

7. ART THERAPY AS A PRACTICE IN TIMES OF WAR AND TRAUMA INTERVENTION: THE ROLE OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION FOR CHILDREN IN UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract: *The recent war in Ukraine has brought physical and psychological damage widespreading trauma that can last for generations leaving indelible marks. Art therapy as a practice within war zones aids community cohesion and trauma processing during times of crisis. Unlike talk therapies, a non-verbal, accessible art practice has become a necessity, especially for children. In seven refugee camps in Republic of Moldova, a series of art workshops "My home" were conducted by Valeria Barbas for over 150 displaced Ukrainian children (in 2022). The independent initiative, which addresses the fragility of the concept of home, aimed to provide a temporary sense of security through art practice. Using drawing and painting as primary mediums in visual creation, fostered self-expression, so as the participatory, sharing and realization experiences, a sense of community.*

Key words: *art therapy, children, war in Ukraine, refugee, trauma, painting*

1. Introduction

The recent war in Ukraine has brought physical, psychological and emotional damage widespreading trauma that can last for generations leaving indelible marks. Mental health has emerged as a vital aspect of well-being, becoming a critical aspect of life nowadays, that affects societies worldwide, influencing both social structures and economic outcomes. The World Health Organization (WHO) has included mental well-being in its definition of health, describing it as "...a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" [1, p.1] and as "...a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" [2, p.1]. Recent WHO reports consider mental health an intrinsic value, suggesting it "can be attributed to various qualities in the abstract by society, culture, or philosophical or religious frameworks" [3, p.47]. Approaching mental health concepts in infancy and childhood in a particular culture it is important to analyze them within their political, economic and social context, and in correlation to a particular time segment.

2. Discussions

Amidst the backdrop of crises and the ongoing war in Ukraine, a profound toll on the mental health of millions, impacting individuals and communities across the country and those displaced globally. Pedro Mendes notes the enormous influence that "external life conditions," such as political, economic, and social hardships, exert on individuals in war-torn regions. He describes the situation in Angola, where 4 million (40%) of the population have been displaced as a result of the war and have moved from small towns or rural areas into slums on the outskirts of towns or into camps. He considers that "The inability to cope with urban life, loss of loved

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ones and property and current lack of work opportunity leads to an ingrained sense of hopelessness, dependency on external aid and resignation to an unpredictable future. The resulting attitudes of apathy and passivity impact on all human relationships, but particularly on relationships with children” [4, p.47].

The Republic of Moldova, a significant host and transit country for refugees, has received an estimated 810,836 Ukrainian citizens as of November 2022 (according to General Inspectorate of Border Police data) [5]. The displacement of millions of Ukrainians has created a host of additional mental health challenges. Refugees face stressors that compound the trauma of war, such as language barriers, economic hardships, and uncertainty regarding their future. Separation from loved ones, feelings of isolation, and a lack of community support exacerbate these challenges.

War is a traumatic experience that led to widespread psychological distress, war-related psychological effects, with children particularly vulnerable to: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), flashbacks, fear of contact, nervous tics, hypervigilance, nightmares, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, disrupted childhood development. Despite the challenges, significant efforts are being made both nationally, internationally and locally – a community-based support implying local volunteers, to address the mental health crisis in Ukraine. In seven refugee camps in Republic of Moldova, a series of art workshops “My home” were conducted by artist V.Barbas for approximately 200 displaced Ukrainian children aged 3 to 14. The independent initiative "My Home" addresses the fragility of the concept of "home" amid wartime uncertainty, having the purpose to offer a temporary sense of security through art practice.



During March - December 2022, weekly painting workshops were held at six refugee centers in Chişinău, the capital of the Republic of Moldova: Moldexpo, USM FRIȘPA, The Temporary Placement Center for Refugees from Ukraine (Центр допомоги біженцям з України у Молдові on Drumul Viilor, 38/1), "Andrieș" Community Center for Children and Youth (Râșcani sector), FIDES Refugee Center, Ukrainian Refugee Placement Center at the Light Athletics Hall. The idea for these art workshops emerged as a response to a critical need observed in the initial phase of migration (March–April). At that time, many centers lacked formal representation from international child-focused organizations and did not have dedicated spaces for children. The need for these workshops became evident when observing young children’s drawings, which often depicted the horrors of war.

