

BOOK REVIEW

The Arts and Psychotherapy

Shaun McNiff

(Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1981, 232 pages, \$19.75)

Among the several books now available to anyone who is looking for an informed survey of the field of art therapy, McNiff's work stands out not only as useful and intelligent but also as particularly appealing. It is an exhilarating book because it is pervaded by the spirit of health rather than of illness and by the total involvement of a person of many talents, who leaves the imprint of his lively presence on every page.

The central theme of the book is the overcoming of hampering dichotomies. Therefore the best way of giving an account of its content is by describing the consequences of this strategy of liberation. Tellingly enough, McNiff's guiding image is that of the shaman, the healer in aboriginal societies. The shaman is in the enviable position of being so thoroughly integrated with his culture that the community's trust and beliefs endow him with his healing powers. Not as a specialist enshrined in his office but as the agent of a collective endeavor, the shaman faces his ailing fellow tribesman as a neighbor whose inner upheavals are to be acted out in the mind and body of the healer himself.

McNiff approaches therapeutic work as an artist, that is, as a person who by his very vocation does not focus primarily upon the psychological obstacles within himself but views them as barriers to be overcome in the interest of the artistic task. In fact, those conflicting mental tendencies may become the very subject matter to be dealt with and resolved in the work. The author is grounded in the principles of psychotherapy, but he sees the distinctions between art and therapy

as one of the dichotomies to be overcome. Psychotherapy functions as an art, and art is always therapeutic.

The approach described and advocated in this book is called "expressive art therapy"—an awkward term, to be sure, but one not easy to replace by a better one. The meaning is clear. The "expressive art therapist" is one who treats the characteristics of his clients and their art work not as intellectually defined symptoms. Rather he views the directly perceivable properties of body, voice, behavior, and art product as expressive manifestations of the person's state of mind. McNiff's way of reading expression is far from the methods of those who, in the words of T.S. Eliot, "describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry, observe disease in signatures, evoke biography from the wrinkles of the palm and tragedy from fingers." He is averse to spotting a penis in every chimney. He rather takes his clues from the revealing dynamics of the body in action or dance and from the emanation of such expressive dynamics in the rhythm of music or in the strokes of the painter's brush. In fact, more often than not, he goes beyond detached observation. He responds by his own expressive behavior and interacts with the client in a shared performance.

Given this way of viewing art work with the client as a life situation rather than a set of scheduled therapeutic sessions, McNiff has come to revise his priorities, which originally made him give preference to drawing, painting, and modeling. He says illuminating things about

these pictorial media. They are able to create objects that preserve symbolic images of mental conflicts and embodiments of fear and love and that manifest emerging order. But the intercourse between the client and his art object may tend to perpetuate an asocial isolation and therefore is best combined with other media. Quite consistently McNiff now gives priority to bodily movement, that is, to dance and drama, and observes that the unfolding of physical behavior has a liberating influence upon work with the more object-related media. A particularly convincing case study to this effect is the one reported on pp. 119 ff.

Inevitably this approach has made the author extend his own work to all the principal media and to see them as interrelated. The media become aspects of a unitary activity, each contributing its own particular virtues; and the therapist finds himself drawn into practicing the various media himself. He develops from a painter into an "artist" in the more universal sense of the term. Thus his chapters on the performing and the visual arts, on music and poetry, are enlivened by an empathy that derives from personal participation.

An artist so fully aware of the "language" transmitted through the spontaneous expression

of visual, aural, and kinesthetic form can be expected to center his work with clients upon perceivable appearance. He often begins by discussing with them the tangible properties of their work and alerts them thereby to the expression inherent in shape, color, sound, or movement. Once given a chance, such expression can be depended upon to evoke in the mind of the client deep-seated emotional analogies and thereby produce responses that would not have been obtained by attacking more directly the psychological "problems" to be treated.

All sections of McNiff's book are imbued with the rich experience of a therapist who practices what he preaches. He is the founder of the Institute for the Arts and Human Development at Lesley College in Cambridge (Mass.). At the same time, his presentation has none of the stifling narrowness of mere shoptalk. McNiff sees his work in the context of broad cultural and historical perspectives, and there are reverberations everywhere of the many things he has read and seen. Readers will receive many an unexpected bonus in addition to seasoned professional advice.

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