

## ATOL: Art Therapy Online

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Visual Representation Piece:

## Beyond the ashtray

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### Abstract

Ashtrays portray a recurrent theme in the art therapy sessions with people dealing with addiction, often provoking ambivalent reactions to the therapist. Approaching the complex dynamics of addiction, I have found many similarities between the needs which both the addictive substance and the creation of the ashtray aim to cover. Through the creative process and the support of the therapeutic relationship, there can be a shift in the function of this artwork, from the destructive usability to the constructive symbolism. The ashtray can thereby pose a metaphor for integration and containing, representing the development of a more resilient and autonomous self.

### Key words

art therapy, addiction, symbol, self-destruction, self-healing, containing

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In my work as an art therapist in a rehabilitation clinic for people with addictions, I often come across an ambivalent theme: the ashtray. While clients mostly appreciate this object's 'usefulness', it is often met with suspicion by therapists. This contradiction reflects the complex dynamics of addiction, where the addictive substance can be equally used as a means of self-destruction and as an attempt of self-healing (Rost, 2009). It is common for therapists to feel powerless or controlling when confronted with the threat of the beloved and almighty drug of preference and its substitutes (Ebi,

2000). Clients who still appear ambivalent about abstinence (Holt and Kaiser, 2009), their most effective defence-mechanism against inner and outer frustrations, disappointments, and losses (Rost, 2009), often evoke rejecting countertransference impulses in the therapist (Ebi, 2000). But confronted with the challenges of a non-directive setting, the expectations of 'being creative' and 'delivering something' by the end of an art therapy session, clients arguably find hold, comfort and familiarity (McClean, 1999) in this symbol of the only 'acceptable' addiction they have been left with: smoking.

When accommodating the clients idea to create an ashtray the art therapist provides an opportunity for them to get engaged in the creative process, to awaken motivation and decision-taking, as well as to counterbalance feelings of helplessness and emptiness with the experience of self-efficacy (Holt and Kaiser, 2009). Through the perception and preparation of their artwork, clients will be able to consciously and unconsciously express and explore inner conflicts, wishes and fears. They might project idealized or unbearable self elements in this work, in the form of aggressive attacks or contempt. In a compassionate, holding environment they can experience less fear towards those conflicting impulses and more willingness to aim for the 'right form', as a search for a congruent sense of identity (Dannecker, 2015). The ashtray's raised walls enable clients to find a symbolic representation of the 'second skin' (McClean, 1999) that protected them for so long, as well as carve a safe container for the self, reminiscent of the womb. Clients can start differentiating between inner and outer reality, the confusion of which had often been overwhelming before, and also open passages in the form of the ashtray's notches, regulating the communication between the inside and outside.

The tangible result of such efforts, this unexpected transitional-object, can act as an anchor for distant observation and reflection, as opposed to the addictive substance that immediately becomes incorporated into the body (Rost, 2009). A therapist who understands the ashtray as a mediator for both verbal and non-verbal communication within the therapeutic relationship will also challenge its function in the addictive dynamic. In an allegory where smoking poses a re-enactment of a death-rebirth ceremony of the self (Rost, 2009), the ashtray will withstand the aggressive attacks of the lit cigarette and contain its ashes, just as the therapeutic relationship did for the

client. Upon its completion, many of my clients decide that their ashtray is 'too precious' to use, indicating that its function has shifted from the useful object which serves a destructive pattern, to a symbol of integrity, resilience, autonomy, and self-care. The image I have chosen for my contribution characteristically depicts one of these artworks (Fig. 1): A symbol for the new self.

## Biography

Alkistis Karouli was born in Thessaloniki, Greece, where she made her BA and MA at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts of Aristotle University. After participating in European and international scholarship and volunteer programmes in Italy, Romania and Indonesia, she completed a second MA in Art Therapy at the Weißensee School of Art in Berlin. Since graduating in 2021, she has been working in a rehabilitation clinic for people with addictions.

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