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# viewpoint

## Therapeutic Impact of Public Art Exhibits During COVID-19

Susan Devine

### Abstract

*During the unprecedented time of COVID-19, one art therapist noticed that her clients created images expressing their loneliness. To foster a sense of community catharsis, the art therapist worked with her clients to create an art display at a public mall to enable the general population to receive secondary therapeutic support for their own feelings of isolation and depression during the pandemic. Such use of a therapeutic art exhibition promoted a sense of connection and understanding.*

**Keywords:** Social isolation; pandemic; art therapy exhibit; response art

Early in 2020, my clients began showing signs of stress related to COVID-19. Their emotional responses to the pandemic became thematic and overshadowed the individual work I had been doing with them prior to this shared experience. Elizabeth (all names have been changed to pseudonyms), age 16, said of her art (Figure 1):

Because of COVID-19, I haven't been able to go to school on a regular basis, see friends and family or participate in activities in the way that I'm used to. All of the changes over the past year have made me feel overwhelmed and stressed. My artwork shows the accumulation of all the feelings that I have experienced during the pandemic. The single tear rolling down the face of the girl in the watercolor holds all of the fear, sadness, frustration, and loneliness that I believe everyone has felt at some point this year.

Another client yearned to see people's faces again as she looked forward to the day the world would not have to regularly wear masks. And still another adolescent

shared her extreme anxiety about tele-video platforms for school, having to stare at her image all day long in light of how much she despised the way she looked. Several clients grieved the loss of physical contact with relatives who were locked away in nursing homes. Charlie, age 58, shared, "This image illustrates my feelings about my brother who is in a lockdown in his memory care facility. Due to his state of dementia, and his inability to comprehend the pandemic visiting restrictions, he does not have the cognitive ability to understand why we are not coming to see him" (Figure 2).

On reviewing the art created in individual sessions about how COVID was affecting their lives, I speculated that individuals who were able to freely and safely express their feelings of depression and loss of social interaction would fare slightly better than the segment of the population who had no safe place to process their pain and suffering. Banerjee and Rai (2020) reflect that the modern world has never before seen such drastic social restriction resulting in a "penetrating feeling of loneliness" (p. 525) that "has literally crushed the wings of unlimited social interaction" (p. 526). These issues caused me to wonder how an exhibition of client art might affirm my client's feelings and others who were experiencing the same emotions, frustration and pain due to the isolation of the pandemic shutdown.

To foster a sense of community catharsis, I spoke with clients about the purpose and goal of an art exhibit. Those who wanted to participate wrote artistic statements that were displayed alongside their art giving voice to their image as it related to their feelings about the pandemic. Each participant gave their written informed consent to use their art images for the purpose of exhibition and publishing. All names were changed to protect client confidentiality. The end result was about 30 client images displayed in an intimate gallery space in my office where my clients could see that they were not alone as they viewed others' artistic expressions.

Feelings of isolation and depression were common to most participants. Sarah, age 12, shared her personal suffering with her image entitled, "Mental Health Going Down." In her marker drawing, Sarah drew a house and wrote "SLAM" by the closed door. She emphatically expressed her frustration, "My depression has gotten worse

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since the lockdown during COVID-19. People need to see other people! Being alone is NOT going to help!”. Still another adolescent reflected feeling sad, lonely, and scared as she depicted herself crying (Figure 3). Mucci et al. (2020) warned mental health professionals to be prepared for the long-term effects of COVID-19 in the general population. They predict that the mental health field will face a “parallel pandemic” of an array of debilitating psychiatric disorders, including an uptick of suicides (p. 63). In 2022, these predictions were particularly notable. As an antidote to their pain, individuals reflected that



Figure 1. *A Lonely Tear* (2020), Watercolor

viewing the show was a cathartic and therapeutic process for them, as they related to others’ pictorial depictions of how the pandemic had affected their lives. Many clients were pleasantly surprised that their feelings regarding COVID isolation were similar to others in my practice.

## Community Exhibit

In the days that followed, several clients encouraged me to search for a larger and more public venue so that the images could provide a form of therapy to the general population during this unprecedented time. According to Andrus (2020), “moving stories out of the private into the public can be transformative and impactful” (p. 175). After one call, the Eden Prairie Center Mall in Eden Prairie, Minnesota provided a large space to display the COVID artwork. A local cable television network also covered the art show, validating the importance of coming together during a crisis and allowing time and space to process a shared life experience. For two months, mall visitors took time to consider the artworks and to read the artists’ descriptions that accompanied each piece (Figure 4). Many viewers provided verbal and written feedback to the organizers. Most comments and responses revealed that the forum and artworks resonated emotionally with them.

