

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Mandated Measures:
Seismic Shifts in the Discipline and Training of Art Therapy**

Ronald Lay

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Abstract

Confronted by catastrophic circumstances, such as the complexities instigated by COVID-19 and the global pandemic, art therapists naturally interpreted this as an opportunity to effectively evidence their resiliency, innovation, compassion and, indeed, their creativity. This article prioritises the practice and training of art therapy, and explores how the unprecedented circumstances we currently find ourselves in have needed the discipline to evolve in ways that ensures the continuation of the overall integrity, best practices, ethics, and expected standards. This discourse champions the art in art therapy by highlighting creativity as a core tenet of this resilient discipline.

Keywords:

COVID-19, arts-based response, art therapy, art therapy training, Singapore

Stepping back to take a breather from this pandemic, I stoically embraced Art Therapy OnLine's invitation to consider the subject *COVID-19: Creativity or Collapse* and penned thoughts to paper related to my interrelated roles of art therapy practitioner, educator and artist. Progressing a purposeful reflection on the global pandemic and the significant impact, if not seismic shifts, this has had on the discipline and training of art therapy, I created artwork (Figure 1, Figure 2). In terms of my leanings on this subject, I uphold the core tenets of art therapy and unreservedly side with creativity (Lay, 2020, McNiff, 2019).

Like the rest of the world, my personal and professional lives have been affected by COVID-19 in unexpected ways. Given the unbelievable persistence of the pandemic itself, established routine, structure and ways of being have been replaced with prolonged periods of uncertainty and unpredictability. However, gradual adaptation and a morphing of our new experienced realities have been needed in order for art therapists and trainees to resume practice and training. This augmented reality combined with mandated measures and new laws are resulting in much of what we typically would have achieved through face-to-face interaction, to be transitioned to practice and training being conducted at a distance, through personal protective barriers, through online platforms and/or through a hybrid combination of each.

The litany of restrictions imposed by this unforgiving disease has seemed to infect all aspects of art therapy practice and in training it has resulted in additional layers of obstacles but also opportunities. Postgraduate art therapy training programs, for example, that have been approved by national or international professional authorities and/or regulatory agencies must ensure the highest level of adherence to strict training standards, best practices and ethics. Typically, this is achieved through rigorous planning, delivery, monitoring and review, however, during the pandemic practice and training were severely disrupted. For example, access to client populations and placement settings were quite limited, and the delivery of training sessions during a national lockdown, the 'circuit breaker' in Singapore, needed to be shifted online. Online training and online practice require additional layers of ethics and ethical considerations. As such, it was essential that these were effectively addressed to not only safeguard the best interests of clients but also the integrity of the profession itself.

Although stressful at first, viable solutions were secured and trainees were able to successfully complete their semester with us. At this juncture, art therapists, educators and trainees can either take a catastrophising stance or, they can embrace a full range of opportunities that are presenting themselves as the mandated measures and pandemic persist. Admittedly, I was overwhelmed by the responsibilities that I have as the Program Leader of a postgraduate art therapy training in Singapore, however, my team and I also recognize that the circumstances we find ourselves in are actually a critical juncture for art therapy in terms of its development and survival (Lay, 2020).

Planning for the next academic year began with some trepidation but this was short-lived. The teaching team drew on the strengths of each other and were encouraged by the creativity demonstrated by the trainees (many of whom found employment upon graduation) and by the local practitioners who re-invented their practice by integrating teletherapy methodologies into their services (Choe, and Carlton, 2019, Lay, 2020). Admittedly, we also embraced the evolving opportunities that surfaced as a way to proactively integrate technologies into the training we provide, and to recalibrate our own perspectives on what innovative and context-specific art therapy practice and training can be.

Learning curves have been steep, however, challenges have been embraced and re-imagined as opportunities to enhance, expand and evolve practice and training. As such, technologies have been brought into our classroom, our recent graduates and alumni are mentoring our trainees and providing workshops and presentations on their innovative practice, and we are increasingly interacting with larger communities outside our region through virtual means (Choe, and Carlton, 2019, Lay, 2020). Indeed, creativity is leading to innovation, to new cultivation of ideas and I am confident that these will contribute to the larger practice and training paradigms internationally (Backos, and Carolan, 2018, Choe and Carlton, 2019, Lay, 2020).

