

# **ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine**

**Book Review by Beth Hoyes**

**Art Therapy in the Early Years: Therapeutic Interventions With  
Infants, Toddlers and Their Families**

**Edited by Julia Meyerowitz-Katz and Dean Reddick**

**Routledge 2017**

**ISBN: 978-1-138-81377-6**

When working in an infant school a couple of years ago, I often felt in need of some further reading on art therapy with this age group. I always found it surprising that this area had not been covered more fully within art therapy literature up to this point. With this in mind I feel this much needed book is a very welcome arrival. The book is a well-woven and diverse collection of current practice in art therapy with very young children and their families. Whilst reading the book I often found myself drawn to thinking about my work with older children, parents and carers in a primary school, and my work with young people as well. The formative early years shape so much of our internal worlds and relationships with others that I feel the experiences from these years are often met in different layers and forms within the therapy room, despite the client's physical age. This book is not only relevant for

those working with early years but also enables us to be in touch with the tender, often chaotic, unprocessed or partially processed baby and toddler experiences that need to be heard or seen for movement or change to happen at any age. The book travels through the UK, Australia and Spain observing the universal early human experiences alongside the differences in each unique cultural and environmental setting, as well as the several layers of difference within each therapeutic encounter.

A concise and encompassing introduction starts with a history of art therapy and the forming of the book, outlining a small body of art therapy literature working with early years to date. It is noted that the intention for the book is to be widely readable and useable for art therapists and non-art therapists working with infants and children, seeing art materials as often offered to children and infants naturally in various contexts. The psychodynamic theoretical orientation of the book is then described, and the key aspects of the relationships around the child focusing on primary carers are outlined. Research from biological sciences is considered and the unconscious and conscious transmission of personal, relational and socio-historical experiences from generation to generation is described including the passing down of 'encrypted or hidden away' trauma (p. 5). The Structure of the book is summarised with descriptions of the various sections, finishing with a conclusion where a key focus point highlights art therapy's potential for multi-layered 'embodied thinking which is inherently transformational and which provides the experience of a living, transformational psychosomatic object which can be internalised' (p. 10).

Within three sections various case examples are described, giving the reader a live and research framed account of various sessions and environments. Each section considers different forms of art therapy sessions with toddlers, infants and their families; the first looks at individual work, the second focuses on dyadic and family work and the third on group art therapy. The sections feature case studies written by 13 authors. The case studies are wide ranging, enabling the reader to gain a sense of ways of working within different approaches, settings and countries. Each chapter enables the

reader to gain a strong sense of the infant and toddlers' experiences imbedded within their own unique context.

Accounts, such as 'I Do Dots' by Celia Connolly and Judy King, explore important aspects of difference and transgenerational trauma and the gravity of understanding ways of relating depending on cultural and geographical belonging within the infant's inherited experience within Australian Aboriginal culture. The sense of something implicitly and unconsciously handed down is also considered in 'The Crisis of Cream Cakes' by Julia Meyerowitz-Katz, where an unsettling experience of holding a child and seeing them as partially unborn, triggers a long period of holding without knowing before something can be given shape through exploration of Jung's concept of 'Psychoid Experience' (p. 126). This concept, amongst other understandings of the complexities of a joined body-mind, recognises the engagement of both mind and body together in processes of structuring experience and learning what it is like being within a relationship to an 'other'. The strong presence of these explorations throughout the book shows the intrinsic presence of embodied experiences when working with very young children and with the relationships that surround them, including the art therapist's need to be sensitive to their own body-mind experiences when working with this age group.

The making of mess is also often mentioned within the case studies and within the conclusion. The chapter titled 'Amazing Mess' by Hilary Hosea indicates the need for acceptance of messy art making with this client group. In the toddler and parent group described there are valuable approaches and thoughts around facilitating this type of group within a Sure Start Centre, enabling a responsive space within which the children and parents can experiment, play and discover together. This case study, like others in the book, looks at the importance of other professionals' roles within these spaces in facilitating attunement and a healthy valuing of the toddlers' marks and their engagement in the art materials and art making. The soothing activity of parents washing the toddlers in warm soapy water at the end of the parent-child painting group, allows for a sensory sharing in an ending process that both parents and toddlers can engage in; a reassuring way of transitioning

from one space to another. Tender writings, descriptions and moments like these are among many within the book that have stayed with me.

