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## On the Interactive Relationship between Humans and Art Therapy in Contemporary Art Spaces

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### Abstract

Faced with life pressures such as academic examinations and employment, contemporary young people experience psychological anxiety and unease, with their spiritual and cultural needs continuously escalating, necessitating psychological solace through diverse channels. As a primary avenue for the public to fulfill spiritual and cultural needs, contemporary art spaces are increasingly manifesting their public responsibility; in recent years, they have gradually embarked on experimental integrations with art therapy, advancing toward transformation and upgrading through practical development. This article first categorizes the spatial manifestations of art therapy, analyzes its underlying logic and operational mechanisms, and subsequently investigates the interactive relationships among individuals, art therapy, and contemporary art spaces, thereby seeking a foundation and possibilities for their mutual development.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

**Title:** On the Interactive Relationship Between People and Art Therapy in Contemporary Art Spaces

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**Abstract:** Faced with the pressures of academic advancement, employment, and other life stressors, contemporary youth are experiencing heightened levels of anxiety and unease. Their spiritual and cultural needs continue to evolve, necessitating exploration of additional avenues for psychological solace. Contemporary art spaces have emerged as one of the primary means through which the public can satisfy these needs, and their public responsibility has become increasingly apparent. In recent years, there has been a gradual shift toward incorporating art therapy into these spaces as part of their developmental transformation. This article begins by categorizing the spatial presentation of art

therapy and analyzing its inherent logic and operational mechanisms. It then delves into exploring the interactive relationship between individuals, art therapy, and contemporary art spaces in order to identify common ground for their mutual development potential.

**Keywords:** art healing; public space; new public cultural space; interactive relationship

As the pace of modern urban life accelerates, young people often feel lost and depressed when confronted with complex work and life challenges. In 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the world, dealing a massive blow to both the physical and mental health of the public. Affected by a series of derivative issues including medical risks, economic pressures, and interpersonal relationships, people harbored multiple uncertainties about the future, and pessimistic sentiments spread throughout society. According to an online survey of 50,000 people conducted by Academician Lu Lin of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and his team[3], the probabilities of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) among medical staff, infected individuals, and the general population during the pandemic were 26.9%, 23.8%, and 19.3% respectively—undoubtedly adding insult to injury for youth groups already under tremendous pressure from academic and employment challenges. In April 2022, the General Office of the State Council issued the “14th Five-Year Plan” for National Health, which further clarified the development goal of “slowing the rising trend of psychological-related diseases by 2025 and effectively controlling serious mental disorders.” As society enters the post-pandemic recovery phase and various industries resume work and production, the issue of mental health reconstruction among young people has attracted increasing media attention.

A 2022 survey on the “spiritual consumption” status of contemporary young people, released by the JD Consumption and Industrial Development Research Institute in collaboration with multiple institutions[4], revealed that nearly 70% of respondents prioritized recreational needs (watching movies, listening to music, reading books, using mobile phones, etc.), followed by learning-oriented needs (professional skill improvement, certification training, etc.) and artistic/cultural needs (learning musical instruments, visiting exhibitions, attending lectures, etc.). Among these, “Generation Z” (typically referring to digital natives born between 1995 and 2009 for whom the internet and digital products are part of daily life)[5] showed higher interest in recreation, learning, and arts than other age groups, making them the primary demanders and consumers of spiritual and emotional fulfillment.

In recent years, art therapy activities have shown a trend of extending into contemporary art spaces represented by museums and art galleries. Integrating art therapy into healing spaces represents a social trend in interdisciplinary design application in China’s post-pandemic era[1]. The “14th Five-Year Plan” report also proposed requirements for “continuously optimizing the layout of the cultural industry structure and significantly improving the quality of cultural supply.” The current development of integrated cultural and tourism consump-

tion formats must consider not only economic benefits but also address people's internal spiritual needs, promoting a "people-centered" development concept and enhancing public participation. Based on this, this article aims to explore the multidirectional interactive relationships and relational effects among art therapy activities, young participants, and contemporary art spaces, thereby providing innovative inspiration for art therapy creators and participants to further enrich activity content and expand application scenarios. Simultaneously, it offers new development opportunities for domestic contemporary art spaces to innovate exhibition forms and connotations and enhance social responsibility based on the interactive relationship between people and art therapy.

