Art Therapy and Social Action

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To Ani,

who improves my world just by being in it
Acknowledgements

Book acknowledgements present something of a quandary. How many people should be mentioned? – there are such a lot who contribute in one way or another to a book’s completion. Should the friend who spurred me on by saying, “Do it and do it now!” get a mention? I say, “Yes,” and I say, “Thank you, Audrey.” Should the contributor who read several of the chapters (in addition to her own) and found some errors be singled out? Absolutely! “Many thanks, Lani.” Should all the other friends and acquaintances who listened patiently while I explained and complained about the work involved also be mentioned? That would be too long a list, I’m afraid, but they are certainly owed a collective “Thank you!” Now what about family – those people to whom I am closest and who gave encouragement, took on some of my responsibilities to allow me time to work, and who only occasionally interfered? Definitely! Many thanks and a heap of gratitude go to Martin, Ruth, Jason, and Summer. Without them (and grandbaby Anika), my life would be without luster.

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# Contents

**Introduction**  
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**Part I Expanding the Therapeutic Role**

1. Art Therapy as a Tool for Social Change: A Conceptual Model  
   Dan Hocoy, Pacifica Graduate Institute, Carpinteria, CA

2. The Art Therapist as Social Activist: Reflections on a Life  
   Maxine Borowsky Junge, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA

---

**Part II Acting and Reflecting on the Action**

3. Facing Homelessness: A Community Mask Making Project  
   Pat B. Allen, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

4. Wielding the Shield: The Art Therapist as Conscious Witness in the Realm of Social Action  
   Pat B. Allen

---

**Part III Resolving Conflict**

5. Art and Conflict Resolution  
   Frances F. Kaplan

6. Drawing Out Conflict  
   Anndy Wiselogle, East Metro Meditation of the City of Gresham, Gresham, OR
Part IV Confronting Anger and Aggression

7. Anger Management Group Art Therapy for Clients in the Mental Health System 125
   Marian Liebmann, Inner City Mental Health Service, Bristol, UK

8. Symbolic Interactionism, Aggression, and Art Therapy 142
   David E. Gussak, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL

9. The Paper People Project on Gun Violence 157
   Rachel Citron O’Rourke, Portland, OR

Part V Healing Trauma

10. Some Personal and Clinical Thoughts About Trauma, Art, and World Events 175
    Annette Shore, Marylhurst University, Marylhurst, OR

11. Art Making as a Response to Terrorism 191
    Rachel Lev-Wiesel, Haifa University, Haifa, Israel and Nancy Slater,
    Adler School for Professional Psychology, Chicago, IL

Part VI Building Community

12. Unity in Diversity: Communal Pluralism in the Art Studio and the Classroom 213
    Michael Franklin, Naropa University, Boulder, CO, Merryl E. Rothaus,
    Naropa University, Boulder, CA and Kendra Schpok, Mount Saint
    Vincent Home, Denver, CO

13. Art and Community Building from the Puppet and Mask Maker’s Perspective 231
    Lani Gerity, Prospect, Nova Scotia, Canada and Edward “Ned”
    Albert Bear, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada

14. Art Therapy for this Multicultural World 244
    Susan Berkowitz, Founder, All People’s Day®, Lake Hiawatha, NJ

THE CONTRIBUTORS 263
SUBJECT INDEX 267
AUTHOR INDEX 271
Tables

Table 11.1: Incidence of specific art elements across groups 204
Table 11.2: Examples of narrative themes across groups 205
Table 11.3: Incidence of narrative responses across groups 206

