

An abstract painting with a textured, golden-brown background. In the center, a hand in shades of red and pink holds a lit candle. The candle is white with a yellow flame. The hand's fingers are visible at the top right. The overall style is expressive and textured.

ART-BASED SUPERVISION

Cultivating Therapeutic Insight Through Imagery

BARBARA J. FISH

ROUTLEDGE

The Routledge logo, which consists of a stylized white 'R' shape on a dark background.

ART-BASED SUPERVISION

Art-Based Supervision is a unique text for graduate supervision classes and seminars as well as a resource for postgraduate supervisors and practitioners. It offers a new view of supervision, one that incorporates both images and words as tools to investigate and communicate the interactions that occur in therapy and in the systems in which clinicians work. The fundamental principles of supervision provided in the book are useful for anyone interested in exploring the use of images to support reflection, understanding, and empathy in their work. Full-color images further enrich the narrative.

In addition to supervision courses, *Art-Based Supervision* may be used for introductory art therapy, psychology, social work, and counseling courses for readers interested in a broad range of intimate examples of the challenges of therapeutic work and the use of response art to grasp nuanced communication.

Barbara J. Fish, PhD, is an artist, art therapist, clinical counselor, supervisor, and educator serving on the faculty of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Dr. Fish specializes in working with trauma, program development, and art-based supervision. She is currently exploring the use of response art in art-based research.

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ART-BASED SUPERVISION

Cultivating Therapeutic Insight
Through Imagery

Barbara J. Fish

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*For those who work to restore broken imaginations and for
those who guide their practice.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara J. Fish, PhD, ATR-BC, LCPC is an art therapist and clinical counselor with more than thirty years of supervisory, clinical, teaching, and administrative experience. As a faculty member, she has provided supervision for those in graduate training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Adler School of Professional Psychology, and the University of Illinois at Chicago.

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Barbara has written about her use of response art and has melded her focus on art-based supervision with her interest in art-based research. She recently published "Painting Research: Opportunities in Intimacy and Depth," a chapter in Shaun McNiff's edited text *Art as Research: Opportunities and Challenges*, published by the University of Chicago Press. Her future publications include a forthcoming chapter, "Drawing and Painting Research," in Patricia Leavy's edited text *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*, published by Guilford Press.

FOREWORD

Art-Based Supervision: Cultivating Therapeutic Insight Through Imagery describes the process of artistic inquiry within supervisory relationships and models it with sensitivity and imagination. The images shown throughout the book and every element of the process of creating them involve a discipline of feeling, shaping, and allowing forms and expressions to emerge in ways that are simply inaccessible through our more linear and narrative speech.

This is the first full-length book on art therapy supervision and, without in any way questioning the clear distinction that is made between supervision and therapy, I feel that it is also an important new book on art therapy practice and its underpinnings in creative expression. The contextual purpose and professional responsibilities of therapy and supervision are different, but the operational processes of artistic inquiry may not be so far apart. What we do in one setting informs others with good ideas and methods crossing over from one domain of practice to another. As much as convention and professions might insist on strict separations and silos of experience, reality does not oblige.

In my book *Educating the Creative Arts Therapist*, where I said that the arts therapies “must initiate art-based modes” of supervision (McNiff, 1986, pp. 163–164), I also addressed the idea that “supervision is a therapy of therapy; in other words, it is a metatherapy” (Abroms, 1977, p. 82). It pleases me greatly to see Barbara Fish dealing in a comprehensive and inspirational way with these issues in relation to art therapy.

While agreeing that there is a porous separation between supervision and therapy, I want to take this opportunity to once again affirm that supervision is supervision and not therapy. The same applies to more general distinctions between training and therapy. Everything we do professionally is determined by the purpose of the context. The roles we play and the missions of the places where we

work and our contractual relations define what is and is not therapy. Yet everything is connected to everything else, and the core process of artistic inquiry has transcontextual qualities; it is for me a *metaprocess* that can be applied across the broad spectrum of life situations.

What I see as the most fundamental and important feature of this book is the way the author and others use the process of personal artistic expression in the presence of another professional person, the defining feature of art therapy practice, to understand and perfect what is happening in the art therapy experience. Barbara Fish succinctly says how artmaking furthers insight—“Since my earliest experiences as a therapist I have used imagery to understand my practice. I make response art when an incident strikes me powerfully, when I feel overwhelmed, confused, or have a reaction that seems overly intense or does not make sense for the situation. Working with imagery makes it possible for me to take the event and give it form so that I can look at it outside of myself.”

