

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Sally Skaife

Art Therapy for Social Justice: Radical Intersections

Edited by Savneet K. Talwar

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This book is a must read for art therapists around the world. Whilst it is born of, and intrinsically related to, its context in the USA, the issues it raises are important for us all. The main message of the book is that art therapy needs to shift its focus away from treatments for individualised pathologies – deficit models, to practices that prioritise radical caring and social justice based on the recognition that social, political and cultural conditions shape our lives and are responsible for mental health problems disproportionately affecting the less advantaged.

The book is written by authors who are feminists of colour, those with disabilities and LGBTQ + communities, about art therapy with these communities. It is these groups, Talwar says, whose issues have been written out of dominant art therapy discourses, that are at the vanguard of challenging mainstream frameworks of art therapy. The book as a whole gives voice to socially marginalised communities in a way that has barely been done before in art therapy literature, to my awareness. For example, Gipson discusses the invisibility of black art therapists and black communities. Her chapter redresses the lack of acknowledgement of three black founding members of art therapy in the States, Georgette Seabrooke Powell, Sarah Pollard McGee and Lucille D. Venture. There has been more interest, Gipson says, in European ‘Outsider Art’ than in black community art projects in the US such as the Harlem renaissance where art and well-being came together in radical art making.

The subtitle of the book ‘Radical Intersections’ refers to intersectionality, the recognition that there are overlapping identities and oppressions – women, the working class, racism, LGBTQ + people and those with a disability. Radical intersections also refers to intersections of art forms; examples are given of art making, craft, performance art, movement and so on, combined in particular projects. The priority is to respond to the needs of the community rather than ‘to provide fixed recipes’.

The book begins with a well-argued discussion on diversity and social justice and is anchored in radical literature. Moving away from individualism, it advocates an acknowledgement of historical and systematic oppressions and the calling out of injustice. It recognises the current context of ‘Trumpism’ with its normalising of racism and sexism.

The book moves on to question the epistemological frameworks of art therapy discourses that stand in the way of a social justice vision. Like Susan Hogan (2001) in the UK, Talmar argues that art therapy can be historically located in the Eugenics movement, a movement that aimed to improve the genes of humanity by controlled breeding. The emphasis was on wanted and unwanted bodies and relied strongly on images for the distinctions. An idea of 'normality' took hold. Thus art therapy, within the field of psychology, was about devising tests to recognise deviance from the norm, and treatments to bring back to the norm.

Each of the chapters on praxis presents a particular model of care and wellbeing. These are based on concepts of self-care – which is seen here as community caring leading to individual self-caring, hospitality (inclusion), and restorative practice methodologies, referring to activities which give a feeling of wellbeing. Social action art therapy involves communities acknowledging and naming the realities of their lives through art making. Art therapy is then a transforming experience in which individuals come to feel a sense of belonging, self worth and collective wellbeing through performing and promoting social justice.

An example is A Long Walk Home, a year long artist-activist programme set up to empower African-American teen girls in Chicago to advocate for gender and racial equality in their communities and beyond. Many of these girls have experienced police, community, domestic and sexual violence or been witness to it in their area of Chicago; they are traumatised. The art therapists who are also African American choose 'a black feminist rubric self-care' as a model of art therapy. To enter into the programme each girl produces an art portfolio which reflects the various forms of art expressions present in their homes and communities - hair braiding, rapping and stepping, creative writing, photography, dance and visual art. Classes on gender and equality invite the students to share their stories and students are given an individual therapist where appropriate. The girls are given journals and cameras so that they can document their lives through monologues and self-portraits. This stage is called Girl/Me. They move onto Girl/Culture in which they think about how their experiences are shared by others. An exhibition of 100 black girls featured the artwork they had made on the project. Lastly, in Girl/Power they upend the antifeminist and racist concept of 'self-care' by considering it in a wider political sense of interdependence. At a Domestic Violence Awareness march which

commemorated the life of an unarmed young woman shot in the back of the head by a police officer, they handed out leaflets they had made that included self portraits of themselves, thus joining themselves to a larger collective and dissolving the boundaries between politicised violence and personalised trauma.

Other chapters discuss projects focussed on gender violence, disability culture and refugee and immigrant communities. I hesitate in separating out distinct client groups, the favoured structure in art therapy publications, as Talwar succeeds in promoting intersectionality in the book. Many of the women might appear in several of the groups. The book is radical in challenging the notion of issues or problems as belonging to individual groups of women, rather than as embedded in political and cultural systems that marginalise people on the basis of race, gender and class. An interesting thing about the book is that you hardly notice that it is written by women, about women, as this identity in itself is not made a feature.

Art therapy practice in this book works with conscious material and this is perhaps related to its context in the US. In the UK art therapy has historically placed more emphasis on unconscious processes. Talmar includes psychoanalysis within her critique of individualised, deficit models of art therapy that are based on the notion that something is wrong with the client that needs to be corrected, and that excludes the relevance of the social, political and cultural. She describes psychoanalysis as a practice in which the material of the unconscious inner world of the individual is brought to consciousness to be shaped to fit social norms. Whilst there is some validity to this, it does not capture the nuance in Freud's ideas, which include a social unconscious. It also does not do justice to art therapy practice which recognises the ways in which dominant ideologies operate within us in ways we are unaware of and invade the actual power relations between therapist and client. The art making process can be considered as one in which we grapple with others in our heads and thus, through replication, give form to those relations making them accessible.

This is a refreshing book which at last brings communities which have been hidden in mainstream art therapy discourses to the fore. Talmar writes eruditely about the way in which the contemporary political landscape effects the personal lives of the marginalised. The thrust of the book is hopeful as it demonstrates a clear path for a

recognition of the social context of personal pain and gives some very interesting examples of art therapy practice which foster 'healing' and 'wellbeing' through political engagement.

Biography

Sally Skaife was formerly a Senior Lecturer in Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths, University of London. She now works in private practice.

Reference

Hogan, S. (2001) Healing Arts: The History of Art Therapy Jessica Kingsley Publishers,