

THE EXPLORATION OF THE SELF IN PICTURES. PHOTO-THERAPY

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Abstract

We are living in a world surrounded by images; everywhere we go we are overwhelmed by commercials, plasma screens, posters etc. We get lost in these “perfect” pictures, we dream about that perfect body, that perfect sunny holiday and that perfectly happy family. We spend time consuming those pictures, but we don't spend time to see ourselves as we are, to discover our inner self. But, can we discover ourselves in pictures? I believe so, but only when the pictures are created and not consumed. When pictures are created, creation becomes therapy and the result of the work becomes a means of self discovery and exploration. There are many examples of artists using different media like: sculpture, painting, installation, video that create pictures making use of their own body/face, of their own lives, of their own dreams, hallucinations or obsessions. This is a good way to bring their problems out of the subconscious, to use them in a creative and playful way, to visualize them and to share them with the world. The paper intends to explore the possibilities of self discovery through creating pictures, and in what proportion this activity can become therapy, art or both. The analysis will focus on the possibilities of accepting and comprehending oneself by taking pictures of oneself; on how genuine self-portraits can overcome the individual conflict between who one actually is, what one believes people's perceptions of oneself are and who one thinks people want one to be in order to be accepted or even successful.

Keywords: *self exploration, self portrait, art therapy, photo-therapy, subconscious.*

Introduction

As far as we can go back in time, any artist's work has been envisaged as the mirror of his experiences, thoughts and ideas. More often than not, the artist has purposefully used his own life or body, and plenty of examples from contemporary art can be given to support this idea. Throughout art history, one can easily notice that most often the artists' inspiration source has been represented by certain obsessions, traumas, and painters such as Edvard Munch or Francisco Goya are well known illustrations of this fact. The question is what would have happened if these artists tormented by such obsessions, depressions etc. had not found art as a means of escape, if they had not channeled all their repressions and anxieties in their works? We think that in many situations what gives birth to creation is exactly this overwhelming amount of thoughts and inner torments. Also, it is puzzling that especially such negative, intense experiences can turn into art, into something “beautiful” or “harmonious”. If all these feelings had not been expressed, if they had not been discharged by being turned into an artistic object, one would have probably witnessed more suicide cases. Emil Cioran himself, in the interview given to Gabriel Liiceanu for the documentary “The Apocalypse According to Cioran” stated that his writings had been a real form of therapy, which had helped him go on.

Content

This paper attempts at emphasizing the approach in which studying various cases of artists and the way they work can represent a departure point in devising a self-cognition system for every person, so that this method of setting oneself free through art, through creation would not exclusively be destined to persons that have the “artist” statute. This starting point related to the use of art as

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therapy will be exemplified by artists whose works are particularly their own biography, a documentation on their own lives.

Therapy through art is relatively new, as it started to be used as such towards the middle of the 20th century. This psychotherapeutic discipline has double meaning, either referring to therapeutically producing a work of art (in this case the emphasis is on the process itself) or to the interpretation of a work of art created by the patient (in this case the emphasis is on the product and on the symbols used).

Apparently, the British artist Adrian Hill is the one who seems to have used for the first time the term “art therapy” to describe the therapeutic effect of producing images. Hill discovered the beneficial effect that drawing and painting can have in the process of recovery after tuberculosis. The values of art therapy are to release the creative energy of the inhibited patient through this captivating activity that involves both mind and fingers. In the sanatorium where he had been treated for tuberculosis, Hill suggested patients to start doing art; this was the starting point for his work with patients, based on art therapy, documented later in his book *“Art Versus Illness”* in 1945. Artist Edward Adamson joined Adrian Hill, applying this therapy form in insane asylums in England, where he opened workshops for patients to come and start paint. Adamson militated in favour of the patients’ freedom of expression, being against interpreting their creations by specialized persons; for Adamson these interpretations would have signified only the psychotherapist’s projections on the respective work.