The visitors’ reactions to the art show impressed upon me the powerful therapeutic impact that images created in art therapy can have on communities. Ioannides (2016) reflects that art therapists, in collaboration with galleries, may use art exhibitions for the purpose of emotional and

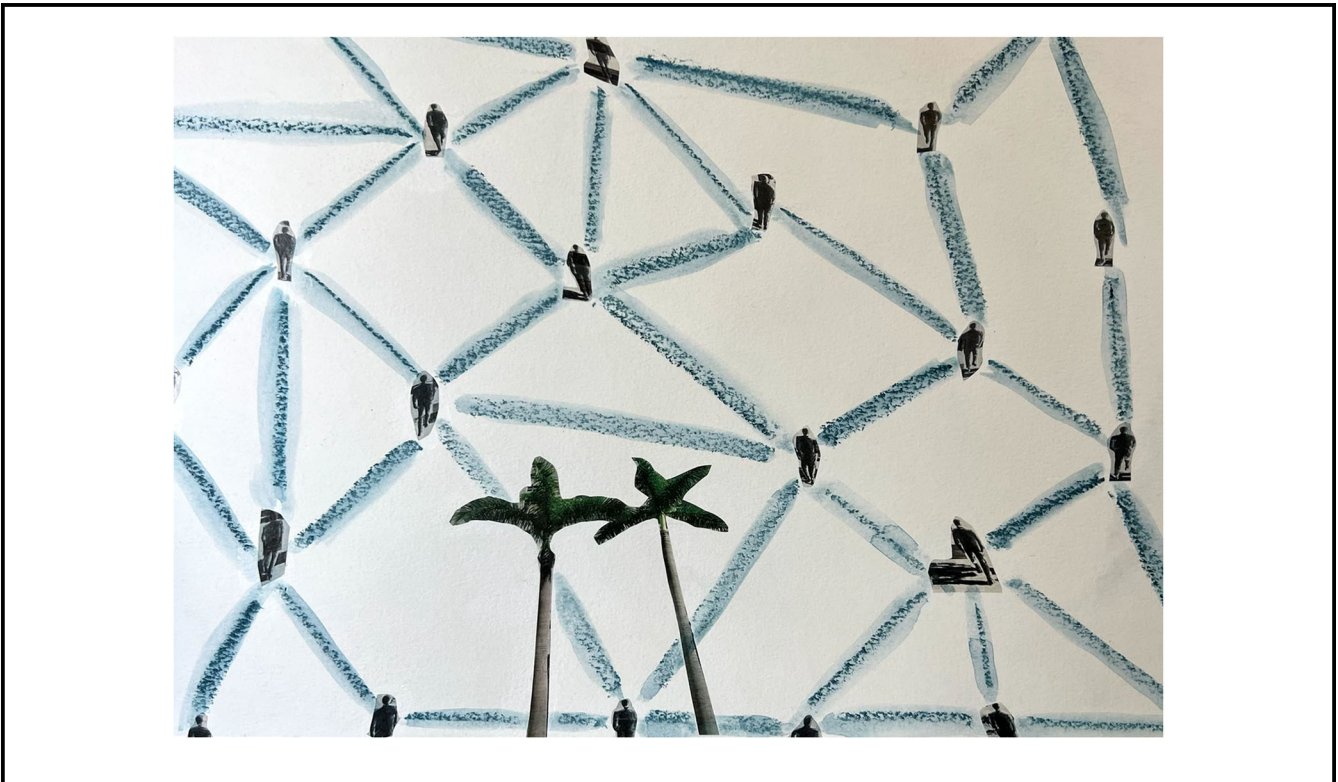


Figure 2. *6 Feet Apart* (2020), Watercolor, Oil Pastels and Collage



Figure 3. COVID Loneliness (2020), Markers on Paper



Figure 4. Public COVID Art Therapy Exhibit (2021)

social development of the viewers. She postulates that because museums are filled with a large array of art, visitors are apt to feel symptomatic relief as they relate to the images being witnessed.

