

# Stretching material possibilities within the creative arts therapies: Exploring margarine, charcoal and sound, and their affective entanglements within co-responsive ecosystems

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## Abstract

This article explores the forces and reverberations of materials in affecting artmaking processes, and their unique and varied capacities to elicit profound therapeutic responses. Engaging experientially with margarine, charcoal and sound as arts materials, alongside two fellow emerging creative arts therapists, I share my perspective on our group's resonances/dissonances in relation to creative arts therapy frameworks such as the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC). While some alternative media classifications hint at a material vitalism, I feel there is a scarcity of theory/classifications specific to creative arts therapies (CAT) that situate materials as agential beings, intra-actively co-creating and inviting potential for therapeutic expression. In contrast to predominantly humanistic perspectives, this article explores the new materialist agential potency of material impermanency as offering therapeutic possibilities for transformation and the building of new orders. These entangle with themes of the profound effects of environmental considerations, eating disorders, body image and self-expression, while highlighting the cultural considerations of tikanga (protocol) when working with food in a therapeutic context.

## Keywords

New materialism, arts materials, food art, eating disorders, Expressive Therapies Continuum, creative arts therapies

## Grounding

Rooted in Aotearoa New Zealand, the land in which I was born, and in which these words were conceived, two fellow emerging creative arts therapists, Sarah Wilson and Julian Chote, and I embarked on seven days in February 2023 of durational explorations of the therapeutic use of materials in artmaking. Each choosing a material that piqued our interest, we individually creatively engaged with margarine, charcoal and sound in daily art-making sessions followed by thick discussions of our encounters with each. Inspired by new materialism, I filter these experiences through Lange-Berndt's (2015) methodology of 'material complicity', which celebrates the agential power/potency of materials "to follow the material and to *act with* the material" (p.13), prioritising matter as alive, transient and

rhizomatic, perpetually in a space of *becoming*. I acknowledge and send gratitude to ngā iwi Māori as tangata whenua (people of the land) of Aotearoa, and despite the processes I have undertaken to respect tikanga (protocols) when using food as an art material on this land, this may cause offence to some readers and their own cultural customs. I honour and hold space for all responses to these ponderings as valid, and I invite you to engage with the work in whatever way feels appropriate. Below are the written unravellings of my personal explorations, interweaving and entangling within parallaxical perspectives of my peers as we tease out material potentialities and their alignments/deviations from creative arts therapist material frameworks such as the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC).

## Salient themes

The neuroscientific and psychologically informed ETC uses a hierarchical, children's developmental continuum of visual information-processing to distinguish fluid, affective materials on one side, in contrast to restrictive, cognitive materials on the other (Lusebrink, 1990). While many of our processes aligned loosely with the ETC, we equally troubled the model, yearning for a more diverse and entangled web of material possibilities that spoke to our diverse emotional, sensorial experiences and their interconnections with the natural environment. As we explored how our intersubjective material engagements co-responded with one another, our deep attunements to environmental factors became apparent, and their a/effects on our materials and how we engaged with them. We collectively found that mediators (such as gloves, carving tools, sound-editing programmes) invited us to work through potential material-aversions and functioned as both distancers and portals towards meaning-making, particularly within our sound explorations. Another salient theme was the ways in which impermanence, mess and containment a/effected our processes and helped address potential risk elements.

## Material explorations of margarine

Margarine called to me during the January 2023 Auckland floods, the nostalgic yellowy matter churning and transforming within the bowl, somehow soothing my nerves. This prompted reflexing on my past tendencies to 'stress bake' as a way to emotionally regulate in times of crisis, transporting me back to cheeky childhood bowl-licking. I felt a desire emerging to explore and re-contextualise the accessible and assumed everydayness of margarine as an art material. Kramer's (1975) warning of creative arts therapists (CATs) using alternative materials as a gimmick loomed in my head, anxieties spiralling...