Among the first psychologists that have encouraged self-discovery through a creative method was the famous Carl Gustav Jung. Self-exploration achieved by Jung brings about change as far as the type of analysis that he approached is concerned. He encouraged all his patients to start a self-cognitive and self-exploratory process. Patients were instructed on how to use their active imagination, on how to talk to their innerness and on how to paint their fantasies³. Thus, Jung himself encouraged the activity of transforming emotions into images: “Emotional torment can be differently solved, not by intellectually clarifying it, but by giving it visible form. The patients that have certain skills for drawing or painting can express their state of mind by means of an image. It is not important for it to be technically or esthetically satisfactory, but it should allow fantasy to go wild and the entire thing to be accomplished as well as possible.”⁴

The means of expression generally accepted and used in art therapy have been predominantly painting, drawing and molding. Despite publications related to the therapeutic aspects of photography (Cornelison and Arsenian, 1960) or video registration (Alger and Hogan, 1967), numerous supporters of art therapy have remained skeptical about using these artistic means.⁵ In 1981 Jerry Fryrear together with Bob Fleshman approached the theme of cooperation among different artistic branches in their work *“The Arts in Therapy”*. Fryrear noticed that throughout history, among the different artistic branches there has been connection, more often than not inseparable, this tendency being ever so more apparent in contemporary art.⁶ Thus, skepticism about the new artistic means – photography and video – has been moderated by the fact that these technologies include: movement, directing and body presentation. In his paper *“Photo Art Therapy”*, Fryrear accomplishes a synthesis of his previous papers, *“The Arts in Therapy”*, and two more publications about photo-therapy (1983) and video-therapy (1981). *“Photo Art Therapy”* demonstrates that not only does instant photographing include various aspects from visual arts, but it also contributes with new artistic features that could offer various therapeutic possibilities. Both Jerry Fryrear and the coauthor of the book, Irene Corbit, use photography in their therapeutic practice. What they do is photographing their patients in order to study their posture, and then using the

³ *Red Book. Liber Novus*, Carl Gustav Jung, p. 205

⁴ *Collected works*, Carl Gustav Jung, Vol.8, p. 78-79

⁵ *Photo Art Therapy: A Jungian Perspective*, Jerry L. Fryrear, Irene E. Corbit, p. V

⁶ *Idem*

respective photographs for the so called “self-image confrontation”.⁷ Moreover, they invite their patients to construct their own images and to pose for the photo camera, by imagining various moods or feelings that characterize themselves. The importance Fryrear and Corbit give to posture, to the way in which people sit in front of the photo camera becomes therapy, as our mind reacts to the expression our body gets, our body turns out to be a visual experience that changes according to emotions, moods etc. At the basis of their therapy there lies the creative process of change, which is described by the two authors as “visual transition.” One of the experiments used by Fryrear and Corbit is the “self-portrait box” which explores the multitude of a person’s facets. On each square of the cube, there is a self-portrait of the artist that tries to capture the various characteristics of one’s personality. These images are accompanied by six more, which disclose more intimate sides of the respective person. This process encourages the articulation of the multiple aspects of one’s personality that we choose to exhibit or not in front of the others.

The two psychotherapists’ entire practice promotes the idea of bringing moods, experiences, so far lying beyond the conscious, by means of visual expression. Thus, worries, frustrations, fantasies, memories etc. get a concrete form. “It is easier for people to confront, discuss, change and treat a concrete referent, as compared to an abstract idea. Giving the abstract a visible form, the client creates a referent which is tangible. It has form, colour, dimension and can be directly confronted, discussed and changed in a visible manner. By means of a photograph, a client can create a photographic posture which is visibly the form of an emotion or memory (...).”⁸

Among the other characteristics of photography as therapy, enumerated by the authors of “*Photo Art Therapy*”, one could refer, on the one side, to the efficiency put forth by the rapidness of taking a photo as compared to painting or drawing, and, on the other side, to the lack of the possible frustration that a patient might have related to one’s ability to draw/paint.

Nowadays, almost everybody has access to a photo camera, which has become very easy to use once they have been digitalized, thus self-exploring by means of self-portrait photography is at anybody’s hand. This art democratization allows each person to discover oneself through creative means related to the visual arts domain, which, in the past was exclusively reserved to gifted persons or to persons specialized in this field. Therefore, “photo-therapy” can be “a means of disclosing, expressing, comprehending some fragments that belong to our inner self.”⁹ Although we rationally know that photographs are not “real”, that they “do not say the truth”, as they stand for specific choices, constructions, decisive moments, however, we provide them with meaning. Nevertheless, many people think that it is in the power of photographs “to say” the truth. Precisely this contradiction and this tension become extremely productive in the therapeutic process. Looking at their pictures, being witnesses of their flexibility, one considers obvious that “truth” is a construct, that identity is fragmented in many “truths”. By becoming the individual is set free from constantly looking for an immutable “ideal self”, and, at the same time, it allows one to understand the self as process and evolution.¹⁰

This self-exploring method through photography, art or creation brings about, besides the satisfaction caused by one’s own creation, a ludic dimension which is emphasized in psychotherapy. Psychotherapy lies at the intersection of two ludic spaces – the one belonging to the patient and the one belonging to the therapist. Psychotherapy means two persons that play together. Consequently, when playing is not possible, the therapist’s effort is channeled towards making the patient able to play. Playing is trusting and it belongs to the prospective space (what existed at the beginning) between the child and the maternal figure. Only by being creative, one can discover our truthful self.

