

## Book review

### *New developments in expressive arts therapy: The play of poiesis*

Edited by Ellen G. Levine and Stephen K. Levine  
Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 2017  
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Reviewed by Deborah Green

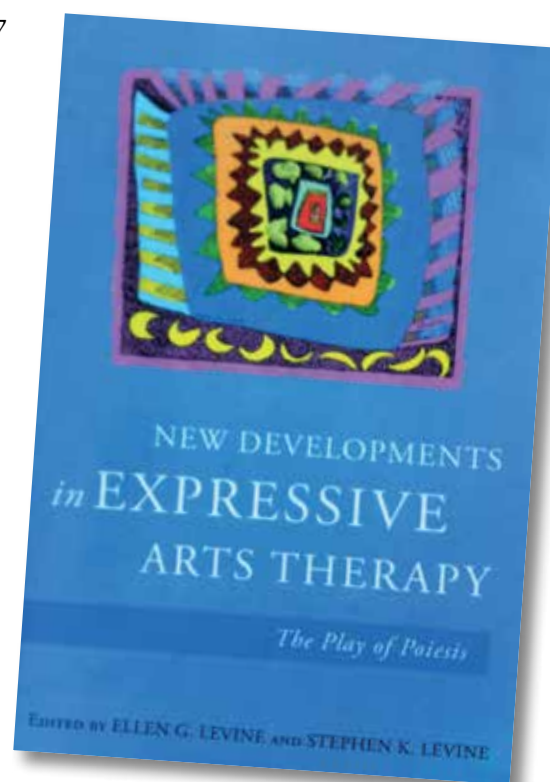
*The play of poiesis from the stage to the page – remembering and reviewing the Levines’ poietic presence at the 2017 ACATA/ANZATA Conference and in their latest book.*

The transformatory poietic work of Ellen G. Levine and Stephen K. Levine, founding members of the expressive arts therapy movement and the European Graduate School (EGS), came into my world while I was grappling to make sense of my role as arts therapist during the Canterbury earthquakes and their aftermath (2010–12). It was thus with great anticipation that I attended their presentations during the 2017 ACATA/ANZATA Arts Therapy Conference, ‘Gather, Envision, Create’ in Melbourne.

*Ellen sets up a large creative surface and, using a range of materials including paint, pastels, and coloured crepe paper, she builds an artwork in response to an emotionally stirring photographic image of an abandoned sandal. She shares her thoughts about her evolving creative process and its emergent meanings in bite-sized chunks every 15 minutes. She doesn’t reference Stephen’s narrative directly yet speaks of being subliminally aware of his words as she creates – and she leaves it open to the audience to make connections between her process and his. This offers us a fascinating enactment of their principle of decentring – where arts*



Figure 1: The Levines’ keynote address. 2017, photo by Deborah Green.



*creation steps away from direct engagement with the issue at hand and rather opens space for innovation and fresh insight. While Ellen actively models decentring, Stephen distributes snippets of paper among the audience. On each piece is a word as a prompt, and audience members are invited to call out these words as Stephen speaks. He considers each word and then spontaneously interweaves these ideas, producing an off-the-cuff emergent grounding theory that is, as he frames it, ‘indigenous to arts therapy’. In response to words such as ‘chaos’, ‘improvisation’, ‘modernism’ and ‘play’, his layered musings open glimpses into ways of being with expressive arts therapy that focus on setting aside formulas and dogmas. Rather he calls for us to come fully present to the aesthetic moment, to whimsy and playfulness, surprise and curiosity, to multiplicity and creative emergence, to allowing new order to emerge from the chaos of poietic creation – all of which invites stuckness to shift, and new ways of being and doing to emerge.<sup>1</sup>*

Ellen Levine and Stephen Levine's performative, improvised, in-the-moment, responsive and presence-based keynote address was an invitation to experience innovative creative contemplations about the nature of arts therapy, with particular emphasis on expressive arts therapy. This is amplified in *New developments in expressive arts therapy: The play of poiesis* (2017). This book, edited by Ellen G. Levine and Stephen K. Levine, plunges the reader into the heart of the phenomenological expressive arts therapy approach pioneered at Lesley University and further developed at EGS. In the book, reflexive explorations interweave visual art, poetry, thick descriptions of applied work, and theoretical and philosophical pondering in a layered work that is energising, troubling, provocative, dense and forward-looking. As the expressive arts are grounded in phenomenology rather than psychology, the collection presupposes a foundational familiarity with tailored concepts such as poiesis, field of play, decentring, worlding, intermodality and intermediality, low skill/high sensitivity, and staying on the surface. The collection begins by playing with and laying down emergent theoretical constructs underpinning expressive arts therapy, before exploring how this theory is lived in therapy, education, social and ecological change, and research.

