

ART AS A MEANS OF ACCESSING OURSELVES. USING ART IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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SUMMARY

Using art in psychotherapy could become an interesting instrument for the cure and the prevention of psychological and psychiatric problems. This belongs to that trend that sees the mediation of art as having big potential to go beyond the spoken word. Everybody knows that our emotions, thoughts, feelings, and so on, are living in the body and speaking through the body, in fact the symbolic dimension (art, music, dance, painting and so on) reconfigures the experience of living. In this form of therapy we use Art as a means of accessing ourselves and opening ourselves up to the world. The forms of artistic mediation that we mainly describe in the paper are the basic elements of tango and performative theatrical technique (Theatre of the Oppressed and Physical Theatre). In the final part of this paper a series of images illustrate specific cases in which the method and its outcomes are described.

Key words: the co-perceiving Self and Others - Leib - Koerper - art mediation - group-psychotherapy

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Art as a means of accessing ourselves: What does it mean?

For ages, Art has allowed us to favor the process of catharsis, to free deeply suppressed emotions, to express fear and upsetting and “dangerous” emotions especially if they are unspoken. Through Psychoanalysis the work of art has been considered the expression of the sub-conscious and therefore as a product/result of the process of sublimation of basic instincts, such as fantasies, dreams, angst, traumas and conflicts which instead of becoming a symptom, become an artistic creation. By expressing through artistic creation these emotions and “dangerous” drives (aggressiveness, frustration, angst, pain and suffering), the individual not only has the chance to free himself/herself from the negative energy, but also to keep a distance from the emotion itself, projecting it on the work of art.

Independently from our psychotherapeutic approach, we must agree with psychoanalysis on the fact that expression through art has the capacity to reveal the unspoken and sometimes not understood traces of the Self. Edward Munch stated that he did not believe in an Art that did not come from the desire to reveal himself to the other and open up his own heart. This is the sense of the artistic expression in its use as mediator of oneself: the possibility to reveal, open up, provide a special way to access inner contents, otherwise unspoken, not grasped, and to lead towards inner thoughts. Therefore, Art can be seen as a revealing possibility.

In this sense – within the treatment setting – the use of art, in any form, becomes a fundamental medium not because of its aesthetical beauty, but because of its capacity to convey a meaning. Everything becomes an expression of the inner world and a real text that the individual carries and – as in every psychotherapy – is read out by a psychotherapist, without preconceived interpretations. This makes every artistic expression a

possible way to express oneself, in a safe space, as well as a way to communicate and get to a place where words are not able to.

What is the body?

From birth each one of us wears a body, recognizes himself/herself in a body, lives in a body. The body retains in itself traces of the life that we have lived until now. The body, on the one hand is the mediator through which we open ourselves up to the world and, on the other hand, is the place where we perceive ourselves moment by moment. Being situated is mediated by our body and being a Self seems to imply that the mode in which each of us feels ourselves in various ongoing situations is established by different emotional tones that are inside our own body. Here, we are referring to a complex relationship between Leib and Koerper. According to Husserl and, later, to Merleau-Ponty, Koerper is the body-object, while Leib is the lived-living body. Leib- the body that I am, not the body that I have-is a body that has no boundaries delimited, it is a body in which a consciousness lives. This “body” is the place through which mankind feels an immediate experiencing of itself (the acting and the experiencing). This is really the specific aspect of the Leib: the body that experiences itself as a “self”, as a “mine”. If I consider my body as a Koerper, thus my body will appear a thing to me and not essentially differ from things around me, with characteristics like size, shape, color and so on. Koerper- the body that I have, not the body that I am – is the physical body, which occupies a space delimited by the skin. This dimension of my corporeality does not generate the experience of the me-ness of my body. Could I only have an experience of me-ness based on the fact that the body I instantly experience as mine simultaneously is nothing but a thing, a Koerper? We think that we cannot distinguish

between Leib and Koerper, we cannot separate them. The Leib experience does not exist separate from the Koerper experience. Leib is both Leib (sensing) and Koerper (think-like). The Leib presupposes and confirms the Koerper. This is why Husserl starts his analysis of the Leib by remarking that such an analysis inevitably focuses on our Leibkoerper. Leib and Koerper differ from one another, but they also condition one another. In other words a pure Leib does not exist! It is not a pure spirit, it would not be real in the world. The "body-leib" experience is an experience of me-ness based on corporal experience. It is a form of self-consciousness that becomes apparent through the body. It is a consciousness, an embodied consciousness. On the other hand, the "body-Koerper", cannot be a purely corporality: it would be stolen of its dignity!

