Online Art Therapy:

Reimagining Body, Place, Object and Relations

in the Digital Era

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Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where

I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Tsun-wei Lily Hsu

Dedication

For Andrew and Anna, my beloved parents

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Abstract

Online art therapy, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, has challenged the existing art therapy paradigm, reshaping all aspects of how art therapists work, including the ways to connect with clients, work with art, and make space for therapy session. This thesis provides a theoretical framework for navigating these challenges, examining the reciprocal process in which technology shapes us as much as we shape it. In the era of rapid digitalisation and AI advancement, I explore the reconceptualisation of the body, place, object, and relationships in art therapy to better understand this emerging way of working. This research adopts a post-humanist lens, viewing the human-technology interaction as a dynamic network, which made this study multidisciplinary in nature. I draw from art therapy and psychodynamics theory, as well as phenomenology, humanistic geography, anthropology, psychology, and visual art theory. Bricoleur approach and digital ethnographic methods were employed for data collection.

The 'cyborg' metaphor is used to understand the intra-twining (Barad, 2007) between the coupling of art therapist and technologies at conscious, pre-conscious, and unconscious levels. My fieldwork first investigates how art therapists develop ability to 'think with' the technology, then explore how this 'cyborg body' moves, such as viewing an artwork online, which subsequently unveils a new mode of bodily-based verbal and non-verbal communication specific to a digitally mediated environment. I name this process 'digital muscles'. Moreover, findings from this study led to an expansion of the triangular relationship between the client, the art therapist, and the artwork (Schaverien, 2000), I have incorporated four new elements into the formulation,

including: 1) digital object; 2) phenomenological existence; 3) corporeal existence; and 4) spatial element. This has created a three-dimensional, octahedron-shaped diagram representing the 'digital skeleton'—a theoretical scaffold for art therapists navigating the complex layers of working online.

The 'digital musculoskeletal system' proposed in this thesis serves as a framework to aid art therapists in exploring the nuances of how digital technology impacts the therapeutic relationship. This study concludes with future implications of the theory, and suggestions for developing art therapists' digital literacy. As the line between human and digital objects is increasingly blurred, what are we becoming? And where are we going? This research is an exploration to make sense of, and find grounding in, this rapidly evolving digital era.

Keyword: online art therapy, digital ethnography, digital placemaking, post-humanism, cyborg, digital literacy

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Figure 1. Prompt/ Online Art Therapy: Reimagining Body, Place, Object and Relations in the Digital Era (Credit: Generated by AI, Recreated by me. Whose work is this?)

The phrase "Can you hear me and see me okay?" often serves as the opening line when I conduct an online art therapy session. I find myself wondering whether 'hearing' and 'seeing' retain the same essence in the online context as they do in an in-person setting. When the camera and speaker become extensions of our eyes and ears, what are we truly perceiving? How do we 'sense'? and what is our 'body' becoming in this context? When an art therapy room is no longer confined to physical space, what defines an 'art therapy room'? As working online appears to reshape the therapeutic elements we were once familiar with, how does this influence the therapeutic relationship?

This research delves into the human-technology relationship from the art therapists' perspective. Written between 2019 and 2023, a pivotal era characterised by the pandemic and the surge of AI, the Figure 1 shows a joint effort between AI and me — questions how our engagement with technology challenges the existing paradigms, boundaries, and reshaping the nature of our once familiar way of conducting art therapy, as well as everyday concepts such as place, body, and, materiality. My research journey began with online art therapy but unexpectedly led me into human civilisation from prehistorical time to the latest computing, to the fantasy of cyborg. The question of how to conduct art therapy online is not just practical question, but also a philosophical one. In this study, I aim to develop a theoretical framework to facilitate art therapists' thinking and support our practice in an era of rapid technological advancement.

1.1 Chapter Outline

In this chapter, I first define the use of terminologies, then I outline the personal and professional background of this study, providing the reader with a better understanding of how my personal experiences inform my viewpoint on online art therapy. Following this, I identify the knowledge gap in current art therapy literature and formulate my research direction and questions. Finally, I provide an outline of each chapter to give an overview of this thesis.

1.2 Defining Terminologies

1.2.1 What is Art Therapy

Art therapy, is defined by the British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) as an established form of psychological therapy delivered by trained art therapists/ art psychotherapists. It is designed to work with anyone, including those whose life has been affected by adverse experiences, illness, or disability. The distinction between art therapy and other forms of psychotherapy is, the participants use art to express their experiences, to find the words to articulate how they have been affected, and to support their wellbeing, including social, emotional, and mental health needs. A qualified practitioner is registered with and regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) (BAAT, 2022).

The art therapy profession is developed from the dual heritage of art and psychotherapy, therefore there is a spectrum of definitions and ways of working (Case

& Dalley, 2014. p.1). The use of the term on art therapy or/and art psychotherapy reflects the practitioner's theoretical orientation, training, personal preference, client group and context. I identify myself as an art psychotherapist since I am trained psychodynamically and working with the unconscious material as my main approach. However, I decide to use the more generic term **art therapy** in this thesis, to include the diverse theoretical approaches that are discussed in the research and used by the art therapist worldwide.

1.2.2 What is Online Art Therapy

When art therapy services are delivered via distanced-communication methods, they are known by many names. **'Online art therapy'** is the most frequently used term, but **'tele art therapy'**, **'virtual art therapy'**, and other terms are also used interchangeably by art therapists. In this section, I scrutinise these terms not only to be precise in my language, but also to explore the inherent characteristics implied in this emerging working model through its nomenclature. The evolution and diversity of these terms reveal how the nuance difference in how art therapists conceptualise this practice.

- Tele Art Therapy

In the case of 'tele art therapy', the etymology of 'tele-' comes from Greek tēl- , which means far off. It has become the prefix to described something 'at a distance, or over a distance' especially when referring to a distanced-communication technology, eg. telegram, television, telecommunication (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022). Telehealth and telemedicine, is used to described healthcare that is provided via telecommunication devices, such as phone call, live video conferencing, mobile health

apps, or remote patient monitoring (Catalyst, 2018). 'Tele art therapy' locates art therapy in this telehealth movement. Katie Collie was the one of first art therapists to situated art therapy into the landscape of telehealth, she wrote the paper *An Art Therapy Solution to the Tele Health Problem* (1999) with her computer scientist colleague, proposed a program allows cancer patients to make art online and communicated through text. They named the intervention *Computer-supported Distance Art Therapy* (Collie and Čubranić, 1999).

- Virtual Art Therapy

Virtual art therapy, which also involves the use of technology, has a slightly different focus than tele art therapy. The term 'virtual' is defined as: 1) something that is almost true or real to such an extent that it can be considered as such for most purposes, and 2) objects and activities that are computer-generated to simulate real counterparts (Collins English Dictionary, 2022). The term 'virtual' marks the distinction between physical existence and its digitally simulated version.

Helen Jury, an art psychotherapist researcher exploring the sense of touch, used the term 'Virtual Art Psychotherapy' to contrast it with in-person modes of working (Jury, 2022a). The first art therapy book dedicated to online practice, *Virtual Art Therapy: Research and Practice* (2022), edited by Michelle Winkel, also chose 'virtual' in its title to highlight "synchronous online conferencing, where the therapist and client can see and hear each other simultaneously through a webcam and computer microphones or a telephone" (Winkel, 2022, p.2). Cathy Malchiodi used terms such as 'virtual art therapist', 'cyber art therapist', and 'computer-mediated art therapy' (Malchiodi, 2000, pp.100-120) to describe her early experiences keeping in touch with clients via email

when she was physically absent. The term 'virtual' emphasises the digital simulations that make the connection between the therapist and the client possible.

It's worth mentioning that 'virtual art therapy' can also describe the use of digital artmaking methods in an in-person setting. *The Virtual Art Therapy Studio* (1999) by Shaun McNiff advocates for the benefits of incorporating video-making and photography into art therapy. The term 'virtual art therapy' can also be confused with the use of Virtual Reality (VR) in art therapy sessions. Although VR holds great potential for conducting distance communication in the foreseeable future, currently it has primarily been used in in-person sessions as a headset that the client wears to create art via a virtual artmaking program (Shamri Zeevi, 2021).

- Online Art Therapy

While 'tele' refers to technology facilitating distance communication and 'virtual' denotes digital simulations, 'online' describes a different dimension. The term 'online' is defined as 1) an activity or service available on the internet or another computer network, or 2) a person connected to the internet (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2022), 'online' emphasises the **status** of a person or an activity being internet-connected. The term 'on-line', from a time before widespread wireless technology, literally refers to a physical 'line' or cable connecting the device to the internet. One's status can be either 'on-line' or 'off-line', but regardless of whether one is connected, this 'line' represents a constant potential for connection. Once the therapist and client are both 'on-the-line', a virtual therapy room can be instantly created.

In this thesis, I decided to use **online art therapy** as the main terminology to describe the art therapy intervention that is conducted via digital platform for the following reasons:

1. The term 'online' blurs the boundary between physical entities (the line) and virtual components that facilitate online art therapy sessions. This aligns with my agenda on online art therapy is constructed with both the virtual components and physical elements in the given environment both the art therapist and the client inhabited.

2. At the time of conducting this research, videoconferencing calls (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Google Meet) were the most common interface for remotely-delivered sessions. While 'tele art therapy' predominantly refers to sessions using videoconferencing, it could also describe other forms of remote therapy such as phone calls, which are beyond the scope of this thesis. 'Virtual art therapy' could lead to confusion with digital media working methods, such as the use of VR. Hence, 'online art therapy' is a term less confusing.

3. 'Online art therapy' is currently the most commonly used term (Park, 2016; Collie *et al.*, 2017; Benoit, 2020; Carlier *et al.*, 2020; Datlen and Pandolfi, 2020; Huet *et al.*, 2020; Shaw, 2020; Zubala and Hackett, 2020; Small, 2021).

1.3 Background

This research emerged from the disruption Covid-19 posed to both my doctoral study and the broader field of art therapy. My initial PhD project planned to study object handling in museum-based art psychotherapy, with a focus on social inclusion (Sandell, 2002). However, physical interaction and direct observation posed potential infection risks under pandemic restrictions. Therefore, due to the uncertainty of lockdown duration at the time, I decided to shift my focus from working in the museum to working online - partly due to practical considerations, and partly as my attempt to understand this unique time we were living through.

Shifting the research focus from museum to online art therapy might seem like a radical change, but to me, they share a similar quality. This view emerges from the experiences of my art psychotherapy clinical practice; therefore, I would like to introduce my background first to pave the ground for further discussion.

As an HCPC registered art psychotherapist from Taiwan, trained in psychodynamic-based MA program at Goldsmiths, University of London, I have worked in a variety of unconventional settings since returning to my home country in 2011. My first job was at an outreach interdisciplinary rehabilitation team for children with learning difficulties in the marginal areas in the Eastern Coast. We delivered therapy to children at their homes, nurseries, or wherever they were. Sessions took place in living rooms, open playgrounds in villages, shared classrooms with staff walking around, or even on the beach. Working in these **given environments** — a term I refer to for spaces not

dedicate for therapy use— challenged my perception of boundaries (Hsu et al., 2022; Hsu, 2013). Here is an example of our team's working environment:

> Lahu, a six-year-old boy, lived in a factory with his parents. The only space we could use for therapy was the family's bedroom. The room was barely enough to contain a double bed, which was shared by his parents and himself. For sessions, we had to sit on the bed, pushing aside the scattered toys and clothes. When Lahu stayed with his grandparents, we conducted sessions in their open front yard. Sessions there attracted Lahu's cousins and local children who wanted to join.

In conventional healthcare settings, an art therapy room is expected to be consistence, interruption-free, and well-equipped for artmaking without hindrance. However, in resource-limited areas, we adapt to and make the most of the available environments. Despite these constraints, my colleagues and I strived to maintain the quality of our intervention. To do so, we created the therapeutic space collaboratively with our clients, intentionally integrating objects, people, landscape, and even animals present in the environment (Hsu *et al.*, 2022). Since all given environments have their original purpose of use, they inevitably influence sessions through their inherent characteristics, daily activities, and sometimes unexpected events. The child's connections to the place and their personal history embedded in everyday objects, such as toys, become valuable materials that allow us to see the world through their eyes and as medium to express their feelings.

When working in a child's environment, therapists become immersed in the child's relationship, and sometimes struggle, with that environment. I often partner with children to redefine their sense of places. For instance, I once worked with a child who did not have personal space at home or in the nursery. Our session became an adventure in search for a place he can feel comfortable. Figure 2 shows he found a quiet staircase in the nursery, and we turned it into a temporary creative corner. Here, the therapy room's 'wall' has been reconceptualised as fluid rather than concrete.

Figure 2. An art therapy session by the staircase. (Photo credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

I found the concept of a fluid therapy space rather helpful when tapping into settings that were not setup for art therapy use, especially later when I worked in a palliative care ward by the terminally ill patient's bedside, and in a museum. A hospital bedside

and a museum might sound vastly different, but I see the challenge for the art therapist as similar to my work with the children in the marginal areas: **how to transform a given environment into a temporary therapy space?**

When the physical setup of a place is unalterable, objects can play a pivotal role in altering the ambiance. For example, with the presence of my art trolley, a bedside can immediately transform into a temporary art studio. I enjoy incorporating everyday objects into my art material collection because they possess the capacity to evoke an individual's feelings and memories. The emotions associated with these objects can transport a person back in time and space. For example, when I gave a patient a ball of yarn to hold, it reminded her of the times she spent knitting for her loved ones. The tactile sensation also transported us to her family living room in the 70s, a time of economic boom in Taiwan. The government's slogan "Living Rooms as Factories" (Hsiung, 1996) encouraged the general public, particularly married women, to work from home, producing items for small subcontracted manufacturers. She handcrafted scarves and knitted hats that were exported to Western countries, all labeled 'Made in Taiwan'. As she stroked and fiddled with the yarn while discussing her pride as a working woman, the sorrow of her lost mobility due to illness made her grip the yarn very, very tightly.

Objects not only connect people with their personal history, but also with our collective one. This is especially true for museum objects, which serve as repositories of humanity. I can still recall the moment when I held a prehistoric hand axe in the British Museum when I was a depressed teenager. That day, a volunteer lady gently handed me a 500,000-year-old ancient stone piece during a hands-on session. I could still

vividly remember its teardrop shape, its slightly sharp edge, and the icy coldness in my hands. For the first time, I felt I was connected to the long river of human history. To me, this was a profound experience that I still could not quite articulate it even now.

This feeling stays with me. It strongly influences the way I facilitate the museum-based art psychotherapy groups. I participated in a National Palace Museum Taipei project, promoting social inclusion (Sandell, 1998, 2002) and making museums accessible to those otherwise unable to access them due to physical, psychological, geographical, or socioeconomical reasons. Alongside a museum educator colleague, we initiated outreach projects, bringing museum objects and art materials into places like women's shelter, care home, psychiatric ward, and adult learning disabilities community (Hsu & Yu, 2019). Our goal was to temporarily convert these institutions into both museums and therapeutic spaces — I define a 'therapeutic space' as a place that makes participants feel safe enough to get in touch with and explore their feelings. My colleagues and I encouraged participants to interpret the works in their own way.

When we brought Xizun - a 2000-year-old animal-shaped bronze vessel (replicated) - into the care home, a gentleman in his 90s gently stroking it like a pet. The weight of the bronze (about 6kg) reminded him of the weight of history bearing down on him. He recounted his time as a Chinese communist solider fighting in the Korean war, after been kept hostage by the US army, then he was deployed to Taiwan and stayed here for rest of his life. His life is deeply intertwined with the conflict of the Chinese Civil War and the international politics. The collections in the National Palace Museum Taipei also share a similar fate. This is a royal collection that was owned by the Chinese emperors throughout 5000 years of history, and then been brought to Taiwan by the

Kuomintang (KMT)[1] government after they been defeated by the Communist Party in China. The museum's history is deeply intertwined with wars, international politics, and colonisation, making it a controversial presence (Huang, 2012). For some Taiwanese, it represents the KMT government's colonisation and oppression. On the other hand, for soldiers who have been displaced from China to Taiwan, like this gentleman, the collection represents a nostalgic homeland. He looked at the bronze animal and said, "You came here to Taiwan, just like me, aren't you?"

1.4 Formulating Research Direction

Whether considering an everyday item or a museum artefact, an object has the capacity to encapsulate multiple layers of time and space, both personal and collective. My initial research project aimed to explore this process of meaning-making through sensory contact. Despite being put on hold due to the pandemic, I believe the theme of **'creating a temporary therapy space in the given environment through objects'** remains pertinent in online art therapy.

One vital difference between in-person and online art therapy is the space the session inhabits. In in-person sessions, therapists and clients share a physical space. In contrast, online sessions occur in individual's domestic space which not designated for therapeutic use. This therapeutic space exists temporarily, disappearing once the digital platform disconnects. Although some therapists may conduct sessions from

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[1] The Kuomintang (KMT), also referred to as the Chinese Nationalist Party. During the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949), KMT was defeated by the Communist Party and relocated to Taiwan in 1949. Upon arrival, Chiang Kai-shek declared the longest martial law in history (1949-1987) to retain the KMT's authoritarian rule over Taiwan. It was only in the 1980s that democratic reforms began to enacted, leading to full democratisation in the 1990s.

their dedicated studios, clients may not have a space reserved solely for therapy, sometimes resulting in the use of unusual locations such as closets or bathrooms (Gottlieb, 2020). Therefore, I would suggest that the working environment of online session is more like a 'given environment' I have previously described, where the therapist does not have full control.

To work in any given environment, it is important to take the objects in the place into account and learn about the impact it can made to therapy sessions. Online art therapy is made possible by digital devices that have an inbuilt camera, a screen, a speaker, and a microphone, together with the Internet connection and a digital platform to host the meeting. I would suggest all these hardware and software that are also **objects**. Given that all objects have the ability to trigger emotional responses, do we really know how digital devices influence us at the emotional and unconscious level?

This is what I mean when I say 'working with museum and online art therapy share similar qualities'. All given environments have their primary daily functions, which can inevitably cause restrictions when they are used for therapy. This is the same whether we are working remotely, by the hospital bedside, in a museum, or online. The question of 'how to conduct online art therapy?' can be viewed as asking 'how to create a viable space for art therapy through digital devices?'. To answer this, this thesis focuses on reframing the challenges imposed by online art therapy, through contextualising how does technology shape the way art therapists conceptualise our profession.

I am not a person who is passionate about technology. I prefer paperbacks, face-to-face conversations, and crafting things by hand. However, living in a time when reality

increasingly resembles the world depicted in science fiction, this thesis is my attempt to make sense of this unprecedented time we are in. The term 'the given environment' implies a passive attitude towards what the environment imposes on us. As art therapists, we might not be able to avoid the wave of digitalisation, but I hope that by investigating the dilemma between art therapy and technology, we can find more agency to actively navigate this challenging environment, and reimagine the possibilities for the coupling between online and art therapy.

1.5 My Online Art Therapy-Related Experience

My thoughts on online art therapy have been shaped by my own online-related experiences. In this section, I provide a brief overview to illustrate how these experiences have guided this research project.

I started receiving art therapy supervision online in 2014 and began providing supervision online in 2017, both primarily to overcome geographical barriers. In 2019, when I relocated from Taiwan to London to pursue my PhD, these positive experiences in online supervision emboldened me to transfer my private practice online entirely. However, I had no prior training or experience in online-related psychotherapy, and I did not know any art therapists practicing in this way. Therefore, I was learning how to work online alongside my clients and being transparent with them about my lack of experience in this new mode of practice. Fortunately, they were open to experimenting with me.

Working online presents challenges to the existing art therapy paradigm that emphasises tactile and sensory experiences in art making, non-verbal communication, and the holding qualities of physical spaces and materials. The basic tasks in in-person sessions, such as setting up the art therapy room, storing artwork, and providing art materials, become complex in an online setting. As an art therapist, I found myself grappling with numerous questions: How can I maintain a therapeutic space when we cannot be physically present with the client? How can I sense the client's presence through the limited view of a screen? If I cannot observe the client's artmaking process and their facial expressions simultaneously, how does that impact my understanding of the artwork and the struggles they try to convey? How can we look at art together? Is it safe for clients to keep their artwork with them? What happens if the client cannot find a private space for the session? Moreover, how do all these factors impact the therapeutic relationship? The list of questions seemed endless.

These questions indicate the challenging nature of applying art therapy in online settings. Initially, these differences from working in-person filled me with anxiety. I felt inadequate, deskilled, and frustrated. However, a pivotal moment occurred one day when a client found some paper scraps in her bag and used them for artmaking. This session made me rethink about what online art therapy could offer:

> She did not have a specific idea about what she wanted to do with these paper scraps; she briefly told me where she got them from and her relationship with the person who turned these papers into scraps. On the screen, I could see her face but not her artmaking process. When she showed me the finished artwork in front of the camera, it was slightly out of focus, but since we were near the end of the

session, I thought there was not enough time to spend on adjusting the equipment, so I decided not to insist on seeing the details of the artwork. Instead, I asked her about the artmaking process. She said, 'You know what? I wasn't thinking much when I was rearranging and gluing down these scraps that should have been thrown away, but when these 'unwanted' bits became a piece of art, I suddenly felt like I was seeing the unwanted parts in that person who left these scrapes, and in myself, too."

This session shed light on my client, and on me as well. The scenario prompted me to rethink the role and meaning of art materials prepared by the client. Prior to this, the inability to witness the artmaking process and prepare art materials for clients caused me to feel anxious. However, the meaningful experience she gained from using the found materials, and our in-depth exploration without me seeing the process and the artwork itself, I began to rethink the interconnected layers present in this scenario: the history embedded in the object (the paper scraps), the art-making process and the artwork itself, the physical presence versus absence, the screen, the camera, the time and space, and the virtual and physical realities. I started to see how all these factors could influence our therapeutic relationship in online art therapy. I realised working online is not, and should not be, an imitation of in-person therapy, nor does seeing one better or lesser than the other. They are just different, and an other-than-in-person way of understanding is needed to be a functional therapist in this unique given environment.

My clients and I went through many trials and errors to make the therapy work for us. It is an intriguing but slightly lonely journey since I had no colleagues with online art

therapy experience to discuss the nuances of this novel way of working. More than a year later, the pandemic broke out. Suddenly online art therapy became the solution to the social distancing restrictions for the art therapy community worldwide. This boom gave me the chance to explore online art therapy beyond my personal experience. At the same time, I started my personal therapy online, which broaden my thinking on this working model from a client's perspective. All these experiences have informed my research direction.

1.6 Identifying Research Gap

Before the pandemic, online art therapy was an under-researched topic, with very few researchers written about it. I believe it is fair to say that the starting point for all teletherapy is to overcome the barriers that restrict a client's accessibility to in-person sessions, whether due to distance or health reasons. At the end of the twentieth century, Canadian art therapist Kate Collie and her IT engineer colleague designed the first trial program that allowed a group of cancer patients to make art and communicate through text synchronously (Collie and Čubranić, 1999, 2002; Collie *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, American art therapist Cathy Malchiodi (2000) began email communications with a group of homeless teenagers living in a shelter. Although she noted this was more akin to mentoring than psychotherapy, this digital exchange nevertheless became a meaningful experience for both her and the group.

These pioneering works propose inspiring visions and underscore the value of conducting art therapy via distance-communication technology. This groundwork paved the way for the rapid expansion of online art therapy following the first COVID-

19 outbreak. The current literature body grew to cover various aspects including pragmatic considerations, safeguarding guidelines, surveys, and practice-based studies (Choudhry, R. & Keane, C., 2021; Benoit, 2020; Carlier et al., 2020; Datlen & Pandolfi, 2020; Huet et al., 2020; Jury, 2022; Lobban & Murphy, 2020; Proulx, 2022; Shaw, 2020; Small, 2021; Usiskin & Lloyd, 2020; Winkel, 2022; Zubala & Hackett, 2020). These papers provide vivid accounts of how art therapists worldwide adapted their practices to sudden disruptions, presenting creative and innovative ways to approach challenges in online art therapy. These publications offer practical considerations, such as thinking about setup, safety, workplace-specific contexts, and how their client groups respond to the digital medium and the pandemic. For example, British art therapists Datlen and Pandolfi (2020) illustrated the setup of a WhatsApp group for young adults with learning difficulties and discussed how the clients used the group and the app's features during the first lockdown. Usiskin and Lloyd (2020) presented their innovative 'Community Table Online' project with refugees in France. Drawing from their extensive experience in a refugee context, they designed art activities to foster a sense of grounding by using everyday objects and transforming the camera into a playful, experimental stage to facilitate connections.

These pieces of literature showcase the multifaceted nature of online art therapy and the creative adaptations made by art therapists. However, the more I read, the more I found myself asking, 'What is online art therapy?'. Given that the majority of the literature focuses on how art therapists work with specific client groups or in certain contexts, it seems that our understanding and description of online art therapy are largely shaped by the characteristics of the particular client group, individual client, or

context. But 'online art therapy' is not synonymous with any specific client group or context, so what exactly is 'online art therapy'?

The more I work with and learn about online art therapy, the more I realise it is a slippery concept. My clients range from teenagers to middle-aged adults, and their usage of the online setting varies greatly. For instance, my adult clients typically sit still in front of their laptops, simply talk and draw. Conversely, my teenage clients would send me online images via chat during our discussions, ask me to watch YouTube videos, and even invite me to play online games. The way an individual behaves online creates very different dynamics in therapy, leading me to reconsider boundaries differently with each client. I understand the age group and individual's experience with technology are important factors, but this does not entirely answer my question.

To deconstruct 'what online art therapy is', I examine it from two perspectives: form and content. 'Content' refers to the events and materials the client brings to therapy for exploration with the therapist, while 'form' pertains to the communication medium itself, including the hardware, software, and elements that constitute the online setting. The intertwining of form and content creates an online session. My question of 'what is online art therapy' originates from the perspective of **form**. Specifically, I am interested in how the form influences its content, or in other words, how the communication medium affects the content of the therapy. In the existing literature on online art therapy, there appears to be **a gap in understanding the medium itself**.

Marshall McLuhan, a pioneer theorist in new media studies, proposed the idea "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 2001, p.1), which suggests the communication

medium itself should be the primary focus of study. He pointed out that, although we often consider the content delivered as the main message, it is actually the medium that shapes and controls "the scale and the form of human association and action" (p.9). The medium itself impacts an individual's way of meaning-making subtly but profoundly.

Joy Schaverien's concept of the triangular relationship in art therapy, which visually illustrates the therapeutic relationship between the client, the art therapist, and the artwork, is one of the key theoretical frameworks in the current art therapy profession (Schaverien, 2000). However, as telecommunication devices are introduced into therapy, this view of the therapeutic relationship has been challenged. Telecommunication devices are convenient tools that allow art therapists to connect with people from a distance, but their impact on the client, the therapist, artwork, and the therapeutic relationship makes them more than just tools. In *Squaring the Schaverien Triangle* (2022) by Lucille Proulx, she adds the computer screen as the fourth element in the therapeutic relationship to "demonstrate how the spiritual autonomy of the individual is maintained in the virtual experience" (Proulx, 2022, p.112). Haywood and Grant (2022) go further, proposing a hexagonal relationship (fig.3) that includes 'the Virtual' into the Schaverien Triangle. By 'the Virtual,' they mean "all aspects of the therapeutic encounter associated with the technology, including the hardware used to access a session (laptop, tablet, phone), the software, and also the unconscious and symbolic aspects of the digitally-mediated relationship" (Haywood & Grant, 2022, p.145). Their diagram aims to facilitate thinking around the complex conscious and unconscious dynamic evoked by the Virtual. However, Haywood and Grant's theory does not delve into 'how and why' the digital mediums make such an

impact on the art therapist, the client, and the artwork. I aim to develop their idea further by bringing 'the Physical' into account. By this, I refer to the actual space both parties inhabit, the objects, the body, and the sensory experiences. I believe online art therapy is not entirely 'virtual,' but involves multilayers of placemaking with physical objects. After all, it is about creating a place safe enough to explore the unconscious.
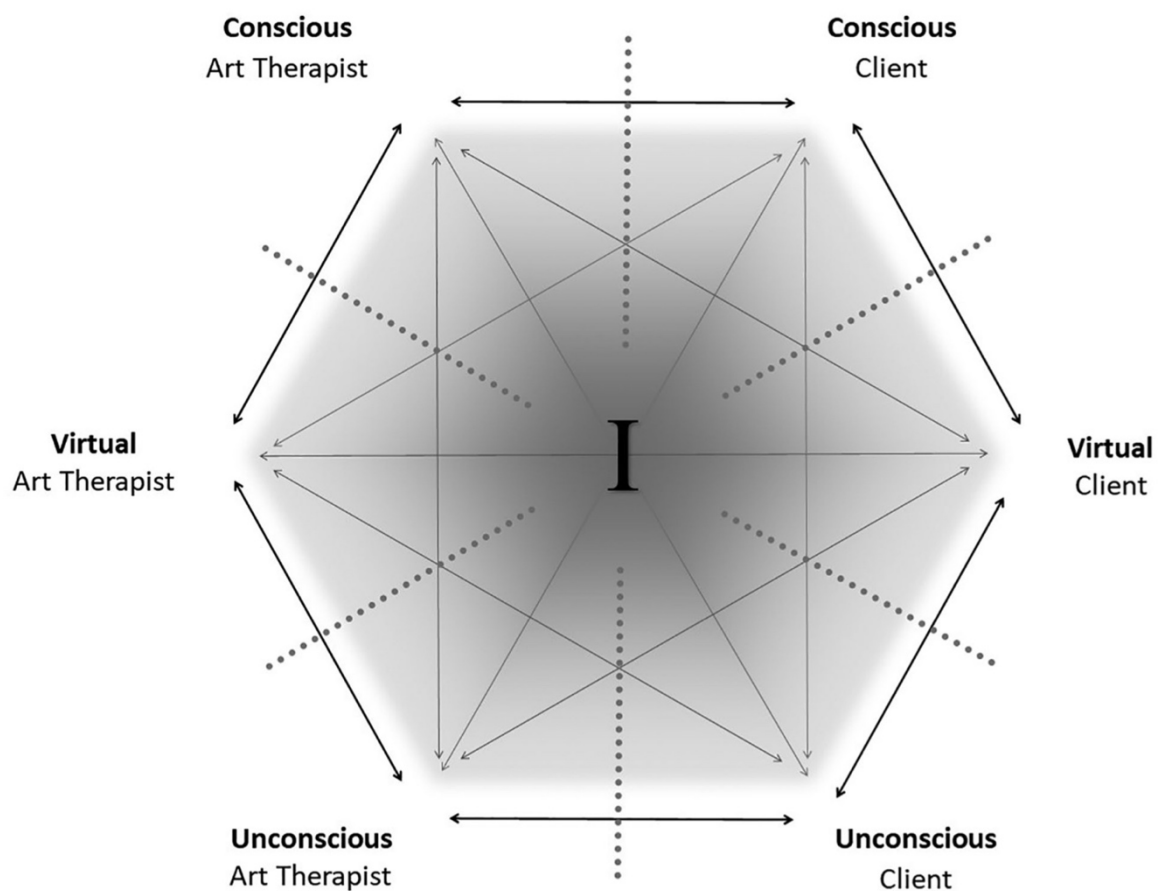
Figure 3. Hexagonal Relationship (Credit: Haywood & Grant)

This thesis is an exploratory study about the medium that constitutes online art therapy. It provides a new perspective on the dilemma between physicality and virtuality, including the reconceptualisation of 1) the absence of the body; 2) placemaking in the

digital environment; 3) the role of art; 4) how the above elements shape the therapeutic relationship. Since 'the form/medium' is the focus of this study, I explore the form from an art therapy practitioner's perspective. This is done under the assumption that art therapists will have awareness and willingness to reflect on the message carried by the medium itself. Please note that I do not intend to disregard the client's perspective. However, the clients' experience with digital technology may be subject to diverse factors, such as age groups, disabilities, education, cultural factors and more. These would require a different, more wide-ranging, larger scale study.

This study is positioned as fundamental research, also known as basic or pure research. Its goal is to advance knowledge for a better understanding of observed phenomena. My aim is to generate a theory that not only opens up thinking around art therapy and technology, but also serves as a building block supporting the practical application of online art therapy.

1.7 Structuring the Thesis

Chapter One sets the background of this study, as well as my research question and direction. I review the current literature to identify the research gap and direction. I have defined the online setting as a 'given environment'. As this environment is made possible by the telecommunication medium, this thesis is structured to investigate the paradigm shift the digital technology brings to the art therapy profession.

Chapter Two provides an in-depth literature review to further contextualise online art therapy, investigating how art therapists have historically responded to the constraints

and possibilities of their 'given environments', developing theoretical frameworks in response to the context art therapists found themselves in, which consequently led to paradigm shifts in the profession. I explore the evolution of art therapy practices and the theoretical constructs from the art studios in asylums to the shared multifunctional rooms in psychiatric wards, and then to more diverse and unconventional settings.

To understand the underlying dynamics between art therapy and its given environment, I draw on the concept of 'placemaking' from humanistic geography (Casey, 1996; Cresswell, 2004, 2014; Courage *et al.*, 2021). This concept includes studies on the intertwining of physical and digital spaces and places (Moores, 2012). Within this frame, I understand online art therapy as a dynamic process of 'digital placemaking'. Then, I return to existing art therapy literature and scrutinise online art therapy through this lens, leading to the insight that the 'slippery' quality of online therapy may stem from the merging of the 'environment' with our body through digital technology, forming a uniquely human-technological hybrid 'body'. This 'new body', with its limitations in performing tasks that can be easily accomplished in in-person settings, can feel 'disabled' to art therapists. To further investigate this sense of disability, I employ the metaphor of a 'cyborg' to conceptualise this human-technology relationship.

Chapter Three presents the methodology, focusing on the ontological and the epistemological position of this study. The concept of 'cyborg' indicates that as digital technology enters the therapeutic relationship, a 'more-than-human' perspective is needed to untangle the nuance in online art therapy, which naturally led this thesis into a posthumanist position. To locate my study, I examine the nature of posthuman knowledge production, the new materialist turns in expressive arts therapy research,

and the historical development of the concept of cyborg in social studies. The cyborg metaphor challenges the binaries between animate and inanimate entities, as well as wider socially constructed categories, exploring how technology radically shapes our relationship in all aspects of the world, which provides a framework to think about the art therapist's emerging subjectivity in this rapidly changing, technology-mediated society. As a piece of qualitative research, this is a heuristic inquiry that emphasises the importance of personal knowledge and subjectivity in personal experience and interpretation. It assumes that reality is constructed and plural in nature, and that human experience is shaped by material, social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Chapter Four presents my research method, rooted in the philosophical stance outlined earlier, aiming to explore the multiple layers of online art therapy from the therapists' perspective. This study adopts a bricoleur approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; McLeod, 2011) and employs digital ethnographic methods (Burrell, 2009; Pink *et al.*, 2016; Hine, 2019) for data collection. The data for this research are collected from two primary sources. First, data are gathered from research participants through online interviews that include artmaking, with sampling criteria, recruitment, and ethical considerations thoroughly discussed. Secondly, considering my aim to explore how technology shapes art therapists, I treat all the digital technologies involved in this study as 'other-than-human' research participants. This includes carefully recording and be reflexive regarding my interactions with these technologies and actively experimenting with them through digital artmaking, note-taking, and data analysis.

I employ Chat GPT - one of the most advanced AI models based on Large Language Models as of the time this thesis is written - for proofreading and as an exploratory tool

to facilitate discussions about human collaboration with technology. This raises a provocative question: by collaborating with AI, do the author and the thesis itself become a 'cyborg' in their own right? I maintain transparency about my use of this AI, my mixed feelings towards this technology, and openly discuss the controversies associated with its usage in academic contexts.

Chapter Five presents the findings from my fieldwork, initiated by an observation-driven question: 'Why does the idea of 'working online' provoke negative emotional responses in many art therapists, including myself?'. These anxieties, often rooted in professional ethical and practical concerns, might also suggest the existence of unexplored unconscious material. To investigate this possibility, I collected accounts of art therapists' anxieties and fantasies prior to their actual initial online sessions, and delved into the potential personal meanings behind these responses in collaboration with my research participants. The research revealed how art therapists' identities, both personal and professional, are gradually emerged through repeating online session engagements. This process from initial anxiety to a learned ability to 'think with' digital devices, accommodating the limitations of online settings, is detailed. In this exploration, I witnessed the emergence of art therapists' 'cyborg self' – I refer to as the art therapist's evolving subjectivity and identity in relation to online settings and digital technology.

Chapter Six further investigates the 'bodily aspect' of the art therapist-technology hybrid, leading towards the potential discovery of a new 'language' of online art therapy rooted in a blend of bodily and visual elements. The exploration begins with a discussion with my participants on 'why does talking seem to overshadow artmaking

in online sessions?'. This discussion unexpectedly uncovers layers of 'pre-conscious movements' that were previously unnoticed. I then contextualise this observation through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (2014), unveiling a world that operates at a pre-reflexive level in our bodies when we engage with technology. The body schema, as the underlying mechanism that navigates our engagement with tools, incorporates these tools into our sense of body, creating a 'phenomenological body' from our 'corporeal body'.

When analysing the process of 'viewing artwork online' through a phenomenological lens, I find that the digitalisation of artwork creates a phenomenological copy of the original artwork. Thus, I propose the concept of 'phenomenological artwork', where 'the artwork' is no longer confined to its physical limits but extends its boundaries to exist in forms other than its original. This discovery prompts me to explore the complex interactions between bodily presence and artwork in an online scenarios, and to investigate how meaning is created in this process. The discussion is further elaborated through clinical vignettes.

Chapter Seven presents additional findings from my fieldwork, focusing on the spatial and visual elements in online art therapy, and proposes ways to conceptualise the background as the 'new body language'. One of the primary limitations of online art therapy is the absence of the full body, which can lead to missing nuanced non-verbal bodily cues. However, my findings show that my research participants have intuitively developed ways to compensate for these limitations by observing and/or curating what appears in the background. Where does this intuition come from? This curiosity led me to studies on digital placemaking in domestic spaces to unpack the complex

intertwining elements embedded in the 'background' (Halegoua and Polson, 2021; Hardley and Richardson, 2021). Additionally, I propose another way of conceptualising the background/visual representation in online art therapy, rooted in visual art history (*David Hockney's Secret Knowledge*, 2003; Hockney and Gayford, 2020). This approach aims to perceive emotions in the atmosphere, which could potentially serve as a window to access the client's psychic reality.

Chapter Eight provides a discussion and summary of all my findings from the previous chapters. I build upon Schaverien's triangular relationship model, which includes the art therapist, the client, and the artwork, adapting it to account for the paradigm shift introduced by online art therapy. I propose an octahedron diagram that integrates the more-than-human factors that are discovered throughout this research, including digital objects, phenomenological existence, corporeal existence, and spatial elements. This diagram is conceptualised as the 'digital muscle' and 'digital skeleton' of the art therapist cyborg, I further explain how this 'digital musculoskeletal system' can serve as a framework to assist art therapist navigating around the complex layers of online art therapy sessions. Case vignettes and the thinking process behind this formulation are thoroughly articulated.

Additionally, I explore the future implications of the findings in this study, and suggest the digital literacy that art therapists need to gain agency in this rapidly evolving world. This thesis is about online art therapy, but also an exploration into wider social context and human condition in the time of rapid technological advancement. As the boundary between humans and digital objects is increasingly blurred, particularly with the rise of AI, we could not avoid asking: Where did we come from? Where are we going to? And

what are we becoming? This research is exploratory and open-ended, representing my attempt to make sense of, and find grounding in, the unprecedented moment in human history we are in.

Chapter Two:

Literature Review: From Studio in Asylum to Online Art Therapy

2.1 Exploring the History of Paradigm Shifts in Art Therapy

The literature related to the history of online art therapy is often illustrated as starting from Katie Collie's experimental program (Collie and Čubranić, 1999), which put the development of online art therapy into the picture of the evolving telehealth landscape (Miller and McDonald, 2020; Zubala and Hackett, 2020; Winkel, 2022b). These early pioneers had indeed formed an imperative foundation for the art therapy profession to respond to the increasingly digitalised world, especially since the pandemic. However, I would like to propose an alternative way to contextualise online art therapy in the history of art therapy, by exploring how social changes impacted the settings and the spaces art therapists worked in, and ask how these lead up to theoretical and clinical paradigm shifts in art therapy practice.

Innovative practices and paradigm shifts often emerge when art therapists respond to challenges and limitations (Coles and Jury, 2022). The pandemic and social distancing restrictions have brought a radical shift to the profession. However, this is not the first time in the history of art therapy that we have had to reshape our working model and theoretical framework. This chapter investigates the ability of art therapists to adapt, create, and keep up with the demands and needs of our clients, responding to the times we live in. Whenever there is a change, reform, or crisis – either societal or institutional – one of the first impacts on art therapy services is often reflected in the setting and the space we work in. For instance, competition for resources, driven by

the economic climate or/and organisational dynamics, can often result in changes to the allocation of therapy rooms. Therefore, this review focuses on how art therapists have conceptualised the role of the therapy space in a client's recovery. It examines the evolution from large studios in asylums to shared rooms in psychiatric wards, from dedicated therapy rooms to peripatetic working models, and from in-person sessions to online art therapy.

In this chapter, I first explore the theoretical constructs behind these paradigm shifts in art therapy workspace. Please note I use the term 'patient' and 'client' according to the terminology that an author uses in their literature. Then I draw from studies on **placemaking** in the field of humanistic geography to pave the way for further exploration, and I examine current online art therapy literature through this lens. The process of adaptation is never straightforward, it involves trials and errors, debates, occasional moments of breakthrough, and constant struggles. I not only want to present the early pioneers' process of theoretical formation but also to illustrate those difficult moments. I believe the strength of the profession lies in our ability to create thinking space even when we are in the midst of uncertainty.