*A breach of tikanga?*

*Wasteful?*

*Is this even 'art'?*

## Intentionality and tikanga (protocols)

Rich conversations with my companions challenged me to delve deeper into my core intention. With time, I excavated and shared my unspoken past encounters with disordered eating and the leaching guilt and shame attached to this. My conflicted desire/shame in exploring margarine highlighted rhizomatic tendrils within my gut, connecting food (particularly 'fat'), my emotional processing, and inhabiting a 'female' body.

Through generous kōrero (conversation), consultation and written guidance from Heleina Waimoana Dalton, for which I am forever grateful, I was able to provide invitational guides to my peers that acknowledged tikanga and opened possibilities for constructing personal ritual frameworks in preparation for using margarine as an art material.

*Emphasising involvement as an invitation; personal agency prioritised.*

*A disclaimer of the potentiality for tikanga/protocols to be established around using kai/food within art-making with consciousness.*

*A specific articulation of margarine being invited to be explored as an art material in this context, not as food; and an offering of a non-food material substitute with similar sensorial qualities.*

*An invitation for a ritualised designation of food being explored as an art material, for the purpose of arts-making, in a space that is distinct from spaces of cooking/eating.*

*A calling to deeply consider personal responses and to engage in ways that feel right from moment to moment.*

*An invitation to wash/dry hands before engaging and options for mediators like gloves/carving tools.*

*An offering of a karakia, prayer or personal centring so the rōpū/group or individuals can engage with the material in a way that is culturally appropriate for them.*

*Post art-making, an invitation to whakanoa (breaking tapu/safely exiting liminality) through cleansing with water.*

*Lastly, a consideration of quantity, disposal and an offering of gradual combining into a green food-scrap bin.*

This process grounded me in the intentions of my art-making, allowing me to safely respond to my inner calling to explore this loaded matter.



Figure 1. Virginia Frankovich, *A humid morning in the tin shed studio with refrigerated margarine*, 2023, digital photograph.

## Troubling the ETC

Julian's, Sarah's and my own experiences resonated/troubled established frameworks of materials and their intended therapeutic use within the creative arts therapies. Collectively, we loosely equated margarine's properties to 'wet clay', which resides on the 'fluid/affective' side of the ETC continuum (Hinz, 2009) and, according to this framework, should elicit emotional over cognitive responses. However, when I shared my experiences of freezing the material, it offered a myriad of additional, more resistive properties that troubled this initial positioning, alluding to the food material's amorphous quality. Seiden's (2001) lens of materials possessing innate human-adjacent qualities, which are imbued and affected by client/therapist, helped me to make sense of the quality of fragility we recognised within the margarine. Imbuing the margarine with human-like characteristics symbolically alluded to a sense of the vulnerability and impermanence of the land that we had witnessed amidst the Auckland floods and Cyclone Gabrielle. The group's recurring emphasis on considerations of mess highlights the importance of therapists tolerating/surrendering to chaos (Knill et al., 2005) as we all related to the material's complete requirement of presence/ing as it morphed from moment to moment.



Figure 2. Virginia Frankovich, *Day one margarine explorations*, 2023, digital photograph.



Figure 6. Julian Chote, *Day one margarine process*, 2023, digital photograph.



Figure 3. Virginia Frankovich, *In the muggy lounge room in the evening with frozen margarine*, 2023, digital photograph.



Figure 5. Sarah Wilson, *Day two margarine process*, 2023, digital photograph.