Figures

Figure 1.1: Arcs of influence 31
Figure 1.2: Desired state 35
Figure 3.1: Masks on exhibit at Oak Park Village Hall 60
Figure 3.2: Mask making in the park 63
Figure 3.3: Mask titled “Local Warrior” by John, Township Youth Services Director 65
Figure 4.1: Still life 78
Figure 4.2: House and fool 84
Figure 6.1: Allen’s conflict situation (photograph by Richard Fung) 106
Figure 6.2: Teresa’s tools for working with conflict (photograph by Richard Fung) 107
Figure 6.3: Gina’s perspectives drawing (photograph by Richard Fung) 115
Figure 6.4: Interests versus positions: the iceberg (photograph by Richard Fung) 116
Figure 7.1: “Bad Day – Good Day” 131
Figure 7.2: Peaceful place/cemetery 132
Figure 7.3: “ANGER = VIOLENCE” 133
Figure 7.4: “ANGER = CRIME” 134
Figure 7.5: Positive and negative images 135
Figure 7.6: “Peace/Harmony/Happiness” 136
Figure 7.7: Anger and peace 137
Figure 8.1: Jason’s inside-outside origami box 150
Figure 8.2: Prison project mural (detail of Jason’s section) 151
Figure 8.3: Jason’s mandala drawing 152
Figure 8.4: Eric’s torture chamber made of Styrofoam blocks and popsicle sticks 153
Figure 8.5: Eric’s “Scorpion anger Beast” made from Model Magic 154
Figure 9.1: Paper Person showing heart 167
Figure 9.2: Paper Person as superhero by eight-year-old boy 168
Figure 9.3: Paper Person as memorial 169
Figure 9.4: Die-in, Portland, Oregon 171
Figure 10.1: Pencil drawing of a brutal scene 183
Figure 10.2: Restorative pencil drawing 184
Figure 10.3: Oil painting of two owls in the darkness 184
Figure 10.4: “The World,” colored pencil drawing 186
Figure 10.5: Two warriors, colored pencil drawing 187
Figure 11.1: G’s drawing: “Total Destruction” 199
Figure 11.2: Z’s drawing: “Them and Us” 199
Figure 11.3: Y’s drawing: “The Crash” 200
Figure 11.4: R’s drawing: “Hurt” 201
Figure 11.5: L’s drawing: “Indifference: Why or Until When?” 202
Figure 11.6: C’s drawing: “Helplessness” 203
Figure 12.1: Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi visits the NCAS 215
Figure 12.2: Members of the aphasia group working on a mural 219
Figure 12.3: A beloved member of the Naropa University community visits the NCAS 222
Figure 12.4: Kendra Schpok working on a large painting 226
Figure 12.5: NCAS member with partial paralysis enthusiastically working on a large drawing 228
Figure 13.1: A group of puppets in the Bread and Puppet collection 234
Figure 13.2: “A Warrior Knows,” mask by Ned Bear 237
Figure 13.3: A K’chi Kuhkiyik Arts Camp participant with puppet 240
Figure 14.1: The Craft-Dough People by participants ages 11 to adult (photograph by Angelo Quaglia) 248
Figure 14.2: Teenagers portray the race of their Craft-Dough Person while performing skits that disprove prejudice-lies (photograph by Susan Berkowitz) 249
Figure 14.3: A young student experiences the beauty of different cultures by drawing one of the four family groups (photograph by Angelo Quaglia) 255
Figure 14.4: Life-size figures created by students serve as a backdrop for their original skits about the possible misunderstandings between people of different cultures (photograph by Angelo Quaglia) 256
Figure 14.5: Susan helps a student learn to fold a Peace Crane, which is a universal symbol of peace (photograph by Angelo Quaglia) 258
Why this book?

Some people are still waiting to be convinced that art and therapy go together. Certainly for them – and possibly for you who are reading this and who most likely accept art therapy as a viable modality – social action art therapy is something of a contradiction in terms. After all, art therapy endeavors to facilitate inner, individual change, and social action strives to make outer, collective change. But, before addressing what social action art therapy is or might be, the reasons for attempting to combine the two approaches should be addressed. In an attempt to present a holistic view, I’ll start with some underlying personal motivations and build from there.

Throughout much of my life, I’ve felt the urge to bring together seemingly disparate entities. This probably began in childhood with my attempt to be the glue for a family that didn’t quite fit together – with, as one can imagine, only limited success. As an adult, I’ve responded to this urge in ways both trivial and significant. When I took up cooking, I searched for recipes for dishes that combined unusual ingredients such as the “soup to nuts” cake that uses condensed tomato soup as a major component. When I sought my life’s work, I looked for ways to combine my two loves: art and science. In the process of this last, I more or less “invented” the concept of art therapy and then discovered that others had gotten there before me (Kaplan 2000). Finally, in midlife, I became interested in promoting change – not just on an individual level but also on a societal one – and spent many years involved with the peace movement.

Thus began my efforts to apply art therapy to larger issues. And, as it happened, I found that others had preceded me there as well (e.g. Junge et al. 1993). Knowing that I was not alone in seeing the potential for art therapy to widen its scope encouraged me to take on this book project – a project that
represents more than my own predilections and presents some of the remarkable work that others have been doing. In this way, art therapists and other members of the helping professions could be offered models for expansion of their fields and could, in the process, quite possibly increase the effectiveness of what they do.

**What is social action art therapy?**

During the first half of the 20th century when art therapy had its beginnings, psychoanalysis was the therapy of choice. Consequently, art therapy started out as a form of psychoanalysis that used visual imagery. Indeed, it has been said that Margaret Naumburg, considered to be the original “mother” of art therapy in the US, simply substituted the easel for the couch (Ulman 1987). Her focus was on exploring the individual’s unconscious, and the painting or drawing by the client was the object of free association in a manner similar to the Freudian approach to dreams.

