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To cite this article: Ronald P.M.H. Lay (2020) Championing Art in Art Therapy Training: A Multidimensional Art Collaboration in Southeast Asia (Promotion de l'art dans la formation en art-thérapie : une collaboration artistique multidimensionnelle en Asie du Sud-Est), Canadian Journal of Art Therapy, 33:2, 80-88, DOI: [10.1080/26907240.2020.1844437](https://doi.org/10.1080/26907240.2020.1844437)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/26907240.2020.1844437>



Published online: 15 Dec 2020.



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## Championing Art in Art Therapy Training: A Multidimensional Art Collaboration in Southeast Asia (Promotion de l'art dans la formation en art-thérapie : une collaboration artistique multidimensionnelle en Asie du Sud-Est)

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### ABSTRACT

Art therapy is a dynamic discipline that readily embraces opportunities to further develop and expand practices and applications. This can be observed in art therapy training pedagogy, initiatives, and projects. For those art therapy training programs that are new and/or are being developed in regions around the world, it is important that their contributions to the field are acknowledged and shared with a global audience. Art-based methodology supports the reflexive stance of this preliminary investigation and documents this initial phase of a larger research initiative. This article serves to highlight an overview of a cross-border, cross-cultural collaboration that led to a two-part digital experiential workshop between a Bali-based artist and an artist/art therapist, involving his postgraduate art therapy students from LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. The art in art therapy is championed with a focus on integrating technologies with one's art practice, one's artist identity, and one's art therapy practice.

### RÉSUMÉ

L'art-thérapie est une discipline dynamique qui saisit facilement les occasions de développer et d'étendre davantage les pratiques et leur application. Ceci peut être observé dans la formation en art-thérapie à travers la pédagogie, les initiatives et les projets. S'agissant des programmes de formation en art-thérapie qui sont nouveaux et/ou en cours de développement dans les régions du monde entier, il est important que leurs contributions dans le domaine soient reconnues et partagées avec un public mondial. La méthodologie basée sur l'art soutient la position réflexive de cette enquête préliminaire et documente la phase initiale d'une initiative de recherche plus large. Cet article sert à mettre en valeur un aperçu de collaboration transfrontalière et interculturelle qui a conduit à un atelier expérimental numérique en deux parties entre un artiste basé à Bali et un artiste/art-thérapeute qui a engagé ses étudiants de troisième cycle en art-thérapie du LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapour. L'art dans l'art-thérapie est défendu en mettant l'accent sur l'intégration des technologies dans la pratique artistique de chacun, dans son identité d'artiste et dans sa pratique de l'art-thérapie.

### Introduction

The aim of this article is to highlight how a relatively nascent art therapy training program in Singapore has used active engagement in art to nurture art practice, art skills, and competencies with their postgraduate students through strategic collaboration and engagement. Consolidated through direct experience of designing and delivering a multidimensional art collaboration, with an internationally accomplished Bali-based artist

and two cohorts of my postgraduate art therapy students in Singapore, I offer a reflective perspective on in-person versus digital realities. Granted, the digital realities referred to within this context serve more as a stimulus for further thinking as opposed to virtual reality and related technologies being explored in art and art therapy as posited by Hacmum et al. (2018). This perspective surfaces the intention of integrating technologies into one's art practice, into art therapy pedagogy, and

into clinical art therapy practice (Choe & Carlton, 2019; Herrmann et al., 2020).

## Methodology

Art-based methodology was selected as a best fit methodology as it optimizes perspectives and the consolidated articulation of experiences, visuals, and reflection (Gerber et al., 2013; Potash, 2019). Purposeful visual reflection is a tenet of art therapy training and practice, and it was a visual that progressed reflection to publication in the form of this article (Lay, 2018). Interested in the complexities of layers and associations by the things I see, metaphorical and/or actual, I took *Reflections & Dimensions*, a digital photograph, in my classroom as there were connections between a series of pedagogical experiences with students and an intent to document these formally (Figure 1). Within research endeavor, wherein we try to make sense of and gain understanding into questions, we must often make use of what we have at hand and in art therapy, this includes our own artwork (Gerber et al., 2013; Potash, 2019). This article introduces and describes a multidimensional art collaboration within a given context that can be of interest to other art therapy educators, art therapy students, art therapy practitioners, artists, and other collaborators.

