

ART THERAPY AS A TOOL OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION – FRIDA KAHLO IN THE STUDENTS' WRITTEN AND VISUAL REFLECTIONS

^aJANKA SATKOVÁ

*Department of Creative Arts and Art Education, Faculty of Education in Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
Dražovská cesta 4, 949 74 Nitra, Slovakia
email: ^ajsatkova@ukf.sk*

This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-15-0368.

Abstract: The art works of the famous artist Frida Kahlo could be a base for creation of reflections made by university students – the future teachers. This way our work with art had the principles of art therapy, because the students could express themselves, their inner world with its important difficult or painful messages. Beside it, the future teachers of fine art education can develop creativity and critical thinking. The students reflections were more or less intimate and personal, and we analyzed them by qualitative content analysis.

Keywords: Fine arts, Education, Future teacher, Creativity, Critical thinking, Reflection.

1 Introduction

At the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, we prepare the future teachers of fine arts education for the second degree of primary schools, for high schools and for the fine arts sections of art schools. An important part of our education is also work with the personalities of the students in area of their personal development. This time, emphasis is on critical thinking and creativity. To deal with fine arts itself, learning about lives of the artists and interpretative practical work with the art works, are perfect ways, how to develop creative and critical thinking, important in human's life, the more in preparing of the future teachers, which will have a big impact on their future pupils and students. Through practical/visual interpretation of art works, our students learn how to critically think about them and how to express their opinions. Usually, after familiarization with the specific artist, at first they have to say and write what they like or don't like about the artist. Then they make the visual and written reflections and listen to the opinions of their classmates about the art works.

2 Theory

The principles of art therapy are already included more or less in our current educational system, for example in the lessons of fine arts education in the schools. Although art therapy has its own difficulties, there are also many benefits of it.

Šicková (2008) defines art therapy as planned influencing of attitudes and behavior through art and through techniques derived from art, with aim of treatment or alleviation of disease, and an integration or enrichment of personality. The aim of art therapy is to rebuild disrupted natural disposition of person - creativity, spontaneity, ability to communicate with oneself, with others, with the environment, understanding of life in its context and meaningful living. There are individual and social objectives of art therapy, individual and group work with people, relaxation and therapeutic groups/aims of group, receptive and productive art therapy (perception and creation).

We implemented some of the art therapy principles into our lessons. An important part of a group creative work is discussion and the feedback. However, no one should be forcing to speak about own work. Finally, in group work, it is appropriate to reflect the experienced moments, also negative feelings, but mainly to share and reinforce the positive feelings. The common creation helps the members of the group to inspire each other, to develop communication and relationships within the group. It is believed that the experience of the group creation can be carried over into everyday life. In the beginning of the meeting, the group would agree about some rules. The rules should evoke an

atmosphere of trust, for example "Let every person speak. Everyone has the right to be heard. Each work will be accepted".

Our teaching of art therapy consists from two parts: passive – perceiving and active – creation part. We teach these two sides of art therapy at the didactic disciplines „Alternative Fine Arts Education“ and „Basis of Art Therapy and Artphiletics“ and both subjects are part of the study programme „Teaching of Fine Arts in Combination“.

3 Research

Aim of the study

To discover, how our students react on the Frida Kahlo's art work, and how we can use this way for personal development of the students in area critical thinking and creativity.

Hypotheses

According to the principles of qualitative research, we don't have any hypotheses.

Research plan

In February 2018, we get 13 written and 17 visual reflections from the 17 students, 2 male and 15 female.

Methods

The methods of data collection were the written reflections from the students. Processing method was a qualitative content analysis of the written students' reflections.

