

Three keywords: Therapy, Expression, Catharsis

Proposed question for Independent Inquiry: How can catharsis be found through art therapy?

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In this proposal for my dissertation, I have decided to focus on art therapy, having a keen interest in art as well as psychology. To start my research, I will investigate 3 keywords: Therapy, expression, and catharsis. These keywords are broad but relevant to the topic and will help focus the direction of my writing. I will look at artists including Tracey Emin and Yayoi Kusama who have expressed trauma and battles with mental health and how art has helped them express themselves and cope. Notable figures such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung are important within the psychoanalytic theory so I will look at some of their ideas that have shaped art therapy.

Therapy

The word therapy has a simple definition, “any form of treatment for a disorder by a method other than surgery; such treatments in general” (Colman,2015) but is used broadly. There are many types of therapy however I want to look at this in relation to art. Art therapy is defined as “A form of psychotherapy in which clients or patients are encouraged to express their feelings and inner conflicts through art.” (Colman,2015)

Over the last decade, art therapy has been frequently used in conjunction with mindfulness, the act of looking inward at your own feelings and taking self-care through meditative means. This has moved into popular culture; books are readily available to be used for colouring in and as well as the creation of mandalas to de-stress and relax.

The mandala, meaning circle in Sanskrit and symbolised as the universe appears in Jungian psychology. Carl Jung wrote in his *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (2019) about the time he first drew a mandala between 1918-19 and had not understood it, pictured in Figure 1. “I sketched every morning in a notebook a small circular drawing, a mandala, which seemed to correspond to my inner situation at the time. With the help of these drawings, I could observe my psychic transformation from day to day.” (Jung, p232,2019)

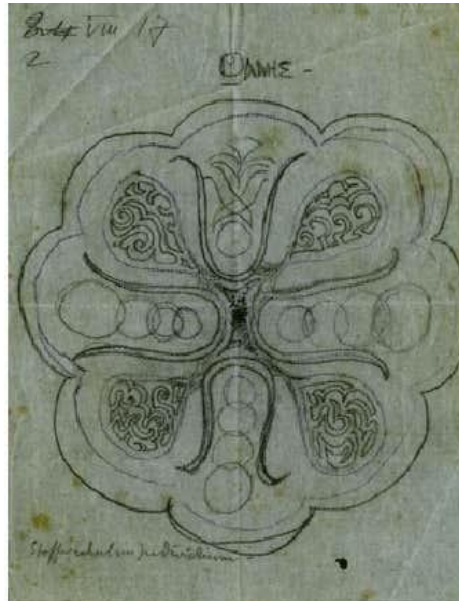


Fig.1 Jung (1918-19) *Mandala*

“The mandala is an archetypal image whose occurrence is attested throughout the ages. It signifies the wholeness of the self.” (Jung, p.393, 2019) Jung discovered the healing capability of art-making by helping to deal with our ‘inner worlds’. It is the mandala that is often used with art therapists as a tool to produce positive psychological effects, to help patients work through grief, illness, trauma, and mental health issues through bringing out the unconscious self. The patient is invited to express thoughts and feelings in their current mental state before explaining their expressive work to the therapist. Art being subjective, means it is important that the therapist does not project any interpretation but allows the patient to talk through their process.

On the other hand, art can also be a therapeutic experience for those that are also artists. In the UK, art therapy came about through the artist, Edward Adamson, and Adrian Hill in the 1940s who discovered that his art was therapeutic to him whilst suffering from tuberculosis, coining the term

'art therapy'. (BAAT,2021) Further research into this would be beneficial to the work of my dissertation and possibly making comparisons of his work before and during his illness.



Fig.2 Cheng (2013) *The Concept of Symmetry*

Contemporary New York based artist, Amy Cheng, produces her own mandala's, such as the one above in figure 2. Her mandala is much more intricate than that of Jung's first concept drawing. Comparatively, a lot of mandalas featured in colouring books for mindfulness are ridged geometric patterns, easy for colouring in. Whereas those created in therapy can appear much more expressive and fluid in shape. Cheng has a 3d quality to her work, using shades in circles behind the first. It appears as the pink and green circles come together, joining as one in the middle.

"I align myself with the long tradition of geometric and floral ornamentation the Far Eastern, Middle Eastern, and European craftsmen have long employed. They did so with the implicit understanding that pattern and repetition, which are endemic in nature, are primal in their rhythmic connection to the human nervous system."

Cheng (2021)

Questions arise from this keyword are: How do mandalas differ in therapy? how are mental illnesses reflected in the use of colours, patterns, or imagery? How does Adrian Hill's artwork differ from when he was using it therapeutically? How does art therapy differ between those that use Jungian theory and those that use Freudian theory? What are other therapeutic ways of expression within art psychotherapy? Other keywords that have come about from this exploration is mandala, colour, well-being, resilience, rehabilitation, health, recovery, representation and psychotherapy. I could also look at not only Jungian or Freudian therapy but Gestalt and any well-known art therapists.

