

Art materials

Materials of the creator

The field Art Therapy constantly fluctuates between the material and the spiritual domains. It is an Alchemy in which the material represents the spiritual and vice versa, simultaneously. Nevertheless, little has been written about the spiritual facet of materials used in therapy or otherwise. Materials are rarely mentioned in their own right, for their own inherent qualities, except in the context of individual case studies. Of course, writing on this matter is no simple task. Writing about completed artworks in terms of composition, colors or contents, is far more straightforward than focusing on the raw materials from which they were created.

After all, what is there to write about a globule of oil paint, besides the way it depicts the glistening light on the dress of a woman running down a hill, her parasol in hand? [1] The image of the woman engulfed in light is much more enticing than discussing the actual illusion behind it, created by mere oil stains. How did Monet manage to transform an opaque & oily paste into vivid images of transparency, light and even breeze, wrapping a woman's dress around her legs? What did he actually do to create glistening light out of dense paste? That magic, created with the stroke of a brush soaked in matter, is what fascinates me so.

Observing the creative process of artists, students, clients and myself, I have learned that materials wordlessly succeed in revealing much of one's soul. This essay was born from a lack of texts that focus on the spiritual and mental essence of matter. I will present a tool I've developed, called "The Tree Metaphor", which enables introspection into the entire creative process – beginning with material in its rawest state, through its selection and unique utilization, and finally to its culmination into meaningful structure and content. The case examples presented throughout this work are illustrations of clients, students and skilled artists. The term "creator" is used for anyone working with materials, whether they are children or accomplished artists, clients or students. As will be shown, the deeply spiritual essence of materials greatly affects all creators, regardless of how skilled they are.

What substance am I now?

As artist, teacher and art therapist, I find that focusing on which material would best express the creator's most prominent feeling, gratifies a profound need and paves the path for a creative process that had hitherto been blocked or stifled.

Pondering this issue at a time of crisis led me wandering along stretches of beach with my camera. I was unconsciously compelled to photograph holes and burrows in the sand, dug out by children. Studying that matter with a camera lens resulted in hundreds of slides showing sand-dug pits. I hadn't considered it art. I was merely listening to the art-therapist in me. "Trust the body, be attuned to the hands - when and what they choose to photograph". This gave rise to the exhibit called "Pit of Memory & Oblivion", www.nonaorbach.com shown in the early 1990s. Three projectors were hung on the Museum's ceiling, projecting images of the photographed pits onto the floor. Some of the snapshots were augmented with sketching of animal-like images, herds or organic relics. They interchanged to the beat of the humming projectors. The audience was ushered into

the darkened hall and toured along the projected display of dugouts, in a visceral reenactment of a walk along a sandcastle-strewn beach. Perhaps they were recalling their own memories of playing in the sand. The pit as a metaphor for beginnings and endings, the rhythm of ocean waves in the beat of projectors and lights - all this depicted my emotional, mental framework on separation, death and metamorphosis.

This artwork is imbued with multitudinous layers of meanings, and I am continuously learning about myself through it. In the process of having a vague notion to photograph without a premeditated plan, I learned that the question “what matter presently suits me best?” or “which materials do I feel like using now?” is like a magic key. I had hit upon an accurate working tool. From then on I noticed more sharply how true this was for my clients as well: whenever the creator trusted his choice of material, something meaningful occurred. It does seem that Matter metaphorically reflects an inner, impartial truth.

Ever since then I keep returning to the issue of Materials as a starting point. One can safely ascertain that the choice of Matter is never coincidental. Why is a specific material selected? Why is it chosen at that particular time? How does its utilization reflect the creator’s inner world? The answers to these questions tend to shed light on the creator’s deepest emotional, mental realms. Even in cases where my client hadn’t dabbled in art since early childhood, or when we are still fairly new to each other, we are still able to jointly discover, at least after-fact, how accurately his materials express his emotions and state-of-mind. It seems that the selection of materials is often governed by unconscious processes rather than logic or conscious knowledge, and is therefore a real, impartial choice. Thus, no prior knowledge or experience in art is necessary; no matter how unaccustomed to artistic endeavors, the creator will always choose the best-suited Materials that reflect his innermost feelings and desires.

Moreover, even seasoned artists’ selection of materials is only partially conscious, reflecting their inner essence beyond style or intellectual processes. For example, Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), a German artist whose medical studies were curtailed by mandated military service, was severely wounded in WWII when his plane was shot down over Russia. Nearly frozen to death, he was found by villagers who nursed him back to life by wrapping him in oil-soaked blankets of felt. This experience profoundly affected the course of his life, as he consistently utilized those materials - oil and felt - throughout all his years of artistic creation. As I see it, Beuys’ choice of materials, even as an accomplished artist, is related first and foremost to his salvation by their means. They seemed to be, essentially, his “Life Substance”.