2.2 1940s-50s: The Art Studios in the Asylums

In this section, I focus on the development of art therapy in Britain. Adrian Hill is generally regarded as the founder. He was an artist and had used drawing as a way to surmount his boredom while recovering from tuberculosis in a sanatorium. This experience inspired him to explore the therapeutic aspect of artmaking. In 1942, he was teaching art to a small group of patients and coined the term 'art therapy'. Hill's

work received positive feedback from patients and his influence spread as more people joined him in advocating healing through the arts (Hill, 1945, p.34-37). Edward Adamson was a practicing artist and joined Hill's project in a psychiatric hospital. Adamson later became the first art therapist to be employed by the NHS in Netherne Asylum, Surrey, in 1946.

In *The History of Art Therapy and Psychosis (1938-95)* (1997), Chris Wood recalled the memory of her work in Netherne Asylum in the late 1970s. At the time, the art studio and gallery established by Adamson still in existence. She wrote:

"The studio was a long, white wooden building with windows on three sides. The equipment for each person included an easel, a white wooden chair, and a white wooden frame with two shelves for art materials; each person was able to have a small self-contained area in which to work. It is spacious and people who work in the space did not feel overlooked.

(Wood, 1997, pp.152-3)

Chris Wood's description vividly illustrated the first-ever art therapy studio set up in the asylum. In her conversation with some of the long-term patients that still remembered 'Mr. Adamson', they all mentioned the quietness of the studio and Adamson's equally quiet presence. Chris Wood thought it may be partly due to the effect of medication, and partly as the result of Adamson's personality (Wood, 1997, p.153). Adamson provided a very powerfully receptive container for many of the patients who worked with him. His way of inviting people to do some painting was very simple: he would sit

down next to them and ask if they would like to do some painting (Wood, 1997, p154). Wood retrieved Adamson's therapy notes to understand his approach:

> When a person comes to the studio, I never suggest what he should draw; it is essential that the idea should be entirely his own. This particular approach demands a considerable amount of patience, sometimes it is often weeks, months, or even years, that we are both obliged to wait for someone's creativity. All I can do is try and create a permissive atmosphere and have the necessary paint and paper on hand. If the person is prepared to spend time with me, then I must be prepared to join in the vigil.
>
> (Adamson 1984, p.7, cited in Wood, 1997, p.154)

Diane Waller (1993) suggested that the open studio model within psychiatric hospitals in the early days of art therapy mirrored the art school setting. Patients were encouraged to use art materials within their own spaces in the room, and artwork discussions were held privately, often in "whispered conversations in a corner of a room to the exclusion of other patients" (Waller, 1993, p.8). This makes sense given that the early pioneers of art therapy were trained artists, influenced by their own art education. Adamson's approach mainly focused on encouraging the patient's connection with their inner creativity. During his time at Netherne, he did not align his work with any specific theory. However, even at this early stage of professional development, we can see that he was using the space and art materials to provide a supportive environment for patients in acute psychotic stages.

2.3 1960s to 1980s: Art Studio Room as Skin Container

In 1960s, more artists and art teachers were employed as art therapists in large psychiatric hospitals, they were influenced by new ideas about group and psychotherapy theories (Skaife & Huet, 1998). Art therapists gradually moved away from Adamson's ad hoc way of working, in order to define and strengthen both practice and professional identity. The British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) and training programs were established as a professional body for art therapy during this period (Waller, 1993, 2013a).

In the 1980s, art therapists began to propose that art therapy required a theoretical grounding when working with people experiencing psychosis. They closely aligned art therapy with psychoanalytical concepts from the Kleinian tradition, especially those of Wilfred Bion, Hanna Segal, and Donald Winnicott. Art therapists Greenwood and Layton (1987) described their work with a community-based art therapy group for mental health service users, underpinned by Bion's concept of containment. They took a side-by-side approach and make use of group dynamics, perceived the group as a container during both the verbal and the artmaking processes. They identified the potential of artwork to provide containment in three phases: projection, digestion, and retrojection. Unconscious material is projected and represented in the image, then digested through the artmaking process and during group discussions aimed at understanding the role of art (Greenwood & Layton, 1987, cited in Skaife & Huet, 1998, p.6).

On the other hand, Katherine Killick (1997, 2000) also looks into containment theory, but she associated it with the art therapy studio space. She considered the studio space, objects in the room, and artwork as **skin container** — a concept proposed by Bick (1986). Bick suggested when a patient is in an 'unintegrated' state, they may franticly search for an external object that can contain their fragmentated parts, and experienced it as a skin, such as the nipple in the mouth for infant. "The concept of space within self cannot arise until the containing object is introjected" (Bick, 1968, cited in Killick 1997, p.39). Killick believed it is the concreteness of the studio setting, the materiality of artmaking, and of the transactions which take place within it can absorb the impact of psychotic patient's primitive affective states.

Killick described her patient's use of the room to worked on their projected material. For example, a patient with a more paranoid organisation tend to avoid using the table, because he believed it was a trap set up by the art therapist. The fact that an expected invasion did not happen helped the patient to establish the distinction between the internal persecution and the external state of affairs (Killick, 1997, p.42). The stability of the studio space allows trust to be build. Every detail of the room contributes to the work of containment. Anna Goldsmith (1992) gave an account of the room previously used by Killick; it showed the sensitive attention to the use of the room when working with patients in the midst of their psychosis:

> The programme for this kind of functioning state may be designed so that the table is kept entirely for that person's use and the work and other objects put on or near the table are left totally undisturbed. The table and its environs (including any images) may be experienced as an extension of the psychotic person's self-

structure. To interfere with, or make unsafe, that safe area of experiencing is to risk gross intrusion into fragile 'self' defining structure…… To support it can enable the psychotic person to relax some of the defensive strategies and experiment with others that later may be more viable in the world of relationships and symbolic structures.

(Goldsmith, 1992:45, cited in Wood, 1997, p.168)

In other words, for patients in the acute psychotic stage, the stability of the concrete setting can serve as points of contact with reality. Killick presents an innovative art therapy model that builds a patient-therapist relationship around the concrete structure of a physical space and its material presence. This reduces psychotic anxiety about direct interpersonal forms of relating while maintaining a constant invitation for patients to engage when they are able and ready. Killick's approach was influential among art therapists working in large asylums during this period (Goldsmith, 1992; Foster, 1997; Seth-Smith, 1997).

2.4 1980s to 1990s: From Dedicated Art Therapy Studios to Shared Rooms

These large art therapy studios were once been described as 'asylum within the asylum' (Case & Dalley, 2014), which encouraged creative ethos and a human touch to the impersonal anonymity of the institution. The anti-psychiatric movement and mental health service reformation in the 1980s and 1990s had brought the large mental health institutes to closure, so did the studios.

This period marked a time when art therapists experienced many changes in public sector legislation (Wood, 1997; Waller, 2013b; Brown and Omand, 2022). Economic considerations drove many art therapy services to relocate to shared multifunctional rooms alongside other professions in acute psychiatric wards. Some were fortunate enough to have a dedicated art studio, albeit significantly smaller and unable to offer individual designated workspaces where things could be left untouched due to the high admission rate and rapid discharge of service users (Seth-Smith, 1997). Killick questioned the lack of dedicated studio space and the short-term nature of the work, arguing that these conditions were insufficient for patients in acute-psychotic states (Killick, 2000, p.99). Chris Wood continues to explore the therapeutic value of being absorbed in art studios, advocated for the significance and importance of such spaces for wellbeing and creativity within the public sector (Wood, 2000, 2014, 2022).

The newly given environments posed challenges to the art therapists who considered the stableness of the room as the primary attachment to held fragmentated patients together. Killick left the public sector and continued her work with some patients from the asylum in private practice. For art therapists who stayed in public sectors, the new environment called for new ways of working. In the next section, I present how art therapists tried to make space and to manoeuvre around limitations.

2.5 After 1990s: Making Space in the Given Environments

This section is a literature review on how art therapists have adapted their practice in response to the loss of dedicated studio, by expanding theoretical constructs regarding space and containment. In her work *Return to the Open Studio Group* (1998), Sarah

Deco discusses the challenges and frustrations encountered while working in an acute psychiatric ward. These include rapid patient discharges, staff shortages, and a lack of funding, all of which compromise the ability to provide containment within the institution and contribute to an environment that often feels sterile and impersonal (Deco, 1998, p.88). To adapt to these less-than-ideal working conditions, Deco proposes a model that centres on interpersonal relationships as the main focus, as opposed to treating the room as the primary point of attachment. In this model, the role of artworks shifts from containing a patient's unintegrated parts to deepening communication between group members or between the therapist and the patient, which is similar to Greenwood and Leyton's (1987) use the concept of containment in the 1980s.

This does not mean Deco ignores the physicality of the room. The physical setup of the room remains an important element in Deco's model. Even when working in a multifunctional room shared with other professions, she would meticulously arrange the furniture to ensure consistency across all art therapy open studio sessions, providing a sense of containment through the stable environment. However, the transient nature of this setup, unlike the stable 'studio in the asylum', may lack robust containment, such as the possibility to leave the patient's work untouched. Therefore, it became necessary to explore additional alternatives and techniques to offer an experience of holding.

Deco proposed that the group could serve as a supportive backdrop for the individual. Drawing from Yalom's group theory, she suggested that patients experiencing psychosis should be provided with "opportunities for social interaction that are

undemanding, broken into brief time segments, and interspersed with periods of solo activity" (Yalom, 1985, p.281, cited in Deco, 1998, p.102). Deco aimed to create a group environment that offered both opportunities for interaction and for withdrawal. The type of containment described here is more akin to the experience of living within a 'community' (Deco, 1998, p.101-102). In Deco's open studio group model, the group and the therapeutic relationship act as primary containers for attachment.

Fiona Seth-Smith (1997), an art therapist who had previously worked in an asylum, based her approach on the model developed by Killick. As a result of the institutional closure, she found herself in a new workplace where she had to "carry art materials around from building to building and to set up groups in unpropitious circumstances" (Seth-Smith, 1997, p.85). Despite these challenges, her new environment provided renewed insights into the role of artwork. She noticed that patients often asked: 'Where is my picture… you know, the one I did last time?' In some cases, 'last time' might have been anywhere from two to twenty years before, or even in another hospital (Seth-Smith, 1997, p.87). These observations led her to explore the significance of images through Lacanian and Kleinian theories. She proposed that the sense of continuity and the therapeutic process are sustained within the artwork, as well as in the therapeutic relationship between the therapist and clients (Seth-Smith, 1997, p.86).

In response to changes, the art therapy profession has gradually evolved, shifting the theoretical focus of therapy from the concrete room to artwork and interpersonal dynamics (e.g., conversation, group members). This shift sparked a debate within the profession regarding where containment resides: in the image or in the conversation? (Maclagan, 2005; Mann, 2006). Christopher Brown (2008) reintroduced the element

of studio space into this discussion. He proposed that both the artmaking process and therapeutic relationship were dependent on the provision of a concrete studio space. His model emphasised a boundaried use of the studio, attentiveness to the client's needs, and a therapeutic relationship that does not make transference explicit through interpretation, as this could present significant challenges to individuals experiencing psychosis (Brown, 2008, pp.13-14).

Brown argues that although Killick advocated for the boundaried use of the setting as a means of offering the patient an experience of containment, her approach was primarily based on her work with patients who were experiencing a loss of symbolic function; for many of these patients, there was no differentiation between the studio and the self. However, with advances in medication, Brown suggested that for patients who have further developed towards symbol formation, the studio can be perceived as separate from the self, sharing the qualities of a transitional object (Winnicott, 1971). Winnicott's concept of a transitional object functions as a precursor to the symbol. It occupies the space of illusion where the transitional object both is, and is not, the self. Th object bridges the gap between the concrete and symbolic, and between internal and external reality. Brown conceptualised the studio as embodying the 'potential space' where play can develop (Brown, 2008, p.14).

In summary, the evolution of art therapy models and their theories seems to be underpinned by the art therapists' active reflections on the questions: 'How can I provide a sense of containment to my client in this given environment, even when it is less than ideal?' and 'How can I best utilise the resources at hand, which are sometimes limited?' For art therapists who predominantly use a

psychodynamic/psychoanalytical approach in their practice, the concept of space appears to be closely associated with containment. The art therapy studio/room, the physical objects within the space, and the people involved (e.g., the art therapist, the group members), and artworks made in the sessions are seen as containers that able to hold varying degrees of the client's projection. This is one way to conceptualise the increasingly fluid therapy settings, but it is not the only way. In the next section, a more art-based approach to working with 'the given environment' is explored.

2.6 Studio Art Therapy Model: From a Therapy Room to Peripatetic Practice

In *The Handbook of Art Therapy* (2014), Case and Dalley stated that the art therapy room is "essentially a private place with a firm outer boundary which enables a sense of containment, security, freedom from intrusion, and an atmosphere of calm and reflection" (Case & Dalley, p.60). However, an increasing number of art therapists find themselves working in environments that may not necessarily be private, sometimes even lacking concrete walls. This is partly due to the profession's expansion beyond conventional health or educational settings, providing opportunities to deliver therapy in clients' living spaces, outdoor areas, community centres, or museums and galleries (Moon, 2002; Corro, 2014; Kalmanowitz, 2016; Wright and Andrew, 2017; Coles *et al.*, 2019; Heginworth and Nash, 2019; Hollingsbee, 2019; Usiskin *et al.*, 2020; Hsu *et al.*, 2022). Flexibility has become more important than ever in adapting to our rapidly changing society.

In this section, I focus on the **Studio Art Therapy Model**, proposed by North American art therapist Cathy Hyland Moon (2002, 2016). In the previous section, the term 'studio'

has been associated with a physical setting such as an art college studio (Waller, 1993), the art studio in an asylum (Killick, 2000; Wood, 1997), an open studio in an acute psychiatric ward (Deco, 1998), and an artist's studio (Wood, 2000, 2014). However, Hyland Moon suggests thinking of 'studio' as a **metaphor** for a space that cultivates artistic creativity. The Studio Art Therapy Model encourages art therapists to internalise the creative spirit and to use our artistic abilities to transform any given space into a place where healing can occur, whether it be a storage room in an institution, a client's kitchen, or a refugee camp. Hyland Moon asserts that the foundation of art therapy theory and practice should be grounded in art. However, this does not necessarily mean that an art-based practice has to be opposed to clinical ways of working. She believes it is possible to be a proficient clinician when employs the studio art therapy model.

Hyland Moon developed her thinking based on contemporary aesthetic theories, her artist identity, clinical experiences, and exchanges with other art therapists/artists. She adopted the theory of Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002) as a theoretical construct, opening up a possibility to place art back at the centre of art therapy work. The definition of art has become more democratised and broadened since the 1960s, where art has become less bound by traditional art forms such as painting, drawing, or sculpture, and increasingly dematerialised, performative, collaborative, and social in the nature of its practice. Thereby, the aesthetic experience is constituted and shaped by the lived experiences of people from diverse social, cultural, and political contexts (Hyland Moon, 2016, pp.51-53). From this perspective, art is the dynamic process of how we interconnect with the world in which we live, and how we conceptualise and make meaning out of this experience. Art therapists have

internalised this artistic way of seeing, to "look at the dynamic whole of the experience of therapy" (Hyland Moon, 2016, p.56), noticing the nuances and poetic qualities in everything we encounter, including the space, people, nature, objects, and atmosphere. She proposed to make use of the space in a relational way. This mindset expands our awareness beyond the therapeutic relationship between the art therapist and the client; it allows the art therapist to see multiple possibilities in the given environment, not just adapting to a place, but also actively making use of chances and circumstances that occur during the session.

Hyland Moon defined space as a creative partner, with containment lying in the therapist's ability to actively engage and attune with the given place. She encourages art therapists to employ our senses, tap into our personal associations with the location, and scrutinise our preconceptions about it, all with the aim of becoming more attuned to the impact the place can have on the therapeutic process. This way of thinking allows us to be resourceful and to utilise whatever is available in the given environment, even if it might be far from an ideal therapy room. She suggested that even a subtle shift in our perception, such as from "this is a messy house" to "this is a lively house", could transform a kitchen table strewn with half-eaten food into a space that can potentially facilitate connection and creativity by thinking about the 'poetry of place' (Hyland Moon, 2016, p.67).

The Studio Art Therapy approach is adopted by many art therapists globally, particularly those who work peripatetically or are based in settings without a dedicated therapy room, such as in refugee camps, at hospital bedsides, or in clients' homes (Kalmanowitz and Lloyd, 1997, 2005; Moon, 2002, 2016; Jones *et al.*, 2006; McGee,

2006; Thomas, 2006; Derouaux, 2007; Golebiowski, 2013; Kalmanowitz, 2016; Wright and Andrew, 2017; Hollingsbee, 2019; Usiskin *et al.*, 2020; Hsu *et al.*, 2022). Kalmanowitz and Lloyd (2005) proposed a **Portable Studio Model** for working in refugee camps in the former Yugoslavia, based on the premise of the internal structure and internal space we carry within us as art therapists. This concept allows work to take place anywhere, from the dining room to the bedroom in a refugee camp, and even in a local rubbish dump (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, p.108).

My former colleagues and I, who worked in Taitung - a marginalised area of Taiwan - have taken the studio art therapy model further and proposed the **Relational Space-making Model** (Hsu *et al.*, 2022), as a way to respond to the local context. Our paper is underpinned by Jill Westwood's concept of the **Hybrid Creature**, a metaphor to explore the multilayers of cross-cultural encounters (Westwood, 2010, 2019). This perspective encourages us to consider not only geographical, material, sensorial, and sociological factors, but also how we, as art therapists, have been shaped by our upbringing, the culture of where we were trained, theoretical influences, and personal preferences. Both the given environment and the art therapists' personal influences shape the way art therapy is practiced when working in a cross-cultural context. This is a reciprocal process.

Figure 4. Our Hybrid Creature. (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu, Jasmine Wu, Wei-wen Chan, Chia-yu Lui)

Figure 4 presents the collaborative image, made by my colleagues and me, exploring our evolving understanding of art therapy in response to Taitung's unique environment, which has led us to conceptualise our own version of the 'hybrid creature'. It guided us when we felt lost amidst the complexities of our work. These complexities included working in shared spaces with others present, managing tensions between local culture and the art therapy model developed in Western contexts, as well as juggling psychodynamic-based and art-based theories. Our creature has the head of Reeve's muntjac - a deer species native to Taiwan. This solitary and sensitive animal, living in the forests of Taitung, symbolises the sparse population of art therapists working in the region. It also has the body of a monkey – a gregarious animal that reminded us how we are nurtured and sometimes struggle with the collectivism embedded in the Taiwanese culture. Its wing-like fins from a flying fish that allow it to swim and to leap out of the water, as a symbol of the flexibility we need to work across different settings. In its hand, our creature holds a rolled-up picnic blanket with the colours of the British Union Jack, signifying our British-based art psychotherapy training. The landscape, the community, and found objects in the environment, all constitute the space we work with children (Hsu *et al.*, p.121).

To summarise, art therapy is continually evolving in response to the surrounding environment. The Studio Art Therapy Model offers a valuable framework that allows art therapy to be integrated into diverse settings, opening up the possibility of creating a therapeutic space even in the most unlikely places. The analogy of the hybrid creature underscores the question of how art therapy can establish its roots in a new place, and not to be carried away by the wave of changes. In the next section, I explore

the concept of placemaking as an alternative frame to conceptualised the theoretic ground underlying these paradigm shifts in art therapy.

2.7 Making Place in Art Therapy: from Physical to Digital

As art therapy transitions from a room with concrete walls to less defined environments, it is evident that both psychodynamic and art-based approaches are increasingly considering environmental factors. This section begins by drawing from current art therapy theory that explore the other-than-human and other-than-technique elements in therapeutic relationships, incorporating materiality and place into the theoretical framework (Fenner, 2011). Following this, I introduce studies on placemaking and digital placemaking. These studies offer a fresh perspective to challenge the binary distinctions between the so-called 'physical' and 'virtual' spaces, opening up an alternative narrative to conceptualise online art therapy.

2.7.1. Expanding the Therapeutic Relationship

In *Place, Matter and Meaning* (2011) by Australian art therapist Patricia Fenner, her research showed that the art therapy room and the objects in the space may be more than a backdrop. Despite the mainstream psychotherapy/art therapy practice often focusing on the client-therapist relationship and the techniques, she proposed the understanding of the relationship should be expanded and include other-than-human and other-than-technique factors into the dynamic process (Fenner, 2011, p.851). Fenner studied the client's and the therapist's experiences of art therapy room, and found out that both parties present attachment to the place and to the objects, such

as curtains, furniture, and window views. Her research shows that the material environment provides support and stabilising influences on the therapy.

Fenner investigated literatures in philosophy, sociology, psychology, and architecture to understand how the human consciousness and subjectivity intertwined with, and embodied in, the environmental factors (Fenner 2011, p.852). She suggests a **sense of place** should be considered as a constitutive element in the psychotherapy practice. This research provides evidence for the claims made by psychodynamic and art-based authors, on how the room and objects can serve as container for the client or partner in the therapy (Brown, 2008; Deco, 1998; Greenwood & Layton, 1987; Hsu et al., 2022; Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 1997, 2005; Killick, 1997, 2000; Moon, 2002, 2016; Seth-Smith, 1997; Usiskin et al., 2020).

Sense of place, and the concept of place, has long been one of the principal objects of studies for humanistic geographers. Cresswell (2004) pointed out that 'place' is a slippery concept, since it is a frequently used everyday word, which makes it hard to go beyond that common-sense level. Humanistic geography is a study aim to unpack the nuances of people's attachment to location, explores the multilayers of meaning embedded in place, from as big as a nation, to as small as a room (Cresswell, 2004, p.7). Places are where our everyday-life activities take place, and it affects how our daily lives is organised. Fenner's research put art therapy space into the context of this rich discipline. The definition of place is further explored in following sections, as to navigate us go beyond the common-sense of what is online art therapy 'space'.

2.7.2 Conceptualising Place and Digital Placemaking

Place can be understood from three aspects: location, locale, and through sense of place (Agnew, 1987). Firstly, location is generally referring to the particular physical position on the surface of the Earth, but sometimes it can also refer to imaginary places, such as places in films or literature (Cresswell, 2004). Locale means the complex intersection of culture and context occur within that specific location (Anderson, 2009), explores people's social interaction, connection and inclusion, as well as exclusion, which is often closely relate to socially constructed categorisations, e.g. gender, class, race, nationality, or more. Sense of place refers to the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place – how do we feel about a place, and why? where do these feelings come from? How are we shape and be shaped by the place?

Although current art therapy literature suggests that online art therapy 'space' is located in the virtual platform itself and in the individual spaces inhabited by the therapist and the client (Haywood & Grant, 2022; Proulx, 2022; Shaw, 2020; Usiskin & Lloyd, 2020; Winkel, 2022), humanist geographers conceptualise online space differently. They see a digitally-mediated space as a **dynamic process of becoming**. Thus, mobility, movement, and people's routines should all be considered. This notion stems from the subtle differences between the concepts of 'space' and 'place'. While these terms might be used interchangeably in everyday language, 'space' is more abstract and less defined than 'place'. Cresswell (2004) describes space as a realm without assigned meaning, a basic coordinate for human life, or a 'fact of life' akin to time (Cresswell, 2004, p.10). A space transitions into a place when the individuals who use or occupy it assign meaning or significance to it. In other words, the activities and

actions within a space transform it from 'a space' into 'a place'. Thrift (2008) posits 'space' as movement embodied through routine, describing 'space' as "a series of carefully worked-out connections… consisting of pathways which bind quite often unalike things together, usually on a routine, circulating basis." (Thrift, 2008, p.88). Yi-fu Tuan, a prominent theorist in humanistic geography, succinctly states, "If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (Tuan, 1977, p.6).

Place is not restricted to describing physical location. With the advance of tele-technology, the debate on how digital media altered and transformed people's perception on place has been an ongoing discussion. Joshua Meyrowitz's classic *No Sense of Place: The impact of electronic media on social behaviour* (1986) describes the sense of 'placelessness' electric media has created in people, and its effect on changing the situational geography of social life. Due to the advance of communication technology, social interaction no longer has to rely on physical co-presence, which leaves people with a strong sense of uncertainty regarding how our social roles connect to physical space.

However, as we progress into the twenty-first century and adapt to an increasingly mobile lifestyle, Shaun Moores (2012) challenges the idea of seeing digitally-mediated spaces as 'placeless'. He posits that a sense of place can be reimagined by reintroducing the concept of mobility, thereby redefining the concept of dwelling in this digitally-mediated world. By mobility, he refers not only to movements such as walking, driving, or flying, but also the smaller actions such as manipulating a remote control

or a mouse, or even travelling imaginatively and virtually across vast distances via e-media (Moores, 2012, p.xi).

While digitalisation may diminish our bodily connection with the physical surroundings, Moores attempts to reinstate a place for the body by drawing from Paddy Scannell's concept of the 'Doubling of Place' (1996). This concept explores a new phenomenological experience of being in more than one place at a time, facilitated by telecommunication technologies. The 'Doubling of Place' originally referred to the time-space compression nature of broadcast media (e.g., radio, television), which could transport a person's mind to a place other than their physical location. Moores expands on this notion to understand our relationship with the latest mobile devices.

He proposes that the sense of place in contemporary society is created through the habitual and mundane use of technology across various settings (e.g., working across continents with a mobile and a laptop), and/or, through the use of multiple technologies in one setting. For example, he shares his experience as a British expat in Australia, illustrating the role of the internet, mobile, radio, and TV in constituting his sense of the UK while residing in Australia. Moores refers to this as a 'non-media-centric' approach to placemaking in the media environment, which gives physical presence a place in the digital experience. According to this perspective, the meaning of a place is not constructed through cognitive processes or symbolic representation, but rather, it is formulated through precognitive understanding and embodiment, or in other words, its usage.

2.8 Placemaking in Online Art Therapy

Digital placemaking has been conceptualise as dynamic process of engagement between the place, the digital devices, and the body movement. Here I return to current online art therapy literature and scrutinise the presented cases through this lens.

2.8.1 The Emergence of a New Kind of Subjectivity

The current views and discourse in literature regarding the 'space' of online art therapy, mainly divided the space into 'the virtual' (e.g., the hardware and software) and 'the physical' (e.g., the spaces inhabited by both parties)) (Haywood & Grant, 2022; Proulx, 2022; Shaw, 2020; Snyder, 2021; Winkel, 2022). The notion of placemaking offers a perspective that sees 'the virtual' and 'the physical' not as separate and binary entities, but as interrelated presences in a broader context. The digital media and physical matters intertwine through the therapist's and client's repetitive engagements, which is bodily-based in nature. It would be appropriate to frame the online art therapy sessions as an act of placemaking[2], since the therapist and the client are in the process of co-creating meaning through interacting with animate and inanimate entities across locations.

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[2] Please note that 'placemaking' can refers to the field that promote a paradigm shift in urban design, planning and policies to engaging the community voice (Courage et al., 2021). The term can also be use in a more general way to describe the process of the making of a place through human activities, such as, homeowners make their house into a home through. In this thesis, I use the latter definition to describe the making of the online art therapy session.

In this sense, the question posed in Chapter One - 'How to create a viable space for art therapy through digital devices?' becomes 'How is the sense of place created in online art therapy sessions?'. I examine current literature relevant to this inquiry in online art therapy. At this point, I turn to the visual poetry titled *Lament* (2021) created by Australian art therapist Julie Green, to explore the concept of an online art therapy place as "a form of intersubjectivity that we have not yet found language for" (Green, 2021, p.1). Please see the visual poetry displayed on the next page (fig.5). If you are reading this from a digital device, feel free to manipulate the size with your fingertips to view the whole image, or zoom in to read the words. By engaging with this pictorial form of text, I hope to bring the readers' awareness to their sensory and bodily engagement with the digital device.

A lament[1] for the room for the Lament the appearance The appearance of things
and the behaviour of light[2] + Light of behavior and things of appearance and++
+disappearance The sound of the door the smell of the room the sound of +
the therapist The sound of the client in the room + the smell the sound[3]++
the art materials, clay, cloth, water, paint, paper, brush+++ cardboard,
glue, ink, collage tear, felt+++++, thread, wool gone the feeling of life
medium materiality contact contract++++++++++++ gone virtual
online abstract +d+i+g+i+t+a+l ++++ beneficial limitations gone
spatial limitlessness[4] is it safe+++++++++++++++++++++ safe
safety complexity+++++++++++++++++++++ sight is always
in action+++++++++++++++++++++++++++ but not online
keep moving++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++ roll
++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++your chair
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++++++++++++++++++your chair++++++++++++++
+++++++++++++keep moving roll++++++++++++++++
++++++in action but++++++++++++++++++ not online
++++++++++safety complexity sight is always+++++++++
+spatial limitlessness is++++++++++++++++++ it safe safe+
++online abstract++++++ beneficial+++++ limitations gone+++
++medium materiality contact contract gone++++++++++ virtual
++glue, ink, collage tear, felt, thread, wool gone the feeling of life+++
++the art materials, clay, cloth, water, paint, paper, brush, cardboard+
++the therapist The sound of the client in the room the smell the sound+
+++appearance The sound of the door the smell of the room the sound of++
++and the behavior of light Light of behavior and things of appearance and++
A return to the room for the +++ of appearance the appearance of things a return

69

Julie Green plays with the chiasm structure to explore the sense of presence and absence, as well as departure and return. A chiasm is created from the overlap of two triangles, with the middle section of the concrete prose intersecting each other. For Green, this point of contact symbolises the crossover between the client's and the therapist's space. She lists the elements that constitute this space: art materials, sound, smell, spoken words, unspoken words, potentialities, concerns, objects, voids, the internet signal, the body, and everything in between. Green invites the reader to also pay attention to the blank space around the body of the chiasm, which "may be read as two screens on an awkward tilt facing each other with a lot of digital matter in between" (Green, 2021, p.1). *Lament* is an attempt to address the experience of online art therapy space in an abstract, pictorial form, to reflect on "a new kind of subjectivity and interrelationship that may happen in the online platform as distinctly different from being in the room together with another in the art psychotherapy space" (Green, 2021, p.1).

Green has opened an imaginative way to conceptualise the crossover between the therapist's and the client's space. The dynamic process of how art therapists adapt their practice from in-person to online setting, may be seen as an act of digital placemaking in domestic environment (Hardley and Richardson, 2021). In a broad sense, all practice-based literatures on online art therapy are attempts to "finding spaces and making places" (Tipple, 2017) in the practitioners' specific work context. In the next section, I explore how art therapists conceptualise and make place in online

art therapy sessions, to investigate the emerging shape of this "new kind of subjectivity and interrelationship" (Green, 2021, p.1).

2.8.2 Sense of Place, Materiality, and Body

Since the pandemic, there has been a surge in practice-based literature on online art therapy. This body of work provides rich accounts of how the professional community responded to the sudden shift to working online, offering a glimpse into the art therapists' initial encounters and reflections on this newly framed therapeutic environment. The questions to ask are: what new experiences have the online setting brought to art therapy sessions? How has it shaped the way therapists and clients relate to each other? This review specifically focuses on how art therapists and their clients co-created a sense of place in their online sessions. Moores' non-media-centric approach offers a way to consider the role of the body in digital placemaking. The discussion in this section revolves around conceptualising the intertwine between the place, digital technologies, and body in online art therapy.

British art psychotherapist Helen Jury (2022) described an innovative method for facilitating online sessions. She suggests 'touring' the client around the therapist's room, then inviting them to select physical materials, tools, or objects they wish to have. The client is allowed to direct any manoeuvring of the objects into a position for viewing on the screen. This approach maintains a physical connection, albeit virtually. The objects serve "almost as a witness, or even a participant, in the therapy," and the therapist becomes "the de facto 'eyes and hands' of the client, with the client acting as puppet master" (Jury, 2022, p.36). Although the client is unable to physically 'touch'

the objects, these selected items displayed on the screen can represent significant symbolic references for the client in artwork and/or discussion. For instance, one of Jury's clients mentioned how she could imagine precisely where the thick willow charcoal sticks were positioned. Despite being unable to use them in her artwork, having them visible on screen allowed her imaginative access (Jury, 2022, p.36).

Jury introduces an alternative sense of the 'as if' experience (Jury, 2022, p.36), which had not been encountered in in-person sessions before. The power dynamics and the phenomenological positioning of the 'body' have been altered. The metaphor of the client as 'a puppet master' is intriguing as it suggests that the physical body of the therapist acts as an extension of the client's body. The art psychotherapist can serve as 'additional tools, instruments, or materials' for the client to use, essentially "touching, handling, and accessing components of the artmaking and discussion by proxy" (Jury, 2022, p.36). The therapist's bodily engagement with the client's chosen objects (picking them up and arranging them) is an act that carries the intention, consciousness, and unconscious of both parties. This bridges the two sides of the screen and creates a unique space to feel, think, sense, and explore. The interaction between the body, the objects, and the digital devices reconciles the binary between the physical and the virtual, transforming the online art therapy session into an embodied place. This new experience of embodiment is made possible by the camera and the screen, leading to a more fundamental question: if the camera and the screen have become our 'eyes and hands', then what is our 'body' becoming?

2.8.3 *The Camera, the Screen, and the 'Dis-abled' Body*

McLuhan (2001) proposed the idea on technologies as the extension of humans, and stated "any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex" (McLuhan, 2001, p.4). If the camera and the screen serve as the extension of our bodily presence, how have they affected art therapy sessions? British art psychotherapist Lucy Shaw (2020) discussed the camera and the screen's impact on the 'body' and psychic of the clients and the therapist. At the beginning of the pandemic, Shaw worked with a group of three teenage girls with Anorexia Nervosa. She vividly illustrated how the clients' bodies and self-images were challenged by the web camera and the screen, and reflected on how her ability to serve as an art therapist is affected.

Shaw reported one member turned off the camera during a session and did not feel able to turn it back on or explain why. After the session, the therapist called the member and discovered that her struggle with seeing herself on the screen triggered her discomfort with her self-image. The member said, on days she did not like the way she looked, she found it particularly hard to come to the group as seeing herself on camera would fuel negative thoughts (Shaw, 2020, p.215). Since the online platform allowed her to have control over the view, she found it easier to show her artwork when she switched off the windows of other group members and pretended that she was sharing only with the therapist.

Being able to constantly seeing one's own image is an experience unique in videoconferencing call, as well as the ability to 'erase' the presence of other group members. The camera and the screen as an extended pair of eyes, have altered the experience of co-presence, which also changes the group dynamics, power dynamics,

and interpersonal relationships. The medium itself is neutral, but its impact varies among individuals. Clinical psychologist Buchanan (2014) suggested that people who suffer from body dissatisfaction might be more likely to experience difficulties with attention modulation. This could manifest during videoconferencing calls, with such individuals unintentionally focusing on their own image rather than others present in the online meeting (Buchanan, 2020, cited in Valenti, 2020, para 3-4). According to Moores (2012), it is the repetitive bodily engagement with digital media that forms a sense of place and meaning. Thus, with repeated struggles, this digital environment can pose particular challenges for this client group in establishing a positive sense of self and a healthy relationship with others.

On the therapist's side, Shaw was highly aware that both she and her client were physically situated in separate spaces while sharing a digital one together. According to the vignettes, this physical separateness posed a hindrance to the group. Shaw genuinely described how she felt deskilled, unable to utilise typical art therapy approaches to attune to clients through non-verbal communication, such as gaze and facial expression. For instance, she attempted to smile and make eye contact with a distressed member, but she could not be sure who the client was looking at - the therapist, other members, or even herself. Additionally, she could not quietly support any member with their artmaking without making it publicly heard by the whole group. Furthermore, she felt deskilled by her inability to see the artmaking process and the artworks (when the client decided not to hold them up), meaning she had to rely on the client's own description rather than forming her own impression of the image.

When the camera and the screen become extensions of our eyes and body, they provide us with the ability to overcome distance. However, these are eyes with a limited view and a body incapable of utilising typical body language for expression. For therapists facilitating groups online, being unable to individually address group members is a common challenge (Omand, 2022). For the majority of art therapists, the inability to witness the artmaking process is one of the main concerns and struggles. Online art therapy, or more precisely, art therapy sessions conducted via videoconferencing calls, bear an ambiguous quality that enables connection in one way but causes disconnection in another. Technology provides us with a new 'body', but it appears to be a 'disabled' body — one which 'dis-ables' the therapist's usual ways of engagement and the art therapist's distinctive way of knowing through observing the artmaking process. When this 'body' is unable to perform the basic tasks that are straightforward in an in-person session, it is likely for the therapist to feel deskilled, frustrated, helpless, or even nostalgic.

Our gains and losses through employing the camera and the screen as extensions of our bodies have led art therapists into a new realm. This new 'body' seems 'disabled', but is it so? What make us able, or unable, to perform certain task? In the next section, I explore the environmental factors in the online setting that construct our agency.

2.8.4 Body and the Features of a Platform

British art therapists Datlen and Pandolfi (2020) shared an interesting case about how the chosen platform and its features constructed the therapy space. WhatsApp's built-in features were utilised to host an online studio art therapy group for learning-disabled

young adults. Before the Covid-19 outbreak, the group was held in a studio setting within a diverse artist community. Members were periodically invited to exhibit artworks, and worked in collaboration with local galleries. Therefore, when the group moved online due to the pandemic, they were looking for a platform that could maintain the vibe of the studio. WhatsApp was chosen as it is accessible, familiar, and was already being used by the group members. Additionally, it is less formal than conference-style platforms like Zoom.

At the pre-planning stage, the therapists were struck by the wide variety of communication methods available on WhatsApp, including text, sound, image, video, and emojis. This inclusivity seemed to meet the different communication needs of the group members and felt potentially suitable for managing the group (Datlen & Pandolfi , p.196). Parallel to their original practice in the studio, the therapists planned to continue making art and upload their responses alongside the members. The therapists also arranged multiway calls with each member.

The features of the chosen program influence the way art therapists facilitate the group, such as how boundaries are maintained. Unlike Zoom or other conferencing call programs that have clear boundaries regarding the opening and closing of a session, WhatsApp, being an instant messaging app for daily social use, made the therapists feel uncomfortable due to a sense of invading the group members' social space. Therefore, after the first session, the facilitators decided to temporarily close the group by removing members and re-adding them before the next session, as this was the only way to deactivate and reactivate the group. Initially, the facilitators felt uncomfortable with this arrangement, perceiving it as a controlling and rejecting act.

However, it proved to be helpful in maintaining boundaries and managing interactions within sessions. Despite these measures, members still seemed to engage comfortably.

The therapists shared an interesting observation about how the clients behave differently in online and in-person settings. They noticed that this new means of interaction may have encouraged greater openness around identity expression for some members. Particularly for those whom found verbal interaction challenging, there appeared to be new and different ways of relating to and engaging with the group. Additionally, it seemed that members engaged more directly with the group rather than with the facilitators (Datlen & Pandolfi , p.197). While the paper did not provide an example of the interaction, it seems fair to suggest that the features in WhatsApp may subtly shape one's behaviour.

Dalten and Pandolfi suggested that WhatsApp might be a comfortable medium for younger generation and people with leaning difficulties to express difficult emotions. For example, the use of emojis and stickers seems to allow members to address feelings, such as loss, more easily. The use of emojis is an interesting example of how features could become an extension of human body parts. These small icons are not our corporeal faces, but they have become a shared language and an embodied facial expression that communicates emotions. For linguistics scholars, emojis are one of the best examples of how technologies affect the communication process itself. Emojis evolved out of the need to compensate for the emotional bluntness in mobile-mediated messaging (Seargeant, 2019, p.6). BRIS, a Swedish Child helpline NGO, even specifically developed a set of emojis for abused children to communicate their

situations more precisely (King, 2015). Emojis can be a powerful medium to express a wide range of emotions. However, it is important to note that emojis or technology cannot fully compensate for communication difficulties. Dalten and Pandolfi reported that some members still experienced difficulties understanding what was being asked and said, which could result in confusion and attempts to please the therapist. It is vital for therapists to be sensitive to how each individual reacts to the digital medium.

2.8.5 The Body, the Environment, and the Technology: A Hybrid Creature

Environment, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, refers to 'the conditions that you live or work in, and the way that they influence how you feel or how effectively you can work' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). In this sense, the environmental factors that constructed an online place play a key role in determining how able or unable an individual is to function. Dalten and Pandolfi's case show that the features of a chosen platform play an important role in influencing how a session is conducted. While Zoom and WhatsApp are both capable of facilitating video and voice calls, as well as sending text, images, and emojis, they are designed for different social purposes. The overall design of a program can enable or restrict users, making it easier or more difficult to perform certain tasks. These designs and features are often considered as constructs of an online environment. However, I would like to suggest that they should also be considered as constructs of our new **'body'**.

The body and the environment should not be viewed as binary concepts. Their relationship has been studied extensively, especially in disability studies. Disability has long been perceived as what a person is unable to do due to their health condition,

but in contemporary discourse, disability is considered the result of the interaction between an individual's health condition and personal and environmental factors (World Health Organization, 2022). In other words, what an individual is able or unable to do cannot be simply attributed to the individual or environmental factors alone; it is the interaction between the two that determines the outcome. In this sense, the body and the environment are correlated. A technological object — more precisely, the design and features of software/hardware — has a system or environment of its own, and when it interacts with people, the technological object becomes an extension of our 'body' parts.

Here, the concepts of the body, environment, and technology have become interrelated. These three concepts might seem clearly defined physically — here are my eyes and hands, my room and paintbrush, my laptop and the program I chose, and on the other side of the screen are yours — but phenomenologically, they are intermingled. It is hard to tell where the body begins and end, nor do the environment and the technology.

