In an extract from his new book, DANIEL WOJCIK examines the effect of trauma on the life and work of two artists.

Ionel Talpazan at his New York apartment in 1996, photo: Ted Degener
Although there is an extensive body of literature on art therapy practice and theory in the clinical setting, there is much less written about the spontaneous creation of art by individuals who, through their own ingenuity, have used creativity as a form of self-therapy in relation to grieving over a loss, coping with traumatic events, confronting stressful situations or dealing with mental illness. Painful emotions and traumatic experiences sometimes cannot be communicated in words, but the creating of things can be a medium for their expression, an external manifestation of inner turmoil or overwhelming experiences, and may help clarify issues or restore a sense of self-worth.

To be clear in this context: creativity is not inevitably interwoven with suffering; tragedy and emotional pain are not prerequisites for artistic activity; and the creative outputs of the vast majority of individuals labelled “outsider artists,” “visionary artists,” “self-taught artists” and artists in general are not necessarily related to trauma or life-crisis. Although many of the individuals discussed in this study have used creativity as a way to cope with misfortune, they are not presented here as somehow representative of self-taught or “outsider” artists overall.

The potentially therapeutic features of art making are illustrated by the art of Ionel Talpazan (1955–2015), a refugee from Romania who lived in New York City. Talpazan created more than 1000 paintings, drawings and sculptures inspired by his ideas about flying saucers and life in outer space. He said that he “sacrificed his life to the UFO” and his dream was to share his ideas with NASA scientists; his ultimate goal was to reveal the unknown technologies and hidden meanings of flying saucers, with the hope of helping humanity.

Talpazan’s early work often shows scenes of outer space and the energies of the cosmos in an expressionistic style, his canvases thickly textured with rich pigments. His later work includes large diagrams of UFOs that reveal the details of flying saucer technology, with his theories about their systems of propulsion sometimes written on them (for example, antigravitational, magnetic, antimagnetic, nuclear, vacuum technologies and so on). These drawings resemble illuminated, mandala-like flying machines that radiate halos of energy or vibrate with hallucinatory intensity. With their meticulous details, clarity of form, and Talpazan’s absolute devotion to them, these diagrams convey a genuine believability.
Talpazan equated the technology of flying saucers with cosmic laws and some sort of universal spirituality: “My art shows spiritual technology, something beautiful and beyond human imagination, that comes from another galaxy. Something superior in intelligence and technology. So, in a relative way, this is like the God, it is perfect”. He hoped that his theories and illustrations could be used for peaceful purposes, to save the environment, avert nuclear disaster, and help create a better world.

Throughout his life, Talpazan encountered an inordinate amount of emotional trauma, from the hardship of his early years (childhood abandonment and abuse, oppression, attempted escapes from Romania, imprisonment, refugee camps) to the difficulties of his life in the USA, struggling to survive as a refugee in New York City, homeless on two occasions, living on the verge of poverty, and barely able to pay his rent and bills.

Talpazan explained the personal meaning of his art in this context: “My life is like a bomb, atomic – it can explode, any time . . . I go into my mind thinking about the UFOs; this is my escape from problems. I find my personal freedom through my drawings . . . I go into a different dimension, to forget my life.”

The ideas of cosmic wonder, escape, freedom and being “from elsewhere” were central themes in Talpazan’s life, and the global icon of the UFO symbolises these notions. As numerous theorists have demonstrated, vernacular beliefs about flying saucers are essentially a religious phenomenon, an update of earlier ideas about a divine mediator, a syncretism of new gods and superhuman technology, offering escape and salvation. Carl Jung, in his influential book *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, argued that the circular shape of the flying saucer resembles the archetype of the mandala found in mythology, dreams and iconography throughout the world, and which often is used to focus attention, induce trance states and create sacred space. Jung regarded the mandala as an expression of the self, of wholeness, and of God. He observed that during times of personal trauma, fragmentation or societal crisis, mandalas are often visualised and created by people yearning for harmony, stability and psychic equilibrium. To illustrate his theories, Jung actually acquired some of Adolf Wölflí’s geometrically-ordered drawings that contained mandala symbolism, such as *Medical Faculty* (1905). Mandala-like shapes and repetitive...
patterns characterise the art of numerous self-taught and visionary artists, including Martín Ramírez, Eugene Andolsek, Paul Laffoley and Charles Dellschau.

One evening when I was visiting Talpazan, he resumed his work on a large piece that he called *Silver UFO*. As the evening wore on, I watched him retrace and repaint this mandala-shaped diagram throughout the night until about 5:30am, on his knees on the floor, working in serene silence, his face inches away from the design, with his white dove, Maria, perched on his shoulder, cooing quietly. Talpazan was not just drawing a spaceship; the process itself was a trance-like and therapeutic act, a suspension of time and space. Entirely immersed in the creative act, his image of a flying saucer transported him to another realm, free from the difficulties of his life.