By the 1960s when I was undergoing my personal therapy, psychoanalysis was beginning to widen its scope. Although many psychoanalysts were against seeing clients in groups, the psychoanalyst I went to had an interpersonal bent and used group therapy in combination with individual therapy. Art therapists, initially more out of necessity than theory (seeing a number of people at a time was cost efficient), were conducting groups as well. However, under the influence of Edith Kramer (our “second mother” of art therapy), the group approach was by and large an art studio approach with little emphasis on interpersonal interactions. By the time I started my art therapy training in 1974, however, change was evident. Interactional group art therapy based on neo-Freudian psychodynamic theory was being advocated and practiced.

The latter part of the 20th century and the first part of the 21st century have seen additional changes. Art therapy has embraced many psychotherapeutic approaches in addition to psychoanalysis, and it has begun to be sensitive to the diverse cultural backgrounds from which clients originate. In addition to becoming more culturally competent, this means that some art therapists try to assist clients with culture-related problems as well as intra- and interpersonal problems. It also means that a few art therapists have approached certain problematic aspects of society as though these were the “clients” they wished to help.

But we are not yet at a point where the question – What is social action art therapy? – can be adequately answered. When I began soliciting authors
for the various chapters in this collection, I had only a vague idea of how social action art therapy could be defined. When a potential contributor to this collection expressed confusion about what was wanted, I responded with a succinct yet simplistic definition. I said in effect that social action art therapy operates outside the usual box of individual illness (mental or physical) and addresses societal problems by providing services to perpetrators, victims (potential or actual), or people who work with members of these groups. However, in the process of editing this book, the contributors have educated me by expanding my perspective: social action art therapy is this and more.

In the interests of clarification, let’s return to the problem of creating an amalgam of seemingly incompatible elements (art, social action, therapy). Recall that many artists have used their art to address social issues (for some relatively recent examples, see O’Brien and Little 1990). Also recognize that therapists, too, have a certain history of working for the betterment of society, as the organizations Psychologists for Social Responsibility and Counselors for Social Justice attest (for information about these groups, see www.psysr.org and www.counselorsforsocialjustice.org).

These realizations could lead us to conclude that it is primarily individual artist-therapists who undertake social action to address certain social problems, either inside or outside the traditional therapy setting. And, indeed, this is part of what social action art therapy is about (see chapters in Parts III and IV of this book). Or we might decide that it means using art activities to help people deal with environmental or cultural calamities (see Part V); or that it means practicing art therapy or therapeutic art outside traditional therapy settings – taking art therapy into the streets, as it were (see Part VI). And, again, we only have partial answers.

But, in different ways, the chapters in Parts I and II invite us to look at this brand of art therapy from another angle. What the authors of these chapters have to say suggests that social action and art therapy cannot – or at least should not – be separated. Now, how do we wrap our minds around this? The solution is both complicated and simple – that is, it is complicated in practice yet ultimately simple in concept: we cannot separate the people we treat from the cultural settings in which they live and by which they have been influenced. None of us exists in a social vacuum: each of us comprises a unique amalgam of genetic endowment, family upbringing, environmental influences, and collective history.

We have been inclined to think about personality and psychopathology in terms of nature or nurture – often attempting to assign etiology to one or
the other. Lately, we have begun to understand that the origins of both are an interaction of the two. At the same time, largely due to the multicultural movement, we have come to understand that we cannot ignore the contributions of culture, which have sources well beyond the family unit and even beyond ethnicity and race (Lee 1999). This means that, when we treat people, we must take into account the culture (or variety of cultures) they come from and to which they will return. It also means that we must honor their backgrounds and yet assist them in dealing with aspects of society that have contributed to their suffering. And, given the uniqueness of each one of us, it means that whenever we attempt to help someone we must be aware that we are essentially working cross-culturally and therefore must proceed with all the sensitivity and self-knowledge we can muster. To do otherwise runs the risk of imposing on our clients some of the same injustices they have experienced in the larger social order.

Where does this leave us? The inescapable conclusion is that whether we take art therapy into the streets or we remain secluded in our treatment settings, we would do well to “think” social action. Just as some family therapists have stated that family therapy is a way of conceptualizing treatment as well as a set of treatment techniques, so, too, is social action art therapy a state of mind as well as a method of action. One does not necessarily need to have the whole family in the room to treat family problems (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1985), and one does not necessarily need to be demonstrating in public places to effect social action.