The ancients thought that through the diaphragm, presaged through the heart, declaimed prophetic words through the inspiration of their soul, and the acceleration of the heartbeat meant the proximity of a loved one. So, the ancients were used to experiencing their body: the body as a store of meanings that we have lost over time. According to Husserl we can say that the ancient considered their body as a Leibkoerper. Nowadays, the body has become a group of organs put together with the only purpose of functioning. This is why we do not recognize the signs that our body gives us. We do not grasp its inner meaning, we listen to the body only in terms of wellness or illness. We have reduced the "body" to the "organism", losing all the symbolic meanings that the body acquired a long time ago! The body has so much expressive power and so many infinite possibilities of meanings that we risk losing them after this reduction. Our body has become a closed box that we only treat in terms of aesthetic or in terms of medical science.

In conclusion, we would like to report this sentence by De Waelhens: "In reality the body in nothing but the manner in which we gain access to the world and, at the same time, or correlatively, a certain mode of appearance of the world itself ... The body is the ensemble of concrete conditions under which an existential project actualizes itself and becomes, by actualizing itself, properly mine."

What is psychotherapy? Why do we use psychotherapy through the body? How do we use Art in psychotherapy?

Psychotherapy is a form of treatment that uses "words". The core problem of cure through words implies that the therapist will be able to reach the inner world of the patient and that all individual passions and actions will be understood within the framework of the historical dimension of the patient himself. The individual is often incapable of recognizing his own experience as a personal experience. In psychotherapy we must not reduce the different ways of experiencing one's own life to the psychotherapist's theory: if we do

this, the patient's experience of living will be polarized on the theory of who interprets and the results will be a denatured experience. From this point of view, the fundamental question is how to have access to the individual's world. It is well known that there is a correlation between bodily and emotional states and we know that experiencing an emotion coincides with perceiving a change in one's own bodily state. The body is always meaningful (Leibkoerper). In light of what has been said to this point, we believe that in Psychotherapy it is important to use the body as an instrument of therapeutic mediation, because our emotions, thoughts, feelings, live in the body and are communicated through the body.

As mentioned above, the body is both the mediator through which we open up ourselves to the world and, at the same time, we perceive ourselves here and now. The body tells me, on the one hand, about my "here and now", and on the other hand, about my capacity to change and/or to treasure the changes. The way I feel in any situation is always mediated by my body. Therefore being-in-the-world moves me and I experience it through a body that feels emotions. The body is the place where I feel and I live. We think that when the body is engaged in an "artistic" act it generates sense and connection with the emotional range. And the emotion is always meaningful! It becomes meaningful neither by thinking nor by creating a representation, but in the act of existing itself. Art is the symbolic dimension that reconfigures the experience of living. For these reasons we use Art as a means of accessing ourselves.

Working with the body means working with a body that has a story to tell. We can do this through all the forms of art that are integrated in order to express, elaborate and in the end, bring back "forgotten" emotions that by actualizing themselves, become concrete and may tend to action. These just "acted" emotions are traces of ourselves, these produced emotions and feelings reveal the ongoing experience which - as in all psychotherapy - need to be read out. Compared to the traditional group-therapy setting, what changes here is that the individual expresses himself/herself through acting instead of speaking. It is a real group psychotherapy, whose main feature is working through art mediation, and what in traditional psychotherapy is spoken, here is experienced through the body. Acting and speaking share the same area! First we work - through art - with the body, later with the word. In this sense, whatever happens within Art is the "truth".

What we do and how we do it?

We apply our model to various kinds of groups. These usually combine Psychiatric patients (having a variety of different psychiatric diagnoses - especially mood disorders and anxiety disorders) alongside patients who have minor psychological problems. The depth of our work depends on the composition of the group and the type of patients. We have been applying

this method in both Psychiatry and Psychosocial Rehabilitation. It is important to have a large room that can hold a number of people and is neither too large nor too small, so that they are able to move freely. A room, whether too small or too large, would lead into discomfort. The duration and the typology of the group could vary, depending on the client and users (usually from three to six or twelve months, but actually we have been working with an open group for eighteen months). It is possible to work with an open group for two or three years. There are possible full immersion groups. The group must be coordinated and led by a psychotherapist. I work with a team of three colleagues who are experts in various forms of Art. In our work we use various forms of artistic mediation: basic elements of tango, performative theatrical techniques, sound, meditation, the use of colors and photography. All these forms of artistic mediation could be integrated with each other or could be used separately.