A reflexive stance provides the overarching structure from which the rich material from the collaboration is organized and described from the perspective of the primary collaborator and author of this article. The material presented here is considered preliminary to a potentially larger research project as it simply describes the experience, the art collaboration, from one perspective.

To integrate visuals within the main text further supports the credence of art in art therapy. Senior-level students who had participated in the collaboration were invited to contribute artwork as well as a brief statement related to their experience. As part of their informed consent to include their images, the students also provided consent to include their name and brief statement. For the purpose of this article, aimed at describing the multidimensional art collaboration, there was no attempt to analyze the student artwork but to include it to augment the written



**Figure 1.** Ronald P.M.H. Lay, *Reflections & Dimensions*, 2020, digital photograph.

reflections and statements. Future research projects may include a deeper analysis of the visuals themselves.

## Postgraduate art therapy training: Expanding territories

Creativity within art therapy is championed as an effective strategy to challenge, stimulate and even transform the lives of others given the seemingly endless outcomes and outputs of human imagination through art media and materials (Backos & Carolan, 2018; Franklin, 2020; Jue, 2017; Jue & Jung, 2020; McNiff, 2019). Art therapy is one of those interesting mental health modalities that stretches tradition and convention, and that embraces new ways of working, constructing one's reality and identity, and of enhancing reflexivity of the therapist and the client (Alders et al., 2011; Backos & Carolan, 2018; Choe & Carlton, 2019; Ghadim, 2020). As such, the discipline of art therapy is dynamic and ever-evolving through research, practice, and through its introduction into new territory and contexts, which further illuminates unique opportunities

and developments, as well as prioritizing ethics (Kelly et al., 2017; Lay, 2018; Potash et al., 2017).

What is described in this article is just one layer, one example, of a comprehensive cross-disciplinary art, culture, and mental health collaboration between an artist and an artist/art therapist, both happen to be Canadian, with interests in meaning making in art and digital technologies in a fast-paced world. We wanted to involve art therapy students in a series of art activities and experientials that purposefully addressed technologies and the increasing addictions to digital media, that intentionally delayed gratification as a response to technologies, and that stimulated engagement and application to practice. It is hoped that students would transfer skill sets, insight, and understanding garnered from their own involvement in the art collaboration to their own art practice and work with clients.

To establish the broader context of this collaboration, it is imperative to properly introduce the MA Art Therapy program at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. This program was initiated in 2006, it is the only postgraduate training of its kind in Southeast Asia, it emphasizes approaches that are contemporary and culturally relevant with consideration to Asian contexts, and is contributing to the larger mental health landscapes in and around this culturally rich and diverse region (Kelly et al., 2017; Lay, 2018). The best practices, ethical codes, and training standards of the art(s) therapy associations and credentialing boards internationally further inform this training, becoming an *approved* program with the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association (ANZACATA, formerly the Australian and New Zealand Art Therapy Association) in 2009 (Lay, 2018).

This training has been grounded, guided, and informed by psychodynamic and psychotherapy theory, and it also appreciates, validates, centralizes, and asserts the significance of art in art therapy (Backos & Carolan, 2018; Franklin, 2020; Lay, 2018; McNiff, 2019; Whitaker & Riccardi, 2019). As such, the teaching team, all credentialed art therapists and artists, proactively integrates art-based strategies into the pedagogy and clinical supervision to further enhance the student understanding and application to practice in local and Asian contexts. Additionally, each

member of the teaching team leads and/or has collaborated with a range of industry partners, including artists, on a number of high-profile national and international community arts projects. Students embrace opportunities to lead, facilitate, and even consult on these projects as a way to augment their overall training.

Since arriving in Singapore in 2011, I found the tendency to engage intergenerationally and with large groups intriguing but have come to realize that these are naturally necessitated to build, reinforce, and ensure a cohesive and perhaps harmonious community; a likely indicator of the values of this collectivist nation (Lay, 2018). Understandably, this has proven effective in expanding and simultaneously complimenting notions of what art therapy can be outside of theoretical underpinnings, readings, and perhaps preconceived assumptions (Ghadim, 2020; McNiff, 2019; Whitaker & Riccardi, 2019). This city-state has a long history of cross-cultural interaction, respect and collegiality among the distinct races living here, and so it is only fitting that these dynamics are embraced throughout the training, throughout the arts projects, and explored as part of one's reflexivity, privilege, and difference.