**Summing up**

Trends in treatment have ranged from seeing mental problems as largely the result of internal processes, be they of a psychological or a biological nature (Freud 1949; Shuchter, Downs and Zisook 1996), to locating the cause in early family relationships (Kernberg 1976; Kohut 1971), to placing it within the larger social realm (Laing 1967), and to initial attempts to give credence to all these sources (Erikson 1963). Social action art therapy puts the emphasis on societal factors because they have been neglected too often. It is conceived in the various chapters of this book as working to create social change, elevate awareness of social problems, provide community service, understand origins of socially unacceptable behavior, provide instruction in socially oriented interventions, and increase sensitivity to the social context of troubled individuals. However, none of this means that, in the general
practice of therapy, personal and relationship factors should be neglected. Rather, it means that a third component should be added to these two.

As the foregoing implies, the chapters in this book are quite different in style and content. Some are mostly practical, providing techniques that others can adopt or adapt; some are highly personal, offering insight into the type of person the artist-therapist-activist tends to be; and some are conceptual in whole or in part, supplying the groundwork for a theoretical approach to the book’s topic. Nevertheless, there is a common thread that runs through all. Looked at from a broad perspective, this text examines the degree to which art therapists and other members of the helping professions bear a responsibility to the larger community from which their clients originate. It also provides a variety of creative answers – and raises some significant questions – as to how artist-therapists might proceed in shouldering a rather overwhelming but highly important obligation.

Lunching with an art therapist friend awhile back, I was struck by a comment she made when the conversation inevitably turned to art. “I don’t think art can save the world these days,” she said with a sad shake of her head. I nodded in dejected agreement. Thinking about this exchange later, I came to a more nuanced conclusion: perhaps art can’t save the world, but combined with therapy it can have a significant part to play in rescuing some of its citizens. And this, it seems logical to advocate, can be done most successfully by considering these citizens in their full context.

Some concluding words

Now, before I step behind the editor’s protective curtain of relative anonymity, I’ll let you in on something else. I almost abandoned this project in its very early stages. The reason had a great deal to do with what happened on September 11, 2001. I had barely begun to work on the initial version of this book when the terrorists struck, badly damaging the Pentagon and destroying the World Trade Center in New York. Suddenly, my project seemed trivial – frivolous even – and extremely futile. These judgments were reinforced by the US government declaring a “war on terrorism,” which some media pundits also referred to as “the first [emphasis added] war of the 21st century.” I went through a period during which I vacillated between rebuking myself for being grandiose (who was I to think I had anything to contribute?!) and berating humanity for being such a lost cause.

Shortly after the devastating events of 9/11, however, I read an article by John Rockwell, in The New York Times (2001), whose message eventually
worked its way to the depths of my consciousness and helped to bring me around (along with the reminder to myself that whatever small bit we can do is better than doing nothing at all). Rockwell asked, “What is the role of the arts in the present crisis, and how will the arts change in response to the new circumstances in which we live?” (p.1). He also conjectured that, on the basis of responses to the crisis from nine artists from different fields, artists in general felt helpless and judged their work “irrelevant, even offensive” (p.1). He concluded his piece, however, with these memorable words:

In any crisis there is a risk that the arts will be scorned or dismissed as an irrelevant distraction. Now that the real news, of terror and death and war, has arrived, attention to art with a different agenda might seem out of place.

But art has its own importance; it stakes its own claim. We are told that in times of crisis, we need to rely on faith. Art can be a faith, too, from which some of us draw the deepest solace. A terrible consequence of this new climate of fear and revenge would be for our enemies, blind and intolerant, to turn us into them. We must retain our values, and those values very much embrace the sometimes messy creativity of the arts.

Art is life itself. If we can sustain our arts in a diversity as rich as our social and political and religious diversity, then our artists can indeed play a most valuable role. They can sustain and inspire us, but they can also lead us – directly or, more likely, indirectly – from darkness to light. (Rockwell 2001, p.3, Copyright © 2001 by The New York Times Co. Reprinted with permission.)

To add to this would be superfluous.

I’ll leave the stage now and open the curtain on the main event. In what follows, the focus is on visual art therapy, but it should be kept in mind that much of what is said can also be applied to other creative approaches used by helping professions.

References


PART I

Expanding the Therapeutic Role
CHAPTER 1

Art Therapy as a Tool for Social Change
A Conceptual Model

Dan Hocoy

Introduction: How the twain meet

The relationship between art therapy and social action is not entirely self-evident. Although conceived from feminist origins and nurtured by progressive political leanings (Junge 1994), art therapy in contemporary practice (Elkins and Stovall 2000) still diverges significantly from political activism and direct interventions for social justice. Conversely, social action does not specifically address the psychological and intrapsychic wounds of individuals. So, how exactly does the healing profession of art therapy intersect with the political praxis of social action? Is there a theoretical framework that might undergird a coherent relationship between these enterprises? As art therapy has struggled to find an adequate theory just to reconcile art and therapy (Rubin 1987), it is not surprising that there exists no conceptual model that integrates the work of social action with the practice of art therapy in a comprehensive fashion. Yet, an overarching framework that recognizes this inherent relationship and articulates its concepts, principles, and orientation would be of value.