## 1. The Spatial Presentation of Art Therapy and Its Internal Mechanisms

The term "art therapy" can be traced back to a 1922 psychiatric work by German art historian and psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn. In the 1930s, American psychiatrist Margaret Naumburg formally proposed the concept and subsequently introduced it as a therapeutic method into psychiatric research. After nearly a century of development, it has established a relatively complete theoretical system abroad. In China, however, theoretical research and practice related to art therapy remain quite limited. From an academic perspective, domestic scholars have only recently begun attempting interdisciplinary research between art therapy and fields such as architecture, education, and medicine. The China Academy of Art offered a course in "Art Psychology" in 1990, which is the earliest recorded domestic institution to conduct art therapy teaching and research. Additionally, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music Education Development Foundation's support for music therapy activities for breast cancer patients has sparked industry discussion on the psychological healing functions of music and related methodologies.

Regarding the term "public space," it first appeared in Western sociological and political philosophy works published in the 1950s. Western academic discussions on public space primarily exhibit interdisciplinary characteristics, encompassing issues such as democratic politics, architectural design, and philosophy, reflecting changes in Western social values. Contemporary art spaces possess two important attributes—"artistic" and "public"—making them a type of public space. Their "artistic" nature serves as a catalyst for activating public space vitality, a platform for innovating public participation and enriching spiritual worlds, and offers entertainment and aesthetic education functions difficult for other public space forms to replace. According to data released by China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism at the "Innovative Expansion of Urban and Rural Public Cultural Spaces" symposium[6], as of September 2023, China has built over 33,500 new public cultural spaces. Since public space itself is a product of interdisciplinary development, understanding its concept requires comprehensive research from multiple disciplines. Concerns about public space should gradually shift from practical social issues such as "old village renovation" to

the interactive relationship between “people” and “space.” For museum and art gallery public cultural spaces, mainstream academic circles have previously conducted insufficient research on their significance for public participation, requiring the addition of more humanistic perspectives. Furthermore, the “publicness” of contemporary art spaces is reflected not only in the public attributes of their spatial carriers but also in the “public participation” of their content dissemination audiences. In summary, the author believes that “art therapy,” as an expressive treatment method, demonstrates a trend of multidisciplinary collaborative research in domestic and international studies, with its spatial boundaries continuously expanding. Its presentation forms can be roughly categorized as follows:

### **(1) Spectator-Style Art Appreciation and Unidirectional Aesthetic Transmission**

The English term “Art Therapy” literally includes meanings such as art therapy, art treatment, and painting therapy. Among these, painting therapy can be considered a type of art treatment, and both belong to the category of art therapy. When many people think of art, they first think of so-called “fine arts” such as painting. In traditional art spaces represented by art galleries, paintings, artifacts, sculptures, and installations are also the most historically established and common forms of artistic presentation. The original purpose of Chinese and Western artists in creating artworks was to express inner emotions and convey personal attitudes, without expecting to evoke understanding or resonance from third parties; the public responsibility of art was not yet fully revealed. After works are exhibited, to ensure their preservation, the public must often view them from a certain distance, generally limiting their sensory experience to vision. During the appreciation process, viewers intake symbolic elements from the artwork, search for corresponding memory fragments in their minds to match them, and interpret the work from their own subjective perspective with the help of introductions, constructing a unidirectional aesthetic transmission with the work. However, due to varying work themes and styles, and constraints such as viewers’ education levels, aesthetic standards, and personal preferences, they may not fully understand the ideas the creator intended to express.

This form of art therapy is relatively primitive and common, primarily manifesting as the creator’s self-healing during the process of emotional expression, with few guided external healing appeals or evaluation mechanisms.

### **(2) Creative Participation-Based Emotional Catharsis and Audience Self-Expression**

When the general public faces extreme and highly stimulating special moments, their language expression systems are often in a state of chaos, making it difficult to clearly articulate their feelings and emotions using words. Art forms such as painting, sculpture, and dance abandon the rational processing of language systems and return to the most authentic and direct sensory experience. For

example, after the devastating Wenchuan earthquake on May 12, artist Zhou Chunya led a team to use painting creation as a healing method to help student groups rebuild mental health. During the creative process, participants used different colors, lines, and brushstrokes based on their personal experiences to paint, abstracting specific trauma-related figures and events into certain images or symbols, thereby conducting cognitive reconstruction in their subconscious and guiding students toward a spiritual outlet of liberation. In this process, painting creation transforms into a process of emotional visualization. After the painting is completed, an analytical communication session is added, where professional psychological counselors conduct associative analysis of the painting content based on the creator's personal background, deeply analyzing the inner world projected by the artwork.