### **A chance encounter in Singapore: Let's talk about addictions**

While facilitating a series of open art studio sessions at the College with an industry partner, as part of a large-scale multiday community initiative seeking to proactively and gently discuss addictions and address the associated stigma, I was introduced to a gregarious individual. David Trevelyan, an artist living in Bali, happened to be in Singapore and noticed the congregated group creating artwork on campus. He created an artwork in response to the theme and was fascinated by what the students had described to him in terms of art therapy, art making and the aims of the collaboration. He too has an interest in addictions, primarily on addictions to the Internet and how this is becoming quite apparent with children as observed through the art classes he provides in Bali.

Afterward, this chance encounter led to several online and in-person discussions, meetings and

visits to both Indonesia and Singapore, and served as the impetus for the conceptualization of this current article. We discussed ways to address a range of life issues, problems, and dilemmas through art and creative means, making the necessary links between art and art therapy, and decided that we must merge our mutual interests in art and the common good with our expertise and specialist skills. We agreed that for our envisioned collaboration, involving immersive art experiential learning, that it was critical for students to expand their art practices, embrace their identity as artist, and to enhance their critical thinking, insight, and understanding as linked to art therapy theory and practice with a range of populations and contexts, while sharing culture, experience, and skill sets.

In particular, we wanted the art therapy students to spend time in Bali making art, to further develop their skills and practice, and to somehow address their own reliance on technologies by deliberately shifting their reality from one space to another (Backos & Carolan, 2018; Whitaker & Riccardi, 2019). From this, the annual MA Art Therapy's Art, Culture and Mental Health overseas student trip to Bali was initiated, which I lead and supervise (Potash et al., 2017). Previous trips to the United Kingdom, to California and to Malaysia were conducted with a similar agenda as aligned to the College's strategic goals of internationality and of enhancing the student learning experience.

Although a full discussion on this annual overseas trip is rich, it is beyond the scope of this present article. However, in response to the significant experiential learning and art making that took place during our week-long trip, we decided to bring aspects of the experience into Singapore in order for more students to take part and to share observations with the larger art therapy community. We forged a way forward in terms of developing a multidimensional collaboration, involving layers of online and in-person communication, tasks, and art making, that extended into both countries, involving art therapy students. This translated into David traveling to Singapore to spend one full day with each cohort, providing them with a studio-based workshop blended with presentations on his work with

children and expanding upon his ideas of art making. The next section describes the intentions, pragmatics, and processes of a two-part workshop that combined online and in-person experiences.

### **Collaboration and processes: Technologies, art, and art therapy students**

Optimizing the euphoria of the success of the student trip to Bali, we coalesced our interests in technologies, art making, and intentions of challenging the art therapy students' practice and repertoire within clinical frameworks. As with all experiential learning with our students, they are encouraged to reflect upon their own processes and how they might introduce and/or integrate aspects of their own insights into their clinical work where appropriate. Creating art, enhancing their own competencies with a range of media and materials, and also affirming a willingness to continue to experiment and consider emerging technologies as part of their practice were additional intentions of this particular collaboration.

To bridge the work between Indonesia and Singapore, stemming from the student trip in Bali during the semester break, we created video instructions (in advance) in Bali. The video featured me introducing David as our next international visiting guest, as part of our MA Art Therapy's Artist-in-Residence series, and then David introducing a segment of his pending workshop with instructions on how the students were to prepare and create some artwork prior to his actual visit. His final video instructions to the students left them with tasks and a sense of mystery and intrigue. This was deliberately planned as a strategy to delay their *gratification* in light of the immediate gratification experienced while using technologies. We wanted to pique their interest, yet have them sustain this until David's face-to-face workshop, and to use this as a discussion point as related to their own therapy practice with a range of client populations. The video was shared through WhatsApp with the four student representatives from both cohorts, who in turn, shared the video with the rest of the students through the same app.





**Figure 2.** Digital photograph of the in-person workshop in Singapore with the prerecorded video instructions on screen from Bali, Indonesia.