Perhaps the reason why online art therapy is such a slippery concept is because when these three very common, everyday elements — the body, environment, and technology — are intermingled, they form something unfamiliar to us. It becomes an assemblage, or more accurately, a hybrid creature. This creature has the ability to overcome distance barriers, yet it does not guarantee intimacy; it takes away some of our usual modes of expression while providing us with new ones. It appears confusing and difficult to grasp. Jill Westwood proposed the metaphor of a hybrid creature to conceptualise the migration of art therapy or the art therapist to a new environment

and their localisation process (Westwood, 2010, 2019). It seems fitting to see the transition of art therapy or the art therapist into the online world also as a migration, and we are in the process of becoming a yet-to-be-explored creature.

I like to think of online art therapy as a creature because it suggests it possesses the qualities of a living thing. Technology is often associated with being cold and inanimate, but in reality, it is a collection of human minds and efforts. As hardware/software are constantly updating, they are evolving. The metaphor of a 'disabled body' was used to describe art therapists' sense of being deskilled due to our inability to perform tasks that can be easily accomplished in an in-person setting. Art therapists lose something, yet also gain something that we are not familiar with. We are grieving our losses, but we are also in the process of learning how to move and feel with the newly gains. This might be a 'disabled body', but it is also an 'evolving body'.

By venturing into the online world, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, the art therapist has become a **Cyborg**. Julie Green's visual poem poses the question: what is the new subjectivity and interrelation in online art therapy? Perhaps this new subjectivity is brought about by the new and unfamiliar body we acquire, and this is a process of exploring how we relate to others, our environment, and ourselves through this evolving, prosthesis-equipped, cyborg body.

The concept of technology as a body extension has brought my exploration of online art therapy into the realm of posthumanism. In the next chapter, my methodology is based on exploring the philosophical position of this human-technology hybridity experience and planning my research method around it.

Chapter Three: Methodology: Philosophical Position

3.1 Introduction

Technology has entered the therapeutic relationship with an undeniable and radical influence. Chapter Two discussed how technology has shaped the way art therapists conduct sessions, or more precisely, how technology influences the art therapists' sensory and perceptual processes that we use and rely on to construct our understanding of a therapy session. Therefore, the nature of this thesis is an inquiry in exploring the nature of knowledge production through the interaction between human and technological objects.

Chapter Three is an outline of the ontological and the epistemological position of this thesis. The metaphor of the 'art therapist as cyborg' has brought this inquiry into the realm of Posthumanism, which suggests a 'more-than-human' perspective is needed to reimagine art therapists' experiences in online art therapy. In this chapter, I position the philosophical ground of the study and lays the foundation for the epistemological inquiry into the relationship between body and technology. To locate my study, I examine what is posthuman knowledge, the new materialist turns in expressive arts therapy research, and the historical development of the concept of cyborg in social studies. The cyborg metaphor not only challenges the presumption between animate and inanimate entities, but also wider socially constructed binaries, exploring how technology radically shapes our relationship with the world, which provides a

framework for us to think about the art therapist's emerging subjectivity in this rapidly changing, technology-mediated society.

This research is positioned in the qualitative paradigm as a piece of heuristic inquiry. It emphasises the importance of personal knowledge and subjectivity in personal experience and interpretation. It assumes that reality is constructed and plural in nature, and that human experience is shaped by material, social, cultural, and historical contexts.

3.2 What is Posthumanism

Posthumanism is a philosophical perspective of how change is enacted in the world. It challenges the classical "humanism" perspective - which frequently assumes the human is autonomous, conscious, intentional, and exceptional in acts of change. Posthumanism challenges this by proposing alternative worldviews that reconceptualise how agency is distributed through dynamic forces, in which humans participate but do not completely intend or control (Keeling and Lehman, 2018). If humans are not the only possible subjects or objects of study, then a door is open to a wide variety of possibilities. This repositioning is radical, since it unavoidably questions how we, as human, relate to our surroundings in all aspects. Therefore, it is not a surprise that Posthumanism soon gained scholarly attention across disciplines and encouraged theoretical turns in areas including, animal rights, environmental studies, philosophy, humanistic geography, bioethics, cognitive science, education, and more. Academics in the expressive arts therapy, including art therapy and dance movement therapy, have also taken part in this emerging conversation.

As posthumanism embraces the plurality of perspectives, it has become an umbrella term that encompassed a wide variety of branches. Before we look at the posthumanist turn in art therapy, I would like to go through an overview of the theoretical foundation of posthumanism, to provide a context to locate the art therapy literature and my study.

3.3 The 'More-than-Human' Turn

This 'more-than-human' turn is closely associated with the notion of the Anthropocene, which comes from the Greek terms 'anthropo' for human, and 'cene' for new. This concept was proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene F Stoermer (2002), who suggested we are living in a new geological epoch in which humans have had significant, long lasting, and potentially irreversible impacts on Earth. The Anthropocene was originally a concept in geographical study, but it has been taken up by posthumanists to discuss why and to think beyond human perspective matters. Braidotti believes Anthropocene is "a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human" (Braidotti, 2013, p.5). As posthumanists come from a wide range of disciplines, the theory may be conceptualised differently due to the individual disciplinary priorities. Jasmine Ulmer (2017) suggests the concept has influenced academic research mainly in two ways: 1) it provides a framework to think about the ways in which we shape, and are shaped by, our material environments. 2) some academics contest the choice of Anthropocene and attempt to "imagine a non-Anthropocene (or even post-Anthropocene) human" (Colebrook, 2014, p.8, cited in

Ulmer, 2017, p.4), such as transhumanism, alternative economic systems, forward-thinking environmental policies, and a healthier planet.

Since posthumanism celebrates plural views and highly values the vitality heterogeneity can bring, one should not expect a unified definition of the field. In the next section, I outline my understanding on how knowledge may be produced from a posthuman research lens, which mainly draws from Jasmines Ulmer's review on methodology and is aligned with my experience as an art therapist researcher.

3.4 Knowledge Production in Posthumanist Research

In contrast to empirical models that seek to determine causality and validity, posthuman knowledges move towards material ways of thinking and being. The 'material ways' often refers to a process that recognises and explores the agency of matters. In Karen Barad's *Posthumanist Performativity: Towards an Understanding of How Matters comes to Matter* (2003), she proposes a posthumanist account that questions differential categories of 'human' and 'nonhuman', examining how these boundaries are stabilised and destabilised. For Barad, Donna Haraway's *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1989) – from primates to cyborgs to companions species – epitomizes this point (Barad, 2003, p.808). I will look into this iconic paper in more detail later. While the distinction between human and nonhuman has constantly been challenged and rechallenged, posthumanism does not deny the value of human. Instead, it seeks ways to respond to the complex problems in the current climate. This thesis is an example of recognising that the existing theoretical framework in the art therapy profession is insufficient for understanding the complexities of online art therapy.

Therefore, non-human components, such as technology, need to be included into the picture to facilitate thinking around emerging challenges and possibilities.

In posthuman research, phenomena are understood as multiple, subjective, and produced from a series of complex relations. Ulmer suggests the knowledge produced in this genre are situated, material, interconnected, processual and/or affirmative (Ulmer, 2017, p.5). By **situated** knowledge, she means partial knowledges that intersect with methodological conversations regarding positionality, reflexivity, voice, and power. This is a hard-won epistemological and political achievement by critical theorists, it provides a necessary means for translating experiences among marginalised communities. However, Ulmer points out the problematic nature of situated knowledges when they shift from the context of interpretivism to posthumanism. She cited Haraway's argument on the conflict between critical approaches and posthumanism - one centres the knowledge of marginalised groups, while the other seeks to decentre the role of humans altogether. To stay sharp and inclusive, Haraway proposes that the political and power dynamics might be generated by the materiality of human/non-human bodies.

This links to Ulmer's second point on the **material** nature of knowledge. In *Bodily Natures: Science, Nature, and the Material Self* (2010)*,* Stacy Alaimo uses the term 'transcorporeality' to describe how material knowledges move across human/non-human bodies. Although 'body' has often been discussed by cultural and feminist scholars, Alaimo argues their notion of 'body' overly forefronts the role of social and cultural construction. She believes culture does not primarily produce meaning, but rather, how, where, and why matter interacts with culture, biology, politics, gender, policy, and class is what ultimately shapes 'the culture'.

Ulmer's third point is that knowledge is **interconnected** and **relational**. This refers not only to the interconnection between knowledges themselves but also to how materiality and matters remain interconnected. This transversality "cut across artificial divides, including those that are human/nonhuman, nature/culture, living/non-living etc." (Alaimo, 2010, p.6). The notion of interconnection plays a key role in removing the central focus from humans, and considers ways in which other species live-in, and interact with their material surroundings. This view is particularly influential in animal and plants studies, as it opens the door to the potential to viewing the world from the lens of a nonhuman being, stimulating thinking around alternative interconnections beyond human perception and encouraging to think of phenomena as 'systems'.

New materialist Karan Barad (2007) used the term 'intra-action' to replace 'interaction' as a way to understand how entities interconnected with each other, and form a system. The difference between the two is that interaction implies separate entities acting upon each other with cause-and-effect relationships, for example, if you kick a ball, the ball will move in response to your force. In this case, the ball and you are seen as separate entities that interact with each other. On the other hand, in an intra-action, the entities are not seen as separated, but rather, emerge through a dynamic process of ongoing exchange, influence, and diffraction with other entities. Intra-action regards agency not as an inherent property of an individual or human to be exercised, but as a dynamism of forces (Barad, 2007, p.141, cited by [Stark, 2016]). For instance, the action of kicking a ball involves the person's intention, physical ability, the material the ball is made of, and the environmental factors such as the wind, the textual of the ground, and the context of the place. The meaning of a ball kicking arises from a system

emerging out of the result of all the living and non-living components constantly intracting and influencing each other.

Since 'life' is viewed as interconnected, relational, and transversal, Ulmer suggests that posthuman knowledge can be positioned as **processual**, characterised by intractive and open-ended processes (Ulmer, 2017, p.6). Drawing from Braidotti (2013), she proposed that the emphasis upon process invokes new conceptual creativity, leading to alternative projects and possibilities in research. This **affirmative** approach to creativity can be found throughout the writing in posthumanist scholars. In this sense, posthuman research is often both a process and a practice, in line with non-representational approach in research – a methodology that rejects the idea that the world is made up of objective, pre-existing facts that can be represented and measured, emphasising the important of understanding how the world is actively constructed through social, cultural, and material practices. Ulmer cites Tim Ingold (2015) to capture this spirit:

> This is not exactly a theory, nor is it a method or technique as commonly understood. It is not a regulated set of steps to be taken towards the realisation of some predetermined end. It is a means, rather, of carrying on and of being carried – that is, of living a life with others, humans and non-humans all – that is cognizant of the past, finely attuned to the conditions of the present, and speculatively open to the possibilities of the future. I call it a *correspondence*, in the sense of not coming up with some exact match or simulacrum for what we find in the things and happenings going on around us, but of *answering* them with interventions, questions, and responses of our own.

(Ingold, 2015, p.vii, cited in Ulmer, 2017, p.7)

The non-representational approach is popular among scholars who wish to expand the scope of what counts as 'social' in social science research. It challenges prescriptive research methods by arguing that standardised methods may provide a false sense of security that knowledge is stable. Fixed structures may discourage and inhibit creativity. As posthumanist embraces the uncertainty of knowledge and the messiness of knowledge production, this stance against standardised methods pushes posthumanist scholars to take an imaginative leap towards alternative ways of thinking and doing research. The non-representational research attitude encourages active engagement with our surroundings, allowing scholars reconnect with their sense of wonder, astonishment, and curiosity by entangled with their environments. Thrift (2008) outlines seven core principles – more akin to ideal qualities rather than a system of non-representational research – including:

- emphasising movements and flows of everyday life

- pre-individuality

- practices

- things

- experimentations

- affect and sensations

- space

Some posthumanists attempt to broaden our perspective by **thinking with** other-than-human being (Thrift, 2008, p.10-11), such as thinking with objects, animals, plants,

elements, and/or physical phenomenon. For example, Karen Barad uses diffraction –
a classic physical phenomenon occurring when waves encounter an obstacle or pass
through a narrow opening, causing the waves bend, spread, overlap, and extend into
one another - as a theoretical framework to conceptualise the entanglement of matter
and meaning. She argues that the way in which waves diffract with obstacles is
analogous to the way matters and meaning 'intra-act' in the world, representing
another form of critical consciousness (Barad, 2007).

3.5 The Posthuman Turn in Expressive Arts Therapy Research

Posthumanism involves the realisation and acknowledgement that a human-centric
view is insufficient to address the current challenges and the complexity of the world
we face today. This is certainly true in the discipline of expressive arts therapy. Since
Fenner (2011) proposed a theoretical shift to consider other-than-human factors (eg.
place and object) and other-than-technique orientated factors in art therapy, art
therapist researchers has ventured into this realm of how human and non-human are
intertwined and inform the construction of knowing.

Art psychotherapists Lesley Morris and Jill Westwood (2021a, 2021b) explore the
interconnections and intra-actions between found objects, spaces, time, art, and
people through the concept of diffraction (Barad, 2007). This perspective offers a
refreshing and stimulating way to rethink how an art therapist's subjectivity is
constructed with, and embodied in, the materiality in our everyday life.

In *Crossing the Field* (2021a), Morris and Westwood draw from a New Materialist point of view to facilitate their thinking on a collaborative installation art project in the field at Goldsmiths, University of London. Many activities took place on the field during the three days on the International Art Therapy Conference. This paper raises questions about the multi-layered and complex intertwining of the place-space-time-context in art therapy. By gathering the encounters between humans and non-humans, artworks, stories, and reflections, the authors seek questions they are not yet aware of, as well as ways to push the limits of their consciousness.

In *The Subterranean Dreaming in the Intertidal Zone* (2021b), Morris and Westwood illustrate a dynamic process of how meanings are formulated and identities are reflected during a walk along the shore of River Thames. Through their encounters with the objects they brought, and the objects they found on the way, as well as the passer-by, the author's body, weather, landscape, history, social and political contexts, sensory experiences, and all the entities they are aware of, and possibly not aware of. These two papers pose questions to all art therapists: how aware are you of your entanglement with the material world around you? How do you understand them? How have they shaped you, and how you shaped them, on both professional and personal levels?

Dance movement psychotherapist Caroline Frizell also ventures onto these epistemological questions in her thesis, *Towards Posthuman Dancing Subjects* (2021). The New Materialist Posthumanist Post-qualitative (NMPHPQ) lens provides her with a theoretical framework to consider her writing room, the window view, her clients, a woodlouse, the natural world, her movements, and many more meaningful encounters

in life. She captures the process of searching through experimental and creative uses of writing, photography, and video making to explore the emerging ontological and epistemological shifts in her practice and research. This paper demonstrates how our knowledge is constructed through intertwining with our surroundings and suggests that the nature of knowledge itself is a process of becoming.

The posthuman turn in current expressive arts therapy research focuses on art therapists' subjectivity interwoven with their surroundings and calls for expanding the understanding of what constitutes a 'relationship' in art therapy on a pre-cognitive level. The current research mainly touches on art therapists' relationships with everyday life and natural environments. My thesis follows the same spirit but goes down the other path of exploring the art therapist's relationship with technology and artificial environments, which is more in line with the concept of a **post-Anthropocene human**.

The metaphor of the cyborg is used in Chapter Two to discuss the entanglement between the art therapist's body and the digital environment. The cyborg is also a well-researched subject in academia. In the next section, I first contextualise the concept of the cyborg to investigate how the body, the environment, and technology interact. Then, I explore the metaphor's potential to facilitate thinking around constructing an appropriate research method to capture the complexity of the new experiences art therapists have in online settings.

3.6 Cyborg: Human's Relationship with the Technological Advancement

Cyborg – a term blending the elements of **cyb**ernetic[3] and **org**anism – was first coined in *Cyborg and Space* (1960) by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline to refer to humans with mechanical and/or technological body parts. Since then, the term has been widely adopted by the engineers, the social researchers, and in popular culture, such as science fiction and film. Why is this image of the human-machine hybridity so influential and rooted in our everyday life nowadays? And how does it contribute to research and knowledge production? More importantly, how does it support this study in imagining a post-Anthropocene art therapist? This section delves into how the concept of cyborg could serve as a thought experiment and thinking tool in research to lay the ground for developing a research framework for this thesis.

3.6.1 The Origin of the Cyborg

Clynes and Kline's idea of the cyborg was originally proposed to allow humans to adapt to the extreme environment of space travel. They listed the physiological and psychological challenges an astronaut might encounter and provided imaginative solutions to enhance bodily functions through technological and mechanical supports. They imagined a cyborg that "deliberately incorporates exogenous components

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[3] Cybernetics is an interdisciplinary study concerned the control and communication system in living organisms and machines. It provided the theoretical basis for the devolvement of cyborgs, by exploring the principle of the biological or/and artificial mechanism of their circular processes and feedback loops, which allow one system to be able to integrated with another. This has led to the development of prosthetics, implants, and other technologies that can enhance the abilities of human beings and other animal. From a more metaphoric view, it can refer to an organism that has been plugged into another system.

extending the self-regulatory control function of the organism in order to adapt it to new environments" (Clynes & Kline, 1960, para.9). For them, mechanical support must be incorporated into the body's homeostatic systems, because if the astronaut is too busy constantly checking on the devices to keep themselves alive, they become a slave to the machine (Clynes & Kline, 1960, para.10). By providing an organisational system that takes care of these robot-like problems automatically and unconsciously, the cyborg leaves humans free "to explore, to create, to think, and to feel" (Clynes & Kline, 1960, para 10).

3.6.2 Defining Technology

In this sense, the incorporated mechanical parts are considered as pieces of technology to support humans in achieving better living conditions, which implies overcoming the fragile or not-functional-enough corporal body in certain environments. It is important to clarify that the term 'technology' has often been referred to high-tech objects in everyday language, such as digital devices or electronic industrial products, but in fact, it originally means "the application of scientific knowledge to the practical aims of human life or, as it is sometimes phrased, to the change and manipulation of the human environment" (Britannica, 2023, para.1). In other words, technology is about humans' ability to make tools to adapt to their environment, and what is seen as 'contemporary technology' is subject to the time in history we are referring to. Please note that the term 'technology' in this section is referring to its nature as a tool, rather than as any contemporary high-tech product.

3.6.3 Hand Axe and Prometheus: The Beginning of Technology

The history of humans using tools to enhance bodily function and life quality can be traced back to prehistorical times and the creation myth in ancient Greece, which shows humans' entanglement with technology as a fundamental part of our ways of living, identity, and civilisation. Hand axes are the earliest evidence of tools used in history. The latest archaeological findings show the use of hand axes can be traced back to 520,000 to 620,000 years ago by Homo Heidelbergensis, which is 300,000 years earlier than our ancestor Homo Sapiens had even evolved (Hale, 2022). As flints were sharpened to a bifacial form, the majority of archaeologists believe hand axes mainly served as cutting tools to butcher catches and chop plant materials. Although humans did not have sharp claws and thick fur, the hand axe could serve as an extension of their body to cut prey, then obtain its fur as an exogenous skin for protection.

As archaeological exploration provides evidence of humans' earliest relationship with materiality, myth is a discourse that explores humanity's psychological origin. Carl Jung believes myths were expressions of the collective unconscious, which express core ideas that are part of the human species as a whole (Jung, 1981). In Adrienne Mayor's *Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology* (2018), she explores how technology is interpreted by ancient Greeks. Prometheus is known for making humans out of clay, stealing fire from Zeus, and bringing civilisation to humankind. Mayor recounted another version of the story from Plato' *Protagoras*,

which expresses the relationship between the fragility of the human corporeal body and technology. Below is my summary of Plato's version:

> After the humans and animals were created by the gods, the gods entrusted Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus with the task of giving each animal their appropriate capabilities to protect them from environmental elements. Epimetheus gave strength, speed, feathers, claws, furs, and many more qualities to all animals. When Prometheus inspected Epimetheus's work, he found that his brother had left humans unclothed, unshod, and unarmed. Therefore, Prometheus stole fire, knowledge, and practical wisdom on how to make crafts and tools from the gods for the naked mortals, to compensate for their fragility and ensure their survival (Mayor, 2018).

The interplay between the fragility of the human body, the challenges in the living environment, and the use of tools/technology seems to be a thread that runs through human history. It shows that the body, the environment, and the technology are a set of closely intertwined concepts that should be considered as correlated when discussing one or another. In other words, the line between the three has been blurry from the beginning of human history, and the change in any one of the elements will unavoidably affect the others; it should be fair to say they interact as a **system**. This echoes the question raised at the end of Chapter Two on how the art therapist's body, the digital devices, and the physical and virtual places are mingled in online art therapy. In the next section, I contextualise how the concept of cyborg may serve as a thinking tool in research, which could later navigate us through this entanglement in the online art therapy setting.

3.6.4 Cyborg as a Thought Experiment and Analytical Tool

The human-environment-technology/tool relationship has a long history. The metaphor of the cyborg is a contemporary exploration into this relationship, stemming from the rapid technological advancements since the second half of the twentieth century. This section explores the role of the cyborg in knowledge production. As the cyborg has become a powerful and influential cultural image in society today, it may serve as a thought experiment and analytical tool to stimulate imagination regarding the possibilities of enhancing human conditions. It also contributes to research and public discourse by providing a reference to imagine future humanity.

A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s (1985) by feminist scholar and philosopher Donna Haraway, is a crucial reading that remains influential today. She proposes that with the advancement of technology, we are all cyborgs. On one hand, she is referring to how machines have become an inseparable part of life as human dependence on machines has surged. Nearly 40 years ago, she already foresaw the development in modern medicine (e.g., prosthetics, implants, reproductive technology) and how the advancement of the miniaturisation of silicon semiconductor chips would bring about the boom in portable and complex devices (e.g., mobile phones, laptops), which now intertwine with all aspects of contemporary life. Since these 'machine' could be non-physical (e.g., software, cloud computing), it becomes more difficult to decide where the machine ends, and where the human begins. On the other hand, she used the hybrid nature of the cyborg as a metaphor not only to question the line between human and machine but also to blur

many traditional dualisms, including the lines between social reality and fiction, human and animal, as well as social constructions, such as gender, race, and class.

Haraway challenges these binaries as her resistance to the patriarchal ideas that define 'what is woman' based on their nature and cultural constructs. For Haraway, her cyborg myth is not only a reflection of material reality today but also a thought experiment to imagine the possibilities for recoupling. Since a cyborg is a hybrid of machine and organism, the human body acquires features that it could not have developed on its own, which questions traditional biological/nature-based categorisations in identity politics. This recoupling with machines "merges nature and culture into one body, blurring the line between them and eliminating the validity of essentialist claims about human nature... including specific social roles reserved for each sex based on biological differences, age, or race." (Ahmad, 2019, para.8). In this sense, the cyborg may be seen as a metaphor for reimagining the presumed power relationships and politics.

Haraway is aware that most progressive socialists and feminists view high-technology and scientific culture as dominating or controlling, creating splits between mind/body, organism/machine, and other social hierarchies. Progressives often emphasise the importance of an 'organic body' in their resistance against oppressive systems. However, Haraway sees this perspective as problematic. This view reinforces traditional dualisms that privilege and assume that there is a 'natural body' and see technology as something external to humans that needs to be controlled, rather than something that can be integrated into our identities and political work.

Her argument is that the hybridity and fluidity of the cyborg can serve as a thinking tool for us to move away from the fixed categories that traditionally form our identity, such as gender, race, class, and age, which dominated the feminist discourse in the 80s. She outlines a complex phenomenon of gender politics in a society dominated by information and communication technologies, as well as biotechnology, providing sharp insights into the radical changes in how technological advancements intertwine with women's lives in all aspects, such as career, family life, social role, and childcare. Haraway is not naïve about the dangers of technology but rejects technological determinism. She believes some high-tech-facilitated social relations can "provide fresh sources of power", and suggests that "we need fresh sources of analysis and political actions" (Haraway, 1985, p.25). Therefore, she encourages socialist feminism not to be afraid of forming kinship with machines. As the cyborg is a "condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two jointed centres structuring any possibilities for historical transformation." (Haraway, 1985, p.8). The cyborg metaphor gives us agency to deconstruct and reconstruct our ways of being in the time of the digital era, and to explore "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self" in the context of informatic domination (Haraway, 1985, p.23). Through the cyborg, she imagines a future for feminists not to seek unity based on rigid identity categories but affinity, which allows for diverse groups to work together without sacrificing their uniqueness.

Haraway's discourse on the cyborg has had a significant impact on social research and has facilitated intellectual conversations in society, particularly in today's technology-driven world (Downey *et al.*, 1995; Kunzru, 1997; Hayles, 1999a; Barad, 2003; Hayles, 2006; Braidotti, 2013; Ahmad, 2019; Weigel, 2019). In summary, the

cyborg has become a metaphor and an analytical tool for understanding complex social phenomena, especially in the context of technology, identity, and power relations. It is important to note that, for Haraway, the cyborg always refers to a situated context rather than a universal one (Nakamura, 2012). The concept of cyborg has contributed to research and knowledge production by 1) deconstructing binaries, 2) integrating interdisciplinary approaches, 3) providing an anchor point to focus on the **relationship** between humans, technology, and the environment, and 4) rethinking identity. I particularly want to emphasise the word 'relationship' because the multilayers within this coupling are so slippery to capture, and the image of the cyborg provides a helpful reference point to return to when navigating the complexities of these relationships.

3.7. Imagining a Post-Anthropocene Art Therapist

Haraway took an imaginary leap with the metaphor of the cyborg, and found its voice and agency in the social and political realms. The cyborg, as a hybrid creature, is capable of encompassing heterogeneous materials and qualities into the body. This made me wonder, what kind of cyborg is the art therapist like? In this thesis, I use the metaphor of the cyborg to refer to the art therapist's coupling with technology, as a way to imagine what a post-Anthropocene art therapist could be like. A cyborg can mean any individual art therapist who engages with technology-mediated mediums, and/or refer to the collective of art therapists in the time of a technological-mediated era. In this sense, all art therapists are cyborgs. What is incorporated into our body? How do we move and how do we sense? How do we relate with others and ourselves? Where did we come from, what are we becoming, and where are we going to?

As I ventured into the world of the cyborg, I am aware that my inquiry seems to share a close link with transhumanism – an intellectual and interdisciplinary academic movement that explores the enhancement of human capabilities and improving human conditions through the use of technology and science, and the related ethical discussions. However, as words such as 'enhancement,' 'improvement,' 'evolution,' and 'making changes' frequently appear in transhuman-related literature (Kurzweil, 2006), I could not ignore the fact that the ideology of 'bettering humans' underpinning this discipline is very different from mine. It is true that technological advances allow art therapists to overcome certain human limitations (i.e., distance). However, as we have seen in Chapter Two, this coupling brings the art therapists a partially 'disabled' body. I am concerned that overly emphasising the aspect of improving human conditions seems not to have enough space to hold and process those ambiguous experiences in human-machine relationships.

This research may share a similar theme and even be categorised as transhumanism, but I do not have an affinity for it. The cyborg in transhumanism makes me think of what my art therapist cyborg is not: it is not intended to 'better oneself' in a bodily sense, it wants the ability to connect – connect with the people on the other side of the screen, connect with oneself, connect with this surreal yet very real digital age we are in.

This thesis aims to develop narratives that give art therapists more agency in this new given body and working environment. In the next chapter, I articulate my chosen research method and research design to pursue this inquiry.

Chapter Four: Methodology: Research Methods

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I outline my methods for data collection and analysis. I begin by articulating the challenges of capturing the slippery and temporary nature of online art therapy sessions and then provide a rationale for why I consider the bricoleur approach (Rogers, 2012; Pratt *et al.*, 2022) to be appropriate in this context. Given that art therapy encompasses a broad community with therapists from various cultural backgrounds around the globe, employing diverse approaches, and practicing in a wide range of clinical settings, I have chosen to use Digital Ethnography (Pink, 2015; Pink *et al.*, 2016) as my main framework for its adaptability, which facilitates navigation through the complexities of researching a population within an elusive setting. This chapter details how I define and decide on the field site and research participants, including selection criteria, recruitment, and ethical considerations. Data are generated through close collaboration with participants, which includes online interviews accompanied by responsive art-making. Conversational exchanges between the researcher and the participants, including emails and messages, are also retained as data. Participants were encouraged to keep a research diary in the format of their preference. Additionally, my personal research diary and art-making constitute important parts of the data (McNiff, 2008).

Online art therapy does not exist in vacuum; it is part of the accelerated global digitalisation movement during and post the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, I carefully consider every piece of technology, including software and hardware, that are involved

in conducting this study also as data. I kept a journal about my interactions with these digital entities, to investigate how technology become extensions of one's 'body' and explore the potential formation of an 'Art Therapist Cyborg'.

Two programs are explored in this chapter, 1) **Obsidian**, a note-taking program designed based on the ethos of Digital Gardening, to support my data analysis (Appleton, 2022); 2) **Chat GPT**, the latest revolutionary AI based on the Large Language Models, which I used for proofreading. I understand the controversy of using AI in academic research (Cotton *et al.*, 2023). My decision to work with Chat GPT in this study was driven not only by its practical advantages, but also by the opportunity it offers to explore and stimulate discussion about the role AI may play in shaping academic research. By collaborating with AI in the process of writing, it raises the question: does the input of the AI make this thesis a 'cyborg' as well?

4.2 Challenges of Constructing this Research

Constructing this study presents two primary challenges. Firstly, the constitution of online art therapy encompasses a multi-layered, temporary interaction between places, technologies, and the body, which proves difficult to capture. Moreover, online art therapy sessions are not a field that the researcher can directly involve in observation, since this is a psychotherapy intervention that has been strictly protected by confidentiality.

Secondly, capturing the broader social context in which this study is situated presents an additional challenge. Although the social context may not appear directly relevant

to the topic of online art therapy, I believe it is an important aspect to address. Based on the finding in Chapter Two, we know the paradigm shifts in art therapy are often responses to the shift in social climate at the time. The span of this research, from June 2020 to June 2023, was a period characterised by the global pandemic and revolutionary technological advancements. These included the rise and fall of the Metaverse; the AI boom in 2022, marked by the releases of Midjourney in July and Chat GPT in November; and the introduction of the spatial computing device, Apple Vision Pro, in 2023. This has prompted me to expand the scope of this study to reflect the broader context online art therapy sessions are situated. Therefore, my observations and experiments with digital tools are seen as part of the data for this research. Through this thesis, I also aim to capture and portray the evolving landscape of art therapy during this unique moment in human history.

4.3 What is Bricoleur Approach

To maintain the flexibility needed to address the continuously evolving nature of this study, I adopted a bricoleur approach to data collection. This involves assembling existing research methods to accomplish the task in a practical manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), which proves particularly useful for complex and interdisciplinary research questions.

Bricoleur is a French term (Bricolage in English) originally proposed by anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss to describes "someone who works with his [or her] hands" (Levi-Strauss, 1962, p.16, cited in Johnson, 2012, p.358), which was originally presented as a metaphor for how mythical thought works, by selecting fragments of previous cultural

formations and re-deploying them in new combinations. Since then, the concept has been adapted and has travelled into the field of science and humanities (Johnson, 2012, p.355), as well as into research methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Denzin and Lincoln use the image of bricoleur as a way to explain how researchers work through the confusing array of methodological genres that exist. The concept of bricoleur supports researchers to deploy whatever strategies, methods, or materials in hands, even invent or piece together new tools if needed. This requires the researcher to be knowledgeable about the many interpretive paradigms and be practical to pursue the inquiry.

John McLeod is a pioneer in research methods for psychotherapy and counselling. He suggests research on psychotherapy is often bricoleur in nature, because the research questions in this field are often "multifaceted and ethically sensitive, and require great ingenuity and resourcefulness on the part of the researcher…… in order to construct knowledge products that have practical value" (McLeod, 2011, p.83). Bricoleur approach gives this study the flexibility to navigate through the complexity of this topic, and the practical challenges posed by the pandemic.

4.4 Digital Ethnography

This research employs Digital Ethnography (Pink, 2015; Pink *et al.*, 2016) as the framework to pursuit this inquiry. Ethnography is traditionally described as a fieldwork method, which requires the researcher to immerse in the lives of people and the place for an extensive period of time. It aims to understand human behaviour and cultural phenomena in context. The ways for data collection are diverse, usually involve

participant observation, field notes, interviews, audio/visual recordings, and sometimes to collect artifacts. Reflexivity - a process of the researcher recognising how one's positionalities may shape the interpretation of the collected data - is a crucial part in the data analysis.

Online art therapy was conceptualised as a form of placemaking in Chapter Two. The immersive quality of ethnography possesses the capacity to enable an in-depth investigation into the art therapists' sense of place and subjectivity, therefore I consider ethnography as an appropriate method for conducting this study. However, undertaking ethnography within a digitally-mediated environment presents certain challenges. The field of digital ethnography contextualises contemporary debates on the impact of digital media technologies on ethnographic practice, discussing how technological advances influence and redefine aspects such as, collaboration with participants, observation methods, the concept of field-site, the nature of data, data collection, and analysis processes (Hine, 2000; Postill, 2015; Pink *et al.*, 2016; Hjorth *et al.*, 2019). Hine (2019) suggests that digital mediums have the quality to enable individuals to be presence in multiple locations simultaneously, leading to digital ethnography as a multi-model, multi-sited study brings fresh practice and analytic challenges. As a researcher, one must decide which connections between these settings to pursue and how to do so. The follow sections articulate the path I have chosen.

4.5 Researching Sensory and Affects in Ethnography

The main theme of this research is to explore the art therapists' experience of place, technology, and the body in the online art therapy sessions. Anthropologists Sarah Pink et.al (2016) suggests investigation into the experience involving digital medium can be seen as an analytic tool in research to 1) understand a world which digital medium are an integral component, and 2) understand how individual's subjectivity is constituted through the use of digital technology (Pink et al., 2016, pp.19-20). They propose focusing on the **sensory** and **affective** aspects in order to capture how experiences are embodied and lived in the everyday life. The theoretical foundation of this claim originates from studies in phenomenology, including "Husserl's focus in consciousness, Heidegger's exploration of experience as fundamentally connected to situated ways of being in the world, and Merleau-Ponty to emphasis body as the site of our knowledge of the world" (Pink et al., 2016, p.20). Merleau-Ponty's exploration into body schema (2014) plays an crucial role in my thesis for understanding the relationship between our phenomenological body, the technological devices, and our corporeal body. This is discussed further in Chapter Six.

My fieldwork begins with exploring art therapists' emotional responses evoked by transiting from in-person to online setting, which is detailed in Chapter Five. Pink et.al. (2016) suggest that 'the experiences' are often difficult to articulate or observe directly, but through the researcher's immersion in the field sites and identification of concepts associated with sensory or emotional experiences, it could facilitate the discussion with research participants. In the next section, I outline my research plan to carry out this inquiry.

4.6 Defining Participants

My research question - exploring art therapists' subjective experience of online art therapy sessions - implies that I should seek participants who are art therapists with experience working online. However, identifying suitable participants is not a straightforward task. Firstly, as this study is commenced during the early stage of the pandemic, the majority of art therapists had limited or no prior experience working online (Zubala & Hackett, 2020; Choudhry, R. & Keane, C., 2021), resulting in a scarcity of 'experts' in this field. Secondly, art therapists constitute a heterogeneous community, employing various approaches, working with diverse client groups and settings, and practicing worldwide. The definition of 'online art therapy' is rather fluid, encompassing any instance in which art therapists conduct sessions via the internet, which means the experiences of art therapists from different contexts are likely to vary vastly. Therefore, in the early stages of the research, while considering potential participants, I found my choices both very limited and exceedingly broad, leading to a sense of disorientation and overwhelm in defining the scope of this study.

The overwhelming nature of researching and defining digitally-mediated social contexts is discussed by the digital ethnographers Annette Markham and Ane Gammelby (2018). They introduce the concept of **flow** as a primary means of making sense of the complexity and entanglement of digital phenomena, emphasising the importance of closely and reflexively examining how one's 'movement' shapes a particular path of inquiry. In this context, 'movement' is referred to the researcher's chosen direction. In digital ethnography, methods represent a series of choices made

by the researcher at critical junctures when navigating the emerging analytical path. Markham and Gammelby encourage embracing selective subjectivity (p.14). The choices made inevitably obscure alternative paths, resulting in producing situated knowledge that is inherently heuristic. The research process is guided by an overarching ideology that, due to operating within endless and vast networked flows, the researcher should maintain heightened awareness of their motivations, curiosities, and instincts rather than relying on or continually seeking an external rationale (Markham and Gammelby, p.10).

Art therapy as a profession, values co-creation of meaning and understanding through dialogue, cherishing each individual's unique perspective. To follow this ethos and the process of fostering a developing understanding, I chose to adopt a broader interpretation of 'participants' in this study. Accordingly, I have classified participation into two distinct categories: **'key participants'** and **'auxiliary participants'**. Key participants are those who satisfy the study's recruitment criteria (see section 4.7), participate in scheduled interviews, and provide written consent for the inclusion of their clinical and personal content in the study. They are the main contributors to the research and play a substantial role in shaping the study's findings. On the other hand, auxiliary participants are art therapists who share their experiences regarding online art therapy with me during less formal occasions, such as private conversations or lectures. They might not meet the specific criteria to be key participants, but they still have valuable insights. Therefore, I asked them for verbal consent to include their opinions in this study, ensuring that none of their clinical content is included. These participants offer insights that enrich the contextual understanding of the topic.

This study includes 62 auxiliary participants and 10 key participants. In my writing, I refer to key participants simply as 'participants', while auxiliary participants are referred to according to my relationship with them, such as 'colleague', 'friend', or 'student', etc. All key participants are given pseudonyms to ensure that the clinical content they share is well-protected. Most auxiliary participants are referred to by pseudonyms as well, and some have requested to be identified by their actual names. Those identified by their actual names are clearly labeled with a citation. Further details regarding ethical considerations and confidentiality are discussed in section 4.9.

4.7 Sampling and Criteria for Key Participants

In this study, purposeful sampling is considered a suitable method for key participant recruitment. Also known as purposive, judgement, selective, or subjective sampling, this non-probability sampling technique is employed in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases pertinent to the research topic. Among the various selection processes, purposeful sampling appears to be the most frequently utilised method (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Researchers establish criteria to select a representative sample that aligns with the research objectives, specifically targeting individuals who meet these criteria. Participant recruitment through purposive sampling relies on the researcher's judgment in determining whom to invite for participation. While this method offers the advantage of yielding information-rich results with limited resources and time, it also carries the potential risk of volunteer bias (Tongco, 2007).

For the selection of key participants in this study, I decided not to base my criteria on contextual factors of the art therapists' clinical contents, such as client group, practice setting, location, theoretical orientation, and training background. Although these factors undoubtedly influence the facilitation of therapy sessions and impact the therapists' experiences, I posit that the heterogeneity of participants' backgrounds can, in fact, highlight more fundamental challenges in working online. This assumption stems from my personal experience, wherein the stark contrast between how my adult and adolescent clients engage in online sessions prompted me to reflect more deeply on how my understanding of online work is constructed. It is through repeated engagement with online sessions that my understanding has developed. Therefore, the criteria I establish for recruiting key participants primarily focus on the number of clients and sessions an art therapist has conducted, rather than their background.

Key participants had to meet all the following criteria:

- **Online art therapy clinical experience:**

  Participants should have conducted art therapy sessions with at least two individual clients or an art therapy group through an online platform, which may include video/audio calls, messaging apps, or a combination thereof. The requirement of working with at least two clients/groups aims to prevent the art therapist from overgeneralising the experience drawn from a single case. As the primary focus of this study is on the art therapist's perspective rather than the clinical case, the more clients an art therapist works with, the more experience they can draw upon, potentially revealing patterns in their approach.

- **Time frame:**

  Participants should have engaged with online work for a minimum of four sessions, although a longer duration is preferred. This study mainly explores the professional transitional phase art therapists experience when shifting from in-person to online sessions. A period of four sessions, or approximately one month of work, allows art therapists sufficient time to familiarise themselves with the new setting, adjust their approach, and engage in trial and error.

- **Mode of art therapy:**

  The therapy could be a mixture of in-person and online sessions or exclusively conducted online. Many art therapists transitioned to online settings due to the pandemic. Their mode of working may be an important factor in understanding how their practice has been affected by these changes.

- **Professional registration:**

  Participants must be registered art psychotherapists with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) or equivalent professional registration in local country.

- **Supervisory Experience (optional):**

  Ideally, participants should have supervised at least one supervisee working online. Preference will be given to art therapy educators, as they are likely to be in contact with more trainees working in diverse settings and also maintain their own clinical practice.

4.8 Recruitment

Following receiving the ethical approval from Department of Social Therapeutic and Community Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, I approached those art therapists who had previously shared their online experiences with me in both formal and informal contexts, such as conferences, lectures, and private gatherings, and expressed a keen interest in further exploring their experiences. If they met the criteria, I invited them to be my key participants.

Please note that due to the ethical considerations and confidentiality, I decided not to reveal individual participant's background, to ensure the clinical contents they share could not be identified, however, here are the general background information:

- Total number of key participants: 10

- Geographical location: UK 5, Taiwan 4, Europe 2 (some works across more than one location)

- Client group: Children and Adolescent 4, Adult 5, Children + Adult 1

I conducted a total of 37 interviews between September 2021 and December 2022. The distribution of the interviews among the participants was as follows: one participant had 16 sessions; another had 10 sessions; one had 4 sessions; and 7 others each had a single session. Participants who joined the research in its early stages attended more sessions because I was in the process of formulating the research direction through our regular conversations. As the research focus become clearer, I invited more participants to join. Given that our discussions were more

focused by this point, I scheduled only one interview with these later participants, followed by further discussions via text-based messaging.