The concept of flow, as a mental state of totally focused and energised involvement in an activity that provides a sense of timelessness, was proposed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi after his observations in the 1960s of artists who became so engaged in the creative process that they would ignore their need for food, water and sleep, and lose their sense of time and of self. As Csikszentmihalyi describes it, the experience of flow is so fulfilling that nothing else seems to matter: “The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost.”  

For Vietnam-veteran Gregory Van Maanen (born 1947), art making has become a cathartic endeavour, offering a degree of emotional healing from trauma. On February 27, 1969, on the battlefields of Vietnam, the 21-year old Van Maanen watched as his fellow infantrymen were killed next to him, and he was shot and left for dead. A rescue unit later found him, and he spent several months recovering in a hospital before returning to his hometown in Paterson, New Jersey. Back in the States, he was tormented by memories of Vietnam; a bullet is still lodged in his shoulder, a reminder of wounds he suffered during the war. For a time he had difficulty speaking about his experiences, but then he began painting and sculpting as a way to deal
with his ongoing struggles with post-traumatic stress. He says that for him art is a form of medicine and ritual, a way to “release the scenes” in his mind and purge negative energies, sometimes in “a natural flow.” (2)

Like many other veterans, for years Van Maanen experienced panic attacks, flashbacks, hypervigilance and insomnia – common symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. He avoided crowded spaces and ventured outside only when he had too, spending most of his time painting in his basement, which he calls his “safety bunker”. His initial work often expressed the anger he felt after the war; the process of creating thousands of drawings, paintings and sculptures that depict spirit skulls, all-seeing eyes, ghosts, blasts of light and nightmarish creatures was cathartic and “cleansing”. Some of his more recent work expresses a sense of peace, rebirth and thankfulness; a number of these pieces are mandala-like in their design, characterised by bold circular forms and precise symmetrical shapes. Having gained some measure of control over war trauma, Van Maanen’s art has become a means of personal power, self-revelation, and transcendence. He says he no longer thinks of his work as “art”, but as medicine and prayer created for the purposes of healing and helping humanity, especially other veterans who can relate to the work. (3) His use of discarded materials is significant here; these cast-off things, like the Vietnam veterans who were cast aside, broken, and often treated like “garbage” upon their return from the war, are found to have value, salvaged and transformed through the creative process.

For veterans and other individuals who have experienced trauma, art-making can offer distinctive therapeutic benefits, particularly as a means of visually expressing and integrating experiences difficult to put into words. Trauma is not only psychological in nature, but it resides in the body as a physiological and sensory experience. The physical activity of creating things allows for the possible expression and processing of the sensory memories of traumatic events in ways that verbal communication cannot. The medium of the artwork itself, whether paper, canvas, sculpture, or another form, serves as a manageable “container” for materialising overwhelming emotions, allowing individuals to gain a sense of control over intrusive memories and otherwise unruly responses. The complete immersion in the creative process, as described by Van Maanen, Talpazan, Kevin Blythe Sampson, Hiroyuki Doi, Eugene Andolsek and others, can assuage inner turmoil, provide a calming effect, and evoke positive feelings of flow or transformation.

Furthermore, as illustrated by the accounts of numerous artists discussed in this study, making art may help rebuild identity and serve as a basis for establishing meaningful bonds with others, both of which have significant therapeutic value for those who have experienced trauma.

In contextualising individual suffering and attempting to understand artistic responses to adversity, it becomes apparent that the creative endeavors of the individuals highlighted here are not idiosyncratic. Instead, their art making reveals a familiar behavioural response to life crisis and emotional pain: individuals with little or no formal artistic training have discovered the therapeutic aspects of the creative process. Throughout this study, particular emphasis has been placed on the multiple sources that have influenced the work of specific individuals, as well as their reasons for making art. This approach regards the tangible objects that people make not as distinct artefacts, but as manifestations of behaviour, formed by the circumstances that influence their creation as well as by the knowledge of existing cultural practices and techniques. Instead of conceptualising these creators as entirely idiosyncratic and untouched by culture, or celebrating their perceived otherness and ultimately exiling them to the outposts of society, the perspective offered here invites these artists in from the margins, includes them in “our” world, and reveals their connections to culture and broader humanity.

This article is an edited extract from Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma, by Daniel Wojcik, University Press of Mississippi, 2016.

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Daniel Wojcik is professor of English and Folklore Studies at the University of Oregon. His books include Punk and Neo-Tribal Body Art; The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America; and Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma.