

"Art Opens to the World", Ellen G. Levine and Stephen K Levine, eds.,
Art in Action: Expressive Arts Therapy and Social Change (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2011)

Art Opens to the World: Expressive Arts and Social Action

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In this essay, I attempt to lay a theoretical foundation for the field of Expressive Arts and social change. In order to do so, I first have to conduct a brief survey of the development of the field of Expressive Arts itself.

As a specific discipline, Expressive Arts had its beginnings during the 1970's at Lesley College Graduate School (now Lesley University) through the work of Shaun McNiff, Paolo J. Knill, Norma Canner, Elizabeth McKim and others. At the time the field was called "expressive therapy." Shaun McNiff has explained in *The Arts in Psychotherapy* (republished in radically revised form as *Integrating the Arts in Therapy*) and elsewhere that the word "expressive" came to him from outside, in the context of gaining support from initial funding sources. In some ways, the name is a misnomer, insofar as it has been taken to mean that art is "self-expression," the outward representation of inner feelings. This interpretation fit with the prevailing ethos of the times, "Express your self!", but it is not a good basis for understanding the work of the arts.

Even at the time, it was understood that the arts do more than express outwardly what is felt inwardly, that in fact artistic expression cannot be reduced to pre-existing psychological states. Indeed, in contradistinction to the individual creative arts therapies, which usually begin from an established psychological framework, expressive therapy called for a "theory indigenous to the arts," a way of understanding that would be appropriate to aesthetic experience itself, not based upon another foundation.

The beginnings of such a theory were formulated by Paolo J. Knill with his notion of "intermodality." An obvious difference between expressive therapy and the creative arts therapies is that the former draws upon all the arts, rather than working only within one specialized form (be it visual art, dance, drama, poetry, etc). *Minstrels of Soul*, Knill's first book in English, had the subtitle: *Intermodal Expressive Therapy*, indicating that what is

distinctive about the field is its intermodal character. This character of intermodality makes sense once we realize that artistic disciplines are rooted in the different modalities of sensory experience. We can make visual art because we see; we can make music because we hear; we dance because we move, etc. And all of these sensory modalities are united in the common sense experience of having a body. It is the same body that sees, hears, moves, etc. In fact, the separation and extreme specialization of the arts in modern times is itself a recent historical phenomenon. Art-making has traditionally been intermodal within the context of dramatic or ritual performance. Only the removal of the arts from everyday life has enabled practitioners to explore their specialized and formal capacities. As contemporary and post-modern art has developed, a renewed interest in interdisciplinary work has also emerged. Traditional artistic boundaries have been erased, and new cross-disciplinary work is now common.

In addition, it was clear to practitioners of the Expressive Arts that the basic framework of the field had an artistic rather than psychological base. Both McNiff and Knill were artists (a painter and musician respectively) before they were therapists. As the field developed during the 1980's and 1990's, the word "arts" was gradually placed between "expressive" and "therapy." The International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA) replaced the National Expressive Therapy Association (NETA) as the primary professional association in the field and deliberately included "Arts" in its title, as did many of the books that attempted to lay the theoretical foundations for the field (Cf. S. Levine & E. Levine, eds. *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy* , and P. Knill et al, *Principles and Practice of Expressive Arts Therapy*).

This shift in nomenclature was significant; it not only rooted the field in its proper place, it also made it possible to extend the work in other directions outside of psychotherapy. IEATA opened registration to Expressive Arts educators and consultants as well as therapists, and programs were developed that included these new initiatives. At the European Graduate School (EGS), the doctoral program in Expressive Arts Therapy changed its name to Expressive Arts: Therapy, Education and Consulting (including coaching under the term "Consulting"). It has now been extended to include the term, "Social Change," indicating a further development of the field, of which the present book is another indication.

The evolution of a field is an interesting phenomenon; it often reflects changes in the wider society. If the field itself does not grow concurrently, it risks becoming outdated and irrelevant. During the past two decades psychotherapy has lost some of its cachet. Partly this reflects its professionalization; what was once an open, innovative (and sometimes undisciplined) field of practice has become codified, licensed and restricted to those with licensed professional training. In addition, the concern with abusive practices, though important in protecting clients, has had the side effect of making therapists wary of trying anything not already approved or that could be considered “unsafe”. To a great extent, the dynamic energy that had been a mark of expressive therapy practice in the seventies has migrated elsewhere.

