

Exploration on Application Value of Arts-based Healing Curating Mode in the Maintenance of Emotional Well-being

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Abstract

Mental health is now a problem around the world. Art therapy curation combines psychology, space aesthetics and social care, and is now a new field of study in academia that has attracted much attention. This paper studies the applications of the above model in supporting emotional health. Art therapy curation at the operational level creates spaces for emotional expression through spatial narratives, cultivates emotional awareness through multi-sensory interactive installations, and directs emotional expression towards cognitive reconstruction in professional workshops. Various practical cases have been collected in different places, such as hospitals, communities and schools. King's College London has conducted a study that shows that people are about 22% less stressed, as indicated by lower cortisol levels, after observing original works of art in a museum. The actual operation of exhibitions such as Color Realm and Mind-Body Realm in China shows that curatorial ideas are now expanding from aesthetic display to emotional care. The art-therapy curation model has converted private art-therapy experiences into public participation-based emotional-health-maintenance methods. It is a non-drug, low-threshold type that provides an alternative route to psychological help for the public.

Keywords

Art therapy; curation model; emotional health; emotional regulation; public art.

1. Introduction

As of now, approximately 1 billion people across the world have experienced some form of mental illness, according to the World Health Organisation. In China, the proportion of children and adolescents aged 6-16 with psychological disorders is 17.5 per cent, the detection rate for depressive mood is 24.6 per cent, and the prevalence rate of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is about 6.3 per cent. A total of over 23 million children have been affected. How to offer emotional support and psychological care to the public through non-drug, low-threshold means is a social problem that needs to be addressed now.

Art therapy employs the process of making art for psychological healing and has received increasing attention in China and abroad recently [1]. Most of the traditional art therapy takes place in individual treatment settings, and there is little public participation. On the other hand, art therapy exhibitions have been relocated from the therapy room to open exhibition spaces, and now more people can gain emotional awareness and self-regulation through viewing and interacting. Through narrative space organisation, interactive installations and experiential processes, curators and artists create a place for emotions, consciousness and communication. The Latin root of "curare" for "to take care of" is also linked to the term curation, and therapy can be traced back to this root in etymology. Art therapy exhibitions do not add a psychological intervention function to the exhibitions; rather, they activate and make visible the quality of attentive care in curatorial practice.

In November 2025, the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts started the first high-level cross-disciplinary training program in China focusing on "art therapy" and "curatorial practice". In the same year, the "Healing People Project" of the Nanjing Art University Museum was nominated for the "2024 National Art Museum Outstanding Public Education Project" by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The two events show that art therapy curation in China has moved from individual exploration to institutionalised professional training.

In practice, investigating the relevant value of the art therapy curating model for promoting emotional health will provide support for its theoretical system and offer a reference point for application. Before determining how practically useful the model will be, we first need to explain what it is and what theories it is based on.

2. Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Foundation of the Art Therapy Exhibition Model

Art therapy exhibitions are new cross-disciplinary concepts, and their connotations are still being explored and expanded continuously. Compositionally speaking, the above idea has at least three levels of superposition: Art therapy refers to the application of art as a medium in psychological intervention to regulate emotions and integrate the psyche through non-verbal creation and expression; Exhibition curation is the systematic organisation and design of exhibition content, space and audience experience; When combined, it means incorporating the therapeutic goal into all stages of exhibition curation to create an exhibition that serves as a public cultural practice with therapeutic benefits.

Shi Duo, Dean of the IFIC International Institute of Art Therapy, defines art therapy exhibition curation as "creating emotional connections by means of art; it is an artistic way to organise people, spaces and stories". Therefore, it is not the same as the previous model of exhibition. Traditional exhibitions focus on how to display the works and what aesthetic qualities they have. On the other hand, the curation of art therapy exhibitions also considers whether the audience has been emotionally stimulated and their sense of well-being improved. Now, curation is not only about the location of works; it also concerns how to promote emotional changes through space and experience design [2].

This practice has developed a certain body of research. Jung's mandala symbolism theory in psychology believes that the act of creating art aids people in achieving self-realisation, and research on embodied cognition has found that body perception is linked to emotion regulation. In October 2025, King's College London led a study that found that art has positive effects on the immune system, endocrine system and autonomic nervous system, thus providing physiological support for art therapy. In curatorial studies, an article titled "Care and Repair—An exploration of art therapy based on museum space" in *Architecture and Culture* (2024, Issue 1) pointed out that museums are "both tangible physical spaces and important spiritual and aesthetic spaces in the city"—that is, they are both real places and carry functions of spirit and aesthetics [3]. In addition, the paper also indicated that the healing effect of museums arises from both the attributes of the space and the artistic activities organised according to that space. Together, these theories provide full support for the curatorial model of art therapy at all levels. Theoretical research is needed to some extent, but how exactly art therapy exhibitions promote people's emotional health cannot be fully understood without examining their actual operation in specific exhibitions. The first is the emotional world that the space-time narrative has created.

