

Differences and similarities between art therapy and alchemy:  
A theoretical inquiry about the processes of art therapy and alchemy

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## **ABSTRACT**

Differences and similarities between art therapy and alchemy: A theoretical inquiry about the processes of art therapy and alchemy

Priscilla Monge Vásquez

Art therapy and alchemy are two disciplines aimed to use materials to transform the human psyche. Although Carl Gustav Jung (1968) established interconnection between alchemy and psychotherapy, it appears there is no direct exploration of the transformation process of art supplies into artwork used in art therapy and the transformation of metals in alchemy. This theoretical study explores the definition of alchemy within the hermetic philosophy, followed by an examination of the art therapy literature written by Shaun McNiff, Bruce Moon, and Pat Allen. A literature review about the goals of the alchemist, the art therapist and the client, their individual qualities, their approach to materials, the manner in which they relate to their process of transformation and to its end product inform this research paper. The analysis of the data revealed multiple differences and similarities between the alchemical process and the art therapy process. The role of the alchemist seems to be more appropriately related to the roles of art therapist and client when these last two are considered as a dyad.

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## Introduction

### *Overview*

One of the distinguishing features of art therapy is that it uses art making as one of the main tools to help promote insight, growth, self-expression, emotional reparation, or conflict resolution (Malchiodi, 1998). In an art therapy session, the client is invited to choose art materials, to create an image, and to respond to the process of art making (McNiff, 1988). According to Shaun McNiff (1988), it is the physical contact with materials and the engagement of the emotions within this process that defines art therapy.

Another discipline known to use materials to transform the human psyche is alchemy (Baigent & Leigh, 1997). Alchemy is often known as the precursor of modern chemistry; a science that sought to change metals into gold through multiple chemical operations (Klossowski de Rola, 1973). Alchemy is less known as a philosophical doctrine that originates in Hermetic thought (Baigent & Leigh). The Hermetic philosophy maintains that everything is interconnected within a whole (Baigent & Leigh). It states that if an individual acts on a level of reality (e.g. metals), his actions will have an impact on another level of reality (e.g. his inner self) and vice versa (Baigent & Leigh). Many authors establish that alchemy's goal to transform metals into gold was a means to improve the alchemist's awareness (Jung, 1968; Klossowski de Rola, 1973; Schwartz-Salant, 1995). Carl Gustav Jung established a direct interconnection between the internal transformation processes of the alchemist with those of a client in psychotherapy.

This research inquiry intends to explore interconnections between art therapy and alchemy as two processes that use the transformation of materials as a means to

promote change within the individual who engages in the transformation of materials. I will inform the basis of this inquiry by an initial literature review of the origin and definition of alchemy as given by Klossowski de Rola (1973), and Baigent and Leigh (1997), three authors who approach alchemy as a philosophical discipline based on the Hermetic philosophy. I will also review some of the features of an alchemist (Edinger, 1985; Jung, 1963) and the description of the alchemical process, its presumed stages and procedures (Baigent and Leigh; Edinger; Jung, 1968; Klossowski de Rola; Roberts, 1994).

My research inquiry will then move to review the literature of art therapists such as Pat Allen (1995, 2005), Shaun McNiff (1981, 1988, 1989, 2003) and Bruce Moon (1994, 1997, 2007), who maintain that the relationship between the client, the art materials, the image and the art making process has transformational effects on art therapy clients. I will compare and contrast their approach to the materials, their perception and understanding of the transformation process, and the ways they relate to the possible outcome of their processes. This research will conclude with an exploration of the similarities and differences between art therapy and alchemy. I will also compare and contrast the goals of change in both disciplines and the notion of sacred in alchemy and in art therapy, as observed by the abovementioned authors.

## *Research questions*

### *Primary Research Question*

What are the similarities and differences between art therapy's therapeutic process and the alchemical process?

### *Subsidiary Research Question*

What is the relationship between the role of the alchemist and the roles of the art therapist and client?

## *Delimitations*

The delimitations this study has are: a) since many versions of the alchemical process are available, a generalized compilation of several versions will be made instead of referring to one author's version only; b) this research will not delve into the alchemical symbolism of images created in an art therapy context; c) this research inquiry will only refer to three art therapy authors: Pat Allen, Shaun McNiff and Bruce Moon, due to their particular approach to art materials and art making within their art therapy practice, specifically relevant to alchemy.

## *Limitations*

Since literature related to alchemy is available in many languages and editions, this study is limited to texts available physically and digitally to the researcher in English, French and Spanish (languages in which I am fluent).



### *Methodology*

This research inquiry was guided by two research methodologies: the historical/documentary method and the theoretical research method. The historical/documentary method is highly valuable to explore themes and areas that have not been touched upon in previous literature or research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Since this method seeks to find relationships between theories and events (Marshall & Rossman) and to establish innovative interpretive patterns to reveal new focus in a given area of study (Reitzel & Lindeman, 1982), it was an appropriate methodology to establish interrelationships between art therapy and alchemy. Theoretical research, on the other hand, seeks to critique theory and then integrate it with the purpose of providing more comprehensive and solid contributions to the current knowledgebase of a subject (Junge & Linesch, 1993). The tools of theoretical research methodology (i.e. logical analysis, evaluation and synthesis) provided a methodological frame to compare and contrast the theoretical data available in the fields of art therapy and alchemy (Junge & Linesch).

### *Data Collection*

According to the historical/documentary methodology, data was drawn from the theory found in literature. Relevant literature for this inquiry was found in books, articles and databases such as PsycINFO, ProQuest, Academic Search Premier, and SAGE Journals. Keywords used for search of topics included: art therapy, Carl Jung, positive psychology, Jungian psychotherapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy, alchemy, alchemist, transmutation, Hermeticism, Hermetic philosophy, conjunctio, calcinatio, solutio, coagulatio, sublimatio, putrefactio, nigredo, albedo and rubedo.

For the section on alchemy and psychotherapy, I limited my search to articles and books published within the past sixty years. I included writings from C.G. Jung who specifically addressed alchemy and psychotherapy; from authors who wrote about alchemy as it is understood within the Hermetic philosophy, and from authors who made a connection between alchemy and psychological change. For the theoretical section in art therapy, I limited my search to articles, books and references by Bruce Moon, Pat Allen and Shaun McNiff, published in the past thirty years in order to include ideas by Shaun McNiff, who wrote three of his cited books in the 1980's.

#### *Data Analysis*

The theoretical data reviewed in this inquiry was analyzed, evaluated and synthesized according to the theoretical research method described by Junge and Linesch (1993). This data analysis process involves definition, description, comparison, and contrast of the concepts mentioned in the literature review of art therapy and alchemy. All these procedures had as main goal to achieve a clear understanding of the similarities and differences between art therapy and alchemy.

## Chapter 1. Alchemy

### *Origins of Alchemy*

Some authors maintain that alchemy was born within the Hermetic tradition (Baigent & Leigh, 1997; Jung, 1968; Klossowski de Rola, 1973; Schwartz-Salant, 1995). The origins of Hermeticism go back to the first century of the Christian era, in Alexandria (Baigent & Leigh). According to Baigent & Leigh, Hermeticism got its name and many of its fundamental ideas from ancient Egypt, specifically from the Egyptian priest Thoth-Hermes, also referred to as Hermes Trismegistus. This deity known as Thoth evolved from the ibis-headed Egyptian god figure called 'Djeuti', who performed in ancient Egyptian mythology as a psychopomp (i.e. initiator) into the mysteries of the arcane. References to this deity go as far back as the third century BC. The historical moment where Thoth and Hermes became one is suggested by Baigent & Leigh to be during the Ptolemaic dynasty –known to have fabricated deities that would appeal to Egyptians and Greeks alike– where Thoth's godly profile was merged with the Greek deity Hermes.

