundamental building blocks of artistic visual language, or symbolic speech,¹⁹ which ultimately enables the artist to give feelings structure and outward appearance.¹⁸ Furthermore, these expressive elements of design, such as rough and smooth textures and warm and cool colors, are flexible enough to contain and communicate the full range of human emotion.

It would seem then that there is a human drive to create, "to make special," which is believed by some to be a hard-wired biological trait of the human species.²⁰ The creative impulse, with its will to manifest the unseen, has offered profound contributions to our collective cultural history. Throughout the ages, the arts have helped humankind to reconcile the endless challenges intrinsic to the human condition.²¹ Art therapists are addressing this inherent creative drive as a form of medicine wherein imagination ministers to the deepest internal calling of people to strive for personal and cultural health.²²

Moreover, visual relationships of form and content, process and product, which directly relate to our inner sensations, is known as isomorphism.²³ The notion of isomorphism, that external art forms are similar in structure to the inner state of the artist, is an important concept that helps to explain why art is

therapeutic.²⁴ Isomorphism helps lay a foundation that explains why Langer's ideas on the language of art serve as a direct and metaphorical form of communication. Emotion that is mostly inaccessible and unformed can now be accessed and known through the expressive use of materials such as paint, clay, or digital media.

Visual symbols need the facilitation of these art materials in order to reveal and transport latent unconscious material into manifest forms. As in dreams, even though these symbols can now be seen, they often still exist in a disguised form. The inner narrative is now visible as a painting or sculpture, but not yet fully understood in terms of its meaning. Existing in the realm of a veiled metaphor, inspired from the truthful depths of the psyche, the enlivened image is trusted to lead the way toward a healing narrative.²²

Lastly, related to Kramer's ideas on sublimation, art is also extremely helpful in identifying inherent strengths in the midst of psychological pathology. As Kramer² has observed, many clients will reach their highest level of functioning in the art as therapy process. As shall be seen in the next section, owing to a deeper understanding of art and sublimation, art is a therapeutic act in and of itself. For Kramer, art facilitates the transformation of inner impulses by containing and organizing them into symbolic equivalents directly related to the original impulsive desires and urges. During this process, it is often the case that individuals must loosen defenses and even regress, blurring the boundaries between their conscious/unconscious and internal/external realities. At some point all art processes serve to relax defenses, as emotional material is made available for subject matter.

Ernst Kris²⁵ describes this precarious process as "regression in the service of the ego." This unique form of relaxed control enables individuals to simultaneously repress, monitor, and relax control in order to maintain access to charged emotional material.²⁶ Although individuals can lose themselves in the cre-

ative process, the observing ego endures in sublimation.²⁶ In creative endeavors one quickly learns to directly experience emotion while also observing and organizing emotional material into works of art.

Initial responses to these emerging, usually unconscious, impulses that arise in the process of regression are often manifested as visual displacements. In art, displaced impulses are characterized as unformed visual chaos. Art based solely on the displacement of raw affect falls short of sublimation, since intense emotions are visually discharged only, rather than symbolically contained, in esthetic form. Also, visual displacement does not change a person's inner state, as in sublimation, which mollifies these chaotic discharges and encloses them in symbolic, esthetically accurate, visual configurations. Although sublimation incorporates displacement, it utilizes and symbolically forms emergent urges rather than only immediately discharging them. Eventually there is recontextualization of emotions and memories that are intentionally contained in formed visual equivalents.

Edith Kramer, Art as Therapy, and Sublimation

Seeing the human condition through a psychoanalytic lens, Edith Kramer felt that we are driven by asocial primitive instinctual drives that hold an evolutionary relevance. With the onset of conceptual thought, instincts could no longer be safely relied upon. This evolutionary shift promoted an accumulation of unregulated impulses. When stimulated by strong emotions these forces surface, demanding gratification. The ego employs multiple defense mechanisms, such as displacement, to manage resultant anxiety; sublimation and its corresponding organizing mechanisms exclusively allow partial instinctual gratification through the creative process. The process of sublimation is multifaceted; it includes mechanisms of regression, displacement, and a re-channeling of drive energies.

Sublimation unfolds as a journey with various components, including visual displacement and the

partial neutralization of drive energies.²⁷ In the arts, sublimation involves creating a deliberate, socially productive, and formed symbolic equivalent for an instinctual urge rather than acting out the urge in an asocial manner. Key to understanding the process of sublimation is a consideration of the compromise reached between acting out and symbolically configuring an impulse, while maintaining an honest relationship with the initial strong emotions stimulating the urge. As a result of ongoing exposure to such powerful emotions, which becomes the content of the artwork, this journey necessitates inner resourcing to prevent the possibility of decomposition. As the ego precariously suspends its control in order to enable the creative process to unfold, it must also simultaneously regulate this regressive pull when confronted with the challenge of channeling urges into formed visual expressions. In some instances, in order to permit fulfillment of the creative process, the ego must regulate itself by suspending degrees of control when potentially flooded and therefore confronted with the challenge of channeling urges into formed visual expressions. Ultimately, sublimation is a victory for the ego and society since powerful impulsive urges have been transformed into art rather than acted out in a socially harmful manner.

