Knowing and feeling: new subjectivities and aesthetic experience

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An understanding of the relationship between images, words and the body as elaborated by Jeanne Achterberg (1985) underpins the arguments presented in this essay. I will also draw on the work of practitioners and theorists including Gerda Alexander, Sharon M. Hymen, Julia Kristeva, Shaun McNiff, Michael and Nancy Samuels and Gilbert Rose, who suggest that the use of expressive arts in therapy is a means of overcoming a negation of the role of the body and an over-reliance on verbal language in therapeutic practices. Visualisation and imagery are integrated, embodied processes involved in both verbal and non-verbal expressive arts. There is growing evidence that bodily processes activated through artistic and creative practices are intrinsic to reparation and healing. In aesthetic experience, physiological interactions involved in perception, feeling and affect are integrated in complex processes of meaning-making which provide forms for feelings to take. By objectifying the nature and pattern of bodily and emotional responses, the use of expressive arts in therapy promotes mind-body integration crucial to healing, psychic well being and the constitution of an alternative sense of self or subjectivity.

The tendency in traditional psychology to deny the body’s role in mediating meaning is based on a general suspicion of the body as irrational matter, and negates a fundamental dimension of thought which is dependent on bodily processes. A number of practitioners and theo-
rists suggest that incorporating expressive arts in therapy is a means of overcoming the negation of the role of the body and an over-reliance on verbal language in psychotherapeutic practices. Visualisation and imagery, which are integrated, embodied processes, are related to both verbal and non-verbal expressive arts. Vital bodily processes engendered through artistic and creative practices are intrinsic to reparation and well being.

With reference to Gilbert J. Rose, Shaun McNiff, Jeanne Achterberg, Julia Kristeva and others, I will consider how a physiognomic response to language and visual images is related to embodied processes. I will argue that physiological interactions involved in perception, feeling and affect are part of the continuum of meaning-making processes which allow feelings to be realised and given external expression. By objectifying the nature and pattern of somatic and emotional responses, the use of expressive arts in therapy promotes mind-body integration crucial to healing, psychic well being and the constitution of new or enhanced subjectivities.

The role of the body and primary processes involved in practices which are broadly defined as 'art' can be understood through an investigation of various medical and psychotherapeutic practices. These approaches incorporate theories of how the human organism processes information produced through its interactions with the physical and social environment. Carl Roger's client-centred approach with its emphasis on process rather than product is an example (Rogers 1961). This approach is concerned with reconnecting modes of producing meaning to the subject's vital biology and unconscious processes. Also pertinent are therapies which incorporate music, dance, the visual and verbal arts, and others, such as Gerda Alexander's method which focuses on bodily and sensory awareness as integral mechanisms of reparation (Alexander 1995).

I suggest that specific practices in the creative and expressive arts are a more deliberate and active intensification of other everyday practices in which these processes occur. Subjectivity, thought, language and the spectrum of 'knowledges' from which cultural experience is realised can be said to be the residues of such practices. Although they are harnessed and incorporated into discourses of social production, these practices do not belong exclusively to that domain but also serve a more immediate function of enablement for individuals that engage in them. They constitute what has been described as the human 'striv-
ing to affirm, to maximise its potentialities, its powers, its possibilities, in terms of the concrete options its situation affords it' (Grosz 1994: 13).

I am suggesting that creativity has survival value. This implies a striving for technical mastery not for its own sake, or for mastery over others, but as a function which extends the individual's capacity for change and growth. Michael and Nancy Samuels assert that what has been designated as 'art' is a manifestation of a more inherent and profound tendency of living processes, an intensification of what cybernetic science describes as processes which, at a primary level, operate as an 'automatic creative mechanism' (Samuels and Samuels 1990: 146).

An understanding of the body's intrinsic involvement in creativity is supported by Elizabeth Grosz' view that the body is the centre of perspective, reflection, desire and agency, 'the very stuff of subjectivity' (Grosz 1994: 13). Subjectivity may be posited not as fixity, but as perpetual interaction between the chaos and flux of internal and external environments and the dynamic integration required for the effective functioning of the organism. The processes involved are not exclusively biological. Grosz points out that 'biology must be understood as psychologically pliable' (Grosz 1994: 28), and I have, elsewhere, illustrated through the work of Julia Kristeva and others that somatic processes are always socially mediated. What I am proposing is that the subject be viewed as a process of body/mind and internal/external interplay involving multiple levels of fragmentation and integration required for effective functioning. The notion of interplay moves us away from cultural and social determinism permitting a conception of subjectivity as a fluid, open and unpredictable process of becoming. This perspective reinserts human agency and creative practices into accounts of social change.