⁷ *Photo Art Therapy: A Jungian Perspective*, Jerry L. Fryrear, Irene E. Corbit, p. VI

⁸ *Photo Art Therapy: A Jungian Perspective*, Jerry L. Fryrear, Irene E. Corbit

⁹ *The Photography Reader*, Liz Wells, part eight, chapter 37 “Photo-therapy. Psychic realism as a healing art”, Rosy Martin & Joe Spence, p. 402

¹⁰ Idem

Self discovery, together with self-expression, is very useful in our opinion, to the extent that in nowadays society, we are bombed with images, chimeras of an idealized body, an idealized personality or the perfect family. “The spectator is drugged by spectacular images”¹¹, thus becoming more and more difficult to discover who one really is. Because of the reasons that have just been enumerated, a conflict is born between what a person really is, what he/she wants or could improve about his/her own person and the desire to comply with the standards imposed by society and by the entire gallery of seducing images promoted by mass-media. As Gaston Bachelard stated “personality lives in a rhythm of conciliation and aggression, related to the game between self-love and other-love.” In this conflict generated by the disagreement between desires, aspirations, ideals and what it really exists – the confrontation with an image created by one’s own fantasy can be revealing. A simple self-portrait photograph could contribute to accepting a type of reality. Thus, a representation of one’s own face, which is not idealized and lacks any artificiality or make-up, could be the first step to an authentic self-introspection. This courageous attempt could, however, bring an artist to a vulnerable position, to the extent that the respective artist does not only produce an introspection through his/her works, but also he/she introduces his/her personality in front of the world. In this context, one can say that Rembrandt’s work represents an inventory of his self-change, the creator of the work of art being also the subject of the work of art.

As we stated earlier in the paper, we will use the work of some artists to exemplify the way in which art can be a means of setting a person free from one’s obsessions, fears, frustrations.

We will start by referring to the Dutch artist **Ed van der Elksen** and his novel made up of photographs (“*photonovel*”). The idea of a novel made up of photographs was developed by Dutch photographers in the 1950s. Photography was used as kind of diary, thus endowing documentary photography with new features, turning it into something more spontaneous and more personal, directed on the intimate space and focused on the life of the photographer more than on the life of other persons. The most famous novel based on photographs is that made up by the Dutch Ed van der Elksen in 1956, named “*Love on the left bank*”.¹² This work of art is based on a series of photographs depicting the photographer’s female and male friends that lived in Saint Germain-des-Pres, Paris. Before this work was published, van der Elksen made a photo-essay (the photos were annotated) that appeared in “*Picture Post*”: “This is not a film. This is a story from real life, about people that really exist.”¹³ The story contained in this photo-essay was slightly changed, so that it could have become a book with documentary photographs. The decision to make a filmic story was obviously taken to serve a commercial purpose.

Nan Goldin is an artist that also very well exemplifies the interpretation of the work of art as diary/documentation of one’s own life, as she photographed her homosexual or heterosexual friends and her life partners in intimate situations. Thus, in her documentary photographs, Nan Goldin depicts aspects of sexual orientation ambiguity: homosexuals, lesbians, travesties. Her photographs do not judge, they just portray an aspect that belongs to reality. The heterosexual couples, which Goldin most often reveals during sexual intercourse, are considered either as expression of completion and perfect union, or as expression of possible frustration, lack of communication between couple members. One of the photographs that suggests lack of resonance between the two, the discontinuance of the couple, is the one in which Goldin lies in bed and looks at her boyfriend who is smoking a cigarette in the foreground, which is closer to the viewer; their eyes do not meet; the line that divides light from shadow might suggest the wall that was raised between the two, woman and man, who are incapable of getting harmonized, to recreate the archetype of the complete being.

¹¹ *Societatea spectacolului. Comentarii la societatea spectacolului*, Guy Debord, traducere si note de Ciprian Mihali si Radu Stoenescu

¹² *The genius of photography*, Gerry Badger, 2007, Quadrille Publishing Limited, p. 121

¹³ *The genius of photography*, Gerry Badger, p. 121

Another artist who could exemplify the manner in which the work of art becomes intrinsic to the artist him/herself is **Marina Abramovic**, the well-known performance creator. Marina Abramovic's art is an extension of her own life; she discloses herself with complete sincerity, going beyond her physical and mental limits.

