



Review article

# Mechanisms of Art for Social Art Therapy

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## ***Abstract***

*In our current turbulent social climate, with climate change, wars, political upheaval, and migration, social problems become central issues for many of clients. This theoretical paper offers a method of understanding art in art therapy through social theories providing four inherent mechanisms of art that are connected to social theories. These mechanisms include: using art to explore phenomenological experience of social context; using art to integrate subjective experience within social background; using art as mapping our social reality; using art as mediating communication within a system. Each of these mechanisms is illustrated with examples from the author's previous publications. Appropriate social settings are also outlined. This paper will contribute to art therapists' ability to use art through social lense within their art therapy practice in long-term crises. It presents how to use art mechanisms to help a family, group, or community, and manage the constant shifts, from homeostasis to change, that crisis demands.*

**Keywords:** *Social art therapy; Mechanisms of art; Social mechanisms of art*

## Introduction and Literature Survey

The current unstable social climate of the world, including epidemics, climate change, wars, migration, and general social instability, means that multiple and long-term community crises have seeped into art therapists' professional and private lives. These shifts have "pushed" art therapy into social spheres of intervention, highlighting the impact of social context in all our lives. Health insecurity, poverty, unemployment, loneliness, uncertainty, migration, trauma and the social fragmentation, along with the change that these issues bring, can produce problems that range from long-term stress to trauma, but are clearly socially contextualized problems (Tomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2020). This social reality which characterizes our times, has forced art therapists to adjust art therapy "on the ground" to new theories, roles, ways of working, and settings, leading to the emergence of new definitions of professional identity (American Art Therapy Association, 2020; EFAT, European Association of Art Therapy, 2020; Potash et al., 2020).

Within long-term social crises, it is important to activate social contact and solidarity, cognition, rather than emotion, and to initiate effective action (especially that of helping others) so as to promote the return of one's sense of control and meaning, rather than falling into a sense

of helplessness and passivity. Long-term crisis is one made up of multiple moments or peaks of crisis. In between those moments, feelings can be explored in relation to the past, but with each new peak of crisis, people need to activate themselves and others in their system, in the here and now, so as to deal with the real, socially contextualized problems (Segal Engelchin et al., 2020; Gidron et al., 2023).

Social support and the activation of systems, is a central resource when dealing with community crises, as are theories of stress and trauma, but most importantly, methods of coping, and utilizing existing resources, are central to interventions in crises. Another central concept is that the context, the stress, is constantly changing, and people have to adjust to these changes in motion as the crises unfolds. Thus, stress and coping are specific to a specific time and place, and need to be constantly adjusted.

Art therapists can use the mechanisms of art that can enhance systems, social cooperation, and constant re-evaluation of what is stressful right now, and what resources are available to cope. Thus, art therapy must be mindful of specific social contexts.

However, art therapy tends to follow psychological rather than social theories, in alignment with psychotherapeutic theories and thus, also when intervening

within crises situations, the focus is often on humanistic and dynamic, rather than systemic or coping theories (Huss & Havsteen Franklin, 2023).

Focusing only on psychological theories, such as trauma as a decontextualized illness, and on coping in terms of self-regulation of the body and mind, without including the social context, can decontextualize the situation and keep the client from seeing the real social problems and accessing the resources that he or she needs to activate in order to survive a long-term social crisis.

How can art therapy deeply address and work with, socially contextualized, and not only internal decontextualized psychological stress? This paper will demonstrate how art connects to social theories, how arts can be utilized and then analysed through social theories and theories of coping, which will provide art therapists with tools to meet the increasing social challenges of our times.

The aim of this review paper is to address the gap in the art therapy literature by reviewing social theories, along with theories of crises and coping. Most importantly, the aim of the article is outlining the art mechanisms that can enhance these theories in order to provide a theoretical understanding of socially contextualized theories, and the mechanisms of arts that can enhance them, together with examples of how to activate them in the field.

## **Social Theories**

Theories are central to how we use art within art therapy interventions. Theoretical prisms define the role of art within art therapy (Hogan & Coulter, 2014; Huss, 2017). In times of social stress, we aim to focus on social systems and their shifting contexts (such as migration, loss, poverty, illness) in the here and now, so as to understand how to cope with it. This approach differs from psychodynamic exploration. Thus, central theoretical prisms for intervention shift from dynamic and humanistic theories used in psychotherapy, to systemic theories and to theories of coping (Huss & Havsteen-Franklin, 2023). Social theories conceptualize people as complex social organism that work together to solve problems. They are ecological, considering the shifting interactive definition of stresses and resources within a specific social context. Social ecological theories contextualize the psychological phenomenological experience of the individual, from the “outside in” (Bos & Huss, 2023; Huss, 2015; 2017).