4.9 Ethical Consideration

As this study involves human participants, it is required to go through ethical approval process to ensure the participants are fully protected. The application is submitted to the Research Ethic Committee from the Department of Social Therapeutic and Community Studies (STaCS), Goldsmiths, University of London on 14 September 2021, and the approval is granted on the 27 September 2021.

All key participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 1) and a Consent Form (Appendix 2) via email prior to the initial interview. The Participant Information Sheet outlines the study's purpose, the reasons for their invitation, and the details of participation, including the time frame and nature of ongoing collaboration. Regarding the potential risks, as the interview entails discussing the participant's clinical experience, which may touch on their professional and personal histories or aspects of their sessions with clients, participants may experience some discomfort. Thus, they are reminded to only share information with which they are comfortable. The interview sessions are recorded, and participants could ask to stop the recording at any time. The recording is likely to reveal the participant's location and background, which may contain personal information they do not wish to disclose. Further details on background and privacy are discussed in Chapter Seven.

In terms of data protection, all information provided by participants is treated with respect and adheres to professional guidelines. Furthermore, data storage complies with the Data Protection Act (2018). The data is securely stored on university-provided online storage, protected by a password and only accessible by the researcher, for a period of up to five years. For confidentiality reasons, all interview recordings, transcripts, and artworks created during the interview are anonymised and coded. All participants are referred to pseudonyms in the thesis, ensuring their anonymity. All identifiable personal details have been altered or omitted from the thesis. I have sent the draft to participants for review to ensure they are fairly represented. Participants retain the right to withdraw consent at any time during the research, without needing to provide an explanation.

4.10 Defining the Field Site

Online art therapy is strictly bound by ethical considerations and safeguarding regulations, making it distinct from a traditional 'field site' or 'internet event' (Hine, 2000) where a researcher could engage in direct participant observation. To collect data in an ethically responsible manner while maximising the research potential, I explore the definition of 'field site' within digital ethnography and then delineate the scope of the field site for this inquiry.

Postill and Pink (2012) examine the nature of the internet as an ethnographic site by suggesting that concepts of routine, movement, and sociality enable us to understand the construction of knowledge in social media ethnography and its place (Postill and Pink, 2012, p.123). They perceive the internet as a 'messy' fieldwork environment,

acknowledging the complexity of the intersection between online and offline worlds. The field site is thus connected and constituted through the ethnographer's narrative. In The *Field Site as a Network* (2009) by Jenna Burrell, she defines an internet-based field site as a heterogeneous network incorporating physical, virtual, and imagined spaces. She also propose that, to capture parts this site, it may rely on participants' recollections in interviews to map out the space (Burrell, 2009, p.186).

Although online art therapy is not a study of social media, the ethnographers' conceptualisation of the 'messiness' of online field site provides a framework for addressing the sense of disorientation I experienced whilst attempting to define the field site of this research. This challenge likely stems from the multilayers and overlapping of spaces and places. Online art therapy itself represents a temporary presence, constructed through the process of online encounters between the art therapist and the client in their physical locations via an online platform within a set timeframe. After the session is over, it exists only in the therapist's and the client's memory, which is continued to be shaped by personal reflections and inner process. In this sense, online art therapy is an ongoing placemaking process that encompass all parties' online and offline spaces, as well as the imaginary spaces.

However, the focus of this study is not on the actual online art therapy sessions themselves, but on 'how art therapists conceptualise their practice in an online setting, through the sessions they conducted'. Therefore, whilst I must rely on my participant's narrative to gain insight into the behind-the-scenes of online art therapy sessions, the actual field site of this study is, in fact, the encounter between my research participant, who carries the multilayered experiences of online art therapy within them, and myself,

also an art therapist with my own narrative of experience. The field site exists in our exchange of these recollections. In other words, it would be fair to say that the online interviews themselves constitute the field site of this study.

Drawing from humanistic geographer Tuan's definition of the relationship between space and place (Tuan, 1977), it is the meanings generated through the movements of the researcher and the participants that connect the dots of these spaces, transforming spaces into a place. In this sense, the field site of this research is constructed through the movements of the researcher and participants between physical, virtual, and internal spaces. The 'movement' in digital placemaking, as discussed in Chapter Two, can encompass a broad range of activities and interactions. These include verbal and non-verbal communications in an online interview, fingers clicking to enter a videoconferencing call, making art, waving hands at another person's pet entering the screen view, among many others. In this context, interviews serve not only as a method of data collection but also as a collaborative effort between the researcher and participants to co-construct the field site together. In the next section, I will discuss the logistics of the interview with further details.

4.11 Data Collection: Interviews

The data was generated through close collaboration with participants, including online interviews with responsive artmaking. Conversational exchanges between the researcher and the participants, including emails and messages, were also preserved as data. In the early stages of data collection, the interviews were non-directive, without any preset themes for discussion. Participants and I would share what was on

our minds or discuss how our thinking had evolved since our last meeting. I deliberately designed the interviews this way, believing that knowledge is co-created and that insights most often emerge from free-flowing dialogue. Therefore, the interviews were non-structured, conducted in an ad hoc manner, and artmaking was incorporated into the process when appropriate. Participants were also encouraged to keep a research diary in a format of their preference. My personal research diary and artmaking were also integral parts of the data (McNiff, 2008).

This method worked well, as it generated rich data and gradually helped formulate my research focus. I then began to invite more participants for one-off semi-structured interviews, with two preset questions: 1) What were your initial anxieties before conducting online art therapy? 2) What do you use for your background in online art therapy sessions? These questions helped formulate the findings in Chapter Five and Chapter Seven. Some participants continued to send me text-based messages to elaborate on their points after the interview. These messages were also used as data.

4.12 Data Collection: Digital Tools

In order to response to the wider social context this study is situated in, it is important to think about art therapist's relationship with digital technology slightly beyond online art therapy. To do so, I include studying 'digital tools' into my research design, which include the software and hardware that are used during this study. Collecting objects that has been used is usually part of data collection in traditional ethnographic studies. I keep a diary to record my engagement with digital tools in everyday life, and pay close attention to how I am shaped by technology. In Chapter Six and Eight, I articulate

how this experiment has built up the foundation of my sensitivity towards the nuances between body and technologies.

In the next section, I discuss two programs that are used in this study: 1) **Obsidian**, a note-taking program designed based on the ethos of Digital Gardening, to support my data analysis (Appleton, 2022); 2) **Chat GPT**, the latest revolutionary AI Large Language Model (LLM), which I used for proofreading.

4.13 Data Analysis, and its Relations with Digital Tools

In the beginning of this study, I mainly kept my notes in Word documents and paperback notebooks. However, as the quantity of the notes increase throughout time, I was deeply troubled by unable to find the notes I am looking for, and forgot about what I have been writing in earlier notes, my ideas appear to be fragmentated. Therefore, I have been trying out different note-keeping program, including Obsidian, Evernote, Roam Research, Notion, Scrivener. At the same time, paying close attention to how does each program shaped the way I journal. I see this as part of my experiment of engaging with digital tools.
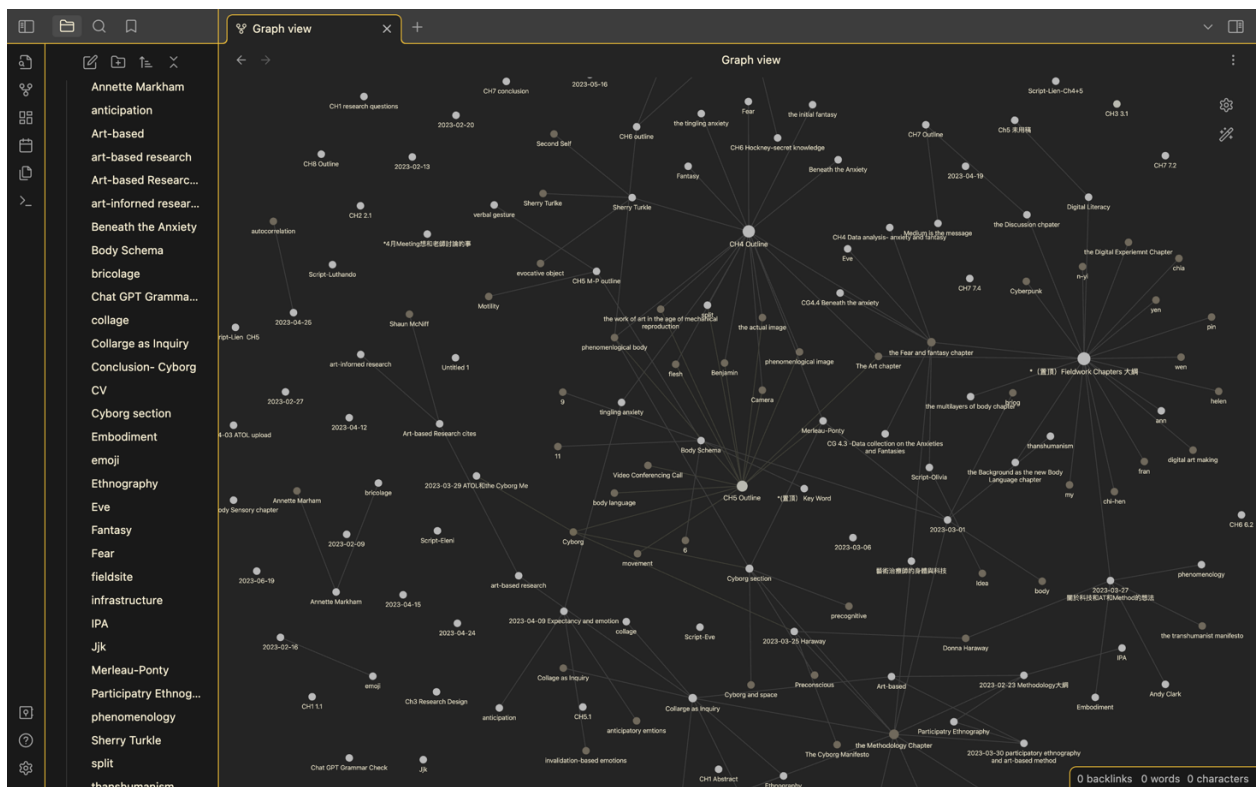
Figure 6. My Obsidian Graph (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

At the end, I stayed with Obsidian. Obsidian is a note-taking program designed to provide an alternative way of organising information and generating knowledge. Figure 6 illustrates a novel approach to organising notes, providing graphs to map out the interrelations between keywords in each document, as opposed to the conventional method of filing by folders (e.g., in Microsoft Word). Figure 7 zooms in to demonstrate how this new method of organisation provides backlinks that allow pieces of information to be interconnected.

So far, I have not seen any paper regarding Obsidian as tool for data analysis. However, its powerful feature to connected up keywords in notes truly helped me to connected up my ideas, formulate new thoughts, and plays an important role in my

data analysis. Therefore, I would regard it as an important material part of data analysis in this study.
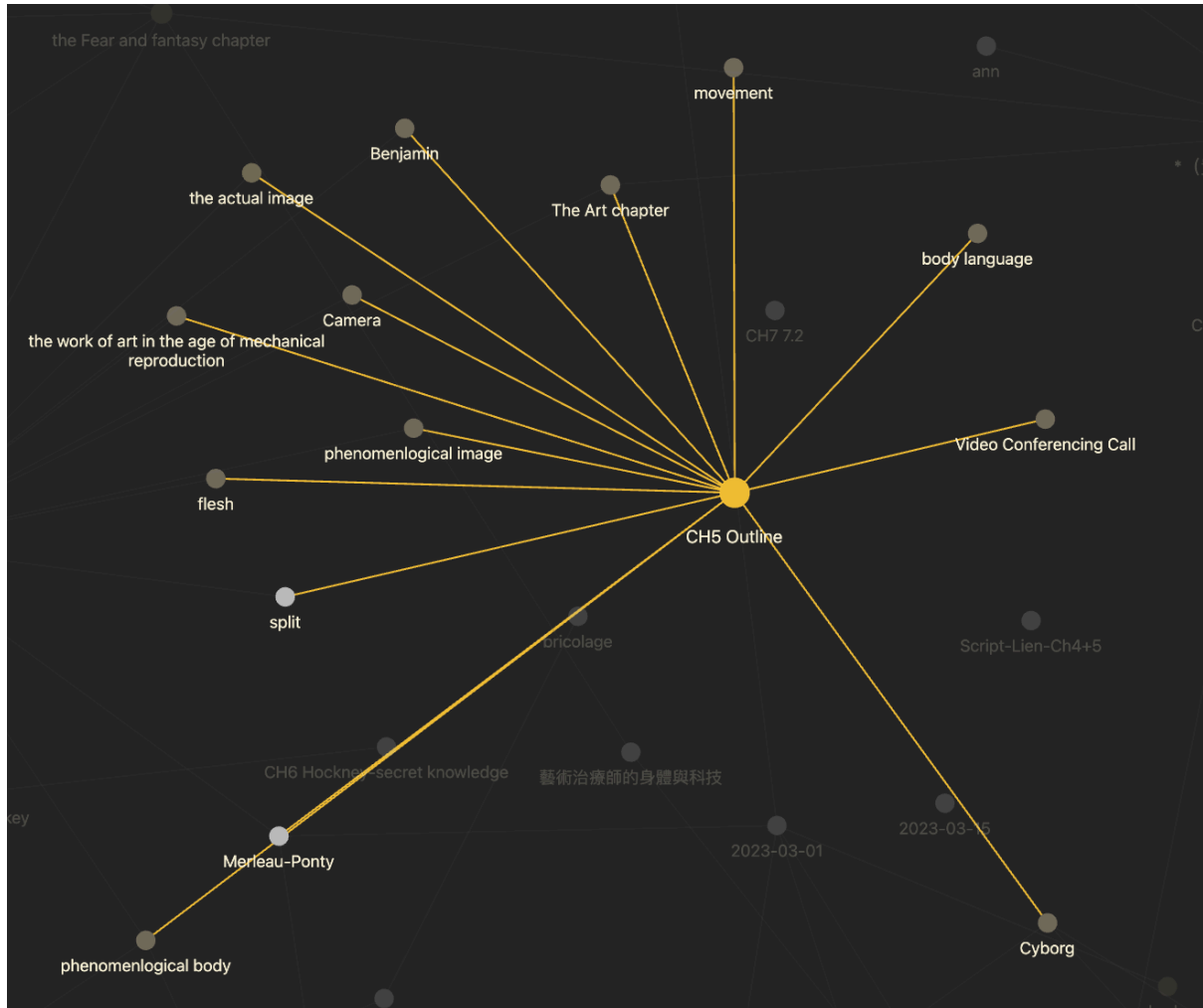
Figure 7. Interconnection between Notes in Obsidian (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

Obsidian's philosophy is based on the concept of **Digital Gardening**, which is a movement promoting accumulating personal knowledge over time in an explorable space. The metaphor of 'garden' suggests ways to present information in a richly linked landscape that grows slowly over time, and helps us move away from time-bound streams (eg. Words documents in folders), and move into contextual knowledge spaces (Appleton, 2022). Caroline Ward and Erinma Ochu (2022) suggested the ethos

of digital garden is closely link with Rosi Braidotti's posthuman approach — with its ontological commitment to flows, networks and dynamic transformations. This is an embodiment of the discursiveness in the idea generating process, which reflect the philosophy of posthumanism.

4.14 Chat GPT Inputs

Chat GPT is one of the most powerful AI Large Language Models available at the time this thesis is written. It was launched in November 2022, and I began using it in March 2023 for proofreading purpose. Despite occasional inaccuracies in factual information, ChatGPT has taken the academic world by storm due to its ability to produce highly human-like text (Cotton *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, I refrained from using it for any fact-based searches. However, its exceptional capability in analysing language patterns makes it effective in detecting grammatical mistakes and support me to articulate the meaning I intended to express without being constrained by my language barrier since English is not my first language.

At the time this thesis was written, there was no official guideline from my university regarding the use of artificial intelligence in thesis writing. When my supervisor addressed the question to the department, the concern regarding the ownership of content provided by users was raised. It remains unclear how ChatGPT uses the content entered by users in the chat. For example, would it present content written by a user as an 'answer' to another user? This could raise issues regarding the ownership of ideas and ethics. To find out more, I reviewed OpenAI's privacy policy (OpenAI, 2023). The website stated that they use users' content to train their model, but did not

provide further details on how this is done (OpenAI, 2023, para. 2). However, they offer an option for users to opt out of data collection, so I opted out to ensure the confidentiality of my thesis content.

Another concern I had was that by engaging AI in the writing process, this might cast doubt on the trustworthiness of this study, as readers might not be able to discern which input came from me and which from the AI. After discussions with my supervisors, I decided to employ Chat GPT in my study while being transparent about its use in this thesis, and detailing how I used it. I can declare that this thesis is my original work, as I primarily used Chat GPT for grammar checks. Here is my writing process: I would write a paragraph, then ask Chat GPT to check the grammar and clarity. Sometimes it can misunderstand my meaning, which serves as an indicator that the way I articulate the idea might be confusing to readers. Therefore, I would rewrite the paragraph and feed it back to Chat GPT for another check. This process usually goes back and forth at least four or five times, until the English precisely matches the idea I want to express.

As a non-native English speaker, this is the first time I have felt fully able to articulate myself in English. Collaborating with AI feels like acquiring a cognitive prosthesis. Initially, I saw ChatGPT as merely a digital tool, but after a week of use, it has become much more. It serves as a patient English teacher, responding to my grammatical questions and 'discussing' sentence phrasing with me, even at 3 am. I noticed a developing sense of companionship in me towards ChatGPT, due to its human-like, instant responses that accompany me through the solitude of thesis writing. My use of it and the feelings it has evoked intrigue me. This exploration of the human-technology

relationship is a crucial part of my study (see Chapter Five). The decision to incorporate ChatGPT into my thesis was driven not only by practical considerations of proofreading but also by a desire to explore and discuss how AI can potentially shape the formation of a thesis, influence my thinking as an academic, and as an art therapist.

As this study delves into human-technology hybridity, I aim to answer my research questions by experimenting with the format and medium of this thesis. Does the input from AI transform this thesis into a 'cyborg'? How might the involvement of AI shape my understanding of online art therapy and my relationship with this study? Although these questions may not appear to directly relate to conducting online art therapy sessions, they bring in the broader social context and ask fundamental questions that we cannot avoid in this era of rapid technological advancement. How online art therapy correlates to the times we live in is at the core of this research. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven present my findings from the fieldwork, which aim to address the complex intertwining of art therapy and digital technology from diverse perspectives.

Chapter Five:

Unpacking Art Therapists' Anxieties and Initial Fantasies

in the Transition to Online Practice

5.1. Introduction

This chapter explores art therapists' concerns and emotional responses when transitioning from in-person to online sessions, serving as the starting point of my fieldwork. The initial inquiry posed the question: "Why does working online appear to evoke anxiety in many art therapists I have encountered (including myself)?". While these anxieties primarily stem from professional ethical and practical considerations, as an art therapist, I posit that such intense emotional reactions may also signal the presence of unexplored unconscious materials. To investigate this possibility, I collected the accounts of art therapists' anxieties and fantasies prior to their actual online sessions, delve into the potential personal meanings behind the responses in collaboration with my research participants, and also explored anthropologist Sherry Turkle's concept of technology as an 'evocative object' that embodies humans' unconscious projections (Turkle, 2005).

As digital devices become integral to art therapy sessions and shake the familiar foundation we rely on in in-person sessions, what does working online trigger within art therapists, and how does it shape our understanding of art therapy and the therapeutic relationship? In this chapter, I aim to investigate and deconstruct the anxieties, fears, and fantasies associated with online art therapy, and create a thinking space for art therapists to reflect on the potential unconscious materials underlying

personal emotional responses, and facilitate art therapists emerging subjectivity and identity in the digital era.

Please note that all names have been changed for confidentiality reason, unless the individual has specifically requested to be identified. In such cases, a citation is provided following their name.

5.2. The Intuitive Emotional Responses

5.2.1 The 'Tingling Anxiety'

Since 2018, I have been seeing clients online due to relocating from Taiwan to London. This was my choice. However, research shows that 86% of art therapists who shifted their practice online due to the pandemic, and for them, this was not their choice (Zubala and Hackett, 2020). My art therapist friend Nina was one of them. During the first lockdown, she called me for advice and bombarded me with questions:

"What if the client suddenly has a mental breakdown and I can't be by their side?"
"What if the client tried to commit self-harm on the other side of the screen?"
"What if they attempt to suicide in front of me, and I can't do anything about it?"

I had never encountered these situations in my practice. However, Nina's anxiety had crept into me, causing me to imagine how helpless I would feel if my client committed self-harm out of my reach. I wondered if I had just been lucky that things like this had not happen to me yet.

"I don't think it's safe to conduct art therapy sessions online" Nina concluded.

Although I agreed that her concerns were valid, I was unsure about the conclusion. I spoke to Nina about safeguarding protocols: ways to assess the client's suitability for online art therapy; identifying signs of distress in the client before the situation developed into a worst-case-scenario; and involving emergency contacts or services to approach the client in person. Nina agreed that these procedures were helpful to thinking about how to handle challenging situations. She was somewhat convinced by me that online art therapy is possible but still felt uncomfortable with the idea. I could sense a lingering 'tingling anxiety' in her voice. I also felt it in myself.

I describe it as 'tingling' because the anxiety feels slightly prickling under the skin. It seems to be more than just worrying about a client's potential self-harm but rather, it touches on something deeper. On a pragmatic level, the safeguarding procedure was helpful to get one started and deal with risk. Nevertheless, Nina's concerns about "being on the other side of the screen", "out of reach", and "unable to be by the client's side" indicated that the lack of physical co-presence in an online setting had stirred up a specific type of anxiety. However, I did not know how to articulate this unsettling feeling at the time. It lingered in me after I hung the phone, and it returned again when I decided to shift my research topic from the museum-based art therapy to online art therapy.

Art therapists seem to have an instinctual sense about the dangers of conducting sessions online. How do we know this? Where does this instinct come from? Why are

most associations with online art therapy negative[4]? This tingling anxiety has become the starting point of my inquiry.

5.2.2 Anxiety as an Anticipatory Emotion: The Initial Fantasy

I noticed this '**tingling anxiety'** - an intuitive anxiety towards online art therapy - in many art therapists I have encountered, including my colleagues, friends, students, and research participants. In the British Association for Art Therapists *Newsbriefing Summer 2020*, Sophie Benoit also mentioned her observation on some art therapists' resistance towards the digitally-mediated way of working. Some believe it is not a real "face-to-face meeting"; while others suggest online art therapy might have negative effects on the service users such as stirring up client's feelings of worthlessness. Even for art therapists who feel the need to embrace working online, Benoit reported that they still feel "we do not seem to know much about it." (Benoit, 2020, para.2). My friend Bertha reacted similarly, as she believed online art therapy is not real therapy; I invited one of my research participants Olivia to take part in this study because she had expressed critical views toward online work initially.

I find these critical comments fascinating, not because I am interested in debating whether online work is 'real therapy' or not, or its effectiveness, but in what might be projected onto the online art therapy. I notice many therapists, who usual speak gently, would raise their voice and talk faster when discussing their concerns about online art therapy. It seems like this anxiety appeared to be the strongest among those art

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[4] So far, I only heard one art therapist talk about online art therapy without a negative–attitude before they started their initial online sessions.

therapists who had not yet had the actual experience of conducting an online session, and I was wondering what the relation between this anxiety and this specific timeframe is.

Italian social psychologists Maria Miceli and Cristiano Castelfranchi (2015) define anxiety as part of a family of anticipatory emotions, which includes a set of emotions that imply beliefs of possibility, predictions, expectations, desired, and/or undesired, such as hope and fear. They suggest that the mind is an anticipatory device, acting to build and work on the mental representations of the future. These representations are not the output of current perceptual stimuli, but rather a 'simulation' of perception. The simulation "could solve a problem by working on an internal representation of the problem, by acting upon 'images', 'schemas', or mental models; by simulating events and actions; and by anticipating possible solutions" (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2015, p.3). Anticipatory emotions enable us to mentally simulate alternative courses of action and their possible side effects. In this sense, anxiety can be viewed as an emotion that informs us of our internal predictions of the future.

This may explain why 'the tingling anxiety' often occurs in art therapists before they have the actual experience working online, as it is a future simulation preparing us for upcoming challenges. I would call this tingling anxiety an '**initial fantasy'** and define it as a specific emotional response that occurs before an art therapist's initial online session. The word 'fantasy' is not meant to suggest that the therapist's concerns are purely imaginary, but rather to emphasis the anticipatory nature of the anxiety. By naming it as an 'initial fantasy', my intention is to move beyond the negative

connotations associated with 'anxiety', and explore the emotion in a more neutral way, investigating any underlying unconscious material.

The tingling anxiety could be seen as a natural anticipatory response to the coupling between art therapy and telecommunication technology. The 'initial fantasy' is a way to conceptualise this anxiety within a specific timeframe. I believe it is important to pay attention to our emotional response before the first online experience, as our attitude and presumptions could impact the way we conduct the therapy, utilise the setting, and even relate to clients. Furthermore, it provides a framework for understanding the emotional experiences of art therapists transitioning to online work, and for examining the underlying unconscious material related to this anticipatory anxiety. In the next section, a range of art therapist's anxieties and fantasies are collected for further exploration.

5.3 Common Anxieties and Initial Fantasies

During my research, I engaged in conversations with numerous art therapists to explore their anxieties and initial fantasies. I typically began these discussions by asking, "What are/were your anxieties, fears, or fantasies before you start/started working online?" Through these interactions with research participants, colleagues, lecture audiences (primarily art psychotherapy trainees), and friends, I collected over 60 responses. The full list can be found in Appendix 3.

As I delved into the collected narratives, five themes emerged, revealing key concerns among the participants. These themes encompassed:

1) issues with digital placemaking, such as technical failure

2) the shifting role of body language and non-verbal communication

3) art-related challenges

4) the nuances of the therapeutic relationship, and

5) accessibility to technological devices and potential inequality

In the next section, I analyse these points in more details.

5.3.1 Issues with Digital Placemaking

The most frequently mentioned concerns among art therapists are the impact of digital mediums on communication, such as technical failures, and are followed by challenges in maintaining boundaries, including privacy and confidentiality, as well as the client's safety. This is mainly due to the physical separation between therapist and client during online sessions. These concerns can be understood as issues arising from digital placemaking, as their nature stems from the uncontrollability of the multiple layers of spaces involved, such as the client's environment, the digital platform, and the therapist's space. I explore the issues relate to digital placemaking further in Chapter Seven.

5.3.2 Body/Non-verbal Communication

Another predominant anxiety among art therapists regard to the loss of non-verbal communication and the limitations of body language, due to the restrictions of

technology and visual access. This concern is primarily driven by the fear of potential miscommunication resulting from these limitations. Additionally, the loss of sensory contact and physical co-presence contribute to the apprehension. These issues are be explored in greater depth in Chapter Six, Seven, and Eight.

5.3.3 Art-related Challenges

Among the various concerns that have arisen, art-related challenges are unique to art therapists, distinguishing us from other mental health professionals. Artmaking is typically an inherently physical process, and the primary anxiety revolves around the ways in which digitalisation transforms the handling and storage of artworks, the observation of the process, the preparation of art materials, and cleanup. For art therapists, these actions serve more than just pragmatic purposes; they also possess strong symbolic meanings. Additionally, the use of digital programs for artmaking may be an unfamiliar realm for some art therapists, potentially affecting their ability to support clients' artmaking in an online setting. Therefore, working online presents challenges to the core of the art therapy profession. These challenges are further explored, and I propose ways to reconceptualise 'art' in online art therapy in Chapters Six.

5.3.4 Therapeutic Relationship

The therapeutic relationship can be influenced by various factors in nuanced ways, both consciously and unconsciously. Transitioning therapy work to an online setting introduces additional elements that may further complicate the therapeutic relationship.

Factors such as technical issues, technological devices, absence of physical art, and lack of physical embodiment can significantly or subtly affect the ways in which therapists and clients engage with each other and the unconscious material they project onto one another. It is worth questioning whether transference manifests in the same way in an online environment as it does in an in-person setting (Balick and Tsempelis, 2014; Russell, 2015). The anxiety surrounding the therapeutic relationship underpins many other concerns expressed by art therapists. It is reasonable to assert that the central question of 'how online art therapy affects the therapeutic relationship' underlies the various anxieties and fantasies experienced by art therapists. This is a theme that run through all the following chapters.

5.3.5 Accessibility and Potential Digital Inequality

The majority of client groups that art therapists work with may face challenges in accessing technological devices and the internet due to financial, geographical, physical, or psychological reasons. Therefore, the issue of digital inequality, which can hinder the inclusivity of online art therapy, should not be overlooked. Whilst keeping this agenda in mind during my thesis research, I realised that my research design—focusing on how my research participants engage with their clients in online sessions—naturally excludes those who cannot attend online art therapy for any reason. This is a limitation of this study and an area that will require further exploration in the future.

There can also be a generational gap in the ability to engage with digital platforms. As a result, it is entirely reasonable for art therapists to be concerned about the

accessibility of technology and issues surrounding inequality. These concerns are not limited to clients, as some art therapists who are unfamiliar with technology may also experience anxiety. This concern highlights the importance of addressing digital accessibility and inclusivity within the profession.

5.3.6 Questions

Art therapists' concerns surrounding issues on digital placemaking, body language and non-verbal communication, art-related challenges, therapeutic relationships, and accessibility and inequality illustrate the multifaceted challenges present in this mode of working. While all the concerns raised are important, this study focuses on the psychological aspects of these concerns rather than the concrete solutions to address these challenges. This approach leads to crucial questions: why does each art therapist have a different initial fantasy, and how can we explore the meaning behind the individual's response? One may have many anxieties, but in this case, I mean **the first thought** that come into the art therapist's mind when thinking about working online.

For example, my initial anxiety revolved around the issue that an online setup does not allow the client to make mess and for me to clean up after them, whereas Nina's concern relates to the inability to reach the client in case of an emergency. Even though both concerns are reasonable, it remains unclear why our immediate reactions differ. In the following section, my research collaborators and I have delved into this question together, to explore the underlying meaning in the initial fantasy for individuals.

It is important to note that the categorisation presented here does not intend to suggest that an art therapist's initial fantasy can be neatly confined to a single category. In reality, all responses are composed of multiple elements. For example, although I classified my anxiety about being unable to clean up the mess for a client under Art-related Challenges, this issue also arises from the loss of physical co-presence and may influence the therapeutic relationship. Concerns around the disruption of technical failures is a common initial anxiety among art therapists, but if ask the individual art therapist to articulate their reason behind the worry, the response may varies. Therefore, I would like to explore this multilayers behind the anxieties in my fieldwork. The purpose of this categorisation is to illustrate the complexity and interrelatedness of these elements, rather than to provide a reductionist view of the concerns.

5.4 Behind the Initial Fantasy

5.4.1 The Amplification of Pre-existing Anxiety

Lien, a Taiwanese art therapist based in the UK, working with children and teenagers. When I asked about her feelings before initiating her first online session, Lien shared her primary concern revolved around the lack of body language and non-verbal communication in the online setting. She explained, "Since English is my second language, when working in in-person sessions, my client and I have various ways to communicate apart from verbal communication, including the richness of facial and body language, and the art and play materials in the room. But I imagined in the

absence of non-verbal communication in online settings, the session would become very verbally focused."

Lien and I discussed how the potential verbal focus of online sessions might exacerbate her anxiety about English not being her first language—an anxiety I could easily relate to. Although this anxiety has always been present, Lien's years of experience working in the UK had given her confidence in in-person sessions. However, the shift to online work seemed to magnify this anxiety once again. Curious about her experience after starting online therapy, I asked Lien how she felt after the sessions had begun. She responded, "It's really interesting. Even the clients did use more words compared to in-person session, our communication actually went well."

This conversation with Lien led me to wonder whether the 'tingling anxiety' might actually stem from pre-existing anxieties. Triggered by the instability of the online environment for the reasons we previously explored, these anxieties might become the initial fantasy and escalate into the anticipation of the possible dangers. In other words, pre-existing anxieties might be amplified by the online setting, underpinning the predictions we make about the potential worst-case scenario and our emotional responses to online art therapy.

After my conversation with Lien, I spoke with other art therapists who also worked with children and teenagers, and I found that even though they worked in similar contexts, their initial anxieties appeared to be quite different.

My colleague Beatrice, for example, was concerned about client engagement and participation in online art therapy. The worst-case scenario she could imagine was sitting in silence with a child, both not knowing what to do. Having known Beatrice for some years, we have discussed her anxiety about silence and client's passive engagement on several occasions. This anxiety was enlarged again when the family she worked with in face-to-face asked for online session during the lockdown.

My friend Yi-chun Ho works in a primary school, and her immediate reaction to my question about initial fantasy was, "Since students have many online art classes during the lockdown, I am worried that some younger children may not be able to differentiate between online art class and online art therapy session, and they might expect the art therapist to act like an art teacher, setting out art exercise. Although this confusion can happen in in-person session too, but the setup of online environment makes it even harder to distinguish." (Ho, 2021).

Lien, Beatrice, and Yi-chun all work with the same client group, but their initial fantasies seem to reflect aspects which are closely linked to their personal contexts. Lien and Beatrice's anxiety are related to their fear of not being good enough or uncertainty, whereas Yi-chun's response stemmed from her long struggle of working in a school setting, and the historical entanglement between art therapy and art education professions. This led me to wonder, maybe the pre-existing anxiety that could be triggered by working online is not limited to personal fear of inadequacy, but also a wider range of context. In the next section, I want to explore the breadth of the art therapist's responses.

5.4.2 The Anxiety of Being a Part Object

When Olivia heard I was researching online art therapy, she immediately said, "It must be difficult to do art therapy online because clients would have to prepare their own art materials, right? But in this case, wouldn't the symbolic meaning of providing the nurturing through materials be lost?" Intrigued by her initial fantasy, I invited Olivia to participate in the study and she agreed.

Olivia is a psychodynamically trained senior art therapist, who works with the object relations approach that is grounded in the mother-infant relationship. For her, the primary challenges in online art therapy are the inability to provide holding through art materials and a well-boundaried, secure therapeutic environment. She explained, while both in-person and online sessions involve working with the client's fantasy world (which could be seen as virtual), a critical distinction between the two is, in in-person sessions, the therapist maintains the boundary, whereas in an online setting, the responsibility for upholding the boundary falls upon the client.

From Olivia's experiences, many clients seeking therapy may be in a state that is unable to maintain boundaries independently, therefore in the usual therapy scenario, the role of the therapist is akin to a mother holding space for her baby before the baby gradually learns to uphold boundaries themselves. Olivia suggests there are two layers of containment. The first is the space, which transcending mere physicality to delineate the client's internal and external worlds. Through the therapist's holding, the client may develop the ability to hold the transitional space (Winnicott, 2005) that enables them to facilitate the processing of conflicts between their inner and outer

worlds. The second layer is the art, where the therapist providing art materials constitutes a part of this symbolic containment, as it can symbolise feeding and nurturing the infant. "Therefore, the most frustrating thing about online art therapy is," Olivia raised her voice, "as a therapist, I can't provide these containments to my clients! I think that those clients who are in a very vulnerable state may not be able to hold a safe enough space for themselves. Online art therapy may work for some, but not for all." She articulated her concerns.

The nature of online art therapy has challenged some of the foundational principles in psychodynamic practice, leading to frustration for therapists who work within this approach (Shaw, 2020). In a discussion with another research participant, Luthando, who is also psychodynamically trained, she characterised this feeling of being deskilled as akin to "**becoming a part object**." This description captured the anxiety associated with the inability to relate to the client to the fullest extent possible in an online setting. In psychodynamic theory, a 'part object' refers to a fragmented perception of a person, where only a specific aspect of the individual is acknowledged or recognised, rather than the person as a whole. In this sense, Luthando vividly captured the therapist's frustration of being able to provide only a limited aspect of their professional capacity in online art therapy.

Upon identifying and naming this emotion, Luthando and I realised that there is a strong sense of grief beneath the anxiety - grieving the loss of the aspects in art therapy that we rely on and cherish. The aspects Olivia and Luthando raised are just two of the examples of how an online setting has shaken some art therapist's

theoretical base, perhaps we may all think of some aspect in art therapy that we rely on or even cherish has been demolished due to the nature of the online setup.

5.4.3 The Anxiety of the Art Therapist Identity Been Challenged

By examining individual art therapists' anxieties, I wonder whether one's initial fantasy of online art therapy serves as a **reflection of our identity** as an art therapist. For therapists whose sense of inadequacy has been magnified, this may be indicative of the aspect in which they consistently feel their therapist identity is challenged. For those who experience frustration due to the loss of the theoretical foundation they rely on, the online setting may challenges their ability to provide clients with their fullest capacity and raises the question: do I still embody the art therapist I perceive myself to be?

In both scenarios, the instability of the online setting may deconstruct some aspects of the professional identity we have built, which stirs up one's unconscious fears, manifesting as instinctual reactions to online art therapy. If the reaction leans more towards the negative, it could give rise to consciousness as a prediction of potential dangers. In this sense, although all concerns discussed by art therapists are relevant and valid, the initial fantasy of an individual should be regarded as a highly personal response and a potential gateway to reflect on one's unconscious fears or/and one's values of art therapy or sometimes personal life.

It is worth mentioning that, throughout the research, only one participant reported not experiencing anxiety prior to her first session. Una, a senior art therapist and an

experienced supervisor explained, "I didn't have any particular fantasy or anxiety because, before that, I had heard a lot from friends and supervisees about their experiences with online sessions. So when it was my turn, I didn't feel like it was a new idea or something completely unimaginable." This raises an interesting point regarding how uncertainty could trigger anxiety, and how it might be mitigated by gaining prior knowledge of possible scenarios drawn from real-life experiences. From conversation with Una, it become apparent that it does not mean working online implies no concerns or challenges for her, rather, her experiences in in-person therapy and the knowledge she had acquired beforehand enabled her to adopt a pragmatic attitude and realistic expectation towards online art therapy. In this case, the concerns do not seem to challenge her self-identity as an art therapist and did not appear in the form of anxiety.

5.5 'Online Art Therapy' as Evocative Object

The findings from my fieldwork suggest that the initial fantasies art therapists experience may be closely linked to their personal contexts. Nevertheless, this observation does not adequately explain why the majority of art therapists exhibit strong and diverse emotional responses towards working online. So far, I have focused on examining the underlying causes of anxiety and fantasy at an individual level. In this section, I explore Sherry Turkle's conceptualisation of digital devices (she uses the term computational machine) as an evocative object, to investigate the collective dimensions of anxiety and fantasy in relation to digital technology among art therapists.

5.5.1 Sherry Turkle: Computational Machines as Evocative Object

Sherry Turkle, an anthropologist working at MIT's computer science institute, specialises in researching the relationship between humans and computational machines. During her fieldwork in 1980s, she encountered Deborah, a thirteen-year-old student on a school programming course, who articulated her experience with engaging with technological device as, "when you program a computer, there is a little piece of your mind and now it's a little piece of the computer's mind." This analogy resonated with Turkle and inspired the title of her book, *The Second Self* (Turkle, 2005, p.1).

Turkle refers to computational machines as our second self, challenging the conventional idea that a computer is 'just a tool'. Although it is a tool, but she argues that it is also an 'evocative object' - an object that provokes people's projections, emotions, and self-reflection (Turkle, 2005, p.2). Given that computers are capable of processing complex tasks and responding to our requests through commands and coding language, it is a piece of complex machine that 'thinks'. This challenges the human notion of 'mind' and presents a quality that lies between inanimate and animate entities. Describing these machines as 'just a tool' dismisses their influence on the development of our consciousness and emotional lives. Turkle's study involved over 400 participants, half of them are children and half are adults, ranging from five-year-old to teenagers to general public to computer scientists, illustrating a vivid picture of how engagement with computing machines invited people's psychological interpretation and, at the same time, "incited them to think differently about human thought, memory and understanding." (Turkle, 2005, p.1). Turkle wrote:

"In consequence, [people] came to see both their minds and computational machines as strangely unfamiliar or 'uncanny' in the sense that Freud had defined it. For Freud, the uncanny was that which is "known of old and long familiar" seen anew, as strangely unfamiliar." (Turkle, 2005, p.1)

As computational machines blur the line between the familiar and unfamiliar, they provoke anxiety and reflection on fundamental questions that bring issues of philosophy and identity into everyday life:

"We ask not only about where we stand in nature, but about where we stand in the world of artefact. We search for a link between who we are and what we have made, between who we are and what we might create, between who we are and what, through our intimacy with our own creations, we might become." (Turkle, 2005, p.18)

In this sense, Turkle suggests that a computer is a "metaphysical machine" and a "psychological machine" in the way it influences how we think about ourselves (Turkle, 2005, p.21). She observes that "when people sit down at computers, even when they sit down at the same computer to do the 'same' job, their styles of interacting with the machine are very different" (Turkle, 2005, p.20). Turkle associates the computer to a Rorschach inkblot, suggesting that what people make of the computer speaks of their larger concerns and reflects their individual personalities. As Deborah describes how engaging with a computer leads to a part of our mind becoming embedded in the

computer's mind, and vice versa, a 'second self' emerges through the repeated engagement between the two.

The first edition of *The Second Self* was published in 1984, it was the time when computers first became accessible to the public. In the foreword of the 2004 edition, Turkle noted that although computational machines have grown more complex, the fundamental aspects of how people relate to this medium have remained constant. Interestingly, Turkle highlights the irony of psychoanalysts using the term 'object relations' to refers to the relationship between people, as how we take each other as the objects of our attention and emotional focus. Consider the intensity of the relationships we form with the inanimate world, she calls for an object relations perspective that addresses "our connection with things, an object relations perspective that takes 'object' as its subject." (Turkle, 2005, p.287)

5.5.2 'Object' Relations in Online Art Therapy

In the interview with Eve, she recounted her initial resistance to online art therapy and the subsequent development of a new relationship with this mode of practice. Throughout this process, the integration of technology into the therapeutic relationship appeared to give rise to some new insights regarding her understanding of her clients, herself, as well as art therapy.

