Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.
Art in the time of corona: A thematic analysis

Elana Lakh, Liat Shamri-Zeevi *, Debra Kalmanowitz

The Academic College of the Society and the Arts, Israel

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Art COVID-19 pandemic Stress Regulation Resilience

ABSTRACT

This study looks at 102 images made by women in the month of April 2020 at the time of COVID-19 and during the first lockdown in Israel. Submissions were anonymous and participants were asked to write a few words of description alongside their images. The data collected was analyzed by thematic analysis approach. Four major themes were revealed: Art making for self-regulation, artmaking as embodying and containing mental states and emotional expression, art as enabling creativity, imagination, experimentation and play and art making as related to time. The art making in this study pointed to the mental processes of the contributors as well as to the role that art played.

Introduction

The Corona virus (COVID-19) was first reported on in December 2019 in Wuhan China and has now expanded and reached every corner of the globe. Millions of people around the world have become sick and millions have died. On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) named this outbreak as a pandemic and a global crisis. The first case in Israel was confirmed on February 21, 2020.

At the beginning of March, 2020 Israel began enforcing social distancing and restrictions in numbers of gatherings to limit the spread of the virus. On March 19 a national state of emergency was called and the social distancing restrictions were enforced legally. Israelis were not allowed to leave their homes unless absolutely necessary while essential services and stores would remain open. As the virus spiked the government imposed a travel ban and mandated that citizens could not move more than 100 m from their house. Parallel to other countries around the world, the first lockdown in Israel was enforced on April 14, coinciding with the Jewish Holiday of Passover. It was at this point that the researchers collected images made during the lockdown.

Aims & scope

The aim of this project was to learn how art was being used during the COVID-19 pandemic, how people gave meaning to their experience through the visual arts as well as to identify the psychological content expressed in the art made by the contributors. The information gained at the outset, has enabled an understanding of the potential of the use of art over the subsequent year. Pandemics are not new to humankind and looking at the way arts have been used in this pandemic can connect us to lesson learned not only from this past year, but also historically.

Art at the time of COVID-19

At this time of COVID-19 artmaking has become widespread and accessible to many, artists and non-artists alike. Artists have portrayed their own experiences of the pandemic (Vincente-Herrero, 2020; Wilkin, 2020) and shared this widely. COVID-19 has formed the content of street art (Gupta, 2020; Sherrard, 2021) as well as seen a proliferation of online exhibitions (Novak, 2020; Sanger, 2020). It is, however, not only artists that have turned to art, but non-professional artists have spontaneously turned to the arts to express and process their experiences during this time too (Oommen, 2021; Renzi et al., 2020). In addition, art therapists, community workers, humanitarian aid workers have utilized the arts in directed activities with a focus on stress release, health and wellbeing (Kalmanowitz, 2020; Potash, Kalmanowitz, Fung, Anand, & Miller, 2020). McNiff (2020) writes that artmaking can be stimulated by the wound of disturbing and threatening experiences as well as by vulnerability. He also reminds us that spontaneous expressions of all kinds of art affirm life out of hardship. Kalmanowitz (2020) proposes that art during the COVID-19 crisis, provides the potential for holding space, without the need for a solution: “The arts have allowed for embodied connection, balance and kindness as well as to assist in the reconnection to nature and to the nature of our reality (tao)” (p.4). Art can also be seen as a social reaction – not only for the individual, but also for the collective and the world. At times of social distancing, loneliness and stress, the arts are available for all: “The expressive arts provide a
supplementary, empowering antidote to this crisis of health” (Gupta, 2020, p.594). In case of COVID-19 pandemic, the threat is collective, as is the vulnerability, and a sense of chaos that has resulted from an extended period of not knowing.

