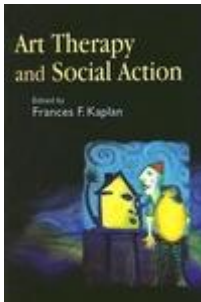


How Can the Creative Arts Therapies Be Used for Social Action?

A review of



Art Therapy and Social Action

by Frances F. Kaplan (Ed.)

London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007. 272 pp. ISBN

978-1-8431-0798-9. \$29.95, paperback



Reviewed by

[Ilene Serlin](#)

Why is it important to document the use of art therapy as social action? Surprisingly, the myth still exists that art therapy consists of a Freudian interpretation of a picture painted in an exclusive private practice setting. Perhaps this was true in the early days of art therapy (as in the work of Margaret Naumburg, 1966, and Edith Kramer, 1979, the “mothers” of art therapy), which grew up during the primacy of Freudian orthodoxy. But, like other psychotherapeutic modalities, art therapy has grown and developed new branches. It has reached out into the community, been used to work with disadvantaged children and families, become multiculturally sensitive, and dealt with pressing social issues. The main thesis of Frances Kaplan's new book is that “we cannot separate the people we treat from the cultural settings in which they live and by which they have been influenced” (p. 13).

In *Art Therapy and Social Action*, Frances Kaplan shows us an impressive number of models from the United Kingdom and the United States in which art therapy and social action come together. Some example chapters from this book include “Art Therapy as a Tool for Social Change: A Conceptual Model,” “Facing Homelessness: A Community Mask Making Project,” “Art and Conflict Resolution,” “The Paper People Project on Gun Violence,” and “Art Making as a Response to Terrorism.”

Beginning with a conceptual model, the art therapist is positioned as a social activist with “an awareness of the interconnectivity between individual and collective, between a person's suffering and social imbalance, as well as an active commitment to personal and social transformation through advocacy for those aspects of individuals and society that are disenfranchised” (p. 31). The art therapist as social activist addresses his or her “own complicity and taking a conscious and ethical stand in redressing social disparities” (p. 31). Mary Watkins, an archetypal psychologist, goes further in delineating this social mandate:

The job of the activist is to connect with what needs activating, with what has been pushed outside the margins and silenced while listening carefully to the silence that is charged with unspoken truth and giving it form through the image. (p. 74)

The role of the socially conscious art therapist is intimately grounded in its prime modality: the image. The image, according to Cassirer (1955), mediates between conscious and unconscious, between the individual and the collective, and between the individual and the world. Working with images, the art therapist sees through the manifest reality to a reality that is closer to the human unconscious. Carl Jung described two main ways in which working directly with images can be transformative: It brings consciousness to what was previously denied, and it evokes the healing power of the psyche or the self. Kaplan summarizes, “Clearly, then, the image can serve as a call for individual and collective action to address marginalized aspects of human potential” (p. 23).

In this way, art therapists have been, as Rollo May (1975) once said, closer to the role of prophet and seer than to that of social worker. The art therapist sees the multiple layers of reality and their interconnection:

She must see the context of the person who is depressed: lack of health insurance, unemployment, divorce, chronic illness related to stress or environmental factors, fragmentation of families and their extended support systems due to the underlying despair that [Joanna] Macy talks about. (p. 75)

She cannot turn away from the pain of the world but voluntarily steep herself in it in order to reflect it in images. For example, Pat Allen describes her very personal feelings, which she does not explain away as countertransference, when she works with the homeless:

In every aspect of the Facing Homelessness project, I was confronted with the fact that it wasn't just the homeless individuals who were suffering and the other participants who were somehow not suffering and had the resources to offer help... I received an image that set me on the road to understanding my own denial, the denial of my own homelessness. My sense of unease was strong enough to make me stop and take stock at the end of the project. For a year, I sat with my sense of failure. (p. 79)