## Material properties of margarine

Despite beginning a session with it refrigerated, we all found that the margarine melted swiftly when we worked with it, thus steering it away from its initial ‘resistive’ qualities, inviting more sensorial tactility, affirming the duality of the kinesthetic/sensory continuum (Hinz, 2009). Despite Hinz’s claims that mediators decrease sensory elements, Sarah’s and Julian’s use of mediators (gloves, knives, scrapers) still elicited high sensory processing of smells and textures. Choosing to touch the margarine directly on day one, I experienced purely sensory/kinaesthetic process-based play. In contrast, on day two, frozen matter invited more resistive, considered, perceptual/cognitive mark-making (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978). Inability to ‘master’ particular materials can counteract healing through feelings of irritation (Hinz, 2009), and it is important to investigate why frustration occurs, experimenting with adjusting elements to explore alternative possibilities (Graves-Alcorn & Kagin, 2017). Our resonant feelings of irritability at the dramatic changes of form were counteracted not only through freezing the material but by changing the contact surface to paper, the permanent grease marks counteracting transience, allowing perceptual composition with the permanent imprints, removing feelings of frustration.



Figure 4. Julian Chote, *Day two margarine artwork*, 2023, digital photograph.



Figure 7. Virginia Frankovich, *Day one margarine process*, 2023, digital photograph.

## Eating disorders and food as an art material

Moon (2010) likens art materials to foods, equating their abilities to nourish emotions, recognising them as palpable channels to inner worlds, with an ability to communicate beyond the verbal language, possessing powerful capabilities for clients with eating disorders. I reflect on my bingeing of art materials, increasing quantity-determinants daily, followed by guilt of wastage afterwards, which was heightened by the art material being literal food. Using materials that are culturally meaningful can accelerate/accentuate therapeutic processes (Moon, 2010) and I reflex on how food often feels like an innate language of my personal expression. Food as an art material has sensory qualities fuelling metaphor and symbolism to reflect sociocultural issues, entangling food art with political activism (Rozin, 2007). I am curious how others with histories of eating disorders may respond to working with foodstuffs as an art material and how these entangle with cultural, economic and hygienic considerations.



Figure 8. Virginia Frankovich, *Day three on the deck in the cold morning rain with frozen and room-temperature margarine*, 2023, digital photograph.



Figure 9. Virginia Frankovich, *Day three witnessing*, 2023, margarine sculpture, 254 × 228 × 190mm.



Figure 10. Virginia Frankovich, *Day three margarine artwork*, 2023, margarine sculpture, 254 × 228 × 190mm.

*Yesterday's collapsed creation reinvents itself as a figure on my deck.*

*Expanding, regenerating.*

*No longer margarine, the matter transcends into a communing co-conspirator.*

*I stare at the being, it stares back at me.*

*Sweat, tears drip down its face.*

*"What's the point, when it's just going to collapse?"*

*We lock eyes once more, a live, intimate encounter.*

*A theatre show with no audience, never to be seen again.*

*Intra-actions between the more-than-margarine, myself and our entangled surrounds.*

*By midday, its presence fades, collaborating with the sun to reconfigure as a crumpled terrain.*



## Material explorations of charcoal

Sarah chose to explore the materiality of charcoal as an opportunity to delve into fresh feelings of guilt, shame and resistance around the material when she compared her level of skill with past art-school days. Fenner (2012) asserts the importance of remaining curious about the influence of therapeutic environments on art sense-making, and our group noted that intimate, domestic environments (bedrooms, lounges) prompted inward-looking/reflexive explorations. This contrasted with Sarah's session in her serene garden, where external factors such as the sun, breeze and surface textures invited mindfulness, feeding into her expression. Similarly, my artwork at the threshold of domesticity against the glass front door offered a nature portal, the gusts and flashes of Cyclone Gabrielle feeding into my expression.

*It's early morning.*

*Trees dancing viciously.*

*Confined to the lounge room, I tape a large piece of butcher's paper to the glass door, away from tiny hands.*

*The door transforms into a lightbox, illuminating the paper with the storm's brooding glow.*

*Cognition leaves as I begin large gestural mark-making with the charcoal.*

*Kinesthetic, embodied freedom creates mottled ashy marks across the textural glass surface.*

*Rubbing the charcoal with my fingers, I shift into sensorial play.*

Our rōpū (group) collectively noted the strong influences and transformation of the material depending on the surfaces and textures which it engaged with (mottled window glass, outdoor concrete, cork tiles), highlighting to me an opportunity for our group's integral environmental considerations to be treated as materials themselves, worthy of deeper awareness for arts therapists within media/material frameworks such as the ETC.