Gerda Alexander explains the relationship between bodily or muscular activity, emotions and creativity through notions of tonus and eutony (Alexander 1995: 259). Tonus is the system by which one feels and reacts. It is the capacity for fibre muscles to change in response to effort required for various levels of action. Tonus changes not only with physical effort but also with every emotional change, and is also the basis for all artistic creation and experience (Alexander 1995: 260). Einstein and Nietzsche (amongst others) have been explicit in describing muscular and visual elements as essential to their creative thought.
processes. Einstein claimed that only when these had reached an adequate level of 'combinatory play' was he able to search for the words to describe the discursive or conceptual content of the process (Rose 1991: 133). Nietzsche commented, 'My most creative moments were always accompanied by unusual muscular activity ... I might often have been seen dancing in those days' (Nietzsche, cited by McNiff 1981: 110).

Alexander extends his explanation of the importance of tonus in creative practices through the notion of eutony (Alexander, 1995: 261). Eutony involves a level of awareness of the body's reactions and responses in relation to the environment. It requires a sense of 'presence' or neutral attitude that permits observations to occur which are not affected by mediated or prior expectations of results. Eutony produces a state of unity and integrity that liberates creative forces. This condition, accompanying creative practice, has been elaborated by Norman Bryson (1983) through his explication of art as interactive labour, Michael Polanyi (1969) through the notion of tacit knowledge and Julia Kristeva (1984) through her elaboration of the influence of bodily drives in creative textual production, a process which she terms *significance*. Artist Barbara Bolt has illustrated how this condition is realised in her own practice as a painter through the state of 'working hot'. In this situation sensory and other bodily responses are fully focussed on the demands of the unpredictable and uncontrollable materiality of paint interacting with the environment. Stimuli arise in the heat of the moment to which the painter's creative gesture becomes a reaction that is released from conceptual ways of thinking: 'The process of painting is a response to what happens in the interaction between paint, oil, turps, canvas, gravity, sun, heat, the occasional live beast and my body ... It is working in the heat of the moment' (Bolt 1998: 6).

The operation of 'body knowledge', as it pertains to art and craft, is advanced by Don Ihde's description of artistic practices as 'technics'. Drawing on philosopher Martin Heidegger's theory of 'praxical knowledge', which asserts the material basis of all knowledge, Ihde describes the process of craft making as embodied practices which mediate and produce meanings and knowledges (Ihde 1990: 3). This view implies that, ultimately, ideas and theory are the result of practice rather than vice versa. It is a perspective that problematises the idea of the mind/body split which underpins overly cognitive and logocentric approaches in psychotherapy.
Gilbert J. Rose supports approaches in therapy that place less emphasis on verbal and cognitive processes and claims that where psychotherapy is most successful it operates as art (Rose 1991: 111). The development of art therapy as a discipline has emerged from the recognition of the expressive arts as therapeutic processes that operate independently and beyond the narrow diagnostic and interpretive limits of traditional psychoanalysis. Sharon M. Hymer has pointed out the therapeutic nature of art and its potential for self-reparation and non-compliance. She notes that the restoration of a person 'includes not only the integration and regulation of self, but also the transformation of self' (Hymer 1983: 61). Hymer suggests that the ambiguous nature of art allows for the individual shaping of feelings and experiences.

Shaun McNiff extends this in his view that the incorporation of expressive arts in psychotherapy is a way of overcoming the denial of the body in conventional psychotherapeutic practices, a denial which has been intensified in society by fixed expectations of action in daily life. Pragmatic and normative demands of everyday interactions limit possibilities for expressive play and communication. This constraint negates a fundamental dimension of thought which is dependent on the body's movement. In therapy people are often treated with programmes that 'manage their behaviour and provide emotional outlets only within the restrictions of controlled discursive speech' (McNiff 1981: 111). This denial of the body in traditional psychoanalysis is derived from a general suspicion of the body as the source of irrational and undesirable behaviour, a view that has been carried over from Victorian society and Freudian notions of subjectivity as repression and antagonism.

Central to the process of reparation is mind/body integration. McNiff suggests that the Descartian splitting of body and mind and subsequent fragmentation and specialisation of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have produced approaches to health care quite different from earlier holistic practices (McNiff 1981: 111). He adds that the term 'psychotherapy' itself may prove inadequate because it perpetuates the mind/body split. The inclusion of the arts in therapy is believed to be a means of overcoming the effects of this split: 'The arts offer a valuable operational polarity to the use of discursive language in psychotherapy, and allow us to communicate with the emotions in their own language. Their multisensory rhythms must be kept

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intact rather than be absorbed within the more conventional verbal exchange of psychotherapy' (McNiff 1981: xii).