Through the video, students were instructed to create a scribble with a pencil, photograph it with their mobile phone, send it to a nearby printer to be printed on canvas, and then have it ready for David's in-person workshop. As can be seen at this point, there have been multiple layers of using and interacting with technologies, with art and art making, as well as with and between people known and unknown locally and internationally. During David's actual face-to-face workshop, I replayed the video to the students on the classroom computer (Figure 2). Certainly, this led to discussion and reflection on dimensions of reality and potential of technologies in art therapy.

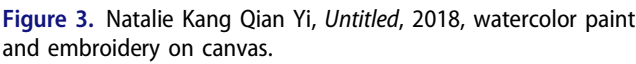
The workshop brief was provided to the students in advance through online platforms:

To inspire, teach, and foster a healthy partnership/balance and relationship between human tactile experience with machines and modern technology, to create and produce in both worlds. Creating/making something in a digital environment then producing it in a physical material tactile manner, or the other way around. Participants will learn about the cooperative relationship with technology through this workshop inspired by David's observations, concerns of people with their electronics and the impact that this has on their lives. David aims to draw attention

to a cyber-intuitive approach and hopes to help people with their addiction to the Internet by creating something with purpose and intention instead of being an entertainment device that pacifies/hypnotizes, which leads to an avoidance antisocial escape mechanism, mesmerized by the electronic media itself.

David proceeded with his workshop and presentation, *Cyber Intuitive Balancing Act*, and students were encouraged to continue to develop their artwork from the graphic scribble printed on canvas. Students used markers, acrylic paint, mixed media, and one student even used needle and thread in her artwork. The discussion during the in-person workshop oscillated between the pragmatics of art making, the selection of art materials, and reflections of images used with links to clinical practice. In particular, students considered client populations that might benefit from the use of technologies within clinical contexts, and how best to introduce these into the therapeutic encounter.

Aligned to the technology aspects of the experiential workshop, students were further invited to photo-document their process using their mobile phone (Figures 3, 4, 5 & 6), they



Given the richness and vibrancy of the experience and artwork created I thought it important to invite some of the graduating students to contribute some thoughts, reflections, and an image from this workshop (Jue & Jung, 2020; McNiff, 2019). Natalie Kang Qian Yi stated that:

She added that,

(N. Kang, personal communication, June 8, 2020; Figure 3).

**Figure 4.** Jou Wei-Kay, *Self-Portrait: Multiple Perspectives*, 201,830 cm x 30 cm, acrylic on canvas.



with attention regulation. The best part of the workshop was when David shared his personal stories and his artworks. I was drawn to his sincerity and inspired by his creativity” (J. Wei-Kay, personal communication, June 7, 2020; [Figure 4](#)). When asked about her reflections, Jolene Chiang shared that her experience with the workshop was “[a]n immersive and meditating experience that allows one to explore the deep unknown and make-meaning from new connections” (J.





**Figure 6.** Kimo Ong, *Untitled*, 2018, acrylic and marker on canvas, 40 cm x 40 cm.

Chiang, personal communication, June 8, 2020; Figure 5). Kimo Ong reflected that:

“I think the directive is rather special —before meeting David, we had a vague idea about how he was going to conduct the workshop with us; instructions pertaining to what we need to prepare prior to meeting him were quite peculiar, which was what intrigued me the most. When we finally met David, his energy level, and love for art matched the directive perfectly —without judgment, and full of spontaneity. This art-making session had made a significant impact on my art therapy practice, where I learned to sit with the unknown, alongside my client(s), as we explore the uncertainties that are ahead of us”

(K. Ong, personal communication, June 8, 2020; Figure 6).

As with many collaborations, there are countless offshoots that inspire further growth and expansion of ideas, and new ways of seeing and being with others. In the multidimensional collaboration described herein, our students were indeed challenged; however, these challenges were proactively embraced in ways that heightened and augmented their mark making, their art practice, and their developing identities of qualified art therapists. The collaboration expanded how students thought about and engaged with novel art materials, it stimulated new ways of visual experimentation both virtual and in-person, it

challenged perceptions of space and how space can be manipulated and/or optimized, and it stimulated new ideas for working with a range of client populations. The various and intertwined layers of this experience impacted the students throughout the semester and overall training, as evidenced in their reflective journals, their presentations, and their academic work including their research.