The thematic areas (representing the themes that must be gradually developed in hierarchical order) explored until now, have been: the actual experience of being (the individual recognizes the various emotions and actions characterizing his existence over time as his/her own); the co-perceiving Self and Others; the experience of shaping their own uniqueness by the appropriation of their own experience of being; the experience of setting the concrete relationship among the individual itself, the Others and the World. Each theme is treated using different artistic perspectives and instruments in order to better allow us to establish immediately a direct relationship with ourselves, with others and with the context. We work in a transversal way despite the different diagnoses and the personality styles, while considering their psychological and psychopathological aspects not only during the artistic part of the work session but also in the psychotherapeutic part. In our experience, in a session we have identified the following progressive steps: warm welcome; free verbalization; emotional attunement; bodily experiential work with various mixed forms of art; psychotherapeutic session; "emotional" relaxation.

The forms of artistic mediation that we have mainly used in the last year are the basic elements of tango and performative theatrical techniques.

Basic elements of tango

When the body moves through tango, everybody feels intense emotions that are traces of themselves and reveal themselves. Tango is not therapeutic in itself, but it is used as a therapeutic mediation. From this dance some basic elements (posture, walk, basic steps, improvisation, various techniques of hug, contact, e.t.c.) are taken. These elements become no longer the purpose, but the means by which a person could reflect on one's own way of being, of feeling emotions and of meeting the "other". Using tango's basic elements aims at offering a space of expression, knowledge and development

of The Self, and this is possible because through the movement, the body speaks and tells about its fears, anger, sadness, ambition, dreams and such like. The two dancing bodies are not empty shells without soul; they are living bodies, with experiences and stories. Psychotherapeutically speaking, tango has inside a lot of elements that are very useful: sympathy, fusion, evaluation, curiosity, desire, discomfort, seduction, tension. And again, through tango exercises it is possible to evaluate several psychological processes as the contact with the intimacy and emotions of the other, the self-perception of rigidity or softness, the feeling of being rejected, the communication without talking, the perception of manifold feelings related to different people, the feeling of being stable situated in a warm hug and so forth. Everything becomes the subject of exploration and analysis. Throughout the exercises taken from tango, used as instruments, we can access a living body for knowing its inner world. When we are working throughout this form of "art", the emotions are working: anxiety, uncertainty, feeling of the other's invasiveness, fear of negative judgment of others, jealousy, envy, courage, avoidance, disappointment, fear of bodily contact and so on. Experiencing basic elements of tango, each of us feels oneself in various ongoing situations, and we can see a correlation between bodily states and emotional states. Moreover, experiencing an emotion corresponds to perceiving a change in one's bodily state and this is the potential of art mediation that allows making tango a therapy. In this way we express through movements what words fail to communicate and we encourage a change from the "danced" experience. Here we would like to underline that our working methods are based only on the human material that comes from the experiencing that occurs in the work session. The psychotherapist helps the person to make sense of what is happening, so that - starting from this new self-knowledge - he can open up new possibilities of being oneself and living in a healthier, more balanced, more appropriate way.

This method begins with Federico Trossero, an Italian-Argentinian psychiatrist, tango dancer, who understands that tango could become an interesting instrument for the cure and the prevention of psychiatric, psychological and physical problems. He begins to practice his method with his psychiatric patients, and, having had a good result, he starts to develop and spread his method, publishing in 2006 his first book (*Tangoterapia. Una propuesta para elencuentro con uno mismo y con el otro*, Ediciones Continente, Buenos Aires). The first International Congress of Tango-therapy was held in Argentina, in 2008.

