

## Conceptual Therapeutic Photography Effect After Fifteen Years (Case Study: Evita Sugiarto)

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### Abstract

Therapeutic photography is generally better known by the realism photography style that displays photos as they are as a medium to store memories, but in this research the author tries to take a different approach through a pictorial photography style that emphasizes the concept in the photo. The purpose of this research is to find out how therapeutic photography with a pictorial style approach can still provide therapeutic benefits as perceived in the realism style approach? Then how is the therapeutic effect produced by the photo fifteen years later since the photo was first made? This research uses a qualitative methodology, with a case study approach for an exploratory, longitudinal analysis of the fifteen-year experience of the subject named Evita Sugiarto. In addition, the researcher also wanted to further explore Roland Barthes' Studium and Punctum theories on the subject. The research results are that conceptual photography can still provide therapeutic benefits to Evita Sugiarto even for fifteen years through the Studium and Punctum of her photo.

**Keywords:** *Therapeutic, Photography, Conceptual.*

### Introduction

#### Conceptual Photography

Conceptual photography is a genre of photography in which the artist's primary objective is the conveyance of a concept, idea, or message, as opposed to the mere capture of a visually appealing or realistic image. The medium of photography is employed to explore philosophical, political and emotional themes, frequently through the use of staged and manipulated imagery.

In the early years of the 20th century, the primary function of photography was for the purpose of documentation. The concept of conceptual art was pioneered in 1950 by the sculptor Edward Kienholz. This new genre of art focuses on concepts or ideas in a work as a freer form of expression and is less concerned with technique, skill, material and the beauty of form (Suler, Zakia, 2018). The domain of conceptual photography has expanded concomitantly with technological advancements, such as the advent of digital cameras and the development of post-processing software.

Conceptual works are characterised by the presence of ideas, symbolism, and metaphors, which are often staged or constructed in a deliberate manner. These works often take the form of narratives or are interpretive in nature.

The medium of conceptual photography has the capacity to convey a more expansive and liberated message, encompassing social issues, political subjects, and human psychological themes.

The approach to the actualisation process of the work can also vary. While it may appear to be a common concept, its visualisation can differ or be unconventional, often containing an element of ambiguity. Consequently, it can be interpreted subjectively, according to the viewer's expectations, feelings, and background. In other words, there can be a process of assimilation or sharpening.

#### Therapeutic Photography

Therapeutic photography and conceptual photography can be said to be related because the creative photographic approach, in essence, provides a means to translate and evaluate personal experiences through the creation of original photographic artwork. The process under discussion has

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been shown to facilitate a new relationship with experiences through the development of emotional distance. The term 'emotional distance' is employed here to denote the means by which an experience can be understood, and its implications appreciated, from a more balanced and informed perspective. When contextualised within a health-related framework, it has been utilised as a significant approach for fostering personal well-being, facilitating the process of 'therapeutic change' (Dalley in Loewenthal, 2013).

Therapeutic photography is defined as a photography-based activity that is either self-initiated or conducted in a group setting. The primary distinction between therapeutic photography and other forms of photography is that it does not necessitate the involvement of a counsellor, therapist, or mental health professional. The primary objectives of therapeutic photography are to enhance self-knowledge and awareness among the individual, to promote positive social change, to strengthen communities, to improve intercultural relations, to reduce conflict, to draw attention to issues of social justice, to deepen visual literacy, to enhance education, to expand qualitative research methodologies, to produce other kinds of photo-based healing or learning (Weiser, 2010). The fundamental techniques encompass photographs of subject, photographs of subject taken by others, self-portraits, family photographs, biographical photographs of subject, and photo-projectives (Weiser, 2015).

The therapeutic use of photography has been demonstrated to facilitate the exploration of emotions, the articulation of verbal information, and self-confrontation (Fryrear in Gibson, 2018). This approach has been shown to engender opportunities for patients/clients to express themselves creatively. The resulting photographic work is not a cure, but a useful supplement to enhance therapeutic communication (Cosden, Reynolds in Gibson, 2018).