Finally, after confronting his or her own sense of helplessness in the face of enormous social problems and suffering, the therapist must also transform pain and suffering into hope. In their chapter “Unity in Diversity” for the training of socially engaged art therapists, Franklin and colleagues have created a model for their graduate program based on the concept of *seva*, a Sanskrit word meaning selfless service. As part of their model, their training studio deliberately “confronts the existential overwhelmingness of separateness” (p. 216) that brings great loneliness to people in a consumerist, individualist society. Students practice together a meditation based on selfless service and collaboration:

the simple heartfelt connections involving the humanistic values of mutuality, listening, witnessing and pluralism. Simply put, educating the socially engaged art therapist who is service minded implies a sort of dimensionality that goes beyond the limits of traditional clinical training. (p. 216)

How do socially engaged art therapists evaluate and document the complexity of their projects? Hocoy describes a multiculturally sensitive action research approach that is “consistent with the values, beliefs, and healing traditions of the local culture” and avoids “acting as an acculturating force” (p. 32). Art therapy as action research understands that many levels of the self—the psychological–political, ecological–economic, cultural–social, corporeal–spiritual—are interdependent. The following projects are described as action research; that is, the researcher is embedded as part of the ongoing process, is affected by the process, and combines subjective and objective descriptions of its effect over time.

For example, the Paper People Project on Gun Violence was created by Rachel Citron O'Rourke to “invite people from countries around the world... in response to their ideas, feelings, and experiences related to gun violence” (p. 163). With its goal of empowering individuals and communities to take action, this project also confronted the war in Iraq. In Portland, Oregon, people were invited to participate in a “die-in” in the downtown public square. Their images of gunshot wounds attracted attention from National Public Radio and local radio stations.

Another example of using art with trauma focused on depicting the “shame and self-deprecation” that are “insidious and pervasive sequelae of trauma” (p. 176). This approach helps dispel the feelings of “fog” that are inevitable but also limit the potential of living fully (Van der Kolk, 2003).

A further valuable use of the arts is to work with trauma in the face of terrorist attacks. My own experience working in Israel during the 2006 war in Lebanon confirmed the fact that trauma and its psychological effects are often nonverbal and that nonverbal methods, especially those using imagery and the body, can be particularly effective (Serlin & Cannon, 2004; Serlin & Speiser, 2007). In a collaboration between an Israeli social worker at Ben Gurion University and an art therapist, art therapy approaches compared responses of graduate students at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel with responses to the September 11 attacks in the United States. Working from shared assumptions that art can help people “*express and reflect* their own pain and loss” (Lev-Wiesel and Slater, p. 197) and can “include both ugliness” and beauty (p. 197), two groups explored responses to violent events using drawing, narrative writing, and group discussion. Results showed that “participants' strong sense of connection to the U.S. both before and after the September 11 terrorist attacks is reflected in the graphic and narrative responses” (p. 209).

In summary, art therapy is a powerful modality that can access imagery directly, thus mediating between conscious and unconscious, and between individual and community. In *Art Therapy and Social Action*, Frances Kaplan ably documents the new development of art therapy to include social and spiritual awareness by providing clear conceptual frameworks and examples of actual applications in the United Kingdom and the United States. For all those interested in psychotherapy, creativity, and social consciousness, this book will be very valuable.

References

- Cassirer, E. (1955). *The philosophy of symbolic forms*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kramer, E. (1979). *Childhood and art therapy*. New York: Schocken.
- May, R. (1975). *The courage to create*. New York: Bantam.
- Naumburg, M. (1966). *Dynamically oriented art therapy: Its principles and practice*. New York: Grune & Stratton. [PsychINFO](#)
- Serlin, I. A., & Cannon, J. (2004). A humanistic approach to the psychology of trauma. In D. Knafo (Ed.), *Living with terror, working with trauma: A clinician's handbook* (pp. 313–331). Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Serlin, I. A., & Speiser, V. (2007). Imagine: Expression in the service of humanity. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 47, 280–287. [PsychINFO](#) [Article](#)
- Van der Kolk, B. (2003). Posttraumatic stress disorder and the nature of trauma. In M. Solomon & D. Siegel (Eds.), *Healing trauma: Attachment, mind, body, and brain*. New York: Norton.

PsycCRITIQUES

1554-0138

February 27, 2008, Vol. 53, Release 9, Article 7

[© 2008, American Psychological Association](#)