

Art Therapists as Intermediaries for Social Change

Art therapists can serve as social change agents by guiding art-making and art-viewing within an environment that fosters relationships and sustains empathy.

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Abstract

Although many art therapists are proponents of social justice and advocate for their underserved clients, they may not think of art therapy as a change agent for communities or societal ills such as discrimination and inequality. In this paper a proposal to infuse art therapy with the political philosophies and practices of nonviolent resistance may bring to light how art therapists can be a tool for advancing both individual and community change. Social change begins with generating empathy for others. Reaching out to the community through facilitating art exhibits may be one way to heighten empathy for client-artists. Guided relational viewing is proposed as a theoretical principle to motivate art therapists to move from being a proponent of social justice to becoming an agent of social transformation.

Keywords: social change, art therapy, nonviolent resistance, exhibits, empathy

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Artists are often at the forefront of social change and there is a movement to encourage art therapists to do the same (Kaplan, 2005; 2007). Art therapists are finding ways to contribute to societal functioning beyond individual and family healing that have historically been the dominant focus of the field (Junge & Asawa, 1994). Although a clinical focus may legitimize the profession in the eyes of other healthcare professionals, this role limits art therapists to working primarily with clients' mental, neurological, physical, or emotional issues. With such a heavy focus on the individual, art therapists may not have the either personal or professional resources to explore larger opportunities for healing societal ills such as discrimination and injustice. The focus of this paper is to identify ways in which art therapists best contribute to the work of social justice and creative nonviolence. I offer a theoretical model for art therapists who want to serve in the area of social change. This article is a call to action for art therapists to educate others on our role as social activists.

To begin there are several art therapists who have emphasized the benefits of art therapy for social change. Cliff Joseph, an African-American artist, is an example of an art therapist who joined the field in the 1960s. Wanting to find a way to inte-

grate his artist identity in service to social justice, he advanced mural making to build democratic processes for his clients in a psychiatric ward and advocated for them to attend a civil rights march (Riley-Hiscox, 1997). Other ways that art therapists can make a social impact include:

- encouraging the creation of art that focuses on social ills (Joseph, 2006)
- serving as a remedy for violence (Kapitan, 1997)
- promoting support from a witness (Allen, 2007b)
- engaging the power of collaborative relationships, (Golub, 2005)
- working in traditional and nonconventional clinical settings (Kaplan, 2007)
- paying attention to individual and societal needs (Moon, 2002)
- facilitating imagination for the creation of new possibilities for societal well-being (Junge et. al, 1997; Hoco, 2005)
- advocating for constructive social policies (AATA, 2003).

Art therapists can further explore the concept of the profession as a social change agent. By reframing the notion that identified clients are people who are impacted by societal factors, art therapists may help others reevaluate the influence of stigma

and discrimination on mental health. And it is possible that these “others” may have the influence to correct imbalances that foster inequality and also may be willing to use their clout to take corrective actions. Attendees of art exhibits may have the power to effect change through voting, lobbying and advocating. Therefore, I would like to offer that art therapists can impact social change by doing the following:

- inviting the general community to understand their role in sustaining and alleviating discrimination,
- integrating ideas of activist artists with acceptable mental health interventions for our clients, and
- offering community exhibition opportunities for those in art therapy.

Using these examples as a guide, it is possible for art therapists to adapt their skills from individual therapy to social healing.

Kurlansky (2008) suggested that the use of violence to achieve goals reflects “a lack of imagination” to finding alternate responses (p. 80). It is possible that solving the problem of injustice may be informed by those who actively promote, work with, and facilitate imaginative and creative tendencies. As professionals who help client-artists tap into their creative tendencies and who understand the creative process, art therapists are in a position to champion justice.