Figure 11. Sarah Wilson, *Day two charcoal process*, 2023, charcoal on brown paper, 900 × 1200mm.



Figure 12. Virginia Frankovich, *Day two charcoal exploration amidst Cyclone Gabrielle*, 2023, charcoal on butcher's paper, 1200 × 740mm.

## Charcoal's spiritual cycle

An 'open-studio' approach to CAT views materials, media and mediators as belonging to separate whānau (families), carrying "spiritual-technical-cognitive-emotional knowledge... awaiting bodily awakening" (Orbach, 2020, p. 58). Sorted into *wet, dry, 3D, connector/divider* categories, the distinct families share lineages and identities of knowing. Within this framework, charcoal belongs to the 'dry' family, with identifying traits such as powerfulness, impulsiveness and sensuality (Orbach, 2020). These qualities resonate with Seiden's (2001) human-like material characterisations, and I feel these lenses offer more scope to charcoal's capabilities beyond the ETC's 'resistive' categorisation (Hinz, 2009). I contemplate charcoal's spiritual cycle within our group's art-making:

*Living trees*

*Flames*

*Resurrection through art-making*

... the spiritual essence permeating through charcoal's association with intergenerational grief (Orbach & Galkin, 2016) and my own personal experience of its capacity to trigger my repressed emotions. Small boundary-determined media can help contain emotion (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978), and our group created containment through smaller paper boundaries, yet quickly found this restrictive. Finding freedom in larger spaces, kinaesthetic expressions emerged within our process-based expressions. A collective resonance within our group was a sense of yo-yoing across extremes of the ETC. At points throughout our charcoal engagements, we could become immersed in finite, affective details, shortly followed by pixelating outwards into a more cognitive/perceptual lens where symbols and narratives emerged.

## Impermanence and mess

Julian and I felt conscious of the impermanence of the charcoal sticks themselves, their fast-shedding nature eliciting a tenderness within us, and pondered whether our lower quantity-determinants made us acutely aware of the material's swift vanishing. I'm curious whether charcoal's temporality could elicit a sense of achievement or conversely feelings of disappointment, to see something whittled down so quickly, the dark sediment reinforcing our sympoietic resonances around the toleration/embracing of mess. Within a CAT context, I connect Robbins' (1999) articulations of mess as a portal to discovering "new orders" (p.121) within our group's collective experiences, where the sensorial, smudgy chaos inevitably birthed a myriad of symbols from which meaning was made.

## The rhythms and risks of charcoal

I ponder Robbins' (1994) considerations of materials' rhythmic and risk qualities, pondering the multi-sonic beats of charcoal and connecting 'risk' to the resonant and complex hyper-sensory inclinations that arose within our group's charcoal unravellings.

*smearing black mess/fingerprints*

*squeaking, scrrrrappinggg*

*SNAP!*

*tiny stub whittling down, down, down.*

*Gone.*

*My drumming heart sprints*

*ashy debris lying at my feet.*

I feel the emotional weight of charcoal and its potential for triggering risk factors as I recall a previous art-making session where it elicited an unexpected outpouring of my emotions, which unsettled me within a group setting. Visceral experiences combined with rich group discussions about our explorations highlight to me the importance of considering safety and containment when working with charcoal.