Stephen K. Levine's prologue traces the philosophical and phenomenological grounding of poiesis. This opens the way for 'Part I: Theory', composed of two creative pieces and five essays. Those uninitiated into the rather complex terrain of phenomenological philosophy and/or the expressive arts therapy movement may find this section initially impenetrable. It thus may be wise to first turn to the later more applied sections. Following this, a return to the theory will be rewarded.

The first essay in the theory section is by another founder of the expressive arts movement, Shaun McNiff. He teases out his ideas about cultivating imagination, believing that imagination is the primary and "integrating intelligence", the conductor of creative action (p.23). He praises of the power of the "relaxed reverie of imagining" (p.22), during which linear thinking is suspended and an intermediate realm that avoids dichotomies is entered. This evokes the principle of simultaneity, during which many things happen at once in a constant kinesis of integration and movement, contradictions are accepted and allowed to interact, and creation is contagious, encouraging the application of the "medicine of the imagination" (p.27).

Following McNiff, Paulo J. Knill goes in search of the essence of the therapeutic process, suggesting that it may exist in the provision of an alternative experience of worlding. He explores rituals of restoration to address loss of societal binding. These healing rituals, evoked in situations of distress or dis-ease, involve leaving the everyday and entering a devotional space facilitated by a change agent with specific skills and competencies. This decentring, which entails exiting from the narrow situational/personal restrictions of the problem by engaging the logic of the imagination, reopens the field of play narrowed through distress or dis-ease, and thus offers alternative experiences of world. Art work forges interstructural relationships between the everyday and the imaginative reality, challenging and offering alternatives to the habitual worlding of everyday reality which "gives the hidden a chance to be met and to be utilized as a resource" (p.46).

Stephen K. Levine then presents an interview with Paulo J. Knill exploring how Knill came to his current understanding of expressive arts. Knill traces the formation of core ideas back to childhood experiences that led him to ground his work in phenomenology rather than psychology, and his use of 'expressive' in the French sense – not as psychological self-expression but the expressiveness of the arts media and their use. The artwork is thus viewed as 'thingly' – a thing in itself and not a by-product of a single ego. The ego and the problem are placed to one side and a process of intermodal decentring places the imagination and the arts at the centre. Jacques Stitelmann contemplates modality in a bid to clear up misunderstandings about intermodality as used in the expressive arts. He presents modality as a phenomenological term rather than as a synonym for mediality – the media used for expression. Stitelmann believes traditional art therapy is anchored in psychology: artwork is a product of an individual psyche, and unresolved aspects of the psyche are expressed and resolved through artistic process; the medium is thus chosen for its ability to best express the individual problem. Expressive arts therapy is grounded in phenomenology, and avoids psychological interpretations by viewing intermodality as the meeting of multiple material, immaterial and human elements in a creative experience. Modalities are thus ways of imagining. While mediality refers to the media which is 'not-me' (the materials used), modality is 'me', and refers to how I feel and understand my encounter with the world and the media. Stitelmann proposes six modalities: image, sound, act, word, movement and taste-smell. Each arts process/media usually engages one core

modality at its centre and each problem manifests in one or two modalities, leaving the others free for creative exploration. It is thus the “therapist’s job... to sort out the frightening and upsetting modalities from those that quiver with life and where creativity is possible” (p.78). Intermodal decentring involves a move away from the place of repetitive suffering to create space where new/other sensations, ideas and feelings may be experienced. Majken Jacoby dives into the depths of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy to explore poiesis, Being, expression and the ‘other’.

‘Part II: Therapy’ contains artwork and six essays exploring the expressive arts principles as applied in arts therapy. Hubert Eberhart begins with an exploration of intermodal decentring. He privileges an open relationship involving “appreciative curiosity”, and “artistic language” that moves towards the senses (p.100). He advocates a process that is resource-orientated, playful, inventive, curious, engages courageous modesty and encourages trust in the “pleasure of the unexpected” (p.101). He leads the reader through his process of: discussing the problem; moving to the studio; an invitation to create using restricted resources; aesthetic analysis which stays on the surface through detailed descriptions of the process/product and avoids any form of psychological interpretation; harvesting, during which the client pulls out several features that feel alive and connected to the problem; and, finally, integration builds bridges by linking the creative descriptions and real life. Shaun McNiff tackles the gnarly issue of quality in expressive arts therapy. He poses several provocative questions regarding the role and value of considering quality within arts therapy and calls for an “ongoing critical examination of artistic quality in relation to far-ranging and endlessly variable conditions of practice and personal style” (p.115).