The Role of Art in Relationship Building

To shift the focus of art therapy from individual healing to societal healing, alternative theoretical frameworks on the

role that art plays in relationship building may be helpful. Buber (1923/1970) articulated a theory of human relationships in *I-Thou* that underscores the role of art as being able to initiate and sustain authentic relationships. Shapira (1999) identified two of Buber’s overarching human drives that inform the work of art therapists: the *instinct of origination* proposed that humans strive to be creative as a way to understand the world and the *instinct of communion* acknowledged that humans want to form meaningful relationships. May (1975) echoed these ideas by theorizing that interactions with art are *creative encounters* that have the potential to generate new possibilities not only for the individual, but also for the world. Moon (2009) translated these existential ideas into art therapy practice by emphasizing that the interactive process among client-artists, art therapists, and audiences facilitates the discovery of meaning. Using these powerful ideas as a base, art therapy can be framed as a inspired vehicle to satisfy the desire to create and the need for meaningful relationships. Art therapy is ideally situated to uphold these vital human impulses.

Creative encounters are possible when individuals balance two internal complementary forces. Buber (1923/1970) referred to them as *will* and *grace* and May (1975) called them *will* and *love*. Both pairs of terms define the necessity to draw from the world (*will*, *will*), while being accepting to what is offered (*grace*, *love*). In a related concept, complementary forces are an essential

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aspect of the yin-yang philosophy used in traditional Chinese medicine (O'Brien & Xue, 2003). Traditional Chinese medicine emphasizes harmony and the balance between *yin* and *yang* as a model of health.

In synthesizing these concepts, I found that two drives are needed to maintain positive social relationships: *sensitive intentionality*, which is a willingness to respectfully assert oneself to be present for another and *active receptivity*, which refers to the ability to be dynamically open to receive the intentions of another. These forces form a therapeutic construct whereby the goal of therapy is to achieve an equilibrium that allows for the development and maintenance of relationships for individual and communal peace. By preparing interventions that seek to recalibrate relationship imbalances, art therapists can put into practice social justice concepts.

Guiding: Facilitating Meaningful Art Making

In art therapy, the meaning of a work of art is uncovered through a mutual process of discovery between client and art therapist. If therapeutic art work is also used for communicating with a larger audience, then the art therapist might also help the client create an image understandable to others. This notion is supported by Kramer (1971) who advocated high quality standards for the art made in art therapy. Among other factors, she evaluated how well the art expressed the intended emotion and meaning of the creator. Her ideas are mirrored in contemporary practices endorsed by protest art-

ists that emphasize the importance of the message (Felshin, 1995) and ability to be provocative (Pincus, 1995), while taking into consideration the intended audience (Phillips, 1995). If art therapists emphasize these benchmarks of quality, then they can advance the notion that artistic creations hold meaning for wider audiences. In this model the therapist's role includes helping artists choose themes that illuminate their experiences, using artistic skills to enhance the image, and ensuring that symbols accurately convey the intended message to viewers. All of these tasks can be accomplished without displacing the core values of art therapy.

Ensuring that art can be used to engage another is usually the responsibility of the artist. But art therapists may want to be an intermediary for their clients. Kalmowitz and Lloyd (2005) stipulated the need for using art created in art therapy to raise awareness and highlight social problems. To do this, art therapists need to position themselves as mediators between the client-artist and the viewer to help ensure accurate transmission of the intended message. Facilitating personally meaningful art-making can help the client-artist with personal healing and providing opportunities for this art to be viewed by others can empower the client be a part of societal healing. By taking on the role of the intermediary, the art therapist guides empathy-building and relationship-formation, becoming a link in the Great Chain of Nonviolence that unites marginalized client-artists with the wider community and leaders (Galtung, 1989).

Relating: Using Images for Generating Empathy and Building Community

One function of an intermediary is to help bridge the divide between two parties by providing opportunities to understand the position of another, which in turn inspires empathy in an opponent. This is an important strategy of nonviolent resistance. According to psychological research, empathy is built when one is able to imagine the situation of another (Batson et al., 2003; Davis et al., 2004). Raising awareness of injustices (Dovidio et al., 2003) and finding commonalities with others (Nelson & Baumgarte, 2004) heighten the development of empathy. Conversely, empathy may be hindered if the above strategies evoke anxiety or distress (Hassenstab, Dziobek, Rogers, Wolf, & Convit, 2007). Once achieved, empathy allows individuals to reconsider their attitudes and prejudices, as well as, promotes pro-social behaviors (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Batson, et al., 1997; Batson, et al., 2003). The ability to imagine the emotional experiences of the other is a major factor in invoking empathy. In fact, emotion-focused interventions resulted in longer lasting empathy than cognitive-focused ones.

