

Emergence, resonant felt sensing and the arts: With/in relational spaces of us

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Abstract

In this paper I speak to the idea of emergence as a key quality of processes of coming to knowing or understanding, with/in relational interaction. My research into relational interactions began with an intention to focus on a therapeutic context, however, this focus quickly opened up to include all relational interactions, including interactions with artworks and materials. When we, as individuals, engage with each other we are in a process of ongoingly responding to each other in an improvisational dialogue. We respond as a means to clarify or express what we feel or sense may be meaningful, and we can do this very effectively using the arts, especially when what feels meaningful is not quite known, is unformed, or evades words. Emergence has to do with staying with what arises and maintaining an attitude of openness to uncertainty.

Keywords

Emergence, intersubjectivity, multimodal arts, resonant felt sense, arts-based inquiry.

Noticing, attending to, and following or responding to your bodily felt sense of what is happening in the relational space of an arts-based inquiry is, I believe, an emergent process.

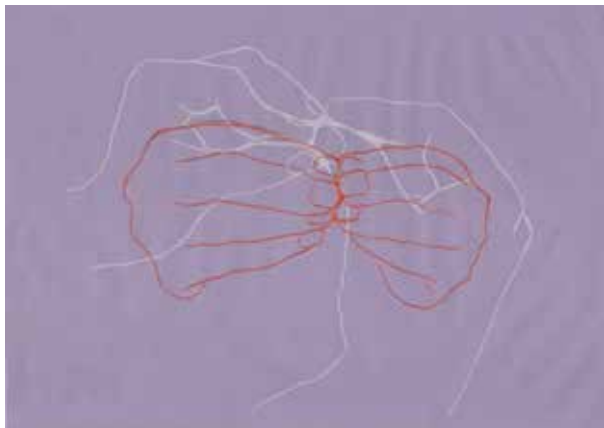


Figure 1. Stacey Bush, *A shifting exchange, a dialogue*, 2011, coloured pencil on tracing paper, 297 x 210mm.

The image above depicts an exploration of being with/in a confronting relational space. The hands are a representation of constantly shifting movements, in a responsive process of trying to find a fit, of trying to find a place of meaningful meeting. I hold a curiosity about what happens in the relational space of us...

Being present is already an exchange, a dialogue. Being present to self and other with/in experiencing means being present to many different energies. It means holding many

different resonances and responses at one time. Difficulty can lie in holding different and conflicting resonant dialogues. What is important here is to stay with and give voice to the felt senses and resonances that call strongly and persistently when responding. It is this dialogue of resonance that constantly moves between us. In this way the spaces between self and other/s shift constantly and can never be definitively pinned down. Space definition can become clearer and stronger when emotion runs high. Yet this strength and clarity is somehow intangible, here one minute and gone the next. This intangibility invites continued attempts to catch hold of definition and clarity of self in relation to the other, it invites constant searching for form and to make sense of what there is between us. You, me, and the space of us move together in an ongoing interactive dance to find the shape or form of us. There is never just one story to tell of an exchange of resonant responding, of a dialogue with others. This too is shifting and unpindownable, each of us who come to an interaction will have a different story to tell. The very act of engaging with another, engaging in dialogues of resonant responding, is an act of co-creation; it is an active process of engaging imagination and agile processes of association. It is a shared, ambiguous, open-ended, and dynamic process of interaction.
(Bush, 2014, p.346)

This paper speaks to my understanding that the being with/in any relational interaction is all about the process of coming to knowing or understanding, and the most important quality of this process is that it is emergent. I focus on what I believe to be key elements of this process of being with/in relational spaces of us. These elements are: resonant felt sensing as a key dynamic in the process of coming to knowing; the use of multi-modal creative arts to express what is known and not quite known; and emergence as a process that privileges being open to and led by the not-quite-known. The searching and re-searching which led me to new understandings in relation to the importance of emergence resulted in my doctoral thesis, titled *Being with/in the space of us: An emergent arts inquiry* (Bush, 2014). This paper draws from my thesis and is a companion piece to a presentation I gave at the 2014 ANZATA Symposium in Singapore titled 'Enhancing therapist capacity for resonance'.

To give some background, the starting point of my thesis was a curiosity about just what happens, and how it happens, in the relational between of us, or intersubjective space, when in therapeutic interaction. While I began with an intention to focus on a therapeutic context, in the course of my searching and re-searching this focus opened up to include all relational interactions, including interactions with artworks and materials. When I speak of intersubjective space here, I am speaking of relational spaces which may be explicitly therapeutic, hold an intention for research and scholarship, or an intention for exploration of arts practice.