**History**

History shows a variety of examples of art thriving during times of plagues. Chorba (2020) looks at the notion of “social distancing” and notes that as far back as the bible social distancing is used as a tool against infection. In Lev, 13:46 (New Jerusalem Version in Chorba, 2020) we read about the leper being removed from the community. In reflecting back, Chorba (2020) also looks at anthropological studies and cultural history on pandemics and social distancing and refers to an American cultural anthropologist, Edward Hall, as coining the term “social distance” already in 1963. Of interest to our study is his connection between social isolation and the arts. That art can be seen as a chronicle of the human experiences, an expression of human tragedies, a reflection of the human psyche and the artist’s mind is not new. Tragic events, like pandemics are frequently remembered through art (Goldstein, 2020). Artists have been painting plagues throughout history using the art’s “ability to concretize, to coagulate something that is impregnable, rarefied as a disease, in a painting” (Frau, 2020, p.144). Painters; Peter Bruegel the elder, Gaetano Zummo, Jacopo Tintoretto, Hieronimus Bosch and others depicted the horrors of Black Death plague of the 14th century in their paintings. Edvard Munch painted a Self–Portrait with Spanish Flu in 1919 and Egon Schiele painted a portrait called The Family also during the Spanish Flu, a year before, 1918 (Frau, 2020; Friedlaender & Friedlaender, 2020). Historically pandemics have shaped not only our health, internal worlds and emotions but also our relationships and national and international politics. They have “changed economic policies, shaped societies, produced new technologies, and influenced artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals responding to how societies faced their mortality and sudden death” (Ozin, 2020, para. 2).

While there is much to learn from history, this paper focuses on the specifics of the current situation. The year 2020 has seen numerous articles being published about various aspects of arts and the arts in therapy at this time (e.g., Carlier, Powell, El-Halawani, Dixon, & Weber, 2020; Gupta, 2020; Kalmanowitz, 2020; McNiff, 2020; Miller & McDonald, 2020; Vincente-Herrero, 2020). Despite the former, there is as yet, still much to emerge and no doubt many publications in press. In researching the topic for this paper, while not conclusive, as far as the authors of this article are aware, the articles listed previously represent much of the current published literature on this topic to date.

**Methodology**

**Research design**

This study used purposive sampling as the interest was to understand how this specific group of contributors, familiar with art and creative process, engaged in art making at a time of medical emergency and lockdown in Israel. During the first lockdown a call was sent out for images. The call was posted on Facebook and sent via e-mail to potential contributors. The call was open - simply asking for art made during lockdown. The exact words as translated from Hebrew: “We will be happy for you to send us any art made during the lockdown period, with a title to the art-work, a few words describing the work, or a short story is also possible”. Submissions were anonymous.

**Participants**

Israeli women, familiar with art making process, between the ages 20–70, with an average age of 43.5 (See Table 1).

| Age Group | Percentage |
|-----------|------------|
| 20-29     | 32.7%      |
| 30-39     | 21.9%      |
| 40-49     | 27.1%      |
| 50-59     | 14.6%      |
| 60-69     | 3.2%       |
| 70+       | 2.7%       |

**Data analysis**

This study uses thematic analysis as well as an empirical and phenomenological approach to looking at images. Thematic Analysis is a qualitative research method aimed at identifying and analyzing patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis was used for the analysis of verbal data, written information as well as for patterns that were found in images. Braun and Clarke (2012) write “Thematic analysis is a method used for identifying analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p.81). Joffe (2012) points out that the value of thematic analysis is that patterns are sought which are both explicit and implicit in content and that “open-ended responses to questionnaire items, diaries, video material, images and essays can also be thematically analysed” (p.213).

Thematic analysis includes a six-phase process. In the first phase, the researchers familiarized themselves with the text and images and identified items of interest. The second phase included the creation of initial categories that identified features of the data. The categories addressed the research question. Categories were applied to the images by grouping and naming, and by collating categories from segments of the groupings. The third phase involved identification of themes. These themes were identified by examining the data and categories to identify wider patterns of meaning. The fourth phase entailed a review of the themes. It was conducted by applying potential themes to the images and accompanying words to decide whether they answered the research question. In this phase the themes were split, discarded, refined, or combined. The fifth phase included defining and naming themes. This stage was processed by the development of a detailed analysis for each of the themes. The six and last phase was writing up of the findings, analysis and discussion. In this phase the researchers combined the themes found in the written narratives, with those found in the images and referred the analysis to literature (Braun, Clarke, & Rance, 2015).

As written above, coding of the images was divided into 6 phases. The initial 4 themes that emerged in the first stage of coding were: 1. Jungian Perspectives; 2. Environmental perspectives; 3. Resilience; 4. Relationships. Once divided, selected and counted further, it became clear that most of these themes fitted under theme 3 of resilience. The images were then explored under this one theme and further sub themes identified. The 9 sub themes under the main theme of resilience (See Table 2).

