

What is art therapy?

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Artist, art therapist, educator, supervisor

It is not a coincidence that I have listed my different professional identities up here. Being an art therapist, it is necessary to use them all and more; I need to activate my artistic knowledge of life in the studio, mirrored by different mediums through my actions, carried out by my hands. I use my body knowledge to grasp the actions done with the medium by my clients. I wish to utilize my understanding of materials and perhaps educate a client about a technical [therapeutic] aspect in their work. I also need to be my own attuned psychological supervisor and choose, for example, when and how much to move around the studio. An art therapist makes many unplanned physical actions in each session, synchronizing them all with deep psychological knowledge. This also indicates that all actions, tools, materials and settings are not only technical means, they also possess various rich disciplines of knowledge and implications interweaved within. I hope that all this becomes a related organic embroidery attuned to a client in a specific session.

I perceive our profession as primarily rooted in the history of humankind, ever since people painted animals on cave walls. Apparently, those creations were an integral part of a culture and rituals in the quest after the meaning of life. It was very unlikely mere entertainment or beautiful stuff in a "cave gallery." If you ever had a chance to observe such ancient images and lines in a dark cave, you must have felt that it was genuine and crucial to the creator and the community, as it holds within a profound resonance and spirit that appeal to us, despite not knowing what the actual context was.

Our trade can correspondingly be compared to the alchemist's quest for knowledge by heating powders and liquids in a vessel on a fire, hoping to create gold. Alchemy observes life as one organic existence where matter resembles spirit and vice versa. Alchemist's search for gold, but more than that, they pursue wisdom and the meaning of life through mixing powders, liquids, leaves and beetle wings. Metaphorically, isn't this what we do?

Initially, an art therapist is deeply connected and recognizes his powders and solutions. These substances are his allies. He cooks them together with other parts of his knowledge, such as imagination, mythology and psychology. Inside the apparatus and hot fire process, a brush, a pencil, a blot of paint possesses layered meanings. Moreover, all these tools and components will have specific meanings for every single client. It is a multi-layered hands-on artistry, adding psychological knowledge to the mixture. Psychology is the youngest component added to our ancient profession as an aid to dealing with our soul, sorrows and existence through different artistic expressions and manifestations.

In the art therapy studio as a safe place, the client is allowed to live such processes. She is encouraged to mix potions and create powerful combinations. The laboratory of the alchemist searching for gold or the cave drawings is revived. Thus, magic comes to life.

Interestingly enough, during this process, the underlying archetypes of the person are revealed. Her typical qualities, her blueprint, comes up front. The phenomenology of a specific person is given names and noticed by the therapist who acknowledges and perhaps mirrors his understanding.

Moreover, the universal archetypes appear as well and take their place, together with the uniqueness of that specific client. One individual's art making may unknowingly resonate from a long chain of creators. We are one, but we also refer to and are resonating from the path we come from. We are a part of humanity.

When we are at the studio making "things," facilitated and witnessed by a knowledgeable art therapist, all this comes to life and has a deep impact, even if nothing has been said.

In our art therapy studio, all components of this rhizome integrate and rehearse the dormant memories connecting us to our higher creative, stronger self.

How do you explain such a complex trade?

How do I clarify the difference between art therapy and other helping professions?

Since our trade is particularly layered by rich modalities, including non-verbal ones, we need to find a way to speak about it among ourselves and share it with others. The venue I have found to deal with all this overwhelming rhizome information is to use metaphors assisting me with this complexity and richness, such as describing the alchemist above.

Another substantial metaphor has been used since 1997. It is presented in *The Spirit of Matter*. [Orbach, Galkin 1997, Hebrew version, 2016, English e-book]

A six-stage journey has been chosen as the backbone structure of any therapeutic or educational creative process. This organizing tool has detailed anchors regarding all fundamental issues that might come up in an artistic session. These anchors allow you to fly and be creative and imaginative, but at the same time have an inner map showing where you are at, as the therapist or educator.

We have divided the exercises we use into six journey stages. Thus, I can easily recall my old experiences at the present moment and choose any activity needed. I can leaf through the stage my client is at, get inspiration and suggest something. As a therapist, I can also know where I am with this client on his inner map. For example, I can understand if we are on the threshold of the city walls, or if we are departing

from it. Since this tool was structured I have been less anxious, as I have had metaphors to anchor me and to help me talk to myself as an inner supervisor. It is much more empathetic to say to yourself: "The client is on a threshold. I need to be there with her," then "The therapy is going nowhere."

Moreover, each suggestion is analyzed from many perspectives: emotional, cognitive, technical and social aims, how to arrange the setting, the medium, the metaphor of the specific intervention, self-supervision questions, what to look at during the art making, what do the art works to resemble, and so on. Therefore, a whole journey is mapped and anchored, teaching how to think and do art therapy. It is an integrative anchor that gives you wings, since you can understand how every aspect is interrelated with the others, when reading any table. Since it is accurately and richly written, it enabled you to create your own variation.

The journey metaphor is also useful, because if I have an inner map where my client is, I might not say he is resisting, but imagine him as sitting at the threshold of his inner city. I shall then accompany him there, being less stressed and not telling myself that the therapy process is going nowhere. It will also be very convenient to easily find an artistic intervention, as they are organized in their most typical place within the collection. Thus, if my client is on the threshold, I shall read all relevant texts for inspiration.

Another metaphor that assists me is the tree metaphor. It observes in depth one art process through actions and the medium. The deepest and oldest will be the creation with medium in the root phase, the dark, damp, unconscious art making. The second phase is the trunk, where a creator thinks of his work from afar. She might step aside and talk about the work as an observer.

These are my tools. However, although widely used, especially in Israel, it is not enough.

What do we need to search for? What are we missing? What should we do?

I believe we need to write more. We need to write more about MEDIUM and its significance - how WE as being close to materials perceive the whole process. We need to get away from the outcome. The How is lacking, compared to What is painted.

Not much has been written about art therapy from the medium-action aspect. Our "alchemical kitchen" is not yet rich enough. Most art therapists talk too little about mediums as practical tools and often nothing more. We need to base our fundamental identity much more on our life in the studio. We need to come home. This means art therapists might go back to art creation themselves.

I believe that if we have more texts dealing with this alchemical psychological issue, we will be able to share more what we actually do in the studio and not be misused by others.

Will you write?



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[the Spirit of Matter eBook On Amazon](#)