

A visual autoethnography: mapping memory through art and reflexivity

Une autoethnographie visuelle: cartographier la mémoire à travers l'art et la réflexivité

Vera Heller

This presentation discusses a twofold project based on autoethnography, a research methodology that connects lived experience to its cultural context (Patton, 2015). The objective of this first-person inquiry is to draw knowledge about the creative process through personal experience (Barone & Eisener, 2006, McNiff, 2015), artistic exploration and reflexivity (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015).

The first part of the research consists in a visual exploration of the presenter's experience of growing up in Eastern Europe during the Cold war. Her contact with the work of artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Antoni Tàpies, Anselm Kieffer and Miguel Barcelo - which integrates personal experience, social awareness and reflexivity - has sparked her own creativity. The reflexive dimension of this inquiry is concerned with the healing power of sustained creative work and the contribution of a deeper understanding of the artistic process to art therapy. Dreifuss-Kattan (2016) notes that by creating consistently, the artist gets to transcend time and space, thus transforming traumatic memory into "a permanent memorial" that connects her inner and outer worlds. The art's reparative function relates closely to the mourning process (Anzieu, 1981).

The second part of the research will take place at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and will consist of facilitating a group of immigrant co-researchers who will elaborate their own visual autoethnographies. Ilea (2017) notes that the immigrants' stories seldom succeed in breaking through the silence that accompanies displacement, and that they usually end up being glossed over. The final step of the project will consist of the creation of a collective autoethnographic tapestry that bears witness to the migratory reality and reflects the multiplicity of experiences in a global world. Due to its transformative power, art breaks the silence and allows marginalized groups to imagine and fictionalize alternative stories to improve their lives.

References

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Cette présentation portera sur un projet à deux volets basé sur l'autoethnographie, une méthodologie de recherche reliant l'expérience vécue à son contexte culturel (Patton, 2015). L'objectif de cette approche en première personne est d'acquérir des connaissances sur le processus de création à travers l'expérience personnelle (Barone & Eisener, 2006, McNiff, 2015), l'exploration artistique et la réflexivité (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015).

Le premier volet consiste en l'exploration visuelle par la chercheuse de l'expérience d'avoir grandi en Europe de l'Est pendant la guerre froide. Son intérêt pour le travail d'artistes tels que Louise Bourgeois, Antoni Tàpies et Miguel Barcelò – qui intègre autant l'expérience personnelle que la conscience sociale et la réflexivité – a suscité sa propre créativité. La dimension réflexive de ce premier volet concerne le pouvoir de guérison d'un travail créatif

soutenu et l'importance d'une compréhension plus approfondie du processus artistique en art-thérapie. Dreifuss-Kattan (2016) souligne qu'en créant de manière consistante, l'artiste parvient à transcender le temps et l'espace, et à transformer la mémoire traumatique en un « mémorial permanent » qui relie son monde intérieur au monde extérieur. La fonction réparatrice de l'art est étroitement liée au processus de deuil (Anzieu, 1981).

Le deuxième volet se déroulera au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. Il consiste en l'animation d'un groupe de co-chercheurs immigrants qui seront amenés à élaborer leurs propres autoethnographies visuelles. Ilea (2017) remarque que les histoires des immigrants réussissent rarement à briser le silence qui accompagne le déplacement, et qu'elles finissent généralement par être ignorées. Cette partie se terminera par la création d'une tapisserie autoethnographique collective qui témoignera de la réalité migratoire et la multiplicité d'expériences vécues dans un monde globalisé. En raison de son pouvoir de transformation, l'art brise le silence et permet aux groupes marginalisés d'imaginer et de mettre en fiction des histoires alternatives pour améliorer leurs vies.

Biography

Vera Heller is currently a professor and the director of the art therapy graduate programmes at the University of Quebec in Abitibi-Témiscamingue. After having completed a bachelor in fine arts and another in social work, she continued with a Master's degree in art therapy. She obtained her Ph.D. in Expressive Therapies from Lesley University, U.S.A. In 2007. Dr. Heller teaches in Tokyo and Bangkok with the Canadian International Institute of Art Therapy and maintains an active practice as an artist and art psychotherapist. She used to facilitate a variety of workshops in Canada, Cuba, Mexico and Brazil which eventually became the foundations of her further inquiries. Her research revolves around cross-cultural issues that she approaches from an existential and archetypal perspective and the topics of displacement, mourning, individuation and the therapeutic value of the artistic process. As an artist, she participated in various exhibitions in Canada, United States and Switzerland.

Recent conference presentations

2019: Poster: *Existential migrants and the Hero's Myth: Imagining landmarks, recreating the journey.*, ECARTe conference, Alcalá de Henares, Spain, September, 2019.

2018: *Existential migrants' art: Transforming identities through reflexivity and creation.* AATA conference, Miami, United States, November, 2018.

2018: *Imaginal Journeys: Hybrid identities, creation et reflexivity.* CATA (Canadian Art Therapy Association) conference, Montreal, Canada, October, 2018.

2017: (Heller, V., Riccardi, M. et Deziel, B.) Workshop: *Symbolic journey: An introductory workshop to the symbolic value of sand play figurines.*

Sandplay Therapy Day. Concordia, University, Montreal, Canada, October, 2017.

2017: *Imaginal journeys: A phenomenological, arts-based research on the experience of existential migration.* ECARTe conference, Krakow, Poland, September, 2017.