The practice of therapeutic photography is founded on the principle that its efficacy is derived from the subject itself, and its usefulness must be perceived by the subject. In approaching internal factors, it is important to be able to empathise and to explore in a rational manner from psychological, physiological and social perspectives, in order to create perceptions and representations of the source. This multifaceted approach can be initiated from the perspective of the subject's personal experiences and self-perceptions within their social milieu. An approach may be adopted through a variety of avenues, including family, education, friendships, talents, hobbies, and social life.

## **Research Methods**

### **Methods of Data Collecting**

This research uses a qualitative methodology that focuses on understanding people's experiences, behaviours and social phenomena from a subjective point of view. Qualitative research emphasises depth, context and interpretation to explore open questions such as how and why. This approach is rooted in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology and education, where understanding complexity is essential.

The approach taken was a case study approach, which is a research design found in a variety of fields, particularly evaluation, in which researchers develop an in-depth analysis of a case, often a programme, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. The case is bounded by time and activity, and the researcher collects detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (Stake, Yin in Creswell, 2018).

Primary data was collected by interviewing Evita Sugiarto via Zoom online meeting, observing during the interview and showing some photographic artefacts.

### **Methods of Data Analyzing**

The method of data analysis is carried out by triangulating the results of the primary data interviews, then comparing them with Judy Weiser's theory of therapeutic photography and also with Roland Barthes's theory of studium and punctum, while also using the general interpretation of Cristina Nunez, who in my other research has said that conceptual photography seems less suitable for therapeutic photography because it is feared that the therapeutic effect that occurs does not last long compared to realism photos that are as they are.

## **1 Results and Discussion**

The subject was Evita Sugiarto, born on 27 November 1997 in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia. Evita is a woman with cerebral palsy, her daily activity is working at home managing paid promote social media. Evita and her family are quite religious, so Evita has been quite familiar with church activities

since her childhood. Evita Sugiarto profile picture with the author Junaidi Wirawan at the Special School of Yayasan Pembinaan Anak Cacat (YPAC) Surabaya in 2009 (see Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Evita Sugiarto (left), and the author Junaidi Wirawan (right).

The author started the Hopes and Dreams project in 2009 until the beginning of 2010, in which the author worked with the Special School of Yayasan Pembinaan Anak Cacat (YPAC) Surabaya to create conceptual photos according to the hopes and dreams of 23 kindergarten to high school students. One of them was Evita Sugiarto, who was 12 years old at the time (3rd grade). After a one-month process of approach and socialisation, Evita chose the concept of a church singer, symbolised by the image of a dove on her microphone. To make the photo process more memorable and natural, the microphone was fully active and the song played was a spiritual song that Evita liked. This made Evita feel comfortable and she sang with deep emotion. Behind the scene of the photosession (see Fig. 2). Hopes and Dreams conceptual photowork of Evita Sugiarto (see Fig. 3).



**Fig. 2.** Behind The Scene of the Photosession.



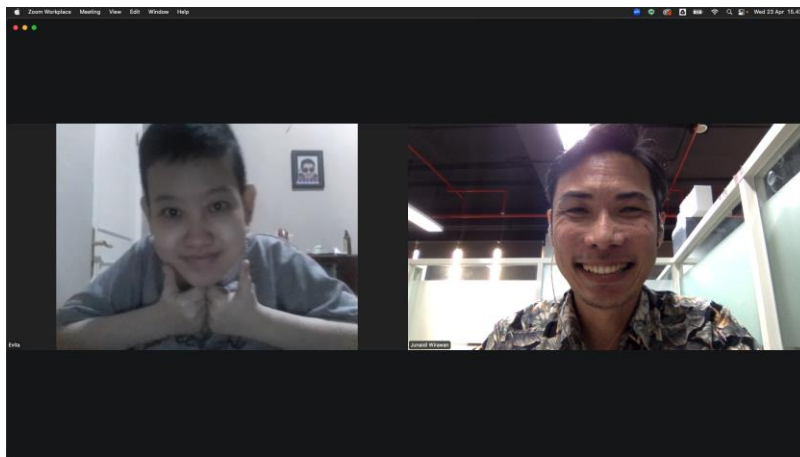
**Fig. 3.** Hopes and Dreams Conceptual Photoworks of Evita Sugiarto.