As therapy lost its attraction, many turned to the new field of coaching and consulting, becoming Expressive Arts coaches. Others turned their attention to education and called themselves Expressive Arts educators. It became clear that although the work of Expressive Arts had begun in psychotherapy, the basic principles could be extended to other areas of practice. Most recently this has included the field of social change. Under the direction of Ellen Levine, EGS began a graduate certificate program in Expressive Arts and Social Change (now developed into a full masters degree program in Expressive Arts in Conflict-Transformation and Peacebuilding, cf. her article in this volume). Students began to apply the work outside of the restricted settings of the clinic, school or corporation to the wider world of communities and conflict-laden social groups.

We need to understand what the theoretical foundation underlying this new development is. What are the principles of Expressive Arts that open work in the field to broader social concerns? In order to understand this, we have to look at the basis of artistic expression itself. In several articles and books, I have tried to formulate this through the use of the concept of *poiesis* (e.g., Levine, *Poiesis: the Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul*) The word *poiesis* is taken from classical Greek, originally signifying the act of making in general and artistic making in particular. I go back to this word in order to make it easier to understand art-making from a different perspective than we are accustomed to, one that will perhaps shed light upon the subject in a new way.

What is implied in the concept of *poiesis* is that art-making is not divorced from other forms of production. It is not a specialized activity radically separated from others; rather it is an

extension and development of the basic capacity of human beings to shape their worlds. The human being is distinct from other creatures in that it is not pre-adapted to a particular environment. Instead it has the ability to build radically different worlds suitable (or not) to a wide diversity of surroundings. In building its world, the human shapes the environment; and as it does so, it shapes itself. *World-building is self-building*. This phenomenon accounts for the wide variety of cultures that exist in the world and the various ways that humans have changed their behaviors and world-views accordingly. If there is an essential quality of being human, it does not lie in a particular way of living but in this capacity to shape ourselves and others according to our needs.

Of course, this does not imply that all forms of world-building are appropriate. As we can see in our current understanding of environmental crisis, it is quite possible for us to mis-shape worlds, and ourselves with it. However the very fact that we have made this world as it is should awaken us to the possibility of changing it. *Poiesis is always possible*, as I have remarked elsewhere (cf. Levine, 1999, p. 31).

What role can the arts play in bringing about the possibility of social change? First we have to understand art-making within the broader perspective of *poiesis*. The arts are a particular form of making that differentiate themselves by showing themselves as having been made. Whatever else art is (and that is certainly a question without any agreed-upon answer), it *shows* something and it shows itself as having been made. One could say that, as something that shows, art needs to be seen; we could even say in this sense that art is always *performative*. Even visual art is “performed” in the viewing of it; it requires an audience in order to be what it is. This does not mean that works that have gone unpublished are not art-works; it only signifies that they have the capacity to be seen (heard, read) by others, even if that never comes to pass.

By showing itself in the mode of existing-as-being-seen, art indicates its quality of irreality, its ability to create an alternative world of the imagination. We know that the actor playing Oedipus does not actually tear out his eyes; nor is there anyone really murdered in *Hamlet*. Rather the work creates an imaginary world in which it exists. This quality of irreality does not make it any less effective; on the contrary, the limitation from realistic constraints means that the work can affect us on a deeper level than the actual event it depicts could.

At the same time, this alternative world of imagination always takes place within the literal reality in which we exist. The imaginal world of the play, for example, happens in the real world of the theater. But more importantly, it always happens within the world in which we actually live on a daily basis. *Hamlet* today happens in a different world than it did in Shakespeare's time. The production itself changes, even if we try to make it "authentically" Elizabethan. And we see it differently; it occurs within a different horizon of understanding than it did originally. We live in a different historical world and we are shaped differently by it; both our behavior and our perceptions have changed.

Because the work happens within our world, it has the capacity to affect us. The work "touches" us; we are "moved" by it. We call this our "aesthetic response" to the work. The term "aesthetic response" has often been understood in expressive therapy as the artistic response of the therapist to the client (e.g. by writing a poem in response to the client's art-work); but it properly means the *client's* affective response to what he or she has made. When the work results an aesthetic response on the part of the client, we can say that it has been effective, it has touched what we can call their "effective reality." The power of art is that, although itself existing only in imaginal reality, it can nevertheless touch people's literal reality and have an impact upon them.