One fundamental aspect of the Egyptian beliefs inherited by Hermeticism and later on by alchemy is explained by Marie-Louise von Franz (1979). She explains how the Egyptians mummified people driven by the belief that the dead person was slowly absorbed by one main god figure, known as the Ba-soul, the all-pervading spirit of the universe. All steps of the mummification process meant a closer integration to this unifying god. For example, von Franz quotes how the linen bandages wrapped around the body represented the goddesses Isis and Nephtys, and how the gold carefully placed in the body's nails belonged to Horus. The essential belief that survived the centuries through Hermeticism and alchemy is the following:

The concrete material things are laden with mana, then they are divine things  
(...) Materials are divine; therefore, if we use any kind of matter, we use a god  
(...) and by mixing materials, divine powers are mixed and a divine power is  
exerted, or we bring forth changes within the realm of the divine powers. (von  
Franz, 1979, p. 7)

Therefore, two Hermetic principles of possible Egyptian origin determine the  
shape of the discipline of alchemy. The first principle observed is that the world is  
conceived as a unity; everything is interconnected within this one cosmic whole (Baigent  
and Leigh, 1997; von Franz, 1979). Since Hermetic thought promotes  
interconnectedness among all things, any person can act, for example, in the material  
realm, in order to make things happen in the spiritual realm. The metaphor Baigent and  
Leigh use to illustrate this mechanism alludes to a tapestry of reality, where individuals  
can pull a thread in one place of the tapestry prompting another area of the tapestry to  
shift. Alchemists educated within the Hermetic tradition therefore knew that they could  
shift reality by means of literal actions. Instead of remaining helplessly passive towards  
the world, humans could become active agents of change (Baigent & Leigh).

The second postulate alchemy inherits from the Hermetic thought is the  
interrelationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Hermeticism maintains  
that the action performed upon a microcosm influences the macrocosm and vice versa  
(Baigent and Leigh, 1997). The first two lines of the text found in the Emerald Tablet,  
whose authorship is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, illustrate these two principles of  
Hermeticism and alchemy:

*This is true and remote from all cover of falsehood.*

*Whatever is below is similar to that which is above.*

*Through this the marvels of the work of one thing are procured and perfected.*

*Also, as all things are made from one, by the consideration of one, so all things were made from this one, by conjunction. (Hare, 2008. Translation by Georgio Beato)*

Alchemists thought that matter and people are made from the same elements, and the microcosm of a substance could be equated to the macrocosm of the universe. The mystery of the structure of the universe is within matter as well as within individuals. Given the duality of this idea, Von Franz (1979) names the two currents born within alchemical literature: the alchemy devoted outwardly to the matter –which eventually became the science of chemistry (Klossowski de Rola, 1973) – and the alchemy devoted inwardly to the alchemist –which became the philosophical alchemy. Roberts (1994) quotes Roger Bacon to support von Franz in this regard: Bacon says there was *alkimia operativa* which taught the making of noble metals, and *alkimia speculativa*, which concerned itself with theory and speculation, often in figurative language.

#### *Definition of Alchemy*

The Hermetic school of thought speaks of a deeper understanding of the human mind and the human inner world through the understanding and practice of external transmutation of materials. Alchemy, as understood within the hermetic philosophy, was a spiritual discipline. It encouraged the alchemist to see the reflection of his internal

processes on the external transmutation of metals into gold, and vice versa (Baigent & Leigh, 1997; Schwartz-Salant, 1995).

### *The goals of Alchemy*

Alchemy sought to repeat nature's Great Work, also referred to as *Opus* (Klossowski de Rola, 1973). The goal of the Great Work depended on the alchemist's conception: sometimes it was the white or red tincture known as *aqua permanens*, some other times it was the philosopher's stone, the panacea known as the *elixir vitae*, or the philosophical gold (Jung, 1968).

According to Klossowski de Rola (1973), the Great Work was a metaphor of the full dominion of humankind's faculties. Some authors (Baigent & Leigh, 1997; Klossowski de Rola) maintain that the gold that was sought was not precisely the highly valued precious metal but a metaphor of the understanding of the law between the micro and the macro: a vision of the transformation of the ordinary human 'made of lead' into the extraordinary human 'made of gold'. If we go back to the Hermetic principles that inform alchemy, the alchemist sought to understand the ways of transmuting metals so s/he could understand the ways of changing her/himself (Baigent and Leigh). For example, the alchemist physically tried to clean the metals from their impurities, and as s/he cleaned the metal s/he was prompting cleanliness within his/her inner self, aware or not of the fact that s/he was applying the principle of correspondence between the macro and the micro. Klossowski de Rola (1973) refers to this process as the transmutation "of the obscure ignorance into the light of wisdom" (p.13). He maintains that the alchemist's work with matter helped him/her reduce his/her ignorance; the reflection upon matter, its behaviours and its inner life prompted the alchemist to also make a

correspondence between him/herself, his/her behaviours and his inner life. Once the alchemist understood the change that happened within matter, s/he could realize that the transformation s/he sought within matter could be achieved equally within his/her own inner self.

### *The Alchemist*

According to several descriptions in texts related to alchemy (Edinger, 1985; Jung, 1963), the alchemist needed certain specific qualities in order to attain the goal of the Great Work. Waite (In Edinger), in his book *The Hermetic Museum*, explains in depth how the alchemist had to be able to tolerate frustration, despair, and deception. He describes the work of the alchemist as one full of discouraging thoughts and changes of course. He mentions how some alchemists got to the point of doubting the teacher who was said to possess the secret of the alchemical art. Waite further suggests that many alchemists even thought their master kept the most important secrets of alchemy only to him/herself (cited in Edinger). The alchemist needed to be patient, courageous and persevering in spite of the setbacks of his/her practice. The alchemist student was required to trust the process and trust the teacher.

Due to the sacred nature of the Great Work, a respectful and holy attitude was also necessary. Waite mentions in his *Turba Philosophorum* (In Edinger, 1985) how the alchemist had to have a humble attitude towards the higher powers and accept that only God decided who was worthy of the art. The alchemist had to be open and in contact with the mystical world. The requirements of an alchemist thus included faith, humbleness, and openness to the sacred and numinous.

Other characteristics of the alchemists were defined by the logistics of their practice. Von Franz (1979) skilfully illustrates the alchemist's daily challenges in the middle ages. She describes how the alchemist had to begin with the construction of the alchemical furnace. Since the alchemist had to be weary of the risk of fire, s/he probably built the furnace outside of his living quarters. This, at the overpopulated town lodgings, may have prompted an important group of curious ignorant inquisitors. Therefore, the alchemist was often forced to buy or rent a piece of isolated land away from unwanted judging looks. Von Franz suggests that rumours may have spread that the alchemist was a black magician conjuring smoking demons which rendered the neighbours sick, possessed or dead. This possibly required the alchemist to bribe the authorities, if not the neighbours, to leave him/her alone. Even if the alchemist was successful in overcoming these challenges, s/he also risked of being kidnapped by greedy men who thought they could become rich if they could persuade the alchemist to create gold through his/her magical ways. For all these logistical and contextual reasons, alchemists worked alone, anonymously and without much flamboyance. They may have hired one helper who had to swear to keep secret everything he had seen or done (Edinger, 1985); one helper who hopefully wouldn't go off to the bar, telling his drinking pals about his job and leaving the furnace without the air-blown currents that were needed to keep the required higher temperatures during many days in a row (von Franz). The alchemist was certainly required to fully understand the goal of the work in order to be willing to live through the challenges of this practice.