The key elements of resonant felt sensing, the arts, and emergence play out in the intersubjective space of an interaction. What I have bumped up against in the writing of this paper is the difficulty of teasing these elements apart in order to articulate my understanding of the process of emergence. It becomes clear that these elements play out in an interconnected and integrated way. This brings to mind Warren Lett's (2011) concept of integrative flow, where content, process, and knowing cannot be engaged separately in the flow of experiencing. Rather, every moment of engagement is integrated in a flowing process of meaning-making (p.278). With this in mind, I have chosen to define each of these elements separately, aware that there is overlap and interweaving, and invite the reader to hold a mindfulness that they function, in practice, in an integrated flow. I begin by speaking to intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity has to do with being and knowing relationally. It has to do with what is of 'me', what is of 'you', and what is co-created by us. Daniel Stern (2004) speaks of an intersubjective matrix, which I understand to be a relational space or context for our interactions. He says it is the "overriding crucible in which interacting minds take on their current form" (p.78). So there is something about a place in which creation, or co-creation takes place. He goes on to say that "Two minds create intersubjectivity. But equally, intersubjectivity shapes the two minds" (2004, p.78). This feels important as it points to the idea that we each form or co-create our interactions and are in turn formed or co-created by them. A key assumption here is that as individuals we exist in and are formed in relational connection with others, with the world. Nick Crossley (1996) takes this further, saying that "we can recognise that selfhood is inevitably intersubjective. Self is seen to be achieved only in relation to other" (p.68). This potentially disrupts notions that we are subjectively formed and suggests that we are intersubjectively formed in an ongoing way, in interaction with others/the world, and that this forming takes place in a relational space, an intersubjective space. We are ongoingly engaged in the process of making sense, of clarifying and redefining what we think we know in all of our relational experiencing.

At the beginning of this paper there is an excerpt from part of a data set in my doctoral thesis. It speaks to qualities of being within the intersubjective space of interaction. Here the constantly shifting, ongoing work of responsiveness to self and other is expressed as intangible, difficult to pin down. It reflects the idea of a constant and co-creative forming and re-forming. This work of responsiveness and co-creation with/in an intersubjective space is demonstrated by Michael Franklin (2013) when he speaks of engaging with a pot he has made.

Engaging with this particular pot became a wrestling match, literally beating me back with its strong presence... there was magnetism to its truthfulness. The rawness and accuracy of the image beckoned me closer, and so I kept moving my awareness in as we re-created each other. (p.88)

Franklin makes the point that here he does not perceive himself as simply the creator or 'owner' of the pot, and only in relationship with it as art object. Rather, he experiences the work as engaging with him in a mutual process of re-creation. Further, Franklin

(2013) speaks of a movement towards the other in relational encounters where he says the encounter “takes time to simmer and emerge” (p.89).

There is something compelling for me about the intersubjective space of interaction as it includes, yet is much more than, physical space. It is the space of ‘me’, the space of ‘you’, and the space of what lies between us, what moves between us, what grows of us and what transforms us. Kay Thorburn and Sarva Hibbard (2008) commented on this in relation to a therapeutic interaction with a client:

Kay documented the spatiality, pace and rhythm she observed in our movements. It was a dance of ‘us’ rather than a room that contained him, her and another. ‘Us’ included our conversations, our bodies, our drawings and other creative representations that emerged in the session. (p.160)

Here the ‘space of us’ holds much. It holds time, it holds the rhythm and pace of our movements, it holds our inter-actions. The ‘space of us’ holds our conversations in all forms, our spoken words, our storied and poetic words, and our images. It holds our bodies also. This is an intensely rich and dynamic space, a space that breathes with the rhythms of our experiencing and grows in co-creative processes of forming.

Resonant felt sensing

Resonant felt sense has to do with the feeling quality which flows within us in response to our experiencing. Eugene Gendlin (1997) makes the point that felt sense or felt meaning is not about *how* we are feeling. It is not emotion. It is the ever-present flow of feeling within us.

[W]e always have concrete feeling, an inward sensing whose nature is broader... It is not at all vague in its being there, it may be vague only in that we may not know what it is. We can put only a few aspects of it into words. (p.11)

For Gendlin (1981) a felt sense is a “special kind of internal bodily awareness” (p.10). He goes on to say that “a felt sense doesn’t come to you in the form of thoughts or words or other separate units, but as a single (though often puzzling and very complex) bodily feeling” (p.33). At times we may have a very clear sense of what the resonant felt sense is pointing to, at other times it may be felt as something not quite known or out of reach.