This focus on accessing “innate knowledge” through artistic expression in order to reflect upon art therapy is a logical extension from, and affirmation of, the art therapy process. I have always asked, how can we be complete and consistent in art therapy without engaging art as a primary way of understanding? If we believe that artistic expression generates insights inaccessible to spoken language, why do we exclusively use the latter in supervision? How can we begin to know what art does unless we experience it ourselves and actively experiment with the process? How can we ask others to do something unless we do it ourselves?

But there is a distinct divide within art therapy where many are not involved in personal artistic practice and where art is not used as a primary way of knowing in supervision, education, and research. The conventional and perhaps dominant paradigm assumes that artistic processes ultimately need to be translated into psychological concepts in order to be understood and accepted. Professional art therapy presentations and publications have adopted social science formats for just about everything they show and thus do not look, feel, and sound like what I experience as the unique character of the worldwide practice of the discipline (McNiff, 2014). This book makes a major contribution to correcting the imbalance between art and psychology, showing how the former can lead from time to time within the relationship rather than always be secondary.

I repeatedly discover through my own experience with making art how the process and the emerging imagery are always a few steps ahead of the reflecting mind. Thoughts and words have an important place in art therapy, but ideally we relax the need to know the end at the beginning, accept uncertainty, and learn how to do a better job witnessing creative expression without judgment and preconception and with a sense of purpose that guides and sustains the overall process.

The use of artistic expression to understand experience is demonstrated throughout this book by a wealth of varied and vivid vignettes offering a sense of what happens in art-based supervision sessions with a broad spectrum of professionals from art therapy to nursing and child care. The artworks made by the

author and the people she supervises include aesthetically crafted works by experienced artists and the authentic, equally sensitive expressions of beginners. The overall presentation of artworks has a strong impact on me as a reader and arguably says as much about the value and appeal of the process as the verbal descriptions. I am not in any way questioning the complementary verbal dialogue and explication. It is the one-sided hegemony pervading even art-based professions that is the problem. Art is more than a supplier of “data” and raw materials for analysis by other modes of thought and communication. It is, as Barbara Fish says, a way to understand experience and is uniquely capable of compassionately engaging disturbing emotions. The chapter “Harm’s Touch: How We Are Affected by What We Witness” shows how art-based supervision does something creative with “the intensity and impact of therapy,” the tendency to absorb the pain and tumult of others that challenges the ability of many to stay involved with therapeutic practice.

With regard to the written word, Barbara has a special ability to write about complex processes and expressions in a terse way that is free of academic formalities. I see the same subtle and sensitive directness and precision in her artistic expressions. The pages feel closely attuned to her readers; no doubt this is an extension of the way she is with the people she supervises, and their art. The book explicitly shows this attentiveness in the section where Barbara reflects upon when it might be useful to show her own art and also when it might interfere with the process. I envision her witnessing it all carefully and trying to assure that whatever she initiates helps to further the particular situation.

A recent experience with Barbara where we were supervising a doctoral candidate’s work crystallizes for me how the process of artistic inquiry works in all aspects of the arts in therapy, including practice, training, clinical supervision, and research. Sarah Hamil, an art therapist working in a Memphis art museum, was questioning how she might use her personal artistic expression to interpret a series of interviews about art therapy in museum settings. Like any significant lived experience, the interviews were a “complex” of materials that lent themselves to multiple and varied interpretations, some more capable than others in identifying meaning and new possibilities for understanding. Verbal discussion, and in some cases numbers, can be indispensable modes of interpretation, but they can also obscure more subtle processes that operate within alternative paths and sensibilities of knowing. Discursive responses follow certain rules and narrative structures that advance their communication by selecting certain contents and not others. The capacity to augment expression, communication, and understanding is one of the major reasons why the arts in therapy came into existence, but as I say above there are clear gaps and inconsistencies between what we may do in sessions and how we reflect on the experiences and communicate what we think happened.

Sarah was aware of the prejudicial aspects of textual analysis and the limitations of the literal quantitative coding of words and phrases permeating contemporary

social science, and she devised a method of restating what she considered to be poignant words, phrases, and sentences into an aesthetically organized form, constructed in relation to what we might call a “feel” for the material and its expression (McNiff, 2015, p. 58). The method involved a careful and sustained reading of the text by the researcher. However, rather than marginalize personal and emotional interpretative responses, they were maximized as one of many ways of understanding the interviews that lived on in memory with their cadences, emphases, and numerous sensory dimensions.

Yet even this interpretive method was still limited to words. Sarah also wanted to use the visual artmaking process to reflect on the work but did not have a clear sense of how to go about doing this. Barbara suggested that she simply make art on a regular basis as a parallel process while conducting and reflecting on the interviews without a particular objective but with an intention to enhance understanding. I was struck by how this recommendation affirmed the most fundamental qualities of artistic inquiry and how they differ from more linear logical and verbal analysis.