Material

During the lesson, we looked at the Frida Kahlo's photos and artworks in a book about her. Some of the students even saw a movie about her life and told us what they think about a movie and what form her life they remembered from the movie. After the introductions, the creative part of the lesson started. All students said and wrote their opinions about Frida Kahlo's artworks and then created their own paintings, inspired by her (the examples of the art works are the pictures 1 – 3). According to our experiences, the students consider this task as quite difficult. They can easily say if they like or don't like something, but they had trouble to express why, but we insisted on the task. Even after more time for thinking, some of the students were unable to substantiate their attitude. The next task was also quite difficult. We asked the students to create the artistic reflections of her art by water colours, but we asked them to react not only at the visual form of her art works, but to find something common between themselves and the artist. According to the art therapy rules, we pointed out the need for borders of intimacy, which the students should make themselves. Then, they started to create their paintings, but at first, they wrote down their spoken opinions and explanations.

4 Research results

In the students' written reflections, we can see a whole scale of the opinions – from „I like it very much“, through „it is not interesting for me“, to „I don't like it“. We consider this wide of evaluation as the proof of their authenticity and we are sure they did not respond how they thought they should.

Student's written reflections of the Frida Kahlo's artworks:

I'm confused from the work of Frida Kahlo and I have mixed feelings. I admire her for her courage in creation, and for the expression, which she was able to give into her work.

The same time I like and I do not like Frida Kahlo's creation. I like some of her paintings, but I think some are disgusting, for example the pictures of the born fetus (baby), or the corset. I liked the picture where she was twice, showing a disparity, but my impressions were very pleasant.

I like her work mainly because of the colors.

I appreciate F. Kahlo's creation because I like her courage in area of content and artistic expression.

I have a neutral attitude towards F. Kahlo's work. Despite the fact that some of her work are more pleasing than others, I do not consider her brave works repulsive or disgusting or inappropriate, because I simply accept the fact that it is her personal way of expressing her thoughts and feelings. Her work attracted me by expressing her attitude towards herself, her suffering, her life, through her works.

I don't like a creation of Frida K., because her paintings seemed very stereotypical and monotonous and not very special.

I like a creation of Frida K. I like also the paintings that others consider as disgusting and ugly, because they show also the dark side of life. But life is not just about those nice things, it is also about unpleasant things and experiences and we need to be able to deal with them.

I do not like it because of the too sharp colors and the style of painting itself. On the contrary, it is very sympathetic how she cope with her life and fate. I mean mainly self-portraits which are authentic and they are the expression of searching for her own identity.

I like it mainly because of the self-portraits, which I still see as an expression of self-interest, even though I know it is not so. I like also the colors and the use of animal and plant motives. I also perceive the pictures with a more negative value as nice and lovely.

I have mixed feelings about it. Some paintings attracted me with colors and I like mainly portraits and the pictures of animals. On the contrary, paintings showing their infertility are very disgusting to me.

I consider her as an interesting artist. I was most attracted to her self-portraits; especially that she did not appear too distorted, but realistically, as she really looked and perceived herself. I also like the colors and folk motives.

Generally I don't like the creation of Frida Kahlo, because the colors of her paintings are too aggressive for me.

In the view of the incidents in her life, I can say her paintings are often authentic. Nevertheless, I regard it as frightening, not regrettable. It is self-evident that the artist has coped with the incidents, and therefore I think they seem horribly. Nobody considers negative situations in "bright" shades. To me, these works are repulsive - like a nightmare.

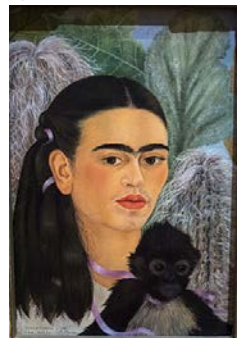
In the students' painting reflections of the Frida Kahlo's art works we can see multiple levels of connection between the student and the artist. Some of the students reacted only at the form of the artworks (typical colors, repeating of the topics), without deeper identification with the artist. Others reacted with a slight connection with the artist, finding something interesting in the author's personality. A few students found a deep connection between their lives and artist's artworks.

The pictures of students' visual reflections (pictures 4 – 20, author of all photos: Janka Satková) are organized from reactions at form to reactions at content and from shallow to personal level of intimacy and authenticity.



