



Betts, D. and Huet, V. (eds)

Bridging the Creative Arts Therapies and Arts in Health

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This is a timely and welcome volume edited by two leading figures in the field of Arts Therapy. It provides an overview of international developments over the last three decades in creative arts therapies and the related field of ‘arts in health’. The introduction from Betts and Huet addresses progress in policy, guidelines and practice in the United States and the United Kingdom. Individual chapters range widely in describing initiatives from Australia, UK, USA, Greece, South Africa, India, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. Readers of this journal may be disappointed, however, to find there are no references to the excellent work going on in the wider Nordic region (see Jensen et al., 2020; Bonde and Theorell, 2018; the work of the *Nordic School of Arts and Health*, NSAH, 2023).

All chapters consider collaborations between art therapists (i.e., visual artists, musicians, dancers, actors and other creative people who are also accredited therapists) and creative artists and ‘cultural practitioners’ working collaboratively in a wide range of settings. These include community venues, museums, galleries, educational establishments, secure hospitals for offenders with psychiatric conditions, and health and social care institutions. A wide range of health issues is covered, including veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress, recovering drug users, people with mental health challenges and people with neurological conditions such as dementia and Parkinson’s. A further theme considered throughout the book is the impact of COVID-19, and the contributions made by the arts therapies and creative activities delivered online in helping people to cope with the negative social and health consequences of the pandemic. In this short review, I want to focus on two contributions I found particularly inspiring, while affirming that every chapter contains invaluable insights into the practical challenges of creative engagement for health and wellbeing.

For me, Chapter 6, on the Creative Forces® programme in the United States, is the most moving contribution. The authors illustrate the power of visual arts, music and dance in supporting veterans living with the physical and psychological scars of war. They also demonstrate the importance of a ‘continuum’ between clinical creative arts therapies, as a form of treatment for individuals, and wider community involvement in opportunities for veterans and their family members to be creative. The scale and reach of this programme is truly impressive, as is the commitment to continual consultation with communities and

participants in the planning and evaluation of programmes. I first became aware of the role of creative arts therapies in supporting US veterans from a remarkable feature in *National Geographic* magazine (Stone, 2015), describing the work of Melissa Walker, an art therapist, supporting veterans in creating masks to represent the inner psychological pain caused by the traumas of war. Melissa is one of the authors of Chapter 6, and Chapter 11 on ‘exhibitions and immersive spaces as therapeutic settings’, but the harrowing artwork produced by veterans is not described or illustrated. Through the *National Geographic* website, it is possible to listen to testimonials from veterans who talk about their creative work and the impact it had on themselves and their close family members.

Chapter 10 provides an inspiring account of work with recovering drug users through the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens (EMST). This is, of course, only one example of the many outreach programmes now run by cultural sector institutions and museums throughout the world with the express intention of promoting community well-being and health (see McKay, 2022, for further examples). What is striking about this chapter, however, is that it reports on the lessons learned from over five years of collaborative working with the Drug Addiction Treatment Unit, within the State Psychiatric Hospital of Attica. The work arose directly from the appreciation of curatorial staff within the National Museum of its location in the centre of Athens:

A challenge for use has also been EMST’s location in proximity to the center of Athens, where poverty, drug abuse, and trafficking are serious social issues. It has been of great importance to the museum to creative initiatives and take an active position to engage with such social phenomena (...) We believe that (...) museum programs can make a positive contribution to the everyday life of former drug addicts and marginalized individuals. This can be of significant complementary and alternative assistance to their therapy and social reintegration. (p.196)

This quotation expresses admirably the conviction of the authors of this chapter and is a leitmotif and article of faith for the entire book.

The work with recovering drug users is delivered collaboratively with EMST curators, artists, and art therapists inside and outside the museum, and supports participants in engaging with art on display and with producing their own artwork. The need for a careful approach in developing relationships and trust is emphasised. Gradually participants began to “open up and reveal themselves without fear or hesitation” (p.198), and their involvement in creating exhibitions of their work served to “boost participants’ self-esteem and confidence.” Displays of their work also served to promote “public awareness towards the crucial problem of drug abuse at a time of economic and social crisis” (p.199). Sadly, as with Chapter 6, we do not see the work of participants, or hear from them directly, but paintings included in the EMST 2021 exhibition for World Day Against Drugs can be seen on their website (EMST, 2021).

In the Foreword to this excellent collection, Lord Howarth of Newport (UK House of Lords) says of arts-based work in health and wellbeing, “The benefits to participants/clients are well evidenced: evaluation results and participants testimonies reflect the significant and lasting positive impact on their mental health and quality of life” (p.7). Reading this book, it is hard not to believe that participants in all the programmes described gained benefits for their wellbeing, at least in the short-term. Whether benefits of engagement with the arts are significant and lasting for people with serious health and social challenges, however, remains to be demonstrated.

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