To conclude this visit to Singapore as well as this aspect of the collaboration, David presented, *Dharma Taksu Yoga: Considerations to Balance Using the Arts and Technology with Application to Art Therapy Practice* to the MA Art Therapy students, our alumni, and to the larger art therapy community. This presentation was timely and well received given the emerging statistics, prevalence, and clinical implications of Internet addiction with young people in Asia (Ong & Tan, 2014). This led to even more discussion on the topic of technologies and art therapy that evening and afterward, including the decision that the MA Art Therapy program at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore would serve as a host-hive for the Digital International Creative Arts Therapies Symposium (DICATS), an inaugural 24-hour global event that was held in February 2019. Indeed, the topics underlying this article as well as the discussions and reflections throughout the workshop and presentation are keeping in line with current discourses on technology within art therapy and within practice (Alders et al., 2011; Choe & Carlton, 2019).

### Future trajectories

Creativity can be manifested through various platforms and in a dynamic discipline such as art therapy (Franklin, 2020; Ghadim, 2020; McNiff, 2019; Whitaker & Riccardi, 2019). Through an illustrative example of a multidimensional art collaboration in Southeast Asia, between an artist and an artist/art therapist involving postgraduate art therapy students, it was shown how one's practice can be challenged, enhanced, and progressed through novel, yet (inter)connected ways. The purposeful use of technology stimulated one's art making, one's artist identity, and one's consideration to how best insights learned might



be introduced and/or integrated within one's art therapy practice.

Art-based methodology is an important starting point to document processes and experiences within art therapy training and practice, and to address questions that emerge along the way (Gerber et al., 2013; Potash, 2019). Returning to Figure 1, I am reminded that it was the art that instigated this inquiry and through reflection, understanding became clearer and emergent through art-based methodology. Mirroring processes between experiential learning within art therapy training, art making and meaning making, this image served a critical role with the overall aim of the article. This article documented an initial aspect of a larger research initiative yet to be progressed. In the meantime, personal and professional discoveries are ongoing and these include art and art making.

Increasingly, our postgraduate art therapy training is expanding into new territory on many fronts, from pedagogy to emerging technologies to an internationality of the teaching and learning overall (Herrmann et al., 2020). Indeed, there have been long-standing threads of commonality of connections that were initiated with our community arts collaborations (where we first met David), intentions of expanding art and art therapy practices locally and within the region, and of contributing to the more global inclinations of art therapy through contemporary and emerging developments (Backos & Carolan, 2018; Choe & Carlton, 2019; Jue, 2017; Ong & Tan, 2014; Potash et al., 2017; Toll & Winkel, 2019; Whitaker & Riccardi, 2019). Aspects of this sustaining collaboration are ongoing and involve reciprocal visits between Bali and Singapore.

Challenging the conventions of psychodynamic and psychotherapy approaches as applied within postgraduate art therapy training while also championing an art-based pedagogy that seamlessly complimented these was an intention. The collaboration described a collective experience that certainly acknowledges Asian values and contexts, and that further elevated contemporary and emerging potential in light of developing responses to the global pandemic. The resultant need to shift much of what we do online does provide us with positive possibilities in that even

more of our training and our lectures by visiting distinguished guests can be available to a much wider and global audience. Truly then, we will become that much more in-tuned and further connected with the art and arts therapies communities.

Although this year's overseas student trip was canceled given the imposed restrictions and precautions of the global pandemic, our online connections have intensified as have our creativity and ingenuity of working with technologies, materials, and processes.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to both David and Rani Trevelyan for their creativity, their humanity, and for their generosity in both their home-based studio in Bali, Indonesia as our hosts and in Singapore as our guests. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge the significant and profound work that the students, alumni, and teaching team of the MA Art Therapy program, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore are engaged in as they are truly championing the discipline and are forging new ground with their academic, clinical, research, and art pursuits. Thirdly, a very special thank you to Natalie Kang Qian Yi, Jou Wei-Kay, Jolene Chiang, and Kimo Ong for graciously granting permission to include their reflections, thoughts, and artwork into this article.

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