Tracing the origins of creative participation-based art therapy, dance therapy emerged even earlier. This therapy originates from Jung's analytical psychology, Gestalt psychology, and self-psychology concepts, transforming "internal feelings" into a source of "active imagination," and belongs to expressive art therapy along with painting therapy. This irrational expression bypasses the language system and directly associates with physical experience, leading participants into deeper consciousness stages[2]. Creative participation-based healing methods often adopt group participation forms. From Jung's psychological perspective, the memories stored in our bodies include not only individual unconsciousness but also collective unconsciousness. Since ancient times, there has been evidence of people using dance to convey emotions and maintain community. Neolithic painted pottery with dance patterns mostly depicts multiple people dancing hand in hand. From the figures' attire and postures, it can be inferred as a ceremonial activity for celebrating harvests and praying for blessings. Unlike prehistoric uniformly choreographed dance movements, contemporary dance therapy emphasizes individuals freely dancing according to their authentic feelings. In the initial stages of healing, individuals often face psychological barriers, but dancing together with multiple people makes it easier to generate a sense of security and identity, gradually removing psychological defenses and releasing the self as much as possible. Dance therapy activities require cooperation between therapists and participants. Under the therapist's guidance, both parties must externalize internal feelings onto body movements according to the "mind-body integration" principle, thereby completing emotional catharsis and self-expression through dance.

### **(3) Immersive Multi-Sensory Integration and Virtual-Real Combined Experience**

As interactive installations, virtual reality, and other technologies continue to iterate and emerge, "immersive art" forms have been greatly enriched and developed. Existing research confirms that healing environments play a positive role in promoting positive emotions, reducing negative emotions, facilitating attention restoration, alleviating stress, and improving cognition[4]. Virtual environ-

ments can compensate for natural environments to a certain extent, bringing more personalized visual experiences to individuals. The core of this healing approach lies in mobilizing people's multiple sensory integration, promoting individual memory recall, triggering a series of physical and mental feelings, and thereby obtaining surreal experiences in spaces that break physical boundaries. Currently, academic circles generally believe that the mechanism of art therapy originates from the lateralization of brain function. The left hemisphere of the brain is primarily responsible for logical analysis, language organization, and comprehension memory, while the right hemisphere is mainly responsible for spatial image memory, emotion, imagination, and visual perception. When viewers are placed in virtual-real combined spaces, both their senses and psychology are influenced by environmental factors, and various regions of the cerebral cortex are fully mobilized and engaged under multiple stimuli, thereby enhancing the right brain's function and increasing happiness under strong stimulation. For example, Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama's interactive experience work "I Have a Dream" in 2013 and Random International's "Rain Room" created in 2015 both utilize virtual reality technologies such as sound, image, light, and shadow to provide audiences with interactive spatial experiences combining digital and physical elements. These embodied experiences (or memories of embodied experiences) triggered by environmental media can help healing subjects maintain higher and more sustained attention, improve their sense of happiness and self-esteem, and promote social inclusion[5].

## 2. The Interactive Relationship Between People and Art Therapy in Contemporary Art Spaces

### (1) The Interactive Relationship Between "People" and "Art Therapy"

In traditional artistic creation processes, the relationships involved are typically binary: between creator and artwork, and between viewer and artwork. With the arrival of the consumer society, elite art has gradually become popularized, placing higher functional demands on art therapy activities and expanding the social responsibilities carried by artistic activities. Art therapy, as an effective way to infuse artistic activities with social education and spiritual aesthetic education, uses art as a medium to purposefully help individuals transform their psychological and mental health states through designed processes and spiritual transmission, thereby achieving a higher level of selfhood. In this process, the binary relationship enriches into a ternary one: creator and artwork, viewer and artwork, and creator and viewer.

First, art therapy activities can help people reconstruct their relationship with themselves, a function more evident in art creators. As Dr. Meng Peixin stated, "The subconscious is the driver of creativity, and the creative process itself is healing. This process opens up people's cognitive space and enables the application of self-awareness functions to achieve healing." Human subconsciousness

is like a black box hidden in the heart, storing suppressed and supposedly forgotten things and intuitions, but in reality, the subconscious has a tremendous influence on human thinking and behavior. Artistic creation is an effective tool for expressing the subconscious. Creators transform fragmented memories and inspirations into other symbolic forms through non-language forms such as painting, thereby connecting with their deeper selves and ultimately achieving communication and balance between consciousness and subconsciousness. Memory is closely related to human psychological and spiritual activities. Many symbolic art installations use memory functions in psychology to awaken audiences' childhood memories about festivals, groups, and emotions. Artworks exert subtle psychological influences on viewers, then transfer audiences' emotions into artwork elements through an empathy-transference mechanism, thereby generating resonance and achieving effects of emotional infection, memory triggering, and cognitive reconstruction, influencing and healing audiences during their participation process.