Expression

"We express ourselves in many ways: through tone of voice, posture, the face, words, and, in more subtle cases, paint, music, sculpture, and other forms of art. Linking these disparate phenomena together is a pattern of behaviour coping with a felt need. It is one thing to bring someone's attention to the prey, the water source, the lurking danger, or your injury. It is another thing to make them aware of how things appear from your point of view."

(Green, 2007)

Recently, the Royal Academy announced the exhibition of Tracey Emin called *The Loneliness of the Soul*, with 25 of Emin's artworks, including figure 3, alongside 18 watercolour and oil paintings by Edvard Munch. She has long expressed her love of Munch's expressionism, with his frequent representation of vulnerability throughout his work to loneliness, grief, and emotional openness. Equally, Emin has taken influence from him throughout the course of her work and produces 'confessional' expressive art. (Brandtzaeg et al. 2020)

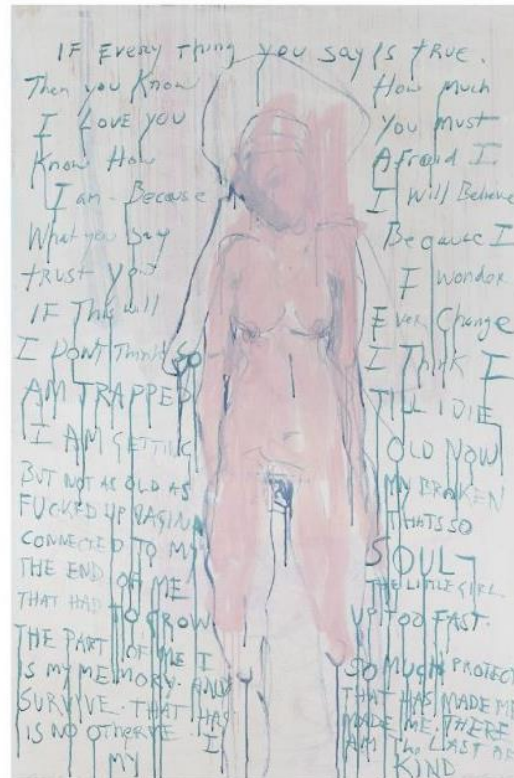


Fig.3 Emin (2019) *I am The Last of my Kind*

Confessional art refers to the revealing of private emotions, thoughts, or experiences of the artist.

The word 'confession' usually brings the thought of some sort of wrongdoing having had taken place by a villain however when we look at the work of Emin we realise she has been the victim. Arguably most known for *My Bed* (1998), an installation of a messy bed representational for a moment in time in her life when facing depression and self-harm. It is the result of 4 days spent in bed during a mental breakdown. The work contains many small artefacts that the viewer can read into the narrative; a duvet was thrown over to one side, empty vodka bottles, an apple core, cigarettes, and period-stained clothing. (Cohen, 2018)

Munch, most known for *The Scream* (1893), had artwork before this, looked down upon for expressing too much emotionally, however, it was this work that seemed to cause the most stir. It depicts an androgynous almost alien type of figure, against a brightly coloured background. Because of the open-mouthed face of the figure, you could assume the scream was coming from them,

however, Munch described it as “I sensed a great scream passing through nature.” (Brandtzaeg et al. 2020) Describing the feelings of loneliness and isolation he felt when walking with friends.

In figure 3, *I am The Last of my Kind* (2019) Emin depicts a pale pink coloured female, nude with her face slanted down, arms limp at her sides. Around her, a pale blue outline hovers above her head like a ghostly figure. And Emin’s words surround her completely, it honours the work *Exploration of the Soul* (1994) which expressed the abuse and rape she faced. In this piece, however, her writing seems to be a little like a diary entry to herself. Acknowledging the past as a summary of herself today, she cannot rid herself of her trauma or ordeals she has faced but it has made her who she is and the art she produces.

Both artists have expressed very personal feelings in their art that have fuelled their work. They have dealt with loneliness, grief, and longing, which could be argued to have caused a therapeutic relief in the creations. Looking at how both Emin and Munch’s art sit together side by side in the exhibition may be a good opportunity to compare the two artists in closer depth in terms of colour use, brushstrokes, and symbolism for example.

Further keywords to consider are expressionism, confessional, grief, trauma, mental health, memories, response, communication and release. Other artists to look at are Vincent Van Gogh, Louise Bourgeois, Kim Nobel, Frida Kahlo and Sophie Calle. Leading to questions such as Is confessional art a form of public art therapy? How do artists differ in expressing their feelings or emotions?

Catharsis

The word catharsis means “the process of releasing strong feelings, for example through plays or other artistic activities, as a way of providing relief from anger, mental pain, etc.”

(Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com, 2021)

Japanese artist, Yayoi Kusama is notoriously known for her repetition and patterns of polka dots throughout her lifetime of work. This was the result of events in her childhood that led to trauma, causing hallucinations and anxiety. It expressed itself in her vision in the form of multiplying dots and nets with which the artist described as “dissolution and accumulation. Proliferation and fragmentation. The feeling of myself obliterating.” (From Here to Infinity | Tate, 2021)

It is ‘self-obliteration’, which is deeply rooted within many of her artworks, the expression of her experience is shared amongst the likes of walls, canvases, floors, figures of animals and pumpkins in brightly coloured polka dots. By painting her visions, it helped her cope with her mental illness and was an outlet for a cathartic release. Having moved to New York in the ’60s for recognition in the art world, she found she was marginalised, and work was stolen from her by notable white male artists such as Andy Warhol. Struggling to cope, she moved back to Japan and had to start her career all over again. After a suicide attempt in 1974, a year later she voluntarily moved into the Seiwa Hospital in Tokyo, having found art therapy, this is where she still resides today.