They are central to dealing with community crises because a community is by definition a social system. Additionally, people cannot manage social crises alone, rather they need to work together so as to overcome the isolation and helplessness that huge social crises can create.

Social theories understand parts as belonging to a more holistic and interactive whole. Thus, personal problems

are created by the system. Social theories furthermore understand systems as complex sets of rules - governed organisms that seek stability but have to deal with constant change caused by the ongoing crises. These often demand drastic shifts in roles, and a re-distribution of power within the system (Minuchin, 1975; Peirce et al, 1996).

### **Theories of coping**

One way to think about coping is to think about the resources that we have with which to cope. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) describe coping resources as external, such as social support, money, etc. and internal, such as a calm nature, ability to do maths, etc. Thus, even while showing that one is a victim of a system (for example: a woman suffering violence in a patriarchal system, or a refugee suffering displacement) the focus on self-defined resources helps to shift from a victim stance to a position of agency. In crises situations, it is important to work out which internal and external resources we can draw upon. Art can help with this through accentuating the relationship between internal (subject) resources, and external (background) resources, putting them all within a single interactive Gestalt, or a page.

Another theory of coping is Antonovsky's theory of Salutogenesis. According to the salutogenic approach people constantly deal effectively with stressors, and the interesting question is 'what can we learn

from how people deal successfully with stress in ways that can enhance coping?'

Antonovsky focused on 3 components of coping resources into the ability to conceptualize the world as manageable, comprehensible, and meaningful (Antonovsky, 1987). When we feel we can manage the stressful situation, that we understand it, and that coping with it gives our lives meaning, then we gain a sense of coherence (SOC) which plays an important role in the way one perceives stresses, crises, and challenges throughout life. An individual understands, manages, and gives positive meaning to his dealing with stress. According to Antonovsky (1987), sense of coherence is a protective developmental construct which continues to mature into adulthood and that can be enhanced through focusing on it, as we do in arts therapy (Braun-Lewensohn, Sagy, & Roth, 2011).

With each stage of a long-term crisis, salutogenic thinking can help us prepare for, understand, manage, and give meaning to our ways of coping with a stressor. With each peak of a long-term crisis, meaning, manageability, and comprehensibility can be explored and re-activated.

The process of making arts is a type of embodied 'manageability' that activates the body, the senses, cognitive decision making, and the emotions. The person drawing manages their page. The theory of embodied relational aesthetics points to the pleasurable, aesthetic arousal of the whole person, including, autobio-

graphical memory, sensory stimuli, and perceptual innovation (Dalebroux, Goldstein, & Winner, 2008; Huss, Bar Yosef, & Zaccai, 2018; van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004). This helps to reactivate the system after crisis, and to create a sense of action and control. Art making, observing and discussing the art, as in art therapy, enhances meaning and comprehensibility, because the art is a broad hermeneutic space that can hold multiple meanings and understandings.

This process of ensuing reflection, reframing, and reconstructing compositional elements in the artwork validates feelings, challenges preconceptions, and develops solutions to problems from fresh, innovative perspectives (Gombrich & Eribon, 1993; Huss & Samson, 2019). This ability to imagine a compromise, a new organization of a system, or a new resource, is what is needed in crisis situations. However, due to the tendency to freeze, the rigidity, and the black and white thinking that is characteristic of stressful situations, the very creativity that could help us cope is taken away. The act of the art creation re-activates the elements that shut down during crisis, helps reactive symbolization, abstract thinking, self-regulation, sublimation, and communication (Baggerly & Exum, 2007; Huss, 2012a; Huss et al., 2010; Huss & Magos, 2017; McNiff, 1997; Masten, 2001; Segel English et al., 2020).

New resources, meanings, comprehensions, and ways of managing crisis can

be initiated through art process that include moving closer or further, merging or separating, or changing the size and contours of shapes as well as centralizing or decentralizing the overall gestalt of the system (Huss, 2008, 2012b; Huss & Cwikel, 2005).

Because the creator of the art is self-defining the problem within a specific context, they can also self-define solutions or ways of coping that are relevant for that context. This connects to positive psychology and coping theories. An important resource in times of stress, is on the one hand to take life one day at a time, and on the other hand, to create a sense of time, that is, a line between the present and the hopefully-better-future. Hoping that the change will be for the better, gives the person motivation to deal with the crisis; arts enables us to 'dare to imagine' a new way of being and of interacting that will be better, and from that imaged idea, ways of reaching this future can be worked out.

