

Dissolving the Boundaries: Postmodern Art and Art Therapy

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Abstract

This brief report discusses the relevance of postmodern art to contemporary art therapy practice. Postmodernism is defined by art that breaks or blurs the boundaries between product and process, individual and group creation, and artist and viewer. A discussion of contemporary artists who use a postmodern framework, including Anselm Kiefer, Jenny Holzer, Nakahashi Katsushige and others, is provided as an example for how postmodernism may be applied to art therapy. A postmodernist perspective informs a multifaceted therapeutic approach which negotiates the border between individual integrity and community values, blurs the distinction between home and studio, and validates all forms of image-creation with the overall purpose of healing and social empowerment.

Introduction

In this brief report, we discuss the relevance of postmodern art to contemporary art therapy practice. We describe concepts and ideas from postmodern art that dissolve boundaries between art, social art, community art, art as healing and art therapy. Postmodernism tends to relish uncertainty, ambiguity, and paradox rather than promoting certainty, harmony, and conventional aesthetics. Such postmodern qualities can provide a valuable perspective on contemporary art therapy practice. Examples of contemporary artists who use a postmodern framework can inspire art therapists to apply postmodernism to their practice.

Postmodernist Principles

In order to frame a picture of postmodernist art and its relationship to art therapy, therapists need to consider some assumptions of postmodernism. The term postmodernism encompasses not only a relationship to art but also specific connections to thinking, social values, education, and therapy. Postmodernist art has been defined as art that is constructed from social interaction and the elements in society that sponsor them (MacGregor, 1992). Postmodernists deny the existence of a single ideology or theory. They insist

that reality, theories, and knowledge are never value-free. Values, therefore, should be made transparent by the artist and the viewer. At times fact and fiction can become equally valid ideas that subsume innumerable narratives; therefore, meanings and interpretations can be negotiated. In postmodernism there is an awareness of how context shapes meaning and how viewers of the art may be creators as well as spectators. The idea of participation, and sharing of the gift to create meaning by both the viewer and the creator of the artwork, is attributed to Heidegger who emphasized the communication value of art (Jones, 1997).

Examples of Postmodernist Art

Postmodernist principles can provide a connection that links the process with the product of creating art. One example of this is the Mother Tongue Project, a collection of art created by a collaboration of the viewers and the original artists. The content of the art produced in the Mother Tongue Project centers on a social, political, or universal issue which is painted, drawn, or collaged on a panel (Ruhl, 1997). The art is accompanied by a written statement from the artist. There are several pieces of art on the wall and individuals who come to the gallery space are invited to create art in reaction to the "original" art. The secondary piece of art becomes a visual dialogue in which many voices are expressed. This concept is based on Bohm's ideas of dialogue (Bohm & Nichol, 1996) using an exchange of ideas with visual responses. It is postmodern in that there is not just one meaning or one way to relate to an image. Another example of viewers contributing to artworks in their own voices is the installation "A Stitch in Time" by David Medulla. This piece consists of a large scroll-like frame over which a cloth has been stretched. Small stools are placed around the cloth, and threads and needles are available for the viewer to embroider on the piece while interacting with others (Morgan, 2003).

Postmodern art does not emphasize the content or formal aesthetic qualities of art. Postmodern art might be important to the artist and to the viewer through deconstruction, taking apart the form or unraveling the underlying motive or agenda through a reconstruction rather than an interpretation of the art piece (MacGregor, 1992). The viewer of the artwork can be confronted with paradoxes which may occur from unlikely choices of materials or from allusions or references to other styles or eras in art history. These paradoxes result in ambiguity in meaning and surprises, as in the Zero Project by Nakahashi Katsushige, a contemporary Japanese artist. Katsushige was interested

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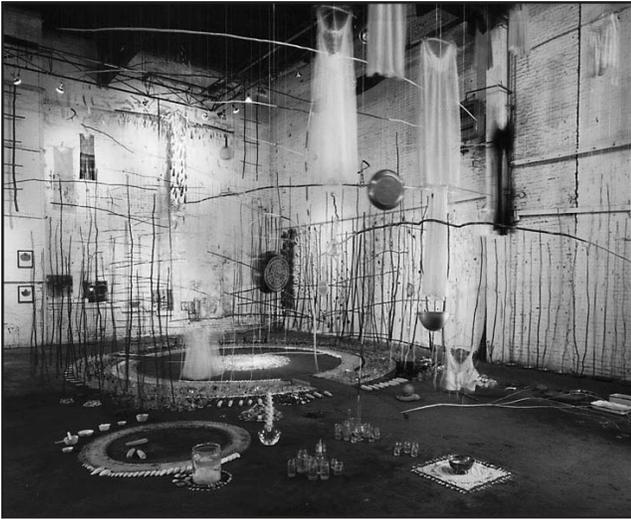