Every life situation or process of inquiry such as the one that Sarah was conducting includes a multifaceted mix of thoughts, memories, feelings, hopes and aspirations, challenges and difficulties, and many things both inside and outside conscious awareness. The stories we tell about what we think happened in an experience both highlight significant processes and keep others outside consciousness. The use of open-ended and spontaneous artistic expression to further insight expands the range of interpretive possibilities. It complements discursive analysis and in some cases provides a vital alternative when the more conventional thought processes are blocked, entangled, or unable to open to perspectives outside of themselves.

The direct and basic artistic advice that Barbara gave contrasts to the general assumption that therapy, research, or any other form of professional experimentation has to involve preestablished and sanctioned technical procedures that inevitably make themselves the primary outcome of the activity. Similarly, I find that even those who might be considering the use of art to further understanding (McNiff, 1998) feel the need for formal technical methods rather than simply making art in relation to a given situation. There is too much emphasis on control and following fixed, step-by-step operations that prevent the intrusion of anything outside them.

Conceptual certainty may limit the creative process by solidifying patterns that do not best serve our ultimate purpose. Pat Allen, in response to her classic book *Art Is a Way of Knowing* (1995), is also saying today that “art is a way of *not* knowing” (Personal communication, February 21, 2013). Accepting what we do not know helps us more completely open to forces moving through present experience unseen, perhaps innately searching for new ways of being organized and presented in awareness.

Art-Based Supervision: Cultivating Therapeutic Insight Through Imagery gives readers an opportunity to witness and practice a way of imaginative inquiry that allows for the emergence of meaning outside the already established and often impermeable structures of thought that guard against change and threats to the way things already appear to be known. It demonstrates from start to finish how open-ended artistic expressions will reliably support the process of discovery, creative change, and the perfection of practice in the supervision of art therapists or any other discipline open to these methods. In showing art therapy how to complete itself by practicing its own essential methods within the supervision process, Barbara Fish makes a historic contribution to the future of the field and its impact on the world.

by Shaun McNiff

Shaun McNiff, University Professor, Lesley University, Cambridge, MA, is the author of Imagination in Action, Art as Research, Integrating the Arts in Therapy, Art Heals, Art as Medicine, Trust the Process: An Artist's Guide to Letting Go, and many other books.

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PREFACE

I walked into a classroom filled with nursing students who were discussing their first training encounters. When I told them that we would be making response art to help them manage their experiences as part of their work, they looked at me like I was crazy. After the seminar I reflected on what they shared about their experiences, making a drawing about one of the nurse's account of sitting with a family in hospice while the father died. The following week, after I shared my drawing with the nurses, they picked up art supplies and vigorously began to make imagery to express their own experiences.

We can understand ideas, one another, and ourselves by making art. Creativity and imagination are resources that are available to everyone. Images can range from quick expressions made with the materials at hand to fully expressed pieces. Art-based supervision engages the therapist in training, the new professional, and the supervisor in the creative process. This approach to supervision is rooted in the belief that artmaking supports deep knowing. Imagery has the potential to show our responses, giving us the opportunity to explore and comprehend them. Art-based supervision supports image-based exploration and critical discussion, helping to bring theoretical concepts to life and integrate theory into practice.

Art therapy texts present casework by discussing the imagery created by the client. Although that work is an important part of supervision, this book focuses on the creative investigation of the supervisee and the supervisor. Art-based supervision introduces the use of imagery to reflect on therapy, bringing new resources for oversight and the support of treatment. This method provides ways to engage in the exploration of clinical issues by transforming them into metaphors, physically handling them through media, and providing a place to put them.

Images, like words, are tools for investigation and communication. Art-based supervision offers a vehicle for self-reflection, helping both supervisors and

supervisees investigate countertransference and supporting their nuanced understanding of the people, places, and interactions that comprise therapeutic work. While making imagery, and after the expression is formed, the supervisor and new therapist have the opportunity to use it as a resource to consider treatment and related issues. This use of media offers fresh perspectives and rich sources for investigation. This method holds opportunities for participants who are willing to engage their imaginations to explore their practice.

For more than three decades I have employed the creative process, and the images that come from it, to explore and understand my practice as an art therapist. In addition to my work providing supervision during graduate training and postgraduate work, most of the supervision that I provide takes place in an interdisciplinary milieu within psychiatric hospitals, therapeutic residential programs, and schools. This gives me an opportunity to use imagery to investigate and share information and concerns across disciplines. Art-based ways of knowing are fundamental to my practice. When my niece asked me what an art therapist does, I responded that I help to repair broken imaginations.