### **Art in Social Theories**

Each theoretical prism will propose the role of art in art therapy differently; for example, dynamic art therapy understands the compositional elements of art as an unconscious expression of the inner world, while humanistic art therapy understands art as authentic self-expression. CBT and mind-body theories understand art as a way to

regulate thoughts and emotions (Huss, 2015). However, art therapy has not yet conceptualized social theories through specific art mechanisms or processes. How can we connect social theories to art? The following four art mechanisms help to think of client's art, through social theories (Huss, 2016, 2017).

*Art Mechanism A:*

*Using compositional decisions to excavate subjective experience of social reality*

In all art making, the dialogue between form and content involves a set of compositional decisions that become an externalization of an inner dialogue, and these help to define and redefine one's experience. The arts also help to distance, symbolize, and create a sense of control over the stressor. We see this exploration of a stressor in the following image of a woman with cancer:

*"The cancer is black, and it's at the basis of everything. In effect, the black clay is under the other colors. The black color is always there at the base, and so I am going to move it upwards a little so that I remember its role, and I don't try to hide it again. I'm also going to enlarge the purple, which is self-care, but it represents sports, and meditation for me; and I will put the orange, the family, that is the most important, in the middle,*

*but they must make room for the cancer, and for my self-care, their roles have to shift, so as to deal with this crisis."* (Huss & Samson, 2019).

In the woman's compositional decisions above, we see how she shifts her understanding of her family system that will have to "make room" for her cancer, through the compositional decisions of placement of the plasticine colours.

Art thus becomes a way to show a system, as experienced by the creator of the art and to negotiate role shifts within. This is empowering as it shifts from the passive concept of being a victim, being "seen" and diagnosed, to actively "seeing" or creating one's own experience of a shifting system, and communicating this to others



Figure 1 My cancer has changed the family system

Adapted from the image of the client's artwork, adapted with permission

(Hooks, 1992, p.208). Freire, a central theorist of empowerment, describes how the arts enable personal interpretation and the engagement of the imagination in relation to social reality (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.86). Thus, by creating a personal interpretation of a cultural reality in an externalized image, a negotiation between individual and social reality can be initiated (Harrington, 2004; Huss, 2017, 2012a; Mahon, 2000).

Within a family or a group context, the dual level of both creating art, and then explaining one's artwork to others as the expert on one's own experience, enables everyone in the system to have a voice. For example, the other family members can also draw the mother's cancer and how they are experiencing shifts in the system from homeostasis to change (Foster, 2007; Hogan, 2003; Huss, 2012b).

#### *Art Mechanism B:*

*Art as creating an aesthetic tension between subjective and social experience through the aesthetic relationship of figure versus background.*

We saw above that art is made up of a set of compositional decisions that best convey one's personal experience. An additional inherent aesthetic tension in art is the compositional tension between figure and background in visual art (which is also found in the relationship between actor and stage, dancer and space, tune and accompaniment). Situating personal experience within social context (or figure within background) helps to highlight

the interactive relationship between the person and the stressful social reality he or she is trying to navigate (Huss et al., 2012; Huss, 2017, Huss & Bos, 2022).

For example, in this image of a tree in the wind, drawn by an impoverished Bedouin woman she explains:

*"I am trying to be strong, to give the children what they need, but it's hard, I am like a tree whose branches are flying in the wind - I have no money, no support from anyone..."* (Huss, 2007).



Figure 2. *Myself as a tree*

Adapted from the image of the client's artwork, adapted with permission

While in psychological "house tree person" diagnostic tests the tree is considered a decontextualized projection of the unconscious self, this woman connects between figure and background, showing how although the tree looks so "weak", it is actually "strong" in the context of its background of deep poverty.

*Art Mechanism C:*

*Art as mapping out social reality*

Visual arts are a spatial and thus broad gestalt, a type of visual “system” that enables to capture the multiple components of a system in visual relation to each other, showing interrelationships between the systems’ different parts within a single gestalt (O’Sullivan, 2001). This is as compared to the more linear and abstract characteristics of words.

Visual arts help to map out how space and other resources, are divided within a system. For example, while countries can define their wars in ideological terms, maps show spaces taken away, and the division of space within a community or house reveals the power divisions within the family system such as who is the largest, the most central, who has colour, space, definition etc. (Huss, 2016, 2017; Merrenissi, 2003). Additionally, the arts can help us imagine shifts in these divisions of power or ways of managing the system.