This experience of aesthetic response can also be seen as the proper psychological point of reference for aesthetic experience. Art is not self-expression; it does not merely give an outward form for what is already there in our inner worlds. This should be obvious from any cursory reflection on the arts. Can we think of *War and Peace* as an expression of Tolstoy's self? It's not even clear what that would mean. The excellence of the artist consists in his or her ability to transcend the self, to be able to imagine the experience of others and the world in which they live. Of course, *War and Peace* could only have been written by Tolstoy; but that does not mean it is a representation of Tolstoy's psyche. In fact the book is properly understood as an imaginative presentation of Russian society during the Napoleonic era in both war and peace. It was made *by* Tolstoy, but it is not a depiction *of* Tolstoy. This misunderstanding of the nature of art could only have taken place within a world-view shaped exclusively by the psychological perspective.

Of course we could say that the impulse to make art often begins with an inner psychic state. However as soon as the artist begins to shape his or her material, that impulse

becomes transformed. The work starts to shape itself, and the role of the artist is to allow it to find its proper form, rather than to force it into a pre-conceived mold. This is why novelists often talk about their characters having lives of their own which the author can only follow at their dictation. Certainly the artist must step back from the initial creative effort and make any necessary revisions; but this is a necessity to be found in the work itself, not in the mind of its creator.

We must get beyond psychological reductionism in order to properly understand the process of art-making and the art-work itself. The work does not express the *self*; it expresses a *world*. It starts with me, but it then finds its own shape which I can only follow. The proper psychological point of reference for the work is in fact in the way that it *affects* me, both in the making of it and in the experience of it once it is made. That the work is not an expression of the self does not mean that it lacks psychological significance. On the contrary, precisely because it goes beyond myself, it can affect me in a powerful way; it can touch me deeply and change my way of being in the world. This is what Rilke meant when, in his poem, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," in which he refers to viewing the fragmentary remains of a Greek sculpture, he speaks not about my experience of looking at the work but about the way in which the work looks at *me*. In the last line of the poem, the sculpture itself addresses the viewer and says, "You must change your life." Of course, when we read this poem, we also understand that it is not only the poet but ourselves who must change our lives.

To deny that the work is to be understood as self-expression, then, is not to take away its power but in fact to make this power comprehensible. Otherwise what possible effect would it have on myself for me merely to see what I am already feeling? Its power precisely comes from bringing me something new that comes to me as a surprise. To say that this new element comes from the "unconscious" does not help here; "unconscious" merely means "not known." To locate this unknown and therefore surprising thing in the psyche is merely to try to find some justification for our psychological prejudice. Unwittingly this prejudice makes the psychological impact of the work impossible to understand.

Moreover not only does the work affect us emotionally, it also has the capacity to change our understanding of ourselves and of the world around us. The work can be a re-description of the world,

a presentation of an alternative reality that helps us see ourselves and others differently. In the philosophical tradition, beginning with Plato, art is understood as semblance, as an imitation of what is already there which is a poor substitute for the real thing. It may give pleasure but it cannot provide truth. This view of art only makes sense within a perspective in which reflective thought is understood as providing access to a form of existence beyond change. Eternal truth, in this view, cannot take sensible form but can only be understood by the intellect freed from the deceptions and changes brought about in sense perception.

Contemporary philosophy, beginning with Nietzsche, has rejected this metaphysical assumption of a second world of unchanging truth that lies beyond the senses and is only accessible to the intellect abstracted from the body and the world. For Heidegger, the founder of contemporary thought, existence itself is temporal; being can only be understood within the perspective of time. Human existence is a being-in-the-world, a world that comes to be and passes away. The very characteristics that traditional philosophy attempted to deny are precisely what characterize the human being. We are sensible beings, we experience the world and others through our senses, and we *make* sense of what we experience. Any other view is an illusion based upon a metaphysical presupposition of eternal presence, what Jacques Derrida has called “the metaphysics of presence.”

If our existence is temporal, that implies that it is also historical. We are born into a world that we have not made; Heidegger even says we are “thrown” into this world. In this sense, we do not have the ability to make our world out of nothing, to act as omnipotent creators. Rather we are already made by this world; I come into it at a certain time, with a gender, race, class, nationality, etc, that I have not chosen. At the same time I am not determined by what has been; rather I always have the capacity to *respond* to what has been given to me. In our own time, we have seen how extensive is our ability to change what we have been. I can embrace a different religion, move to another country, rise or fall in social class and even change my gender. Nevertheless I will always be marked by what I have been. There is no erasing the past, only different ways of living it.