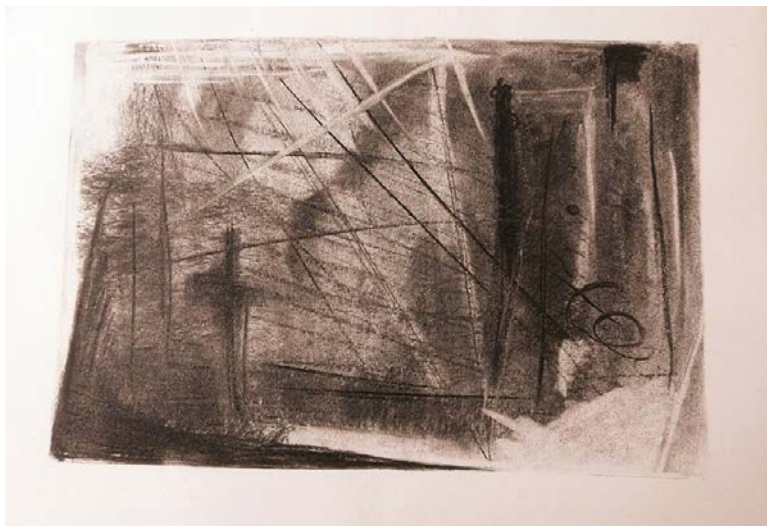


Figure 13. Sarah Wilson, *Day three artwork*, 2023, charcoal on cartridge paper, 297 × 420mm.



Figure 14. Julian Chote, *Day two charcoal artwork*, 2023, digital photograph.



Figure 15. Virginia Frankovich, *Day three charcoal sediment below artwork*, 2023, digital photograph.



Figure 16. Julian Chote, *Day one charcoal process*, 2023, digital photograph.

## Material explorations of sound

Julian chose sound, fuelled by a curiosity to explore how its digital possibilities exist within an arts therapy context. The upcoming generation of CAT clients is undeniably viewing their experiences through digital-processing lenses, necessitating a diversifying and incorporating of technology-based materials within therapeutic spaces (Hinz, 2009). Julian and Sarah both began playing with sounds from within their physical environments, eventually landing with sounds from within themselves, contrasting my progression from internal explorations to sounds in my external world. Discussing sound's amorphous middle positioning within the ETC framework illuminated the limitation of the continuum to encapsulate sound's vastness. I feel Malchiodi's (2023) community and culturally based four-part framework supports my specific consideration of sound, allowing me to explore vibrations and listening to offer richer opportunities for my sense-making, in contrast to the Western prioritisation of language/neuroscience within the ETC.

*A suburban driveway.*

*wind gusts blow the gate closed*

*the metal lock grinds against the concrete.*

*grating reverberations.*

*I draw the rusty lock up*

*down*

*up*

*down*

*The symphony of screeches fill my bones with joy, eliciting familiar memories:*

*It is the sound I wait to hear each night that signals my love is arriving home from work.*

*It is the sound of relief that my family has returned, safe at home.*

*It is the sound of having gotten through a day.*

*It is the sound of being less alone.*



Figure 17. Virginia Frankovich, *Day two sound explorations with gate locks*, 2023, digital photograph.



Figure 18. Julian Chote, *Day one sound explorations*, 2023, digital photograph.

## Noise

Collectively, we felt very aware of creating noise whilst art-making within our shared domestic spaces, which reflected both a self-consciousness of being heard and a concern for disturbing others. Julian and I both went outdoors at points, recording nature sounds from a phenomenological perspective, but when software programs were needed, we were limited to the confines of bed/lounge rooms, and we all opted for headphones to counteract disturbance and create privacy. As we discussed potential accessibility issues informed by our tech-heavy set-ups of computers/software programs (*Ableton Live*, *GarageBand*), we also became conscious of the challenge of accessing an environment that allows unfiltered exploration of sound and volume without disrupting others.

*It's late.*

*I feel overwhelmed with the vastness of sound.*

*Where to begin?*

*I yawn into a microphone, vibrational frequencies extending, enveloping the house.*

*Have I woken everyone from slumber?*

*I haphazardly fiddle with vocal shifts, effects, echoes.*

*Meaning births through deconstruction/rebuilding of my coherence*

*Cognitive over-drive.*

*I turn the lights off and my brain exits the room*



*My body moves, leaking into the sounds*

*breath*

*grunt*

*wheeze*

*Surely I've woken them...*



Figure 19. Virginia Frankovich, *Day one sound process late at night in the lounge*, 2023, digital photograph.

