

Seeking wordlessness: Reflections on a knitted journal

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Abstract

Reflexivity, the unequivocal heart of psychodynamic art therapy, enables practitioners to navigate clinical material and may be honed through art-based journalling. Aside from regular entries, there are no strict parameters on the format or art media. Hence, this article presents practitioner-based insights from a trainee art therapist's knitted journal. Its notable variation in form made visible the implicit intersubjective material that the trainee had unconsciously enacted through her knitting. Thereby, the journal profoundly affected the trainee's emerging practice and reveals craftwork's potential to wordlessly facilitate therapeutic change in the trainee and within the intersubjective client–therapist space.

Keywords

Art therapy, art-based inquiry, reflexivity, knitting, art therapist trainee

Introduction

This article centres on the practitioner-based insights produced by a trainee art therapist, who used knitting for art-based reflective journalling. It is an art-based inquiry written in retrospect after I had fulfilled my postgraduate training.

It traces the development of my interactions with the knitted journal and identifies an unexpected shift in the relationship, where it became a separate, dialogical entity. The article discusses key insights with substantiation. In a nutshell, it asserts the criticality of art-based journalling in aiding a trainee's development. Additionally, it documents knitting's potential to support practitioner growth and therapeutic change.

The boundaries of self-disclosure, client confidentiality and best interests were adhered to in alignment with professional ethical standards and codes of conduct (ANZACATA, 2022; ATAS, 2022). In addition, I received regular clinical supervision during both placements that enriched and tempered this account. Though this is a practitioner-based inquiry, the material presented is inadvertently of an intersubjective source. Hence, further steps were consciously taken to remove any identifiable client data. All therapeutic relationships had terminated at the point of writing and further issues arising from the dual practitioner/researcher role are not foreseen. In recognition of my identity during that span of time, I will continue to refer to myself as a trainee throughout the article.

Before I begin this account, I would like to offer my understanding of the definitions and concepts that underpin this article. I rely on the definition of 'countertransference' as the

therapist's subjective reactions to the client (Lemma, 2016) or the image within the triangular client–therapist–image relationship (Schaverien, 2000). Additionally, I consider the extended definition of countertransference as an unconscious communication from the client, which may manifest as projective identification experienced or enacted by the therapist (Innocente, 2022). With deep roots in philosophy, the intersubjective worldview posits that our individuality is formed in relation to our environments and others (Skaife, 2001). By relation, 'intersubjectivity' refers to the subjective ability to share another's subjective lived experience (Stern, 2005). 'Reflexivity' broadly refers to the critical capacity to self-reflect while considering wider sociocultural factors that might influence the power dynamics, identities and co-created material that manifest in the therapeutic space.

Based on these notions, it is possible to regard countertransference as a relational echo of material, of likely origin from the client, occurring within the therapeutic relationship, which is embedded within the intersubjective field. However, as asserted by Skaife (2001), the use of psychoanalytic language for art therapy imposes awkward descriptions or fails to capture the intersubjective and relational quality of art and art-making. Moreover, a clean delineation between the Self/Other (or subject/object) proves clinically and theoretically troublesome. Therefore, this hinders reconciliation between the psychoanalytic and intersubjective paradigm, as the latter asserts that the products of subject–object interactions, such as shared thoughts, feelings or art-objects, cannot be discretely attributed to either (Skaife, 2001). Given this, this article is inclined towards the intersubjective worldview, though it adopts psychoanalytic terms (i.e., transference, countertransference or projective identification) in the limited use and meaning intended by original authors, such as Schaverien (2000) and Innocente (2022).

Journeying with the knitted journal

Beginnings and context

Serendipitously, the seed of inspiration for the knitted journal was the rice stitch. It grew from an instructional project that my near-centenarian grandmother-in-law urged me to try over the winter break of my first year of postgraduate studies.

With familiar ease, my grandmother-in-law transformed a skein of merino yarn into the humble beginnings of a scarf. Then she handed the incomplete project to me – needles, open loops, skeins and all – and began her lessons through unstructured demonstrations, a pedagogy through which most women of her time acquired skills in cuisine and craft. To make matters worse, most of her tips and explanations wound up lost in translation because we did not share a common language. Though an intimidating experience, this pulled me into a sequestered space where connection and heritage were sustained through apprenticeship. With gestures and utterances, my grandmother-in-law invoked an unhurried, wordless form of social learning. It bypassed my intellectual sense-making and, instead, urged me to empathically listen and relate to her, as she imparted implicit meaning and procedural

knowledge. It was a mode that I felt alienated from, a distance no doubt created by the cognitive comforts of contemporary education – but I craved reacquaintance.