Art as the need for creative self-expression during wartime has been noted by several researchers, seen as an internal survival strategy and a means to exert control over one's inner emotional world. Ornstein (2006), in her study on creativity among those in concentration camps, describes art as a fundamental human necessity in the face of horror and dehumanization, that provides solace amidst atrocity [9, p. 386-406]. The weekly painting workshops in Moldovan refugee centers served as psychological refuge zones for children, providing avenues for self-expression, emotional regulation, and community connection. The workshops aimed to offer children a psychological refuge, a shelter and a way to recuperate from trauma through artistic expression. Workshops were also conducted in rural areas, specifically in community centers in the villages of Hîrtop (Cimișlia), Cociulia, Popeasca, and at the Palanca camp at the border.

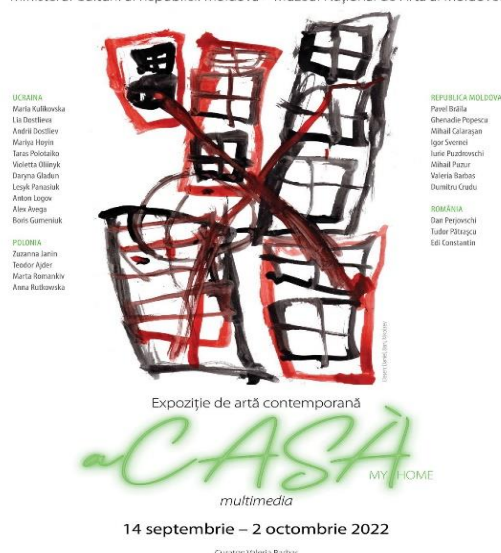
Art therapy as a practice within war zones aids community cohesion and trauma processing during times of crisis. Creative Arts Therapies (CATs) is a broad term used for mental health interventions that blend a wide range of therapeutic approaches integrating creative and expressive arts, such as art therapy, music therapy, dance/movement therapy, drama therapy, or poetry therapy [6, p.2]. Unlike other talk therapies, art therapy has proven to be a valuable tool, as a non-verbal, accessible and participative art practice. It became a necessity, for the ones who struggle to articulate traumatic experiences, especially beneficial for children, who often lack the language to express trauma verbally. Art therapy involves creating visual art (drawing, painting, etc.) individually, however through our observations, it is most effective in group drawing or painting, fostering feelings of participation, sharing, the realization of shared experiences, and a sense of community.

The war in Ukraine (which began in 2014 and escalated in 2022) has resulted in large-scale displacement, separation from family members, and constant exposure to aggression and stress. The immigration process represents a profound life transition for many families and is considered a "secondary trauma" for children and their families, as they face various challenges such as adapting to a new school system, job market, housing, and learning a new language [8, p.50-53]. Rooted in psychological theories from Jungian archetypes to Freudian psychoanalysis, art therapy offers a framework for emotional exploration and processing.

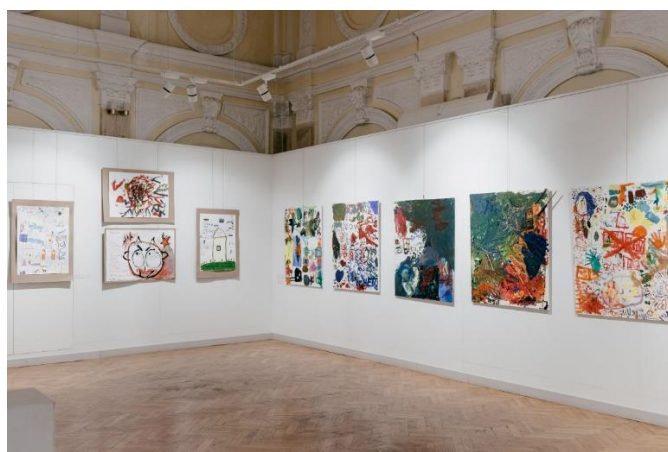
The creative workshops focused on drawing and painting used diverse techniques, including watercolor, gouache, acrylic, and pencil. Using drawing/painting as primary mediums, children were encouraged to depict "safe places" or "happy memories." Art, beside a form of individual expression, is regarded also as a communicative tool: „Drawing tends to convey far more to the observer than language does. Children may not yet have sufficient skills for abstract linguistic expression, but they have symbolic communication methods such as drawing" [7, p. 2220].

3. Results

The results of the art workshops were presented in several painting/drawing curated exhibitions featuring works created by Ukrainian children, both in placement centers and within cultural and art institutions—from cultural houses in rural areas to the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, the Presidency.



The exhibition „Acasă” (transl. *home*) curated by V. Barbas at National Museum of Art, children's paintings and drawings were exhibited alongside works by professional contemporary artists from Moldova (Pavel Braila), Romania (Dan Perjovschi), Ukraine (Lia Dostlieva, Maria Kulikovska), and Poland (Zuzanna Janin). For many children, this was their first experience participating in an art exhibition, symbolizing both the recognition of their experiences and the validation of their voices.