3. The Constructive Function of Spatial Narration and Emotional Field

The emotional field is the basic way art therapy exhibitions help people maintain their emotional health. This Place is not the same as the outside world, and people can feel freely and

be aware of themselves here. All-encompassing qualities are required for the intervention of therapy.

A typical exhibition is a 'no-touch' viewing area; there is generally no contact with the exhibited objects for visitors. Shi Duo also brought this up in a class at Shandong University of Art and Design from another angle. He proposed that therapeutic exhibitions can give people a sense of "touch" in their experience; touch, interaction and expression serve as ways for emotional healing and are also effective means to stimulate people's senses [4]. When the audience is permitted to touch and interact with the work, they are no longer outside observers of the work but have entered the scenario created by the work, and their focus of experience has shifted from visual aesthetics to inner feelings.

The Design of Space is also a form of therapy. The main medium for the mirrors in the I Dwell in Possibility exhibition in Suzhou Industrial Park is used. The mirrors in the exhibition hall do not reflect the artworks; instead, they direct viewers to see themselves, thus creating a viewing path of seeing, accepting and finally expressing. The "Ecological Art Therapy Theme Exhibition" at East China Normal University took a different path. Over the course of 24 solar terms, it is hoped that the scent of traditional Chinese medicinal herbs will be used to stimulate the sense of smell. Four sections were created, such as "The Profound Heaven and the Yellow Earth, Artistic Mind and Healing Reason" and "Heavenly Timing and Earthly Qi, Heart Finds Peace in Things". Although the two schemes had different ways, they both reached the same conclusion: spatial narration needs a clear line to guide the flow of emotions [5].

Whether the story can be healing for the people is also relative to what those individuals are experiencing at present. If the theme is too far removed from the public's actual life, then even if the Space Design is excellent, it will fail to resonate with the people. Yan Wenhua pointed out at the exhibition site of East China Normal University that "ecological art therapy can give shape to those 'invisible, inexpressible emotions'". This indicates that the purpose of spatial narrative is not to make people feel a certain way, but rather to help them transform their vague emotions into something concrete.

Spatial narration addresses the problem of "presence" but still needs more sensory openings for the activation of emotion. This is what the multiple senses do.

4. The Activation Mechanism of Multi-Sensory Interaction and Emotional Perception

Art therapy exhibition curation should not only provide a place but also offer people various ways to experience the senses in their daily lives. The first is to recognize and name emotions, but many people stop here and cannot proceed; they are unable to explain why they feel that way. The benefit of art therapy exhibition curation is that it gives these people a way to express themselves without words.

Only language can be used to express feelings of depression. The Upper Bound is relatively large. People who are not good at expressing themselves or who do not understand their own emotions well are often more anxious in the counselling room. The Art Therapy Exhibition Curator has expanded the prospects. Visual, auditory, tactile and olfactory senses can all be used for expression [6]. The "Forest in the Palm" exhibition at Leshan Normal University does the same. Touch the plants, record the emotions and memories you felt when you did, and then express them in art. The "Ecological Art Therapy Theme Exhibition" at East China Normal University is also organised in this way. Mindfulness viewing, smelling the aroma of traditional Chinese medicine, freehand doodling, repairing the network symbolizing the soul, and labelling emotions. The audience is no longer a passive spectator; they will be involved in the activities together.

The result of multiple senses is not necessarily a sensation. Fifty people aged 18-40 were randomly assigned to the two groups at King's College London. One group watched the original work, and the other group saw a copy. Saliva tests showed that the group watching the original work had a 22 per cent lower average cortisol level than the group that saw the replica, with only an 8 per cent reduction in the replica group. The two pro-inflammatory cytokines (IL-6 and TNF- α) also showed a large change. The group in the art gallery showed a 30 per cent reduction in IL-6 and a 28 per cent reduction in TNF- α , and the other group had little to no change [7]. Tony Woods, a researcher, was very surprised to find that art also affected the immune system, endocrine system and autonomic nervous system at the same time. The first feature of this finding is that merely looking at the original work can induce a state of physiological relaxation. The effect of the design of the interactive exhibition will also be relatively large.

When planning the content of an interactive exhibition, safety and the possibility of expression for the participants should be considered. They have many other ways to show their emotions in a nonverbal manner, such as feeling things with their bodies, drawing, colouring, etc. Yan Wenhua said at the exhibition site that "ecological art therapy makes 'invisible, unverbalizable emotions' concrete", and this process of concretisation is itself a form of therapy.

However, the interactive experiences at the exhibition site are often one-time and relatively short. To enable people to turn emotions into practice, regular teaching and organised assistance need to be available. Therefore, there are work sessions.

5. The Extended Path of Workshops and Emotional Transformation

Art therapy exhibitions can help people manage their emotions in various places, not just at the exhibition site. The following are professional workshops that can help students manage their emotions by engaging in thinking.

The leaders of the workshops often have backgrounds in psychology or art therapy [8]. Paintings, clay, sound and other materials are used to help people gradually learn to recognise their own feelings, give these feelings names, and express or create them. When people stop passively watching and start doing, their feelings and behaviour will also change. Workshops are not free-viewings; they have a fixed process and are led by experts. When expressing their feelings, the participants also try to create a story based on this experience, organise their emotions, and thus the emotional transformation is not shallow but also profound.