Figure 1 Mandala installation

in the Zero fighters and the Kamikaze pilots who flew them and who died on suicide missions during World War II while attacking Allied warships (Morse, 2004). Katsushige described the legacy of the imperial forces in Japan that existed for him as an artificial construct from his childhood memory of constructing model planes (Morse, 2004). He took 13,000 photographs of a 1/32 scale plastic model of a Zero fighter. Katsushige then found community volunteers who had a connection with the Zero fighters or with WWII, Korea, or Vietnam conflicts to assist him in taping the photographs together to create a life-size replica of a plane. During this process participants were asked to share their stories. At the end of the exhibition, in which Katsushige's "plane" was presented, participants were invited to help the artist carry the plane out to a field where it was burned. According to Anderson (1997), in a postmodernist framework art represents something beyond itself. For Katsushige this piece depicted how long-forgotten events can take on a new meaning (Morse, 2004).

Postmodernism can also include personal metaphors and the acknowledgment of the importance of personal myths or myths with multiple references. Art may define a particular narrative or personal worldview. Karen Dolmanisth, a site-specific installation artist, creates mandalas from sand, found materials, and special objects that she has gathered and placed, organized, and transformed through hanging, sewing, and tying. These mandalas become a metaphysical world where the viewer is engaged in the narrative (Figure 1). Dolmanisth described her work as arising from unconscious imagery (K. Dolmanisth, personal communication, February 15, 2004).

These installations are momentary pieces for healing that exist and end, closing one cycle of creation while alert to the possibility of the next. Dolmanisth explores spirit and body by dancing through her installations. Although deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning are evident in the process of creation, her installations blend the elements of time, space, materials, and connection to myths and personal narrative that become a vehicle for public dia-

logue. In other words, meaning is constantly being constructed and evolving. In postmodern art, the viewer gives art its meaning and therefore extends the creative process begun by the artist (Jones, 1997).

Integrating postmodern principles in art making allows for the fusion of visual and conceptual images. Postmodern artists may present the past with a contemporary slant and utilize whatever is available as an art material. Objects are taken out of their original context and then arbitrarily brought together. The use of diverse media can cause multiple references to historical, personal, social, and political events, as in the art of Anselm Kiefer, a German artist. Kiefer's installation, entitled "Twenty Years of Loneliness," included 300 of Kiefer's paintings and organic matter that were placed in a pile left to be burned. This exhibit may be understood as a retrospective of the artist's career, a statement of his feelings about Germany's reunification, and the collective guilt regarding the aftermath of World War II (Saltz, 1993).

Deconstruction, the taking apart of an idea or concept (another central feature of postmodernism), can be described as the artist's use of irony and parody, as seen in the art of Jenny Holzer. Holzer's signs in LED (light emitting diode) not only confront the boundaries between advertising and art but also ask the viewer to think about the society in which we live (Auping, 1992). After learning about the work of Holzer, students in an art therapy class were asked by their professor to create a card with a message that could evoke public discourse. The written messages were placed in the students' dormitories and lecture halls with paper and pens hanging on the wall near the card to encourage dialogue. Students were surprised to receive responses that asked questions and prompted the dialogue to continue. For example, responses to the message "help me create boundaries" ranged from "boundaries, our internal protection from closeness," to "boundaries, the distance society imposes on the masses."

Postmodernist Ideas in Contemporary Art Therapy

Allan Kaprow (1983), creator of Happenings in the 1960s and 1970s, made a distinction between "art like art" and "life like art." "Art like art" holds that art is separate from life and serves only art while "life like art" is art in the service of life. "The purpose of life like art was therapeutic: to reintegrate the piecemeal reality we take for granted. Not just intellectually, but directly, as experience—in this moment, in this house, at this sink" (p. 39). By moving art out of the traditional "high-art" world into life, therapeutic change can occur. Art therapists do this all the time.