Sabine Silberberg recounts her experiences as therapist within a centre in Vancouver for HIV-positive clients, many of whom have active drug addiction. She stresses the importance of meeting clients where they are and ensuring that the “arts are available when the clients are” (p.135). This involves letting go of preconceived ideas of practice. “While the dance of contradictions will remain, availability to stay with the experience of nothingness and fragmentation without imposing a new structure can help shape lives to be lived more creatively – while developing through the arts a ‘harm reduction for the soul’ – with beauty as a powerful ally” (p.135). Rebekah Windmiller contemplates the overlap between her own personal choreographic work and her work making murals with clients with acute mental distress in an in-

patient psychiatric unit. She transfers the power of the step-by-step algorithmic processes from her choreography into her mural-making with her clients by providing a simple map of steps that helped patients with a limited range of play. This led to a collective choreographed dance upon the page which evoked a core hope for herself and her clients “to be well-timed, present, playful, and held together within a structure that ultimately inlocks a new sense of aliveness” (p.144).

Melinda Ashley Meyer DeMott explores her work with traumatised exiles during a group project in Norway. As traumatic experiences have enormous impact upon the senses, this project embraced the “body-based” nature of the arts which communicate “from the senses to the senses” (p.148). The first priority was to create a field of play in which play engages all the senses, demands total presence and has no beginning or end. This allowed for intermodal transfer through a range of arts, with storytelling at the centre, during which tales were shared and witnessed by the group and the arts acted as a container for distress and pain. The final essay in the section on therapy is by Ellen G. Levine, in which she uses her work with children and their parents to ask: What makes play, expressive arts therapy and ritual ‘work’? She presents play as an open to-and-fro where anything can happen, the art process “as opening to the world and to unexplored territory” (p.159) rather than driving towards a psychological interpretation self, and ritual as the universal container that connects us with what makes us human. She renders stories of work with clients to show how these three elements help “us to restore ourselves when we lose our way” (p.173).

‘Part III: Education’ begins with creative pieces and then offers a further five essays in which the core principles of expressive arts are applied in education. Stephen K. Levine begins by exploring aesthetic education emphasising learning through the arts. He points to the need to disrupt the age-old polemic between poiesis and theoria, between chaos/creativity and logic/rationality. Challenging Western educational tendency to reject the former and lean into the latter, the expressive arts restore poiesis as a way of knowing. Analysis is not based on a pre-decided explanatory framework but is phenomenological, allowing meaning to arise from within the immediate creation, and thus the arts are not used to illustrate, but by “engaging poietic acts, students can discover their own resources for imaginative expression and thereby the possibility of helping others to do the same” (p.179).

Margo Fuchs Knill and Paulo J. Knill continue the discussion by exploring aesthetic responsibility in

education, which involves teachers providing frames that encourage the emergence of the new. To learn requires an encounter with something unknown, and the teacher is responsible for fostering an atmosphere where the unknown can be met as an opportunity rather than a threat. The low skill/high sensitivity principle applies to the setting of tasks that are simultaneously challenging but within the coping ability of the student. This motivates curiosity and gives students a sense of achievement that moves, touches, confronts and amazes.

Elizabeth Hösl and Peter Wanzenried address the acts of balance performed by teachers who, given the wide variety of contemporary educational settings and learners, require a high degree of skill as “education becomes more and more an art, a dance, and a losing and finding our balance again and again” (p.184). Stories of educational processes with displaced children and war-weary teachers are plumbed to reveal how the art of teaching and learning demands four kinds of balance. Ellen G. Levine offers a short piece describing a session with students at EGS involving an arts-based exploration of ‘otherness’. Together she and the students created an ‘art asylum’ in which the students were invited to explore by ‘going insane’ in a safe place. The lasting quality of the experience reveals the enduring power of free unfettered play. The final essay in this section belongs to Sally Atkins, who explores the idea of community by comparing elements of Black Mountain College, an experimental liberal arts college active in the United States from 1933 to 1956, and EGS.

‘Part IV: Social and Ecological Change’ deals with its subject via two creative pieces and another five essays. Paulo J. Knill offers a rich descriptive example to demonstrate how community art should offer “an imaginary space that is distinct from everyday reality with its situational restrictions and rigid routines – *the habitual experience of worlding*” (p.213). In this alternative experience of worlding things are surprising, unpredictable and unexpected. This extends the range of play and helps strengthen a community’s resilience and wellbeing.