Being a sensory-oriented person, Eve's primary frustration with online session was the lack of sensory input, which made it challenging for her to envision how an online session works. These anxieties led her to invest in equipment (such as better camera

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and microphone) and engage in extensive discussions with her supervisor prior to starting. As she began conducting therapy online, she gradually saw the distinctions between in-person and online sessions, remarking, "Although I see less in online sessions, I also see more." She gained insights into aspects of the client's life that would not usually be revealed in in-person sessions, such as the space the client inhabited, and their projection onto digital devices in relation to their attachment to caregivers, which became very rich materials to work with in therapy.

As Eve reflected upon her involuntary shift to online work due to the pandemic and the subsequent return to in-person sessions following the easing of lockdown restrictions, she recognised that her initial strong resistance to online art therapy may have been being in a form of paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1975), which involves projecting the inner frustration on to the object, splitting into all good and all bad. Her anxiety, arising from the sense of the unknown brought about by unfamiliarity with online practice, the loss of sensory elements she highly valued in art therapy, and her personal circumstances at the time, coalesced into a projection of online art therapy as all bad. Conversely, she acknowledged that she had over-idealised in-person work. At the time, she held a fantasy that a return to in-person therapy would resolve all difficulties and that in-person sessions is all good. However, when the lockdown was lifted, she recalled that some therapy spaces she had worked in were in fact far from ideal; she had even worked in rather rundown locations, leading her to consider that, sometimes, working online might be a safer alternative. By recognising that neither online nor in-person sessions are wholly good or bad, she described this as entering the depressive position, in which she gains a more integrated and realistic perspective on both working models.

As the physical 'object' entering the object relations-orientated therapy, Eve found that being able to see how her client make use of and relate to, the digital device, gave her new insights into the client's world and her art therapist self. She shared a case vignette on how a client was initially very angry and resisted to shift the session online, after a long process of exploration, she realised how meeting online triggered her client's sense of abandonment by his caregiver. When Eve was able to name this emotion, they gradually found way to work through this. "I feel that the concept of psychodynamic is really useful in working online." Eve said, "Initially, I imagined that without those physical elements in in-person setting, the therapy would be difficult to proceed, but in reality, even if those elements are missing, the psychodynamic lens are still able to see new things that emerge as a result. Although I see less in online sessions, I also see more."

5.5.3 Before and After the Initial Online Session

Interestingly, all the research participants in this study reported that their perception of online art therapy changed once they began actual online sessions, similar to Eve's experience. Olivia observed that when she began the online work, the challenges were precisely as she had anticipated. However, even when the client did not make art as much as in in-person session, or the space was disrupted by other family members, or there were technological disconnections, despite Olivia's frustration regarding the interference, her client managed make use of the therapy. In one instance, a client had problems accessing the link of the videoconferencing call, so the client sent an

invitation to Olivia and hosted the session instead. This experience prompted Olivia to reconsider the power dynamics within the online setting.

During my interview with Marcela, she compared her reactions before and after engaging in actual online sessions. She reflected, "My initial fear — to think about it now, they were not completely invalid — was that the art could be compromised, and that has happened. Another fear was, does online art therapy work? Well, it actually does." By stating 'it works', Marcela is not suggesting that the online setup has no impact on the sessions; rather, she means she could still maintain a thinking space to think with her clients.

As technology becomes increasingly intertwined with the therapeutic process, art therapists gradually adapt to novel methods of understanding our clients, ourselves, and the profession through trial and error. Eve's remark, "Although I see less, I also see more," signifies the ambiguous nature of online art therapy, which simultaneously constrains the elements traditionally relied upon by art therapists while also revealing unique advantages and insights inherent in the virtual format. Object relations theory focuses on an infant's psychological and emotional development, detailing the gradual separation from their mother through the dissolution of fantasy and the emergence of a sense of self, facilitated by oscillating between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position. In this context, the art therapist's projection of all-good and all-bad fantasies may be regarded as a crucial step in cultivating a more integrated perspective on working in the online environment and the emerging identity as an art therapist in the digital era.

5.6 Summary: The Art Therapist's Emerging 'Cyborg Self'

In this chapter, we have explored the tingling anxiety and initial fantasies experienced by art therapists prior to commencing actual online sessions. These emotions reflect an instinctive anticipation of potential dangers associated with venturing into an unfamiliar domain. Such fantasies may encompass both professional considerations and personal concerns, potentially amplifying fears as well as frustration and grief over the perceived loss of cherished aspects of art therapy due to the online format. Nevertheless, based on the exploration with my research participants, it appears that most art therapists, upon actively engaging in online sessions, are able to develop an emerging thinking space to effectively utilise the online environment, despite the differences between in-person and online sessions.

The process of experiencing tingling anxiety, forming initial fantasies, initiating online sessions, and subsequently developing an emerging thinking space appears to be a recurrent pattern among the art therapists who participated in this research. I am aware the limitations of the sample size, but it seems that art therapists tend to instinctively find ways to work despite the constraints of online art therapy. When art therapists bring 'more-than-human' elements into the consciousness, and can "think with" the technology and the environment it created, new understandings emerge. This ability to "think with" technology resonates with Sherry Turkle's concept of the second self, which arises from repeated engagement with the digital medium and the integration of its logic into our consciousness, and vice versa. This integration evokes the cyborg metaphor discussed in Chapter Three, and it raises the question of whether this ability to "think with" the online setup constitutes a form of the 'second self' that art

therapists develop to adapt to the new environment. In this context, it would be reasonable to suggest that art therapists are cultivating a 'cyborg self' through our engagement with technology.

I use the term 'cyborg self' to refer to the art therapist's evolving subjectivity and identity in relation to online settings and digital technology. In the following chapter, I aim to explore the artwork created in online sessions through the lens of this emerging 'cyborg self', which highlights the unique differences between the art therapy profession and other forms of psychotherapy when conducted online.

Chapter Six:

Viewing Art on the Screen: A Phenomenological Exploration

6.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an exploration I undertook with my research participant, Lien, which led to a discovery of the multiple layers of pre-reflexive acts involved in viewing art online. I examine these layers to investigate where the agency of the body lies, drawing on the philosophy of the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty. This investigation subsequently uncovers how digital devices possess the capability to integrate into our body schema, forming a phenomenological body beyond our physical one. Both Posthumanism and Merleau-Ponty's theory on the phenomenological body aim to explore the blurring boundaries between animate and inanimate objects. This discovery lays the groundwork for further discussion on how the 'art therapy cyborg' is formed and moves. In this chapter, I propose a new perspective on how art therapists could work with artwork in a digital format by reflecting on actions specific to digital interactions.

6.2 The Ambiguity Between Artmaking and Verbalisation in Online Setting

6.2.1 Art and Talk

Lien and I regularly meet online to discuss online art therapy. Our conversations usually flow naturally, without any predetermined themes. On one occasion, we found ourselves wondering why online art therapy sessions seem to be more verbally

focused compared to in-person sessions. We speculated that since the sensory channels of videoconference calls are limited to mainly visual (camera and screen) and auditory (microphone and speaker) inputs, this inadvertently encouraging a greater emphasis on verbal communication while restricting opportunities for hands-on art-making experiences, particularly without the atmosphere of a concrete art therapy room.

Our discussion around the ambiguity between art and talking reminded Lien of her struggle in responding to artwork in an online setting. She said whether she is facilitating a therapy session or participating in her institute's staff art-making group, she is usually attuning to the environment and closely observes people's art-making processes. However, she has found that her confidence in providing feedback decreased during online sessions, as she cannot directly witness the art-making process. This insight made her conscious of her reliance on observational feedback. I resonated with her and shared my own experience in trying to compensate for this limitation by encouraging clients to describe their art-making process or elaborate on certain aspects. Nonetheless, my efforts still primarily centred around verbalisation.

As our conversation continued to revolve around the struggle between verbalisation and artmaking, we realised that we were trapped in the loop of a verbal cycle again. It made us wonder why we were talking about the absence of art in the absence of art. To break free from this pattern and explore our thoughts in a different way, I proposed that we made some art to reflect on this.

6.2.2 Looking at Art Together

After spending 30 minutes creating art, Lien and I held up our work in front of the camera (fig.8 and fig.9).

Figure 8. A Screen Shot of Lien's Artwork (Image Captured by Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

Figure 9. A Screenshot of Lily's Artwork (Image Captured by Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

"Wow, your work seems very rich!" I commented.

"Yours looks fancy!" she replied, there seemed to be excitement in her voice.

Reflecting on my comment, I shared, "Initially, I thought your artwork was 'cute', but I quickly realised that 'cute' can be a judgmental term. So, I chose 'rich' instead, which refers to the complexity and variety of elements within the image. While you were making art, I tried to watch you on the screen, but since all I could see was you lowering your head, my commentary was limited to my immediate impression of the artwork."

Lien responded, "I had the same experience. I commented based on my immediate response too. This seems to happen more often in an online setting since I'm not sure where to focus my attention. Therefore, I naturally begin with my own impression, as it feels the most immediate and genuine to me."

Our discussion prompted me to pay closer attention to my sensory process of observing her artwork. I noticed that when I tried to examine the intricate details in Lien's work, a small voice within me worried about her potentially holding up the piece for too long, so I hesitated to look at it for longer. I was not sure when to signal that she could put the work down. Lien admitted having the same hesitations, especially as she is farsighted and often has trouble seeing the work clearly. She further reflected on the subtle discomfort of not being able to maintain eye contact with her clients if she looked at their artwork for too long. As she mainly works with children, she felt the need to hold their attention at all times in online sessions, usually achieved through either gaze (visual) or conversation (auditory). When in in-person session, she felt comfortable to sit quietly with the artwork with her clients for a while without making

immediately comment, but in online setting, she felt the urge to quickly say something or shift her gaze back to the client.

I suggested there might be alternative ways of observing artwork online, such as taking a photo of the piece and uploading it, allowing both parties to have the artwork on their screens. However, I acknowledged that this process might not be manageable for every client, and since these extra steps sometimes disrupt the flow of the session, I rarely ask my client to do so. Lien agreed, adding, "Yeah, and we're not looking at the same physical artwork either."

Although Lien and I often look at art together with our clients, but the focus was usually on the content of the artwork itself, this was the first time we had paid attention to the nuanced emotions and thoughts that arise during the act of perceiving artwork in a videoconferencing call, and scrutinised how our understanding is formulated. A familiar act suddenly seems unfamiliar, it is a strange feeling, or as Freud would say, uncanny.

When Lien shared the content of her work, I was embarrassed to discover that some of my initial impressions differed significantly from her actual intentions. For instance, I initially perceived the piglet as sitting in a cave-like place, conversing with another creature on the opposite side, in fact, the 'cave-like places' were a pair of cat's eyes. This misinterpretation led me to realise that my discussion with Lien was based on the mental representation I had formed from my initial impressions, which was formulated by a less than 20 second viewing, while the artwork was hand-held, constantly moving, not always in focus, and we were talking at the same time.

Furthermore, my mental image incorporated additional layers of my own interpretation. Firstly, there was my own projection: as I was exploring the theme of 'communicating in separate spaces' in my artmaking process, I seemed to project this onto Lien's piece, giving rise to my fantasy about the piglet is also having a conversation with another creature. In fact, 'the creature' was a piece of floating snack Wotsit, so was the big yellow shape in the middle. The inspiration of Wotsit came from Lien's snacking during the artmaking time. Secondly, my memory of the image retained only limited details; for instance, I noticed floating elements with faces, but I could not recall their expressions. Elements that did not immediately capture my attention were absent from my mental representation. It was only later, when Lien discussed these aspects and displayed the image on the screen again, that I began to perceive them.

Consequently, the mental image I formulated was, in fact, a highly fragmented composition consisting of at least three layers: **1) the indistinct impression, 2) my own projections, and 3) my limited attention span**. Upon realising the complexity of the art viewing process and the extent to which my interpretations influenced the image, I felt as though I was discussing a product of my own fantasy rather than Lien's artwork. Although in in-person sessions we may also project our own content onto another person's artwork, the limitations to feel the quality of an artwork in this online setup make imposed projections more likely to occur. In this context, allowing the artist to describe their work becomes more crucial than ever. We speculated that this might be part of the reason why verbal communication becomes more dominant in online sessions.

For Lien, viewing my paper sculpture online proved even more challenging. She mentioned that as soon as she described it as 'fancy,' she felt that it might not have been an appropriate response, but she was unable to tell my intended expression or see the details in the layers. Lien expressed a strong desire of wanting to physically handle the paper sculpture and look at it from different angles. In response, I rotated the sculpture to show her and explained the process of how I built up the layers as my exploration of the multiple layers present in online art therapy. I was aware that I put extra effort to describe the details of the artmaking process to help Lien understand my context. As I shared more information, Lien was able to provide more feedback on my work; however, was she responding to the actual artwork or to my words? The line between the artwork and its description became increasingly blurred.

6.3 Phenomenological Explorations

6.3.1 Phenomenological Inquiry

The issue of artmaking being easily subsumed by verbal interaction is a common challenge in art therapy (Skaife, 2010), and this dilemma has been further magnified in online sessions. Interestingly, in the beginning, Lien and I ironically explored 'why clients prefer talking over artmaking' through talking and was trapped in this vicious circle. While examining 'why' this happened, we realised it might be worthwhile to ask 'how' it happens. By scrutinising and describing the act of viewing art, we ventured into unfamiliar territory where the boundaries between images and words are blurred by our sensory engagements through technological devices. Where do images and words begin and end? Where do the actual image and the viewer's mental representation of

it begin and end? where do our sensory perceptions and what we perceive through technological devices begin and end?

This exploration is phenomenological in nature. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher who made significant contributions to the understanding of perception and body, suggested phenomenology as a school of philosophy that seeks to explore "the world that is always 'already there' prior to reflection – like an inalienable presence – and whose entire effort is to rediscover this naïve contact with the world in order to finally raise it to a philosophical status" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p.xx). He posits that this world can be accessed through direct descriptions of our lived experience. Although I have been working online since 2018, it was only during this discussion with Lien that I realised I was viewing a mental representation of the artwork rather than the artwork itself, which is a phenomenon that has always been "already there", even before my realisation.

This realisation prompted me to reflect on my unexamined assumptions. Since viewing art is an act of sensory engagement with the artwork, the blurred lines resulting from the involvement of technological devices may also challenge our once-familiar concepts of the **'body'** and **'artwork'**. Consequently, I found myself wondering why I, along with the majority of art therapists I have spoken with, seem to naturally and instinctually use language to compensate for the limitations of working with art in an online setting. How do we 'know' this? Furthermore, as this process significantly influences the way we perceive artwork, does it alter the nature of experiencing the artwork in online sessions?

6.3.2 Merleau-Ponty on Body Schema

To explore these questions, firstly, I look at why Merleau-Ponty considers the body as the vital part in the constitution of our consciousness, then I introduce the concept of body schema, which is the main theoretical model in understanding the relationship between our body and tools[5] we use. Since the act of art viewing in online settings involves engagement with technological devices, the concept of body schema could provide a foundation for us to explore the potential underlying mechanism of how our body engages with the tools, namely technological devices in this context.

Merleau-Ponty is famous for challenging the traditional Western notion of prioritising the mind over the body, especially the assumption of the body as a passive "being-for-others" instead of "being-for-itself" (Sartre, 2003). For him, the body should be seen as a pre-reflexive existence prior to consciousness, and that creativity and consciousness emerges through the act of doing. In this sense, "consciousness is not an 'I think that', but rather an 'I can'." (Sartre, 2003, p.139). In other words, our consciousness arises from the agency of the body. However, what he means by 'body' may not be the same as its use in everyday language. He uses the concept of **body schema** to define 'body' and explores where the agency of the body comes from.

Body schema is the mental representation of our body's spatial arrangement, allowing us to perceive our body parts as interconnected rather than separate entities. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, originally written in 1945, Merleau-Ponty described body schema as a summary of our bodily experiences, providing meaning and context

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[5] In Chapter Three, we have defined tool as human-made technical object (including both high-tech and non-high-tech objects)

for our moment-to-moment interoceptive and proprioceptive sensations. This concept helps us understand changes in our body part positions, local stimulus positions within the body, movements during complex gestures, and the continuous translation of kinesthetic and articulate impressions into visual language (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p.101)

As body schema is considered a pre-reflexive process that governs bodily spatial organisation and movement, it holds implicit knowledge for performing tasks, for instance, we learn to ride a bike through riding a bike rather than reading the manual. Merleau-Ponty utilised the concept of body schema to demonstrate that "this non-thetic knowledge of body's orientations and capabilities reflects the individual's way of being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p.xli). I understand this as meaning that a person's subjective experience of situating themselves in their surroundings and engaging with tools is implicitly and subtly shaped by how body schema non-consciously governs the body's positions and the tasks it is capable of performing.

In this sense, body schema exists as a mental representation that not only registers our body parts within a physical spatiality, but also within a **situated spatiality**. Therefore, "my body appears to me as a posture towards a certain task, actual or possible" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p.102). Merleau-Ponty's theory provides an alternative way to conceptualise what we may conventionally perceive as 'instinctual' or 'natural' bodily acts. These could, in fact, be complex processes of how body schema envelops the movements of operating a tool or responding to a situation into our bodily experience.

In this way, the object (it could be the tool or/and situation) we interact with has also been incorporated into our subjective experience through the body movement. As a result, the boundary between the object and subject becomes blurred. The tool (object) is an external entity, but when we engage with it, it becomes a subjective matter that is part of our body. For Merleau-Ponty, this incorporation extends the boundary of one's body. What counts as 'my body' is beyond my skin and the actual corporeal body. The moment I engage with a tool, the boundary of my body is extended to the tool I am operating and how far I can achieve with this coupling, as I am capable of operating the tool and embodied my will. This extended body can be seen as a **phenomenological body** that co-exist with our actual corporeal body.

For instance, during the process of writing this thesis, my laptop died, and I had to switch to a new one. It took me some time to become accustomed to the new keyboard. During this adjustment period, I made several typing errors and needed to constantly look at my hands while typing. However, the moment my hands became familiar with the new layout, I could type smoothly without consciously focusing on the keyboard. At that moment, the new keyboard was incorporated into my body schema. Furthermore, what a laptop allows me to do beyond the function of my corporeal body has formulated my phenomenological body.

The keyboard example demonstrates how a tool can be incorporated into the body schema and, thus, into the phenomenological body. This example illustrates the transition from conscious, effortful interaction with the keyboard to an effortless, automatic interaction that suggests the keyboard has become an extension of the

person's body. This kind of pre-reflective interaction with technologies is a significant aspect of our contemporary everyday life experiences.

Building upon this understanding of the body, it becomes apparent that when engaging with artwork in an in-person setting, one perceives the artwork through their corporeal eyes. Conversely, in an online context, direct visual access to the artwork through one's eyes is unattainable, as we must rely on the camera and the screen to view it. Therefore, we observe the artwork through our phenomenological body in a pre-reflexive manner. This distinction lays the groundwork for further discussion on the changing nature of the body and artwork within the context of online art therapy.

6.3.3 The Intentionality of Phenomenological Body

To facilitate a nuanced understanding of how artwork is perceived in an online setting, in this section, I investigate the operational dynamics of the 'phenomenological body'. This exploration begins by discussing Husserl's concept of intentionality - a foundational theory underpinning the philosophy of phenomenology. Subsequently, I explore how Merleau-Ponty proposed the concept of **motor intentionality**, thereby providing theoretical insights into the constitution of our movement. In culmination of these theoretical explorations, we return to our primary subject of interest, namely the act of viewing artwork within the context of online art therapy.

Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, asserts that **intentionality** is the fundamental structure of human consciousness. This concept refers to the nature of thought to be directed toward, or, about objects. Intentional content, also known as

'act-matter' or 'noema', represents the mode or the way that a thought could embodied in an object in a wide range of phenomena, from perceptions, memories, judgements, inter-subjective experiences, to aesthetic experiences (Spear, 2023). Merleau-Ponty expands on this idea based on perceptions and bodily experiences, he proposes that our body operates on the combination of two modes of motor intentionality: **concrete movement** and **abstract movement**.

Concrete movement refers to spontaneous actions that we carry out without consciously considering each individual act. These actions are not pre-planned, nor do they involve conscious thought. Concrete movement is the lived experience of movement as it occurs at the body's pre-conscious and pre-reflective levels within a situated context. In contrast, abstract movement involves the conceptualisation or intellectualisation of movement, which enables us to detach from the actual lived experience and make movements based on conscious thought and reflection, in other words, making a planned movement.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that human creativity and agency lie in the coordination between these two modes of motor intentionality. Concrete movement responds to the present moment, while abstract movement allows us to detach from the immediate moment and incorporate past and future into actions. The switching between the two modes allows us to interact with our surrounding in a versatile way. This not only enables our body to be responding to real situations (eg. Merleau-Ponty uses 'hitting mosquito when been bitten' as an example), but also to have the ability to response to the internal stimuli or sensory experience. The body can participate in experiments and more generally, be situated in the 'virtual' (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p.111). By virtual,

my understanding is Merleau-Ponty may be referring to the potential, abstract, or imaginative movements - for instance, patching together a mental representation of an artwork and working with it in mind. Please note that 'virtual' in the context of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy does not necessarily correspond directly to the contemporary digital or technological sense of 'virtual'. Rather, it refers more broadly to the potential or imagined actions and experiences that exist in our minds before/without we manifest them in concrete reality.

6.3.4 Reconceptualising 'Art and Talk' in Online Setting

Upon studying the theory of concrete and abstract movement, I found myself wondering why, during the exploration with Lien, we instinctively used language to compensate for the temporary nature of visual representation on the screen and to fill the absence of the artmaking process. Initially, I thought that this verbalisation was an act of intellectualisation, distancing us from the lived experience of the artwork, but is it really so?

I listened and watched the recording several times. I noticed that when we attempted to describe the artwork, our sentences were rather fragmented, as if we were trying to capture and illustrate the vague feelings within us, using words as our medium instead of a paintbrush. There is an example when Lien was attempting to describe her artwork:

Lien: Well, I'm not really sure... (pause). I wanted to draw a huge Wotsit, and then have the little piglet sliding on the Wotsit like a slide...(pause) and I suddenly wanted to add a cat's eye in the background, I don't really know why..... it

reminds me of the laugh from Tom, you know, the cat in Tom and Jerry, which has an evil and mischievous vibe. And these dots...(pause), they give me a bit of discomfort... like goosebumps, making me think of a virus. It suddenly feels very creepy.

Lien was speaking slowly, and the pauses gave me the impression that she was gradually formulating her thoughts through talking. In this sense, her use of language gave me the feeling that the meaning and consciousness were gradually forming via the act of describing. Her words were also completing the mental representation of her artwork in my mind, I was patching together the fragmented piece visually through the act of listening. This led me to question my presumption about the binary between talking and artmaking in online setting.

In Merleau-Ponty's understanding, language, like bodily space, is a form of bodily expression and a pre-cognitive encounter with the world. He argues that language does not merely encode pre-existing thoughts; instead, it communicates meaning through its style or physiognomy as a bodily gesture (2014, p.193). He contends that considering language as a fixed code is a misconception and suggests that "the linguistic gesture, like all others, sketches out its own sense" (p.192). The verbal gesture aims to convey a mental landscape that is not immediately accessible to everyone, and this gesture's primary function is to share this landscape with others. For Merleau-Ponty, the distinction between verbal gesture and other bodily gestures is that all other body movements occur through the spectator's natural perception, whereas verbal gestures involve cultural factors. He uses the term 'available significations' (p.192) to refer to the shared understanding and meaning that stem from

previous acts of expression, which establish a common world between people who are communicating. In other words, the main difference lies in the fact that all other bodily gestures refer to the physical world, while verbal gestures refer to our shared cultural world.

In this context, we can posit that language is often seen as an intellectual or conscious act due to its ability to integrate cultural elements. This integration can potentially disconnect individuals from their immediate experiences and filter their direct responses. However, in Lien's case, words function more as gestures to sketch the nebulous mental image. Interestingly, she employs Tom and Jerry as a cultural reference. This helps her articulate the emotions evoked by the smile and formulate her understanding of why she drew the Wotsit.

Upon revisiting this scenario through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's theory, I discerned that the act of 'talking' within this context might not necessarily equate to an act of intellectualisation or a representation of consciousness. Instead, the descriptive language could potentially function as an instinctual endeavour to capture the 'already-there' world, or in this instance, the 'already-there' image. Consequently, 'talking' about the artwork, which specifically entails describing the artwork and its creative process, might initially appear as an intellectual activity or abstract movement. However, it could be more aptly compared to a concrete movement, a pre-reflexive act situated within the 'virtual'. I use the term 'virtual' here to indicate that the engagement with the artwork occurs within an imaginary sphere, thus formulating a mental depiction of it.

Recognising that the act of viewing art online may be a pre-conscious, pre-reflexive concrete movement might seem like a minor detail; however, I believe it is important to highlight this aspect. Despite the inherent challenges that online platforms pose to art viewing, understanding the underlying mechanism may help mitigate the impact of the sense of uncertainty may evoked in art therapists, such as, feelings of unease, frustration, or even self-doubt, leading to perceptions of being deskilled, incompetent, helpless, and ineffective. While these emotions are normal reactions when one struggles to perform tasks that are usually easily accomplished in in-person therapy, being aware of the underlying process could prevent our projection of negative emotions onto other aspects in therapy. Consequently, therapists may maintain a reflective space, better understand the situation, and remain functional and emotionally available for their clients, despite the limitations. This understanding may also foster creativity in the way we work with art online.

Although a substantial portion of bodily movement operates under pre-conscious, pre-reflexive processes, they are not impossible to recognise. Merleau-Ponty suggests that these processes can be realised through a phenomenological methodology, specifically through direct description of lived experiences and phenomenological reduction (2014, p.xxiv). Since my discussion and exploration with Lien occurred spontaneously, I did not deliberately think about or follow phenomenological methodology at the time; however, the phenomenological approach could be helpful for researchers to further investigate experiences in online art therapy in the future. It is important to note that the method of viewing artwork described in this study (primarily showing the artwork directly in front of the camera during a videoconferencing call) represents only one approach to examining art in online art therapy. Research

participants Una and Marcela, for example, would ask clients to adjust the camera angle to focus on the artwork, while other art therapists might request clients to send the image as a file. Our bodies respond differently to these various viewing methods. This research did not explore alternative viewing methods with participants, as this realisation occurred at a very late stage of the study which was beyond my data collection period. This limitation leaves room for further research in this area.

It is worth to mention that, since Merleau-Ponty first proposed this theory in 1945, research on body schema has developed significantly and has been widely adopted across various disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, sports medicine, and robotics studies (Gallagher, 1986, 2005). Recent neuroscience research on plasticity also provides biological based evidence for the bodily connection with tool use (Maravita and Iriki, 2004).

6.4 Artwork in Digital Age

6.4.1 The Original Artwork and the Phenomenological Artwork

In the previous section, the nuance process of viewing artwork online was explored, with a focus on investigating the integration of technological devices into our bodily schema, ultimately creating a phenomenological body that extends beyond the corporeal that allow us to respond to the situated surrounding through our movements. This exploration has provided insights into what is occurring at the bodily level. However, it does not yet fully address the question of what happens to the artwork in the context of videoconferencing call.

How does technology transform the nature of artwork? This question was posed by Walter Benjamin, a German Jewish philosopher and cultural critic, in his influential paper, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1969), which was originally written in 1935. At the time, the emergence of photography and film had shaken the art world with their capacity to create identical reproductions and dissociate 'artwork' from its original contexts, which permanently shape the way artists, actors, and audiences relate to art. This discussion remains highly relevant to the twenty first centaury we are in today. Benjamin's inquiry prompts me to rethink about the nature of 'artwork' in the context of the digitally-mediated art therapy.

In the collaborative exploration with Lien, it became apparent that creating artwork in an online context blurred several boundaries: those between image and words, the actual artwork and its mental representation, and our corporeal perception and phenomenological perception. When the original artwork is less clearly perceptible to the viewer through digital devices, we found ourselves instinctually memorising the artwork and interpreting the image alongside verbal gestures. This dual approach serves two key functions: it supports the artist in formulating meaning, and it assists the viewer in constructing a more comprehensive mental representation of the artwork. If we consider the use of language and the assembly of mental images as bodily gestures, might this suggest that both language and mental representation function as phenomenological extensions of the artwork?

To engage with an artwork in the context of the limitations or characteristics of digital devices, our bodies make numerous adjustments in response to the work of art, some

are conscious acts, but a large part are pre-reflexive responses. As such, besides direct viewing with our eyes, the artwork can manifest in various forms due to the concrete movements involved in adjusting our bodies to perceive the work. When I speak of **'phenomenological artwork'**, I am proposing a concept where 'the artwork' is no longer confined within its physical limits but extends its boundaries to exist in forms other than its original copy.

In this context, an artwork represented through verbal and/or mental representation is just one of the possible phenomenological forms that an artwork can embody. I suggest that when artwork is photographed and reproduced digitally, it not only transcends its original form and context but also attains a status as a piece of phenomenological artwork.

In the following section, I present a case vignette from a session with my client, to explore the various forms in which artwork may exist in online art therapy sessions, as well as the versatile ways the client could utilised it for emotional expression and self-exploration.

6.4.2 The Artwork I Did Not See

I want to discuss the complexity of phenomenological artwork in the following vignette from my online work with a client of mine:

   During one session, my client told me she gathered some art materials in a rush
   just a minute before our online session started, and felt a resistance to make art

today. She recounted some frustrating moments in the week, her voice carrying a hint of tiredness. She described an image to express how she felt about her week - a comic character kneeling down on the ground, yelling at the sky, questioning why God has done this to her. I responded, "That's very vivid, I can picture it in my head." She said, "That's good, so I don't need to draw it then".

She continued to talk about her week in a discursive manner with rich details about the events. I had a feeling that she was trying to make sense of her experiences, but also wrestling with a dilemma of wanting to understand, yet tired of rationalising and seeking meaning in things. Occasionally, she would glance downward. I wondered if she was doodling, but I did not want to disrupt her train of thought, so I did not ask. Our session ended with a terrifying dream she recounted. I didn't get a chance to ask about her artwork.

A few hours later, I received an email from her. She said she was doodling and had continued it after our session. Along with her email, she attached a poem, a video, and three photos (fig.10, 11, 12). The video showed her artwork rolled up and placed upright on a small plate. Then she lit it like a candle. As the piece burned, it gradually turned into ashes. I was struck by the beauty of the flame and the serenity in this seemingly brutal act of burning an artwork. She captured three snapshots of this process and composed a poem titled "*Life*." See below:

In the beginning

aimlessly

searching for something

Then focusing

striving hard to depict what's seen

but this all seems too pretentious

Destroying it all

and going back and forth

still inadvertently wanting to define "life"

Sometimes clear, sometimes blurry

uncertain about how to view life and death

Unable to decide what comes next

so one could only focus on how to live

those inexplicable hardships of life

I talk about them again and again

What do human actually live for?

When things are unclear

I organise them

both big and small

coiled them up

like a candle

An unexpected, dazzling brightness

so beautiful

utterly stunning

melting away the pessimism of the previous moment

I watch, I guard, I wait,

until the last moment when the soul departs

leaving only the remaining ashes

I smell the lingering smoke, and watch the embers

I am back to the vicious circle of

trying to find meaning in this

I am so bored of myself

I can't stand myself

I was struck by the powerful expression in her works, and wondered whether I should respond to this in the email, but decided it is better to revisit it in our next session. I replied, "Looking at your artwork and reading the words, it feels as if I can also smell the lingering scent of smoke. Let's have this linger in us until we meet again next time."

Figure 10. Snapshot 1 (Image by My Client)

Figure 11. Snapshot 2 (Image by My Client)

Figure 12. Snapshot 3 (Image by My Client)

This session still lingers in me, even until today. It prompted me to rethink what 'artwork' is in the context of online art therapy. While I was uncertain if she was creating art during the session, and the original artwork has physically vanished so that I would never know what was in her doodle, this does not hinder the power of her artistic expression and the exploration into her inner conflicts. The artwork is absent from the art therapist's sight, yet it exists and extends to many embodied forms: as video, poem, snapshots, within an email, in her mind, in my mind, and now in this thesis, and potentially in the mind of you, the reader.

I did not notice it at the time, but upon reflection, I realised these forms are all made possible due to digital technologies (e.g., the camera, the screen, the internet, and the various programs involved). Benjamin (1935) discussed how artwork was originally

imbued with ritualistic qualities, and how its aura is lost during mechanical reproduction. Nearly a century later, when the physical and digital environments become constantly hybrid, the nature of the digital reproduction of an artwork may not merely been a replication of the original copy but become phenomenological extensions of the artwork that embody and facilitate the artist's internal process, as well as the viewer's.

The concept of phenomenological artwork provides a framework for understanding how the actual artwork can be separated from its content and original form, allowing the content and form to recoupling with different mediums and reshape its contents. In this instance, the original form of the artwork (a doodle on paper) was burned, but its essence was recoupled with the video, the photography, and the poetry, then reappeared on the screen. This process of recoupling generates new mental images in both my client and me, allowing the content of the artwork to continue evolving independently of its original form.

While writing this vignette, I intentionally omitted the actual events shared by my client and the discussion of the clinical content. This is partly due to the consideration of confidentiality, but also because I aim to underscore how the body, including bodily gestures, verbal gestures, visual gestures, and mental representations, can still enable an individual to convey, and for the other person to receive, potent unspoken messages, even in restricted scenarios such as limited screen view. Although digital technologies pose restrictions to online artmaking, our body schema has the ability to incorporate the environment and the available tools to embodied content in our unconscious. The challenge for art therapists lies in the fact that digital technologies could disassemble and reassemble the 'artwork', making working with artwork online

more complex than in in-person sessions. This is a new visual language we are yet to explore and learn.

6.4.3 How to Work with Phenomenological Artwork

Digital technologies expand the forms of visual representation in online art therapy, but how do we engage with and work with these new formats of artwork or images? In this section, I aim to explore the **movements** that are unique to online modes of working. Studying movement is an idea that was prompted by a vignette Lien shared with me, which opened a door to scrutinise the concrete and abstract movements involved in engaging with phenomenological artwork or images.

Please note that in this example, Lien's client brought in an image he found online. I am aware that a found image on social media is not the same as artwork created by a client. However, since they are both capable of embodying the client's fantasy, I first focus on discussing the movements involved in this case, and then return to the discussion of online found images and artwork later. The differences in how a client may embody their fantasy in in-person and online settings is examined in more details in the discussion chapter, with the aim of conceptualising the unique dynamics embedded within the digital realm of art therapy.

> Lien had worked with a young client online who had experienced a traumatic
> event and was struggling with sleep difficulties. One day, the client shared that
> he had come across a terrifying ghostly image online and described this image

to Lien. Lien asked if he would like to send her the image, and he did. Upon receiving it, Lien agreed that the image was indeed frightening.

According to Lien, he is a quiet child who generally found it hard to articulate his feelings and experiences. However, through this image, they found a reference point to verbalise and discuss how this image might resonate with his past experiences and insomnia. It was a breakthrough moment for the client. In the end, they decided to delete the image together. The client felt a huge relief after deleting it. He was able to sleep better at night.

In this case, the image exists in a digital format. This means that when it was sent to Lien, she received a copy of the image that the client held. Although identical to the original, this copy exists independently from the original. Therefore, I would consider this a phenomenological image, as it is an extension of the original that was created through the act of 'send'. The specific actions that can only occur when working with digital files or/and working in online sessions, such as sending and deleting, caught my attention. In the discussion with Lien, we were wondering what kind of feelings these 'digitally specific actions' may evoked in client.

The act of sending enables both parties to view the same image while physically distant from each other. As such, 'sending' is a movement that facilitates joint viewing through technology. While looking together in an in-person session implies joint attention (Isserow, 2008), viewing a digital image together by sending it may involve nuanced differences. It could convey underlying messages like 'I am with you even when we are apart' and 'I will be on the receiving end for you.' Clicking the send button

may give the sender a sense of putting something out there or making the sent object 'leave' them. Additionally, 'sending something online' may trigger potential anxiety of being 'unread,' so when the therapist opens it immediately during the session and views it simultaneously, it may provide a sense of instant satisfaction.

In Lien's case, she felt her client was throwing out the unwanted image as well as the unwanted feelings of anxiety, fear, and frustration, and she was at the receiving end, holding these for him. She said that when she opened the file, she was struck by the horrifying image as well, which gave her a sense that she was witnessing what her client wanted her to witness – both the image and the emotions. Although in in-person sessions, a client can also bring found images into the session, it may be worth paying attention to the different dynamics evoked by directly looking at it together, and by looking through digital technologies.

'Deleting an image' may be equivalent to disposing of a physical image, such as throwing it away, destroying it, or putting it out of sight, which involves physical disposal of the image. However, deleting a digital image only takes a click, and then the copy completely disappears without leaving a trace (maybe it is possible to retrieved from the backup, but the image won't be 'damaged' in the way a physical piece would be). In Lien's case, it worked well for her client, as the ability to delete gave him the power to be in control of the frightening object and make it disappear completely without physically touching it. On the other hand, I could imagine that this 'hassle-free' method of disposing of an image could suggest other meanings in different circumstances.

The argument I am developing here emphasises the significance of incorporating the unique aspects of digital interactions into our understanding of the client-therapist relationship within online art therapy. Such interactions include actions like 'sending' and 'deleting' digital images, which can have psychological impacts that pose a different character from in-person sessions, and I believe these may be the nuanced details that significantly impact the therapy. This perspective is informed by Sherry Turkle's proposition, as discussed in Chapter Five, which views the computer as a projective object. Turkle's theory emphasises that individuals interact with technology in distinctive ways, with no two people performing the same task identically. Lien's vignette only shows one of the ways a client may utilise 'send' and 'delete'. My client also 'sent' me the artworks after the session, which is another distinct feature of digital interaction that challenges the time boundary in therapy and is worth thinking about.

There are more digitally specific actions to be explored. These unique, digitally specific actions, which are often executed pre-consciously, should be recognised as valuable material in therapeutic work, offering insight into the individual's interaction with the digital world and potentially informing the therapeutic process.

6.5 The Cyborg Body in Online Art Therapy

6.5.1 How the Cyborg Body Communicates

Digital technologies are shifting our concept of the body and the artwork in art therapy. Since digital devices have been integrated into our body schema, creating a phenomenological body, it seems appropriate to suggest that this human-technology

pairing provides art therapists with a **cyborg body** in a broad sense (Hayles, 1999b; Clark, 2003). In Chapter Two, we discussed the potential feelings of 'disability' that art therapists may experience due to the limitations imposed by this newly formed body. This chapter had delved deeper into the potential mechanisms of how this body operates, particularly when engaging with art viewing. I do not intend to suggest that understanding these movements will resolve all the challenges posed by an online setting. However, it seems to hold potential for discovering **a new set of languages** anchored in the body gestures, visual representations on the screen, verbal gestures, digitally specific actions, and mental representations.

I use the term 'language' to refer to the communicative nature inherent in these gestures. Fundamentally, the role of an art therapist is to explore the difficulties that have led a client to therapy. The client's struggles can be expressed both explicitly and implicitly, and art therapists are trained to identify and work with these verbal and non-verbal expressions of their inner fantasies, and support the client in self-exploration. While art therapists are generally knowledgeable about how this process occurs in an in-person setting, we may be less familiar with how it might manifest online. Therefore, expanding the art therapist's 'vocabulary' of expressions specific to the digital environment may be a valuable tool for both practitioners and clients. It can aid in fostering authentic interactions within the therapeutic relationship, and may be able to engage with artmaking more naturally.

This idea is prompted by my research participant, Luthando. I have had the privilege of accompanying her at the onset of her journey to conduct online art therapy sessions. Over this period, I witnessed her ability to work in a digitally mediated environment

gradually emerge and grow. In this section, I share a conversation we had that inspired me to rethink about the role of digitally specific actions, and their therapeutic potentials.

6.5.2 How the Cyborg Body Moves

During my study, Luthando and I met once a month for a period of 16 months. We puzzle through, brainstorm, and explore the intersection between art therapy and digital technology together. This journey began with discussions around online clinical practice, then gradually enter the realm of our general experiences with digital technology.

After Luthando and I have been speaking regularly for nine months, in one conversation, we were discussing about the distinction between digital artmaking and physical artmaking. At that time, both of us had begun exploring a digital artmaking program called Procreate. Used in conjunction with an iPad and an Apple Pencil, this program enables user to create artworks with a hand-drawn quality. The program is rather intuitive to use. Its key distinction from physical artmaking lying in the concept of **'layer'**. This feature, common to most digital artmaking programs such as Photoshop and Illustrator, allows artists to separate the individual elements in an image into layers, and to work on each layer independently. I shared a set of my own artworks with Luthando, which plays around with the concept of layering. This prompted her to recall a moment from her online personal art therapy session in the flowing vignette:

Figure 13. The Little Person (Credit: Luthando)

Luthando created a small installation with clay in her personal time (fig.13). She photographed the work and brought it to her therapist to discuss the emotions it had stirred within her. During the discussion, she noticed that the breathing sound of her therapist had become noticeably loud, to the extent that she felt a bit concerned. Just as Luthando was about to voice her concern, her therapist asked, "Do you mind if I go and put on a cardigan?". Upon her therapist's return, Luthando brought her concerns into discussion, and asked whether it was the artwork that had evoked some sort of bodily reaction in her therapist, perhaps making her feel cold or triggering some other form of countertransference. The therapist acknowledged that this very seemed likely. Luthando was moved by her therapist's authentic response.

