Review of the Book "Art and Well-being" by Jelena Kovačević

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Abstract

The Faculty of Educational Sciences in Osijek published a new book in the field of art therapy in 2023. Author, Jelena Kovačević, is an art therapist and teacher at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and the Art Therapy Program at the Academy of Art and Culture at the University of Josip Juraj Strossmayer in Osijek, Croatia. The book provides a detailed explanation and description of the benefits of artistic creation, guiding the reader through fundamental concepts and etymology in psychology, visual expression, and visual language. It gradually prepares the reader for the therapeutic role of art, offering insights into the origins of art therapy and its approaches, with a particular emphasis on the Expressive Therapies Continuum (Kagin and Lusebrink, 1978). The author explores various ways how art therapy and visual processes function, highlighting the importance of material selection, creative work, and establishing a strong alliance with an art psychotherapist.

Alongside several suggestions for fostering creativity, the author presents practical examples of art activities aimed at individuals who wish to independently explore their creativity, express emotions and thoughts, with the goals of self-awareness of inner processes, identity exploration, and encouraging free visual expression. The author underscores the need for cau-

tion when independently engaging in visual activities with elements of art therapy and recommends seeking professional guidance from an art therapist.

Keywords*: well-being, visual language, visual arts, art therapy, art as therapy, creativity*

In realizing the power of art, it is necessary to become aware of how it can enrich the life of every person, regardless of individual differences and life paths. While we are united in a universal desire for fulfillment and satisfaction, we differ in what we consider necessary to achieve it. With these words, the author of the book Art and Well-Being: Visual Creativity in the Service of Mental Health, Jelena Kovačević, thoughtfully introduces the idea that we could embark on art creation, focusing primarily on personal well-being and thereafter the art product.

Given that everyone possesses the ability to create, the author describes visual activities as adaptable and accessible to all, despite potential challenges such as visual impairment or blindness, physical or psychological disability. In these cases, professional guidance from an art therapist enables the adaptation of these activities to individuals, creating a personalized approach based on their needs and limitations.

The author's eighteen years of experience in the field of art education methodology, seven of which have been intertwined with insights from art therapy and art as therapy, resulted in the book Art and Well-Being: Visual Creativity in the Ser-vice of Mental Health. This book connects these fields and presents the interweaving of creativity and self-awareness to the reader in a clear, dynamic, and scienti-fically supported manner.

The author reflects on selected concepts from psychology that are significant in understanding the connection between art and quality of life, such as identity, well-being, and self-help. She explores the nature of artistic expression and provides a detailed explanation of the elements of visual language, including point, line, color, shape, proportion, and perspective. Understanding concepts such as quality of life, personal growth, and self-care, facilitates the recognition of the role and power of art in the process of personal development. Identity, for example, develops throughout life, offering opportunities for new insights and personal growth. Health, as the foundation of a quality life, is associated with a sense of well-being, and artistic activities further support this state by promoting the development of self-awareness, reflection, boosting self-confidence, and acting in a preventive manner.

Artistic expression is a form of self-care that, during the creative process, leads us into states of captivating immersion (Csickszantmichalyi, 1996) and mindfulness. Ultimately, the artistic process can be one of the self-help strategies, as Kovačević emphasizes, because self-help enables a deeper understanding of one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors through creativity and the acceptance of so-called creative risk.

In an effort to gain a full understanding, the book also includes a periodization of the development of visual expression, which extends to stages beyond adolescence. By describing the transitional period of decision-making and adolescent artistic expression, which generally marks the end of the developmental process, the author explains why many individuals stop engaging in creative expression. Creativity, as a universal human potential, holds special value due to its connection with divergent thinking, which is specifically encouraged through artistic activities. In describing the various stages of the creative process, the author provides insight into its complexity, including the initial discomfort that often accompanies any new creative endeavor. Kovačević also outlines ways in which individuals can develop their creativity.

Art as therapy is the fundamental idea of the book, which describes the essence of artistic creation: the need for communication (with others, but also with oneself), expressing one's existence, and establishing a connection with art. The deepest goal of art is not the mastery of form, but the adaptation of form to the idea or feeling one wishes to convey. The artist often uses abstract concepts such as emotions, thoughts, and intentions as the basis from which he creates his work. Enjoying artmaking and the personal experience of art, as phenomena, can become a habit that connects us with the surroundings. Learning the visual language provides the foundational knowledge needed to interpret and understand visual messages, preparing us for the reception of an artwork. In addition to knowledge of art theory, this complex, creative process also requires intuition within artistic expression. Connected to these topics are neuroaesthetics, a branch of neuroscience that studies the neurobiological and evolutionary basis of aesthetic experience and creativity.