The role of parents in relation to the infants and toddlers is often reflected on and worked with in the book, as is expected with this client group where the art therapist is usually working with live relationships that continue to daily influence and impact on the developing child. Tessa Dalley and Jen Bromnham's chapter, 'Transitions', enables a stronger understanding of the workings of the supervisory relationship and a sensitivity to the unconscious, unprocessed material arising within the sessions when working with an enmeshed and anxiety ridden relationship between mother and child. Two moving chapters tenderly explore the space that can be offered through art therapy for holding the extremely painful experiences when there is an absence of the birth parent relationships, allowing the potential for the art making and art objects to become anchors within transitional experiences. One being 'The Imprint of Another Life' by Anthea Hendry, where she works with a carer to feel more able to relate to her adopted daughter and the other being 'Building a Fort' by Marcela Andrade del Corro, where the children build a fort which comes to represent the dynamics within the group at different points and becomes a base for exploring their difficult experiences. In 'The Imprint of Another Life' and other chapters there is a concentration on the psycho-educational and practical role of the art therapist, which is sometimes needed to include a proactive encouragement for the carer to make art together with the child or to follow the child's lead.

In 'Side by Side', Alice Rayment describes her work with parallel parent and infant groups indicating the importance of working in a psycho-educational way that is also rooted within a psychodynamic understanding. For example, when addressing a parents' lateness, feeling that it symbolises a difficulty for the parent of connecting with the community, which in turn seems to affect her child's capacity to be able to share with the infant group and take part in it. This awareness of the infant being directly impacted upon by the experiences of their carers or parents and art therapist's external viewpoint, enables work with the unconscious processes of parents' own struggles with their environment, relationships, or their own early experiences. For example, in

Meyerowitz-Katz's chapter, 'The Crisis of the Cream Cakes', the art making is seen as a vessel and mirror for the parents' own trauma or early experiences where the mother paints a portrait of her son, which becomes a scary and repelling figure rather than a life-like representation of the little boy. This enables something unprocessed and hidden to become seen and worked through, lessening its potency for flooding into the space between mother and son (p. 127). In Dean Reddick's chapter 'An Odd Mirror', the art therapy process enables some painful and pre-verbal experiences to be held and understood within the art making and relationship, where a very young boy's experience of an attachment to an incubator mirror becomes a means of attempting to 'hold himself together' within his extremely difficult environment and situation (p. 27).

Alongside the process of making, the power of the artwork and art object is witnessed throughout the case studies. In Susan Rudnik's case study titled 'Cheerful and Not Cheerful' she meets a very young girl waiting for a heart transplant. Naturally, there is an intense mortal fear and wish to return home, which is held within the images, allowing it to be carried with importantly limited interpretation. In these case examples and others throughout the book, I was struck by the life held within the image making and the capacity for the art objects to survive such intensive and complex processes alongside the art therapist, both providing a means of containing unbearable feelings. From the hospital bed to schools to community centres and more, the vast and varied settings for art therapy spaces described in the book is a testament to the art therapists' capacity to make space for creative possibilities within different environments. The chapter, 'Making Waves' by Julie Green provides an insight into an open art therapy space based in a pre-school, where children are able to approach the art therapy areas and take part in art making with a responsive art therapist who is able to facilitate their interactions with the art materials. The waves of emotion that Green explores through her images enable the reader to have an insight into the chaotic milieu of the playground, giving a sense of her own art making as a means of staying grounded and making sense of bodily experiences in this daunting environment.

