

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Diana Velada

For

Contemporary Practice in Studio Art Therapy

Edited by

Christopher Brown and Helen Omand

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'...it is very hard to root in a constantly shifting world. In the studio we tap into a primal source, asking not only 'who are we?' but also and more insistently 'how can we be "at home" in movement' Kapitan (p.56).

Here is a fine manifesto for the re-evaluation of studio art therapy, what defines it, its history, its significance, its variance with more clinical or psychoanalytic approaches, which for many art therapists has for some time been pre-eminent, and its future. This perspective is highlighted by Dalley in the forward when she says this book revisits *'the healing power of art as a foundation of art therapy practice'*

The Studio

While a studio might be thought of as a dedicated 'art-making' space, somewhat set apart from the ordinary demands of daily life, editors Brown, C. & Omand H. point out in their introduction that this reflects a rather privileged European and North American idea of art, rather than understanding it as *'being embedded in communal craft activities, architecture, or religious practices for example'*.

Other contributors take us into their studios where their adaptive and abundant creativity is in evidence; they provide testament to the value and particularity of these spaces both literally - their physical actuality, and in terms of concept - their imagined purpose. Most often, they are communal and constitute a group of some kind but this does not always presume a verbal or demonstrable interaction between participants, or with the therapist. While many have been especially designed and allocated in settled places, others are more spontaneously devised in locations of transience.

One instance of relative stability is an acute in-patient hospital ward, but within that, Cavaliero describes how her groups *'need to be set up and dismantled each time of use, leaving no trace of the activity that has been going on'* (p.156). She explains how this transformation, into a facilitated art making space, distinguishes it from that of the medical model and potentially invites exploration of an alternative identity to that of 'patient' (p.158).

Lloyd and Usiskin detail another kind of ephemeral studio at the France-UK border town of Calais, where the Community Table was set up for people seeking asylum; its purpose could evolve from a gathering for a meal, into a gathering with materials, inviting the potential to seek and share creative responses, where the aim was not to explore pathology but to shore up resilience (p.113).

The History

Brown, C. and Omand H. provide a pertinent account of art therapy practice particularly as it has evolved in the UK, stating that a distinction between arts in health, community arts, healing arts, art as therapy and art therapy may not be too clear (p.12).

They catalogue the particular origins of art therapy practice established in the 1940's; studios within hospital settings, founded on an understanding of art as healing and the studio space as a sanctuary. What is highlighted is the gradual impact of Freud and Jung's psychoanalytic approaches to these engagements and its significance to professional development on the art therapy trainings in the 1970's where psychodynamic concepts became increasingly central.

Studio art therapy influences identified in the book include those of R. D. Laing and his project at Kingsley Hall in 1965, a therapeutic household where people could learn to live together separate from psychiatry (p.69), Berger's ideas about art in its social and political context (p.19), or more recently, the discourse of Bollas, advocating for a facilitated wider public discussion to engage with the psychopathologies of the large group, aiming to 'free the group to come to more considered and sane solutions' (p.21).

The Significance and Variance with Other Approaches

Referencing the current state of humankind with our climate crises and myriad collective anxieties described by Bollas, as 'pathological group thinking as an understandable psychotic, social process', Brown, C. suggests that perhaps a resumption of the ideals of studio art therapy are much needed at this time (p.95).

In this regard Brown, P. considers the value of studio practice for trainee art therapists, where they are invited to learn, free from the demands of formal tutor assessment. She conveys how the studio can offer the trainee a stronger relationship to their artistic practice in the development of becoming an art therapist. She found that the experience of then relating to their artwork in other settings, such as the closed experiential groups, allowed students to appreciate how *'the dynamics at play shift and, along with this, the meaning'* (p.74).

Relevant, is when Kapitan investigated 'phenomena of disenchantment' among art therapists; they reported feeling adrift from the very source their therapeutic practice depended on and how they longed to resume art making in the studio. But those practitioners who had incorporated studio practice into their work, were faring better and felt more resilient (p.53).

It is interesting to read how Studio Upstairs, a project set up in 1988, downplayed the hierarchy of power that can be associated with therapist and patient and decided art therapists would be called 'studio managers' (p.141). However, as Gill, a co-founder, says, 'we did acknowledge we were art therapists', affirming that it was only this professional status which licensed them to explore another way of looking at the therapeutic value of art (p.66).

The idea that someone could 'spend a day' in the studio contrasts with the scheduled 50 minute psychotherapy appointment. Across the chapters it is highlighted how individuals find the non-clinical studio gives accessibility to emotional and psychological experience as the raw material for creativity, something which may be viewed as a symptom of disturbance and dysfunction in other settings (p.63). Equally, it is a place where individual identities are more aligned with health and well-being rather than that of illness or dysfunction.

In several chapters, a strong case is made with regard to the studio model's capacity for containment. Gill explains how it is even possible in these contexts to helpfully accommodate people who suffer from psychosis. In his view what needs to be understood about art is that it is already psychotic, the psychosis is already there, to quote *'People are simply held in art, it's not that we hold them, the art does!'*

(p.67). Brown, C. also discusses the need to negotiate the traumatic threat that the relationship with the therapist can present for those with psychosis; in relation to the open studio model he references Killick, maintaining that it requires *'an appreciation of the loss of the symbolising function in psychosis and the associated concrete nature of thinking and feeling, along with the use of the art making process and product as an intermediary object within the relationship'* (p.85).

Cavaliero, working in a psychiatric in-patient setting, agrees that the therapist's attention may not always be welcome (p.161) and explains how vital it is for her groups to be open; while patients are personally invited to attend each week no-one has to make a commitment. Here, while the therapist and everything about the sessions aims to be consistent and reliable, the patients can freely attend on their terms and at their pace. 'Sometimes a person will enter the room ostensibly for another reason, perhaps to look out the window. This may be a way of testing what it feels like in the room and might help them to join the group next time' (p.157).

Developments

The question as to whether curating, exhibiting and other aspects of the 'art world' can be helpful when related to art therapy engagements, which principally regards confidentiality as paramount, is also appraised in the book.

Page finds parallels between her monthly curating of studio group artworks, and dynamics that arise within verbal groups. Her careful placement of these works onto a wall for the group to behold and reflect on, is an intervention akin to the links that can be made verbally, to connect one member with another (p.178). Participants will have conscious and unconscious responses to the placement of their work and its relation to the art of others. 'The artworks may critically mirror ideas about being "centred", "self centred", "off centre", or "beside oneself", and "on the edge"' (p.179). A large or bold artwork may overshadow a smaller one, similar to a dominant voice in a verbal group (p.180).

Martyn, while acknowledging problematic aspects of exhibiting art work made in a therapy group, advocates for the benefit of this, when working with people who are

refugees, or seeking asylum, he says that exhibitions can be political acts, challenging hegemony and giving the public *'the opportunity to engage with social injustice and inequality'* (184). He adds, instead of feeling marginalised and denigrated, the exhibitors can experience the more privileged status of artist (p.185).

Summary

While there is great value in psychoanalytic understanding to appreciate and work with all the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship, it is hard to overestimate the capacity of art-making in the context of the studio to reach beyond words and magically transform the human experience; this book ardently and informatively speaks to that.

About the Author

Diana Velada is a HCPC registered art psychotherapist in private practice.