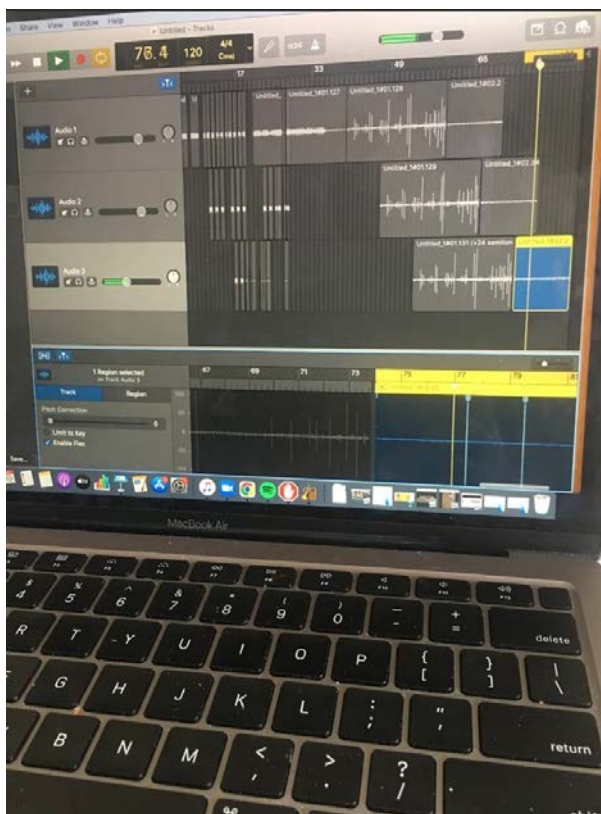


Figure 20. Julian Chote, *Day two sound process*, 2023, digital photograph.

## Sound mediators

Contrasting my process-based sonic explorations, we linked Julian's and Sarah's previous sound experience to their instincts towards cognitive processing, powered by a desire to create balanced, formed sound pieces. The ETC views mediators as cognitive-distancing tools that separate client/artist from the media (Lusebrink, 1990); however, our group experienced de-centring through our technology mediators, noticing affective/symbolic responses through using computer software to shape our sounds. Our explorations seem to resonate more closely with the open-studio's inclusive vocabulary of 'joiners', which speaks to mediators of materials creating connections or divisions (Orbach, 2020), with computer mediation acting as a *connector* between our everyday states in internal domestic settings, transporting us to liminality. Sarah and I voiced initial trepidation in using our voices artistically, but, through using software mediators, we found reclamation, agency, transcendence in the morphing of our voices. Lange-Berndt's (2015) description of how materials within the digital era "can now also be something that is not physical... an effect of an ongoing performance" (p.14) crystallises my belief in the importance of CATs continuing to become more inclusive and exploratory with technology through sound art-making.

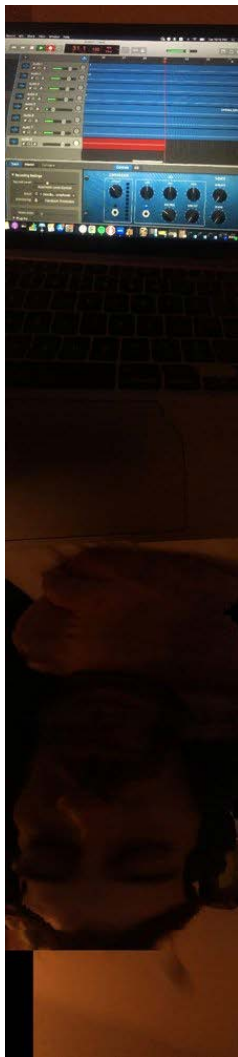


Figure 21. Julian Chote, *Day three sound explorations*, 2023, digital photograph.