In addition to the 9 themes in Table 2, another layer was added – three primary styles, in an effort to maintain the three-dimensional nature of the art. Each image was given a number or two numbers (if the fitted into two themes) and a colour. Each primary style was allocated a colour: 1. Creative process (green); 2. Symbolic expression (red); 3. Self-soothing (blue).

Two examples are included here as an illustration in which the coding allowed an understanding of the images submitted.

Contributor 94, for example, (image 7). Shows a drawing of a woman working in the kitchen fitted into sub theme 4 and primary style 2 (red). This woman used her imagination, fantasy and ability to symbolize to make visible the invisible threat of the virus. Not only was the virus outside, but it had entered into her kitchen and was being fed to her...
Looking at the images

Looking at the images, as art therapists and researchers the approach to images is one of expansion, rather than contraction. Art therapists are accustomed to seeing the image as part of a process and meaning made as part of a series. In so doing images of one person can be compared to itself and from this information gathered. When in a room with a group or individual, the final product cannot be differentiated from the observed process. As this study allowed the researchers to see only one final product, it was important to hold strongly to the commitment not to reduce the images or the people. This process was fraught with tension as the researchers held on to authenticity and the balance of what is being said through one image per person and the accompanying words.

Common themes were identified and understood to be a way of a. identifying aspects that were visible, b. pointing to both explicit and implicit content of art at times of crisis and stress, c. representing collective aspects of experience. Images received, provided the researchers with hints of the contributors perceived reality and were understood to be part of a continuity of their experience. One image from each contributor provided a snapshot of a moment in time.

Ethics

The contributors gave their full consent to use the images, the images title and description for research purposes and signed an on-line consent form for participation in the study. The study was approved by Ethics Committee of the Academic College of Society and the Arts, Netanya, Israel.

Findings

Four major themes as related to the role of the art became evident in the images: Art making for self-regulation, artmaking as embodying and containing mental states and emotional expression, art as enabling creativity, imagination, experimentation and play and art making as related to time (listed in Table 3). In addition to the four themes, three primary styles were identified. The primary styles represented the way in which the art was used. Each image was grouped according to both categories, (both theme and primary style).

The materials used for making images were limited to what contributors had at home and consisted of water colour, goash paints, coloured pencils, pencils, markers, mixed media, natural materials (for example, leaves) and images from newspapers and magazines to make collage. The largest images that were made were on A3 piece of paper (297 × 420 mm), but fifty percent of the works were made on A4 (210 × 297 mm) sheets or in sketchbooks (Table 4 list of images).

Theme 1 – art making as self-regulation

Self-regulation consists of extrinsic and intrinsic processes involved in monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions (Gross, 1998; Thompson, 1994). Self-regulation refers to the attempts of the individual to regulate their physiological responses to fear, anxiety and trauma as induced by the uncontrollable and unexpected situation of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme overlaps with the primary style (kinesthetic sensory - as described later in this paper). The contributors exhibited two aspects of art making that were identified as self-regulatory.

1 Repetition of pattern organic or geometric shapes were used as a form of self-regulation. Contributions included repeated mandalas filled with pattern either in black and white or colour as well as three dimensional and two-dimensional representations.

2 Choice of controllable materials. The use of materials can help contain a person emotionally, leading to a sense of control and aiding in self-regulation. Contributor 77 explained her use of colored pencils writing: "I haven’t used colored pencils for a long time. I found myself drawn to use them, it enables me a sense of control, in the spirit of these times."

