

Book Review

Art as therapy

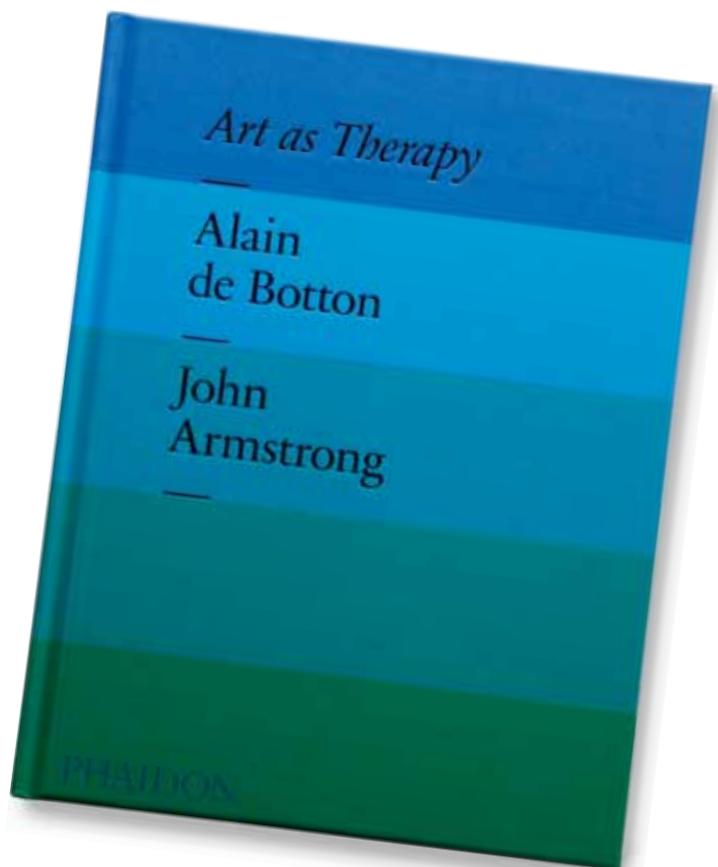
Authors: Alain de Botton and John Armstrong
Phaidon, London & New York, 2013

Reviewed by Robyn de Vries

This is a well-marketed and delightfully presented book that could grace any coffee table. The writing is passionate and intelligent. Authors de Botton and Armstrong make the topic of art and therapy exciting. The book is associated with The School of Life juggernaut, established in London in 2009 and in Melbourne earlier this year. Accompanying the book there is a website, at www.artastherapy.com, and 'Art as Therapy' tours, associated with the book, have taken place at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

The co-authors of the book both come with good credentials. John Armstrong is a British-born art theorist and philosopher, and Alain de Botton is to the field of philosophy that pop culture celebrity icon Professor Brian Cox is to science. De Botton has covered a good many other topics, including philosophy, architecture, travel, status anxiety, work, and more recently, the news and media. He recently toured Australia promoting his latest books, this volume and his most recent book, *The news: A user's manual* (2014).

The idea that art can be therapeutic is not new, as any art therapist will attest, and people are often curious about finding new ways to know themselves. The book has (sometimes scathingly) been described as a self-help book, even by de Botton himself (2013). Hence it may even appeal to those who might otherwise be skeptical about art as therapy; one reviewer of the book commented, in *The Guardian*, "Music, of course, but art? Really?" The aim of the book is to help us live a better life through art, and (contentiously) reduce the need for art once we are healed, through a series of questions and



observations about our modern day dilemmas, prompted by works of art housed in museums.

The most notable thing about the book, from an art therapist's point of view, is that it focuses solely on the therapeutic aspects of 'viewing' art. The authors do not contemplate the transformative power of 'making' art. Thus, the claim that the book introduces a new method of interpreting art – art as a form of therapy, providing powerful solutions to many of life's problems – may cause some art therapists to bristle, depending on their interpretation of 'new method' and their view of art as therapy. Clearly, this book is not about the profession of art therapy, as are books of the same title by English art therapist Tessa Dalley (1984) and American art therapist Edith Kramer (2001).

The book begins with an overview explaining its benefits to us, and how we can reframe our perception of the purpose of art

and apply that reframing to our own lives, rather than seeing art solely in an historical context or other formal structure. An invitation is given to ponder images with a particular concept in mind, and to take the message we receive into our own lives, which is where, the authors say, the message belongs.

To this end, for example, the first chapter offers seven 'functions' of art: remembering, hope, sorrow, rebalancing, self-understanding, growth and appreciation. Although I see these seven functions as a little too reminiscent of headings on the cover of a *Cleo* magazine (as art therapists, we are capable of digesting far broader and more nuanced readings of art), the authors do explore questions about these functions in greater depth throughout the book. For example, they suggest that curators group artworks not so much chronologically, but by theme according to emotional intent. The Gallery of South Australia recently did just that, by including a Tracey Moffatt montage video on the same wall as Renaissance paintings, all connected by the theme of love and relationships.

Although authors de Botton and Armstrong posit viewing and appreciating art, rather than making it (in the process missing pertinent opportunities that art therapists are very familiar with), both authors appear to be respectful of art therapy as a profession, and in a sense theirs is one (possibly new) method of asking questions of ourselves using art as a conduit. In this sense, this book calls upon us to reframe our profession in a much wider paradigm and take a meta-view of where art therapy is situated, straddling the fringes of disciplines such as psychology and psychotherapy, neuroscience, art history, art theory and art practice, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and more.

Historically, the authors state, art was propaganda on behalf of the Christian church and it now needs to be propaganda for psychology. "Art is our new religion and museums are our new cathedrals", writes de Botton (para 1, n.d.), quoting cultural historian Theodore Zeldin. The focus here is on the museum rather than on the art studio and artefacts made by artists, and the claim



'Art as Therapy' tour at the National Gallery of Victoria – participants contemplating Rodin's *The Thinker* 1884, with Manet's *The House at Rueil* 1882 and Lavery's *In Morocco* c.1913 in the background.

Photographer: Irene Villis, 'Art as Therapy' tour for the School of Life, National Gallery of Victoria, 2014.

is made that “the true aspiration of art should be to reduce the need for it. The ultimate goal of the art lover should be to build a world where works of art have become a little less necessary” (p.232). The authors suggest that value lies rather in fighting to attain some of the qualities that art symbolises.

The authors appeal to the lay person, and general gallery-viewing public, but go wide rather than deep in a search to promote a therapeutic use of art on a social and emotional level. For art therapists, this book offers another tool or method of working with clients. To some, the Armstrong and de Botton version of art as therapy is a reductionist view. To others who adopt a constructivist or post-structuralist stance, it is but one approach, and it is an engaging one.

References

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