

Dialoguing with Images

Probably one of the most common misconceptions about art therapy is that it is about interpreting art. Shaun McNiff is an art therapist in the US who has written a lot about the autonomous life of images and how we abuse and kill images when we label and interpret them – when we rigidly hold to and assign a meaning to them. He describes a process of dialoguing with images. When we acknowledge the life and autonomy in our images, we can open to what they can bring into our lives. Each of the two participants in this dialogue are autonomous, each with their own feelings, needs, and desires.

“Personifying images, gestures, and other artistic expressions enables them to act as ‘agencies’ of transformation rather than simply ‘illustrations’ of the psyches of their makers.”
(McNiff, 2004, p. 85)

The Process of Dialogue: It takes two...

First, speak to the image as yourself, imagining that you are speaking to a person.

1. Look at the image carefully. Look deeply as if you are watching another person.
Begin to speak by telling this ‘other’ what you see in detail.
2. How does what you see make you feel?

Next, become the “image’s speaker”

1. How does the image feel about being seen in that way?
2. What does the image need?
3. What does the image want me to know?

References:

- McNiff, S. (2004). *Art heals: How creativity cures the soul*. Boston: Shambhala.
McNiff, S. (1992). *Art as medicine: Creating a therapy of the imagination*. Boston: Shambhala.