1.

2.



3.

Pictures 1, 2, 3. Frida Kahlo's art works.

1. Memory, the Heart, 1937.

2. The Broken Column, 1944.

3. Fulang-Chang and I, 1937.

Online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frida_Kahlo



4.



5.

Pictures 4, 5. The students' visual reflections at the Frida Kahlo's art works:

The Eyebrows. Stereotype in Creation.

The reflections (pictures 4 and 5) react only at the form of the Frida Kahlo's art works, without a visible connection between the students and the artist, what is visible also at the written comments on the other sides of the papers: „Eyebrows – repeating“, „Blue self-portraits - stereotype in creation“.

These words show that the boys don't like the Frida Kahlo's art works, or, at least, they are not interested in them. There is no deeper connection, maybe because the authors are the boys, or maybe they use to focus at form.



6.



7.

Pictures 6, 7. The students' visual reflections at the Frida Kahlo's art works: Color Flood. Hunting of Colors.

The reflections (pictures 6 and 7) do not show the connections between the students and the artist, because they react only at the colors of the artist's artworks, but they have quite attentive artistic expression and they show by the harmonic compositions that these female authors like the Frida Kahlo's art works.



8.

9.

Pictures 8, 9. The students' visual reflections at the Frida Kahlo's art works: Mixed feelings. Untitled.

The reflections (pictures 8 and 9) have no visible connections with the personalities of the students, but have one common part: they both show vivid colors typical for Frida Kahlo's works, but with a sign of familiarization of the dark side of her life and works. According to the written and verbal explanations from the female students, the symbols of difficult life and „disgusting works“ are the „ugly crossings between colors“ in the first picture, and the black drops and lines in the second picture.



10.



11.

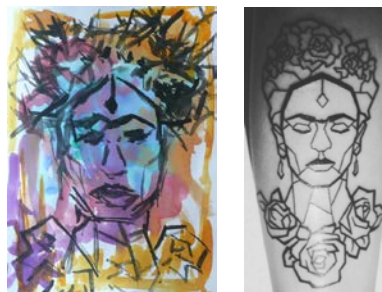
Pictures 10, 11. The students' visual reflections at the Frida Kahlo's art works: Harmony. Pleasant and Unpleasant.

Both paintings (pictures 10 and 11) were made by female students with concern. They show artistic complexity and have a connection with the students' personality. The first picture shows flowers in a meadow, because „Frida often showed nature in her pictures and I like to be in nature...“

The second picture expresses a students' worldview, based on duality of everything: „An image reflects my neutral or even mixed impression from the author's work. The more colorful, supposedly more merry part (on the left) is leaning towards linking the works of Frida Kahlo with nature and with vivid colors in the most of her self portraits. The right, darker part of the image shows the more uncomfortable part of her work, expressing her emotional attitudes that caused her accident. I wanted to express the imaginative duality of her work. Just as a coin has two sides, as well as good and bad exists, as well as

white and black contrasts, also Frida Kahlo's work can be both „pleasant“ and „unpleasant“.

We can see the student creatively included the title of the picture into her explanation. The most long text of all in the class reflects her interest in the artworks, but also indicates the students' responsible attitude to her school tasks, moreover she finished her picture during a break.



12.

13.



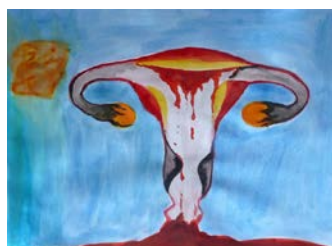
14.

Pictures 12, 13, 14. The students' visual reflections at the Frida Kahlo's art works: Colorful Frida. Photo of a tattoo. Down: Identity.