The conclusion provides a wrapping up of the chapters and main themes, starting with reviewing aspects of the various contexts where the art therapy took place. A significant observation is the art therapist's tendency to embody a 'grandmotherly' role, functioning as a containing elder for parents, carers, infants and other professionals enabling communities to form within circles around the infants and toddlers (p. 179). The psychosomatic experiences of art making and provision of toys and art materials are explored alongside the process of play for this age group. The holding and containing elements of art materials and the interactions around them are then explored, proposing that 'because of the age and development of the children, engaging with art materials is often linked to or resonant with being cared for' (p. 183). I found the thoughts on mess useful when thinking about the differentiation between mess being seen as 'ordinary' or as 'signalling trauma' (p.186-187). The value of the learning and growth that happens outside of the therapy room through supervision, working with staff who surround the infants or toddlers, and work with parents or carers is noted. Countertransference is thought about in relation to the powerful often bodily or pre-verbal experiences that the art therapist holds for the early years client. The powerful emotional responses to the art making process and engagement with the art materials is then reviewed, highlighting the vitality within the processes and artwork looking at symbolic and sensory aspects, proposing a fourth dimension to Schaverien's triangle (Schaverien, 1995) with weight on the 'process of engagement with materials' (p 189). The conclusion finishes with seeing art therapy as a transformational object.

I was often deeply moved by the poignant accounts of sessions with these very young children and their families or carers, and often needed to pause to digest each case study and the information that unfolded through the work. Sometimes pausing for an hour, a day or a few minutes in between. In my experience when working with infants in art therapy I often found it difficult to grapple with the waves of projections, bodily responses and undigested material, and often wished for a book that provided more insight into the complex relational and art making processes that are specific to this client group. This book manages to navigate the potent worlds of infants and their

families sensitively and with purpose creating a rich and intricate framework for working with infants and toddlers where meaning can develop, be fluidly held and carefully given shape. In the first few pages, Meyerowitz-Katz and Reddick comment on the infant being seen within a matrix of relationships and they hold this thread throughout, whether the parents are physically met or not within the clinical work. As Reddick writes, infants are 'inherently relational', drawing from the work of Winnicott's thinking around a baby not existing alone but always within a relationship (p. 3).

Reading this book has allowed me further clarity in seeing the fuller, pre-verbal, less processed experiences of my older child clients. The difficult process of initial separations, the lack of power felt over our bodies and those around us felt in the early years of experience, can be seen in a stirring way within this book. When trying to find the right words for this review, I often found myself trying to make shapes with my hands to conjure up a word that fitted as it felt difficult to find an accurate enough word for what I was trying to describe. Something preverbal, or something that is felt and understood in an intuitive bodily way but there are no words for, which reminded me of Bollas's 'Unthought Known' (1987). This important book demonstrates and promotes the capacity for art therapy to reach these experiences through the art making and the body's interaction with art materials within the therapeutic relationship, as Reddick and Meyerowitz-Katz describe; it is a process that involves 'bodies, minds and brains' (p. 178).

I am still learning from this book, after reading it, thrumming with energy and lingering thoughts. I'm sure I will be dipping back into it when I am called to it from my experiences with clients. It is a thoroughly researched book full of vitality, which gives a great deal of learning to art therapists working with any age group and especially with infants and toddlers. This book provides an opening or window into working with these very young clients, enabling us to be more in touch with experiences that may otherwise be, to some extent, overlooked or not allowed enough space. This book shows the ability of art therapy to bring these early experiences into the light with all the vibrancy, life, pain and palpable emotion that is present in the early years of life, especially when affected by trauma. Each author depicts their own tactile and

responsive meeting of these experiences that take place within various art therapy spaces. I feel very fortunate to have been asked to review this book and feel it marks some important and exciting developments in art therapy theory and literature, which will continue to transform and enhance our understanding of art therapy with the early years and beyond.

### **Biography**

Beth Hoyes is an artist, art psychotherapist and supervisor specialising in working with children, young people and families, currently practicing in a primary school in Essex. Beth has co-directed a project delivering art psychotherapy services to several London schools and has worked in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Essex, providing individual, group, dyadic and family work in clinics, community centres, infant, primary and secondary schools. Most recently Beth tutored at Goldsmiths, University of London on the Masters in Art Psychotherapy.

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