The genuine response from the therapist touched Luthando deeply, leading to a realisation. She recognised that, while discussing the artwork earlier, she had been analysing her own feelings in a detached manner, speaking in terms such as "from a personal level, this may be…" and "from another perspective, it could be…". However, these dissociated words didn't resonate with the profound emotional depth embedded in the artwork. Consequently, when her therapist was able to mirror the suppressed emotions through her own bodily reaction and permitted herself to put on a cardigan, this act enabled Luthando to confront the barriers preventing her from experiencing her emotions fully. This allowed Luthando to connect with herself and the artwork in a more natural and authentic way.

As they looked at the artwork on the shared screen together, Luthando felt an urge to put a cardigan on the little pink person in her installation too. She remembered that the Whiteboard feature in Zoom allows users to draw on top of an image, so she was able to clothe the little person, who was squatting in the corner, with a black cardigan by drawing on a layer of the photo (fig.14[6]). As Luthando and her therapist witnessed this process unfolding on the shared screen, they both felt a great sense of relief. It was a pivotal moment. The little person was now safe and contained.

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[6] The original image is a screenshot, I cropped the image to make sure the window of Luthando is not reveal.

Figure 14.The Little Person with Cardigan (Credit: Luthando)

Upon reflection, Luthando said, "If my therapist hadn't gone and put on the cardigan, then I wouldn't have been able to realise my own state. I felt like it was as if she was saying, 'You can admit this is really hard, and it's okay that you need to wrap yourself with something comfortable.'" Luthando described the experience as if this had suddenly created a new 'layer' — this 'layer' could be the digital layer on the Whiteboard, as well as the additional new 'layer' to their therapeutic relationship.

I was moved by what Luthando shared. I responded, "This is such a poetic process, and it occurred so naturally. This is something that cannot be planned. It seems to require some prior familiarity with the online setting in order to make it happen." Luthando agreed and elaborated further, "Indeed, my therapist said the same thing. She asked me how I knew about how to use the Whiteboard and

was amazed by my technical skill. I didn't plan to do this, but somehow my prior knowledge allowed the process to unfold." Luthando is a psychodynamic-trained art psychotherapist, she compared this experience with the dynamics of an in-person session, "If this had happened in an in-person setting, my therapist could have also gone to pick up her cardigan and I could have made clothes to cover the little person. But we never thought this could unfold so naturally in an online setting. We both sensed that this was an unprecedented moment. This moment made me believe that the flow of artmaking and transference and countertransference are possible in digitally mediated environments, too. Although my little person is still sitting in the rubble, I felt like she could hold herself now."

"We added a new layer to our relationship." Luthando concluded.

I was fascinated by how Luthando utilise the term 'layer' - which is originally a digitally specific action in artmaking. It came to life not only in her use of adding a layer of a virtual cardigan onto the little person, but she also employed it metaphorically to describe her relationship with the therapist. Sherry Turkle (2004) suggests that the incorporation of computer jargon into our everyday language can be seen as an indicator of how we are integrating computational elements into our minds. After all, language inherently carries psychological implications, drawing parallels between the processes occurring in digital technologies and those happening within people, and vice versa (Turkle, 2004, p.22). Having had the privilege to follow Luthando's venture into online art therapy from the start for an extensive period, it feels like I am witnessing her process of emerging cyborg self.

Luthando's ability to navigate the online environment stems from her openness to engage with new digital media and her ability to be reflexive and think critically about the experience. On one occasion, she made a keen observation about the 'undo' feature in digital artmaking. She recounted a conversation with a colleague who was apprehensive about creating art on paper but found digital artmaking liberating, attributing this to the soothing effect of the 'undo' feature in Procreate which eased her anxiety about making irreversible mistakes. Luthando explained to her colleague how an art therapist might work with 'mistakes' in an artwork: we might explore the underlying fear, use it as an opportunity to confront and contain imperfections, or even transform the undesired strokes. This discussion opened a reflective space for her colleague, who subsequently realised that perhaps clicking the 'undo' button served as a coping mechanism. This feature empowered her to create art by providing the safety net of being able to undo mistakes. However, Luthando's words made her recognise the fine line between empowerment and avoidance in her reliance on 'undo'.

6.5.3 Summary

When a physical artwork or image is converted into a digital format, its phenomenological nature enables diverse forms of engagement, allowing the meaning to continue evolving. Familiar actions, such as art viewing, may be complicated by the involvement of digital devices, which add additional pre-reflexive movements. More digitally specific actions are await for further exploration.

In Chapter Five, I conceptualised the art therapist's evolving identity and ability to 'think with' digital devices, despite their limitations, as part of the art therapist's 'cyborg self'. This chapter investigated how the cyborg body emerges and moves, which has led us towards the potential discovery of a new 'language' of online art therapy, rooted in a blend of bodily and visual elements. In the upcoming chapter, the focus will shift towards exploring the roles of spatial and environmental factors in online art therapy, examining these elements from both bodily and visual perspectives.

Chapter Seven: Background as the New Body Language

7.1 Introduction

In previous sections, I delved into how digital technology has reshaped the nature of the body and artwork, and investigated actions that are specific to digital environments. In this chapter I extend this exploration by focusing on one of the most prominent distinctions between in-person and online sessions: the spatial context in which both the therapist and the client are situated. My findings show that the background of an online videoconference call is more than just a 'background'; it is the foundation where a radical paradigm shift occur. When art therapy room — an once physically inhabited place is flattened into a two-dimensional background on a screen, it raises intriguing questions: How does this transformation impact the therapeutic relationship? How can we interpret the messages conveyed by these backgrounds?

Drawing on insights from social studies on digital placemaking in domestic space (Hardley and Richardson, 2021; Ruberg and Lark, 2021) and David Hockney's visual art theory (*David Hockney's Secret Knowledge*, 2003; Hockney and Gayford, 2020), this chapter attempts to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding this online-specific phenomenon and locate art therapy into the contemporary context of digital visual culture. I propose to view the background displayed on screen during online sessions as a digitally specific form of **body language**, embodied through visual representation. This perspective aims to offer a new lens through which to comprehend and navigate the digital therapeutic landscape.

7.2 Background as Visual Representation of Personal Space

7.2.1 The Art Therapists' Backgrounds

Marcela, one of my research participants and an art therapist, began working online before the pandemic due to her frequent travel. Initially, she had a fantasy of recreating the framework akin to conventional in-person therapy, which she could provide a stable setting for each session. However, as life unfolded, she became more familiar with the realities of the digital landscape and recognised the impracticality of her initial expectations, leading her to adopt a more flexible approach.

Marcela made a conscious decision to use a neutral backdrop for her sessions, intentionally adding lively elements like a plant or a candle in the view. These details were chosen to infuse some vitality into the digital frame. While she tried to maintain a consistent backdrop, her frequent travels meant her surroundings often changed, and her clients noticed these shifts. Initially, these changes might have initiated discussions related to transference. Over time, however, Marcela's frequent location changes have become an accepted and predictable aspect of her therapeutic identity. Her transparency about this aspect of her life has become a critical part of building trust in the therapeutic relationships.

My experience resonates with Marcela. Prior to the pandemic, I also travelled frequently. After careful consideration, I chose a white wall as my backdrop to provide a sense of continuity for my clients. This decision was practical - wherever I travelled, a white/plain wall was generally easily accessible. I made it a point to notify my clients

whenever I was working from a different location. Although my choice of using the white wall was not so much an attempt to replicate the concept of a 'blank screen' in psychodynamic therapy, there were a few occasions when this backdrop prompted my clients' curiosity about my environment. This led them to project their ideal lifestyles onto it or fantasise about me. These projections became intriguing material for us to work with in therapy. As a result, my white wall background inadvertently transformed into a kind of visual 'blank screen' that invited projections from my clients.

Not every art therapist uses a white or neutral wall. Olivia chose to have a window in her background. She likes the openness of the window, and it frames the change in nature. It also serves as a metaphor for looking out. Our discussion prompted her to reflect on a personal level, and she realised that this choice reflected her wish to have a room with a window in her personal therapy, which she did not have. Luthando chose to use a virtual background by putting up a photo of her therapy room to create the sense that she and her clients are co-present in the room they have shared while they could not access it. Some clients were very excited to see that, and some even initially thought she was in the actual room.

Hearing about my participants' experiences, I noticed that, somehow, we seem to **intuitively** know that the background is an important factor in online art therapy sessions. Therefore, we all put a lot of thought into our visual representations. We also intuitively look at the other person's background and learn things from it. This made me curious: Where does this intuition come from? Why do we curate our backgrounds? How does the background impact an art therapy session? How do we 'look' and interpret backgrounds?

7.2.2 Background as a Two-way process

Marcela beautifully described the background in online art therapy sessions as a '**canvas**' because we create it and it embodies our choices and intentions. Furthermore, she also described the background as '**the art materials on the table**' because it can be used by the client or the therapist as a topic of conversation, or as a trigger for something. Backgrounds are telling, and they represent a two-way process. They not only reveal something about ourselves, but also provide a window for us to enter the world of others. My research participant Grace is an art therapist who works in adult mental health services. She shares an intriguing observation in her group:

> Grace co-facilitated an art therapy group for individuals struggling with hoarding issues. Originally intended as an in-person group, the format was shifted online due to Covid-19 restrictions. To her surprise, working online provides an extra dimension and insight into this client group. This was because, unlike in in-person sessions where group members talked about their hoarding problems, in the online sessions, they were physically situated in their own environments. Grace made intriguing observation on how group members present their background, which provide rich materials to explore. For some, as the trust was built, they were willing to reveal more of their space to the group. There was a member who put on a virtual background with the image of an ideal home, which made Grace wonder about what the member was trying to present and express.

In the Collins English Dictionary, 'background' is defined as 'the things in a picture or scene that are less noticeable or important than the main things or people in it' ('Background, Collins English Dictionary', 2023). However, in online art therapy, the background plays an unignorable role in the session. It is a small portion of an individual's personal space that is revealed to others through the camera and screen, and the way it is presented may divulge personal information about the individual. This additional visual element adds a layer of context that is not available in in-person therapy sessions, providing therapists with a real-time view into participants' living conditions and how they manage their spaces.

In Grace's vignette, the unique opportunity to engage with clients in their own environments brought the elements of hoarding to life during the sessions. This was made possible due to the characteristics of the online setting. Regardless of whether group members chose to show their personal spaces, the mere possibility of doing so added meaningful context to each client's decisions. In fact, when lockdown restrictions eased, and the organisation inquired about the possibility of Grace running the group in-person again, she considered that maintaining the online format might not be a bad option after all.

7.2.3 Literature Review: Background, Privacy, and Culture Factors

When the background becomes a source of information and material to work with, this ability to tap into both the client's and the therapist's personal space fundamentally reshapes the way art therapy operates. Current literature primarily discusses the background from two perspectives: privacy, and cultural considerations (Carlier *et al.*,

2020; Ahn and Park, 2022; Winkel, 2022a). These two considerations are interrelated, as every culture views the boundaries of privacy and confidentiality differently. Online art therapy not only has the ability to break the wall of the physical rooms, but also able to overcome the borders between countries, brings cultural encounter alive in therapy sessions.

Canadian art therapist Michelle Winkel has reflected on the white-centric presumptions in art therapy. She considers how online art therapy can challenge these assumptions by engaging therapists and clients from diverse cultural backgrounds (Winkel, 2022). An example of this in practice is the Virtual Art Therapy Clinic (VATC) project, in which sessions were provided by trainee art therapists to clients from more than nine countries across four continents. Winkel, along with Dr. Kaimal (both acting as supervisors in VATC), advocates for cultural competence and humility in online art therapy. They argue that the diverse cultural landscape necessitates a shift from traditional theoretical practices. For example, they observe that therapists trained in psychodynamic approaches tend to be rather reserved about self-disclosure. However, Dr. Kaimal comments, "if you go around the world, nobody will trust you if you don't reveal anything" (Winkel, 2022, p.46).

In response to this, they encourage students to give clients a virtual tour of their home office or studio at the beginning of their work together. Winkel applies this practice in her supervisory role, believing that "virtual touring offers a means to establish both relational intimacy and supervisory rapport with my students" (Winkel, 2022, p.49). Furthermore, Winkel proposes acknowledging the clients' and therapist's grounding bases, which can include noting their location, where they are sitting at home, the

day's weather, and what is visible outside their window. She likens this practice of grounding the client-therapist relationship in an online environment to a Canadian tradition: making a land acknowledgement to pay homage to the land and recognise those who inhabited it before Canadian settlers arrived (Winkel, 2022, p.49).

While Winkle encourages to approach background with openness, some art therapist in different parts of the world may approach this with more caution. In the paper, *COVID-19 Transforms Art Therapy Services in the Arabian Gulf* (2020), authors Natalia Gomez Carlier et al., discuss the cultural significance of privacy in the Arab world. They refer to the Islamic concept of 'hurma' (sanctity in English) that governs all privacy relations, attributing an inviolable and sacred character to the homes of Arab-Muslims, which precludes violations of this sacred space as 'haram,' or sinful (Sobh & Belk, 2011, p.322, cited in Carlier et al., 2020, p.204). Consequently, art therapists working in this region were extremely cautious about a client's initiative and choices regarding what they chose to share, especially given that the sessions were conducted virtually, within the client's home. Some clients opted to use virtual backgrounds or switched off their cameras, while others felt comfortable giving a tour of their homes. On occasion, art therapists were given the opportunity to meet the client's family members and pets, which added a meaningful dimension to the therapeutic relationship. Interestingly, these elements were not part of the traditional therapy process before the Covid-19 outbreak (Carlier et al., 2020, p.204).

Korean art therapists Seohyun Ahn and Sojung Park present a case study of a 26-year-old woman undergoing home quarantine due to travel restrictions (Ahn and Park, 2022). The paper includes a discussion on the client's privacy during therapy sessions.

The client utilised a virtual background during meetings as she was reluctant to disclose the state of cleanliness in her room. However, since the background feature pixelated the screen image, she eventually had to reveal her space on one occasion during therapy. Furthermore, uncontrollable noises from outside the room unintentionally revealed aspects of her life, such as unexpected family conflicts (Ahn and Park, 2022, p.68). Ahn and Park suggest that when a client's private information is revealed against their will and beyond the therapist's control, it is important for the therapist to address these issues. The therapist should check in with the client and spend time re-establishing the client's sense of security while reassuring the boundaries of confidentiality. Although this paper did not specifically engage in discussion from a cultural perspective, it demonstrates that the characteristics of the online setting expand ethical considerations, presenting a global challenge for art therapists.

7.2.4 Questions

Current discussions on 'background' in the art therapy field appear to concentrate on ethical considerations and their manifestation at both the cultural and personal levels, some are more open, and some are more reserve. However, this raises questions: Why online setting forefront the privacy issue? What are the differences between working in a client's home environment in in-person, as discussed in Chapter Two (Moon, 2002; Hsu *et al.*, 2022), and observing the client's space on a screen? I understand that one of the main differences is that working online also reveals the therapist's space. However, in the UK, many psychodynamic-trained psychotherapists in private practice provide therapy/supervision from their home office/studio, meaning

it is not uncommon for the client and the therapist to tap into their personal space. Moreover, there seems to be an underlying assumption that the extent to which one reveals their personal space may correlate with their openness and authenticity. While I generally concur with this observation, I question whether it applies universally and wonder about the theoretical basis for this assumption.

Ethical considerations regarding privacy, confidentiality, and cultural awareness indeed play a vital role in discussions around background. Current discourses predominantly stem from the observations made in individual therapists' clinical experiences and explore the meaning of 'background' from socio-cultural perspectives. While these insights are valuable, nevertheless, I wonder, if we consider the 'background' from a more-than-human perspective, what would the materialistic foundation of this phenomenon be? How does technology shaped and shaped by the art therapy context? Are there alternative ways to conceptualise this virtual representation of the client/therapist's physical environment? In the following section, I aim to construct a theoretical framework to explore the intraction between the elements that constitute 'background'.

7.3 Digital Placemaking in Domestic Space

To investigate why the issue of privacy is at the forefront of online art therapy, I first look at current studies on digital placemaking in domestic space (Wilken and Goggin, 2013; Hardley and Richardson, 2021; Ruberg and Lark, 2021). The phenomenon of revealing personal information publicly via digital devices, namely privacy, can be seen as an embodiment of the increasingly blurred line between public and private spaces

within the home. However, this raises a more fundamental question: should art therapy session be considered as a public or a private event? I believe this needs to be explored to facilitate further discussion.

7.3.1 Mobile Devices: Redefining Private and Public Spaces

Mobile devices, including mobile phones, tablets, and laptops, have become an integral part of contemporary daily lives. These are the devices that most therapists and therapy service users rely on for their online sessions. Although some may use desktop computers, the majority of my clients and research participants - including myself - use mobile devices. Therefore, online art therapy sessions are inevitably part of the broader context of how mobile devices are shaping contemporary society. Australian-based digital ethnographers Hardley and Richardson conducted a five-year longitudinal ethnographic study on mobile phone practices in Melbourne and Perth, focusing on everyday mobility and placemaking. During the study, the COVID-19 'stay-at-home' restrictions quickly shifted the world to working and socialising from home, providing researchers with an opportunity to consider the role of mobile media in this process (Hardley and Richardson, 2021).

In their research, Hardley and Richardson found that the relationships their participants had with their homes, as a 'place', were modified by and through their use of mobile media practices. They drew from the theory of **net locality** (Gordon and de Souza e Silvia, 2011, cited in Hardley and Richardson, 2021, p.630), which describes how our experience of a place is co-produced by the physical location we are in and the information we can access via mobile devices (eg. online map, restaurant reviews).

In other words, mobile devices allow us to experience places in a blended, hybrid, physical-digital way. Net locality is usually applied in urban studies to analyse the merging of physical, digital, and social layers. However, when the 'Stay-at-Home' restriction increasingly made domestic spaces the primary site of net locality, the digital contents we can access from home via mobile devices (eg. video conference calls for work meetings, lectures, therapy sessions; text-based messaging app with friends and families etc.) reconfigure our sense of place in domestic space. In Hardley and Richardson's fieldwork, they found this hybridity of work, social, and home spaces generally stirred up feelings of discomfort among their research participants.

One of the most significant phenomena manifested in the participants' common wariness is how mobile devices make their personal material life visually accessible to others in the network. This happens while acknowledging the need to appear (at least facially) as a co-present body to enhance affective connections with others in the online networking (Hardley and Richardson, 2021, p.630). Since the screen-based features of mobile devices have become the primary mode of communication, "this interaction takes on a decidedly **performative or curatorial** aspect, as we deliberately (re)arrange our bodies and background environments for the camera view" (Hardley and Richardson, 2021, p.630). Therefore, "we do not leave our **bodies**, even momentarily, for digital interactions. And increasingly, we do not leave our locality" (Gordon and de Souza e Silvia, 2011, cited in Hardley and Richardson, 2021, p.631).

In this sense, a person's home and body literally become *the* 'local' site - which is typically designated as public or urban space (Hardley and Richardson, 2021, p.631). The performative act of curating one's visual presentation on the screen could be seen

as a response to the blurred line between private and public space, both physically and psychologically. The integration of online networking and net locality into the home requires us to renegotiate how we use domestic space in the digital age. This includes how we position ourselves and our belongings to maintain personal privacy. Essentially, we need to find ways to ensure that our home still feels like our own, even in this new context (Hardley and Richardson, 2021, p.631). In this way, the participants in Hardley and Richardson's study enacted a mode of networked corporeality specific to the home. The study also points out that curating personal presentation on mobile media is not specific to the pandemic context but has increasingly become a mundane and habitual aspect of our everyday life due to social media.

7.3.2 Privacy Paradox in Online Art Therapy

The concept of net locality in domestic placemaking provides a theoretical framework to understand why privacy concerns regarding the background are prominent in online art therapy. This holds true regardless of whether an individual adopts an open or reserved attitude towards their on-camera presence. Hardley and Richardson's study expands our understanding of privacy in domestic spaces, reminding us that the boundaries between public and private spheres are not dichotomous but fluid and permeable (Hardley and Richardson, 2021, p.633). These blurred boundaries may explain the mixed reactions among art therapists and clients towards revealing their backgrounds in online sessions. The transformation of the 'home' from a private space to a central site of net locality bears various implications. For some, as demonstrated in Ahn & Park's case, it may increase the risk of undesired boundary violations. For others, as seen in Winkle's statement, it may enhance social connectivity. Both

scenarios are present in Carlier et al.'s experiences in the Arabian region and are interpreted within the local religious framework. Furthermore, the same individual may display varying degrees of openness as relationship is built, as shown in Grace's vignette.

Whether an individual chooses to actively or passively curate their environment, or to present themselves openly or reservedly on-camera, I propose that the choice may hinges on their personal conceptualisation of the event, for example, one may have different level of openness for an online conference and an online art therapy session. More specifically, their perception of an event as being more public or private— dependent on the specific moment in time and their relationship with the event—may significantly influence their choices. In this sense, the diverse reactions from art therapists and clients may stem from a more fundamental question: does an art therapy session, as an event taking place online, lean more towards the public or private spectrum?

This prompted me to think about the multiple ways to interpret the word '**private**'. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 'private' has several meanings. It could mean "not connected with your work or official position" when referring to private versus public life. Alternatively, it could be understood as feelings or information "you do not want people to know," or as something "intended for or involving a particular person or group of people, not for people in general or for others to know about" ('Private', 2023). On one hand, an art therapy session is definitely not part of the client's or the therapist's private life; it is a professional relationship and often involves wider social support networks, therefore it could be considered 'public'. On the other

hand, art therapy is a mental health profession strictly protected by confidentiality and involving emotional intimacy. This aligns with the definition of sharing feelings or information with a particular person or group only, so it is understandable that some therapists and clients would consider the session as private. Moreover, one's 'private/public' life and what would one want to make 'private/public' may not be the same. The line between private and public is blurred and subject to interpretation. This ambiguity may provide another explanation to the diverse responses and different level of revealing oneself in the background among both art therapists and clients.

In this sense, when an art therapy session takes place in a domestic space, it introduces complex layers of meaning. While a domestic space is part of a person's private life, it is not necessarily a 'private' space in an emotional sense. Also, within a domestic space, different rooms imply various levels of 'privacy'—there is a distinct difference between the living room, the study/work room, the bedroom, and the bathroom. Furthermore, sometimes a public space might feel more 'private.' For instance, one of my clients chose to speak to me from a park. The interplay between how public or private a place feels and an individual's emotional state presents endless possibilities for expression, and it could change throughout the duration of therapy. Therefore, I propose that the presentation of an individual's background and their visual depiction on screen is a dynamic process, continuously reflecting one's state of being in space and time. By 'individual', I'm referring to both the art therapist and the client. In the following section, I provide an example from a client of mine to discuss how the visual presentation can serve as a valuable source of material in therapy.

7.3.3 Vignette: Digital Placemaking as Expression

After three online sessions, a client expressed difficulty managing intense emotions in her home once each session ended. She said that throughout the week, whenever she entered the room, she could still feel the intensity of our sessions lingering in the space. Moreover, she felt awkward exploring her relationship with her flatmate in the space they shared. The overlap between the domestic and therapy space made her feel exposed and unsafe in her own home. Therefore, I booked a room in a co-working space for her to attend the online session outside of her home. This arrangement works well until the COVID-19 lockdown restriction came.

By the time the pandemic occurred, our therapy had already been going on for some time. Therefore, when we discussed the possibility of returning to home again, she felt less intimidated since her relationship with her flatmate had improved significantly and the trust had been established in our therapeutic relationship. With negotiation, her flatmate was willing to respect her privacy by putting on a headphone while being in another room.

My client usually presents herself as a person who is well-organised and sophisticated. Whether she was in a rented room or at home, she usually set up the table for artmaking properly. Upon reflection, she acknowledged that she felt trapped by this urge to present herself well but did not know how to loosen up. One day, I was intrigued to see her lying on a couch, hugging a large stuffed toy, with the edge of her bed showing in the background. She said this was her experiment to let go of the formality that had previously constrained her. To our surprise, this worked well. She appeared more relaxed and allowed herself to free-associate. At one point, there was a moment

of silence, and I thought she might have fallen asleep, but soon she started the conversation again. At the end of the session, I mentioned that this reminded me of Freud's couch. She laughed, saying she had made the same association and quite enjoyed being in this state. I mentioned that sometimes a client might fall asleep in a session. She was surprised and asked, "Why? Is it because they are too tired?" I replied, "Sometimes. But sometimes maybe one just needs to be in this state." In my session note, I reflected on my response to her and realised that I was trying to reassure her that no matter what state she was in, it was acceptable in this space.

Since then, she entered a phase where she sat or even lay on the bed for our sessions. During this time, although she sometimes still struggled to break her pattern, she overall began to loosen up. I was glad to see her progress, but noticed that being in bed made it difficult for artmaking to occur. So, I suggested that we could think about how to make art in a position where she felt more relaxed. Subsequently, she moved to an electric massage chair she had recently bought and set up a movable side table for her tablet, and the table could also be used for artmaking.

7.3.4 Discussion

In this case, through my laptop screen, I have had the privilege to witness the dynamic process of how my client gradually made use of her environment for personal exploration. Despite never having physically been in her spaces, the limited screen view supplied ample material for our sessions. At first, the intensity of the therapy sessions threatened her sense of comfort within her own home. This echoes the concept of the net locality (Hardley and Richardson, 2021), where the domestic space

became the primary site of therapeutic process via mobile device, which could reconfigure one's sense of place. Conventionally, in in-person therapy, the physical room serves to contain the client's intense feelings, offering a temporary respite until the next session. However, when the therapy session intrudes into the domestic setting, it can blur the line between private life and therapeutic space, infringing on the sanctity of her home. By arranging an alternate space for our sessions, we collectively overcame this challenge, building trust in our therapeutic relationship.

As therapy progressed, she developed enough strength to return to online sessions at her home. This shows that one's relationship with the environment is a dynamic process. As her personal situation improved and the therapeutic relationship deepened, her comfort and sense of security within her domestic space increased to the extent that she could contain the intensity of the therapeutic process. Our sessions never returned to the rented room even after the lockdown was eased. This underscores the fluidity of the therapeutic environment and its potential to embody one's therapeutic journey.

As I observed my client's progress through the lens of my laptop, it led me to rethink the notion of 'curating' one's on-camera background or visual presence. While 'curation' often implies an intentional arrangement of physical objects or mindful selection of what appears in the backdrop, my client's approach was more about the conscious decision of how she wanted to present herself. Whether that was portraying an image of being well-organised, or casting aside conventional ideas of 'proper presentation' and choosing to sit on her bed, it was the intention that mattered most.

This perspective aligns with Hardley and Richardson's insights on the embodied nature of digital interactions. An individual's intentionality and physical presence in digital space should be viewed as meaningful bodily gestures. My client's chosen self-representation can be seen as a bodily gesture reflecting her intentions and individuality. In essence, presenting ourselves on screen is fundamentally a form of body language and should be recognised as a distinct mode of communication.

One primary challenge in conducting therapy sessions online is the limited visibility of body, leading to a lack of body language, as typically, only our head and shoulders are visible on screen. However, my findings show that, the constraints of camera and screen do not necessarily limit our capacity for expression. In fact, since our chosen background and presentations can embody our intentionality, and all environmental information is flattened into a two-dimensional image, all visual elements within the frame can be considered as extensions of ourselves. Consequently, they carry qualities akin to our phenomenological body.

Despite the absence of our full physical body, I propose a reinterpretation of the concept of body language. In the context of digital interaction, one's background and visual presentation could be conceptualised as **a new form of body language.** This underlines the premise that even within the limitations of the digital format, individuals can and do express themselves in dynamic, non-verbal ways.

7.4 Background as the New Body Language

7.4.1 Background

When I refer to 'background', I encompass the entire visual presentation of a person as displayed on screen. This includes both the person's bodily presence in the foreground and everything visible in the backdrop. I have opted to use the term 'background' because our usual therapeutic focus is on the content the client presents, whereas the full screen view is often perceived as the therapy's 'background'.

In prior discussions, I introduced the concept of 'background' as a digital extension of our personal expressions and bodily movement. Current social studies and art therapy literature generally regard the 'background' in online sessions as an assemblage of information. This viewpoint frequently guides discussions towards privacy-related or ethical considerations. Indeed, when I suggest that the background serves as a form of language, it includes the possibility of communicating to the viewer as an embodied collection of information. This perspective can certainly be useful when addressing ethical considerations and retrieving information about the person. However, this is just one way to conceptualise this new 'language'.

Taking this discussion further, I propose to frame it from the perspective of the visual arts discipline. As an art therapist and an artist, I see the screen as a picture frame and regard the image on the screen as a **picture** to be explored. After all, the screen captures the three-dimensional world and flattens it into a two-dimensional image. As such, this new form of 'body language' inherently carries the qualities of visual

language. In this section, I delve deeper into the epistemological foundations of how visual representations are constructed through mobile devices. I draw from the work of the British artist David Hockney - who has devoted his career to pushing the boundaries of perception and visual representation - to investigate the potential mechanisms underlying the construction of the 'background'. This exploration further examines how the 'background' is granted the agency to represent a person's intentionality. This context provides insight into how individuals choose their background in online art therapy sessions and how background could serve as means to facilitate therapeutic relationship.

7.4.2 David Hockney: The History of Pictures

In *A History of Pictures: From the Cave to the Computer Screen* (2020), David Hockney and art critic Martin Gayford propose that the images we see on computer screens are part of a long-standing tradition of human picture-making, a lineage that can be traced back to the era of cave paintings. They deliberately use the term 'picture' instead of 'art'. This choice reflects their intention to concentrate their exploration on **depictions** of the world by humans, as the term 'art' often extends to elements that are not necessarily depictions, such as abstract or decorative art (Hockney & Gayford, p.10).

Throughout history, humans have harnessed the latest tools of their time to leave their mark. For instance, ochre bars were used like crayons in prehistoric cave paintings (Royal Society of Chemistry, 2023). This was followed by the invention of tools and mediums such as charcoal, pencils, brushes, frescoes, oil paint, watercolour, and

more. The advent of photography in 1839 and the subsequent development of film technologies marked significant paradigm shifts in the world of picture-making. More recently, the digitalisation has introduced another major turn. Hockney has been experimenting with iPad drawing since 2010. Each invention in tooling has expanded our ability to visually capture our surroundings, and with the rise of smartphones, most of us have created countless pictures everyday. The visuals we now produce on mobile devices represent the latest evolution in this rich history of pictures.

Hockney and Gayford recognise that pictures are inseparable parts of our everyday lives, appearing on laptops, phones, magazines, books, or even street posters. They define a picture as a "representation of the three-dimensional world on flat surfaces" (Hockney & Gayford, p.7). For them, the history of pictures is the long story of how humans attempt to solve the same problem – namely, the impossibility of depicting the three-dimensional into the two-dimensional surface. In fact, two-dimensional surface does not exist in the natural world, Hockney argues that a surface only looks two-dimensional because of our scale. For example, if you were a little fly, a piece of paper would seem quite irregular. Therefore, the flatness of a picture involves the image-maker's process of conceptualising and abstracting this representation of the depicted object. For example, a photograph, even though often thought of as a faithful representation of reality, is in fact a stylised depiction resulted some level of distortion and interpretation (Hockney & Gayford, p.20).

The impossibility to depict the three-dimensional world perfectly, mainly stem from two factors: the constrain of the chosen mediums (including the materials, tools, and/or methods), and the restrict of the image-maker's viewpoint. Every picture represents a

particular perspective or an account of looking at something - even a surveillance camera in a car park has its own limited scope, someone had to place it there, choose its viewpoint, and determine what it would cover. Nothing about this process is automatic.

This concept suggests that every picture, regardless of its quality and even when it might not seem like it, offers a personal interpretation of reality (Hockney & Gayford, p.8). Hockney stated:

> "The history of pictures begins in the caves and ends, at the moment, with an iPad. Who knows where it will go next? But one thing is certain, the pictorial problems will always be there - the difficulties of depicting the world in two dimensions are permanent. Meaning, you never solve them" (Hockney & Gayford, p.19).

Despite these constraints, Hockney, along with countless individuals throughout history, has continually experimented with infinite possibilities to depict our surroundings, playing with ever-evolving materials, techniques, technologies, and methods. From this perspective, it can be argued that human's innovation and creativity are, in part, responses to these enduring challenges. All two-dimensional images represent the creators' partial, situated perspectives. Interestingly, it is this inherent imperfection that opens up a wealth of viewpoints and personal knowledge.

7.4.3 Framing Online Art Therapy

In this sense, the background and visual representation of online art therapy sessions, which are two-dimensional depictions of three-dimensional spaces, can also be considered as part of this long history of picture-making, which provides an alternative way to conceptualise its limitations. This perspective may explain why the view we see online is inevitably partial and limited. The constraints of the online session stem from the enduring limitations of capturing reality through a lens. Although this is a new challenge to the art therapy and psychotherapy professions, it is not new to artists. Painters, illustrators, photographers, and filmmakers have been inventing and reinventing ways to see, to depict, to examine, and to understand 'pictures'. This prompts me to think: could art therapists look at the screen in the same way we look at a piece of picture? Should we be focusing not only on the information that the background provides, but also viewing the screen holistically as a 'picture-to-be-looked-at', perceiving the visual representation through elements such as composition, lighting and shadow, posing, camera angle, colour, staging, sound, and more?

Based on this perspective, I began to pay extra attention to how my clients set up their camera for the session. I started to perceive everything within the screen frame as a holistic 'picture' – as if the clients have arranged a photoshoot for a self-portrait, capturing themselves in the 'here and now' moment. This shift in perception has made me more attuned to subtle changes in the setting of each session, such as the camera angle, lighting, and the client's position. Even when the client maintains the same position across sessions, I have begun to discern subtle variations and have become highly attuned to the overall atmosphere of the 'picture.' For instance, a client of mine

generally use iPad for her session, I notice on days when she was more tired, the camera angle usually skewed a bit, which gives me a sense of her lack of energy to concern the details. Their outfit, hair, body position, and/or distance from the camera are also part of the picture, that could reflect their state today. In this way, I often feel their emotions can be conveyed through their initial appearance on the screen, even before they utter a word. This is akin to in-person sessions, where you often get a sense of the client as soon as they step into the room. When I began paying attention to the atmosphere conveyed in the overall visual representation, I realised it operates in quite a similar manner.

When I share these observations with my research participant Ivy, who works with adult mental health service users in the community, she described her observations in her group:

> When we first went online, I really miss being able to see the whole body of the person. You can read them when they walk through the door, you get so much more information. But in online, you can also tell from the square, just by how they are positing their shoulder and neck when making artwork. Or, when people are in the bad mood, sometimes they will take themselves quite far away to the back. I found particularly that one man in the group who will take himself a meter away from the screen. It's interesting what people do. Whereas in the in-person group, I probably wouldn't notice in the session.

Ivy's words made me think about how when we see the screen as a picture frame, every little movements are being magnified, like in a framed portrait or photograph.

These subtle cues might not have been noticeable in in-person sessions, but the limited nature of the screen could 'frame' these details, which heighten certain aspects of non-verbal communication and provide unique insights into the person's emotional states.

Ivy also brought up the element of light, and how the light lit up things we see. This reminded her of a moment in her group:

> There is a member in the group who has a bright yellow wall. She often wears bright colour. She sometimes reminded me of Matisse, like woman at the table. One of the members made a portrait of her like that, the artwork was made in pastel. When the work was held up, there were two squares look the same! It was a bit like a visual joke, the whole group laughs. It's very lovely to see it.

This vignette further illustrates the pictorial nature of one's visual representation on the screen. Even in an online setting, the fundamental elements of visual art - composition, light, colour - play a significant role in shaping the therapeutic space and group dynamic. Ivy describes her group as often being in the state of chaos. This is a non-directive group underpinned by the open studio model, which the Zoom will be on during the session time, members are welcome to come and go and make art at their own pace. Ivy described one of the first sessions which was particularly hard:

> "At the time, people don't really know how to be on Zoom yet. Members would all talk at once and shouting over each other, some would walk in and out, there was even someone hula hooping. It was a mad manic session. But a member

suddenly reveal she has been drawing the group, and when she held up her picture, it really created this moment of calm. Everyone was like, "Wow~~~". We just saw ourselves as a group connecting in her picture. Then it went into a phrase of people drawing each other, there were lots of portrait drawings…. [the artwork] was like a breathing space, cos it was like talk talk talk, and suddenly, ah, like, look……"

I found Ivy's vignettes fascinating. This example shows that what the visual representation on the screen is conveying more than assemblage of personal information, but also an atmosphere that reflect the emotional states, which was beautifully capture in the member's drawing. In the situation that is difficult to go into any personal detail, seeing the group from the perspective of visual art had provided an alternative perspective to move out of the information overload and to facilitate connection. When I commented on this sense of connectiveness to Ivy, she said:

"Yeah, we were all trying to find each other through drawing each other, because the space felt so cold and sort of like alien. You know, the technology is sort of… what's the word… the screens are hard, aren't they? They have hard corners and edges, like box and everything are in square, like the opposite of an organic human person. I felt by drawing each other, we were trying to find where we were in this space and reached out."

7.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have expanded the exploration of the art therapist's cyborg body, and found that, in the absence of physical body language, the background has emerged as a means of expression. I have delved into two perspectives to interpret the background. From a socio-cultural standpoint and considering digital placemaking in domestic space, the background can be seen as an expression of the individual's reconfiguration between their sense of private and public space at home. The elements they choose to reveal provide a rich assemblage of information, uncovering aspects of the individual's **physical reality** that would not be seen in in-person sessions. In addition, I propose an alternative way to view the background as a holistic 'picture' within the artistic tradition. This perspective heightens our sensitivity to subtle emotions conveyed through elements such as composition, camera angle, and lighting. It opens a gateway to connecting with the individual's emotional state and reflecting the **psychic reality**.

The background in online art therapy is not a still image, it is in fact a dynamic process provides a unique perspective into one's external and internal worlds. This is a two-way process, the therapist and the client are seeing each other. In this context, the background can be conceptualised as a new form of digitally specific body language, given its capacity to communicate a person's intentions and emotional state. As Ivy noted, technologies can feel cold. It is our persistent efforts to reach out to each other and our desire to maintain affective connections that imbue this cyborg presence with a human touch and warmth.

During my writing process, I continually recalled my research participant Eve's words, "In online art therapy, although you see less, but you also see more," which were quoted in Chapter Five. Art therapists have worked hard to adapt to the digital environment, in order to respond to our client's needs. As we gradually become familiar with this new body, we learn to see, move, and express ourselves through this human-technology hybrid state of being. In the subsequent discussion chapter, I aim to present a comprehensive overview of the art therapist as a cyborg, and envisage the future path for this cybernetic entity.

Chapter Eight: Discussion and Conclusion

8.1 The Art Therapist Cyborg

So, what is the 'art therapist cyborg'? This chapter weaves together the earlier discussions and provide a developing paradigm, which formulate a theoretical framework to visualise how this cyborg move, and navigate around the multilayers of online art therapy. Case vignettes and the thinking process behind this formulation are articulated. Additionally, I explore the future implications of the findings in this study, and suggest ways to develop the digital literacy that art therapists need, to gain agency in this rapidly evolving world. While this thesis is about online art therapy, it is also an exploration into the wider social context and human condition in this time of rapid technological advancement.

8.2 Identifying the Digital Muscles

An 'art therapist cyborg' is not about having a chip implant or an artificial prosthesis. In my fieldwork, I have discovered that it represents an encounter between humans and technology at the conscious, pre-conscious, and unconscious levels.

At the conscious level, we weigh the pros and cons of online art therapy, we learn to operate programs and digital devices, we address ethical and safeguarding concerns, and take pragmatic considerations into account to facilitate online sessions. However, this study delves further into those aspects that we seemingly 'know' intuitively, examining the underlying presumptions to explore the epistemological facets of these

implicit knowledges. Chapter Five addressed the immediate associations art therapists have towards online art therapy; Chapter Six explored the instinctive use of language compensating for the difficulties to work with art due to the limitations of the camera and screen view; and Chapter Seven discussed the underlying mechanisms behind why we intuitively know the importance of background, and how we curate and interpret it.

As my research participants and I ventured into these intuitive actions, we discovered a 'world that is already there', as Merleau-Ponty would say (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p.xx). This world consists of a series of bodily gestures that operate at the pre-conscious level to facilitate online sessions, even though sometimes the compensatory strategies may deviate from the conventional ways of conducting art therapy sessions in-person. These digitally mediated gestures remain largely unreflected upon and unnoticed. Therefore, I would like to suggest, these bodily gestures automatically compensate for the limitations of the online setting, which may function similarly to 'muscle compensation' in the physical body. 'Muscle compensation' is a term used in physiotherapy and sports science to describe a situation when certain muscles in our body 'compensate' for the weakness or dysfunction of others. This occurs as the body attempts to maintain functionality and prevent injury when certain muscles are unable to perform their roles. The way we compensate for the limitations in online art therapy, such as utilising verbal gestures to work with art, or using visual representations to compensate for the lack of body language, seems to me to be a similar process.

This idea originates from my own experience with physiotherapy. My therapist informed me that I have a weak core and explained that, due to the interconnected

nature of the body's muscle system, my back pain resulted from other muscles overcompensating for the weaker ones. He helped me identify the weak muscles and subsequently developed a plan to strengthen them. Similarly, I speculate that the difficulties art therapists encounter when working online may arise from the fact that the 'muscles' required for in-person and online sessions differ significantly. As a result, our bodies operate at a pre-reflexive level and make concrete compensatory movements. This compensates for those 'muscles' that were once well-developed in an in-person setting, but do not function in the same way in an online setting. For instance, the challenges of observing the art-making process with our eyes is compensated by describing the process through verbal gestures and forming mental representations.