Sartre has said that, “History is what we make of what is made of us.” Within the framework of Expressive Arts, we could say that *poiesis* implies the capacity to respond to the world in which we find ourselves. We suffer, both individually and collectively, when we find ourselves unable to respond, when this capacity for poietic action is restricted and we

experience ourselves as being in a helpless situation. It is precisely because we are capable of making our world in a different way that we experience ourselves as helpless when we are unable to do so. The work of the change agent in the field of Expressive Arts, then, is to restore the capacity for *poiesis* that the individual or community has lost and to help them expand the range of play within which they can act.

In this process, art-making can play an essential role. By creating an alternative world of the imagination, the art-work shows possibilities that are absent or dormant within our everyday awareness. Moreover the work takes us away from this everyday world within which we experience ourselves as unable to act; we could say that it “decenters” us from this world (Cf. Knill, 2005). In so doing it frees us up for new possibilities that were not apparent within our limited horizon of understanding.

Moreover, art-making is itself a sensory-affective experience that gives participants a experience of their own capacities for action. As affecting us through the body and the emotions, art-making can provide experiences that restore us to a feeling of being fully alive. And in making the work, by acting within the limited frame of the materials and the time and space available, we recover our capacity to be effective in the world, something that we have lost in the helpless situation in which we find ourselves.

Social change is only possible when people in a community have a sense of their own capacity to act, when they become aware of their resources and see themselves as able to re-make the world in which they live. The task of the Expressive Arts change agent is not to enter a community with a pre-existing plan, attempting to steer community action in an anticipated direction. This would be similar to trying to make a work of art by forcing the materials into a form that corresponds to an idea in the mind (a traditional view of art-making that even Marx held).

Rather the work of social change begins with trying to understand the world in which people already live. Only then can we see what the possibilities of responding to that reality are. The role of the change agent from the perspective of Expressive Arts, like the role of the Expressive Arts therapist, is to help the community find its own resources and envision new ways of living together that draw upon them. By helping people engage in community art practices together, not only can they regain an awareness of their own poietic capacity, but

they also can find new forms of being together, types of association that aid in reviving the sense of community itself.

When a social group is in a helpless situation, whether this is due to poverty, oppression, natural disaster or other factors, individuals typically experience themselves as isolated and cut off from others. One of the things that the experience of making art together does is to restore the experience of a living community, of being part of a larger whole than oneself. This is what used to be called “solidarity,” the experience of being together with others that is an essential part of being in the world. This sense of solidarity and community often takes place within a celebratory setting, one in which the joy of singing and dancing together can bind the community into a feeling of *communitas* (Turner), but the arts are also capable of holding the experience of mourning what has been lost. Mourning and celebration are two essential ways in which art-making can touch the essence of being human. Both our tears and our laughter hold us together.

The work of the social change agent in the Expressive Arts ultimately rests upon what Knill calls “aesthetic responsibility” (Knill, 1999) We are responsible for shaping our interventions in such a way as to help the people we are working with regain the capacity for creative action that they have lost. In order to do so, we have to be willing to go into a community without a prearranged agenda, to be sensitive to what we find, and to use our own imagination in helping others to transcend their limitations and become aware of the unexplored possibilities that are available to them.

This process normally includes a liminal phase, one in which we are unable to predict or control what will happen. In this sense, we can say that our work is the opposite of the omnipotent and omniscient creator-god, who knows what he does and can control the outcome. Rather we put ourselves into the difficult state of non-knowing, ‘giving up control in order to achieve mastery,’ as Knill has often remarked in conversation. This requires a tolerance for chaos, an ability to improvise and a love of play. We do not know what will emerge, but we have the faith that it is possible for a surprise to come, for a solution to be found that was not envisioned by anyone, including ourselves.

Social change and social action require a humble and respectful attitude on the part of the change agent. We need to have an “appreciative curiosity” (Eberhart) about situation in

which the community finds itself in order to help the members of the group become aware of their resources and to help them regain an awareness of their capacity for building the world anew. Human existence is essentially poietic. *Poiesis* itself happens only in the world with others. We have made this world together; this means that we can make it differently. The particular power of the Expressive Arts in the field of social change is to help us find our ability to make a new world together. Only by doing so, can we leave to future generations a world which they will find worthy of responding to.