

Artist Exhibit Statement

Ketamine, Art, and Flow

I have PTSD and depression and am currently a Ketamine-assisted psychotherapy (KAP) patient in the process of healing my trauma. Ketamine has effectively treated my mental illness by increasing neuroplasticity and allowing for spiritual healing in an environment that is safe and conducive to building trust.

During my KAP sessions, my brain becomes an upside down snow globe with a flurry of new neural activity and I begin to see 4-dimensional hexagons that form like unique snowflakes. I call them “Ketagons”, a complex and contradictory shape akin to an impossible object that is capable of expanding into dynamic, infinite space.* I see Ketagons every session with varying intensity, depending upon my Ketamine dosage. Ketagons always start out like tilted cubes and then morph counter clockwise into various linear patterns and dimensions. They emerge from lots of shimmering lines and then build to become very voluminous, knotted forms. Sometimes, they even make noises that sound like someone speaking a foreign language. I’m not sure if they’re tesseracts or fractals... but I feel an incredibly personal attachment to them. I see Ketagons as spiritual teachers in the art of neuroplasticity. Like transcendental portals, they literally show me how to think differently, transporting me beyond trauma and sadness.

As part of my healing journey, I have set out to build a language from my KAP sessions to better understand my trauma. Initially, a lot of trauma patients like myself have a very hard time using words to describe their traumatic experiences. Their nervous systems are in fight or flight and their traumatic memories are visual/sensory, fragmented, and deeply compartmentalized. I also notice that Ketamine temporarily hinders speech, but it enables a visualization of bodily dissociation and ego death, much like a liberating spiritual transcendence. I think Ketamine has the ability to access and bypass those traumatic memories in a way that is liberating to a damaged nervous system. The big question is how to integrate that liberating psychedelic experience into patients’ lives, especially when words fail to describe both the traumatic memory and the ineffable KAP. That’s where I think art (and art therapy as a practice) has huge potential to act as the bridge.

Since I’m an artist, I’ve decided to try and integrate my psychedelic experiences into my life through art. In the process, I have learned that the reason art is such an effective integrative tool for Ketamine-assisted psychotherapy is because it involves a special state of ordered consciousness known as flow.

In his book, “Flow: The Psychology of the Optimal Experience”, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as an optimal experience that makes life more enjoyable and meaningful through growing and adding complexity to the self. He describes the common characteristics of flow as, “a sense that one’s skills are adequate to

cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous.”

According to Csikszentmihalyi, art is a flow activity because, “[it is] designed to make optimal experience easier to achieve. [It has] rules that require the learning of skills, [it sets] up goals, [it provides] feedback, [and it makes] control possible. [It facilitates] concentration and involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from the so-called ‘paramount reality’ of everyday existence.” Csikszentmihalyi continues by categorizing art as a form of mimicry, which is one of the broad classes of games that produces flow by creating alternative realities. “Mimicry makes us feel as though we are more than what we actually are through fantasy, pretense, and disguise. Our ancestors, as they danced wearing the masks of their gods, felt a sense of powerful identification with the forces that ruled the universe. By dressing like a deer, the Yaqui Indian dancer felt at one with the spirit of the animal he impersonated. The singer who blends her voice in the harmony of a choir finds chills running down her spine as she feels at one with the beautiful sound she helps create.”

Vertigo is another one of the broad classes of games that produces flow. It directly alters consciousness by scrambling ordinary perception during activities such as riding roller coasters or “taking consciousness-expanding” drugs. While under the influence of Ketamine, I experience vertigo through bodily dissociation and ego death. As Csikszentmihalyi writes, “being able to forget temporarily who we are seems to be very enjoyable. When not preoccupied with our selves, we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are. Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward.” However, Csikszentmihalyi cautions that, “consciousness cannot be expanded [by drugs]; all we can do is shuffle its content, which gives us the impression of having broadened it somehow.” Indeed, the Ketamine snow globe disrupts mental illness by shuffling the content of consciousness, but the resulting neuroplasticity can lead to expansion through effective integration processes.

One of the greatest benefits of flow is that it allows one to live completely in the present, which directly counters the symptoms of PTSD and depression that trap sufferers in the past. After my first KAP session, I had no idea how to verbally describe my psychedelic experience to my trauma therapist. Not only was it inherently ineffable, but at the time my PTSD and depression made it exceedingly difficult to focus on articulating things happening in the present. Being an artist, my natural inclination was to draw it out, and as a result, I began to develop the necessary symbols to create my first words: hexagon, lines, interconnectivity...etc. As I drew, I felt similar to the Yaqui Indian dancer and the singer Csikszentmihalyi describes in his book. Line by line, I began to identify with my KAP memories and regain a sense of transcendence through creating an alternative reality. Not only had I embodied and visually documented my experience, but I had also come out the other side with written language. In this moment, Csikszentmihalyi’s transformational phenomenon of flow had occurred: “... when the [flow] activity is over and self-consciousness has a chance to resume, the self that the person reflects upon is not the same self that existed before the flow experience: it is now enriched by new skills and fresh achievements.”

Once I had completed my first drawing, I was able to use it as a cache of associative memories to piece together a poem and share it with both my trauma therapist and my cognitive behavioral therapist. Talking through the drawings and their subsequent writings allowed me to explore the relationship between images

and words, identify problematic thoughts and feelings, and ultimately reframe my fears and frustrations in a healthier light. Through this reframing, I have reshaped my life's priorities to be more meaningful, developed greater self-compassion, and am actively repairing my faith and trust in humanity.

Through maintaining my Ketamine treatments, I continue to build up a highly specified lexicon ("Ketagons") for mapping out my psychedelic experiences. Now I have both images and words for my own understanding and to share with others and that is incredibly healing. I don't feel so alone with my trauma and depression because I have grown into a more complex person by integrating a deeper transcendental understanding into my life.

This process feels so natural that it makes me wonder about the historical links between the "stoned ape" theory, indigenous psychedelic medicine, and contemporary psychedelic assisted psychotherapy. Perhaps humankind has always relied on the transformative rituals of psychedelic medicine and visionary art to create powerful meaning systems, and over time, modern colonialist society has choked it out of us. Today, I believe there is not only a need for psychedelic medicine, but also the integrative mechanisms such as flow activities that support its efficacy. In the highly traumatized and despairing world we live in, it is now more imperative than ever to prevent the cycles of destructive behavior that hinder good public health and societal advancement. To that end, I aspire to learn more about the relationship between Ketamine, art, and flow.

*It is interesting to note that according to a study cited in the book "Flow", people with attention deficit disorders have a harder time achieving flow due to psychic entropy and inflexibility, and when tested in their ability to reverse the Necker cube, they perform much slower than others without attention deficit. This makes me wonder whether the ability to hallucinate or efficiently interpret impossible objects is not only a direct chemical result of Ketamine, but also the result of experiencing greater neuroplasticity through vertigo-flow.