Dyspraxia is a common disorder that affects a person's movement and coordination skills, making routine tasks challenging. However, it does not affect one's intelligence (NHS, 2017). As some of our in-person 'muscles' become dysfunctional in the online setting, art therapists' sense of feeling 'disabled' or deskilled may be akin to dyspraxia, where our digital muscles are yet to be identified and developed. This study is an exploratory research akin to taking the first steps to identify the 'digital muscles' within the art therapist cyborg's body and learning how this new body operates.

Just as physical muscles can be strengthened, so too, I believe, an art therapist's 'digital muscles' can be developed. This is evident from observing my participants' journey toward becoming familiar with, and adapting to, the online environment. 'Digital muscles' refers to the pre-conscious and unconscious movements we make when interacting with digital tools and environments. Since the body schema is

capable of incorporating technological devices into our bodily experience through spatial information, research on tool use and neuroplasticity in the brain provides a biological and neurological basis for the potential development of our 'digital muscles' (Maravita and Iriki, 2004; Martel *et al.*, 2016, 2021). This might explain why, despite the many limitations of online art therapy, art therapists still find ways to engage and work with this medium. The process does not always proceed smoothly, but as humans we have the capacity to compensate for technological limitations through intuitive and learned behaviours, much like our body compensates for weaker muscles.

As our 'digital muscles' operate at a pre-conscious level, this resonates with the original concept of the 'cyborg', as first proposed in 1960 by Clynes and Kline as discussed in Chapter Three. They envisioned technological body parts as exogenous components extending self-regulatory control, incorporated into the body's homeostatic systems. Technological devices are designed with the intention of operating as smoothly and intuitively as possible (although not always successful) to leave humans 'free to explore, to create, to think, and to feel' (Clynes & Kline, 1960, para.10). In this sense, it is reasonable that many digital interactions remain at a pre-conscious level, because this principle was at the core of their design from the outset.

In the next section, I explore and map out how this body works in a more systematic way, aiming to put together what I have found so far and to gain a more holistic view of our coupling with digital technology.

8.3 Digital Skeleton: Mapping the Art Therapist Cyborg Body

Muscles are foundational for movement in living beings, and in exploring this concept, I found myself wondering about the other important body components that coordinate movement - the skeleton. In this section, I suggest that the structure of online art therapy can be seen as a 'digital skeleton' for the art therapy cyborg. This skeleton provides a framework to help art therapists navigate around the complexity of online art therapy. To establish this structure, I have expanded upon the triangular relationship in art therapy.

In Chapter One, I briefly reviewed the current discussion in art therapy literature regarding the proposed extension of the triangular relationship, which is between the client, the art therapist, and the artwork. Proulx suggested adding the 'computer screen' as the fourth elements into the formulation (Proulx, 2022). Haywood and Grant recommended incorporating 'virtual', 'conscious', and 'unconscious' elements into the diagram to create a hexagon, which could facilitate thinking around how the 'virtual' impacts transference and countertransference (Haywood & Grant, 2022). Both these models offer valuable insights and point out important elements in online art therapy, which inspired me to formulate a further developed version of the online art therapy model based on the discoveries made in this study in the following section.

8.3.1 Defining Terminology: Digital Objects

The discussions revolving around online art therapy are fundamentally anchored in the capabilities and limitations of digital devices. Therefore, incorporating these digital devices into the existing triangular relationship could provide a conceptual framework for understanding the intractions among the digital devices, the client, the art therapist, and the artwork (fig.15). This inclusion highlights the 'more-than-human' nature of this relationship.
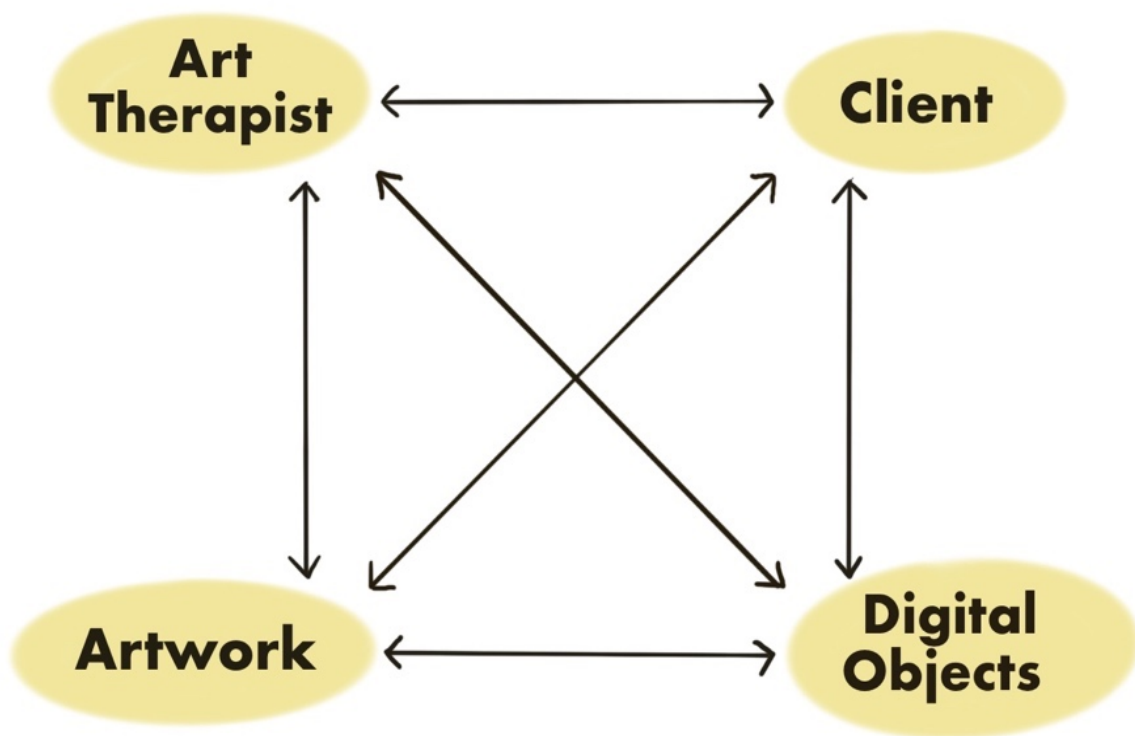

Figure 15 Including the Digital Objects (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

I have been wondering what the most appropriate term is to represent the role of technological entities in this configuration. Proulx suggests the term 'computer screen',

but this term seems to only reflect the visual representation aspect. In fact, facilitating an online session necessitates the collective efforts of various hardware and software, each operating through their own digitally specific interactions. Therefore, there are three terms I have considered to use in this formulation: digital devices, digital technologies, and digital objects.

Initially, I want to employ the term 'digital devices' to encompass the array of high-tech technologies involved in the process. However, as the Cambridge Dictionary defines a 'device' as "1) an object or machine that has been invented to fulfil a particular purpose. 2) a method that is used to produce a particular effect" ('device', 2023). This definition implies that human-made technologies, which are designed for specific functionalities, remain under our control for manipulation, seemingly devoid of agency, which does not completely align with the objectives of this study. Alternatively, I have considered 'digital technologies', a term which encapsulates the long history of humans' relationship with tool-making and locates the 'tools' specifically in contemporary context. Yet, this term also seems to focus more on the creation of the tools and lacks acknowledgment of the reciprocal process in which technology shapes us as much as we shape it.

Therefore, I have decided to use 'digital objects' to describe the intricate entwinement between humans and high-tech technologies. The term 'object' echoes Sherry Turkle's study as discussed in Chapter Five (Turkle, 2005), which sees computational devices not only as a tool, but also as 'evocative objects', that evoke projections from people. This term integrates the actual 'object' into the object relations theory, and provides a framework to consider the significant impact of digital technologies on a person's

development and behaviours. Moreover, it suggests a perspective that is not overly human-centric. The term 'digital objects' appears to better accommodate the complexity and nuanced roles these high-tech devices play in online art therapy. They are not merely passive instruments, but also actively shape the therapy process. 'Digital objects' encompass the hardware, software, the internet, and all electronic devices needed to facilitate an online session. I use the term in the plural, as it requires more than one device to form the online connection.

Please note that I have been using the terms 'digital devices' and 'digital technologies' throughout this thesis up to this point, as I am exploring the 'devices' and 'technologies' themselves. It is only in this formulation that I specifically adopt the term 'digital objects', to reflect the discovered evocative nature of digital devices.

8.3.2 The Phenomenological Existence and the Corporeal Existence

We now have a square that delineates the actors in online art therapy. To this formulation, I would like to introduce two more elements: phenomenological existence and corporeal existence (fig.16). This concept is based on findings from Chapter Six, which discuss the phenomenological body that is created as we engage with digital devices. These devices extend our bodies, enabling us to perform tasks in both physical and virtual realms, thereby enabling (or disabling) us to accomplish activities beyond the capacity of our corporeal body. In this sense, our existence bifurcates into two modes—phenomenological and corporeal—and I believe this distinction should be represented in this model.
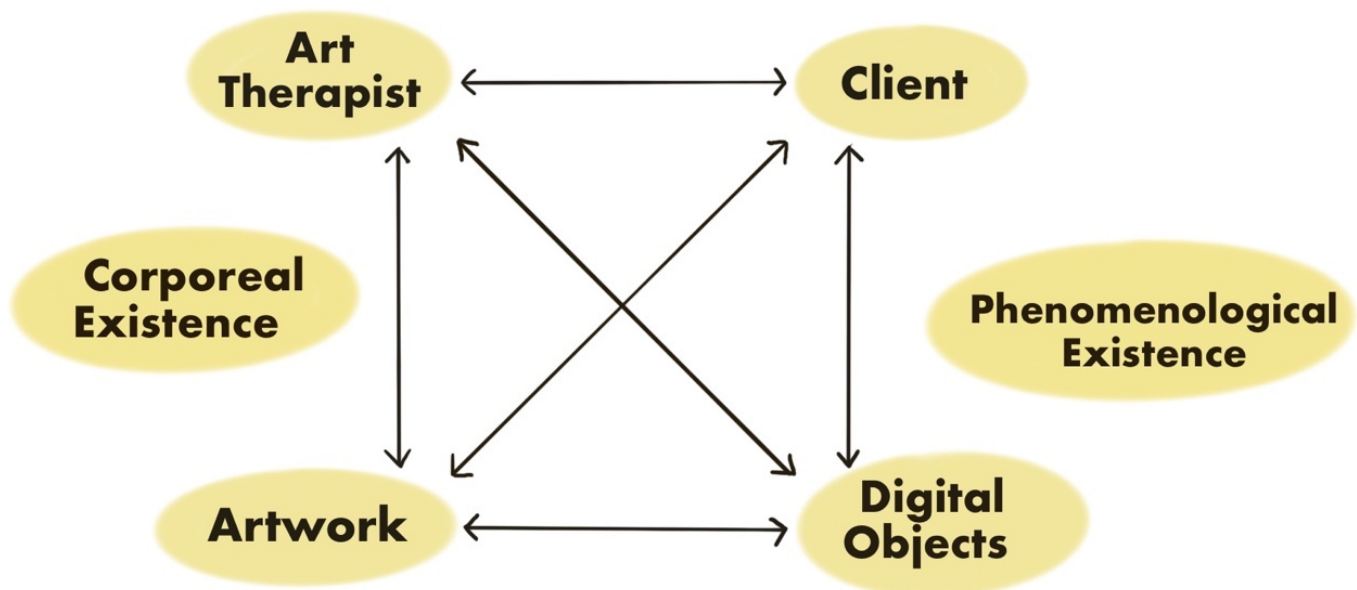
Figure 16. Including Phenomenological and Corporeal Existence (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

Not only is our body split into two modes of existence, but so is the artwork. We have discussed how when the artwork is converted into a digital format, it creates an identical copy that exists separate from the original. We can continue to work with this digital copy without affecting the original artwork. The elements of phenomenological and corporeal existence not only apply to the client's and the therapist's body but also to the artwork in this formulation.

8.3.3 The Spatial Element

In this formulation, six elements are present, suggesting a hexagonal structure. However, the findings from Chapter Seven prompted me to consider the inclusion of spatial and environmental factors into the relationship. Although the environmental information in online art therapy is flattened to two dimensions, the concept of 'space

and place' is nonetheless significant, as discussed in Chapter Two and Seven. After all, online art therapy involves placemaking, a process which encompasses the multi-layered nature of the physical spaces people inhabit, the digital space provided by the platform, and the imaginative space the therapist and the client co-created (Burrell, 2009). This unique fusion allows us to temporarily transform any given environment into a therapeutic space, be it at home or anywhere else.
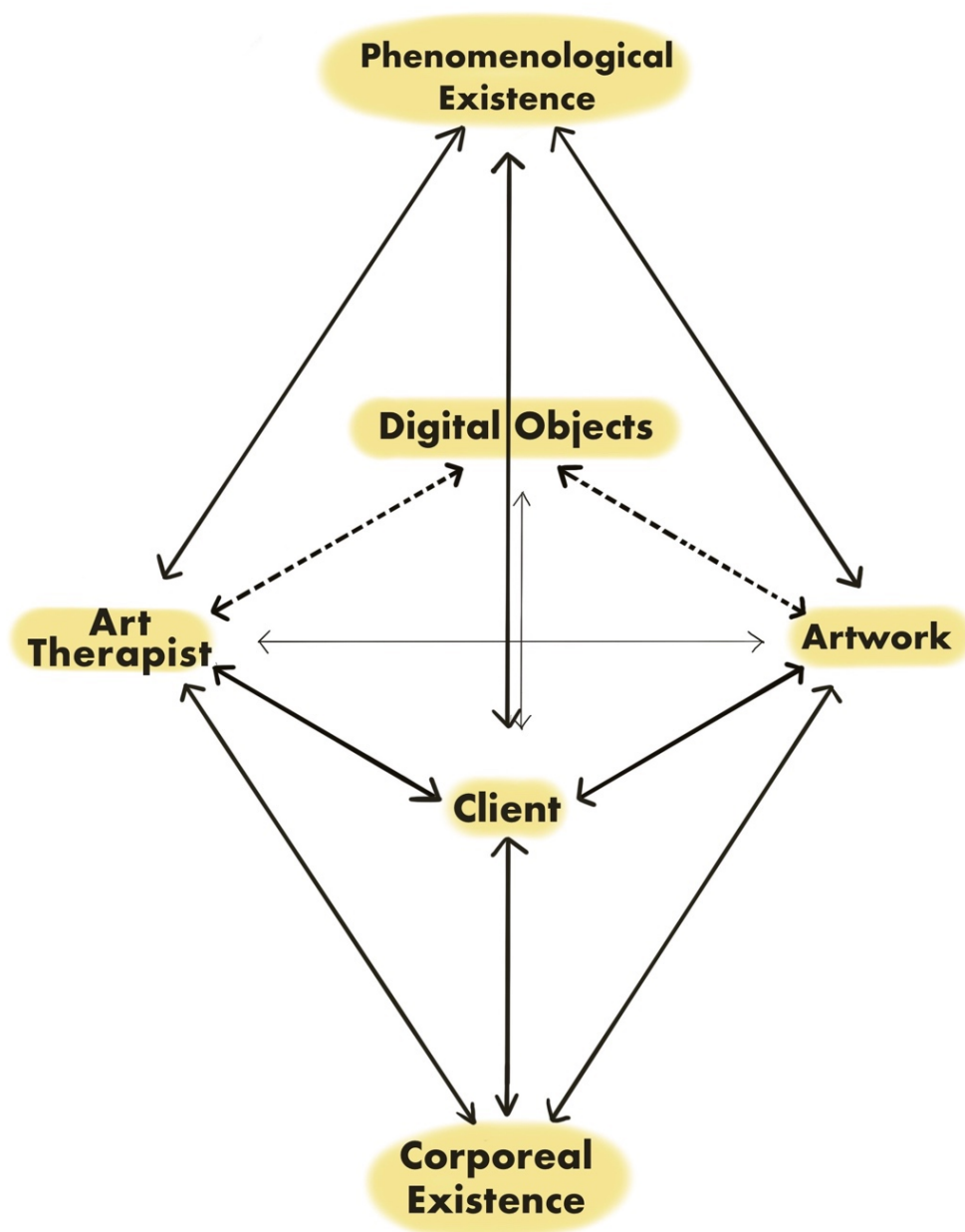

Figure 17. The Octahedron (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

Therefore, I decided to construct the diagram as a three-dimensional octahedron (fig.17) to represent the spatial elements. In Figure 17, the square forms the central structure, and then extends out to two points, creating a three-dimensional space with the phenomenological existence at the top and the corporeal existence at the bottom. I hope that by presenting the diagram in three dimensions, it will highlight the fact that, despite appearing reductive and flat on the screen, online art therapy is situated within the physical environments of both parties and incorporates rich environmental elements. These elements offer insights into the individual's physical and psychic reality, as discussed in Chapter Seven. To highlight the dynamism and interactions between these elements, I have placed arrows between each. I believe it is in these pathways marked with arrows that the 'digital muscles' reside, enabling the movements and agency inherent in the process. Please note the dashed lines simply indicate pathways that are situated at the back of the cone shape, from the viewer's perspective. In the following section, I elaborate on how this diagram could facilitate thinking in clinical situations.

8.3.4 Moving with the Musculoskeletal System: An Example

The octahedron in this model represents the intertwined relationships between body, place, and digital objects within online art therapy, and their interactions with the client, the art therapist, and the artwork. In this section, my aim is to show how this diagram can encapsulate the complexity of these interconnected layers as a whole, while still facilitating the independent examination of each facet. Throughout this process, each movement is facilitated by the 'digital muscles' - the pre-conscious and unconscious

movements we make when interacting with digital tools and environments. Using the

vignette of my client's burned artwork from Chapter Six as an example, I demonstrate

how this diagram aids in navigating and deconstructing the multiple layers present in

a session:

During this session, my client was creating art in her own space, continuing to do so

even after the session ended. In this stage, my involvement as the art therapist was

indirect. I have represented this initial relationship between my client and her artwork,

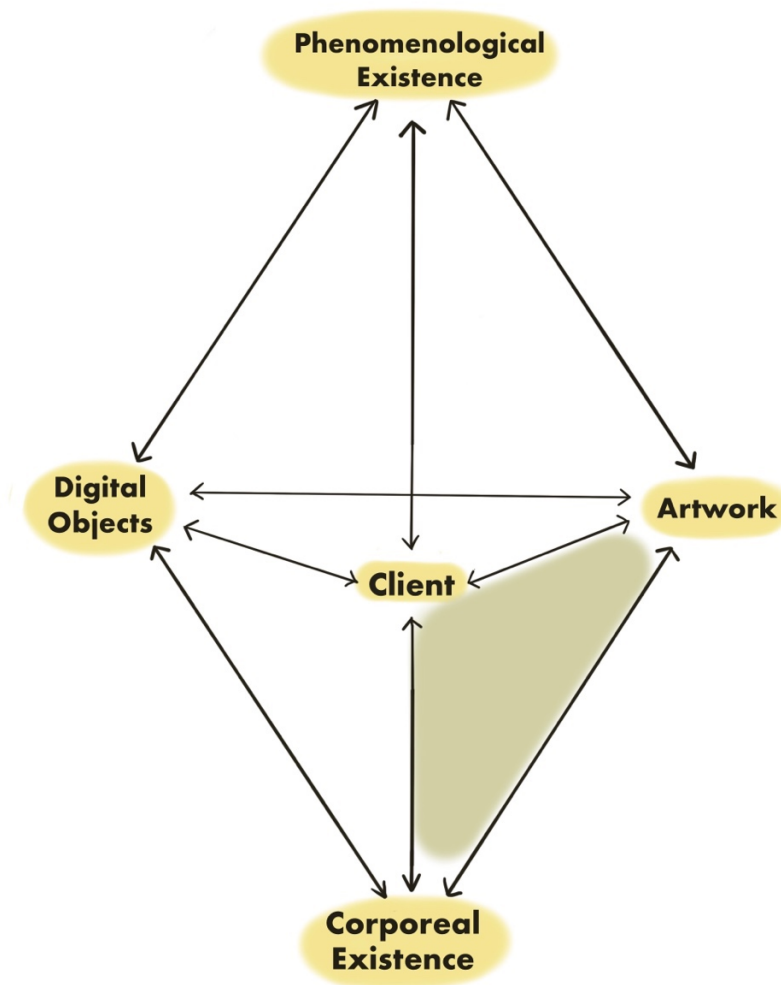which occurred on a corporeal level, with a light green shading in figure 18.

Figure 18. Scene 1 (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

When my client captured the burning process of her artwork through filming and photography, the artwork was digitalised, becoming a phenomenological artwork that could be sent via email. I have marked this transition of the artwork into a phenomenological existence through digital devices in a darker green (fig.19).
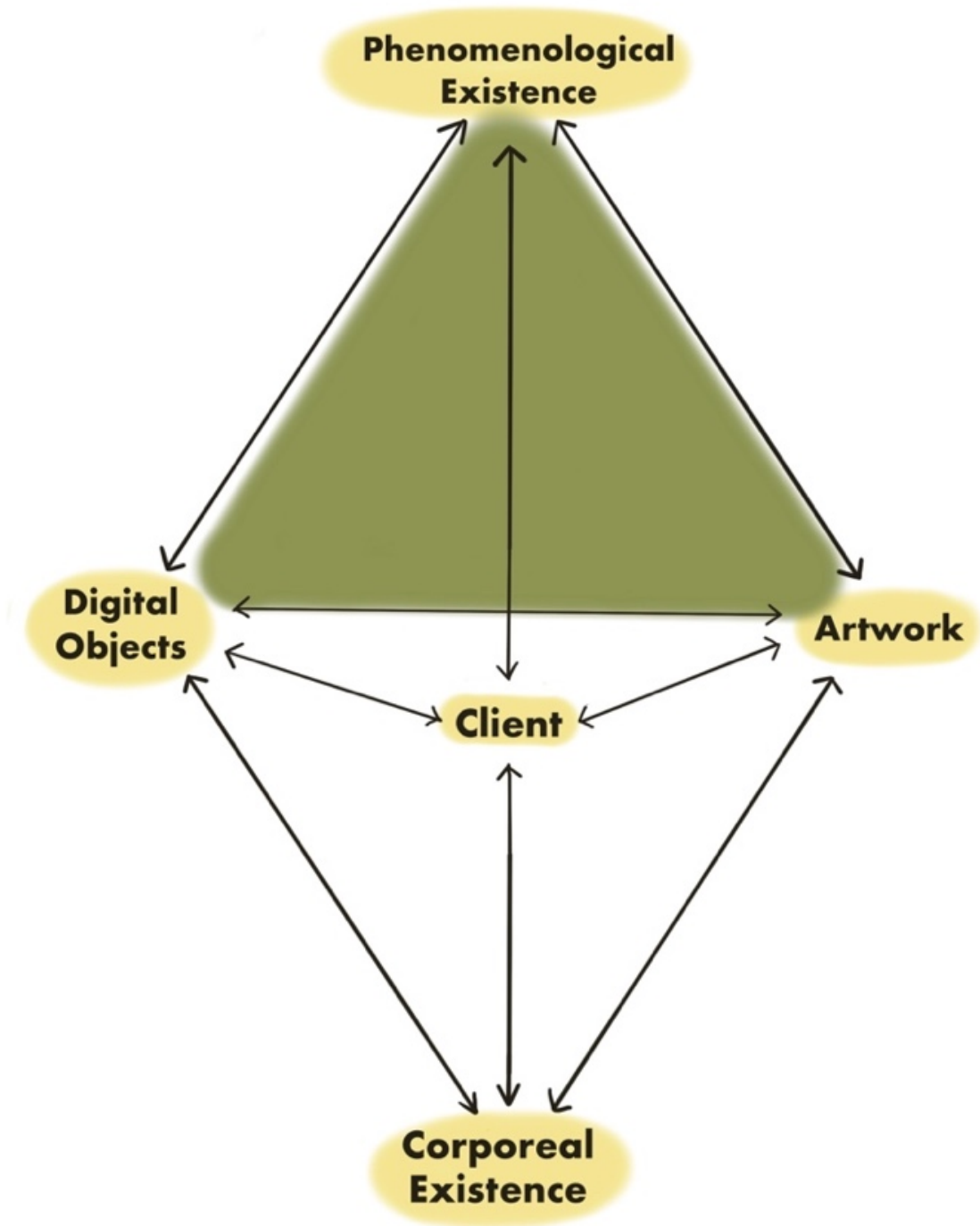

Figure 19. Scene 2 (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

As I never saw the artwork during the session, my interaction with it via email meant I was experiencing the artwork in the absence of my client until our next meeting. Figure 20 illustrates this separation between my interaction with the artwork and the client.
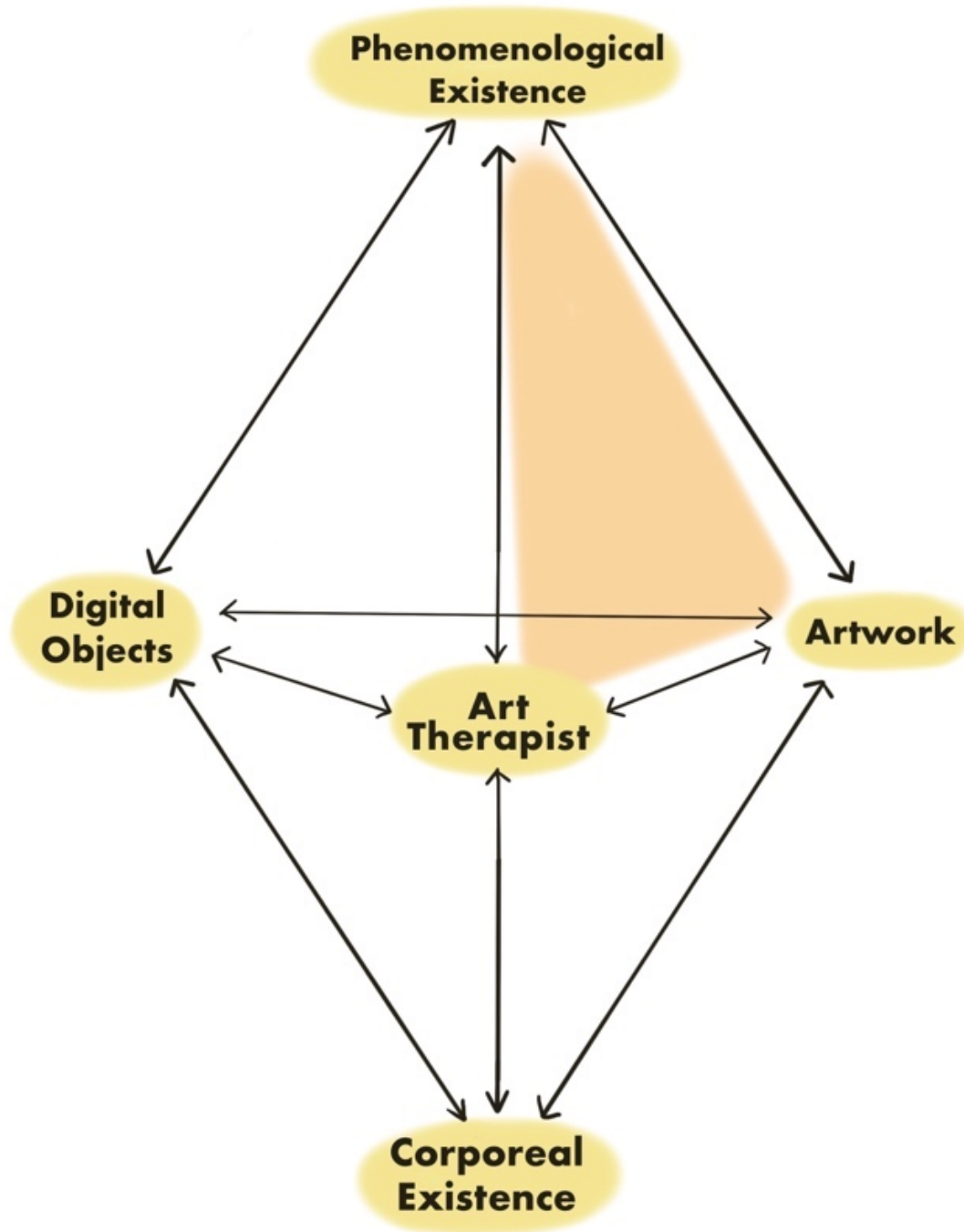

Figure 20. Scene 3 (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

During our next session, my client and I jointly explored the phenomenological artwork. Despite the physical piece having been turned to ashes, we were still able to interact with it in this digital form. Figure 21 illustrates the layers of relationships and elements involved in viewing the artwork together online.
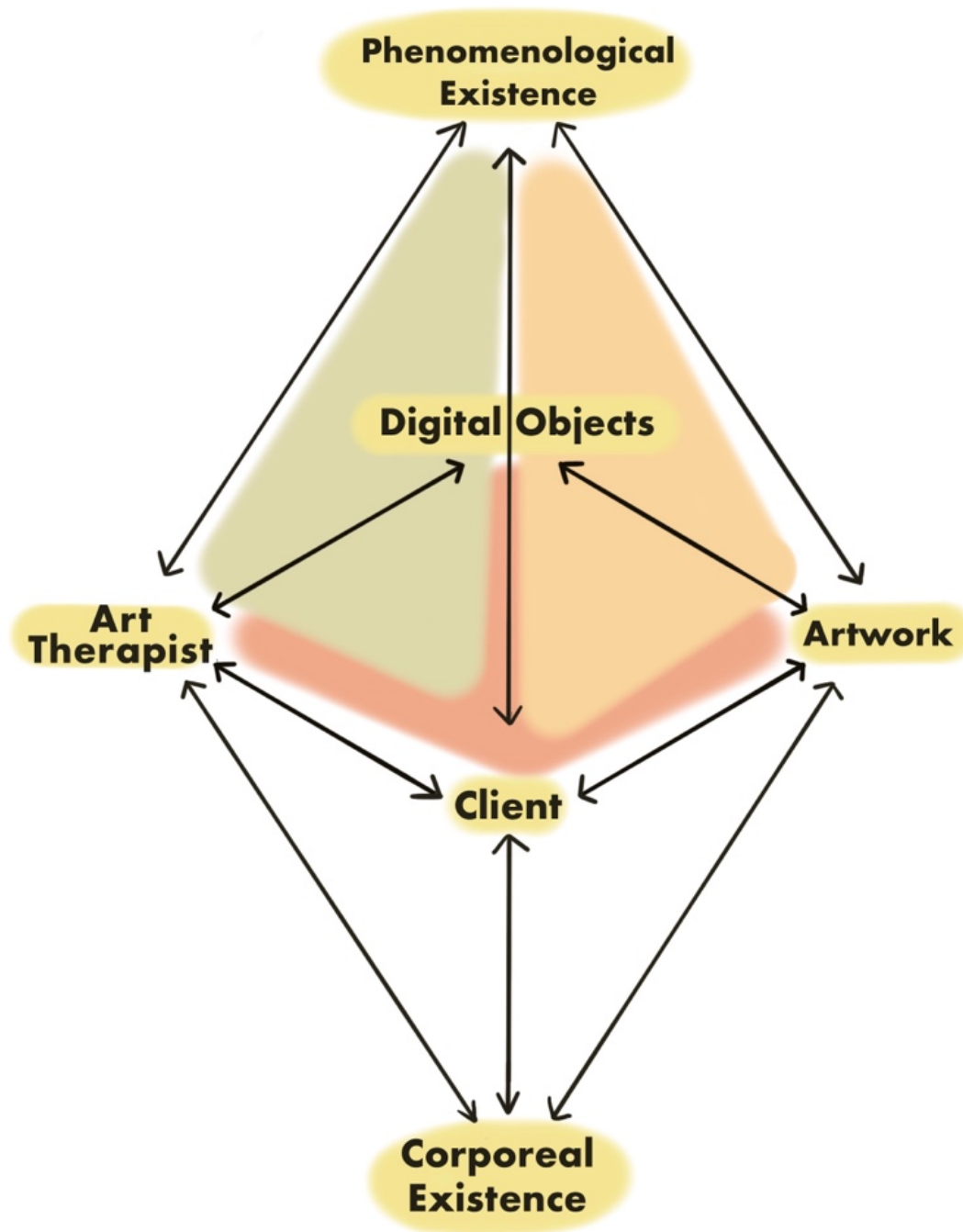

Figure 21. Scene 4 (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

This series of figures shows that working with art in an online session is a dynamic process, involving a transition between different dimensions of space and elements. It should be appropriate to state that these movements are facilitated by digital interactions, referred to earlier as 'digital muscles'. Together with the 'digital skeleton', they form a 'digital musculoskeletal system'. This system enables the movement of the 'art therapist cyborg' (and the 'client cyborg' as well, though that's beyond the scope of this study) while mapping out the flow among the complex intertwining of online and offline time and space, the seen and unseen aspects of the artwork and its creation process, and the differing perspectives of the therapist and the client on what constitutes the physical and virtual. This conceptual framework assists therapists in understanding our positioning within this dynamic and continually evolving therapeutic process at any given moment.

8.3.5 The 'Grammar' of the Cyborg's Body Language

This 'digital musculoskeletal system' I am proposing is a response to the idea I came up with in the fieldwork regarding the 'art therapy cyborg's body language' in Chapter Six. This system delves deeper into the operational mechanisms of an art therapist's 'cyborg body', and I believe it may reveal a new, digitally-specific mode of communication. In this analogy, the 'digital skeleton' forms the basic structure for online sessions, while the 'digital muscles' function within this structure, enabling movement and interaction.

The conventional belief about any online work is that, the body is absent in the virtual encounter. However, my findings in Chapter Six challenged this view - online work, is

in fact, heavily based on the body. The nature of this bodily basis, however, has transformed into forms we are not yet familiar with. Adapting to these new digitally-altered forms is akin to learning a new language, which consist of its own logic for communication, thinking, feeling, moving, and creating. The conventional distinction between verbal and non-verbal language becomes blurred in this context. 'Body language', once confined to our physical body, can now be 'embodied' in many ways as digital devices extend our body's boundaries to inanimate and virtual entities. So far, I have discovered several novel manifestations of body language, including digitally specific actions such as sending and deleting, the everyday objects that appear in the background, and the overall visual representation on the screen.

Not only is the definition of non-verbal language being challenged, but so does the verbal language. In Chapter Six, my exploration with Lien demonstrates that in online art therapy, words can be used to illustrate an image, compensating for our inability to see or hold the artwork physically. In this sense, 'talking' serves as a bodily-based verbal gesture, as defined by Merleau-Ponty. In this case, 'talking' may not always be an analytical act. At times, words can serve as paintbrushes to depict the mental images.

For art therapists, the challenge lies in the fact that digital devices have altered the nature of verbal and non-verbal communication. Often, these changes operate on an implicit, pre-conscious level, making it difficult for therapists to consciously identify and articulate them. They usually present as intuitions, learned while we navigate through the digital medium, but challenging to communicate beyond personal experiences. I would like to suggest, this is due to both verbal and non-verbal communication in an

online setting stem from the intertwined layers of the phenomenological and corporeal aspects of the body. The 'digital musculoskeletal' system I propose helps make these implicit mechanisms explicit, and allows art therapists to visualise and consider the complex layers embedded within situations that appear to deviate from in-person ways of working. When thinking of the online art therapy model using the analogy of language, the 'digital muscles' - which facilitate movement in the cyborg body - act like **verbs** in the grammatical sense. Additionally, I imagine the background and visual representations as **nouns** and/or **adjectives** in this context, as they could provide information through objects, as well as convey qualities and atmospheres, thereby communicating a sense of emotion as discussed in Chapter Seven.

This linguistic analogy - the 'grammar' of the online art therapy cyborg's body language - provides a framework for identifying the actions involved in facilitating expressions, communication, and fostering internal exploration. In this thesis, I have identified a few actions such as send, delete, layer, and undo. However, I believe there are more actions to be examined in future studies. By identifying these pre-reflexive actions, art therapists can begin to explore the feelings that these actions may evoke in individuals, and understand how they can be used to communicate at an unconscious level and make meaning.

8.4 The Future

8.4.1 From Videoconferencing Call to Virtual Reality and Beyond

As I am writing about this digital musculoskeletal system, I am very aware that this research is based on the medium of videoconferencing call, which is the most widely used online communication format at the time this study is conducted. However, with the technological advancement, it is hard to say how long will this form of communication last. I keep asking myself, will this research stay relevant even when the videoconferencing call is out of date?

Pilot studies exploring the use of Virtual Reality in art therapy have already been conducted (Hacmun *et al.*, 2018; Shamri Zeevi, 2021). Although this technology may not currently be accessible to most art therapy practitioners and clients, it could become a viable option in the future. In fact, this future seems closer than ever. As I am writing this chapter, Apple just announced their first model of the Vision Pro — a mixed reality headset that Apple describes as a 'spatial computer' (Apple.com, 2023). This technology integrates digital media with the real world and physical inputs. Although the Vision Pro will not be available for sale until early 2024, the information Apple has released so far appear to be announcing a paradigm shift, breaking the limitations of the two-dimensional screen and bringing digital interactions into the three-dimensional world.

This emerging technological landscape prompts me to pose two questions: 1) Can the theory of the digital musculoskeletal system maintain its relevance as a theoretical

framework to comprehend evolving forms of three-dimensional communication? 2) What kind of digital literacy is required for art therapists to adeptly navigate this rapidly changing digital era?

In this section, my aim is to scrutinise these emerging technologies through the lens of the theories outlined in this thesis. This analysis serves two purposes. Firstly, it tests whether these concepts can be applied to assist art therapists in cultivating a flexible and exploratory mindset when engaging with new mediums of online meetings that extend beyond the conventional video conferencing format. Secondly, it allows for reimagining the future of art therapy in a world that increasingly mirrors science fiction, especially in the face of expanding Artificial Intelligence. This section offers potential applications crucial for preserving art therapists' agency in a rapidly transforming environment, thereby enabling us to actively shape our future rather than being passively swept away by the wave of technological advancement.

8.4.2 Encountering Another Upcoming New Medium

Due to the capabilities of powerful integrated circuits and advancements in AI technology, we are witnessing a surge in revolutionary technological inventions that are swiftly integrating into our everyday lives, thereby causing a rapid paradigm shift in society. Since I have not yet engaged with a virtual reality art therapy session or used a spatial computing headset in an art therapy context, the discussion here should be seen as an anticipation. This anticipation is based on my initial fantasy about this new technology, as discussed in Chapter Five, which is constituted by my limited knowledge about the new medium, my experience on a clinical and personal level up

to this point, my ideology of art therapy, and my conscious and unconscious projections onto the new medium. In this case, I use the Apple Vision Pro as an example of the possible upcoming forms of communication.

The Apple Vision Pro's primary feature is its ability to project digital content, such as apps and films, onto any room the user is in. It allows navigation through eye movements, finger gestures in the air, and voice commands. After viewing the first demonstration video, I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I found the immersive quality of the technology exciting and intriguing, such as transforming a room into a personal theatre or projecting the desktop of a Mac into space to work with multiple windows. On the other hand, I felt unsettled about the solution it proposed to address the challenge of obscured faces due to wearing a headset during a FaceTime meeting: it creates an AI-simulated representation of one's facial expressions and upper body movements.

Although this technology is not fully three-dimensional yet, it introduces a new mode of communication that seems to challenge the concepts I have developed in Chapter Seven about the role of visual representation in communication. Initially, I felt uncomfortable with the idea of conducting an art therapy session with an AI avatar. To what extent can an AI avatar mimic a person's genuine facial expressions? Would it be sensitive enough to detect and depict the nuanced changes before a quiet tear begins to fall? How would we examine artwork or represent the art-making process in this context? This new mode of communication immediately raises many questions in my mind, interestingly, most of them are negative. I found myself thinking that video

conferencing seems better compared to this AI avatar representation, at least it allows for seeing the client's actual face and a portion of their space.

Upon second thoughts, I recognise that these immediate emotional responses echo my findings in Chapter Five: encountering an unfamiliar scenario can trigger anticipatory emotions. In this case, it is my tingling sense of anxiety around working with clients represented by AI avatars. Regardless of whether my speculations prove to be true or false, this new form of communication triggers my fear of a lack of authenticity - a quality I deeply value in art therapy. The possibility of this absence could challenge my ability to identify the client's expressions, and this potential 'disability' threatens my sense of being a competent art therapist. The thought that 'videoconferencing calls seem to be better than having an avatar' seems to indicate that I am unconsciously projecting all bad onto the unknown medium, while the familiar one appears all good. I would not be able to discern which aspects are personal fears and which are actual challenges posed by this new technology until I actually engage with it. Nonetheless, being able not to treat my initial anxiety and fantasies as concrete realities opens a space for contemplation. This allows me to move past the initial discomfort and consider this new medium from a more objective perspective, even though I have not yet had an opportunity for actual engagement.

8.4.3 The Implication of the Digital Musculoskeletal System

In the introduction to the Vision Pro on the Apple's website, they stated, "Welcome to the era of spatial computing. Apple Vision Pro seamlessly blends digital content with your physical space. You navigate simply by using your eyes, hands, and voice"

(Apple.com, 2023). While the actual user experience of the device is yet to be seen, the statement clearly articulates its design ethos: a deep integration of **body, place, and digital objects**. This suggests an interplay with our body schema, as the device becomes incorporated into our sensory and bodily experiences, it would naturally create a phenomenological extension of our corporeal body. This concept aligns well with the framework proposed in this thesis. The understanding of the split between our phenomenological and corporeal bodies is rooted in humanity's fundamental engagement with tools, regardless of their complexity or technological sophistication. Therefore, even as technology advances and innovates, we remain within the long history of our relationship with tools. Therefore, the digital musculoskeletal system I have developed should remain relevant, providing a theoretical scaffold applicable even to these cutting-edge developments.