Therefore, the typical alchemist needed to be able to carefully balance positive qualities (i.e. patience, perseverance, respectfulness, thirst of knowledge) with possible negative emotions and events that arise from the challenges of the practice (i.e.



frustration, despair, deception, harassment, inquisition). The alchemist needed to maintain throughout his/her practice a spiritual mystical attitude and the vision of the long term goal, so s/he could be open to the spiritual gains it brought, while bearing with the difficulties inherent to the process.

### *The Alchemical Process*

The alchemical process required a sacred attitude to begin with (Eliade, 1968). This promoted a particular magical-religious experience in the alchemist's relation with matter, which was noted at their secret initiatory rites, and perpetuated through ritualistic practices (Eliade). This magical-religious experience was complemented by several theoretical assumptions which alchemists held as truths when faced with the divine matter (Roberts, 1994):

1. There are only four elements: fire, water, air, and earth.
2. All bodies are composed of these elements in different proportions and combinations; therefore, if we change the proportion and combination of these elements in a body, it would become a different body.
3. Fire, air, water and earth are transformable into each other; the more they have in common (e.g. fire and air are warm) the easier the shift, the less they have in common (e.g. fire and water) the more difficult the shift.
4. Metals in particular, are made of different proportions of sulphur and mercury carefully blended within the bowels of the earth. Gold has the perfect proportion and the highest quality of sulphur and mercury. The imperfect bodies of tin, lead, copper and iron can be changed if the deficiency of sulphur or mercury is

supplied, if they are cleansed from superfluity and impurities, and if adequate heat is provided.

Alchemy tried to repeat nature's underground process of transforming metals into gold. In general terms, alchemists provided nature's warmth with their furnace, adequate proportions of mercury and sulphur, and nature's enclosed dark and compacted underground environment in the sealed alchemical vessel. Nevertheless, Jung (1968) and Roberts (1994) agree that there is no unanimity in alchemical literature regarding the process and procedures of alchemy. Roberts mentions that agreements are observed in the writings from the fifteenth century onwards, such as the success of the alchemical process being signalled by three coloured stages in the following order: black, white and red. Jung gives other names for these coloured stages: *nigredo* (blackening), *albedo* (whitening) and *rubedo* (reddening). Other stages are mentioned in the literature inconsistently (Roberts; Jung) which include a yellow phase known as *xantosis*, a purple stage known as *iosis*, and intermediate colors such as grey before black, green after white, orange before red, brownish red or blue between the white and the red, and finally, many colors in quick succession, effect known as 'the peacock's tail'. Roberts states that in order to be certain of the success of each stage, all these processes had to take place in a glass vessel that would show the colours. He also observes that even though there was no agreement on the number or duration of each of these stages, most alchemical authors (Flamel, 1624; Paracelsus. n.d.; Thomas Charnock, 1652; Thomas Norton; 1975), agreed on the fact that each colour stage indicated a succession of processes.

Due to the scope of this paper, I will only describe the most often mentioned stages: *nigredo*, *albedo* and *rubedo*. The *nigredo* or blackness was the first stage to be

achieved. The purpose of this stage was to purify matter through fire, decay, or dissolution, so it would get rid of any attached substance that polluted it, even if this purification implied the destruction of the current form of the material (Jung, 1968; Roberts, 1994). This was also understood as a process of death of the material, which was followed by a process of decay. Salts, distilled acids or sharp liquids such as vinegar or urine were recommended during this phase.

The next stage, the *albedo*, was achieved through 'washing' with ocean water, which could give one of two results: a white non-flammable substance, or the peacock's tail, which was said to be one white colour that contains all colours (Jung, 1968). This whiteness was said to demonstrate that the *prima materia* had acquired sufficient strength to resist the temperatures of the coming operations, since it was no longer combustible. Jung explains that the *albedo* was highly prized by alchemists as if it were the ultimate goal. The *albedo* was the silver or moon condition, which still was incomplete and needed to be raised to the condition of the sun – or gold.

The *rubedo*, the final stage where reddening takes place and the philosopher's stone was found, was achieved through raising the heat of the fire to the highest intensity. It immediately preceded the completion of the Great Work (Jung, 1968).

### *Alchemical Operations*

The operations were the mechanical techniques of achieving change in the matter, from a fixed state to a volatile state, from solid to liquid, from liquid to gas and back to liquid. Alchemists were focused on transformation of matter, and these operations were their tools of change. As with the stages, authors never agree to the number of operations necessary for the alchemical process (Jung, 1968; Roberts, 1994).

They could range from seven to sixteen, depending on the author and even on the date of the text, since sometimes authors are not consistent with their previous writings. For example, Roberts mentions how Paracelsus lists seven operations, like the days of the week and of Creation; George Ripley and Daniel Mylius list twelve operational stages, corresponding to the zodiac and to the number of months; Thomas Norton's list consists of fourteen operations. Authors also disagreed in the amount of time it would take to achieve the Great Work. Roberts says that George Ripley mentioned one year of work so the sun goes through all the zodiac signs; nine months were also considered as it was the gestation period for a human being; the alchemist Elias wrote that the whole work took four days, whereas Helvetius wrote that it could take anywhere between seven to nine months (Roberts).

Many of the operations found in the literature are: *Calcinatio*, *Solutio*, *Coagulatio*, *Sublimatio*, *Mortificatio*, *Separatio*, *Coniunctio* (Edinger, 1985). Jung in his book of *Psychology and Alchemy* (1968) adds: *Putrefactio*, *Cibatio*, *Fermentatio*, *Exaltatio*, *Augmentatio*, and *Proiectio*. The use of one or other operation depended on the alchemist's idea of the right procedure and final goal. Those who sought the philosopher's stone chose different operations than those who sought the elixir, given that one was solid and the other was liquid.

Given that alchemists shared the assumption that all bodies of matter are composed of the basic elements (air, fire, water, earth) in different proportions, these operations were to help the alchemist alter the proportions present in one given substance, therefore changing it into another substance: process known as transmutation. *Solutio*, for example, is related to water. It sought to bring a solid into liquid, as bringing matter into its original undifferentiated state (Edinger, 1985).

*Calcinatio* implied the use of fire to promote purification (Jung, 1968). *Sublimatio* is related to air and sought to turn the material into air by volatilizing and elevating it (Edinger). *Separatio* was the name used to signify procedures that would separate opposite components within the same substance; this operation sought to bring order to chaos by separating and discriminating its different parts (Edinger). *Putrefactio* and *mortificatio* implied the decomposition of materials, either by means of time and rotting, or by means of corrosion of one material by other (Edinger, Jung). *Coniunctio* referred to the successful mixing of two different substances into a new one; one with properties different from those of its original components (Edinger, Jung). *Fermetatio* referred to a process of fermentation of the substance (Jung). *Coagulatio* is related to earth, therefore referred to the process of solidification of a substance, where it becomes concrete, with a fixed shape and form (Edinger). *Exaltatio* and *augmentatio* presumably belonged to the stage where once the white or red elixir was obtained; its potency had to be increased (Jung). It remains unclear in the literature as to how exactly these procedures were done. The meanings of the other operations such as *proteico*, and *cibatio* are unclear in the reviewed literature.

Some alchemical authors feel strongly about a precise order of operations while others say that the repetition of change in matter only serves to purify it even further (Jung, 1968; Roberts, 1994). Roberts offers a summary of a general alchemical consensus regarding the purpose of the operations:

1. Break down or purification.
2. Preparation or treatment of the purified or reduced substance through joining together or alternatively separating the 'body' and 'spirit' also understood as the 'fixed' and 'volatile' aspects of it.