Second, art therapy can enhance the construction of group relationships. For example, “one-to-many group therapy” is more suitable for obtaining emotional consensus through sharing experiences and exchanging insights, forming group resonance, and achieving self-growth and healing through social interaction. China's social structure has relational characteristics, covering daily life, work, and political activities with an invisible network of intersecting relationships. Art therapy can serve as a non-language tool to intervene in the construction of relationship networks, enhance organizational communication, promote emotional interaction, and strengthen social connection bonds.

## **(2) The Interactive Relationship Between “People” and “Contemporary Art Space”**

The roles played by “people” in contemporary art spaces are often independent and unidirectional outputs—they can be planners, builders, managers, or participants. All cultures require a standpoint, and the question of who determines the standpoint of contemporary art spaces is a process that develops through change. For example, the “2nd CAFAM Biennale: The Invisible Hand—Curating as a Standpoint” and “3rd CAFAM Biennale: Spatial Negotiation—Never Expected You to Be Like This” held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts Art Museum essentially explore the construction and reconstruction of discourse power. Contemporary art spaces' feedback to people through their cultural bearing and dissemination functions is actually the space transferring definitional power to the public, thereby strengthening their publicness. Through this transformation, contemporary art spaces return to value concerns for “people.”

The boundary of the interactive relationship between people and contemporary art spaces is interwoven and associated through this innovation. French artist Yves Klein's 1958 installation work *The Void (La Vide)* presented viewers with a transparent, empty display case containing a blank wall. The concepts of matter and void, visible and invisible, bounded and unbounded triggered discussions

about the correlation between artworks, people, and environment, representing installation art's movement toward non-visual, non-material conceptual art. Due to the absence of exhibits, viewers needed to reorganize the situation and space they were in and participate in the “physical sensation” of this spatial work. In today's society, the definition of art space has further broken through physical barriers, tending to treat contexts with non-material states and specific conditions as independent art spaces. Based on this, when this article discusses the relationship between people and “contemporary art space,” it is not limited to closed, independent physical spaces but includes all fields and situations where artistic activities can be conducted. The development and changes in the relationship between people and contemporary art spaces reflect not only academic development and innovation but also the reform of industrial structure and social cultural systems.

### **(3) The Interactive Relationship Between “Art Therapy” and “Contemporary Art Space”**

Art therapy and contemporary art space share common ground in being public-demand-oriented and humanistic-care-centered, jointly influencing people's emotional experiences and behavioral patterns. In recent years, as the physical spaces for art therapy have become diversified and borderless, the two have gradually developed a more solid symbiotic relationship.

Beyond vision, art therapy also touches upon audiences' hearing, touch, and even taste, making visitors' experiences more three-dimensional and multidimensional. Healing drama is a very vivid example. In recent years, China has also seen theatrical practices that break theater stage scenes and enter art gallery fields. M Woods Art Museum created a “metaverse” panoramic sound space in the “Austin Lee: Paradise” exhibition hall, presenting the emotions in the paintings through storytelling techniques and staging an immersive art healing drama *The End of Life Is a Bouquet of Flowers*. Through participating in dance tours, interactive healing games, and other segments, audiences interacted with actors following the drama's rhythm, exploring how to face personal emotions and urban anxiety in the electronic technology era, gradually finding their most authentic selves. In this case, healing drama extends the public service function of art museums to the construction of public mental health, further highlighting the humanistic care and social responsibility of contemporary art spaces. Art museums, as spaces, gradually move from static to dynamic, from transmitting knowledge to conveying emotions.

Contemporary art spaces provide a public platform for art therapy activities, also giving workers in this field opportunities to access more sample audiences. China's research on mental health is still in a developmental stage, and a considerable number of people cannot face their psychological problems squarely, feeling ashamed to seek healing methods due to social pressure and self-cognition limitations. Going to specialized institutions for psychological treatment undoubtedly means acknowledging psychological disorders, and the curious or pity-

ing gazes from others increase patients' psychological pressure. Additionally, receiving professional treatment requires significant financial and time costs, deterring many potential groups who are already hesitant. In comparison, contemporary youth participate more frequently in spiritual entertainment activities such as concerts and script murder games, and have lower psychological guard against interactive activities in such spatial scenes. As art therapy organizers, they can incorporate psychological healing elements into music composition or script design, transforming treatment costs into admission tickets for visiting experiences, allowing participants to engage in art therapy interactions subtly and improving treatment effectiveness.