Where the arts can help to articulate that which is implicit, not quite known, or difficult to express, the process of this has to do with engaging resonant felt sensing in an ongoing responsiveness, an

emergent process. In this process it feels important to stay with what resonates and the feeling of that in order to come to increasing clarity of understanding. This resonance may be consonant or it may be dissonant. We explore in order to evoke something of the feeling of our experience. The challenge is to stay within the feeling of experience, the resonant felt sense, and to hold aside explanation and outcomes. This staying within the resonant felt sense can “enable a responsiveness that is capable of modulating uncomfortable psychic experiences whilst receiving uncertainty and ambivalence” (Gunaratnam, 2007, p.281). It ultimately allows for a response to material, which may be very complex and difficult to articulate.

Yasmin Gunaratnam (2007) describes her experience of being open in this way, of working emergently. “I feel called, or more often whispered to and pestered, to take account of wispy and unformulated connections. I can find myself drawn to certain images or to photograph something and not *know why*” (p.275). This speaks to emergence, where an embodied resonant felt sensing urges or even demands a response. Even if I may not know why this is happening, at some level I just know that it needs to happen. There is something within, a resonant felt sense or awareness that is striving to meet that which calls it, striving to move and emerge as, or into, something that is not yet known or difficult to articulate. At times I have felt compelled to create an image, or a colour calls me insistently and fills me with a feeling of its rightness. In one instance, as I begin to represent my experiencing, I am drawn to a purple pastel, it has to be purple – that is very clear to me – but I do not know why. I only know that there is something about the quality of the colour that feels right. That particular purple colour speaks to me of soft edges and shifting forms, of the feeling of fog slowly and softly encroaching and obscuring form in increments of opacity. There is something in these feelings in these sensings that I want to catch.

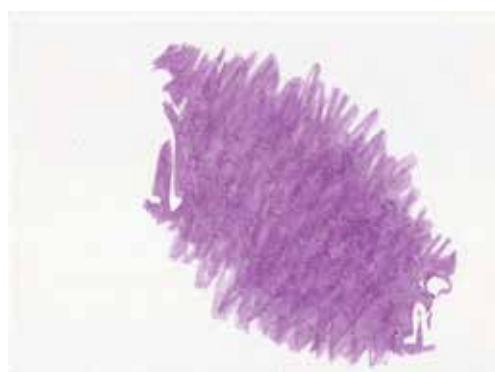


Figure 2. Stacey Bush, *Space In Between #6*, 2010, oil pastel on tracing paper, 267 x 210mm.

Sometimes poems rush into my mind and insist on being caught.

*Complex entities fluttering
On moving grounds
To align
And join the fragments
To solidify the space in between
Out to the edges
I move in
Seeing sensing being
I feel a movement
We sit with
Settling*

These examples speak of a process of emergence where “artistic representations emerge or pull me towards them” (Gunaratnam, 2007, p.275). The path is created as I walk the inquiry.

The arts

Different arts modalities can provide a means to bring into expression that which is less easily accessed or known and help make sense of our resonant felt sensing, of our felt responses to intersubjective interactions with others and the things of the world. The arts connect us well to what we know of emotional and sensory aspects of experiential being and help us express our knowings. For Susan Langer (1964) art is “the practice of creating perceptible forms expressive of human feeling” (p.76). She identifies the feeling, emotional, and storytelling qualities of the arts as important forms of knowing. For Langer (1967), what we know of these things “is a continual play of impressions... a fund of images, not necessarily visual, but often gestic, kinaesthetic, verbal or what I can only call ‘situational’” (p.59). Artistic imagery can map “the form of felt life” (Langer, 1967, p.67). These ideas are reflected in Heron and Reason’s (1997) concept of presentational knowing as showing “an intuitive grasp of the significance of our resonance with and imaging of our world” by way of bringing our experience of the world up into artistic presentation (p.281).

Gunaratnam (2007) uses the arts in various forms in her work as an academic and in palliative care. She speaks of the arts as providing access to sensuous knowing that engages bodies, and also as being able to facilitate access to that which is suppressed, complex, incoherent and ambiguous (p.272). She is interested in:

How artistic representation can create opportunities for evoking and affirming some of the poetics of human experience, that is: the non-measurable; the contradictory;

that which exceeds identity categories; the ‘indescribable and the undismisable’; and the hopefulness of a ‘not yet’. (p.274)

Artistic representation is able to bring experience up in a way that evokes or has a sense of something. It can access and bring up a range of sensings be they formed fully or not, for us to engage in and reflect on. This can be affirming, especially when what is evoked is intangible, uncertain, not quite known, contradictory, or only dreamt of in imaginings.

