

## A Response from Italy to Shaun McNiff's *Ch'i and Artistic Expression*

### 来自意大利的文章回应Shaun McNiff的文章《“气”和艺术性表达》

Mimma Della Cagnoletta  
Association Art Therapy Italiana, Italy

---

When I was young, I was always embarking on the development of “new” ideas, thinking that copying a work of visual art was an act of forgery and repeating was a sign of inadequacy. Little by little I understood that we all copy from those who came before us and nothing is created anew.

With the same kind of humility, I seek correspondence between my thoughts, my reactions, my feelings, and my experience with the thoughts, reactions, feelings and experiences of others. In this mutuality I find a deep knowledge that crosses individual boundaries and personal borders, bypassing the diversity of everyone's upbringing and cultural matrix.

This experience of correspondence is what strongly emerged in reading Shaun McNiff's article. The connection he makes between Eastern and Western concepts and language creates what I experience as intertwining lines. When I am interested in what a person says, I try to initiate a process of corresponding or empathizing, and sending messages in order to generate a response. If there is a reaction, our line of thoughts starts to intertwine, and the result of such an exchange consists of a deep satisfaction, a sharing of experience, and an understanding each other. Andr e Green in her film “Endless Dreams and Water Between” (2009) shows an epistolary correspondence among different women living on islands. They write to each other and describe their visions of their land and water, in life and in dreams. I think that this film depicts in words and images the process of correspondence.

When I approach the concept of *ch'i*, I start to understand it only when I find a familiar concept that contains the same meaning. This is the starting point of my journey, in order to get to know a foreign land, I have to find the familiar in the unfamiliar.

In my work as an art therapist, art materials are the medium of my exchange with the other. In this exchange, I encounter matter as it moves and constantly changes. I follow it. But I am always confronted by many different kinds of energy emanating from each art piece. For example, in one, forms are neatly cut out and glued to the paper, where they stay, as if in a pause, waiting to be animated. In another, paint is spread all over, overcoming the boundaries of the canvas, reaching the artist's face, neck, wrists. Can we say that in the first example, the flow of creative energy has an interruption; and

on the contrary, in the second one, it cannot keep pace with the matter? Can the energy of creative expression be reduced to our thoughts? Does it matter?

As McNiff says, there is a reciprocity between artist and materials that mirrors the “more comprehensive interdependence of life process”. The inner beauty of every creative act is the generation of questions, arising from the process itself and the contemplation of its results. “Questioning” the art piece is intended to be an open attitude that comprises curiosity, unfolding the flow of life, even in situations where it was “dormant or blocked”. It is yet another form of correspondence and engagement that sustains the creative process, the *ch’i*.

### **About the author**

Mimma Della Cagnoletta is founding member and president of the Association Art Therapy Italiana, doctor in philosophy, art therapist, clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst. She has been teaching and supervising for more than twenty years.