Theme 2 – artmaking process as embodying and containing mental states and emotional expression

The artworks embodied emotions, feeling states, thoughts, and psychic contents. This was the largest theme and has been divided into 10 sub themes. The first seven (2.1–2.7) sub themes touch on difficulties that contributors faced while the last three (2.8–2.10) identify personal and collective internal resources that the contributors drew on at this time. These have been summarized in the following recurring themes:

Table 3

| No | Theme | Sub-Theme |
|----|-------|-----------|
| 1  | Art making as self-regulation | 1.1 Repetition of pattern |
| 2  | Artmaking embodying and containing mental states and emotional expression | 2.1 Suffocation and Sense of being closed |
| 3  | Art enables creativity, imagination, experimentation and play | 2.10 Faith |
| 4  | Art making as related to time | |

No Theme Sub-Theme

1 Art making as self-regulation
2 Artmaking embodying and containing mental states and emotional expression
3 Art enables creativity, imagination, experimentation and play
4 Art making as related to time

Contributor 43 (image 9) painted an abstract work, which fitted in to sub theme 1 and primary style 3 (blue). This image was accompanied by the following words: “I was in a bad mood, wanted to do something that would release my stress”. The image along with the words, made the meaning and intention of the painting clear. As is evident in this example, both the theme and primary style overlap.

In summary, in this study thematic analysis was used for identification of themes and patterns as they were found in both the images, accompanying titles and descriptive paragraphs or stories. These formed the base material of the research. Triangulation of visual and verbal information as the researchers held on to authenticity and the balance of what is being said through one image per person and the accompanying words. The artworks embodied emotions, feeling states, thoughts, and psychic contents. This was the largest theme and has been divided into 10 sub themes. The first seven (2.1–2.7) sub themes touch on difficulties that contributors faced while the last three (2.8–2.10) identify personal and collective internal resources that the contributors drew on at this time. These have been summarized in the following recurring themes:

Table 3

| No | Theme | Sub-Theme |
|----|-------|-----------|
| 1  | Art making as self-regulation | 1.1 Repetition of pattern |
| 2  | Artmaking embodying and containing mental states and emotional expression | 2.1 Suffocation and Sense of being closed |
| 3  | Art enables creativity, imagination, experimentation and play | 2.10 Faith |
| 4  | Art making as related to time | |

No Theme Sub-Theme

1 Art making as self-regulation
2 Artmaking embodying and containing mental states and emotional expression
3 Art enables creativity, imagination, experimentation and play
4 Art making as related to time
suffocation and sense of being closed in, fear and anxiety, distress, sadness, sense of uncertainty, loneliness, hope, humor and faith.

2.1 Suffocation and sense of being closed in: This theme was directly connected to the lockdown and the restrictions to freedom of movement. Contributor 65 (Fig. 1) describes: “I felt ill at ease and suffocated. I showed this through the placement of the image on the page. The figure is squeezed by the frame of the paper, clearly too small for it, the figure tries to cope”.

2.2 Fear and anxiety: Concerning the virus and its potential consequences, along with anxiety caused by a perception of the loss of the familiar world and an unknown future were expressed. Contributor 82 wrote: “I felt that I was creating the chaos that is external as well as internal, the anxiety and fear that reality is no longer safe.”

2.3 Distress: Contributor 21 depicts a sense of physical and emotional distress, through image and words: “Feelings of death, located in my throat. Making the images eases the sense of lack of control, but the distress remains”.

2.4 Sense of uncertainty: Contributor 80 (Fig. 2) depicted herself as a puppet on a string. “At the time of Corona, I feel a little like a puppet on a string. Corona is the activator of the puppet. The strings move but at the same time limit movement and have an impact on my mood”.

2.5 Sadness in the present connected some contributors with memories of sadness from their past. Contributor 60 (Fig. 3) depicted herself in the present alongside her younger self, while the entire image seemed to be liquid and made of tears. She wrote: “The time of COVID-19 pandemic, as a time of uncertainty, loss of control and routine, brought me back to sad thoughts and trauma from childhood”.

2.6 Loneliness: Images of people drawn as lone figures or as behind closed windows or stuck in small spaces, looking out, but disconnected from the world. Contributor 16 (Fig. 4) wrote: “There is a feeling of loneliness. I am waiting while life around goes on around me. The elderly is confined to the silence and solitary of their homes”.

2.7 Longing: A longing for people as well as nature were expressed in equal measure. Contributor 101 (Fig. 5) drew two people hugging and wrote: “A hug in this picture is present. In reality it is a distant memory (present in its absence)”. Longing also is conveyed towards nature and seen as inaccessible: “An image of nurturing nature on my balcony as an expression of my longing for the wildness of nature” (Contributor 100).