During the sublimation process, art therapists function as auxiliary egos, or using a term that Kramer²⁸ coined, as a “third hand,” loaning their inner resources necessary to achieve visual sublimation. Kramer described the art therapist’s third hand as the utilization of artistic competence and imagination to compassionately serve others in the least intrusive and restrictive way.²⁹ Art therapists must assist in the creative process without distorting their client’s original intentions. First, art therapists learn to respect and validate the distinct visual language of each client; their personal style must not be implicated in the client’s creative processing.²⁹

Second, art therapists promote spontaneity and act as guardians of the resultant imagery. Spontane-

ity encourages clients to let go, confront ascending impulses, and visually contain them through genuine symbolic representations. Clients encouraged to relax their inner critic and art therapists must provide permission for disordered, partial, or even chaotic artwork.³⁰ Process is continually emphasized in relation to the emerging product. Process cannot be separated from product; the art therapist maintains interest in both parts of this often divided dialectic.

Working with symbolic visual equivalencies of traumas permits the client to revisit and redefine experiences, discovering unknown inner resources and a capacity to heal. Sublimation is a transformative process in which one must lose a little control to find the inner resources necessary for the discovery of autonomy, identity, ego strength, and resiliency. With a trained third hand or auxiliary ego, art therapists guide and support clients’ sublimated visual expressions. Sublimation is an integrative act; clients learn to assimilate their emotional, imaginative, cognitive, and perceptual faculties to achieve sublimation.³¹ Within the miraculous act of artistic sublimation clients’ fragmented selves can be experienced as unified statements of personal truth thus allowing for the healing process to unfold.

Conclusion

Through the art process, new samples of productive behavior can be learned, rehearsed, and actualized. These behaviors consist of an increased capacity for decision-making, tolerating impulses and frustrations, delaying gratification, and confronting a conflict head on in order to immerse oneself, through art, in the struggle at hand.

Historically, art has served to resolve conflicts between powerful primitive urges and the divergent demands of reality. The pleasure derived from sublimation replaces the satisfaction gained from more primal forms of impulse gratification.³² Art has the capacity to evoke powerful feelings within an imaginal reality separate from the perceptual realm. Thus,

art constitutes a sanctuary for self-communication along with the subsequent revision, for example, of haunting memories, impulsive urges, or the loss of a loved one. Similar to Langer's views, Kramer²¹ contends that the primary function of art is the objectification of experience that supports self-reflection.

Sublimation in the arts demands the development of resilient access to inner resources. Artists are in precarious positions; they allow their impulses to emerge without resorting to reactionary defense mechanisms.³² Kramer argued that sublimation is the most gratifying function of the ego, as it attains a compromising balance between the social environment and internal instinctual urges.³² Instead of immediately discharging instinctual energy, the ego utilizes these forces by forming intentional, organized, and formed visual representations of anxiety-provoking instincts. Thus, instinctual gratification is replaced by an act of achievement.

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บทคัดย่อ

ความเข้าใจหลักการเยียวยาและคุณภาพการบำบัดทางศิลปะ

ไมเคิล แฟรงคลิน*, เทย์เลอร์ ซีมอน*

*ฝ่ายบัณฑิตศึกษาศิลปกรรมบำบัด, มหาวิทยาลัยนาโรปา, เมืองเดนเวอร์, รัฐโคโลราโด, ประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา

บทความนี้ได้นำข้อมูลที่รวบรวมจากการทบทวนวรรณกรรมว่าศิลปะเข้าไปมีบทบาทเชิงบำบัดอย่างไรและเพราะเหตุใด โดยนำหลักการสำคัญทางศิลปกรรมบำบัดจากเอกสารวิชาการที่อ้างผลการรักษาปฐมภูมิอย่างสมบูรณ์ ซึ่งรวมถึงการ แสดงออก, กระบวนการ, กรณีตัวอย่าง และผลลัพธ์. ผู้เขียนได้เน้นเป็นพิเศษต่อแนวคิดของอีดิธ เครเมอร์ ที่ว่าศิลปะ ให้การบำบัดและการทำให้หลุดพ้นจากความไม่ถูกต้องไปสู่ทางที่ยอมรับ.

คำสำคัญ: การบำบัดทางศิลปะ, อีดิธ เครเมอร์