Performative theatrical techniques: Theatre of the Oppressed and Physical Theatre

Theatre of the Oppressed (*Teatro do Oprimido*, TdO) was founded in 1971, in Brazil, by Brazilian director and political activist Augusto Boal. It is a form

of popular theater, with the specific goal of dealing with local problems. Soon, it was used all over the country. In Europe, TdO expanded mainly to understand psychological problems, but it was also used as a rehearsal for social action and it still is. TdO was used first by workers, then by teachers and students; nowadays, also by artists, social workers, psychotherapists. More specifically, it is a rehearsal theater designed for people who want to learn ways of fighting back against oppression in their daily lives. In the Theater of the Oppressed, oppression is defined as a relation of domination and command that prohibits the oppressed from being who they are and from exercising their basic human rights. Consequently, the TdO is an interactive theater that encourages democratic and cooperative forms of interaction among participants. Theater is emphasized not as a spectacle but rather as a language designed to: 1) analyze and discuss problems of oppression and power; and 2) explore group solutions to these problems. Starting from the separation between actor (the one who acts) and spectator (the one who observes but is not permitted to intervene in the theatrical situation), the Theater of the Oppressed is practiced by "spect-actors" who have the opportunity to both act and observe, and who engage in self-empowering processes of dialogue that help foster critical thinking. The theatrical act is thus experienced as conscious intervention, as a rehearsal for social action rooted in a collective analysis of shared problems of oppression.

In our work we take from TdO some techniques able to explore the interiority of the person in order to bring out and bring into the scene the oppressors that act into themselves (internal oppressors). These oppressors could have been in the past a real person (or real situation), internalized by the protagonist and now hidden in his head in the form of images of prohibition, terror, impotence, etc. The techniques aim to bring out these conflicts so that the protagonist can recognize them and face them theatrically, but also the other members of the psychotherapeutic group can work and work out to fight against these impediments. In this way, these TdO exercises become therapeutic because they help the protagonist of the scene and the spectators to improve in self-analyses, in interpersonal relationships, and strategies that can lead to the resolution of conflicts. And this happens by seeing the situation lived by the participants; by analyzing the root causes of the situation; and by acting to change the situation. All the techniques are based on an initial story of the protagonist followed by the construction of images/scenes proposed by him and /or by the spectators and subsequent improvisations in a kaleidoscope of relationships and plans (real, symbolic, fantastic, grotesque plans and so on) that allow a rich exploration of suggestions. It is possible that members of the group are called to replace the original protagonist and thus identify themselves with the 'oppressed' in order to open different dialogues on treated topics. Every proposed

solution is brought into the scene to spur the patients to imagine and experience themselves in different roles.

Physical Theatre (PT) could be defined as a form of theatre that puts emphasis on movement rather than dialogue and the human body at the heart of the story telling process. The movements are used in a stylized and representational way. It is a form of art whose dramatic potential permits to explore complex aspects of human relationships. Physical Theatre attempts to find the most appropriate movement method to communicate in ways that are relevant to the audience. PT goes beyond verbal narrative, incorporating physical elements on a level, at least equal, to verbal elements. The base of PT is the idea that the gestures can integrate complex thoughts, not explaining words through movements, but illuminating the audience by expressing what words cannot say. Words and bodywork are combined to express what is sometimes difficult to put into words.

The Physical theatre's main techniques that we use in group-psychotherapy includes simple abstract movements, gestural work (amplification/simplification of gesture), floor work (i.e., rolls, slides ...), contact work, uncontrolled movements, movements based on impulse, everyday acts, violent and provocative movements. The importance of the act is only in what it is clearly communicated in itself. Bringing these movements into the psychotherapy session is necessary when a patient has chosen not to speak or it is important as a complement to a word he had chosen to speak. Moreover, we could choose PT elements as a metaphor for some other psychical transformations or to communicate the deeper meditations. It is clear that movements cannot substitute speech but movements can betray the lies hidden behind our words.

Working with images

In figure 1 we can see an obsessive patient. During the first session he says clearly: Nobody must touch me! In the following sessions we have chosen to work physical contact mediated by music and basic elements of tango. After 3 sessions now he can be touched through an embrace, even though not so warm. In the fourth session he searches for a contact through a finger. In A's case the work based on physical has been the vehicle for a deeper work on the emotional contact and on the emotional perturbation that made him previously feel defeated. So, through this newly acquired kinaesthetic and emotional awareness, a process of personal insight, where the word has collected the meaning of the bodily and emotional work just experienced, has been activated.