2.8 Hope: Representations of difficult distressing feelings expressed an opposite sense of maintaining hope, in the same artwork: “These crazy times pose a challenge to creativity. Sometimes, we just feel lost in a big void! Yet within this cloud of uncertainty, colors still form the fabric of our being” (Contributor 33).

2.9 Humor: Humor enables emotional release in a funny manner that helps view the distressing reality in a different way and changes its meaning. Contributor 29 (Fig. 6) shows this through her cartoon representation of the virus: “Just like we make lemonade out of lemons, I have made a Uni-corona out of the Corona virus (just like unicorn)”.

2.10 - Faith: Artworks that expressed belief or faith gave form to comforting and reassuring thoughts and a sense of meaning. In this study faith appeared in the form of belief in the good that was to come. Contributor 79, drew blossoms on a branch with the words: “It will be good” written in Arabic.

| Figure | Contributor | Subject |
|--------|-------------|---------|
| 1      | 65          | Suffocation and sense of being closed |
| 2      | 80          | Like a puppet on a string |
| 3      | 60          | Past issues and trauma |
| 4      | 16          | Alone |
| 5      | 101         | A hug that is absent/present in the long-distance memory |
| 6      | 29          | Humor |
| 7      | 94          | Playing with imagination |
| 8      | 72          | Magnifying glass |
| 9      | 43          | Spontaneous senso-motoric expression |
| 10     | 53          | Staying wild |

Table 4 Contributor’s Figure List
Theme 3 – art enables creativity, imagination, experimentation and play

Some contributors described their art making process as beginning with experimentation with materials. Through experimentation and play, an image emerged, sometimes surprising the maker with new understanding and meaning. Contributor 28 wrote: "I played with watercolors on the first day of lockdown. With all the fears and pressure, I felt the need to create. Two eyes appeared. Maybe of the Corona monster?". Contributor 94 (Fig. 7) sent an elaborate drawing in which the image of the virus is seen as part of her home environment. She depicts the virus inside the house, in her pot on the stove, it appears as stars in the sky and in her sink to wash. She writes: "The wall that is beginning to unravel... everything has changed. It is unsettling, but yet, one discovers new things about herself, new ways of living".

Theme 4 – art making as related to time

Acknowledgment of the slow movement of time during the COVID-19 pandemic was depicted in artworks or achieved during the process of making art. This enabled a pause or the portrayal of the pause as felt during this time. Enjoying the peace and quiet of the present moment was expressed by many. Contributor 70 described her state of mind while she was drawing: "Enjoying the slow pace that differs from the usual everyday life enables me to release, control and flow". Contributor 72 (Fig. 8) painted a large magnifying glass and wrote: "This is a time of looking inward and outward, with special attention given to detail".

Primary styles

In addition to the four named overall themes and twelve named sub themes, it became clear that the art was being used in three different ways. These have been summarized as three primary styles of art making. One or two of these three primary focuses were found in every artwork.
Kinesthetic sensory style

Served to release tension, helped with relaxation, and was concerned with the tangible qualities of art materials. At this level engagement with materials stemmed from physical movements and bodily sensations evoked by the sense of touch and exploration of the materials, with the final product being of secondary importance. Sensory-kinesthetic use of materials implies that materials are chosen for their sensory qualities as well as engagement of the whole body in movement. Large gestures, scribbling or smearing paints were visible in the art work and reflected in the written descriptions. Contributor 43 (Fig. 9) reflected: "I was in a bad mood, wanted to do something that would release my stress".

Process oriented style

Engagement with the materials and immersion in the art making process, was the focus of this style. Through engagement on a material level, it became evident that mental processes evolved and changed.

Symbolic style

Symbolic representation was prevalent in the art works made in this study and symbolic meaning was supported by the words accompanying the images. Symbols are images representing our mental content in a tangible form. Contributor 81 drew an imaginal figure and wrote: "It is an unrealistic figure, like the reality we live in, now during COVID times. The figure has colorful hair, from which branches and leaves grow. The figures body is colorful and its legs are kind of roots of a tree. Her eyes stare in a wondering, contemplating gaze, that examines and keeps optimistic. The drawing connects directly to the unreal world we live in now. All logic is gone, and there is a new order."