Both paintings (pictures 12 and 14) have the written comments. The first student has a tattoo of the Frida Kahlo's face (picture 13) and she feels a connection between her and the artist: „I like her creation and I tried to express it by the topic of a self portrait and by her typical colors. A self portrait is an image of my tattoo, which I perceive as a connection between Frida and me“. We can guess, that the female student perceives her life or life itself as difficult. The second picture (picture 14) is „reaction to searching for own identity, and reaction to inclusion into the society“, as the female student wrote, so it seems she deals with a problem of socialization this time.



15.



16.



17.

Pictures 15, 16, 17. The students' visual reflections at the Frida Kahlo's art works: I don't want to talk about it. Womb. Down: War.

These three reflections (pictures 15 – 17) have the strong connections with the female students. The first two students express a problem so intimate, that they hid it as a secret in the written comments: „I don't want to talk about it“, „A womb – no comment“. The first picture is even abstract, hiding the concrete message into the abstract shapes.

The third student wrote her explanation: „The war. My own fear expressed with style of F. K.“ The messages of the students are very short or without explanation. We guess the content of the pictures is so difficult that they were able to express it almost only by their pictures, and this reaction is typical for art therapy.



18.



19.



20.

Pictures 18, 19, 20. The students' visual reflections at the Frida Kahlo's art works: Untitled. Untitled. Down: Blood is not Water.

The first picture is without title or explanation, but with the comment: „I keep my thoughts for myself“. Taking into account the arrows from all sides and blood, we can guess the problem is a broken heart.

The second picture, with pointed digestive system inside the woman's body, has an explanation: „I think it is obvious what problem I have. I don't want to talk about it.“

The third picture has the explanation expressed deep inner world of the female student: „On a picture is a portrait of a woman with a menstruation. For men and for society at all, the topic is taboo. They all act as it does not exist, but it is an important part of woman's fertility“. It seems the last picture is not so intimate, because the student writes about a global social problem, but at the same time we can assume it is her personal problem, too. These three pictures have the principles of art therapy – the expressing the inner world with its important difficult or painful messages.

6 Discussion

From our position of a teacher of fine arts education we considered all pictures as meaningful and valuable, regardless of the level of depth and authenticity, but as the teacher of art therapy we appreciated more all students which reacted at Frida Kahlo's artworks with more personal images and texts, expressed their fear, sorrow, anger and troubles.

These types of the challenges are inspirational not only for the students but also for the teachers. After some problems with understanding, all students were able to create their reactions at the Frida Kahlo's artworks, then we were surprised by the depth and authenticity of our female students' works.

We suppose that some of them expressed such intimate topics, because they felt safe in the group then. We appreciate the pictures, which were so personal, that the female students did „not want to talk about it“, as they wrote on the back of the paper. Sure, this way art therapeutic process started, and we consider the obtained skills as very appropriate for the future teachers of fine arts. Now they can express their feelings by artistic creation and increase their emotional intelligence, also they can critically evaluate the art works and express their opinions.

7 Conclusion

At our department is the practical - visual interpretation of art work used also during the theoretical lessons (Réčka, 2018), mainly with the aim to develop creativity and critical thinking. Although we don't think such art therapeutic approach is suitable for education at elementary school, only with the older students, we hope this experience will wake up their interest in art therapy. At first we only wanted to increase creativity and critical thinking, but in the end, our students found new ways of artistic expression and higher level of self-knowledge.

Literature:

1. Réčka, A. 2018. *Kritické myslenie a tvorivosť v rozvoji kultúrneho povedomia a vyjadrovania budúcich učiteľov výtvarného umenia*. In: *Inovatívne trendy v odborových didaktikách v kontexte požiadaviek praxe: zborník štúdií z medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie*. Jana Duchovičová (red.). Nitra: UKF, 2018. p. 399-410. ISBN 978-80-558-1277-9. Online.
2. Šicková, J. 2008. *Základy arteterapie*. Praha: Portál, 2008. 165 p. ISBN 978- 80-7367-708-3.

Primary Paper Section: A

Secondary Paper Section: AM