“Materials are at the very core of art; they facilitate the processes and their manipulation invokes all images and content.” (Orbach & Galkin, 1977). Materials tell us so much, even prior to composition, form or texture. Thus, if we attune ourselves to materials in their rawest state, we can enrich our participation and observation of the creative process itself and as such, of our clients’ very essence.

Art Therapy & the Studio

“The studio is a space that is organized in a convenient and modular fashion, enabling processes of creativity and growth...the studio possesses physical boundaries, inherently and consistently mapped. These boundaries award a sense of security for those working in their midst.” (Orbach & Galkin, 1977, p.25).

The starting point of the Art Therapy studio is the material environment: work tables,

easels, wall-space for hanging works, lighting, sinks, tools and materials. Anyone entering a studio can easily grasp how to work through the location and organization of materials, the positioning of the work space, the method for storage of completed works, etc. The art therapist conveys his own framework through the organization of objects and materials within a confined space. The studio's interior design and the way in which materials are stored and accessed, cultivate an invitation to engage in creative enactment. The process of preparing for artwork should be relatively simple, since a highly accessible studio environment resolves orientation difficulties and alleviates the client's anxiety. Initial activities are already spawned from personal choice: the client can choose to work in a standing or sitting position; at a large table in the center or far off in a corner. She can do as she pleases with all accessible materials and objects, as long as she doesn't harm herself, her surroundings or others in the process. The client is invited to paint, sculpt, mold, tear, cut and paste in an uninhibited atmosphere, unconditioned and free of directives. The dialogue between the client and her materials, the transformation that she affects in them and vice versa, witnessed by the therapist - this whole constellation goes underway. The process of artistic creation materially mirrors the mental, emotional process. However fundamentally different they are, both processes are reflected in each other.

Senses & Matter

The term "Matter" pertains to the material world that surrounds us; a world that is perceived via our senses - tactile, visual, auditory, olfactory & taste. The materials of the artist, art teacher & art therapist are tangible. So are, for example, water- paints, acrylics, oil-paints, dyes, glues, charcoal powders, clay, stones & wood. All these - oils, liquids, pastes, powders & chunks - are perceived through our senses. Every material found in the art studio is malleable by specific tools that change it. Wet paints are applied by brushes, hands, rags, sponges etc. Clay is sculpted with the aid of engraving and cutting tools. Every matter has its own unique physical and chemical traits. According to Alchemy and the concrete experience of artists, every material reflects its own unique spirituality. Thus, it follows that knowing each material individually, highlights its unique "personality" and deepens our therapeutic understanding. It is therefore important to discover, for example, what is unique about each of the materials found in the studio? What spiritual qualities are embodied in acrylics, or charcoal? How is working with water-based red paint different than working with an oil-based shade of red? What is unique about a pencil line, compared to a line drawn with a quill? One can also study the principles of the therapy studio's organization. How does the art therapist classify and arrange the abundance of materials at her disposal? What does she place where, and why? Which materials will she prefer to offer? And what meaning does the same material hold within different sessions?

In light of all this it seems difficult to differentiate between the material itself and its usage. What is significant about poster-paint in a jar, before the creator has embedded it with his own emotional, cultural baggage? It certainly exists in its pasty materiality, its shine, wetness and hue. But until used, its potentials remain dormant. The assignment of meaning beyond its rawness is thus only activated with the selections and actions of the creator. One should therefore preemptively ask: What is the spiritual significance of the various actions imposed on the matter? What psychic or emotional meaning is imbued in

actions such as kneading, cutting, sketching, smearing, hurling, engraving, etc.? What, for instance, is the difference between tearing paper and cutting it? What is distinctive about my way of tearing, compared to yours?

It is difficult to distinguish between the artwork and its materials, because prior to the work itself, material has only potentialities. On one hand, it embodies endless possibilities, but on the other hand, none of them are actualized. In this state one can only refer to material in terms of its chemical, physical and sensual qualities. Another reason for this difficulty lies in the meeting of material and action; once the action is carried out, it depicts a certain person at a certain point in time. The enormous potential inherent in the material becomes reduced to one specific manifestation. How, then, is it possible to bridge between both extremes (all possibilities versus one possibility), generalizing about the material in its entirety based on one private example? Reviewing a range of possibilities may be preferable to generalization, as it would encompass the diverse facets of the material in terms of its manipulation and therefore in terms of associated feelings and sensations. A phenomenological [2] account of all actions [3] performed on a material will undoubtedly reveal something about the artist's internal world at that point in time. The following case examples illustrate how materials are never chosen by coincidence but rather reflect a profound emotional choice. In the first example, a four year old girl uses poster paint in an unconscious emotional exploration. The second example pertains to Claude Monet, an accomplished, skillful, highly self-aware artist. Despite the obvious disparity between them, both examples illustrate the creator's intuitive & precise choice of materials according to his needs at that time. The young girl's work was documented by her art therapist, while Monet's creative process was analyzed after-fact by art historian James Elkins.

