

“The Art of Flow”

A response to the *CAET* forum on Ch’i and Artistic Expression: An East Asian Worldview that Fits the Creative Process Everywhere, by Shaun McNiff, initiated in Issue 2, Number 2, 2016.

‘流动的艺术’

针对 Shaun McNiff 《“气”和艺术性表达：契合所有创造性过程的东亚世界观》的回应

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In his series of eight lectures given at Dornach in 1923 addressing *The Arts and Their Mission*, philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1964) explored what he saw as the inescapable connection between art and the spiritual world. He spoke of the infinite space from which the soul originates as being a place of radiance; a radiance of fluidity and subtle gradations of colour. In human life, form and structure had to be learned when the soul entered the physical body at birth. Memories of radiance remained, however, in potential to be “re-membered” and reconnected, which was experienced, reached potentially through the creative process, through the act of art making, of the construction of a symbolic language. In this, Steiner could easily have been alluding to the *ch’i*, (in traditional Chinese culture, *qi* or *ch’i*, as an active principle forming part of any living thing). This phenomenon could be equated to the life force as being the “soul within”



John Holt. *Flow Map* (mixed media, ink, pastel, 3 × 5 ft, 2016).

and which is accessed through the creative act of art/symbolic making, thereby channeling and opening up the very essence of the life force, making a connection to personal and cosmic nature through the process of creativity.

I have described creativity as “the immune system of the mind and the source of the mythic.” (Clarke, 2005). We have become disconnected from this deep source of healing through creative expression. What we understand as the Art World has, in my opinion, led to a detached and aloof elitism that exists in the world of the arts and culture, in which a vain and over intellectualized minority make and understand the “arts,” whereas the act of creativity, the vehicle of *ch'i* that is open to all, is denied by the majority as a result of the anxiety that the practice of the arts is only for an elite minority who have the key to the knowledge, leaving the rest of us in a cultural darkness.

In his sacred text *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu (1993) wrote,

All the many forms of virtue flow from the Tao
 The Tao is eternal and unceasing –
 It is present at all beginnings.
 How do I know this?
 By the same Tao.

And so to the modern psychological notion of “Flow,” being that the mental state of being completely present and fully immersed in a task – being a strong contributor to creativity. When in flow, the creator and the universe become one, outside distractions recede from consciousness, and one’s mind is fully open and attuned to the act of creating. Since flow is so essential to creativity and well-being across many slices of life, it is, I think, important that we learn more about the characteristics associated with flow so that we may all learn how to tap into this precious mental resource of “re-connection.”

In her book *The Reenchantment of Art*, Suzi Gablik (1992) describes her hope for a new art, born out of a new cultural paradigm embracing a revitalized sense of community, an enlarged ecological perspective, and access to mythic and archetypal sources of spiritual life.

She felt that one of the peculiar developments in our Western world is that we are losing our sense of the divine side of life, of the power of imagination, myth, dream, and vision. The particular structure of modern consciousness, centered in a rationalizing, abstracting, and controlling ego, determines the world in which we live and how we perceive and understand it; without the magical sense of perception, we do not live in a magical world. We no longer have the ability to shift mindsets and thus perceive other realities – to move between worlds, as ancient shamans did.

I personally have worked with people in a high-security psychiatric hospital who turned their dislocation, anger, and fracture as a consequence of brutalized childhoods in on themselves and who then projected that anger either onto the world in the form of violence toward others or themselves in terms of violent acts, self-harm, or even suicide. In my experience, people suffering from this dislocation, this disconnection from the essential “flow” of their lives, can begin to initiate healing by allowing the creative process of the construction of language, of symbols, by being provided with a safe

“creative sanctuary” in which to begin the process of articulation of their “burden” of disconnection.

