



The Problem of Interpretation in Art Therapy – returning to old and developing new strategies

Das Problem der Interpretation in der Kunsttherapie – alte und neue Strategien

Karin Dannecker

Interpretation in art therapy encompasses the essential question: how art therapists make meaning looking at their clients' art. Visual communication contains the main potential for therapeutic impact; the art therapist's understanding of the patient's art is essential for getting insight into his needs and problems. Because of its symbolic nature, the meaning of art is ever-changing: subject to theory, context, personal history and psychological states. These are complex processes in art therapy requiring strategies for visual thinking as well as combining critical thinking with unique art psychotherapeutic skills.

One major challenge in interpreting art in art therapy is paying equal attention to content and form. The philosopher Susan Sontag emphasized that reducing a work of art to its content makes it manipulable, putting categories on it while ignoring all other sensual untranslatable messages (Sontag, 1966).

Art therapists struggle with the dilemma between respecting the art in its own aesthetic right and the need to decipher meaning, aiming to support the patient with therapeutic interventions. In psychodynamic thinking the classical meaning of the term *interpretation*, making explicit an unconscious content, has been broadened and interpretation is sought within the relationship from which it arises. While today most art therapists reflect their subjectivity, carefully being open-ended about interpretation of imagery, we know that there are epistemological inconsistencies between clinical and research practices. Research efforts tend to produce objective, empirical and quantitative results regarding interpretation of art work made in art therapy (Linesch, 1994).

The paper will suggest ideas about interpretation by returning to psychodynamic approaches as well as to contemporary hermeneutics investigating the art of questioning. It aims to point



to the value of understanding the complexity of finding meaning in art therapy through a phenomenologically based aesthetic attitude. Case vignettes will be included.

Biography

Karin Dannecker, PhD, studied art, special education and art education in Frankfurt/Main, Germany, and Art Therapy at New York University, USA. 1992 she received her PhD, in 2005 she qualified with her Habilitation.

She taught art therapy at Cologne University and the University of the Arts in Berlin. In 2005 she became the founder and director of the first Master-Program in Art Therapy in Germany at the *weissensee school of art*, from which she retired at the end of 2023.

Her research focuses on the efficacy of art therapy based on interdisciplinary approaches. She is a registered child- and adolescent psychotherapist. For over 30 years she has worked with psychiatric and psychosomatic patients.

She has published numerous articles and two monographies: *Kunst, Symbol und Seele (Art, Symbol and Soul)* (2014, 4. Ed.), *Psyche und Ästhetik. Die Transformationen der Kunsttherapie (Psyche and Aesthetics. The Transformations in Art Therapy)* (2021, 4. Ed.) and edited four books. See: <https://www.kunsttherapie-berlin.de/dozenten/karin-dannecker/>

Recent Publications

Dannecker, K, Stegemann, T, Bauer, S. (2025). ***Arts Therapies using the examples of psychodynamically funded Music- and Art Therapy***. In: Gumz A, Hörz-Sagstetter S. (Ed.) *Psychodynamische Psychotherapie* Bd. 2. Weinheim: Beltz; 2024. P. 807-819

Dannecker, K. (2025). *Art Therapy in Medicine*. In: S. Willich (Ed.) (2025) *Kunst und Medizin. Berlin: Medizinisch Wissenschaftliche Verlagsgesellschaft MWV*. p. 103-111

Dannecker, K. (2025). ***The Aesthetic Moment. Intersubjectivity, Intervention and Processes of Change in Art Therapy***. In: M. Zarate et al. (Ed.) (2025) *Handbook of Art Therapy*. London: Routledge (in print/Dec. 2025)



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