Francesca Woodman, likewise Marina Abramovic, uses her own body as a means of artistic expression. In most of her photographs, Francesca presents her body nude, in various situations that symbolize her inner quests, confusion, ambiguity. By means of her body, Francesca Woodman initiates a dialogue with herself, which becomes a symbol of receptivity, a meeting point between her and the rest of the world.

Lee Friedlander, an American photographer, has made more than 400 portraits in 50 years. The oldest were made in his youth and they are very direct, except for a few traditional family portraits. During his early artistic stage, Friedlander created the series with mirroring, reflections, shadows of his own figure caught from unusual angles. These self-portraits function as a diary that depicts how a person is changing as he/she is getting old. Among his most recent self-portraits one can find the ones in which Lee Friedlander is in hospital, the artist photographing himself before and after his bypass surgery.¹⁴

Yayoi Kusama is another good example for the way in which art can become therapy and a means of expressing obsessions, hallucinations etc. The Japanese artist uses various media – installation, sculpture, video – to create a type of art generated by her hallucinations caused by the obsessive neurosis Kusama has been suffering from since teenage years. The moment she was labeled with this diagnosis, the artist decided that, most of her time, she would live in a mental care institution in Tokyo, in the vicinity of which there is a spacious studio where could work.

Kusama claims that she started to have short hallucinations ever since childhood, under the form of floral patterns (which started with a vase of flowers) that started to spread out in the entire room, then changing into “threatening” dots.

Painting was the first medium the artist used to express these obsessions, which could get a material, concrete form this way. The work she created helped Kusama keep her psychiatric condition under control.

Kusama confronted with a latent phobia of sexual intercourse, which generated a series of sculptures illustrating phallic forms that she exhibited in mirrored rooms in order to construct an infinity illusion. The artist denied the erotic charge of these sculptures, assigning them totem significance that helped her control her anxiety about this symbol.¹⁵ From the same perspective, the Japanese artist's performances can be rather considered as a type of exorcism than as a means of sensuality celebration through art – “once sexual frustrations have been made distant, there will not be an exaggerated accentuation of the sexual theme, the artist being free to channel her creative energies into real art.”¹⁶

The trauma that generated the artist's illness partially originates in the familial context in which she grew up, that is a rigid, traditionalist background, with an authoritarian mother who used to severely (both physically and psychically) punish her daughter for any unusual behavior and who used to discourage her daughter's interest in art. This aspect is revealed in one of Kusama's early paintings, in which the artist's mother is portrayed in a “tempest” of dots.

Yayoi Kusama's works are based on repetition, which creates a hypnotic effect on the viewer. According to Freud, the value of art lies in its power to trigger “a narcotic effect, offering both the artist and the viewer a substitute, or a means of escaping reality.” Nevertheless, the Japanese artist's work can be characterized by mimesis, as a mirror of her own innerness and as a means of

¹⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jan/22/lee-friedlander-in-picture-review>

¹⁵ *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth*, Jennie Hirsh, Isabelle Loring Wallace, pg. 94

¹⁶ *Idem*, pg. 95

introspection. The result of her work is a “mimetic” reflection of her ego.¹⁷ As Kusama declared: “I do not consider myself an artist; I am looking for art in order to cope with the disability that started in my childhood.”¹⁸

Conclusions

From the distinctions made and the illustrations offered in the body of our paper, one could easily notice that the cases of several artists might exemplify the manner in which art can be both a means of expressing and releasing frustrations, obsessions, memories, traumas.

Being related to creativity, imagination, instinct, subconscious, art therapy has become a curative method that has also excellent results with persons that do not have artistic training. By expressing negative emotions in a work of art, one produces detachment, so that the author-person will succeed in looking within him/herself from another point of view; at the same time, the feelings that caused him/her negative moods will transform into something tangible that can be made real and accepted.

The purpose of this paper has not been to exhaustively document the history or the forms of art-therapy. It is rather an invitation to consider the artistic phenomenon from multiple points of view, focusing on the psychosocial perspective. In this manner, one can understand the motive and the effect of an artistic act at a psychological level. It represents a vision by means of which art is perceived as a form of self-discovery, comprehension of the authentic self.

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¹⁷ *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth*, Jennie Hirsh, Isabelle Loring Wallace, p. 104

¹⁸ *Psychoanalysis and the image. Transdisciplinary perspectives*, Griselda Pollock, chapter 5 “Yayoi Kusama between Abstraction and Pathology”, Izumi Nakajima, p. 133