The role of art therapist as intermediary bears a direct connection to Gandhi's (1928/1956) concept of nonviolent resistance or *satyagraha* ("truth force") and the role emotions play in bridging the distance between two parties. Describing Gandhi's strategy, Hardiman (2003) explained:

truth/*satya* was reached through
a complex dialogue, in which

reasoned argument had often to be reinforced with emotional and political pressure. He knew that, in many cases, reason by itself would not win an argument, for people tend to be swayed as much by emotion as by rational argument. (p. 52)

Emotional engagement can enhance empathy and dialogue, which may result in the desired personal, societal, and political changes. Given that art created in art therapy tends to be emotionally-laden, such imagery could become a catalyst for this process. Trained in facilitating emotional/artistic expression and dialogue, art therapists may have a role in instilling empathy (Wix, 2009).

Artists accomplish the task of empathy-building by depicting difficult conditions or putting a human face on a larger issue (Reed, 2005). Both activist/educator Greene (1995) and psychologist May (1975) see art as having this function. The intentional use of images in this way can alert the viewer to the social conditions of the artist with the goal of understanding the effects of political systems and promoting policy change (Sharp, 1973).

The interplay of imagination, empathy, and social change points to a promising direction for the field of art therapy. Two of the difficulties of this strategy are how to (1) make viewers receptive to the artist's message and (2) sustain empathic feelings long enough to result in meaningful change. An additional challenge is that the viewers need to be willing partners in the process by being open to receiving

the intended message. Trout (2009) addressed how biases and social distance block compassion from taking hold. He suggested implementing strategies and policies that can help shape the environment to counter the obstacles that prevent the formation of empathy. Behavioral economists Thaler and Sunstein (2009) advocated creating frameworks that reflect an attitude of *libertarian paternalism*. They define this strategy as a way of structuring an environment that can help overcome human biases, but still allow for individuals to form their own views. Therefore art therapists need to create environments that allow art to function as a catalyst for empathy in order to sustain the viewer in a process of change.

If art provides opportunities for viewer engagement, micro-interpersonal relationships can develop. Numerous micro relationships can morph into macro-changes and even community-wide changes, which, in turn, goes back to the development and maintenance of I-Thou relationships (Buber, 1923/1970). Buber also discussed the need to build *learning communities* to reinforce dialogue and meaningful exchange (Mayhall & Mayhall, 2004). It should be no surprise that Buber advocated for a community modeled on artist communities in which there is a dynamism and collaborative process of co-creation (Kramer, 2003). In this context, art-making and viewing can be the tools that art therapists offer to promote social change. Allen (2005) promoted the notion of initiating *image communities*, whereby art is used as the means for communicat-

ing, responding, and reflecting. The concept of building community and creating *image communities* honors King's (1964) conception of the *beloved community*, a place to initiate *conspiratorial conversations* that invoke disparate viewpoints that ultimately lead to peace (Barone, 2000) .

There are numerous examples on how to create therapeutic and socially-conscious communities. For example, two art therapists developed programs focused on social change. Lark (2005) created art therapy-infused large group dialogues to enable interaction across racial barriers. Talking Race Engaging Creatively (TREC) used art-making as the primary vehicle for communication. Participants from various racial and cultural backgrounds used their creations as vehicles for honest discussion and relationship-building. The art stimulated inter-racial dialogue but were also exhibited to stimulate discussions amongst a wider audience.

Another method is to use the art-making process as the vehicle for engaging others in an imaginative way. Allen (2007a) described an approach to raise awareness on homelessness through mask-making. Individuals were brought into a studio to paint and embellish plaster masks that were cast from the faces of homeless men and women. Those who agreed to participate reflected on the experiences of the person whose cast they chose. Both Lark and Allen provide exemplary examples of how to craft art therapy spaces for both engaging clients in the artistic process and inviting others to witness and connect as a means of creating community.