By the time I resumed my training after the break, knitting the scarf had become part of my evening routine. That same semester, I began my clinical placement at a nursing home, with late-life clients who were living with dementia and/or experiencing global functional decline. Though, overall, it was a supportive environment, this did not negate the pervasive emotional toll brought about by proximity to loss, grief and human suffering. Clinicians and caregivers alike are confronted by these existential threats of death and disease, and may experience a deep, inexpressible distress at the erosion of a cherished Other's identity, functionality and relationships.

The reality of my clients' profound biopsychosocial challenges had a subconscious effect on me: I felt helpless. This was not unusual for an inexperienced trainee. In general, supporting clients living with advanced dementia entails significant planning and careful execution to elicit a brief, often nonverbal, response. However, the helplessness I experienced was not a solvable problem that I could fix by bolstering my competence – or by thinking hard enough. Rather, it felt like a mute paralysis that stifled my creativity and inner processes. It was as though my connection to my Self was inexplicably interrupted, making it difficult to think and create in an authentic way. As I churned out notes and reports, the words and images I produced felt inadequate or empty, even though they satisfied clinical and academic standards. There was something missing – something beyond words.

My search for a new vocabulary led me through frameworks, concepts and visuals, though these attempts left me overwhelmed, drowning in the cacophonous expressions of others. I grew disillusioned with the paradigm of explicit communication, as language and symbols simply fell short.

A prescribed component of my training was the maintenance of a visual journal, which aims to support trainees by producing a record of lived experiences, transcribed and contained in the form of art. However, though it was intended as a regular practice, I began to neglect mine. My entries were no more than borrowed descriptors and icons. I use the word “borrowed” as it resonates with the emotional disconnection I felt towards my own creative output, a hollow bricolage of cognitive concepts that resonated little with my lived experiences.

Befriending the art object and setting parameters

As I avoided my visual journal, I gravitated towards my side project: the scarf. I drank in its unassuming comfort. It reminded me of the nonverbal connection that I shared with my grandmother-in-law. Though intangible and unobservable, it was an attachment that existed in certain knowability, a resonant felt sense experienced as a gradual softening of clenched muscles in my core and hands, as if I were opening to receive a warm, sympathetic handhold or embrace. I clung to that reassurance, that sense of a connection, like a child clutching a

transitional object that they were not ready to discard. Perhaps I had sensed that the scarf held wisdom yet to be integrated. Or that the scarf was a tangible memento of the nonverbal connection I could – but had yet to – experience with my clients.

Increasingly, the knitting shifted away from technical mastery towards intuitive construction. Upon recognising this resemblance to art-based journaling, I resolved to continue it as an exercise of self-exploration and creative experimentation. Henceforth, it became less a scarf and more a journal, anchored in these parameters: (a) knit at least a row a day; (b) never unravel stitches; and (c) leave mistakes as is.

Each evening, drained of energy and expressively mute, I added a couple of rows of stitches. Most times, I knitted blindly in the fading evening light until it disappeared entirely. The darkness guided my attention inwards, paradoxically shining a light on the sensations I held within my body. It eased me into attunement with the yarn's material qualities and the muffled clicks as the needles danced in production of fabric.

The tactile, rhythmic act of knitting provided grounding, re-centring me in my Self. By occupying my attention, knitting temporarily suspended my cognition and granted reprieve from rumination, and allowed for introspection or reconnection to my felt sense. At times, the art-making brought about a meditative state, marked by a sense of creative embodiment and being in, rather than reflected through, the art-making.

The yarn's pillowy springiness prompted an open playfulness; a tactile reminder of being cocooned in a comforter or a blanket fort. However, in Singapore's tropical climate, yarn's insulative quality was hardly welcome. The fabric trapped an oppressive bubble of heat on my lap, while the working yarn clung to my fingertips like a spider's web, exacerbating my feelings of trepidation. I was pulled between a desire to jump into play and an intense aversion to constrictive suffocation. However, once optimal tension was found, the working yarn would suddenly release its grip and allow itself to be worked into pliable loops. For me, the point where the yarn changes from cutting to agreeable was immensely therapeutic. In a parallel process buoyed by self-sufficiency and creative reconfiguration, the shift in material properties simultaneously prompted a cathartic release from the paralysing knot I was unconsciously trapped in. I felt my inner workings relax and turn as fluid and malleable as the yarn that embraced my index finger.

Some days, I made more errors than a competent knitter should, often losing count of stitches. Others, I would question my memory of my grandmother-in-law's lessons, wondering if I was meant to learn the rice or stockinette stitch. Some days, knitting was smooth and enjoyable. Others, the working yarn strangled my fingers and strained my patience with its uncooperativeness, or it grew so loose that I could barely sense the connection. In hindsight, these were plausible intersubjective experiences that bore echoes of my self-doubt, frustrations with the distal client-therapist relationships, or my clients' struggles with the degradation of cognitive abilities and memory.