At home, some has been achieved. Several kinds of "Yu Ren Project" have been launched by the Art Museum of Nanjing University of the Arts, including exhibition guides, creative experiences, workshops and online courses, to form an all-weather psychological support system. Professor Liu Fan's group at Wuhan Textile University had produced a more elaborate "Weaving the Self" project. First, the participants filled in their emotions on the PANAS emotion scale, then, with the guidance of the team, made non-woven fabric, and the system determined the change in emotion and provided a corresponding colour; they were tested again, and finally, a "Personal Emotional Temperature Map" was generated. Based on the comparison of the data, the participants' positive emotions, such as pleasure and self-acceptance, showed a consistent improvement [9].

The Workshop also has some general advantages. The Art Museum of Nanjing University of the Arts has set up the workshop in the grassroots communities through community practice. People of all ages and professions gathered together to create something. At the same time, they also began to be close. The sense of support provided by collective creation cannot be achieved through the work of a single person in a studio. Therefore, it can be seen that once the strategies of art healing curation enter the field of social care, they will help people better and help build a sense of community.

The social issues presented in the workshop are in fact examples of various types of art therapy in curation practice. Hospitals, communities and schools are all different, so the focus of curating will naturally be different for each.

6. Practical Value of Multi-Scenario Application and Social Emotional Governance

There are many forms of art therapy exhibitions in different environments. Some practical measures have been introduced in hospitals, communities and schools, etc.

A Colour Realm exhibition for the medical field was organised by the Shanghai Science and Technology Museum in collaboration with the Shanghai Mental Health Centre. It opened to the public on July 5, 2025, and many citizens came to see it. The whole Exhibition Area is in a spiral shape inside a conch shell. Two immersive video works, Morning Light and Deep Blue Dream, used flowing orange-red and serene blue colours to represent the start of activity and the peace after worry. The hospital will select suitable patients for regular check-ups and, at a later time, open up to the public for appointment-based services [10]. The Mind-Body Realm exhibition at the Shanghai-Style Art Museum takes a different approach by gathering the forces of art museums, universities, hospitals and social institutions to be open to patients with mental disorders, children with autism and the general public at the same time.

Add the concept of community as well. The "Urban Slow Healing Program" introduced by Jinji Lake Sub-district in Suzhou Industrial Park integrates mental health care into the system of community cooperation to provide psychological support services closer to the people. An exhibition of AI emotional healing will alleviate the psychological pressure on people and motivate them to participate more willingly. The "AT Space" community art healing program organised by Biyun Art Museum has also published a "Community Art Healing Guidance Manual" that can be directly applied and followed by neighbouring communities in their work [11].

There have been some developments at the school level as well. The "Ecological Art Therapy Theme Exhibition" at East China Normal University and the "Forest in the Palm of Your Hand" exhibition at Leshan Normal University have both introduced art therapy curating into the university's mental health education system. In terms of the layout of the exhibition area, the design of interaction, and the arrangement of the process, these exhibitions have provided other schools with direct reference cases.

Based on the above analysis, the medical field will be more professional and standardised; the community will be more accessible in daily life; and schools will integrate this content into their curriculum. Although the three directions have different focuses, they are all motivated by the same reason: to gradually bring emotional care from professional institutions into public life and allow more people to enjoy it.

7. Conclusion

The five areas of study in this paper are the definition of the concept, the construction of spatial narrative, multi-sensory interaction, workshop extension and application in diverse scenes, etc. The main point of the art therapy exhibition is that it has achieved a transformation by moving private art therapy into a public exhibition setting. Therefore, the following two problems have arisen. First, the form of participation has changed. The previously private therapeutic experiences have become public-facing exhibitions and do not require any art education or prior knowledge of psychotherapy. One can start to see the exhibits here. Secondly, the cost of learning has dropped. Abstract problems of emotional health have taken many forms in specific types of spatial arrangements and interactive installations. The public participants do not need

to face the label of "psychological problems" during the participation process and can complete the awareness and expression of emotions at this time. The two reasons above provide a reason for a different type of art therapy exhibition.

There is also some supporting data. Data on cortisol and pro-inflammatory cytokines from King's College London, as well as feedback collected through the PANAS scale at several domestic exhibitions, all indicate that this model has caused some changes in emotion. In addition, the creation of an art therapy curator training program, the selection of outstanding projects in art galleries, and the dissemination of this model in hospitals, communities and schools all indicate that it is moving from exploratory pilot work towards more organised practice.

Certainly, there are still problems. The assessment tools have not been standardized, so the results of different exhibitions cannot be directly compared; most of the existing studies rely on immediate feedback from a single activity, and data on long-term effects are lacking; and systematic research on the different strategies employed by various groups has not been carried out. Based on the existing practice, art therapy curators have indeed offered an alternative path away from the traditional way.

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