The incorporation of expressive arts in psychotherapy is associated with an understanding of the crucial role that action, and more specifically interaction with the external environment, plays in the development of body image required for physical and emotional balance. The lived body can be explored through creative practices which allow stored sensory information to interact with immediate experience. This process is central to the development and constant renewal of body image: 'The biological body, if it exists at all, exists for the subject only through the mediation of an image or series of (social/cultural) images of the body and its capacity for movement and action' (Grosz 1994: 141).

The development of body image commences in what Jacques Lacan has described as the mirror phase where the child sees a totalised image of itself as a Gestalt. This sense of wholeness or imaginary anatomy, and the ability to locate oneself in space, is in constant need of renewal. The process can be enhanced through expressive movement as well as other art forms in which visual elements of body schema are integrated into synergetically organised sensations, described by Oliver Sacks as the 'inner music' required for effective functioning of the organism (Sacks 1984). Sacks' metaphor promotes an understanding of imagery as an aspect of complex sensory processes that go beyond notions of static visualisation.

The recognition of play and art as psychotherapeutic processes in their own right has brought into question Freudian psychopathological interpretations of the content of art practice. The psychosexual orientation of Freudian theory posits all art as emanating from unconscious childhood experiences and as a projection of sexual conflicts, leaving little room for alternative explanations. McNiff claims that sexual conflict and childhood trauma are not the only motivations for art. Furthermore, 'The assertive action of art offers an alternative to passive resignation to psychopathology and personal dysfunction ... Art's value lies in its ability to transform psychopathology and emotional conflict into meaningful action' (McNiff 1981: 30).

Because of excessive emphasis on hidden motives, interpreters of art have given insufficient attention to explanations provided by artists themselves. Freudian interpretations of art have been developed by non-artists who have adapted visual artworks to psycho-diagnostic test-
ing for the purpose of supporting their psychological theories (McNiff 1981: 153).

The move away from the therapist's interpretation initiated by Margaret Naumburg in the 1940s has revealed that personal symbols, emerging from the subject's creative practices and experimentation, followed by self-reflection and interpretation, provide a lasting manifestation of balance and order which has a parallel effect on consciousness. Emotional crises and other conflicts disrupt and fragment the perceptual process, and one of the goals of introducing the arts to therapy is to restore a sense of order within the sensory modalities. All of the arts, including visual arts and poetry, are a means of extending kinesis and inner movement. McNiff suggests that the term 'visual art' is misleading, since the graphic and plastic arts are both tactile and visual. The same may be said of poetry and its relation to body kinesis via synaesthetic responses. Hence, 'All of the arts in therapy must repossess the body if they are to actualise their healing powers fully. The denial of body ... is but symptomatic of the lack of mind body integration within society at large' (McNiff 1981: 111).

Inspiration comprises one element of the creative process. However it is one that may be readily dissipated without structure and integration. The ego must relax control so that inspiration can come from primary process sensations, and, as has already been mentioned, artists put themselves in situations where creative action involves letting go of conscious control and becoming immersed in sensory activities. Elsewhere I have elaborated, through various psychological theories of art including Gestalt theory, the way in which colour line and form induce processes of tension and relief that involve the integration of physiological, emotional and cognitive integration (Barrett 1996).

Jeanne Achterberg suggests that imagery produced in creative practices integrates mind/body processes promoting both mental and physical well being. Achterberg describes imagery, or the stuff of the imagination, as the 'communication mechanism' between perception, emotion and bodily change (Achterberg 1985). Again, this view of imagery is not confined to notions of visualisation, but implies particular phases of sensory activity. Imagery has profound and multiple effects on the body. For example memories of a lover's scent may simultaneously cause the release of hormones and other chemicals associated with emotions. Visualisations of presenting a speech or of competing in a physical event are accompanied by muscular change, activation of
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sweat glands, increased blood pressure and alteration of brain waves.

It can be said that the image represents a phase of intensity that occurs in processes that mediate between verbal or conceptual thought and physiological change. The process of image production may be viewed as an intermediary phase of complex processes influenced by various parts of the brain. Whilst such processes are not fully understood, the advent of electrode technology and chemical trace techniques have provided a theoretical framework by which these processes may, at least provisionally, be explained (Achterberg 1985: 116).

Achterberg's framework is one which demonstrates how images are inextricably woven into the fabric of the brain and the body. Her model presents an outline of the transformations that occur between mind and matter. It enables a view of imagination as a construct, 'a non-thing which is measured only through the observable behaviours of persons and their societies' (Achterberg 1985: 115). This view avoids casting the imagination in mystical terms or positing its operation in a purely biological framework. An understanding of imagination in this context has been applied in well-documented forms of medical treatment and therapy. Achterberg's successes with bio-feedback and visualisation techniques in the treatment of cancer and other patients are evidence of the complex role of imagery in therapeutic practices. These applications provide a basis for understanding the flow between physiological processes, visual imagery, emotion, thought and language. In simple terms, one can conceive of a multi-dimensional flow between physiological processes, images and words or conceptual thought: (body<---image<---word).