Art therapy practice has a great affinity with postmodernist art making in that both break or blur traditional boundaries between individual and group creation, artist and viewer; both value process as much as product (Alter-Muri, 1998). Art of the postmodern period aims to move beyond a mere multicultural awareness and focuses on the construction of meaning (Risatti, 1990). Kapitan and Newhouse (2000) depicted the role of the postmodern art

therapist as including an understanding of the perspectives of others in order to adapt to the ever-changing realities of the world and then to engage in a process of co-created meaning. In looking at a piece of art, attempts may be made to reveal the existence of paradoxical themes which are hidden until a close examination brings them to light. Change comes about not from external interpretation but from developing and examining behaviors in various situations, as in the art of Pepin Osorio. Osorio's mixed media piece entitled "T.K.O." refers to "technical knockout," a boxing term. This piece not only is about fighting but also is a metaphor for the different levels of violence in Puerto Rico, including the United States Navy's bombing exercises on Vieques. Osorio's installation goes beyond the apparent meaning and serves as an allegory to represent the artist's depiction of the Puerto Rican sense of identity and independence (Henry, 2001).

There are parallels between this work and the works of Lily Yeh. These artists have engaged communities to bridge the modernist gap between art and the public. In the art of Lily Yeh this action takes the form of reclaiming land in her community. Spotting vacant lots that were eyesores in the Philadelphia community, Yeh worked with local authorities to claim the land for an art making project with the local residents, who transformed a neglected space into a beautiful site. This brought a sense of ownership and power into the community. In another project, called "Education through the Arts," Yeh used the motif of angels to represent local children's need for security. The children were inspired by Yeh's motif to create their own angels. Prior to this opportunity, these children were afraid to speak because their creativity was bottled up (Leggiere, 2000). The healing function of art, according to Jones (1997), is a major purpose that is enacted in postmodernist art because its function is to change those affected by it.

One basic tenet of postmodernism applied to art and art therapy is a rejection of narratives that have one meaning or story to tell (Effland, Freedman & Stuhr, 1996; Gude, 2004; Kapitan & Newhouse, 2000). Narratives are important in each art piece and in each artist's story because every art piece and cultural story is but one among many. Incorporating a narrative approach in art therapy sessions can empower and deepen the therapeutic relationship.

Metaphors are constructs that are part and parcel in the work of art therapists. They allow therapists to learn to enter into clients' constructions of their stories as depicted in their art. For example, in Alter-Muri's art therapy work with children, one child's story emerged through building a diorama of a garden with mixed media. The fence, the flowers, and the vegetables that the child made from fabric and clay all had a story to tell about the neglect that the child had experienced.

Kapitan and Newhouse (2000) described how, in the context of art therapy, postmodernism does not agree with a single-faceted approach to treatment. This is supported by Moon (2002) who, in describing the "poetry of place," encourages the art therapist to employ qualities drawn from being an artist (p. 70). She applied this same principle to her clients by responding to their behaviors as an

expression of "the poetry of their lives." She is willing to see their behaviors as performance art, for example, rather than as manifestations of pathology. Moon's (2002) work reflects many of the techniques and the sensibilities of postmodernist thinking.

Sazaki and Bloomgarden (2000) described responding to the needs of their elderly clients by working with them in their homes. Their willingness to do so illustrates the postmodern reality of permeable and fluid boundaries described by Elkind (1998). He explored the fluidity of family make up, the boundaries between public and private life, and the combined work place/home environment that demand a continuous shift in roles. A young artist who is also a mother discussed her art with (author) Klein and described her attempt to bring together in her images the struggle between home and studio. Because it is a primary source for her art, her home continuously enters the studio through the art process and product. Each intrusion into these areas of postmodern life has "become much more porous and open than in the modern era" (Elkind, 1998, p. 10). In art therapy, this porosity provides opportunities to respond more spontaneously and imaginatively to clients' needs rather than yielding to the rigidity of a system that may not be addressing these needs.