After the entire photographic process was completed, the author gave the 12R prints (30x40 cm) with frames to YPAC and hung them around the walls of the hall. For the research subjects, the author also gave each of them the prints along with a compact disc (CD) for the soft copy. After years of being displayed in the hall, the photos were moved and placed in the classroom hallway so that more people could see them. After graduation, Evita was regularly invited by the school to attend Christmas and New Year celebrations at YPAC. When Evita visits YPAC every year, she sees that her photos and those of her friends are still up today and are a source of inspiration not only for Evita but also for her younger classmates.

The interview went well and was full of emotion as Evita was almost in tears throughout the interview, especially when the author showed Evita's Hopes and Dreams photo. Evita was able to explain her feelings very well, she felt very grateful to be a part of the Hopes and Dreams photo project and she felt that she had chosen the right photo concept as it is still her inspiration and pride, especially when she was given the opportunity to be a worship leader at Christmas and New Year celebrations at YPAC several times.

Evita said that even though she did not fully become what the concept photo envisioned, it still meant a lot to her and her friends because it gave her the opportunity to have high dreams like other

normal children. When the author asks how photos with a pictorial style approach, in this case conceptual photos, can have a therapeutic effect? Evita answered that the presence of complete information and made into one unit in the photo makes the photo always bring certain feelings such as when Evita remembers being involved in choosing the concept, choosing the song that is sung, and the visual symbol in the form of a dove on the microphone gives a meaning because one time her teacher said to Evita that by looking at the dove symbol in the photo, her teacher immediately understood the message of the photo which was related to spirituality, especially Christianity. Then when the author asked about how the therapeutic effect was felt after fifteen years, Evita answered that the photo still provides the same motivation, still provides enthusiasm as when the photo was first made, the only difference is that when looking at this photo now, this photo feels more emotional than fifteen years ago. And of course whenever Evita is a worship leader at YPAC's Christmas and New Year celebrations or just being an usher at Church, Evita always remembers that photo. Documentation of interview session via Zoom online meeting (see Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** Documentation of Interview Session.

Conceptual photos are proven to have a therapeutic effect on Evita, this is in accordance with Judy Weiser's explanation that therapeutic photography can be done through the help of others, in this case the author as a photographer who helps Evita in making her photos. Conceptual photography also has Studium and Punctum that can support the therapeutic effect. In general, it can be said that studium is the common meaning or basic information in a photograph, which can be easily recognized and agreed upon such as gesture, facial expression, clothing, natural scenery and so on. Whereas punctum is more in-depth and personal information in a photograph that can evoke emotions in the viewer, in this case it can mean Evita (when looking at the photograph) or it can also be other people (who happen to have experiences related to the photograph in this case for example Evita's younger classmates) such as memories, history, momentum, and so on which can even be less logical for other people. The punctum is not entirely the result of the photographer's artistic project, or it can also be said to be something that is hidden and is the main feature of the photo. Since conceptual photography Studium and Punctum also proved to have a lasting therapeutic effect on Evita, what Cristina Nunez said does not fully apply to conceptual photography on Evita.

## Conclusion

Conceptual photography can provide a therapeutic effect, the process of making photos that are centered on the subject, memorable for the subject, the honesty factor of the subject and photographer also plays a very important role that will determine the therapeutic effect produced even in this case for a long time, about fifteen years or even more.

Creativity in concept ideation and foresight in determining the visual semiotic signs that will appear are also needed from the photographer's point of view as an additional figure that can make the photo more conceptual.

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