3. The production of the white elixir that would transmute metals into silver.
4. The production of the red elixir that would transmute metals into gold.
5. Augmentation of the potency of the elixir.

### *Jungian approach to Alchemy*

After many years of in-depth study of alchemy, Jung (1968) concluded that the alchemical *opus* was not only a sequence of chemical experiences that sought a sacred path to gold, but the container of unconscious projections of the psyche. He suggested that while working with the chemical processes, the alchemist observed human-like traits in the materials s/he worked with that actually belonged to the alchemist's unconscious. In his book *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung wrote:

The alchemist, without realizing it and certainly without wanting it, easily fell victim, in the loneliness and obscure nature of his work, to the promptings and unconscious assumptions of his own mind (...) The authors he studied provided him with symbols whose meaning he thought he understood in his own way; but in reality they touched and stimulated his unconscious. (Jung, 1968, p. 35)

Jung explored the subject of alchemy in depth within the world of psychology. His vision of alchemy implies that its processes are objective external correlates of a process occurring within (Baigent and Leigh, 1997). This correlation between outer and inner worlds is what prompted this inquiry as further research in the field of art therapy. Art therapy maintains that the process of doing art and reflecting upon artwork may be used as an external correlate of a process occurring within.

### *Summary of chapter*

Alchemy, within the hermetic philosophy, was understood as a spiritual discipline which sees the reflection of internal processes on the transmutation of metals into gold (Baigent & Leigh, 1997; Schwartz-Salant, 1995). It could have several goals, for example to create the philosopher's stone or the *elixir vitae*. Some authors (Klossowski de Rola, 1973; Baigent & Leigh, 1997) maintain that alchemy's philosophical goal was to increase the alchemist's knowledge of him/herself through the alchemical practice, becoming a better and more aware individual. The alchemist had to be an individual who managed his/her personal positive qualities harmoniously with possible negative emotions that could have come up from the challenges of the practice, like frustration, despair or deception. The alchemical process was a multiple stage, magical-religious experience, which used several different operations to achieve change in matter.

Due to Jung's in-depth study of alchemy and the connections he established between alchemy and psychotherapy, it was possible to formulate this research inquiry to explore points of similarity and difference between art therapy and alchemy.

## Chapter 2. Art Therapy

Art therapy has developed an innovative approach to personal growth and change through both the process of art making and the dialogue with the artwork (McNiff, 1988). Preference for the *process* of creating images is known in the field as 'art as therapy' while the process of dialogue with the image is known as 'art psychotherapy'. These two approaches are relevant for this paper. The first one is important because it highlights the process of creation, the interaction with materials and how art making in itself is a tool for discovery and understanding (Allen, 1995, 2005; Moon, 1994, 1997, 2007). The second one is important because it highlights the process of dialogue with the art piece as an active entity that can provide information the client was not aware of before (McNiff, 1988).

This chapter focuses on three authors: Pat Allen (1995, 2005), Shaun McNiff (1981, 1988, 1989, 2003) and Bruce Moon (1994, 1997, 2007). More so than other art therapy authors, they address themes such as existence and spirituality within their art therapy practice. They include concepts such as 'the soul of art therapy' (Moon, 1997), ritual practice in art therapy (Allen, 2005) and dialogue with the artwork as an animated entity (McNiff, 1988). In their understanding of the practice of art therapy they combine a sacred attitude with respect for the inner wisdom within the client and within the creative process. It is relevant to present these points of view in this research paper in order to later establish differences and similarities between the art therapy process and the alchemical process.



### *McNiff's Approach to Process and Art Product*

McNiff (1988) maintains that materials provide the art therapy process with a structure. He says that art materials, through their specific natures, determine the context of a session. The size of paper, the solid dusty or liquid state of media, the tools or utensils, the amount of space taken, even the smell of art supplies are all essential elements. These are all concrete factors that create a very particular group of conditions. These conditions become a frame to the art therapy intervention, which are also unique to each client.

Art materials keep clients close to their bodies (McNiff, 1988). Art supplies help clients remain in touch with their senses. Materials not only determine the expressiveness of the artwork, but they also are means of expression on themselves. Each material, McNiff continues, has a language of its own. Art therapists and clients must discover this language and be respectful towards it. Having respect for the language of the material also implies having respect for the message it wants to convey. McNiff advises the art therapist and the client to stay with the image, withhold any personal meanings they would like to impose upon it and let the image speak, respecting multiplicity of meanings and even paradox. He encourages imaginative responses, and discourages formulas of interpretation. He insists that there is not one single meaning to an image.

McNiff (1988) writes in his book *Fundamentals of Art Therapy* that the beginning of any creative endeavour starts with an intention. He maintains that intentional acts are the force that drives people to create. Therefore, when a client commits to a course of action in the process of giving birth to an artwork, this product is not an empty shell but a container of meaning and soul (McNiff). McNiff supports the idea that soul is within

every physical thing. He continues to explain that art materials help the client and the therapist to engage with the soul as a concrete thing. He suggests that the soul within the artwork is acknowledged in two ways. First, the client transfers life from him/herself to the artwork through his/her intention of creation. Once created, the artwork is not an empty or dead creation; it belongs to the client and shares content from its creator just like a child shares genes from his/her parents. Second, the expressive quality of the object forces any observer to perceive the content within the artwork. The creative product acquires an independence which allows it to manifest meaning, and to communicate to those around it. This communicative quality opens the opportunity for several dialogues: between the art therapist and the client, the client and the piece of art, and the art therapist and the piece of art. McNiff maintains that the artistic dialogue is the therapeutic process. He explains how the dialogue with the image and between client and therapist is an opportunity to let problems manifest. Dialogue is also an opportunity to imagine an unlimited number of responses to a situation or challenge. For McNiff, therapy is an 'interactional process', a cooperative creation and an exchange of energy among the three parts: client, artwork, and art therapist.

McNiff (1988) includes the principle of correspondence in his practice, which is based on the premise that our inner feelings can be influenced by what we see outside ourselves. He also mentions the reverse process: how our inner feelings can influence what we see and how we see it. From the standpoint of the client and his or her artwork, the formal qualities of the artwork will influence the quality of what s/he feels, or vice versa; during the creation phase, what the client feels will determine the formal qualities of the artwork.

## Summary

From McNiff's (1988) point of view materials provide a structure to the art therapy session. All art materials possess a language inherent to their particular qualities which must be acknowledged and respected. When an artwork is created, life is impregnated into it, animating the artwork. The soul embedded in the artwork allows it to become a third entity with which a dialogue can be established. Dialogue is the interactional therapeutic process that allows issues to arise. The principle of correspondence connects our inner feelings with our outer vision; one influences the other in a constant bidirectional process.

### *Bruce Moon's Approach to Process and Art Product*

Bruce Moon (1994) refers to the essence of his work as the interaction between the client-artist, the media, the procedure and the art therapist. He calls the therapeutic process of interaction between these four elements a "meta-verbal" modality of intervention. The prefix 'meta' means beyond. Moon defines art therapy as a modality which is beyond words: a modality that teaches by living through processes, not by talking.

Moon (1994) refers to the art making process as one requiring practice, repetition and struggle. He states it takes courage and discipline to stick with the work of art, mostly when it is not going well; when it seems all possible things have been done to it, and when it is easier to walk away than to elaborate even further. He claims the image can always be taken to deeper levels. Bruce Moon often encourages students and seasoned art therapists to work with one image for several hours during his workshops, and he says most of them struggle and claim it is a very difficult task. He

mentions how this struggle for self-discipline and dedication is like the struggle clients must apply in their personal therapeutic process. He considers that if clients are capable of developing self-discipline, they will develop self-control while making meaning out of the chaos of their lives.