Figure 22. Sarah Wilson, *Day one sound process*, 2023, digital photograph.

Reflecting again on material impermanence through live sound reiterated my desire to further explore transient materialities that demand therapist/client's utter presence and conceal and hold knowings in the present yet leave no trace – intertwining with my past theatre/live-art background. I am curious to explore the impermanence of materials within a CAT context and whether this may increase tolerance/acceptance of change.

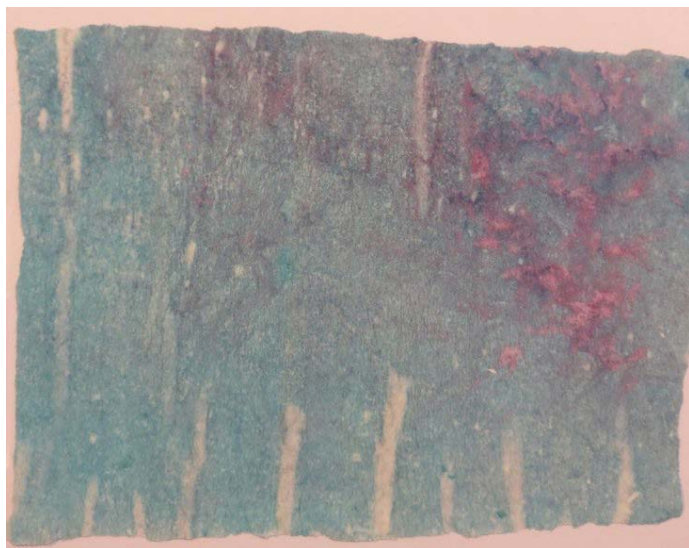


Figure 23. Sarah Wilson, *Felt response artwork to sound exploration*, 2023, digital photograph.



Figure 24. Virginia Frankovich, *Felt response artwork to sound exploration*, 2023, watercolour, 290 × 220mm.

## Conclusion

By exploring margarine, charcoal and sound through an emerging therapeutic lens, the rich complexities and variabilities of our group’s art-making experiences reinforce the need for materials to reflect the communities, mahi (work) and increasingly complex world in which we are absorbed, to provide rich, varied visual languages for therapeutic expression (Hinz, 2009; Moon, 2010; Orbach, 2020). I yearn for more tentacular material frameworks that speak to our group’s diverse emotional, sensorial experiences and their interconnections with the natural environment. While Seiden (2001) and Orbach (2020) hint at material vitality, I feel the traditional CAT material classifications reinforce humanistic subject–object divides, privileging humans as manipulators of matter. By inviting a new materialist lens, I am hopeful that we can become more inclusive of environmental considerations, stretching material possibilities beyond possessing prescriptive ‘properties’. I am curious about what happens when we lean closer into material intra-actions, imbuing all lively matter as conduits and co-conspirators within the reciprocal *encounter* of art-making.

*Material ‘properties’ fade*

*as I surrender to their lively, transient forces*

*unfolding*

*stretching*

*co-responding*

*diffracting*

*to the edges of their agential possibilities.*



Figure 25. Virginia Frankovich, *Day two margarine artwork*, 2023, margarine sculpture, 250 × 180 × 130mm.



Figure 26. Virginia Frankovich, *Transformation/new order*, 2023, margarine sculpture, 100 × 230 × 140mm.

## Endnote

The author has obtained informed consent from peers, including the usage of names, experiences and visual documentation of their artworks.

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**Published:** September 2023

**Issue:** Vol.18, No.2

**Word count:** 3,359

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**Cite this practice paper**

Frankovich, V. (2023). Stretching material possibilities within the creative arts therapies: Exploring margarine, charcoal and sound, and their affective entanglements within co-responsive ecosystems. *JoCAT*, 18(2). <https://www.jocat-online.org/pp-23-frankovich>