The knitted journal remained a reliable companion that took and wove what material was offered into tangible form. It provided containment, grounding and contemplative quietude as it held the residues of my lived experiences.

Separation and deeper dialogue

As I had allowed myself to be led by tactile instinct, the art-making produced a variable form that held meandering tacit narratives within. It captured imperceptible day-to-day shifts in art-making movements, even though I believed I had replicated the stitch identically.

Tension, attention, light, external factors, and my daily lived experience were all implicitly captured in the irregular fabric – in ways better than words could have done.



Figure 1. Celeste Choo, *Knitted journal* (top detail), 2022, knitted merino yarn, dimensions variable.



Figure 2. Celeste Choo, *Knitted journal* (bottom detail), 2022, knitted merino yarn, dimensions variable.

I grew to appreciate the project's tactile quality over its visual aesthetic. Brushing my fingers over it, I would unexpectedly notice features embedded in the fabric, like a loose loop or a pucker, that my eyes had missed. These tactile interactions prompted recollections of events so minute that I barely paid any attention to them when they occurred: such as the nicks and dropped loops introduced when the family cat decided the scarf was fair game, or the unexplained yellow yarn that my grandmother-in-law introduced, its uneven tightness prompting a fuzzy memory of her tugging at it. Through these tactile marks, the knitting sometimes functioned as a story cloth, prompting positive feelings of familial closeness to individuals who were time streams and countries apart. While I was not consciously aware of it then, they were an emotional lifebuoy that counteracted the social pain and loneliness I experienced at placement.

The knitted journal continued to grow wild and unruly, as I unconsciously enacted each day's events one stitch at a time. I attributed the knitted journal's form to inattention, physical exhaustion or bad technique – causal explanations that invariably originated with myself.



Figure 3. Celeste Choo, *Knitted journal*, 2022, knitted merino yarn, dimensions variable.

Over time, however, I began to perceive the knitted journal as an independent entity, rather than a mere container or extension of my chronicled past. The cumulative translated, implicit memories seemed to have rendered the journal ‘not-me’ – as separate and unreadable as an adult child. At the root of it, I could no longer reliably recall the notions that had been coded into the fabric. More interesting, my tactile interactions with the knitted journal prompted new thoughts and sensations that did not originate from within my subjective memory or Self. Much like the image in the therapeutic triangle (Schaverien, 2000), the art object had matured into a separate entity that seemed to possess its own being.

My recognition of this subject/object separation made reflective dialogical processes possible: for instance, the examination of the intersubjective relationship between artist and art object or engaging in imaginal dialogue with it. Having read McNiff (2004) and Schaverien (2000) in the first semester, I had understood these phenomena in theory, but had not experienced or integrated them at an emotional or felt level. Learning to trust and rely on my artwork as a relational Other pushed my reflexivity further.

I became sensitively self-aware; though the viewfinder remained smudged, I could perceive the origin of my enactments in greater dimension and detail. For instance, my largely illogical adjustments to the stitch pattern and number per row reflexively alerted me to a re-enactment of the instinctive adaptations I made in-session to offer closer person-centred support to the client. My oscillating inner observations to manage yarn tension – too much, too little – echoed the self-regulatory attempts to attune to an Other. The haunting helplessness – of being unable to think through the problem and escape the trepidation – dissipated when I was anchored in myself and might be telling of a projective identification. The form seemed to speak volumes of the shifting nature of intersubjective client–therapist encounters. The scarf’s width continued to vary despite conscious attempts to maintain some consistency. It was as if the material was actively resisting and thereby reminding me of inter-action, and that perhaps I should not be yearning to control the process. Moreover, as I had not maintained detailed documentation of daily happenings, I could not triangulate an empirical explanation or cause for this variability. However, as explicit expressions and meaning-making were never the focus of the journal, I came to accept the dialogical message: let go. It shifted me towards openly sensing the quality of the present engagement, an interconnected material attunement that grew out of iterative maintenance of optimal tension.

In parallel, my forays into wordlessness had paved the way for closer attunement with my clients, who were largely nonverbal or facing significant cognitive decline. Learning from the journal’s implicit holding, I learnt to mirror, attune and actively respond to subtle forms of nonverbal interactions that were deeply felt, yet not easily articulated. As I loosened up and allowed for more process-led open-endedness, sessions naturally became more client led. Much like how the yarn and needles responsively transformed input into interaction, so too did monologues tone down to invite conversation. Clients began to surprise me with a warmth and wisdom beyond my imagination. In soothing and containing my anxious desire for definite, tangible proof or outcomes, the knitted journal curtailed a potentially detrimental assertion of my needs as the therapist, over the client’s needs.

Like most arts-based inquiries, these dialogues produced more questions than definite answers. However, my relationship with my knitted journal concretised my tentative, intuitive pursuit of wordlessness that until then had felt like chasing smoke. It established that a tacit, knowable layer of intersubjective experience existed, and even if it never attained tangible, explicit form, it was good enough.