Figure 2 is extremely interesting because here we can see how an obsessive young man outlines his self-portrait on the mirror. The self-portrait on glass obtained by closing an eye, reveals how you see yourself and how you feel. Drawing on the mirror he bisects his face with a line, revealing his inner

dissociation into two parts: cognitive and emotional. This phenomenon of dissociation of the Self into two parts, artistically expressed with bisecting lines, is a phenomenon that we regularly observe in obsessive patients.



Figure 1. Three following steps during the work with an obsessive patient. Three steps of the psychotherapeutic process in which we can observe a progressive opening to bodily contact. At the beginning he feels an aversion to physical contact, but, as we can see in the third part, he is ready for physical contact



Figure 2. The self-portrait of an obsessive young man. Here we can observe the phenomenon of dissociation of the Self into two parts, cognitive and emotional, artistically expressed with bisecting lines, which we regularly see in obsessive patients

In figure 3 using the same technique aforementioned, we can see how a depressed patient outlines the features of his face. All the lines of the face are marked to indicate a hollow face, the palpebral fissure and the oral fissure are downwards, the forehead is corrugated, quite thoughtful. The whole face expresses deep sadness. Facial features that the patient tried to hide.



Figure 3. the self-portrait of a depressed man. Despite his attempt to hide his depression in daily life, all the lines of his face are marked and downwards



Figure 4. Young woman with low self-esteem during a PT work. Working with a trainer, and using a shawl, he gradually expresses a growing anger



Figure 5. Two examples of performative theatrical techniques. The upper part of the picture shows the contact through smell and touch. The lower part is an example of floor work



Figure 6. Example of co-perceiving Self and Other. Feminine hands touch each other

Figure 4 shows us a young woman, a professional dancer, without psychiatric illness, whose problem is low-esteem that, during a PT work, with a trainer, using a shawl, gradually expressed a growing anger. In that moment the shawl becomes an instrument for the fight and the challenge that the young woman tries to engage. After this experience we discussed about what happened.

In figure 5 we can see two examples of performative theatrical technique. In detail, these movements are taken from PT techniques.

Figure 6 and figure 7 are remarkable examples of co-perceiving Self and Other. These figures show profound experiences of touching during the session of therapy in which we use basic elements of tango. Here two bodies dialogue with each other, two bodies learn to know and recognize each other through a deep communication. In figure 6 feminine hands touch each other. In figure 7 two elderly people, two absolute strangers, a man and a woman, express through the characteristics of the embrace, such a tight and intense physical contact that allows transcending the physical appearance and generating a deep inter and intrapersonal non-verbal communication rich in emotions.



Figure 7. Example of co-perceiving Self and Other. Two absolute strangers express through an embrace, an intense bodily contact

Feedback

Contact is the core of our journey. There are many forms of contact which we translate into experience. Sometimes a picture of what is being experienced whether known or unknown, predictable or unpredictable appears on a person's face. We use bright and cheerful, sad and desolate colors, though all lively and able to express feelings. Being with yourself in the here and now in touch with the other (a text written by S. a bipolar woman, aged 38, after a number of group sessions).

A deep experience, an intense work, being in a room all together and not separated in a loneliness used as a form of arrogance; a useful way to crack our fragile shell (a text written by A. a depressed man, aged 52, after a number of group sessions).

S. (obsessive prone style of personality, aged 24) at the end of her group-psychotherapeutic path, dedicated these lines to her inner journey mates:

To all of you who seemed to me from the first day, people and only people, feeling like a stranger and confused when I looked at you;

To all of you who accepted and welcomed me with a glance;

To all of you who through that glance granted me your world and gave me the possibility to grant you mine;

To all of you who didn't wipe away my tears immediately, but you handled them together with yours.

To all of you who walked barefoot with me in that room, to who was shy, to who walked towards freedom with open arms, to who was blind-folded and scared, to who stood still perhaps forever;

To all of you who rescued me from the dark and awakened me, without asking for anything;

To all of you who taught me how to break down prejudice and rediscover my heart as yours;

To all of you who showered me with energy and hope lifting me up, when I needed it;

To all of you who, as guardian of pain and fear, know how to respect and caress the pain and fear of others;

To all of you who, unconsciously, are changing my life and every single story and glance of whom I will treasure inside of me forever.

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