Using art created in actual art therapy sessions, rather than art in museums or galleries, may produce an even more powerful healing effect. Andrus (2020) noticed a three-fold benefit for art therapy participants who shared their art as it related to an experience they had in common. Displaying their art therapy images in the community art exhibition decreased their sense of isolation while, at the same time, increased their feelings of validation to the point of creating new personal meaning. Even though the visitors to the COVID art exhibit were not necessarily in therapy, they received a *therapeutic* experience by immersing themselves in emotional depictions about a common life experience, the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Community and Viewer Impact

Many visitors to the mall exhibit acknowledged the power of the art images. Andrus (2020) also reflected in her own art therapy exhibit that the process of witnessing the art in the exhibit was a cathartic experience as the images helped viewers connect to their own feelings. This prompted me to provide tables and drawing materials for the public to express their own private pain and suffering in the form of art. Visitors were encouraged to post their images on a large display board in the public space, which they eagerly did. Huddled around tables, they created and shared their COVID responses, much like a group art therapy experience. Betts et al. (2015) notes, "Inviting exhibit visitors to reflect on their experiences through the creation of art that is focused on their emotional response can inspire empathy [and] lead to new insights" (p. 23). One viewer who created art in response to the exhibit said, "Just putting my feelings out there on the page allowed me to name my frustrations about COVID and feel a sense of peace because I see that others share my emotions."

As Moon (2016) noted, "Art-based group processes can be used to enhance participants' sense of community" (p. ix). Groups formed naturally in the safety of the exhibit, as the art on the walls gave them permission to freely express their own feelings about COVID, both verbally and through their images. All of this interaction took place organically, without a group leader. As Riley (2001) observed:

Groups are a minor miracle. A group of people come together and, gradually, their very disparate personalities and behaviors come together in some strange way that transforms the group into a personality, an entity in itself... When you add the art expressions to the mix, another mysterious amulet is part of the process. Now a group has voice, behavior, and eyes! (p. xviii)

The exhibit also provided a less obvious form of group therapy which an elderly visitor revealed to me. He pulled me aside to say that he felt so isolated that he started to walk the mall just to "be" with people even though he was amid strangers. He viewed the show every day for the two months it was displayed, as a reminder that he was not alone. In a sense, this man created his own "group therapy" experience within the comfort of this safe gallery space. He felt totally understood by the artists whose works hung on the wall, surrounding him.

## A Safe, Therapeutic Environment

Several other authors who have explored the psychological benefits of providing art therapy in museums and art galleries have noted that the very nature of these non-traditional practice settings has caused a flattening effect in the hierarchy between the therapist and client, enabling participants to feel more relaxed, empowered, and socially included. Watson et al. (2021) stated, "This leveling of the potential power differential is enhanced by a sense of informality and human relating in these settings" (p. 137). Additionally, Chopra (2020) proposes that when art therapy takes place in a public museum or art gallery as opposed to a mental health clinic or hospital setting, "[t]he therapeutic relationship between client and therapist becomes more balanced and equal which is meant to empower the client in a novel manner by allowing them autonomy in their own treatment" (p. 72). These ideas are consistent with my observations from this exhibit. One visitor commented that she was less intimidated to visit an art exhibit where the "artists" were her peers, not professionals. Other viewers related so strongly to specific art images created by their peers that they claimed the images as their own by copying them. For example, Figure 3 represented one such often-reproduced image.

To further community therapeutic benefit of viewing images created in art therapy, after the COVID art therapy exhibit, I assembled another art show. "What My Anxiety Looks Like" was available for viewing from March 1 to July 1, 2022 in the same mall space. The success of these displays has led me to wonder about future exhibitions containing art therapy client imagery to help viewers process other common human experiences, such as depression, divorce, cancer, caring for elders, death, dying ... and the vast range of difficult challenges we are all sure to face.

## Conclusion

The pandemic has triggered many emotional challenges and the psychological fallout has been great. This social experiment of a therapeutic art show demonstrates the dynamic effect of viewing art images created around a common painful experience. I would propose that my clients benefited not only from creating images, but also from viewing many others' depictions of the same human experience. In addition, the community at large

was ministered to on a larger scale by viewing client art and by creating response art to express their own emotions regarding their COVID experience. Even for members of the population who do not have access to psychotherapy, the opportunity to view a public art exhibit that depicts common emotional challenges may render powerful therapeutic benefits.

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