Moon (1994) also insists on the importance of being focused. He claims that discipline also implies an ability to concentrate. "If there is no focus, there will be no art" (1994, p.13). Moon explains how our current lifestyle fosters quick rewards and quick results. He knows that concentration demands patience. Art making requires patience, which helps the clients understand that life challenges also require focus and patience. He gives the example of working with clay in a potter's wheel. In order to achieve a successful centered piece, one requires time, patience, concentration, fine tuning of movements, endless attempts, and an ability to cope with failure. Moon maintains that the discipline required to create art works can be equated to a healthier and more grounded ways of being.

Moon (1994) addresses the mastery of skill in art therapy and art making. He claims it is crucial to make a difference between being a dabbler and being a master in art making. He maintains that seeking to achieve mastery helps the clients struggle with the process of improving themselves. Once clients achieve control and mastery over art techniques, they have a stronger sense of control. He has observed that clients who overcome obstacles in art making also feel more capable to overcome their personal challenges.

Moon (1997) maintains that making visible objects out of inner images provides an opportunity to achieve balance between our inner and outer experience. He makes a parallel between the achievement of an external process (i.e. mastery of technique) and

its repercussion on an internal level (i.e. renewed sense of adequacy and control). He believes artistic expression brings inner and outer vision into compatible form. He also mentions that once the artist gets a grasp of this dance between the inner and outer worlds, a sacred passion takes over. Bruce Moon's attitude of sacredness and passion towards art making insists on an attitude of reverence towards every step of the process: the procedures, the images, the technique, and the product. There must be a deep respect for the whole process from the beginning to the end.

Moon (2007) speaks of the image as a metaphoric container of meanings at multiple levels. He explains that the image can reach beyond the immediate moment and touches several layers of our inner life, our emotions, our thoughts, sensations and soul. In his book, *The role of metaphor in art therapy*, Moon quotes S.B. Kopp and his proposition of three basic ways of knowing things. First, Kopp suggests we can know things rationally, where we check if they are logical and consistent within themselves to consider them true. Second, we can know things through empirical observation, where we use our senses to perceive them so we verify they are true. Third, we can know things through metaphor, which promotes a more intuitive understanding of things and where more than one way of understanding –and more than one truth– is possible. Moon continues to explain that metaphoric imagery allows a non-linear thinking process that relies more on intuition. When clients progressively learn to trust their intuition, they open to new insights that help them approach their challenges differently. Due to the fact that metaphors allow several meanings to coexist in the same container, the client can grasp within the image (i.e. emotions, thoughts, sensations and soul) the different levels of resolution simultaneously.

## Summary

Moon (2007) defines art therapy as a modality which is beyond words, a meta-verbal modality. The process of art making requires discipline, concentration and dedication. The lessons learned through discipline, concentration and dedication in art making can be extrapolated to lessons applicable to daily life. Mastery of skill in art making provides the artist with a sense of control as well as a certitude of being capable to bypass obstacles in art making and life. Moon maintains that creating artwork inspired in the client's inner images provides an opportunity to conciliate his/her inner and outer visions of a theme, emotion or situation relevant to him/her. Given the opportunity to create, the client can address his inner turmoil through the concrete artwork s/he has created. An attitude of sacredness, reverence and deep respect is necessary towards the process of art making. Approaching the image as a metaphoric container promotes an intuitive grasp of what the image is communicating in terms of emotions, thoughts, sensations and soul.

### *Pat Allen's approach to process and art product*

Allen (2005) addresses the process of art making as a spiritual path. This path seeks to explore the Divinity, transcend linear time, and participate fully in the appreciation of joy and pleasure. The main goal of this practice is to live a meaningful life by allowing the inner voices to manifest through her artwork. These inner voices belong to what she calls the 'Creative Source', which is the inner wisdom that speaks to us from within. In her art therapy practice, Pat Allen encourages both therapist and client to allow an attitude of sacredness towards the inner voices that provide the artist with inspiration as a means to follow art making as a spiritual path.

Allen (2005) addresses the process of art making as a ritual, as a prayer which reminds her of the Divine. She also refers to art making as an activity that opens a different state of mind (1995). In this space she mentions one can stop the thinking mind, nourish the soul and be open to visual perceptions and sensations that are not mediated by words. She calls this 'a state of magic realism, where everything is real and everything is magic' (2005, p. 35). This process requires discipline and daily dedication. The purpose of practicing daily art making is to develop the intuition and avoid being guided only by the rational mind.

Her approach to the art therapy process is divided into three well-defined stages: inquiry, engagement, and celebration (Allen, 2005). During the inquiry stage, the client plays with materials and ideas. During this stage, the client must be open to the guidance of the Creative Source. The client must try to set aside any preconceived expectations of the outcome of the art work. Intention occurs when the client asks the Creative Source what s/he hopes to receive from the images.

The engagement stage involves hard work and discipline (Allen, 2005). This is where most of the work is done: preparing materials, approaching the artwork and elaborating it over a certain period of time. During this stage the client can be initially enthusiastic and then discouraged, disappointed, or critical. The evolution of the artwork, while attending the 'Creative Source' can take the client through paths s/he did not expect or plan. Allen (1995, 2005) insists on trusting the creative process, continuing with perseverance and honouring the resistances that may appear along the way.

The celebration stage is where a result is accomplished. At this point, the client can see the process from beginning to end, acknowledge the dialogue s/he had with

his/her images along the process and learn from it. Allen (2005) suggests the celebration stage may have challenges for the artist: some stay away from this culmination to avoid facing the whole of the process; others get alienated by framing and pricing artwork without really honouring the other possible purposes needed by the artwork to be respectfully dealt with. Because of the nature of the art making as a spiritual path, Allen approaches this celebration phase as another opportunity to receive guidance from the Creative Source and see what is necessary to honour the artwork and oneself.

Allen (1995) approaches the image as a direct manifestation of the Creative Source. She recommends the artist-client and artist-therapist to stay with their images without interpretations, assessments, or interventions. This witnessing activity seeks that the artist remains open to the meaning that the image wants to convey. She maintains that images need a witness, and it is through witnessing one's own stories and other's stories that we heal ourselves and the world.

Another aspect of Pat Allen's (1995, 2005) approach to art therapy is the action of witnessing. In her art making process, she promotes a self-witnessing practice through writing, where each artist makes art and then writes about the process of art making. This self-witnessing practice seeks to document and verbalize feelings, thoughts and associations related to the art making that may further increase the depth of our understanding of the image. This practice will promote insight within the artist so they can become vessels of new wisdom.



## Summary

Allen (2005) addresses the process of art making as a spiritual path. This practice encourages a sacred open attitude towards the inner voices of each individual, which can provide guidance to achieve a more fulfilling life. She maintains that art making promotes intuition. Intuitive thinking nourishes the soul and allows richer visual contents to come to the artist, as well as more meaningful perceptions of artwork. Her approach to the art therapy process is divided into three stages: inquiry, engagement, and celebration. These stages are to be followed if one is to use art as a spiritual path.

### *Overview of Authors*

Among the literature reviewed about Shaun McNiff, Bruce Moon and Pat Allen, similarities and differences can be observed in their approach to materials, to the art making process, to the artwork, and to the role of the art therapist and the client within a session.