Discussion of key insights

On knitting and textiles

Knitting is a textile weaving technique, where through tactile manipulation of strands of yarn, a skilled practitioner produces a sensorially rich, pliable fabric renowned for its drape and insulation. For this reason, like most fibre and textile arts, it carries therapeutic potential by way of soothing haptic stimulation and the potential to evoke links to tradition and intimate, personal narratives (Amos & Binkley, 2021; Garlock, 2016, 2021; Innocente, 2022; Leone, 2020). Engagement in these slow forms of art-making may induce heightened states of awareness akin to meditation that allows practitioners to ground, heal and construct (Wellesley-Smith, 2015).

Moreover, thread and textiles are associated with the concepts of maternal holding and attachment (Dormor, 2020; Pajaczowska, 2018). In relation to this, in his vignette titled *String*, Winnicott (1971/2005) examines a boy's striking fascination with string in his defensive denial of maternal separation. Similarly, my instinctive inclination towards yarn or knitting may stem from the desire to feel entwined with a relational Other.

Going beyond the physical characteristics of materials, practitioners may broadly consider the material's evocative and agential potential, which may emerge through deep, contemplative interactions (Bolt & Barrett, 2013; Elbrecht, 2021; Hinz, 2009/2020; Thomson, 2020). The notion of agential materiality suggests the possibility of effects or affect beyond the practitioner's intention or influence and, thereby, the creation of an interactive result that belongs to neither the human subject or non-human object or environment.

Like Innocente (2022), I found myself enacting onto the material the implicit intersubjective material that I unknowingly co-created within the therapeutic relationship. This manifested as uncharacteristic technical mistakes or displaced frustrations, evidenced by describing the material as uncooperative. The fabric also functioned like a story cloth, recording fragments and residues of my lived experience (Garlock, 2016, 2021; Leone, 2020). At times, interactions with it brought to the surface preconscious memories that I did not realise I had retained. Additionally, I experienced a dialogical relationship with the journal as a separate object and entity, which produced new insights beyond the boundaries of my awareness and imagination.

On the trainee's art-based journals

Over the course of my training, my art-based journals have provided critical support and allowed me to deepen my self-reflexivity. Art-based or visual journals have the unique advantage of supporting self-expression and self-discovery through a range of art media, allowing for the development of an intuitive artistic language. They allow practitioners to tap into a range of art media, which they may therapeutically resonate with. Like the practice of response art, journals contain and hold the practitioner's externalised psycho-emotional material for later contemplation – a quality that enables their protective and reflexive function (Fish, 2012, 2019; Nash, 2020). It is worth considering how a journal's content may serve as raw material for art-into-narrative translative processes to enable further reflection (Potash, 2019).

For me, apart from holding my inexpressible distress, the knitted journal allowed me to construct an artistic language that supported the implicit processes I needed to overcome my paralysis. This creative or therapeutic process “expands the language of what it is to be human” (Contos, 2002, p.1). In a similar process described by Shima (2021), the art-making restored an inner resonance, allowing me to regain my creative connection with my Self.

While there are no strict criteria for what a journal may be, the word ‘journal’ suggests an object capable of maintaining a chronological record of events or lived experiences. Typically, this would take the form of a book or folio. However, as shown, a knitted journal – or just a scarf – served a similar purpose. It contained within each loop a quivering imprint of memory that the currents of intersubjective, interactive forces had uncovered in that moment of making. Though it followed no sequential storyline, the fabric's tacit narrative is no less poignant. Finally, the repetitiveness of its construction held and reflected the natural oscillations of lived experience. It is an account that encourages wider consideration of imaginative possibilities for the humble art-based journal.

Conclusion

Art-based journalling is a quintessential part of a trainee's reflexive development, which is the cornerstone of a psychodynamic art psychotherapy practice. Apart from the development of an authentic creative language, the journal is a critical psycho-emotional support for the integration of poignant intersubjective encounters at clinical placement.

In documenting the personal development and therapeutic change facilitated by the knitting, this account encourages broader definition of a journal's form and adds to the growing body of literature on the material qualities of fibre and textile arts.

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Celeste is an art therapist focused on fostering wellbeing and dignity in late life. Through her clinical work, she has journeyed with individuals living with complex, often terminal conditions. These privileged encounters, alongside poignant personal experiences, continue to shape and humanise her practice profoundly. She was trained in psychodynamic art therapy at LASALLE College of the Arts, where she graduated with distinction and two postgraduate scholarships, the LASALLE Merit Award and the ANZACATA Scholarship for a Final Year Master's Student. She roots her therapy and creative practice in Singapore, her fluid, ever-evolving childhood home.



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