In his book *Art, Crime and Madness*, criminologist Prof. Shlomo Giora Shoham explored the relationship among conflict, pain suffering, and creativity. He felt that some conflicts internally felt by the creator may be projected onto his own creation and lend it a personalized dimension of depth. Too much conflict, however, may stifle the creator. In a similar vein, straining to overcome pain, interference, and obstacles fuels the fires of creativity, but unbearable pain and insurmountable obstacles are liable to extinguish them. Either we transform our burden into something creative or slump under it without authenticity, confounded by a petrifying routine. Since creativity is the prime mode of communication, it might well be the antidote to violence.

I personally suspect that what the fractured mind actually seeks is peace, and yet what it gets is so often suffering. Buddhists would contend that all life is suffering, and it is the premise of this understanding that we learn not to attach to the pain of suffering, but to seek a pure and therefore peaceful mind. The antidote to violence, a violence which is in itself born of anger, as cited by Shoham, was evident to me in my work in the high-security psychiatric hospital I mentioned above, and it should begin with understanding the underlying nature of the inner conflict and hostility through “self-managed” creativity, as provided by a nonjudgmental creative sanctuary in which they were allowed to develop a lexicon of images, symbols, and forms in the way of paintings and drawings. One of my patients, noted for his past extreme violence (quoted here with permission), made this comment about the role art had assumed in his life.

I’ve got a more peaceful outlook on life. I used to draw really aggressive, nasty pictures, but now I like atmospheric pictures. I don’t think I could sit down and draw an aggressive picture now, and it come out like it did eight years ago.

I have been painting for about a year, but only twice a week, and then infrequently because of my health. Since I have started to paint I am aware of images all around me, on the wallpaper, and in the ‘floaters’ in my eyes.

Creative sanctuaries are then the grounds in which awareness of self and a sense of peace can grow and prosper via the growth and development of a personal and unique “visual language”—spaces in which there is no judgment, only constructive conversations, where time is given to the exploration of symbols of the life perspectives of the individual, where there is room to “flow.” The notion of a “creative sanctuary” is a portable concept in that it merely requires an empathetic space in which this creative process can take place. In my case, when I was working in the aforementioned secure psychiatric environment, I requested that everyone within the art space simply make art. They all had to participate in the process of art making. Doctors, nurses, psychologists, patients alike all became artists. We dispensed with the boundaries of the hospital and all became artists together!!

In this concept of reconnection through art, it is clear to me that Taoism, in its constant references to “fluidity” and “flow,” as in nature and hence to the nature within

us all, references the implication that transformation can take place through what C. G. Jung (1968) referred to humankind's timeless, inherent propensity to the creative process of constructing "symbolic" shaping. All of this clearly relates to Shaun McNiff's (2016) reflections on *ch'i* and artistic expression:

From a *ch'i* perspective the lost soul can be viewed as the lost flow of creative energy. The blockage and ills stemming from the loss, are transformed by re-activating vital circulation. Toxins, obstacles, and difficulties participate as fuel for what I call art alchemy ... which interestingly enough has a corresponding name in the Taoist principle of *neidan* (内丹), inner alchemy. The process is in my view indigenous to the human condition. It is the basis of healing and essential to the eco-relations that shape us all.

Ch'i, *wu-wei*, soul loss, *neidan*, and other processes described here are all manifestations of the movements of nature on micro and macro levels where no thing or being is separate from the larger creative process. Seeing ourselves as contributors to an all-inclusive creative force both inside and beyond ourselves, is for me the medicine the world needs.

Virginia Woolf's quote in the title of this short paper inspired and touched me and was the title of an exhibition of my Flow Art in Sheffield, England. She said, "I feel a thousand capacities spring up in me. I am arch, gay, languid, melancholy by turns. I am rooted, but I flow" (*The Waves*, Virginia Woolf, 1931). This I feel is an indication of the



John Holt. *Sea Flow* series (ceramic stoneware with marble bases, 2018).

key to the capacity for creativity to heal, moving us inexorably toward self-realization and connectedness. If we can provide the “rootedness,” the space of the creative sanctuary, then art can flow like the waters in a stream of our own consciousness.

About the Author

John Holt is an independent artist in UK. His featured work includes Flow sculpture series.

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