

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

## Therapeutic Self-Portraiture: finding a sense of self during the Pandemic

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With the beginning of the pandemic regular mode of living and doing things have significantly shifted from familiar to unrecognisable. For months we have been unlearning to trust the touch of our loved ones, and even our own skin. News flooded in often confusing us with contradicting information and overwhelming data. The infection curve had become an inverse graph of our mood – when it went up our mood collapsed, when it started to decline – we gained hope. Symptoms were appearing and disappearing making it difficult to listen to our own body – is it a bit of a sore throat or something worse? Adaptation in a world under constant change has never been an easy task, however, trying to function under the permanent threat of contamination has rendered that challenge wearing.

The pandemic is beyond anyone's control, nevertheless the fact that there is no clear end point to this situation fills even the most resilient of us with anxiety. In a recent copy of *The Lancet Psychiatry*, researchers at the University of Oxford stated that it is likely one in five people will be diagnosed with a mental illness within a few months of testing positive (Taquet et al., 2020). This concern was mirrored by Dame Til Wykes, Professor of Clinical Psychology and Rehabilitation at King's College London, who said that society ought to prepare for more mental health problems in the coming years: "*We need to develop as many different, accessible forms of mental health support as possible*" (Roundup of Science Media Centre Briefing, 2020).

As a writer and portrait photographer who lost work due to the outbreak of the pandemic, I started to look at the ways I could adapt my skills and expertise to address the current mental health challenge on a personal and global level. From experience and research I knew that staying in constant worry switches on the survival mode, that has a profound and long lasting influence on mental and physical health. According to Harvard Health Publishing, prolonged stress causes brain changes that may contribute to anxiety, depression, and food, alcohol or drug addiction (2020). So how exactly does mind and body react to a traumatic experience such as the current global pandemic? Most common coping mechanisms include avoidance, denial and repression of the negative emotions. In extreme cases the habit of ignoring emotional clues and numbing senses leads to the development of alexithymia. This is a condition in which a person is disturbed by emotions, to the extent that they are unable to identify or describe their feelings, and even distinguish them from the strong bodily sensations.

Having that in mind, my natural impulse was to look for strategies to deal with mental distress through body related practices. In *Body Keeps The Score* Dr. Van der Kolk quotes his teacher Elvin Semrad who once said that being in charge of your life starts by fully acknowledging the reality of your body, in all its visceral dimensions (2015, p. 73–74). His own findings indicate that re-embodiment can happen through rhythmic interactions and development of somatic awareness. To do that one needs to learn how various feelings manifest themselves in the body. The goal is to connect abstract emotions to their underlying sensations such as pressure for anger, temperature for fear, tension or feeling hollow for anxiety.

Therefore to get in touch with my inner state I created a daily practice of setting up a camera on a tripod and staying present in front of it while acknowledging any rising physical sensations. The time needed to take a self-portrait was an excuse to get into a mindset of discovering the long repressed feelings that were slowly coming up. António Damásio in his book *The Feeling of What Happens* writes “*It is through feelings, which are inwardly directed and private, that emotions, which are outwardly directed and public, begin their impact on the mind; but the full and lasting impact of feelings requires consciousness, because only along with the advent of a sense of self do feelings become known to the individual having them*” (1999, p.36). After a while I started to verbalise the emotional insights from the practice into metaphors creating a library of feelings that I was not aware of before.

Application of photography for therapeutic practice was originally initiated by a Psychologist and Art Therapist Judy Weiser, the Founder and Director of the PhotoTherapy Centre in Vancouver. Weiser suggested that photography can be used to increase well-being, self-knowledge and improving relationships with family and others along with challenging societal issues such as isolation, intercultural relations and social injustice (1999). For the purpose of this article, I focus solely on therapeutic photography, which is defined as self-initiated and self-conducted photo-based activities as opposed to phototherapy where a formal therapist or counsellor is involved.

My main aim in creating a therapeutic self-portraiture method was to establish a simple and easy-to-follow sequence of actions that do not require any creative decision-making, which can potentially trigger irritation and frustration. The process of being in front of the

camera in this practice is important and valid by itself: without any special clothes, props or posing skills. This approach to portraiture reminded me of the essay by John Berger on Fayum portraits, which in 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE Egypt, were an equivalent of a passport for the mummy, destined to be buried. Berger described them as 'Images of men and women making no appeal whatsoever, asking for nothing, yet declaring themselves, and anybody who is looking at them, alive!' (2015, p.64)<sup>1</sup>. Likewise my practice of taking self-portraits seemed to me a legitimate declaration of self-presence, with all its contradiction and complexity within the larger context of nerve-racking pandemic.

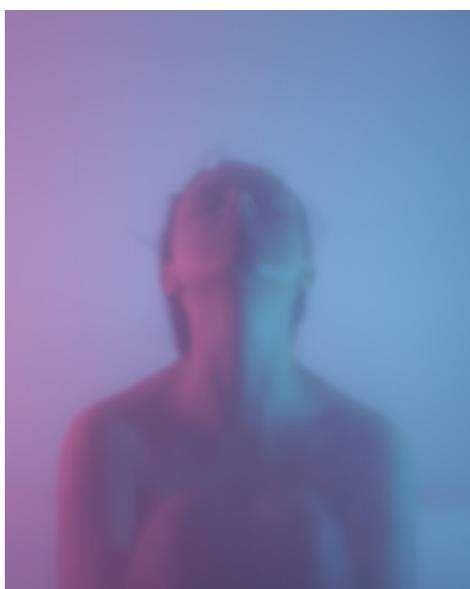


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

When external stimuli become overwhelming the most natural strategy is to turn attention inwards. In this sense self-portraiture is an embodied attempt to learn how to connect body and mind while doing it in a liberating and comforting privacy of one's own home. The whole process requires only a basic skill set and equipment. The camera serves just as a tool and a mode to document ever evolving personal states and a strategy to explore the self. Moreover, using photographs to express feelings, which might be hard to put into words, offers an opportunity for communicating on a non-verbal level with others. As an instant bonus, it provided me with gratification of an accomplished task and in the long-term it has given me a collection of objectively documented states of mind and subjectively expressed feelings available for later analysis in a therapy. In times of hardship photography can be a powerful tool to draw attention to yourself and your own life, which unlike the global pandemic, can be taken under control by the individual.

### **About the Author**

Daria Klima is a photographer and writer with a degree in photojournalism from Danish School of Media and Journalism and Moscow State University. Currently she is researching an innovative way to combine art-therapy and self-portraiture techniques in application to contemporary mental health challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> The Fayum Portraits can be viewed at:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/world-history-magazine/article/al-fayyum-egypt-mummies-portraits-history>