Discussion

Perceptual psychologist, Arnheim (1954) speaks of the notion of gestalt. He observes that while the idea of gestalt is helpful, we cannot say that if a number of listeners each listen to one note of a song, the sum of their experience will equal to listening to the entire melody. This is an important observation with direct implication for this study. The question needs to be asked - if this is the case what can the images collected point to? In this case what is the sum of the parts? With these questions in mind the images were reflected upon in depth.

In Arnheim’s (1954) book Art and Visual Perception. A Psychology of the Creative Eye, he examines different aspects of visual communication including for example balance, shape form, growth, space, light, colour, movement, dynamics and expression in an art-work. For him, visual representation of concepts helps us think and connect ideas with the real world. As such the images received were understood to be as particular as they were collective and as complex as the individuals who made them.

The researchers asked the question “Was there a collective significance while also unique and particular expression to all submissions?” Rather than reduce the images to labels, the researchers attained insight into the world of the contributor, at this time.

Indeed, the art in this study pointed to the mental processes of the contributors as well as to the role that art played. The three identified primary styles were important to name in this context as they added a dimension to the way in which the art was understood. The first style, the engagement of the body through movement and the senses was frequently part of the feedback written by the contributors and is present in all forms of artmaking. McNiff understands movement to be the “basis of expression” and the foundation to imaginative engagement in art process. When teaching McNiff encourages people to begin by moving: “just start moving and keep moving and the painting, drawing, or sculpture will develop itself” (in Nash, 2019, p101). This style has overlaps with the first of the four theme - art making as self-regulation.
Nevertheless, the researchers found that these aspects recurred so frequently, they needed to be identified and named.

The second, involvement with the materials and in the art making process itself, not only allowed for the act of thinking through doing, but also in absorption in the present moment. A focus on the present moment, allowed for a welcome respite from worry about the past and the future and for associations to surface and thoughts to form (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016). This process gave way to an inner dialogue, which involved reflection and imagination (Haeyen & Hinz, 2020).

The third, symbolic representation provided art makers with a tangible means of self-expression and in so doing, facilitated the art of emotion and experience (Langer, 2009). Additionally, creative processes and symbolic communication was enhanced, helping some contributors to find personal significance and personal meaning at this time (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016). Wright (1991) writes: “Symbols are the means by which we communicate (both with ourselves and others), by which we make sense of anything, and by which we endow the world with personal meaning” (p. 89).

**Art making as self-regulation**

Contributors described feeling anxious, fearful, depressed, alone as well as experiencing a sense of grief. The feelings named were often accompanied by physical sensations or tension and stress. The discharge of these physical sensations through the acts of making art was identified in this study and echoes the findings of art therapist Betensky (1973) who wrote that the involvement of the body, movement and engagement in art making allows for the discharge of energy. Repetitive movement and pattern were also found to help contributors to self-regulate and calm down. Malchiodi (1998) notes that repetitive movement has a soothing influence as it can help people to gain both control and a sense of safety in times of stress and crisis. Additionally, the arrangement of numerous small repetitive forms into a composition can organize the turbulent inner states and create meaning in the chaos (Cavaliero, 2016; Lee, 2018). In this study, the repetition of many mandala forms, showed the circular form as providing a framework for repetitive pattern. Following Tibetan Buddhist traditions that use mandala making as a way to assist concentration and meditation, Jung (1968) put forward that spontaneous making of mandalas can facilitate inner order, in states of chaos, disorientation and anxiety: “They express the idea of a safe refuge, of inner reconciliation and wholeness” (p. 384).

The majority of the images in this section were made with pens, felt tips pens, markers and pencils. This is significant as is seen in the art therapy literature – Moon (2010); Snir and Regev (2013) amongst other art therapists, have noted that these materials call for precise, detailed work, allowing for an acquired sense of control.