The importance of materials is stressed mostly by Shaun McNiff (1988) who states that materials provide the art therapy session with a structure and keep client and art therapist close to their physical self and their senses. He also attributes to materials a language of their own, which must be acknowledged and respected. Bruce Moon and Pat Allen do not mention any specific attributes to the materials while they are raw and unused, but they attribute a language to the artwork once it is in progress or finished.

The three authors agree that there must be an intention at the beginning of the creative endeavour. McNiff (1988) calls it intention; Moon (1994) refers to this as being focused; and Allen (2005) gives it relevance in her inquiry stage towards art as a

spiritual path. They all agree that a clear intention at the beginning of the work will give it more meaning, and will increase its therapeutic value as well as its artistic value.

McNiff (1988) attaches his concept of intentionality with the notion of soul. He maintains that the intention of creation breathes life into the artwork, animating it. He believes soul is within every thing, but the artwork is one of his preferred ways of giving a concrete manifestation to soul. Moon (1997) expresses in his books that art making is a restorative way of healing the soul of clients. Art making is therapeutic through mindfulness and discipline (Moon, 1994). Allen (1995, 2005) does not include the concept of soul in her understanding of the process of art making but she gives a high importance to intuition and listening to her inner voices. She promotes the channelling of inner wisdom, which also touches the intangible realms of abstract concepts such as soul. These three authors acknowledge the importance of an inner subtle force that goes beyond materiality and rationality. The way they access this idea of soul or Creative Source is through art making. They use the concrete art media to be in touch with an abstract notion that fulfills them and gives them purpose. The process of manifesting soul is of great relevance for these authors since it gives their work a transcendent quality.

McNiff (1988) is the only author who refers to the therapeutic value of dialogue within the triad of artwork, client, and art therapist. He emphasizes that it is within this space of dialogue that problems can manifest and be resolved creatively. Bruce Moon (1994) overtly disregards verbalization as therapeutic within his art therapy approach, and maintains that making art and understanding art is what is mostly therapeutic in art therapy. Pat Allen (2005) does encourage dialogue but from a different perspective. She encourages dialogue with her inner voices, also referred to as the Creative Source, and

with fellow artists through witnessing, journaling and sharing. Dialogue with the artwork as an entity capable of telling us things we didn't know before is then a constant acknowledgement among these authors, although each approaches the concept in a different way.

Bruce Moon (1994, 1997) and Pat Allen (1995, 2005) share the necessity of having a sacred attitude towards their work. Moon encourages respect and reverence while engaging in the art making process. Allen states that her practice is sacred, and that the routine of art making must be seen as a ritual within a spiritual discipline. No reference was noted in McNiff's texts regarding a sacred attitude towards art making.

All three authors (Allen, 1995, 2005; McNiff, 1988; Moon, 1994, 1997, 2007) agree that art does not and cannot hold only one meaning. Moon (1994, 2007), in his concept of image as a metaphoric container, explains how the metaphor is able to hold many meanings within, even contradictory meanings, all at once. He even encourages clients and art therapists to remain with one single image for hours so they are able to see deeper within an image that seems complete and understood superficially. Allen (2005) also mentions how it is necessary to live with an image for a certain time so it can express more meaning than the first one the client gave to it. McNiff encourages openness and respect towards the image because client and art therapist may be tempted to assign one meaning to the artwork – the first meaning that seems to fit – and not let the image be understood in a deeper, maybe paradoxical, way. Artwork or images, according to these authors, cannot be reduced to one fixed interpretation. Art allows many meanings to coexist simultaneously.

McNiff (1988) and Moon (1997) mention the principle of correspondence between the inner world of the artist and the outer world of the artwork. They refer to

this process as a bidirectional process, where the internal influences the external and vice versa. McNiff mentions how the inner vision of an individual will affect his/her perception of the outer world, just like the outer world may affect the inner feelings. Bruce Moon maintains that this constant modification of perceptions that take place when the client compares and contrasts his/her inner and outer visions is one of the main goals of art making. He believes artistic expression brings inner and outer vision into compatible form. Along his years of experience he has noted that parallels between achievements in the concrete realm (i.e. mastery of a technique) have a repercussion within the inner reality of a client (i.e. improved self perception). In the experience of these two art therapists, there is no doubt that external reality is directly intertwined with internal reality.

Regarding the qualities of artwork, the three authors mention that artwork has the ability to communicate to the observer (Allen, 2005; McNiff, 1988; Moon, 1994, 1997, 2007). McNiff encourages approaching images and artwork with openness to allow more than one meaning to arise, and respect, to avoid imposing meanings onto the artwork that do not belong to it. Allen encourages her clients to witness their images in order to give time to the artist-client and artist-therapist to hear their inner voices and help the observer fully grasp what the image intends to communicate. Moon (1994, 2007) proposes the image as a metaphoric container, which is capable of holding many layers of meaning at once and communicating them simultaneously to the observer. The three authors promote an openness that encourages more imagination and intuition, and less rational analysis. McNiff particularly expresses himself as being against reductive interpretations.

Art making is approached as a disciplined practice by Bruce Moon (1994) and Pat Allen (2005). Both of these authors maintain that art making is an activity that must be taken seriously, with patience and dedication. Moon claims that long-term projects with high technical demands will help clients achieve mastery of skill and mastery of themselves. Allen describes the engagement stage of her art therapy process as one filled with work, dedication, setbacks, and disappointment; but she insists the individual who wants to follow art as a spiritual path must go back to work, no matter how difficult it may seem. For these two authors, it is indispensable that art therapist and client engage in an art making journey in order to fully grasp the great healing benefits of art making.

### Chapter 3. Discussion

In art therapy, the art therapist engages his or her clients in the discovery and understanding of the use of art materials through the creative process. The creation of an artwork with art materials is the main process. Improving the client's mental health is the one of the final goals. Similarly, the discipline of alchemy in the middle ages required an alchemist to engage in the discovery and understanding of chemical operations that would transform substances. Transmutation of metals was the alchemist's main process. Obtaining the final outstanding product of the philosopher's stone or the elixir of life was the final goal. The following discussion intends to interconnect the field of alchemy and the field of art therapy. Within these two subjects, this discussion will compare and contrast their goals, their relation with materials, their processes, the role of the alchemist and the dyad of the art therapist and the client.

The discipline of art therapy and the discipline of alchemy share a main goal on the external level and one main goal on the internal level. On the external level, art therapy and alchemy interact with materials in order to obtain a final product. Art therapy uses art materials to obtain an artwork. Alchemy uses metals, mercury, sulphur and other substances that are deemed necessary in the alchemical operations (i.e. salt, vinegar, urine, other metals, among others) to obtain the philosophical gold, the philosopher's stone or the elixir of life. On the internal level, art therapy and alchemy seek to promote insight and change within the individuals involved in their processes. In art therapy any insight is welcome, and the nature of the acceptable change is broad. More often than not, the change sought is a positive internal change that has observable consequences. In alchemy, the insight sought was of a philosophical nature, and the

change that was desired was that which showed empowerment through deep understanding of the laws of nature.

The first difference that must be addressed between these two disciplines is the number of people involved in their process. Art therapy requires at least of one art therapist and one client. Alchemy requires one alchemist only in order to take place. This two-to-one relationship may seem uneven, and one may be tempted to compare and contrast an alchemist with an individual doing artwork alone at home, for the sake of balance. But for art therapy to happen, it must be in the presence of an art therapist, her skills, and her knowledge. What a person may do alone at home is art but it would not be art therapy. Since this paper seeks to find the differences and similarities between art therapy and alchemy, there must be an art therapist involved with at least one client.