Case Example:

A four year old girl was referred to art therapy as she was not yet toilet-trained. This is our second session, so she is already familiar with the studio environment. She requests poster-paint. To her right is a side-table with paint-filled egg cartons, rags and a water-jar for cleaning brushes. She **chooses** a thick paintbrush, **loads** a huge glob of paint on it, and **hurls** several slabs onto a hanging canvas. Afterwards she **dips** the brush into another color, **without cleaning** it as she would in kindergarten. She **tries to pack** as much paint as possible onto the brush, which begins dripping on the floor. She **looks** at me. After a few paint-dips she **forcefully rinses** the brush, **clattering** it around in the water-jar, **jumping** up and down and **chanting** "What disgusting water! Poopy! Gross!" She **glances** at me. A bit of water spills on the floor. Once again, she **scans** my facial reaction. She lays the brush down, **scoops up** the water-jar with both hands and **tries to pour** its contents into the egg carton. She **glances** at me. She **releases** the jar. She **hits** the canvas with the paintbrush, **singing** and **dancing** around. The water in the jar is a murky brown color. I bring another, with fresh water, saying "Now you have brown water and clear water as well". She **holds** the fresh jar with both hands, **pours** some of it into the brown water and **announces**: "I'm mixing".

The highlighted verbs illustrate this child's story, her relation to primary substances and the intensive process of release that she undergoes: She combines "brown water" with "clear water", testing the boundaries of filth and cleanliness, figuring out where to put what, and enjoying primal self expression in safe surroundings. She monitors my reaction with her glances, perceiving that she is entitled to smear her hands and canvas, to mix

around and use “dirty” words without being reprimanded.

While at first it seemed like she would paint a picture, it soon became apparent that once she felt entitled to express herself freely, she moved into working with the paint in its primeval state. The material’s formless state and the way she used it, indicate that the child needs to further explore her boundaries, sense of control and guilt. She uses the emotional therapeutic space to explore the most primary substances of life, which she hadn’t yet exhausted. The presenting issue, of not relieving oneself in the designated area, is closely related - in substance (brown wet paste) and in form (an uncontrollable, dirtying action) - to the process of therapy within the studio. There is little difference between the action carried out in daily life and its emotional metaphor. The child thus begins a process of self investigation, socialization and sublimation.

Case Example:

In this example the artist Monet is considered from the perspective of art history scholar James Elkins (1999, p.17). Elkins’ book contains several colored snapshots of miniscule fragments from masterpieces – one of them being Monet’s, through which he studies the use of oil-paint, in the brush-strokes frozen on canvas, in the kinds of brushes used, in the layers of paint and in what emerges from them. Elkins notes that Monet’s work seems pretty straightforward to many, as though his forte was simply depicting specific moods and painting light. However Elkins, who had painted himself, set out to discover Monet by tracking his visceral act of painting rather than observing merely the end result. He identifies Monet’s need to create a canvas that in some sense emulates nature. His brush strokes are not aligned in one direction, but rather are like nature in that they’re multi-directional.

“The study of gestures reveals a Monet that I would not have suspected: to make paintings the way he made them, it is necessary to work roughly, with unexpected violence and then with sudden gentleness, and to keep turning the body against itself, so it never does quite what it wants to do – so it never falls into the routine of oval marks, all pelting down in one direction. The gestures tell the story of a certain dissatisfaction, and itchy chafing of the body against itself, of a hand that is impatient and deliberately a little out of control“ (p.17). It is interesting that even an erudite art historian such as Elkins, needed to actually use his own hands in order to fully comprehend Monet’s work. The process that he describes may be better grasped with the use of the Tree Metaphor.

The Tree Metaphor & the Therapeutic Process

The therapeutic process in the studio, with its various phases and complexity, can be likened to a tree. The roots, trunk and branches symbolize three states of material, paralleling three states of the creator’s being. The imagery of a tree will help us discuss the position and meaning of material throughout the process of artistic creation.

The Root

This is the condition in which material is in its raw state, before anything has been done to it. Pastes, clay and powders lay in their packaging. They are supposedly in a primeval state. [4] The creator is compelled to create something, but is yet unsure of what to make; there is a sense of vagueness, however deliberations are strewn with diminutive choices: the work space is chosen, the body’s positioning – standing, sitting; the hand reaches out, presumably by chance, towards a certain kind of paper, a box of acrylics or a chunk of clay. The platform is positioned on a particular side or angle; wide or narrow brushes –