“We come to psychotherapy because the hidden material has become too much, and whatever has been withheld now seeks relief. It pushes beyond the threshold of consciousness in various unpredictable ways with unusual symptoms and conflicts that disturb and distort the conscious mind.” (Swan-Foster, 2018, p.231)

Catharsis has been recognised in psychoanalysis, first by Joseph Breuer in the early 1880s, who whilst treating a patient discovered the ‘talking cure’ where the distressed patient found her release in telling fairy tales. This was a breakthrough in terms of how psychiatric treatment came to be, Sigmund Freud learnt from Breuer who listened to his patient without judgement and treated her accordingly. Together they wrote *Studies on Hysteria*, which will be beneficial to my research in this area. However, Breuer focused on all aspects of his patient’s well-being including their personality and emotional wellbeing whilst in contrast Freud based his ideas on interpretation and sexuality. (Sandhu, 2015)

“We live now in a world that is united, if at all, by the idea that talking does indeed cure. Whether as doctors or therapists, our daily experience is that letting people talk does make a difference.”

(Launer, 2005)



Fig.4 Kusama (2011) *Infinity Mirrored Room – Filled with the Brilliance of Life*

In Kusama's infinity rooms such as *Infinity Mirrored Room – Filled with the Brilliance of Life* (2011).

An installation of multicoloured LED lights, mirrors, and shallow water on the floor, makes an endless abyss with which the viewer is not a spectator but immersed within the work. They see their reflection within the great expanse, that appears as a cosmos of stars. The installation provokes introspection but within a dreamlike physicality. The outside world is blocked out and a focus takes place on the viewers' position within the infinite, they feel Kusama's obliteration in her hallucinogenic state. But the art itself is cathartic, a release from the outside stressors is felt when submerged in a sea of gentle light that fades in and out in the beat of a heart.

Through the research conducted on catharsis, I can take a further look at the differences between the views of practitioners in my final essay and a closer look at how other artists have used their work as a form of release. I will also investigate how catharsis can be achieved for a viewer observing artwork. Other keywords to branch off catharsis are healing, harmony, contentment, art therapy, hope, and resolution. Questions from this are how is catharsis achieved through art? Is catharsis achieved differently depending on the experience of mental health of the patient? What is the process to achieve a cathartic state?

In conclusion, looking at the keywords therapy, expression and catharsis has opened many different paths I could go down when writing my dissertation on the subject of art therapy. I have looked at how mandalas are used as a therapeutic tool to help with stressors and how they were found and are used in Jungian based therapy. I could now look at how Freud's theories differ and any comparisons. As well as other ways art therapists use art to heal as a form of expression. How does interpretation play a part? Exploring Tracey Emin and briefly into Edvard Munch has opened my research into how current and past artists have used their medium to express and confess loneliness, grief and trauma. I believe it would be a good idea to use her most recent exhibition as a comparative tool for confessional and expressive art. I could investigate how expressive art could be argued as a form of art therapy. I believe that the creation of expressive art, has led to some sort of catharsis, a release of emotion, that may ease the burden that they have felt. Although acknowledging work such as Emin's *I Am the Last of my Kind* (2019) as a piece of work that summarised all that she has felt, her memories and work produced into an autobiographical piece, seems to be cathartic. When looking at Kusama, I found how her work is her coping mechanism and how she still voluntarily lives in a psychiatric hospital after finding art therapy. Each keyword has branched off more words and artists, theorists, and ideas I could look into for my dissertation. However, I have formulated that the question I propose to ask in my dissertation will be, how can catharsis be found through art therapy?

I feel that this question will be open enough for me to have plenty to discuss and argue, without being too constrictive. It will allow me to form my own investigation into the world of art therapy, which is something I am interested in pursuing after graduating.

Image reference

Fig. 1 Jung, C., 1918. *Mandala*. [image] Available at: <https://www.academia.edu/40481201/Carl_Jung_s_Red_Book_Mandala_as_Transformative_Integration_of_the_Psyche> [Accessed 11 May 2021].

Fig. 2 Cheng, A., 2013. *The Concept of Symmetry*. [image] Available at: <<https://www.amychengstudio.com/skills/2010s>> [Accessed 11 May 2021].

Fig. 3 Emin, T., 2019. *I am The Last of my Kind*. [image] Available at: <<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/10-works-grief-loneliness-tracey-emin-edvard-munch>> [Accessed 13 May 2021].

Fig. 4 Kusama, Y. 2021. *Infinity Mirrored Room - Filled with the Brilliance of Life*. [image] Available at: <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kusama-infinity-mirrored-room-filled-with-the-brilliance-of-life-t15206>> [Accessed 11 May 2021].

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