Hocoy et al. (2003), psychotherapists who have worked in art therapy in one capacity or another, have struggled with this very issue and developed a general framework for how Western therapeutic practices might be reconciled with social action; the application of this framework to art therapy is presented here.
The image and social action

One way in which social action and art therapy are linked is through the versatility and power of the image. Social action is ultimately predicated on the relationship between personal and collective suffering, and the image has the unique ability to bring to consciousness the reality of a current collective predicament, as well as the universality and timelessness of an individual’s suffering. Moreover, images can concurrently heal personal-collective wounds while demanding a response to injustice.

The image is regarded as having the potential to mediate between the individual and the collective. Cassirer (1955) believed that consciousness is mediated and transformed through symbolic forms, and the image “is one means through which the ‘I’ comes to grips with the world” (p.204). For Carl Jung, the archetypal image, an expression of a universally recurring theme that transcends time and culture (Schaverien 1992), allows connection to the collective unconscious. An awakening to a shared predicament can be transformative in itself, as well as serve as a basis for social action. For instance, the images of the Mexican muralist movement of the early 1900s, which embody Kuhns’ (1983) “enactments in a culture” (p.53), brought awareness of a collective plight and served as a language of solidarity, empowerment, and revolution for a largely illiterate population.

According to Jung, the image can be transformative in two basic ways: (a) through the healing derived from conscious awareness of a previously denied aspect, and (b) by tapping into the healing potential of the psyche – specifically, the central archetype of the Self (Wallace 1987). Evidently, these capacities of the image apply on the collective as well as the individual level. With regard to the first transformative process, Schaverien (1992) explains:

[The image] is the means through which the subjective and objective nature of the patient’s experience is mediated. The [image] is no mere handmaiden in the service of psychotherapy, instead it is a formative element in the establishment of a conscious attitude to the contents of the unconscious mind (p. 11)… Through the seeing of the image… the patient’s relationship to unconscious material begins to change. (p.21)

In terms of the second transformative process, Wallace (1987) describes the Self as a vast, unbounded healing factor that is accessed through the image and that “compensat[es] for any imbalance that might arise” (p.114). These healing functions may be manifest in Augusto Boal’s (2000) *Theatre of the*
Oppressed, in which the frozen gestural images of participants (resulting from exercises to address oppression) bring forth creative improvisation from the unconscious and, conceivably, from the Self in addition to conscienticization (i.e. collective consciousness).

Jung (1961) also alludes to a third way that the image can heal:

The images of the unconscious place a great responsibility upon a man. Failure to understand them, or a shirking of ethical responsibility, deprives him of his wholeness and imposes a painful fragmentariness on his life. (p.193)

Jung suggests here that an image may be a representation of an alienated aspect of the psyche and asserts there is a “moral obligation” (p.187) to understand such messages from the unconscious and to effect reparation. Clearly, then, the image can serve as a call for individual and collective action to address marginalized aspects of human potential. Examples of this may be seen in the photographic images of Sebastiao Salgado (1997, 2000, 2004), which document human plights including struggles for land rights, poverty, displacement, and genocide and implicitly charge the viewer with an obligation to address these instances of injustice. Interestingly, there exists empirical research supporting these dynamics; Kaplan (1994) found evidence of a relationship between the nature of the images one spontaneously produces and the likelihood one will engage in social action.

**Art therapy: Whom does it serve?**

As with any social institution, art therapy “derives from a specific set of cultural assumptions, values, and constructions” (Hocoy 2002a, p.141) and contains within it the biases of the society of which it is a product. Although art therapy may be less culture-bound (e.g. Kalish-Weiss 1989) than other societal enterprises and often acts in countercultural fashion, it is still inescapably shaped by the viewpoint and socioecopolitical arrangements of the culture from which it originates. The structures that undergird contemporary society developed from a particular set of power relations and tend to privilege some individuals at the expense of others; these structures are usually taken for granted because they have been the consistent ground of our existence and are as invisible as the air we breathe (Greenfield 1997). Yet these invisible societal arrangements perpetuate a social order that contributes to disparities in status and resources, ruptures in relationship and experience, and disdain for difference and diversity, as well as a host of other inequities.