The reasons why a client engages initially in art therapy may be dramatically opposite to those of an alchemist. The alchemical literature is not explicit about the concrete reasons why someone would become an alchemist, but it is possible to infer a thirst of understanding, a nudge coming from an intuitive awareness that tells him/her there is more to life than what the average individual expects. The alchemist is very likely to be an idealistic dreamer who seeks these incredible objects such as philosopher's stone and the elixir of life. The art therapy client comes from a radically different place. Therapy, as opposed to alchemy, is not usually a client's ambition or dream. The array of reasons why someone comes to therapy is very broad, but Bruce Moon (1994) explains it very clearly: art therapy or any therapy is considered as a choice when other means of resolution of issues have failed. Psychotherapy is the option considered when an individual does not have the ability to solve his/her problems on

his/her own or with the assistance of the surrounding support network. Art therapy in particular is often considered when verbal therapy is not able to assist a client and a non-verbal approach is needed. In sum, an alchemist is a willing individual whose personal traits and way of thinking promote a voluntary engagement in the discipline, while art therapy clients may or may not have the willingness to start art therapy and have a presenting difficult situation they need to solve and for which they need help. This is why the role of the art therapist is indispensable. The role of the therapist becomes that of a facilitator of process; the provider of a framework that allows the client to find the solutions he couldn't find on his own.

The art therapist facilitates the engagement of clients in the challenging process of change and insight. The dyad of the art therapist and the client is equal to the alchemist alone. The art therapist is the half of the dyad that encourages the process to go forth and who is certain that the process will give fruit, even if it is a hard difficult process. The art therapist is the half of the dyad that knows the art materials and the technicalities of their use. The art therapist is the half that pushes the client to approach art making, to stay with the images, and to allow a communication with them. The alchemist alone had to have the strength of perseverance within him/her. The alchemist had to put him/herself through the challenges of the process: find the materials, buy or steal the texts that would guide the journey, then decode the cryptic instructions and use trial and error to verify his/her method. The alchemist did this alone, while the art therapy client is supported by the art therapist.

Once the challenges of getting engaged in the process are overcome by the alchemist and the dyad of art therapist and client, more parallel aspects arise between them. The alchemist and the dyad must share certain personal qualities in order to be



successful in their goal. Alchemists have to be patient, courageous and perseverant. They must be able to tolerate frustration, despair and deception (Waite, in Edinger, 1985). Coincidentally, art therapists and their clients must have all these qualities as a dyad. If the art therapy client, due to his/her own personal background, is challenged by the setbacks of art making, the art therapist must be able to support him/her and accompany him/her during the process. Moon (1997) mentions how the challenges of art making are part of the obstacles each individual lives through in art therapy. He maintains that if individuals overcome technical difficulties in the art making process, they may have a higher positive self-regard and more confidence when dealing with their personal issues. It is through the art therapist's support during the art making process that the client is encouraged to overcome these challenges. The art therapist, therefore, must cultivate qualities such as patience, tolerance to frustration, and perseverance in order to safely and constructively accompany the client back to the positive extreme of the emotional continuum. The art therapist, just like the client, is actively involved in the client's growth as well as in his/her own personal growth. The alchemist, the art therapist and the client have to further develop their positive qualities and constructively cope with the negative emotions that may arise during the process of either alchemy or art therapy.

Both alchemist and dyad are faced with raw materials that determine their transformation procedures. The metal is the starting point of the alchemist's exploration. The alchemist faces metals full of impurities, which lack the appropriate amount of mercury or sulphur and heating. The alchemical process starts when the alchemist executes his operations (e.g. *calcinatio*, *solutio*) to alter the metal in front of him. The alchemist then observes how his actions upon the material affect it. The art therapy

client is faced with the same situation: raw art materials are waiting to be applied to a surface, modelled or spread. The art therapy client uses the art supply and observes how colors may blend, how the surface shifts, or how textures appear. Both alchemist and client activate their sense of touch, of smell, of sight, and of hearing while witnessing their actions having an effect on these prime materials. The transformation process unveils in front of their eyes as a creative endeavour. The alchemist may want to create the philosopher's stone. The art therapy client and the therapist seek to create artwork with meaningful content for the client. In both cases, the external transformation process as well as the internal transformation may begin with the raw prime materials.

The acquisition of skill is relevant in both fields too. In alchemy, achieving a mastery of the chemical operations involved in the purification of metals was the key to success. It may take the alchemist many attempts and many failures to succeed, but in each attempt s/he learns how to do it better the next time. In art therapy, authors have divided opinions in this regard. Moon (1994) maintains that developing mastery of technical skills is fundamental for the client to developing mastery of his own life. He explains that sense of control at a technical level in art making gives the client a sense of empowerment that helps them extrapolate their control to other areas of their lives. Moon mentions how he disagrees with other art therapists who encourage more expression in short term projects without developing skill. Allen (2005), on a different note, encourages daily work, but she does not put emphasis on the acquisition of technical skill. She only mentions the importance of constant engagement as a daily practice.

The alchemist knows that his transforming of materials in an external manner will affect him/her in an internal manner. Because alchemy applies the Hermetic principle of correspondence, the alchemist knows there is a correlation between the microcosm and the macrocosm. With this knowledge, the alchemist has many ways to use the bidirectional micro-macro relationship around him/her. S/he can understand universal phenomena (macro) when s/he understands the phenomena that happen in his alchemical vessel (micro); s/he can also see how his/her inner feelings correspond to outer manifestations of materials. The combinations are many. Art therapists like Shaun McNiff (1988) and Bruce Moon (1997) have also acknowledged the principle of correspondence within their art therapy practice. They have pointed out that the process of art making has an internal effect on the client, just like the internal feelings in the client will have an effect on the artwork he is working on. Just like in alchemy, the combinations are endless. In this case, the client does not have to know the principle. As long as the art therapist is aware of this bidirectional dynamic, s/he can help the client get familiar with it and learn how to use it in his benefit.

The alchemist, if educated in the Hermetic tradition, will know that the materials –just like him/her– belong to an all encompassing whole. The alchemist’s education gives him/her tools to understand the mysteries of his work: how metals relate to the months of the year, or to the zodiac constellations; how meditation may help him/her understand the deeper meaning of the alchemical opus. The art therapy client, on the other hand, may have never heard of art therapy before and most likely s/he has not been educated in the art therapy discipline. Once again, the art therapist is the half of the dyad that compensates this gap of knowledge in the client and puts her knowledge at the client’s service within the art therapy session. The art therapist knows that the

process of art making encompass more than just materials and artwork. The art therapist knows that art making touches many layers simultaneously (Moon, 1994) and in multiple unspoken ways.

Alchemy maintains that materials have life within them; they have volition, and soul. In the art therapy field, some authors share the idea of soul within the raw materials (McNiff, 1988) or within the artwork (Allen, 1995, 2005; Moon, 1997). Attributing a soul to the materials means attributing human-like qualities to them. Therefore, if the material is alive, it or its by-products are capable of reflecting the observer's emotions. Metals, chemical resulting substances, art supplies or artworks are capable of communicating emotions to its witness (alchemist, art therapist or client), and the witness is also able to respond to these in an effective way. A dialogue can be established. The materials or their derivatives may 'know' something the witness is unaware of, and they may be able to communicate it. Alchemists may claim that the sacred matter spoke to them in a mystical state of mind. Art therapy clients may resolve conflicts by establishing a dialogue with the materials or with the artwork. For example, a material such as sand or clay may be considered as communicative even if it is not intervened upon. One art therapy client may only smell or feel the sand and get a message from it, while another one may create an artwork with it to get a message from it. If sand is considered an 'animated' material, capable of transmitting emotions, feelings or volition, it will be able to do so while it is an art supply or while it is part of an artwork.