Carrie MacLeod provides a storied account of her work in Sierra Leone, pondering “how can artistic process be of service to humanity in a country ravaged by war and oppression?” (p.234). She worked alongside community storytellers using multimodal, improvised work steeped in strong physicality, indigenous cultural forms and music. The work moved beyond linear narratives and explanations by following the collective impulse to return to the body – and these “embodied performances... serve as restorative and retributive

mechanisms” (p.240). When asked by an amputee, “What will you do with your hands?” she was provoked into several answers, one of which was: “With these hands I will hold a breathing space for living art forms to arise from the silence when all else has fallen away” (p.243).

Rosemary Faire explores how the arts can help us find our voices and re-engage with democracy. She combines artwork-centred expressive arts therapy and community arts ritual as ways to counter the an-aestheticising effects of too much bad news, and mobilise communal response to world dis-ease. She pushes back against the domestication of therapy. Using James Hillman’s idea of *Amina Mundi* and returning soul to the world, she encourages a move away from focus on the individual which renders therapy a self-centred project that falls into the “trap of individualizing pathology” (p.255) by failing to acknowledge that the self is an interiorisation of community. Faire contemplates how the expressive arts can encourage the emancipation of *Anima Mundi* so that “the de-souled world can once again be en-souled and speak to us of its suffering without fear of being reduced to projection and neurosis” (p.248).

Per Espen Stoknes contributes a short piece exploring the relationship between eco-philosophy and the expressive arts. Eco-philosophy examines what it would mean for Western society to acknowledge the inherent value of each being by turning from a human-centred to a nature-centred worldview. The expressive arts begin with the realisation that images of the imagination have their own inherent value. Stoknes notes that the expressive arts and eco-philosophy share “the decentering from the egoic concerns to the imagination of the earth” (p.260). Stephen K. Levine completes this section by contemplating what poiesis can contribute to ecological thinking. Within the expressive arts, poiesis centres around the idea that “we shape ourselves by shaping the world” (p.265) and this shaping is not a wilful imposition but a letting-be. In ecological thought and practice this opens the notion of an ‘aesthetic responsibility’ towards the earth and a need to ask: what does the earth need?

The final part of the book, ‘Part V: Research’, presents creative works and five essays. Shaun McNiff begins by pondering: why arts-based research (ABR)? ABR refers to “the use of artistic expressions in various art forms by the researcher, either alone or with others, as a primary mode of inquiry” (p.275). He suggests “artistic processes [are] a number of steps ahead of knowing and the reflecting mind” (p.275). McNiff points to the

contradiction in our profession’s tendency to use other disciplines to justify and explain our artistic procedures. He believes this stems not only from the desire for acceptance, but from uncertainty: ABR can never be planned in advance or use pre-existing procedures – it is infinitely variable, like the arts. ABR “rubs against the pre-ordained” (p.278), involves a venture into the unknown, and may bring anarchy, confusion and chaos. Yet, if we can “accept the risks of artistic experimentation” (p.278), artistic inquiry has the ability to help us discover what we are doing unawares, what we can and cannot see, and how we might not be what we think we are. ABR is thus crucial, as “art-based inquiries have the most potential to shape future practice in the applied art fields” (p.278).

Kelly Clark/Keefe, Jessica Gilway and Emily Miller discuss the disruption of ‘science as usual’ and the outing of science as non-objective and clearly aligned to the relations of power and oppression. They consider how knowing through the sciences and knowing through the arts differ. Artistic inquiry follows postmodern and feminist provocations of how we ‘do’ research, which ushers in further explorations of what happens to ‘data’, ‘analysis’ and ‘representation’ in ABR. Sabine Silberberg explores her journey to discovering ABR as she sought to address how to “capture and communicate the vitality, the liveliness, and the essence of lived experience?” (p.301) of working in an AIDS foundation in Vancouver. Lisa Herman writes of her ABR research into how non-participants experience images of evil events, especially the Holocaust. Carrie MacLeod, in the final essay in the research section, explores research conducted into her work with people in Canada’s refugee protection system, during which she embraced ABR as a way to conduct a “lived inquiry... that moves freely in between the search, the searched and the silence” (p.319).

I ponder this idea of “the search, the searched and the silence” (p.319) as I attempt to close the book and move back into my life as educator, researcher, artist and arts therapist. I notice the experience of the book lingers. I am still within its pages gazing out through wide eyes at my multi-layered practice, searching for new ways come fully present to the aesthetic moment, to whimsy and playfulness, surprise and curiosity, to multiplicity and creative emergence, to allowing new order to emerge from the chaos of poetic creation. I therefore loop back and offer, in closing, the words of one of the poems that open the book (p.20).

## Endnote

1. Adapted with permission from ‘A lived experience of decentring: Ellen and Stephen Levine at the ACATA/ ANZATA Conference’ by Deborah Green, printed in the January 2018 CTAA newsletter.



Figure 2. *Poem*, photo by Deborah Green, 2017.

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