The author distinguishes between the concepts of art as therapy and art therapy, a form of psychotherapy in which communication between the client and the art therapist takes place through the artistic process and work, and therefore creates a space for the processing of expressed content. The author emphasizes that art therapy should only be conducted by a trained art therapist, who has acquired the necessary knowledge in the fields of art and psychology during specialization and applied it through work with different clinical populations. Professionally guided art therapy helps in

achieving psychotherapeutic goals, such as improving emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functioning, strengthening self-confidence, self-awareness, and psychological resilience, as well as developing insight and social skills. Art therapy is based on a specific theoretical and psychological foundation, which the art therapist uses as a guideline in their work with the client. The book offers a theoretical foundation and explores various approaches that shape art therapy, including psychodynamic, humanistic, contemplative, and systemic approaches. Each of these perspectives provides a unique lens for utilizing artistic expression as a means of therapy and personal development.

The psychodynamic approach focuses on understanding unconscious processes through art, while the humanistic approach emphasizes the importance of self-actualization and personal growth. The contemplative approach, on the other hand, uses art as a tool for achieving mindfulness and introspective reflection, whereas the systemic approach considers the role of the individual within broader familial and social contexts.

One of the key contributions of art therapy is the act of „seeing and being seen," which allows the client to have an authentic experience in the present moment. This is followed by observation and reflection on all aspects of the created work and the creative process itself. Throughout this process, the client can only be guided and supported by a trained art therapist.

The importance of proper material selection is explored through the concept of the Continuum of Expressive Therapies (Kagin and Lusebrink, 1978). The author emphasizes the functions of art materials and techniques and their potential for achieving internal change. Physical contact with the material is an important part of the process, and the reader is introduced to the reactions and interactions with different materials through examples. The Continuum is a graphic representation of the effects of individual materials and activities, along with their optimal application in therapy. When planning art therapy activities, the art therapist carefully selects techniques and content, tailoring them to the individual needs of clients while leaving room for spontaneity. At the highest level of the Continuum, creative expression becomes an authentic, personal statement that fulfills the need for completion and achievement, and the processing of the process and results with the art therapist further strengthens this act. A sense of gratitude and satisfaction can also arise when we create independently, as the artistic process releases the inner potential and uniqueness of each individual.

In the final part of the book, the author presents examples of artistic activities that can be applied in everyday life. Kovačević's original art activities are created based on the presented theoretical framework. Due to their adaptability

and non-invasiveness, they allow safe exploration of inner experiences and emotions. However, caution and awareness of one's ability to handle any content that may arise during the process are strongly advised. Through these art activities, the individual learns about themselves in a symbolic way, and such an experience acts as a catalyst for a deeper understanding of their emotions, adjustments, and perceptions. In cases of doubt about one's ability to cope with emotions that may emerge during independent work, the author recommends consulting with a trained art therapist who can provide professional guidance through the process.

Art is a path toward creating a clear, liberating, and holistic image of life. Art activity activates both brain hemispheres, stimulating nearly all of their centers. The person who creates is superior to the process that is unfolding: he plans, makes decisions, reacts, thinks, and remembers. Therefore, art activity is not only a creative but also an intellectual challenge that the individual overcomes in their own unique way. Such expression is based on the interplay of internal and external motivation and is characterized by immersion in the activity. In many cases, Kovačević emphasizes, the creative process is more important than the final product because ”awareness of the goal of any activity must be built over time, which represents the link between art and life itself.”

We might add that the creative process is also a path of exploration, experimentation, and instinctive expression — a blend of the conscious and unconscious — a process in which transformations can occur even without additional verbalization or intellectual awareness. Surrendering and spontaneity are prerequisites for creativity and opening up to oneself, to the unconscious. This is not always an easy process, but once we allow ourselves to immerse in it, we can only grow and develop.

This book is presented as a link between art, art as therapy, and art therapy, which, through the lens of art teaching methods, chronologically guides the reader in understanding visual expression and creative communication. It introduces the fundamental principles of art therapy in a way that provides a solid foundation for further exploration. At the same time, it inspires the reader to engage, inviting them on an introspective and creative journey toward personal growth.

Resources

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