**Artmaking process as embodying and containing mental states and emotional expression**

In this study mental states were evident both in the words and art works. Examples of this can be seen in the written words expressing a sense of disintegration, distress or hope and in their images showing emotions such as sadness and longing. Expression through image and words allowed for an interplay between the mental and the pictorial image and combined the conscious and unconscious content. The images in this category could be seen to fit, for the most part into the definition of “embodied image” (Schaferien, 1992, p. 92). The image which is embodied is close to the mental image in that it “retains the power that is attached to the image” (Schaferien, 1992, p. 87). Contributors were engaged in the creative process of art making that allowed not only for the expression of what they knew, but also for unconscious elements to emerge. As we recall, for Arnheim (1954), visual representation of concepts helps us think and connect ideas with the real world as well as providing a tangible memorial of the present moment in the personal and collective history (Watkins & Shulman, 2008) as is evident in the image of Contributor 53 (Fig. 10).

**Art enables creativity and playful experimentation**

Experimentation with materials at the time of the pandemic allowed some contributors to challenge the difficult reality of the pandemic and to look at life events through an unexpected and unconventional lens. Some contributors shared that imagination served as a refuge from reality. Playful experimentation with art materials enabled imagination and play, and significantly opened avenues to viewing the challenging and difficult reality of the pandemic with imagination and creativity. Imagination, creativity and play can all enhance the ability to cope at times of crisis. This is in line with Winnicott’s (1971) ideas about the relationship of creativity and play with reality. Rogers considered creativity to be an “underlying motivational force for growth” (1961, in Orkibi, 2020). According to psycho-dramatists, Moreno and Moreno (1944) creativity is needed for adaptations to the unaccepted ups and downs of life. Orkibi (2020) connects creativity with wellbeing, which is of concern at the time of this pandemic.

**Art making related to time**

The forced pause in our lives as mandated by the lockdown led to spending time inside, and to a sense of the slowing of time. The frenetic rush of doing, getting and achieving was replaced by being. Some contributors likened this to the process of incubation, with energy and interest directed inward. For some, this pause allowed for creative processes to take place and for discovering new perspectives, as depicted in their artworks. At times of pandemics not only do the arts provide the subject matter for the art form (as seen in this study), but in addition, historically, social isolation has provided artist with time to think, create and work. Shakespeare: “…took advantage of London’s intermittent lockdowns in response to plague during 1603–1613 to dedicate time to writing some of his greatest masterpieces” (Chorba, 2020, para 2).

Beyond creative endeavors, it was inner worlds, thoughts and feelings that were expressed in the art, that allowed some contributors to get in touch with the self as defined by Jung (Lakh, 2020) as well as enabling a renewal of psychic processes. Additionally, with the slowing down, a new relationship with nature was also identified. An appreciation of time itself as expressed by the natural unfolding of nature, including the virus. This realization led to a sense of exhalation, a surrender to time and to the nature of things. A pulpal reminder that we are part of nature and not separate from it.

**Fig. 10. Stay wild.**
Art as means of coping and resilience

Research on coping and resilience (Bonanno, 2005; Manyena, 2006) indicates that individuals cope in multiple ways and draw on different forms of support at times of stress, depending on their personality, propensity and circumstance. According to Dawson and Goljani-Moghaddam (2020) and McCracken, Badinlou, Buhrman, and Brocki (2021) psychological flexibility is associated with greater sense of wellbeing and lower levels of COVID-19 related distress - depression, anxiety and affect coping with the effects of the pandemic. The art and words submitted to this study pointed to the use of the arts to enhance wellbeing as well as coping and building resilience, at this time, and mirror the ideas previously presented. Interestingly the art pointed not only to what contributors had, but also to what they lacked at this time. It seems however, that it is not only the expression and identifying of what was or was not that played a part, but the act of making art itself. Feelings of depression in November 2020 as opposed to 16 per cent in April social isolation, and financial stress. The Central Bureau of Statistics in distress as related to four aspects of life were found in Israel, UK and USA. These web pages support many of the findings in this study. COVID-19 has been challenging in different ways but a year of living with the unknown of the pandemic, has led to stress and anxiety with varying levels for many. For some it has been an active fear, even terror of the virus, illness and perhaps death, while for others it is a more low-grade anxiety or stress, a backdrop to our lives. In addition, COVID-19 has led to a sense of grief (drawing on past or present loss), loneliness, sadness, anxiety (generalized as well as COVID related) and traumatic stress symptoms (Groarke et al., 2020; Shevlin et al., 2020). Anxiety and distress as related to four aspects of life were found in Israel, UK and USA at the outbreak of the pandemic: As related to health, change of routine, social isolation, and financial stress. The Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel (2020) reports that 19 percent of people ages 21 and up reported feeling depressed in November 2020 as opposed to 16 per cent in April 2020. A survey conducted in Israel around the same time as the present study related loneliness and pre-existing chronic illness to high levels of distress (Horesh, Kapel Lev-Ari, & Hassan-Ohayon, 2020) and found that disconnection and isolation significantly contributed to the former (Provenzi & Tronick, 2020). In addition, the pandemic has also led to anger, lack of trust, misunderstanding, stigma, unemployment and poverty. In Israel, much of the anger has been directed toward the government for the mismanagement of the pandemic. This has led to conspiracy theories, a loss of trust in the government and science and a confusion between politics and health. All of the former has contributed to an accumulation of fatigue on a personal, community and collective level. What began as an intense and confusing time, has evolved into an adaptation to life. The words “new normal” are deceptive however, as while across the world we carry on living as best we can, and many even may grow from this time, the random nature of this disease has left nobody untouched.

