

Review of: "Psychotherapy as a Subversive Art"

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As a Creative Arts Therapist (CAT) perching within the precarious role of Heading the only school training Clinical CATs in Aotearoa New Zealand, I was initially excited, then bamboozled, then frustrated and finally enriched (if in some infuriating ways) by Manu Bazzano's densely philosophical piece. Several places of provocation arise as I feel into my embodied responses to this writing and therefore the words that follow are less of a review and more of an invitational response from a Creative Arts (psycho)Therapist to a Psychotherapist who both conceive of therapy as an art but in some significantly differing ways.

My first arising is a sense of sadness that the focus on art seems to stagger and become trampled under the weight of the phenomenological philosophising. There is little deep curiosity regarding the many, layered and often contradictory interpretations that entangle when we use the term 'art'. Cosying up to and allowing some of these to scamper in lively ways through the work may have helped keep the notion of art central. I wonder also about the seeming lack of curiosity about the role of imagination, creativity, playfulness within therapy.

Secondly, I turn to my sense that art is held outside of the living, corporeal embodiment and inter/intra-subjective relationality of the therapeutic space. The art referred to seems to be the art created by talented others and/or the art practiced by a talented therapist. I wonder where the art that may be created by the client resides. This art, through active engagement with painting/drawing/sculpting/singing/dancing/enacting, may enable the client to encounter and express things that words alone may not reach – and may allow the therapist to respond in kind. Art within Bazzano's writing feels disembodied and distant and I find myself agreeing with words offered by another reviewer as regards the lack of applicable boots-on-the-ground aliveness here. The work remains densely esoteric while proposing profound foundational shifts that have significant practicable implications for how we as therapists live into and invite clients to come present to imagination, creativity and alchemy within therapy.

I found myself 'aha-ing' often in response to glimmers... and this is where my rambling turns more to invitational response than review as these glimmers relate to places where Bazzano's writing intersects some of the posthuman/indigenous thinking that is infusing and vivifying our work as CATs. In an attempt to bridge between the (re)orientation-mapping in Bazzano's article and what is fruitfully composting within the Expressive Arts Therapies (EXA) and CAT, I therefore lean into an emergent notion: 'sympoietic-praxis'. This invites contemplation of the two areas I gesture towards above: the arts and (dis)embodiment. EXA and CAT both trouble 'art' as a useful term, experiencing it as laden with multiple interpretations and evocations, many of which can be unhelpful in a therapeutic context. For example, when lodged within a client, the notion of 'art' experienced as high art created by talented artists showcased in galleries, may lead to the client

devaluing their own paddling around in the paint palette to make marks expressive of their felt distress. The term 'poiesis' however offers a fruitful alternative - and I believe it brings into harmony many of the notes hit within Bazzano's paper. Poiesis, from the ancient Greek, welcomes uncertainty and formlessness, that – according to Stephen K. Levine – references a coming-into-form of the chaos of meaning. Engaging therapy through poiesis opens what Donald Winnicott called 'transitional spaces' that inspire meaning-making "in the same way as we engage in creative work: by letting the new form emerge without controlling it" (Levine, 2009, p.139). When 'sym-' precedes 'poiesis' we draw inspiration from Donna Haraway and Shaun McNiff (among others) in acknowledging the relational nature of the therapeutic encounter. Rather than a wilfully individualistic, intellectual act, sympoiesis invites surrender to process, a paradoxical will-to-not-will as the therapist-client dyad support each other to become receptive. And to what are they becoming receptive? Perhaps this is alive in the way 'praxis' is described by Bazzano as generating therapy that is "a more generalized ethico-political commitment geared towards: (a) a refusal to propagate dominant ideologies/illusions; (b) an engagement in a collaborative process of freedom from constrictive ideologies/illusions which maintain the subject captive." (para 21 line 6).

Sympoietic-praxis tangoes with heuristic phenomenology (Clark Moustakas). It is this a form of together-we-make-art-and-the-art-makes-us. It is an invitation to decenter or make-strange, to step away from the taken for granted and enter the unexpected territories of the imagination (Levine), to commune with the mystery (Søren Mølbak). Within sympoietic-praxis, familiar structures are void and new ones have yet to appear, inciting confusion and powerlessness. This resonates with Victor Turner and Paulo Knill's descriptions of ritual liminality. This also invites contemplation of Audra Lorde's notion that the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house and extends a further tendril into the Trickster-esque explorations of 'recovering psychologist' Bayo Akomolafe. His lyrical and playful ponderings offer a provocative and tangly mix of indigenous and posthuman knowing. I believe he's offering ways to think into/through/with the use of creativity/art/poiesis within therapy that feels more honouring of the response-able and relational processes 'good' therapists embody than theories derived from so-called western psychotherapy and psychology. When creative-making becomes the central communicative and change process within therapy, when client and therapist collaborate with arts materials – with the body in expressive movement, poetic language, nature-connected creating, dramatic enactment – then the experience often makes-strange, decentres the taken-for-granted. This diffractive sympoietic-praxis echoes the rupture referenced in the article, that invites the new. Here we are traversing fecund territories opened by existential thought infusing Akomolafe's posthuman thinking via his assertion that we don't precede ourselves but rather are brought into being again and again through relational encounters – such as those within the therapy room between therapist, client and the arts practiced poietically. This new materialist and posthuman thinking leads us to Tyson Yunkaporta and Donna Moodie. These researchers developed an indigenous framework for data analysis grounded in "Aboriginal protocols of communal knowledge production" intra-acting with principles of complexity theory (2021, p.87). In this endeavour, they're seeking to avoid the prevailing co-option of expansive indigenous ways of doing into traditionally reductive western models resulting (resembling the project alive in Bazzano's article?). The arts therapies have long celebrated their origins in traditional healing, shamanistic and indigenous health practices (see for example McNiff, 2015). Yunkaporta and Moodie invite us to consider the arrivals of 'a Something' – the delicious Aboriginal term for those illuminating moments when a new knowing arrives at the confluence several elements – as examples of complexity

theory. This theory addresses dynamic, non-linear, self-organising, open, emergent, sometimes chaotic, and adaptive systems. Mitchell Waldrop's (1992) description of complexity invites fruitful appreciation of how being actively creative in session with clients can be edge-walking, proposing that the "edge of chaos is the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive" (p.15). Stuart Kauffman (1995) traces contour lines within this liminal territory where we're poised at "the edge of chaos... [seeking] to evolve to a natural state between order and chaos, a grand compromise between structure and surprise" (p.15). And Sophie Strand's posthuman worlding invites us to ponder such edgy encounters using the metaphor of ecotones as places where taken-for-granted-ness ruptures, where critters rub the skin off each other causing glitchy genetic mutations as species attempt to adapt to the intra-action of different ecosystems. It's here that more species are born than in any other ecological space.

These forays into the posthuman, indigenous, complexity theory-resonant sympoietic-praxes of EXA and CAT feel like they open a fertile ecotonal territory when invited to intra-act with Bazzano's article. I wonder what may happen as they rub against each other...