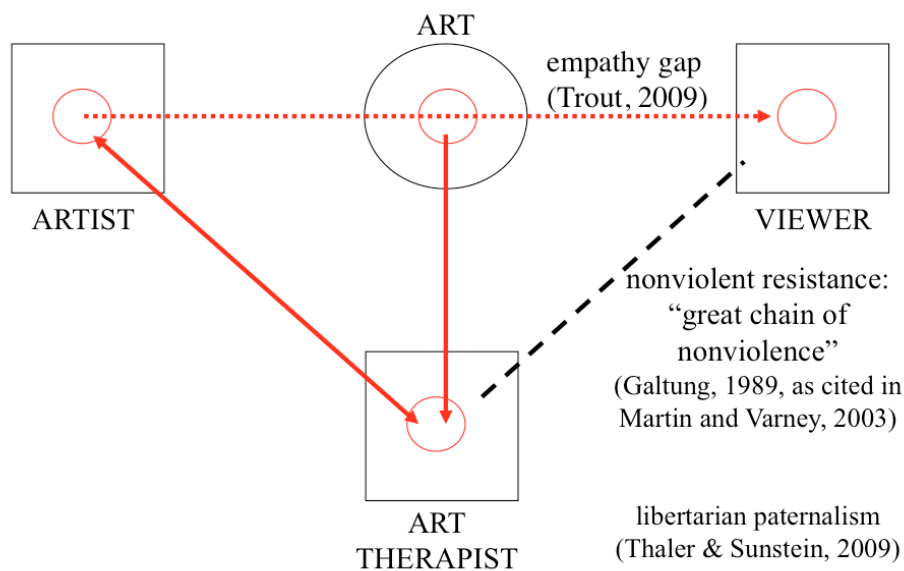


Figure 1: *Guided Relational Viewing Model*

Viewing: Looking at Art for Relationship Building

The above example of on designing art therapy environments for building community is vital for the role an art therapist can play in social change. The next consideration is to examine what role viewing art can offer in a model of social change. Theorems from psychology, aesthetics, and neuroscience provide a framework for understanding how viewing art can lead to individual and social changes.

Jung (1921/1971) believed that viewers assign beauty to art that moves them emotionally. Art can have this effect because engaging with another’s art encourages us to identify with the aspect of the artist’s experience that was embodied in the art. This process relates to Buber’s description of the intersection between an I-Thou relationship and art. Vermes

(1994) elaborated, “the *you* [Thou] remains alive in the ‘shell’ in which it is confined. It needs only new encounters with other *Is* to be released from its *it*-ness and to be *you* once again” (p. 205). Having an aesthetic reaction to a work of art triggers the ability to connect to the emotional intent. A focus on emotional expression becomes crucial to ensuring that art can be used as a tool to affect change in a viewer.

A strategy for helping viewers experience art as a form of interpersonal and social engagement is to find a work of art that they relate to emotionally. Aesthetic philosopher Crowther (1993) believed that individuals adopt specific viewing strategies to achieve particular opportunities for understanding. Looking at art for its formal aesthetic value may be useful for critique, but another type of looking is required for fostering empathy.

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Moon (2002) invited viewers to focus on the emotional aspects of art through what she calls *relational aesthetics*. The image is understood in its particular context and interpreted by facilitating a discussion on the artist's motivations, associations, and insights. Through this process, viewers can discover a point of connection with the artist's experience through a meaningful meeting with their art.

Through the study of neuroscience Iacoboni (2008) confirmed that visual stimuli are directly connected to feelings of empathy through the mirror neuron system. This brain function allows us to interpret another's observed emotional state by mirroring the brain activity that would occur if we were actively experiencing the emotion ourselves. The research points to a deep connection between visual stimuli, the brain, and empathy

**Guided Relational Viewing:
Meaningful Participation with Art**

Art is one means of sustainable relationship-building within communities (O'Neill, Woods, & Webster, 2005). With an art therapist's unique skills in facilitating art-making in the service of building connections, we can offer distinct opportunities for social change. By attending to those who are suffering, art therapists have focused much of their work on theories, practices, and strategies for providing meaningful art making experiences. Typically, these opportunities are limited to the confines of the art therapy studio. More attention might be given to providing meaningful art-viewing experiences

for attendees of galleries and museums. Art therapists can serve as social change agents by guiding art-making and art-viewing within an environment that fosters relationships and sustains empathy.

Theories and practices that emphasize emotional and relational aesthetics provide one such starting place in offering useful guidelines for viewers to approach art with the goal of relating to it and by extension the artist. The model I am suggesting begins with the art therapist working with clients to create art that is expressive and at the same time capable of communicating something about their lives to another. The art therapist then interacts with a viewing audience to ensure that the viewing experience can lead to empathy, awareness, and attitude or behavior change. I have come to see this way of working as providing opportunities for *guided relational viewing* (Potash, 2010; see Figure 1).

Guided refers to the role of an art therapist as an intermediary for those who make art and those who view it. We are already adept at offering an experience to those who are in need of psychological resolution or healing. We know how to attend to the process of art-making in a way which results in a personally meaningful image. Without losing sight of the place of spontaneous imagery for this purpose, we can help client-artists create images that are genuine and readable. Guiding also extends to building the relationship between the art and the viewing audience. Knowing what images will be acceptable and aesthetically appealing to

viewers will help craft an exhibit that has a higher chance of conveying the intended messages. As a guide, the art therapist can bridge the distance caused by depersonalization and dehumanization.

To increase the likelihood that the artists' message will be understood, art therapists can guide art viewers in a *relational* process that seeks to bring the viewer and artist into direct relationship using the art as catalyst. As intermediaries, art therapists can structure art and other experiences for viewers to learn how to engage with images beyond simply looking. Through structured discussions, opportunities for self-reflection, and the creation of response art, art therapists lead viewers into deeper levels of awareness and appreciation of the artists through their images.

There are numerous boundaries that art therapists must not cross as they learn how to craft meaningful art *viewing* experiences. First, art therapists must be careful not to cross over into the realm of propaganda art, which is intended to advance specific political ideologies. Another caveat is to be aware of using advertising psychology techniques intended to advance consumerism when developing exhibitions (Cropley, Cropley, Kaufman, & Runco, 2010). Finally, using sound clinical judgment to determine which art images are appropriate to display is imperative. Exhibitions should be developed with the full participation of the artist and not to exploit the artist's experience (Spaniol, 1990).

I have developed the *guided relational viewing* model for art therapists to use as a template for developing meaningful

art-making experiences and consequential art-viewing experiences both for clients and the community-at-large. Social change is induced when art therapists use art-making to build significant relationships between our clients and others.

Further Steps for Using Art Therapy for Social Change

The purpose of this article was to present a theoretical model for art therapists to use as a framework for engaging in social change. The model is the first step in creating a process for examining how art therapy can be used for social change. Another step is for art therapists to further understand what images best lend themselves to building empathy. Using what is core to art therapy, art therapists can help inform a new aesthetic approach with an increased focus on the empathic. Art therapists may be able to address empathy because they are trained to use art as a means to relationship building and skilled in facilitating process. Thus, art therapists are qualified to help people view art in a way that emphasizes relationship building.

Another challenge for art therapists is to bridge the gap between art therapy as a traditional medical model profession and art therapy as profession invested in social change. This does not require a complete overhaul of the field of art therapy. For those interested in engaging in community development, either in addition to or in place of traditional clinical roles, the model described herein may be a useful tool in making this transition. Finally art therapists will have to find ways to communicate

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with those involved in the fields of community development and social change. Community leaders and organizers may not be aware of the power of art to advance social concerns. Partnering with these individuals will be a vital piece of using art therapy as a social change agent.

Conclusion

Art therapy informed by social justice ideals and rooted in service to others provides increased opportunities to engage in community building. Social change is multileveled and the tasks to accomplish any transformation range from attitude change to policy change. The model of guided relational viewing provides art therapists with a framework to facilitate dialogue and build empathy for our client-artists whose voices may be silent and whose faces are often hidden. By using our unique skills as art therapists we can advance the ideals of justice and equality through relationship building and art.

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