Bringing imagery into my work as a supervisor feels natural because I find it so useful in my practice as a therapist. As I engage in supervision, the use of creativity and imagination fosters therapeutic insight as well. In supervision I set an example by making imagery, demonstrating my dedication to art-based investigation. I help supervisees recognize its value, supporting the ongoing use of their artwork in their practice. There are precedents for the use of imagery in supervision, but little attention has been paid to the value of the supervisor's images to support the practice.

Within the history of human service supervision, dialogues have traditionally been verbal. While this may not be surprising in fields such as counseling, social work, and psychology, it has often been the case in art therapy as well. There is enormous potential to deepen communication and expand the understanding of relationships and the content of therapeutic work through art-based investigation and discourse. Dialogues in images, like the practice of art therapy itself, have the advantage of offering an alternative to more widely used verbal methods of interacting and investigating concerns. Imagery can hold a space for what is sensed but not known. Images can literally contain the intolerable and represent the unspeakable. As in art therapy, artwork made in supervision often expresses information that is not yet conscious or "known" in the cognitive sense. At its best, the unfolding process of supervision promotes the supervisee's developing understanding. The image can contain challenging content until the supervisee is emotionally and intellectually ready to fully apprehend its meaning.

Making images to explore case material is an integral part of art-based supervision, offering diverse perspectives on the internship experience and the complexities of human encounters. Art-based supervision relies heavily on the use of response art, a process-based form of investigation. When used with a well-defined purpose, this way of working with imagery can help to unpack experiences,

effectively exploring and communicating about them. It supports self-reflection, critical investigation, and the appreciation of nuanced didactic and interpersonal material.

This is not a text about how to do art therapy. The art therapy profession encompasses extensive education about the use of materials and their application. While this way of working does not require high levels of artistic skill or training, those providing it should be familiar with the media they offer to others. The intrinsic qualities of materials can settle or stir the therapist in search of clarity in the same way that they can affect clients. Personal experience with a medium is critical before proposing that it might be helpful to someone else. The same is true of supervision assignments. The ability to offer this resource is informed by the supervisor's familiarity with the use of imagery and metaphor in his or her own work.

As supervisors we must work within the scope of our training and the professional standards of our fields. Art-based supervision asks only that you select materials that are familiar to you and use them to stir your imagination and creative resources in the service of developing a fuller understanding of treatment.

This book is intended for supervisors of all levels, from beginning practitioners to those who are advanced in their careers. Art-based supervision offers fresh resources for exploring and managing therapeutic work. Seasoned clinicians, striving to refine their understanding, will find the use of imagery to be a fresh lens to reflect on their practice. This text is also helpful for professionals who anticipate providing supervision in the future, offering fundamental information and creative approaches to hone and deepen their practice. I envision those about to take on a supervisee for the first time using this book as a guide to infuse their work with creative resources. The practice of art-based supervision, introduced early in training, helps new therapists gain an appreciation for how creative expression can facilitate their work. Students and new therapists will also find information about what they can expect from this complex and important relationship. I picture teachers and supervisors reading the book together with those they supervise, engaging the material as a springboard for their discussions and creative investigations.

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INTRODUCTION

Art-Based Supervision is a text that advocates for creative work in any discipline for those striving for therapeutic insight. Counselors, social workers, psychologists, and other clinicians can all venture into their imaginations to find deeper meaning in their work. This text introduces response art, used for investigation and communication, and presents examples of work with imagery as a venue for self-reflection, feedback, and support.

Chapter 1 begins a discussion of the essential elements of supervision with a description of some of the fundamentals. A history of art-based supervision is provided in Chapter 2. Suggestions are offered for creating space that facilitates work with media and strategies are provided for engaging images in Chapters 3 and 4. We move into a discussion of the challenges and opportunities of supervision, including examining power in the supervisory relationship and managing and learning from the toxicity of the content that we witness, in Chapters 5 and 6. We look at the use of art-based supervision during and after formal training in Chapters 7 and 8. We explore its use to deepen understanding and interdisciplinary communication in fields beyond art therapy in Chapter 9. In Chapter 10 we discuss the use of imagery for closure, drawing a comparison between the importance of termination in supervision and in therapy.

Art-based supervision is a rich resource for supporting therapy. Examples of assignments and vignettes describing the work are included throughout the text, demonstrating the potential of art-based supervision to facilitate and expand the options for the investigation of clinical practice. The people in the stories and images included here have been identified according to the wishes of the supervisee involved. This includes the way that race, class, gender, age, religion,