Suzanne Langer adds to Achterberg's explanation in her analogy of steam, water and ice, used to explain the relationship between physiological and psychological states. Langer puts forward a view of the relationship as one involving quality and quantity rather than difference and opposition. Affect, imagery and thought are not added factors, nor are they separate from physiological processes, but are complex, vital interactions, phases or modes of experience registering divergent stimuli through various levels of activity in the cortex (Langer 1967: 9).

The primacy attributed to imagery as a 'bridging' mechanism operating between bodily processes and thought is tied to its relation to language which is believed to have initially been based on images. 'Words functioned to evoke images' (Samuels and Samuels 1990: 13).
Words have come to serve the additional function of distancing the self from experience. Naming and categorising interfere with a fuller perception of objects or ‘seeing with the mind’s eye’ – characterised by an ‘inexhaustible and ineffable quality, by the profoundest interest in the object’ (Samuels and Samuels 1990: 19). Because words as instruments of informational exchange have become more removed from experience, they no longer readily trigger the sensations of objects to which they may refer. The use and development of visualisation has largely been superseded by the development of language as a naming device. Central to the practices of healing and therapy that incorporate imagery is the development of techniques for improving the capacity for embodied visualisation in clients and patients.

It can thus be claimed that words or language do not belong exclusively to the domain of the cognitive or conceptual. Gestalt drive and its relation to tension and the release of tension have been shown to operate in response to language. Words affect the body not only as ideas or concepts, but also as ‘objects’.

It has also been suggested that the physiognomic perception of words is a means by which semantic innovation is achieved: ‘A physiognomic perception of words represents an extreme expansion of semantic space. It involves a rich unfolding of meanings over those twilight regions of meaning which mostly remain suppressed’ (Kreitler and Kreitler 1979: 227).

Physiognomic response to language involves responding to the word or words with an integrated body/mind. J.E. Downey as well as Hans and Shulamith Kreitler have shown that this occurs more readily when one is ‘conversing to oneself and in poetic language’ (Kreitler and Kreitler 1979: 228). This notion of communicating with the self, and its association with semantic innovation, has been theorised by Yuri Lotman (1990) as the ‘I-I’ code of autocommunication, which I have already discussed in some detail in relation to Julia Kristeva’s theory of the interrelationship between symbolic and semiotic dimensions of language (Barrett 1996). Purely formal qualities of language, such as rhythm, rhyme, varying combinations of particular vowel and consonant sounds, patterns of repetition, juxtaposition and other stylistic devices of languages that operate primarily through the perception of sound have been shown to evoke similar states of arousal to those produced in confrontation with visual forms.

Gilbert Rose has suggested that in certain therapeutic practices this
alternative mode of language comes into play through what he terms the 'plasticity of words' (Rose 1991). By the time most thought reaches the point of ordinary discourse much of its raw physicality has been bleached out and the process of naming further obscures the perceptual impact of words. The plasticity of words is derived from the combination of physical sounds, affective weight and intellectual content. The aesthetic plasticity of words makes it possible to combine and correlate these seemingly disparate aspects of information-processing and links various dichotomies making them available for conscious reflection. In this process familiar objects and words can assume different features and take on unusual characteristics. This use of language operates as 'art' and accomplishes what the information exchange function of language cannot readily do. 'It provides forms for feelings to take, it objectifies and presents the nature and patterns of sensitive emotional life' (Rose 1991: 32).

The recognition that creativity and preverbal bodily processes are inextricably entwined in the creative process has been the impetus for a move towards more client-centred forms of therapy, or those therapeutic practices which permit, 'a free experiencing of the actual sensory and visceral reactions of the organism' (Rogers 1961: 80). Rogers suggests this experiencing may be viewed as a growth tendency or an urge which is evident in organic and human life to enhance, expand and extend the organism or the self. It is a mode of experiencing that is an alternative to construing experience in rigid ways (which are perceived as external facts) and it places personal power under personal control. It encompasses the constant movement of change and adaptation and activates preverbal, unconscious processes of desire linked to bodily drives.

I have attempted to show that creative practice involves an integration and an interplay between mind and body, language and materiality. The movement towards client-centred forms of therapy and the incorporation of the creative arts in therapy indicates a recognition of this integration as vital to the reparative process. Such processes in therapy facilitate the production of embodied or situated knowledges in which alternative subjectivities are articulated. This is realised through an interplay between given constructions of the self through social discourses and a perpetual striving in the human organism to maximise its potential despite limits placed on it by social mechanisms. Accordingly, these processes may be viewed as praxis
which results from the intrinsic creativity and tacit knowledge of the body.

References