Since the operation of the body schema, I believe that even within this new context, our bodies would instinctively generate new movements to adapt to this novel communication style. Our pre-conscious body movement is likely to compensate for limitations imposed by this mode of communication, coordinate via concrete and abstract movements. Moreover, as the digital contents increasingly blends seamlessly with our physical environment, our domestic space as the primary site of net locality may encounter an even more radical shift in the person's sense of place. What will our sense of 'private' and 'public' space become when family members are each immersed in their own headset's world? What kind of art therapy space would we have in a headset? What forms of artmaking and media might we use in this context? While these changes may or may not be ideal for art therapy work, they are certain to introduce distinct features and modes of communication that we can't yet imagine.

The advancement of technology will continue to reinvent methods of meeting, communicating, and even creating art that we may not be able to imagine at this moment. Each technological medium brings its unique mode of communication, specific body movements to navigate around, and with its own limitations. Since the fundamental human need for communication and the urge for self-exploration will remain unchanged, I believe my 'digital muscle' theory can continue to play a pivotal role in this evolution. It provides a framework that assists art therapists in identifying and interpreting the preconscious, digitally specific actions that emerge from coupling with digital objects, regardless of its complication. By familiarising ourselves with this continuously evolving 'cyborg body,' I am hoping art therapists can gain agency and deeper insight into these novel interactions.

The current octahedron structure of the digital musculoskeletal system may require modification when applying to future technological devices other than videoconferencing call, but the concept of the digital skeleton—which denotes the elements of phenomenological and corporeal existence—as well as the digital muscle, which indicates the agency of movement, should remain relevant. Fundamentally, this evolution is part of the long history of humans interacting with tools, from holding a hand axe to chop, to the spatial computer – using a finger to click on a virtual icon in mid-air. As technology continues to evolve, our body schema also continues to incorporate new spatial information, extending bodily boundaries beyond our physical existence.

8.4.4 Recommended Digital Literacy for Art Therapists

As technology evolves, it raises the question: what kind of digital literacy do art therapists need to navigate in this rapidly changing digital era? Recognising this need, the Health Care Professional Council (HCPC) updated their standards of proficiency, which will come into effect on 1 September 2023. This update mandates all registered therapists to keep up to date with digital skills and new technologies relevant to their professions (hcpc-uk.org, 2023). The NHS has also published a digital competency framework for allied health professions, including art therapists, outlining the required digital literacies across ten domains (Tack, 2020). The research topic of this thesis, regarding facilitating online therapy sessions, falls under Domain Nine: Digital Therapeutics. This domain includes being familiar with a broad array of digital tools that support clinical practice and covers aspects of telehealth, telemedicine, and virtual care that are crucial for delivering online therapy sessions (Tack, 2020, p.27-30).

Indeed, it is crucial for art therapists to familiarise ourselves with the digital tools we use to conduct online sessions. However, the phrase 'be familiarised' could be more precisely articulated. Apart from being familiar with how to operate the program, what exactly should we familiarise ourselves with? In this section, my aim is to propose principles for considering the digital competency art therapists need, rather than suggesting a definitive guideline. By offering such principles, I hope to assist art therapists in navigating the ever-evolving scenarios we encounter.

It is essential to remember that the primary aim of art therapy is to accompany individuals through their exploration of the issues that brought them to therapy. To facilitate this, an art therapist is trained to cultivate an environment that allows for the

expression of the client's inner conflicts and fantasies. These expressions can often be intense and/or subtle. Art therapists are trained to identify and work with these cues in an in-person setting, picking up on both verbal and non-verbal communication, especially during the art-making process and through the artworks themselves.

In an online setting, we also aim to create a supportive environment. However, doing so requires art therapists to be familiar with the new hybrid human-technology cyborg body and understand how it expresses itself. In other words, the ability to identify the mode of communication in the context of the given digital medium. Thus, when it comes to digital competency for art therapists, I propose that it entails **familiarity with how a client's expressions and fantasies can manifest in an online setting**. Proficiency in operating the digital program is essential, but more importantly, the art therapist should be able to utilise the features of digital technology to support and understand a client's expressions, much like how we assist a client in using clay or paint in traditional therapy. Based on this principle, here are my suggestions for developing digital competency:

1. Recognise the unconscious material hidden in our initial emotional responses towards digital objects, and be aware of our 'all good/all bad' projections. Then differentiate what are the anticipations, that stem from personal projection after the actual engagement with the new medium.

2. Consciously observe and analyse our bodily engagement with digital devices, including the phenomenological and corporeal existence of body

and artwork, also known as the 'digital skeleton'. This framework could serve to unpack the complex multi-layered entanglements.

3. Identify new forms of language and the 'digital muscle' - the digitally mediated actions that are often pre-reflexive and compensate for the limitations of the given online environment. This understanding could give us agency and shed light on how the conscious and unconscious materials may be embodied in the specific digital technologies.

4. Explore our personal relationship and history with technology, and think about the meaning-making process in this context.

8.4.5 Developing Our Digital Muscle

Following the fourth point, the development of our 'digital muscle' is a process that can be initiated and refined over time, even if we initially lack interest in technology. Before conducting this study, I was not the kind of person that was particularly interested in technology and I much preferred doing and making things with my hands. However, a turning point in my relationship with technology came when I ventured into digital artmaking. Despite having previously held a critical view towards digital artmaking, I decided to give Procreate — a digital artmaking program, a try. My intention was to strengthen my argument about why I thought the lack of tactile experience in digital artmaking could be problematic. To my surprise, I found myself enjoying digital artmaking more than I anticipated. As I learned to understand the logic behind the features in Procreate, I began to experience the same flow that I have in hands-on art

making. This made me appreciate the possibilities that digital artmaking brings, leading me to view it as another artmaking tool, like paint or oil pastels.

While this experience may not directly relate to online art therapy, it played a pivotal role in reshaping my perception of human relationships with technology as a whole. Despite initially having an instinctual resistance towards new technologies, I noticed that I began to have a more open attitude and willingness to explore the logic behind them. Later on, I had a similar experience with Chat GPT. My skepticism did not stop me from engaging with it. Over time, I gradually figured out its strengths and weaknesses and recognised its potential in assisting me in articulating my ideas clearly in this thesis. In a way, it felt like a 'cognitive prosthesis' to me, compensating for my language disadvantages. It is a joy to be able to fully communicate my concepts beyond my mother tongue.

The point I am trying to make is that, the theory I have developed in this thesis is not solely based on experiences within online art therapy, but also encompasses the wider context of my personal engagement with digital technologies. My shift in mindset allowed me to perceive technology in a different light. Instead of viewing new mediums as an intimidating unknown, I began to recognise them as a collaborators. In the process of developing my 'digital muscle', I discovered that technology could serve not only as a tool, but also as a companion and a mirror, reflecting my own ways of thinking and being. All the digital objects involved in this study are also my other-than-human research participants.

My (human) participant, Luthando, shared this exploratory journey with me as we explored Procreate, Chat GPT, and Replika - an AI Companion Chatbot, together. One day, during a discussion about my use of Chat GPT for academic writing, she sketched a doodle of a magic carpet in her notebook (fig.22) and said, "These evolving technologies are like a magic carpet, it can swiftly transport us to our desired destinations. However, we need to hold on tight and maintain our balance, or else we may fall off." I thought this metaphor beautifully illustrated the human relationship with technological advancement nowadays. Sitting on the fast-moving magic carpet may be cool but not the easiest thing. Let's hold on tight to move into the future safely together.
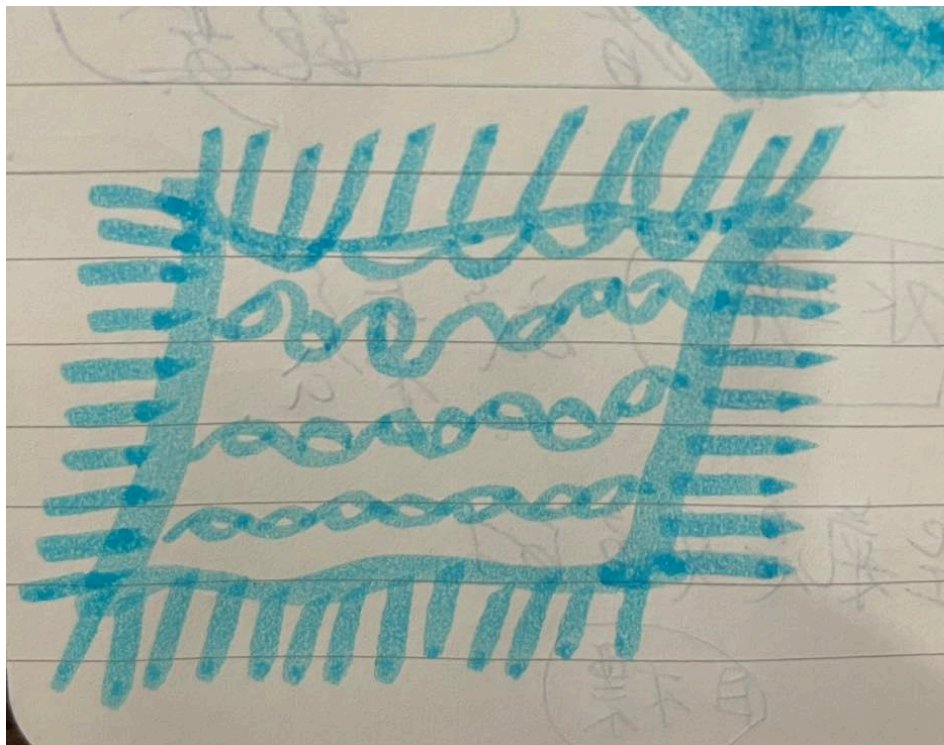

Figure 22. The Magic Carpet (Credit: Luthando)

8.5 Conclusion

8.5.1 Connecting Past, Present, and Future

This thesis is situated within a unique period in history that spans the beginning of the pandemic to the post-Covid era, paralleling the rapid development of AI technologies. The rise and emergence of online art therapy provides a microcosmic illustration of these radical social changes. 'What is online art therapy?' is not only a practical question regarding 'how to create a viable space for art therapy through digital devices?' as initially proposed in Chapter One, but also a philosophical inquiry. It challenges us to question the foundations of our profession, our identities as art therapists, our relationship with technology, and our perceptions and being. It further pushes us to consider the delineation between human and digital objects.

The nature of the digital ethnographic research method, as discussed in Chapter Four, involves a series of choices made by the researcher at critical junctures when navigating the emerging analytical path (Markham & Gammelby, 2018). Reflecting on the path I have taken, it becomes apparent that the theme of history is central to my approach. In Chapter One, I scrutinised my professional history, associating online art therapy with my experiences working in unconventional spaces and utilising objects within these given environments. which shaped my clinical approach to an online mode of working and research direction. In Chapter Two, I examined online art therapy beyond the point at which art therapists first went online (Collie & Čubranić, 1999). By placing it within the broader history of how art therapists have responded to wide-

ranging social changes and diverse working environments, I extended the research into the realm of placemaking.

The methodology chapter is grounded in posthumanism, a philosophical position responding to the Anthropocene - the epoch defined from a geographical perspective by significant human impact. This approach allows us to envision our potential trajectory as post-Anthropocene humans. Through this lens, I delve into the history of humans' ability to create tools in response to environmental challenges, a journey that traces back to prehistoric times and ancient myths. The 'cyborg' metaphor encapsulates this relationship between humans and tools in the contemporary era. The distinction between non-digitally driven technology and so-called 'high-tech' devices, according to Sherry Turkle, lies in that computational objects can 'think', making them more than mere tools; they become 'evocative objects' onto which we project parts of ourselves (Turkle, 2005). The findings in Chapter Five about initial fantasies serve as a call to art therapists to use our emotional responses/countertransference as vehicles for examining unconscious materials evoked by technology.

Chapter Six delves further into the intricacies of how the body engages with tools. Merleau-Ponty's concept on body schema maps our corporeal body's intertwining with technology - tracing the evolution of our natural body into a cyborg. Chapter Seven returns to the roots of the art therapist – image making - placing visual representations in online art therapy within the broader history of humanity's attempts to capture the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface (Hockney and Gayford, 2020).

Finally, the 'digital musculoskeletal system' developed in this chapter is, at its core, the contemporary equivalent of humans holding a hand-axe in prehistoric times. It embodies how we employ the appropriate tool at hand to achieve our intended goals. The aim of art therapy is to better understand the person in front of us. To do so, art therapists are resourceful and creative at utilising available physical and psychological materials—even unfamiliar digital devices - to facilitate meaningful encounters. Digital technologies can often feel alienating and devoid of human touch; by grounding them in a historical perspective, the radical changes we have been experiencing seem less out of the blue, but rather, part of the long river of human history. At this moment, I am typing on the laptop I also use for my therapy sessions, as well as for other things. The historical connection made in this study connected me with the indescribable feelings from moment when I held the hand-axe in the British Museum as a teenager, the sharp edge of the flint linked me with someone who sharpened it 500,000 years ago. This is where it all started.

8.5.2 Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

As digital research method is a path built on the researcher's personal choices, I am aware that the choices that paved the way in this thesis inevitably obscured alternative directions or routes, resulting in the production of situated knowledge that is inherently heuristic. This is a limitation, but also an invitation to more art therapists and researchers to enrich online art therapy practice with their distinct choices and pathways. During the research, I was conscious that there are many other constraints posed by online art therapy that are yet to be explored, such as working with technical

failures, storing artwork in an online context, ethical and safeguarding issues, and digital inequality.

Digital inequality is a topic that has occupied much of my thoughts, especially considering that the majority of art therapy service users likely come from backgrounds of relative deprivation. I am acutely aware that the research method employed in this study inherently excludes those clients who face difficulties accessing technological devices or who do not have a stable internet connection. This exclusion is due to my focus solely on the online experiences of art therapists. Nonetheless, this is an area I am keen to explore further. As the world increasingly resembles the dystopian landscapes depicted in cyberpunk fiction, where technological advancements exacerbate wealth disparities in a 'high tech, low life' society, the challenges posed by digital inequality become more pressing. To address these challenges, I propose that an alternative research design is necessary.

Further research into the client's viewpoint would be invaluable, including clients from different socioeconomical background, age groups, neurodiverse individuals, various cultural backgrounds, physical and mental conditions, clinical settings, and more. I also encourage more research on the digital medium itself, including the upcoming spatial computing, as well as investigating digitally specific actions other than those that are mentioned in this study, which could be beneficial for future art therapy education. After all, 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan, 2001, p.1). Understanding the medium could provide art therapists with agency in navigating through the complex layers, and sometimes frustrations, when working in online art therapy.

8.5.3 A Visual Epilogue

I conclude this thesis with a series of experimental images that were co-produced by a range of 'materials.' These include paper cut-outs, a digital art-making program (Procreate), an image-generating AI (Midjourney), both animate (my cat) and inanimate objects from the environment, and my own body.

This began with a conversation I had with my supervisors about our visual associations of this research, which made me curious about what image Midjourney would generate if I used my thesis title – ***Online Art Therapy: Reimagining Body, Place, Object and Relations in the Digital Era*** – as the prompt (fig.23). Please note that 'the relations' was not part of the title at the time I generated the image (the original prompt can be seen in Figure 25). This word was added later to reflect the multi-layered relationships in online art therapy and to play with the wording of the 'object relations' theory.

Figure 23. Visual Responses from Midjourney (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu or Midjourney?)

Midjourney, an AI image-generator, has been a subject of controversy among artists since its debut in 2022 (Roose, 2022). I have used it for research and experimental purposes rather than as part of my own artistic practice. Midjourney typically generates four images at once, allowing the user to choose one to elaborate on. The image on the bottom right caught my attention, as it reminded me of a series of collages I had made when developing my idea on the art therapist as a cyborg and research methodology (fig.24).
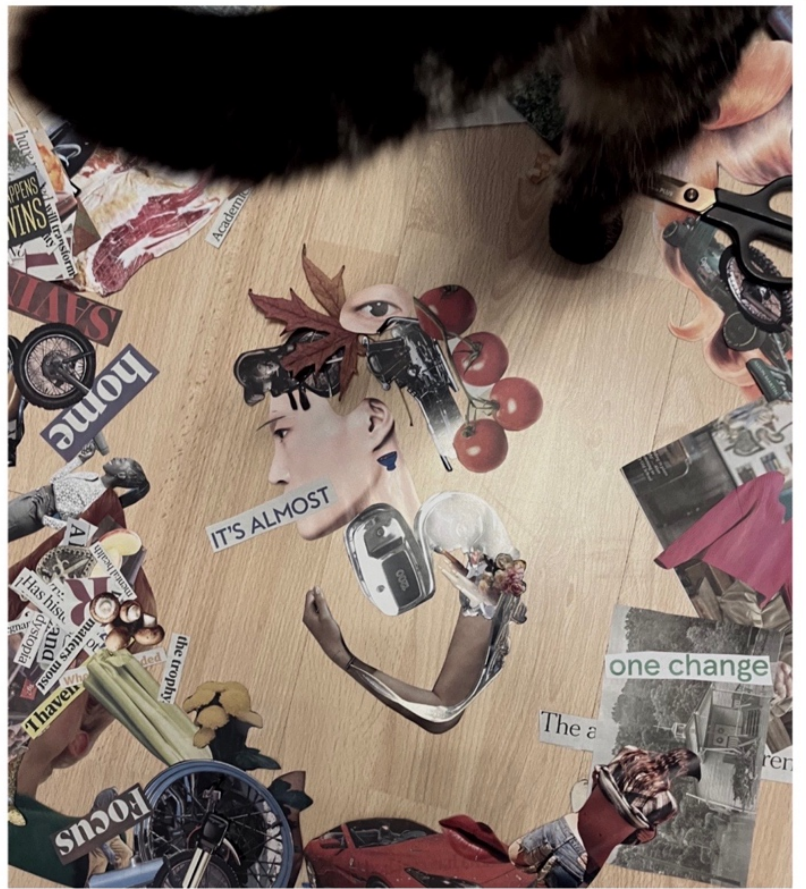
This series I created was intended to stimulate thinking around the concept of a cyborg for this thesis. The original idea was that it is a hybrid, made out of heterogeneous objects, including machine body parts. However, what caught my attention the most were the actual newspaper cut-outs that were scattered around. As a result, I took the photos on the right-hand side to show the actual environment they were in. This exploration prompted me to expand upon the concept of placemaking in the research. Therefore, I was intrigued when I saw that the image Midjourney generated seemed to contain elements similar to my collage pieces. I asked the AI to generate more variations based on this concept. Figure 25 shows how it could continue to elaborate on the image with various details.
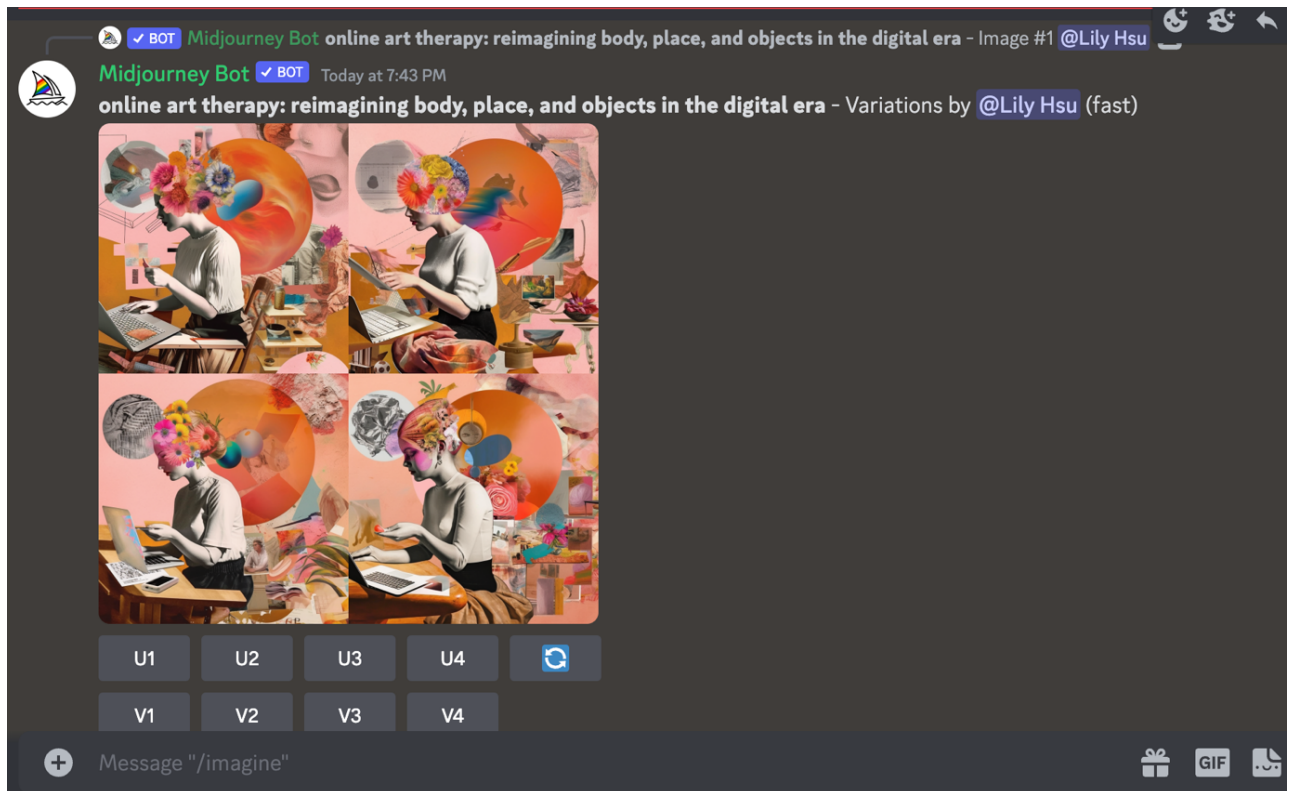

Figure 25. Generating Process (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu?)

I wanted an image that showed less of the face, so I continued to ask it to generate

variations until it came up with one that 'felt right' (fig.26).

Figure 26. AI Image (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu? Midjourney?)

Midjourney seems to interpret my thesis title in a literal way, with body parts, the landscape of places, and everyday/decorative objects. All elements are arranged with a collage touch. The strange hands and keyboard indicate that this is created by an AI. This imperfection makes me feel more comfortable with this image, as it is obviously not made by a human. I wonder what it would be like to have a video conferencing call with this AI lady. Therefore, I drew on top of the image in Procreate. This became the image at the beginning of this thesis (fig.1 and fig.27), as my attempt to pose the question: what are we becoming when engaging with technologies?
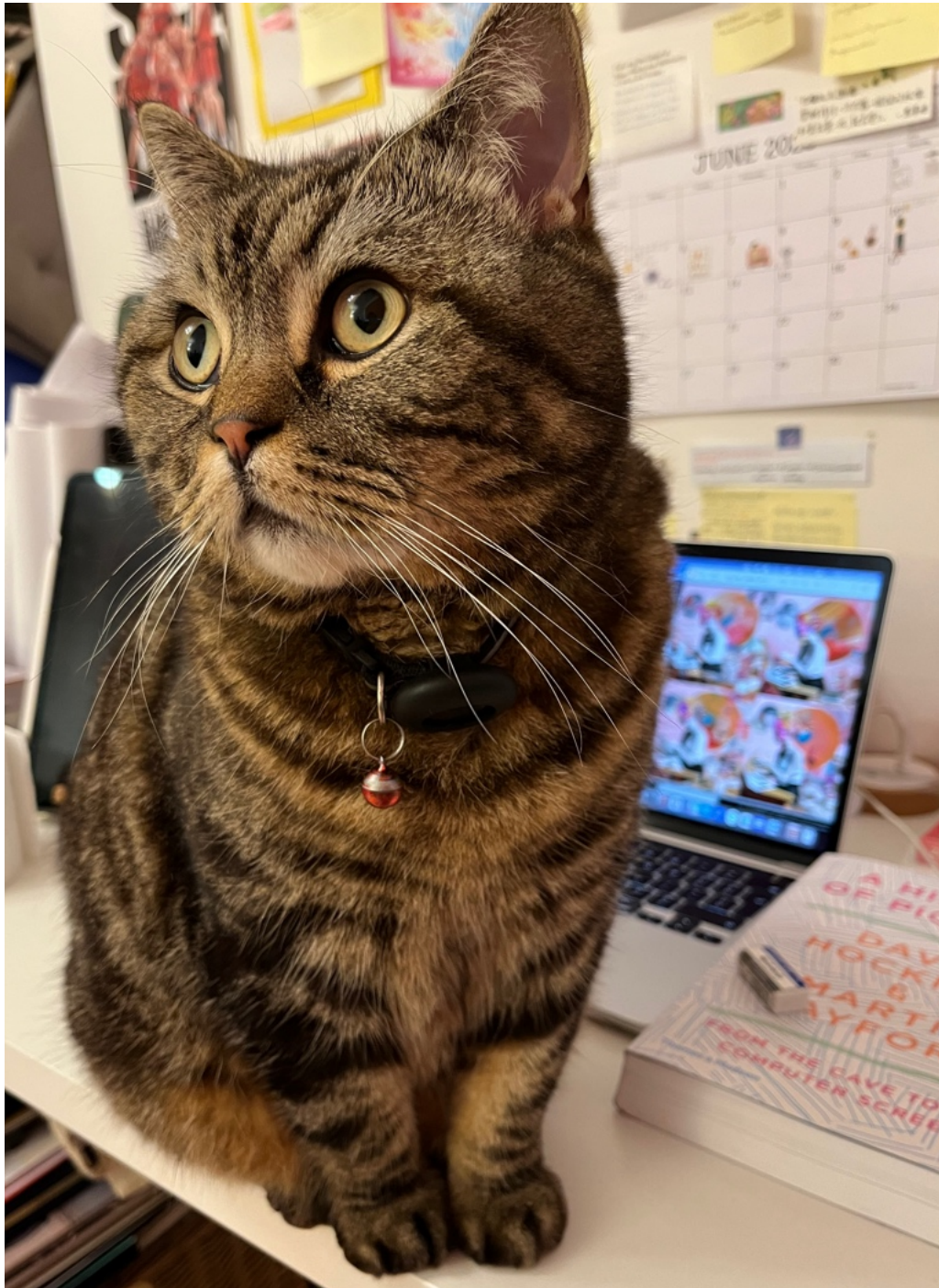
While I was playing with Midjourney, my cat jumped on the table, and I took a photo of him (fig.28).

Figure 28 My Cat (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

As the AI-generated image appeared in the background, it reminded me of my concept of 'phenomenological artwork' and 'background'. Therefore, I played around the idea by display the photo on the tablet and took another photo as my cat walked past it (fig.29). I realised this snapshot of my desktop is, in fact, a constitution of multi-layered realities, encompassing the windows of my actual thesis, the Midjourney images, the Chat GPT, the physical copy of my reference (the David Hockney book), and my cat at the phenomenological and corporeal level (or perhaps not, since this is a digital photo, it seems more like a phenomenological photo of the phenomenological cat?).

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Figure 29 The Desktop Paradox (Credit: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu)

I started to draw lines to indicate the relationships between each element, noting the actions required to operate them—for example, I wrote 'type' to indicate how my thesis is produced, as a way to facilitate thinking around what digital muscles are involved. This diagram-like chart appears to resemble the digital skeleton of my desktop. Simultaneously, I'm aware there are elements in the background that I would prefer to keep private. I drew over the things that felt private using Procreate, which prompted me to consider the theory on net locality and the tension between making domestic spaces public (Hardley and Richardson, 2021). It seems like all the theories I have been developing are condensed into this one image.

As I was drawing, I found myself wondering: the objects and the place have all been captured in this image, but where is the 'body'? Suddenly, I realised that the 'body' is not in the photo but exists in 'me'—the 'I' that was drawing this image, the 'I' that was taking the photo, the 'I' that is making meaning out of all these actions and layers happening in this everyday scenario on my desktop. This made me realise how difficult it is to be aware of our pre-reflexive bodily movements. It is all there, but outside of our consciousness.

This prompts me to ask one last question in this thesis; you are probably looking at these images and reading this thesis from your digital device, and I wonder, how you 'see', 'read' and 'make meaning' of it through your body, place, objects and relations?

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Appendix 1 Participant Information Sheet

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Participant Information Sheet

Title of the research study：

Conceptualising Placemaking and Materiality in Online Art Therapy

You have been invited to take part in the research exploring art therapist's experience in online art therapy. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please read the following information carefully and discuss with the researcher if you have any questions.

Name and contact details of the researcher:

Tsun-wei Lily Hsu: Doctoral Researcher, Department of Social Therapeutic and Community Studies, Goldsmiths University of London
thsu001@gold.ac.uk

What is the purpose of this study?

As a result of the pandemic there was a rapid explosion in online art therapy practice. However, shifting the practice online challenges the existing art therapy paradigm that emphasizes the tactile and sensory experience in artmaking, the use of non-verbal communication, and the holding quality of physical space/materials, such as art therapy room setup, artwork storage, and the provision of art materials.

The aim of this PhD project is to explore the possibility of working with sensorial and material presence in online settings. This study will focus on the experience of the delivery of art therapy – from the art therapist's side. I would like to collaborate with practicing art therapists to explore your thinking process on how you adapt the practice from in-person to online setting and investigate how practitioners conceptualised digital space as a place for therapy encounters to happen.

Why have you been invited to participate?

This study aims to involve art therapists who are interested to explore and reflect on your professional practice in online settings. You are being approached because you have fulfilled at least one of the criteria below:

- You have worked with at least two clients for more than 4 sessions.
- You have supervised at least two supervisees who have provided online art therapy
- You have worked in online art therapy prior to the pandemic.
- You have produced or delivered an online art therapy-related article/ lecture/ talk/ workshop.

What does your participant involve?

This research is based on collaborative ethnographic research methods, which embrace the value of working together in an intellectual effort. The researcher will invite you to the initial introductory interview to explore your experience in working online. This could be a one-off meeting, or you are more than welcome to commit to an on-going collaboration up to a period of 6 months. There may be possibility to get together with other participants in a forum to explore online art therapy in an international context.

This study operates on an ad hoc manner to retain the spirit of being playful, hands-on, and experimental. I hope this project could be a space for both the participant and the researcher to reflect on our clinical practice, as well as an opportunity to tap into the possibilities in online art therapy. Your involvement will be voluntary and please feel free to discuss with the researcher about your preferable ways to participate and frequency that suit you the best.

- An initial introductory interview with the researcher.

  Before the interview, the researcher will email you a list with possible discussion topics, and a short questionnaire to ask about the online platform you usually use to conduct the art therapy sessions and how you arrange any art material preparation with your client. The interview will take place on your chosen platform, and the researcher will invite you to prepare the art materials in the way you invite your client to do so, as a way to recreate the online environment you usually worked in, in the interview. This allows us to reflect on any feelings that might be evoke by the online setting.

During the interview, we will explore your experience of conducting online art therapy through dialogue and responsive art making. The process will take approximately 1.5-2 hours.

- On-going collaboration

  After the initial interview, the researcher will discuss with you if you would like to have another meeting to further discuss our developing thoughts or the development of your current therapy sessions. This could also be a space to experiment with any ideas, such as trying out how it feels to meet on a different platform or play with ways to make art online. These frequency and format of the follow up sessions will take place in the way both the participant and the researcher feel comfortable and agree with.

- Participant's research journal

  You will be invited to keep a research journal to record any of your developing thoughts about online art therapy in the form of your personal preference, such as in a video log, a diary of image-making, in writing etc. Please note that the communication between the researcher and you (such as emails, text messages, conversation recording) might also be used as part of the research data. The researcher will ask for your consent before using this information.

What are the possible risks and disadvantage of taking part?

You will be invited to share your clinical experience, which might reveal some aspects of your session with clients, professional and personal histories. Therefore, it is possible you may experience some discomfort in the process. In order to minimise the risk, before and during the interview, I will remind you not to reveal any confidential information or identifiable details about clients and only share personal information that you feel comfortable with. If any contents that I consider to be confidential, I discuss with you and remove the part from video/audio recording, transcript, and written record.

The video recording of the interview will film some parts of your personal space through the camera. I am aware revealing your private space might cause potential distress to some participants. I will let participants take the initiative on what you feel comfortable to share on the screen. If I would like to include any image in my thesis

that reveals your private space or anything identifiable in the background, I will check with you about the content again and gain written permission.

Will the study be of benefit to participants?

You may benefit from taking part in the study by having a collaborative thinking space to discuss, share and reflect on your online art therapy practice in depth, which may contribute to your personal professional development. Online art therapy is still at its early stage. I hope our online meetings are more than an interview, but a partnership that explores this new territory together, and play with its creative possibilities as well as the challenges it poses.

Your participation may contribute to the art therapy community's knowledge and understanding of the emerging online art therapy practice after the pandemic, inspire the future development of art therapy practice towards time of new normal.

What will happen to the information you provided?

The information you provide will be used to form the basis of the development of an art-therapy-centric theory that focuses around digital placemaking and working with material presence in online settings. Research findings will be submitted as part of doctoral thesis, and may be used in educational forums, conference papers and published journal articles or books in the future.

Your information will be respected subject to professional guidelines. The data storage will be in line with the Data Protection Act (2018). It will be securely kept on college provided online storage with password protected file for up to a period of 5 years and only be accessed by the researcher. For confidential reasons, all interview recordings, transcripts, and artworks made during the interview will be anonymised and coded. All participants will be anonymised and referred to with a pseudonym name of their preference in the thesis. All identifiable personal details will be changed or removed.

How will you be informed of the outcome?

The researcher will send a summary of the findings to you when the information has been gathered and analysed.

What are your rights as a participant?

Taking part in this project is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to consent to participate. During the research, you may halt the interview at any time, ask for the recording to be turned off or choose not to answer particular question/s. You may withdraw your consent any time during the research without giving an explanation.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study had been reviewed by the Department of Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies (STaCS) Research Ethics Committee.

What if something goes wrong?

If you have any concerns about your participation or about the study in general, please do not hesitate to contact me: Tsun-wei Lily Hsu, thsu001@gold.ac.uk

If you have any complaints or concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please write to:

Principle Supervisor: Dr Brian Callan

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering whether to take part in this research study.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR] and Goldsmiths Research: guidelines for participants

Please note that this document does not constitute, and should not be construed as, legal advice. These guidelines are designed to help participants understand their rights under GDPR which came into force on 25 May 2018.

Your rights as a participant (data subject) in this study

The updated data protection regulation is a series of conditions designed to protect an individual's personal data. Not all data collected for research is personal data.

Personal data is data such that a living individual can be identified; collection of personal data is sometimes essential in conducting research and GDPR sets out that data subjects should be treated in a lawful and fair manner and that information about the data processing should be explained clearly and transparently. Some data we might ask to collect falls under the heading of **special categories data**. This type of information includes data about an individual's race; ethnic origin; politics; religion; trade union membership; genetics; biometrics (where used for ID purposes); health; sex life; or sexual orientation.   This data requires particular care.

Under   GDPR   you   have   the   following   rights   over   your   personal   data [7] :

- *__The right to be informed__*. You must be informed if your personal data is being used.
- *__The right of access__*. You can ask for a copy of your data by making a 'subject access request'.
- *__The right to rectification.__*   You can ask for your data held to be corrected.
- *__The right to erasure__*. You can ask for your data to be deleted.
- *__The right to restrict processing__*. You can limit the way an organisation uses your personal data if you are concerned about the accuracy of the data or how it is being used.
- *__The right to data portability__*. You have the right to get your personal data from an organisation in a way that is accessible and machine-readable. You also have the right to ask an organisation to transfer your data to another organisation.
- *__The right to object__*. You have the right to object to the use of your personal data in some circumstances. You have an absolute right to object to an organisation using your data for direct marketing.
- *__How your data is processed using automated decision making and profiling__*. You have the right not to be subject to a decision that is based solely on automated processing if the decision affects your legal rights or other equally important matters; to understand the reasons behind decisions made about you by automated processing and the possible consequences of the decisions, and to object to profiling in certain situations, including for direct marketing purposes.

Please note that these rights are not absolute and only apply in certain circumstances. You should also be informed how long your data will be retained and who it might be shared with.

How does Goldsmiths treat my contribution to this study?
Your participation in this research is very valuable and any personal data you provide will be treated in confidence using the best technical means available to us. The university's legal

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[7] https://ico.org.uk/your-data-matters/

basis for processing your data[8] as part of our research findings is a "task carried out in the public interest". This means that our research is designed to improve the health, happiness and well-being of society and to help us better understand the world we live in. It is not going to be used for marketing or commercial purposes.

In addition to our legal basis under Article 6 (as described above), for **special categories data** as defined under Article 9 of GDPR, our condition for processing is that it is "necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes".[9]

If your data contributes to data from a group then your ability to remove data may be limited as the study progresses, when removal of your data may cause damage to the dataset.

You should also know that you may contact any of the following people if you are unhappy about the way your data or your participation in this study are being treated:

- Goldsmiths Data Protection Officer –   (concerning your rights to control personal data).
- Chair, Goldsmiths Research Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee - via reisc@gold.ac.uk, REISC Secretary (for any other element of the study).
- You also have the right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office at https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/

This information has been provided by the Research Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee with advice from the Research Services and Governance and Legal Teams.
Version: 13 August 2018

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[8] GDPR Article 6; the six lawful bases for processing data are explained here: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/

[9] Article 9 of the GDPR requires this type of data to be treated with great care because of the more significant risks

to a person's fundamental rights and freedoms that mishandling might cause, eg, by putting them at risk of unlawful

discrimination.

Appendix 2 Consent Form

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Informed Consent Form

Consent to participate in Research

Title: Conceptualising Placemaking and Materiality in Online Art Therapy

Tsun-wei Lily Hsu, Doctoral Researcher, Department of Social Therapeutic and Community Studies, Goldsmiths University of London

Please tick the appropriate boxes   Yes   No

1. **Taking part in the study**

   I have read and understood the study information, or it has been read to me. I have been able   ☐   ☐
   to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

   I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to   ☐   ☐
   answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a
   reason.

   I understand that I may withdraw from the research at any time without providing an   ☐   ☐
   explanation or to decline any aspects of participation.

   I understand that taking part in the study involves:

   - To participate in an initial semi-structured interview via an online platform with the   ☐   ☐
     researcher that will be video recorded.
   - Discuss with the researcher about ways to follow up the development of my
     thoughts and reflections on the topic.

2. **Use of the information in the study**

   I understand that information I provide may be used for educational forums, conference   ☐   ☐
   papers and published journal articles or books.

I understand my identity will be kept confidential unless specifically requested otherwise. ☐ ☐

I understand if I have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this ☐ ☐
research, I may contact:

      Dr Brian Callan, Department of Social Therapeutic and Community Studies

      b.callan@gold.ac.uk

3. Signatures

_____   _____   _____

Name of participant [IN CAPITALS]   Signature   Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

_____   _____   _____

Name of researcher [IN CAPITALS]   Signature   Date

4. Study contact details for further information

Tsun-wei Lily Hsu

thsu001@gold.ac.uk

Appendix 3 Collection of Tingling Anxiety and Initial Fantasy

Theme	Responses	
Issues with Digital Placemaking	Technical issues: ♦ Technical failures ♦ Loss of connection ♦ Lag between responses ♦ Delay in communication ♦ Environmental control and boundaries: ♦ Loss of control over the environment ♦ Boundaries become blurry ♦ Unable to access the client when they are unsafe ♦ Distraction from external factors ♦ Finding a suitable space in the client's place Privacy and confidentiality: ♦ Conversation being overheard by others ♦ Unable to fully protect the client's privacy ♦ Revealing personal information in the background ♦ Personal space being invaded	Shared issues With
	♦ Lack of body language ♦ Loss of human contact ♦ Loss of sensory contact ♦ No real eye contacts/difference in gaze ♦ Not able to be fully present ♦ Lack of co–presence ♦ Being misunderstood due to lack of body language ♦ Being offended due to lack of body language ♦ Fear of missing out key communication ♦ Not knowing when to respond	

		Verbal
Body/ non–verbal communication	♦ Client in another space ♦ Not knowing what people are doing behind the camera ♦ View been limited by the camera	Online Psycho– therapy
Ethical/ Social Construct	♦ Technical barriers ♦ Generational gaps ♦ Client not being able to afford digital devices ♦ Client not being able to access the internet ♦ Therapist's difficulty of handling technical issues	
Art related challenges	♦ Not able to see the whole process of artmaking ♦ Not able to see the artmaking and the client's facial expression at the same time ♦ The challenge of storing client's artworks ♦ Not being able to give the artwork to the therapist to hold ♦ Client having to keep their artwork even if it is too heavy ♦ The difficulty of looking at the artwork together ♦ Unable to provide art materials ♦ Client prepares their own art materials ♦ Unable to clear up the mess client made for them ♦ Client doesn't want to make art ♦ Talking overtakes artmaking in the session ♦ How to keep young client's attention on art making? ♦ Involving digital art making online ♦ Young client find it difficult to differentiate online art class and online art therapy	

		Art Therapy Specific
	Concerns: how these factors affect therapeutic relationship?	
Therapeutic Relationship	♦ Client being left feeling uncontained ♦ Can transference be felt via screen? ♦ Technical difficulties creating the sense of disconnection ♦ Client disconnecting in the middle of difficult moment ♦ Client switches off the camera/exit the platform ♦ The fear of losing the client without knowing why ♦ Unable to develop authentic therapeutic relationship ♦ Silence is more difficult to hold ♦ Not being able to connect in an embodied way ♦ Less emotion behind the screen ♦ Quiet members get lost or not being noticed in a group	