A sacred attitude is another common ground for the alchemist and the art therapy authors Allen (2005), McNiff (1988), and Moon (1997). The alchemist is encouraged to be open to mystical and numinous experiences. The alchemist must

acknowledge that higher powers are the ones which allow him/her to be successful in achieving the goal. The art therapists mentioned above also encourage an attitude of sacredness when faced with the process of making artwork and when faced with the artwork's soul. Except for Pat Allen, they don't necessarily encourage acknowledgement of higher powers, but they promote intuitive thinking. Allen, in her process of art as a spiritual path, promotes contact with the Creative Source as a means to develop her intuition and her intuitive grasp of artwork meaning. McNiff also encourages multiple imaginative responses to an artwork to promote non-rational intuitive responses.

The process of achieving the final goal in alchemy and art therapy often takes work, patience and dedication. In art therapy, it may take time for the client to acquire mastery of skill, trust in the therapist, and enough comfort so s/he can freely express him/herself in the art therapy session. There will be good days full of successful procedures, pleasant results and insights, just as there will be bad days, full of challenges, failure, and no insight. In alchemy, the alchemist was constantly tested and challenged by his/her practice. The alchemist may achieve success in one procedure once, but s/he then may fail in the next step and be forced to start all over again. Since the alchemical literature is not clear about the right procedure to follow, failure was not uncommon in the alchemical practice. Risks such as metal poisoning, hallucinations or accidental death are the most dramatic consequences an alchemist may face within his working place. Both the alchemist and the art therapy dyad have to be aware that they have to move forward in spite of the discouraging setbacks. In the dyad in particular, the client may be more easily disappointed by results or lack of results than the therapist, so it is the duty of the art therapist to instil hope in the client. Perseverant discipline is the key to success in both processes.

## Conclusion

### *Summary of findings*

The review of literature reveals multiple differences and similarities between the alchemical process and the art therapy process. Among the differences found between the discipline of art therapy and the discipline of alchemy, we find:

- Alchemy is carried on by one person whereas art therapy takes place at least with the dyad of the art therapist and the client.
- While alchemists are highly motivated and are often spurred by personal interests, art therapy clients may or may not be willing to start art therapy and have a presenting difficulty they need to solve and for which they need support and help.
- Alchemists are encouraged to remain in contact with the higher powers to promote insight, while the art therapists in this paper do not talk about higher powers but of intuitive thinking to promote insight and creative problem resolution.
- Although both processes require an acquisition of skill, alchemy and art therapy differ in their approach to the acquisition of skills. Alchemy requires constant improvement of skill to master the operations they perform on materials in order to perfect their procedures and achieve the final goal. In art therapy, the acquisition of skill and its importance depend on the orientation of the art therapist. Some may emphasize the acquisition of technical skills regarding art materials as a fundamental part of the art therapy process, while others will not require the clients to particularly develop any technical skills in order to achieve the goals of art therapy.

In the similarities found between the discipline of art therapy and the discipline of alchemy, we find:

- Both art therapy and alchemy have an external goal of transforming materials, and an internal goal of transforming the inner self of the participants.
- Alchemists and the art therapy dyad share the need for patience, courage, perseverance as well as tolerance for frustration, deception and despair.
- Both disciplines confront their participants with raw materials that must be transformed into something else to promote change within the participant.
- Alchemist and art therapist are aware that transforming materials in an external manner will promote change in an internal manner, and vice versa. The client is not necessarily aware of this, but will learn it through experience.
- Alchemists and the dyad acknowledge life within their creations. Communicating with them and reacting to them in an effective manner is acceptable and encouraged.
- Both the alchemical process and the art therapy process require discipline, dedication and work.

More similarities than differences were found after analysis of data.

The subsidiary question "What is the relationship between the role of the alchemist with the roles of art therapist and client?" informs this inquiry in various ways.

First, the role of the alchemist embodies many of the ideal qualities and attitudes required in art therapy, such as patience, perseverance, and openness to the unknown. As a group, the alchemist, the art therapist and the client share the interest of working – hands on – with materials, transforming them. They are open to dialogue with materials and their by-products. They are aware of the connection between their inner / outer

worlds. They acknowledge that the processes of which they are active witnesses may reveal information about themselves.

Nevertheless, the role of the alchemist cannot be equated either exclusively to the art therapist or to the client. The art therapist brings into the dyad knowledge about the process that the client does not have. Conversely, the client brings into the process his own decision making and self-knowledge the art therapist does not have. Some of the qualities and skills the art therapist brings into the dyad are:

1. The art therapist brings technical knowledge about the art materials that the client may not be familiar with.
2. The art therapist provides the client with her pertinent experience and education about the creative process.
3. The art therapist is familiar with the process of dialogue with the artwork and with the art materials, and serves as a guide to encourage this dialogue in the client.
4. The art therapist provides openness and a disposition to listen, to be empathic and to support the client during his exploration, no matter the nature of the exploration.

Just like the alchemist possesses the knowledge of the alchemical process acquired from books or an older master, the art therapist within the dyad of client-art therapist brings in the knowledge of the profession into the relationship. The art therapist shares his/her positive and optimistic attitude with the client as someone who trusts the process, believes in it, and has the certainty that it works. The alchemist, in a way similar to the therapist, is driven in his challenging quest by his/her thirst of knowledge and passion for the discovery behind the transformation of metals.



Given the particular reasons why an individual becomes an art therapy client, and his/her inability to solve his/her own issues, the client requires the support and help of the art therapist. All the previous art therapist qualities are conducive for the client to engage in the exploration and transformation process. Only with these qualities at the client's disposition can the client's role approximate the alchemist's role.

Second, in the same manner, the client provides the art therapist and the creative process with choices and knowledge that only the client can make:

1. The client is the one who guides the exploration process towards the directions s/he needs it to go. Even though the art therapist may suggest directions in which to take the creative process, it is ultimately the client's intuitive and concrete knowledge of his/her personal situation that determine the direction of the process.
2. The client's uniqueness also determines the nature of the art supplies chosen and the artwork created: It is the client's unique life experience that will determine the nature of the dialogues established with the artwork. The art therapist is good at facilitating dialogues with the artwork or art materials, but it is only with the intervention of the client and his/her input and knowledge, that an art therapist can come closer to better understand the dialogue with the client's artwork.
3. The client also chooses the pace and development at which the creative endeavour takes place. The art therapist is present to support the client in his/her initiatives and decisions, and can only accompany the client as far as s/he decides to go, for example, in terms of technique, dialogue or exploration.

The client is in charge of deciding the direction of the exploration and transformation of materials. Depending on the client's needs, awareness, and knowledge, the art therapy process will take different directions. The client's uniqueness, just like the alchemist's particular traits, shapes the decisions that will be made along the process. The outcomes of the process, the dialogues and any insight that may take place will be due to the ensemble of particular decisions and circumstances that belong exclusively to the client and alchemist.

The role of the client and the role of the art therapist are only completed in the presence of the other. The role of the alchemist seems to be more appropriately related to the roles of art therapist and client when these last two are considered as a dyad. Only then, they can they try to be a modern homologue of the alchemist.

#### *Directions for future research*

Further research may be conducted towards applications of the similarities between art therapy and alchemy mentioned in this study. The profile of the alchemist may be a useful inspiration for certain profiles of clients, for whom independence, self sufficiency, thirst for knowledge and autonomy are important achievements. This particular client may then seek an art therapist who can share a similar approach to creation, transformation, and growth. Similarly, future research could explore art therapists who wish to work with the alchemical model in mind.

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