Integrating personal therapy and community concerns can empower both the individual and society. Janis Timm-Bottos, an art therapist from Albuquerque, New Mexico, expanded art as therapy into her community via a drop-in art studio. Not only was she successful in attracting people of various ages and abilities from diverse backgrounds to create art as forms of healing, empowerment, and narrative, she was successful in creating art as a form of community. This community was made up of homeless artists, women and children from the domestic violence shelter, and anyone desiring to make art in an open, non-judgmental environment (Timm-Bottos, 1997). She has since created an environment where various groups can display and sell their art to supplement their income.

Alter-Muri (1998) discussed four characteristics of postmodern art therapy: 1) dialogue as a shared reality between the therapist and the client where language and visual images are not just tools but have significant meaning in therapeutic practice; 2) refusal to accept meta-narratives or utilizing universal ideologies or prescribed meaning for symbols in artwork; 3) awareness that every psychological theory and practice is specific to a culture and a time in history, and that clients bring multiple cultures to a session, including family, religion/spirituality, national origin, economic status, and the culture of their community; and, 4) therapy as reflecting a commitment to social action. Postmodernist thought encourages art therapists to reassess their beliefs about art and to recognize that there are no meaningful distinctions among fine art, arts and crafts, folk art, and outsider art. These beliefs call into question the notion of aesthetics in art therapy and the perception of art that some art therapists subscribe to, namely, that the art created in art therapy sessions is not art but simply a form of graphic image making (Alter-Muri, 1998).



Figure 1 *Our-self and the world around us*, mural by the Art 4 E Program

Postmodernist thought blurs the distinctions between when and why a visual image is art. The creation of art can be a collective enterprise, and the postmodernist technique of dialoging with an image is not a new concept to art therapists. The experience of incorporating a visual response by others in a group can reconnect art with a particular community by inviting expression of issues that are relevant to its members (Alter-Muri, 1998).

For example, Jerry Beck is an artist who works with children and adolescents in the Boston area. For many years, he traveled in a van full of art materials, engaging children and adolescents in art making. He is the director of the Revolving Museum in Lowell, Massachusetts, a community with a large number of Cambodian immigrants. His work provides opportunities for local artists to engage high school and middle school children in projects that highlight their feelings about their city. He rents abandoned storefronts to display the art that is created. This gives the adults in the community an opportunity to grasp the issues and concerns uppermost on the minds of their children and creates an opportunity for dialogue between the generations (Lipchitz, 2004).

Art therapists also work with children on a community level to improve self-esteem and empowerment. The "Art as Education, Expression, Exploration and Empowerment Program" or the "A4E" program is a multifaceted, three-year project where students from an inner city elementary school with no art teacher are provided with after-school art instruction focusing on self-esteem. These sessions, developed by a team of art therapists, artist Robert Masla, and a college student, correspond to the standards of the state cur-

riculum in the visual arts. The instruction in art making, art history, and art as healing can be seen in a mural created by the program that was painted on a wall in a local community center (Figure 2). This mural was influenced by the art of Romare Bearden, an African American artist who helped to organize a group of black artists who contributed to the Civil Rights Movement. This group, named the Spiral, worked towards social responsibility through the creation of meaningful art regarding the plight of people of color living within a segregated society. (Gelburd & Golden, 1997). The A4E program's mural focused on the students' narration in a visual form of how they see themselves, their strengths, and the city in which they live.

In postmodernism, a dividing line does not exist to determine when creating art with individuals or groups is therapeutic and when it is purely educational. Art for social change or community building can increase therapeutic gains. Therefore, it does not need to be focused on learning about the process of creating a mural but may focus instead on self esteem, self-expression, or the ability to manage healthy peer relations.

Art therapists use postmodern concepts in their work to empower clients who have no outlet to tell their stories. Postmodernism reminds therapists to appreciate each individual's uniqueness. Applying postmodern concepts to art therapy does not imply that community art or process-orientation are the only tenets of art therapy practice. Dissolving the boundaries of how we as art therapists frame our practice may increase the public's acceptance and knowledge of the important potentials of art as healing and art as therapy. Postmodern principles reinforce the belief

that there is no one style, construct, and medium that is appropriate for every client. By incorporating ideas gleaned from a host of communities and postmodern artists, art therapists broaden their ability to assist clients, not only as witnesses to the clients' narratives but also as mentors who empower clients to use their narratives for psychological growth. Art therapists help their clients utilize their creative potential to confront resistance and increase trust. This, in turn, broadens the therapeutic alliance and allows the process of deconstruction and reconstruction to occur along with the journey of healing.

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