In the following example, we see how a young girl experiences her family system as a closed system, where women have to stay within the house, and all problems have to be solved within the family. She explained that when there is a crisis, they cannot shift their roles or expand outside of the family. This limits their ability to adjust to the shifting context.

However, arts can go beyond describing the system to also helping us to imagine possible shifts in the system, as bellow: where the drawer of the space in her sys-

tem, imagined shifting out of the defined space allocated to her by her family.

The ability of art to map out systems, enables one to ‘dare to imagine’ a new division of roles within the system. Arts enable people to deal with the past in symbolic form, and to reconstruct a vision of the future, creating a fresh conceptual field within which new organizations of the system can be envisaged.



Figure 3 My family as a closed system  
Adapted from the image of the client's artwork, adapted with permission

*Art mechanism D: Using art to communicate within a system*

Arts can help to mediate communication within a system and to prevent direct conflict leading to violence, because phenomenological expression enables to address difficult feelings indirectly. Art is a broad hermeneutic space within which people explore multiple meanings. For example, if each family or group or community member draws how each of them experienced a shift in the system (such as



Figure 4 Shifting the system

Adapted from the image of the client's artwork, adapted with permission

a death, birth, move, war displacement, illness, natural disaster) then new space within the system is created for everyone to express their own lived experience of the shared shift. Indeed, images serve as a central communicative device in cultures that do not engage in direct confrontation to solve problems, or in situations where it is too dangerous to directly confront power holders (Dokter, 1998; Foster, 2007; Huss, 2011a, 2011b; Spivak & Guha, 1988).

We see how the refugee in the following image, warns power holders of their moral commitment and historical role to solve their problem, rather than ignore them, through using symbols of a tear of blood, and of prison, the art helps to indirectly confront the powerholders, and also to arouse their empathy. Thus, art can be a nonviolent way to create change within a system.

## Settings for Social Arts Therapy

Art therapy utilizes art, but also setting: What setting is conducive for social art therapy? Because we are utilizing a theoretical analytical prism, then all types of art therapy settings can utilize social art. For example: a woman who suffers from domestic violence can come to understand that it is not that she is weak, but that society enables men to be violent to women. The therapist uses arts as a socially contextualized space to help the client identify resources and limitations in the context, at a specific moment in the crisis, through understanding the social power relations and systems that cause that suffering (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005; Kaplan, 2000; Levine & Levine, 2011; Orr, 2007; Speiser & Speiser, 2007). Secondly, as described above, a social context such as families, groups and communities, can serve as an additional way to enhance social understanding of



Figure 5 Shifting stands of powerholders  
Adapted from the image of the client's artwork, adapted with permission

the context; For example, a shared reality group, that share the same social context, enables group members to create a sense of solidarity, and an understanding that if the group shares this experience, it is due to social context rather than an individual having an internal weakness. This helps to clear self-blame, to de-pathologize the symptoms, and to gain a better social understanding of what created the problem. Shared reality groups can learn from each other. The arts help by shifting to a visual or symbolic form rather than theoretical and verbal forms of communication enabling professionals and those with lay knowledge to 'meet' in a new zone that helps to destabilize existing terms power relationships (Huss, 2017; Huss& Havsteen-Franklin, 2023, 2022; Oko Mason, 2002).

Often, in social crises, such as the Corona virus, the art therapist is undergoing the same shared reality: she is not an expert on that social reality, but on enabling the space to explore it together. This also disrupts the power relations between therapist and group (Shefi, Orkibi, & Huss, 2022).

Within communities, arts can create symbols that organize the values of the community and enable a space to create a coherent narrative. Arts can also shift the physical spaces of a community, through making spaces special and creating community spaces (Huss, 2012a, 2012b; Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005; Kaplan, 2000; Levine & Levine, 2011; Orr, 2007).

In the following example a group of Ethiopian youth created a traditional Ethiopian bench for their grandparents in a poor area where their immigrant community lives. This enabled them to reconnect to the value of respecting elders and to their own culture while reframing their impoverished area as a special and meaningful space.

## Discussion

Overall aim of the art mechanisms is to understand how within community crisis there is a need to constantly connect inwards to subjective experience of shifting stressors, while also connecting outwards, thinking together of ways to create manageability, comprehension, and meaning of these stressors, so as to cope with them constructively. This ongoing process creates hope. Both stressors and coping must constantly adjust and shift with the ongoing stages of the social crisis. What implications does the use of these arts mechanisms have for art therapy?