Evidence from this initial study, indicates that at the start art and art making had the capacity to address some of these concerns and that this could lead to a sense of wellbeing, relief, lowering of stress as well as a supporting coping and resilience. While reports in the media and social media have shown that the arts have since been used to express anger and protest against perceived injustice, at the time of this study, contributors were concerned with the newness of the virus and the changes it was causing in their own lives and the lives of their immediate family. This study indicates that people drew on the art as a way of exploring and navigating this unknown and invisible threat, to find their own individual resources, reach out to others, to express their beliefs and faith—all of these aspects of coping (Bonanno, 2005; Manyena, 2006). In addition, the use of the art showed engagement of creativity and imagination, another important aspect of coping (Lahad, Sacham & Ayalon, 2013).

A year on

The question to be asked is how significant is this snapshot from April 2020, a year on. Art therapist Shoemaker (1978) looked at something different, but perhaps relevant to this question. She describes that inspired by Carl Jung’s approach to dreams, she began to look at the first image in therapy: “It frequently happens at the very beginning of treatment that a dream will reveal to the doctor, in broad perspective, the whole program of the unconscious” (Jung in Shoemaker, p.157). Shoemaker qualifies this by reminding us that we need to remember that we cannot draw conclusions from an isolated dream, but that findings on dreams and images indicate that there is nevertheless a tendency for the first significant image to hold issues of importance for the dreamer or artist alike. Shoemaker (1978) cautions that conclusive inferences cannot be drawn, but recurring themes found in the images in this study revealed collective themes and that these themes appear as significant in the year after this first lockdown as they were at the time of this study.

Indeed, the themes that were found in the images submitted seemed to be an indication of the mental health challenges to come. As such, the art served an important role in helping these contributors to witness their own process and in so doing hinting at an increased capacity to cope and develop a sense of wellbeing.

Limitations

This research was done in real time which can be seen as a benefit as well as a limitation. It cannot be duplicated. The research that was conducted was based on one image per contributor. While this allows us to compare themes between contributors, it is difficult to understand in depth the personal process of each individual’s participating in the research. Some submissions did not include sufficient verbal description or explanation of the psychological experience, which made it difficult to draw conclusions from the image itself. The research was conducted only in Israel and is specific to the Israeli context.

It is worth noting that while all the contributors were female, this is not an aspect of the research that was possible to explore as there was no control group with whom to compare. While gender difference is important, it is beyond the scope of this study. This may be interesting for further research.

Conclusion

Since the time of the submissions, over a year has passed. Israel has lived through three lockdowns and the future is unknown. Looking at the images has allowed for insight into the mental processes of the contributors and for an understanding the role that art could play during this pandemic. Together with this the images are seen as part of a continuity of experience, hinting at the personal as well as the cultural, political and social.

Translating what was visible and felt in the images into words was no easy task and demanded a layered approach. It was acknowledged that while some images could fit into categories, others tended to defy categorization and for the most part have multiple meanings and that the life and spirit of a person and an image, extends beyond the confines of numbers and codes. Similarly, this pandemic has defied categorization, not only has it impacted significantly on individual lives and health, but also on society, government and governance. It has exposed fault lines in all societies and countries across the globe. Exacerbating already