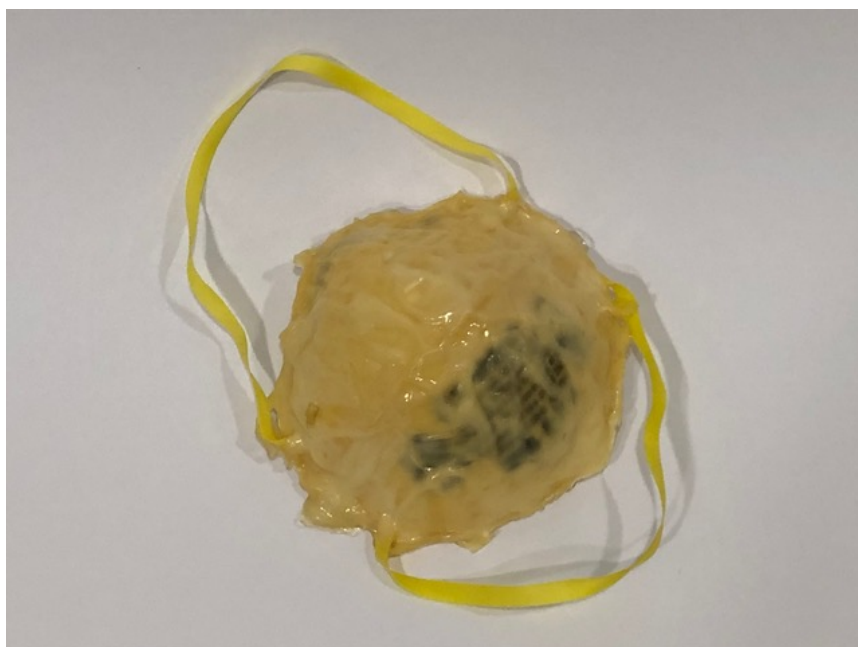


Figure 1: Ronald P.M.H. Lay (2020), *Augmented Breathing Apparatus I*, mixed media, dimensions variable

Engaging in my own art, art making and reflective processes have been a necessary and critical strategy in addressing my personal responses to the pandemic which also contributed to perseverance and the sustaining of my own mental health (Carr, 2020, Lay, 2020, McNiff, 2019). Acknowledging my own bodily sensations, reactions and having the need to be grounded, as reinforced by the inundation of non-stop news stories, online trainings, including webinars and presentations on embodiment, mental health and strategies to deal with the pandemic, I turned to a face mask to structure and begin my

arts-based inquiry into the subject of *COVID-19: Creativity or Collapse* (Figure 1). The mask that I re-purposed disrupts and distorts communication; at this stage it is debilitated and rendered ineffectual. I contemplated the long-term effects that wearing face masks may have, yet realized that until further notice, this will be our reality for some time to come.

Mandated to wear face masks outside of our homes, as part of instituted and strict safety measures and protocols (Lay, 2020, Saunders et al., 2020), I felt stifled, awkward and uncomfortable. This only intensified while trying to engage and interact with my postgraduate trainees throughout scheduled face-to-face lessons. This further extended into our virtual presentations by invited online guest lecturers while the students and I participated through a range of on-site and online spaces. Communication was difficult at best given reverberations caused by the face masks, a difficulty to gauge tone and volume while speaking, and challenges with blocked views of one's mouth and other facial movements while speaking (Saunders et al., 2020).



Figure 2: Ronald P.M.H. Lay (2020), *Self-Portrait: Augmented Breathing Apparatus I*, unmanipulated digital photograph, dimensions variable

Sporting a face mask for extended periods of time throughout the day, I considered my personal freedoms, the instituted mandated measures to help combat the spread and infection rates of COVID-19, and the interplay of the physical, biological, metaphorical and symbolic needs and associations related to breathing, breath work and again, of being grounded. From professional and therapeutic perspectives, I pondered many questions related to effective communication, mis-communication, modes of communication, and how communication within art therapy practice and training have needed to evolve to address the realities of safe distancing.

In art therapy, art therapists often support the importance of staying with the image with the client, the creator, the artist (McNiff, 2019). As such, I decided to stay with my image by briefly wearing my augmented mask during a series of self-portraits (Figure 2). The material used in my art will eventually fade and give way to a new reality and new experiences (Hinz, 2013; McNiff, 2019). With this in mind I make further associations to what is organically transpiring in our art therapy training. This mental health and visual discipline, typically heralded as a hybrid discipline by those within the profession, really has taken on new trajectories leading to further discovery and new ways of training and practicing (Backos and Carolan, 2018; Choe and Carlton, 2019). These enhancements can be viewed as healthy developments and the emerging art therapy practitioners can be effectively described as change agents and perhaps the educators as future-proofing the employability of art therapy graduates equipped with new professional competencies (Backos and Carolan, 2018; Choe and Carlton, 2019).

Art therapy practice and training continues to respond to this global pandemic in ways that are transformative and creative (Carr, 2020; Lay, 2020; McNiff, 2019; Potash et al., 2020). As a discipline, we've had to plunge into the pandemic to proactively find and evolve new strategies to sustain ethical and best practices that meaningfully address the mental health of those we provide services to. We have been stretched to the limits, however, art therapy is resilient, responsive and ever-changing. Art therapists and trainees have risen to the occasion to champion a modality that will not only continue to survive current circumstances but will evolve the discipline in ways that will reinforce the human spirit, sustain community, and that will prioritise art, art making, and of course, the creativity inherent in each of us.

About the Author

Ronald Lay leads the postgraduate art therapy training in Singapore. He has an extensive practice-based career in forensic mental health, and has varied research interests that has led to international consultation, collaborative projects, and leadership. He has designed, facilitated and supervised multiple collaborative arts, culture and mental health overseas experiential trips. Rounding out his professional pursuits is his passion for creating artwork which tends to be constructive and conceptual.

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