#### **(4) The Comprehensive Interactive Relationship Between People and Art Therapy in Contemporary Art Spaces**

According to field theory, "a field can be defined as an objective relationship network existing among various positions." Within a field, the relationships among constituent elements are more important than the constituent elements themselves. People, art therapy, and contemporary art space, as three constituent elements under the same field, serve as both subjects and objects for each other, interacting and influencing one another in the process. The relationships are multidirectional and intersecting. Due to their different characteristics, functional attributes, and carried meanings, the specific mechanisms and related outcomes they play in each independent reaction chain are also different, and the interaction and evolution of these three elements also lead to changes in the field. When people are in contemporary art spaces, viewing artworks as aesthetic objects is a relatively thin learning process. However, participatory creation absorbs people together, enabling those who are objects to temporarily act as subjects in the process, re-examining the space and everything it contains. The fluidity of subject and object identities makes the direction and form of interactive relationships more diverse, thereby generating richer, multidirectional experiences. Practically speaking, this means attaching greater importance to people's subject status and leaving room for visitors to exert subjective initiative in activity planning and execution.

People, as the core of art therapy and contemporary art space, are the starting point and destination of both. Why does art therapy emerge? Why are art spaces created? Tracing to the source, it is human needs that facilitate them. People live in the real world but simultaneously exist in another imagined world. This fantasy is also generated based on people's realistic spiritual needs and physiological sensory structures, and therefore can also be regarded as a second "reality." When one of these realities is extremely deficient, psychological imbalance and dissatisfaction arise, leading to a series of mental health problems of varying degrees. Therefore, people need various healing methods, including art therapy, to restore themselves to a positive and healthy state. People, as subjects, facilitate the emergence of art therapy. As human needs shift and elevate, they continuously enrich and develop art therapy, further benefiting

more people. “Healing” differs from “treatment.” Compared with traditional medical methods, the essence of art therapy is that participants engage in an embodied interactive process with media, environment, and therapists through their bodies[6], focusing more on the participant’s experience during the healing process rather than directly pursuing treatment outcomes. An important characteristic of art therapy is metaphor. Whether in painting, dance, or other art forms, therapists often subtly mobilize the participant’s subjective initiative, enabling them to have dialogues with parts of themselves they were unaware of, expressing and healing in non-language forms[7].

Based on the nature of art therapy, the environment also plays an indispensable role as a necessary component in art therapy. Combined with the artistic characteristics of art therapy, contemporary art space becomes fertile ground for its effectiveness. Relying on the platform of contemporary art space, art therapy can make adaptive adjustments according to the characteristics of different types of art space carriers, entering people’s lives in more daily and diversified forms. People create various spaces with different attributes. The main functions of museums are collection, inheritance, and education; the main functions of cafes are providing beverages and atmosphere to meet people’s life needs. However, when they belong to contemporary art spaces in specific fields, art therapy endows them with richer meanings and functions and feeds back to people. As summarized in Figure 2[Figure 2: see original paper]-1, people, art therapy, and contemporary art space have independently existing, bidirectionally interactive multiple relationships, jointly seeking positive development through mutual integration.

[Figure 2: see original paper]-1 Schematic Diagram of the Interactive Relationship Among People, Art Therapy, and Contemporary Art Space (Drawn by the author)

From a socio-humanistic perspective, both art therapy and contemporary art space have characteristics of being oriented toward the masses and bear social responsibilities of stabilizing society and promoting cultural progress, thus possessing a foundation for cooperation. The general public has different educational backgrounds, consumption capacities, aesthetic orientations, and value concepts. Art therapy activities have flexible and universal characteristics that largely weaken the impact of individual differences, further reflecting the inclusiveness and fairness of aesthetic education healing. People are the common service object and common value orientation of art therapy and contemporary art space, providing the possibility for symbiotic mutual benefit and greatly avoiding problems and obstacles that may arise in cross-industry cooperation. When both parties consciously connect, they form a mutually promoting relationship that can potentially maximize their common goals under correct guidance. For individuals, the general public has broader and lower-threshold opportunities to receive healing; for society, the stable and positive mental state of the masses is a powerful guarantee for the continuous operation of all walks of life.

As a representative existence in the cultural industry, contemporary art spaces

must explore paths more suited to current conditions to seek their own development. In the author's view, one ideal collaborative path is to use contemporary art space as the field, art therapy activities as the tool, and under the leadership and participation of people, explore people's deeper worlds and continuously improve their psychological and mental health.

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