When I draw upon artistic practice as a medium of knowledge creation and expression I rely on being open to uncertainty and accepting of difference. I am often inquiring into living experiencing that holds that which is not quite known, intangible, and as Kelsey McNiff (2013) suggests, that which is not easily structured (p.112). Debra Kalmanowitz (2013) describes the difficulty of articulating experiencing when she says: “It is not as easy as it appears to hold on to the multidimensional potential and the dynamic of an experience before being forced to transform it into a single story” (p.141). Lived experiencing is multidimensional and dynamic, often messily and even chaotically structured, and difficult to articulate in its complexity and uniqueness. I feel that the arts are uniquely suited to exploring the complex, uncertain, and difficult to articulate. Laury Rappaport (2013) points out that the arts can articulate the “ineffable”, that for which there are no words (p.202).

Using multimodal creative arts we can represent and begin to articulate our resonant felt sense of experiencing, which often resists discursive languaging. As Rappaport (2013) goes on to say, the arts can capture felt sense and “provide a vehicle to help externalise this knowing, to carry it forward, and help it be seen and known” (p.202). The use of more than one arts modality supports the work of making sense of resonant felt sensing and supports the creation of a multidimensional dynamic map of the form of felt experiencing.

Emergence

I have come to understand that in any arts inquiry there is a constant tension between what is known and what is not known. This tension is one of staying with experiencing. It is a tension that ultimately drives the inquiry in an emergent fashion. What is represented is “what I perceive, but it can never be the whole; it can only be my whole at a particular moment” (Kalmanowitz, 2013, p.146). A whole that emerges in this moment but will necessarily be incomplete and calling for engagement in the next moment. Kalmanowitz

(2013) says using artistic representation as inquiry is “a quest for elucidation, clarification both on the part of the researcher and the participant, and is probably forever incomplete” (p.147). What I resonate with here is the idea that our inquiry is always incomplete, always in becoming and emerging. As we seek clarification and elucidation of what we know, we are also constantly moving forward into new, as yet unknown and sometimes unanticipated territories. Stephen Levine (2013) says of improvisation that it “indicates action that looks forward to what has not yet been and what cannot be anticipated – the *imprévu*, that which cannot be seen in advance” (p.128). When working emergently it is important to hold this understanding as a curiosity for and openness to the unknown.

Nisha Sajnani (2013) also works with improvisation as a creative modality for inquiry. She speaks of improvisation as used by artists to “push against the boundaries of their own knowledge to generate insight and create new works” (p.78). I feel that an emergent inquiry improvises in a similar way. Each representation, each intersubjective response is a feeling into and pushing against boundaries of what is known, as well as a co-creation of new knowings. Sajnani (2013) speaks of emergent knowing in the following way:

The prospect of discovery begins by placing one’s attention on what is emerging rather than on what exists already in action. Exercising a perpetual curiosity about this difference is perhaps what is most salient... By drawing attention to the slippages, leakages and the spaces between carefully created forms, new information is gathered about knowledge itself. Knowledge emerges as a yearning, a desire, as a *verb* rather than a noun. Knowledge is not cold, hard fact but a *process* filled with sentiment, tension and temporary investments. (p.80)

What stands out for me here is the idea that what emerges, that which is new, different, not quite formed, messy and uncertain, holds potential not only for new knowing, but for new knowing of the process of coming to knowing. The value is in staying with and focusing upon what is emerging as a means to arrive at knowing and processes of knowing. It is important “to be sensitive to what is emerging and be willing to go down unexpected pathways indicated by the knowing that comes toward [us]... and follow the surprise of that” (Levine, 2013, p.128).

With/in spaces of us

We are always in relationship, and responsively engaging with/in relational spaces of us in movements toward ‘finding a fit’ or meaning-making. The dynamic, emergent processes of these movements are like an ever-shifting responsive dialogue of inquiry. I have learnt that focusing upon and staying present to what emerges in the process of engaging in inquiry creates potential for new knowing. I also learn much about my process of coming to new knowing in general. As Sajnani (2013) says, when working this way knowledge emerges as a “verb” a “process” (p.80). What is articulated or accentuated when our focus is on what arises emergently is the ‘how’ of our process of coming to know. It may begin with a resonant felt sense that is often ambiguous and uncertain. The arts prove to be particularly suited as a means to bring that which is ambiguous and uncertain into expression. An attitude of openness and staying within uncertainty, while attending to what newly and often unexpectedly emerges in each moment of inquiry, may facilitate exploration of resonant experiencing. By working emergently in this way, it becomes possible to allow what is held in this process to lead us forward as we follow the energy and the surprise that unfolds.

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