Social arts as a theoretical prism can be adapted, like all theories, to all settings, including individual and clinical contexts. At the same time, its natural contexts are where people gather within their systems: family, community, institution, or larger, global communities. Art therapy often addresses distanced settings, such as disaster areas, that are encapsulated in time and space, or in institutions such as prisons or hospitals. However, as stated, art therapists usually



Figure 6 Use of art in changing of the real public spaces

work through humanistic and dynamic, rather than social change theories, also in these high-context settings. Additionally, art therapy tools can also be effective in the art therapist's back-yard community context – within which both the art therapist and their clients live. Settings can also be political, such as addressing policy makers, or online, which enables the therapist to work with multinational groups.

From the examples above, we see that utilizing a social perspective on long-term social stress also shifts the arts therapist role. In addition to their traditional role of being an interpreter of spontaneous unconscious process and enabler of phenomenological self-expression, they can also activate shifts in a social system, using arts processes, materials, and directives to help groups gain self-under-

standing, shift roles, and self-define both stress and coping. This process within long-term crises is ongoing as the resources, stressors, and roles constantly shift and need re-adjusting. Art can be a place to 'check-in' to what the current stress is, and how it can be coped within the shifting social context. This defines the art therapist as initiating a participatory explorative space, rather than holding an interpretive 'expert' role. Participatory methods are used to co-create knowledge together with the community and the implementers. The arts help by shifting to a visual or symbolic form rather than theoretical and verbal forms of communication (Huss, 2017; Shefi, Orkibi, & Huss, 2022; OkoMason, 2002).

Another shift, as we saw in the shared reality group, is to actively create equality within the relationship between therapist and client, as a model for other systems. This shift demands of the therapist to share power rather than hold it. The arts therapist is the expert on arts facilitation and enabling the group to work, but the individual, family, group, or community members are the experts on the content: their own shared reality and experience. They can tell if the art intervention is working and provide solutions to problems they experience (Huss, Sarid, & Cwikel, 2010).

In terms of empowerment, the role of the therapist is to raise the client's awareness of different types of social marginalization that have impacted her/his problems,

through utilizing the shared reality group experience. The therapist uses arts as a socially contextualized space to help the client identify resources and limitations in the context, at a specific moment in the crisis which can be understood as a projection of unwanted parts of the self onto others (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005; Kaplan, 2000; Levine & Levine, 2011; Orr, 2007; Speiser & Speiser, 2007).

This paper has outlined and exemplified a theoretical model in which the broad spatial and hermeneutic base of arts enables us to conceptualize stress and coping not as discrete ‘medical’ elements but as interactive, and occurring within and in response to specific social contexts. In crisis situations, these contexts constantly shift and ‘peak.’ The article demonstrates how we can take social theories deeply into art therapy through firstly understanding the theories, and secondly, translating them into inherent arts mechanisms; and understand how they can expand arts therapists’ understanding of art process, product, setting, role, thus adding both evaluative and research methods as a new tool to include in the art therapist’s toolbox.

The theories explored here, as all theories, are interconnected. They are an additional layer for art therapy to utilize within the current socially volatile era. Hopefully, this paper shows the deep affinity between art therapy and social theories, and helps translate them into specific art mechanisms, analyses, acti-

ons, therapy roles and settings for arts therapist wishing to expand their skills and to add additional social layers, to the existing dynamic and humanistic layers of art therapy.

## Conclusion

The following table summarises the above examples of social art mechanisms, uses and contexts.

Table 1 Mechanism and uses of arts within art therapy through a social lens

Art Mechanism A	Using compositional decisions to excavate subjective experience of social reality
Art Mechanism B	Art as creating an aesthetic tension between subjective and social experience or between figure and background
Art Mechanism C	Art as mapping out social reality
Art Mechanism D	Art as mediating communication within a system
Settings	Family, shared reality group, community

In sum, this theoretical paper aimed to connect art mechanisms to social theo-

ries, so that arts therapists can analyse their clients' art not only through projective dynamic, or phenomenological theories, but also, through social theories. This contributes, in our complex social times, to understanding how people experience the systems that they live within and the impact of this context on their subjective psychological wellbeing.

This paper argued for the relevance of inherent elements of arts to social theories, thus helping to create a structured deep analytical prism for using art in socially oriented art therapy. I hope that this will help art therapists to expand their toolboxes to include social art therapy practices to meet the increasing social challenges of our times.

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