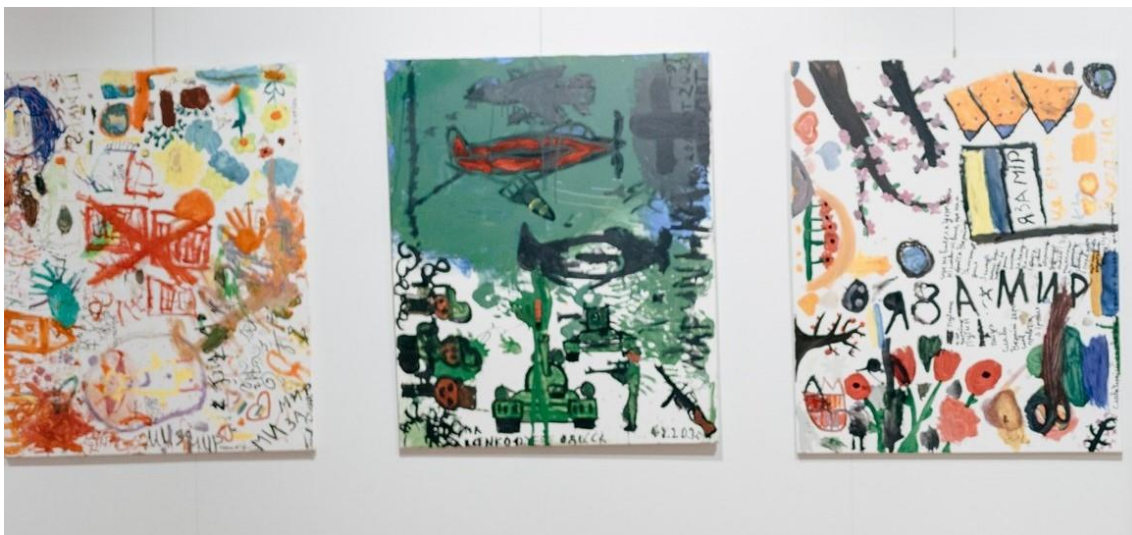
“Acasă” exhibition, National Art Museum, 2022, Chișinău, R. Moldova

Throughout the year, children of various ethnic backgrounds (including Ukrainian, Azerbaijani, Romani, Moldovan, and Belarusian origins) from different regions of Ukraine—Odessa, Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Irpin, Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy, Zaporizhzhia, and others—participated in the drawing and painting workshops. War disrupts both personal and communal identity, resulting in lost or diffused identity; through art practice, children can reclaim parts of themselves lost to war, reinforcing their sense of self and resilience. The other theme explored in imagistics is the migration, using as code: bus, car, train, departure, walking figures, suitcase. This perspective was regarded in special project extension on theme of portretizing migration, conducted during one month within refugee camp in Popeasca village, focusing on family portret and self portrait.



Results of art workshops presented at curated exhibition "My Family & I" OU Gallery, Chişinău, R. Moldova

Given that the workshops took place over the span of a year, the impact of trauma can be observed both as immediate and during a year of migration. Thus, as a reflection of immediate post-trauma, during the first months, the themes of the drawings predominantly represented scenes of war. Art therapy sessions revealed a progression in children's themes, with early drawings predominantly depicting war scenes, which gradually shifted to themes of peace and family as children experienced a sense of safety. Symbols of peace included family, the home, pets, and nature, while symbols of war included destroyed homes, soldiers, and weapons. Also changes were observed in the use of the color palette, from bichromatic, or the limitation only to pencil — to plurichromatic. This shift demonstrates how art helps children navigate complex emotions, reclaiming parts of their lost or fragmented identities.



4. Conclusions

Visual creation and self-expression allow individuals to project internalized emotions (an "inner war") and suppressed memories onto external mediums—externalizing trauma, thus providing relief and insight. Post-war trauma tends to be transmitted intergenerationally, making long-term intervention through various artistic practices all the more important and essential. As mentioned by Debra Kalmanowitz and Bobby Lloyd: "The role of art making and art therapy have in supporting individuals, families and communities in coping with their experiences of political violence. Art therapy is only a fragment of a growing discourse among

a wide range of disciplines responding to political violence and trauma” [10, p.3]. In conflict zones, art become an especially valuable tool, a practice, that taps into creativity to foster emotional expression and overcoming trauma. By enabling individuals to visualize and externalize their experiences, art therapy fosters resilience, healing, and a sense of community amid the upheaval of war.

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