

NOMADISM IN ART THERAPY

AND THE ACT OF MAKING A MARK:
Towards a Creative-Relational
Arts-Based Inquiry



MITRA REYHANI GHADIM

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THE ACT OF MAKING A MARK**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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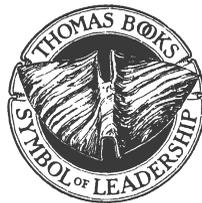
Dr. Mitra Reyhani Ghadim is a New York State licensed and board-certified creative arts therapist (LCAT, ATR-BC, ATCS) and educator whose work bridges clinical practice, research, and the arts. She holds a Master of Fine Arts, a Master's, and a Doctorate in Art Therapy. She is Director of The Living Museum at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center, one of the New York State Office of Mental Health's hospitals, where she curates exhibitions and mentors artists. With over a decade of experience across psychiatric centers, hospitals, museums, and universities, she has advanced creative arts therapy through practice and scholarship. She teaches graduate courses at Pratt Institute and Long Island University, and her transdisciplinary research draws on philosophy and literature to expand art therapy's relational and cultural dimensions. Her publications explore museum-based practice, nomadism, and relational models of healing. *Nomadism in Art Therapy and the Act of Making a Mark* reflects her commitment to inquiry, connection, and transformation, viewing art as a generative force that creates new concepts, new modes of thought, and new ways of being.

NOMADISM IN ART THERAPY AND THE ACT OF MAKING A MARK

Towards a Creative-Relational Arts-Based Inquiry

By

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CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER • LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704

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ISBN 978-0-398-09491-1 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-398-09492-8 (ebook)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2025045294 (print)
2025045295 (ebook)

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*Printed in the United States of America
LD-C-1*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

PREFACE

From the very beginning of my engagement with art, psychology, and later art therapy, I have moved between diverse communities, age groups, and settings, drawn by an intuitive need to connect, witness, and to create. Yet it was perhaps my personal experience of movement, of leaving my homeland and migrating across countries and cultures, that quietly planted the seeds of what would become the central philosophical thread of this book: *Nomadism*. These transitions through shifting geographies, languages, and social terrains profoundly shaped both my artist identity and my art therapy practice, forming the basis for how I understand creativity, identity, and transformation.

This book centers on the concept of nomadism in art therapy, not simply as a physical act, but as a way of being, a relational and philosophical stance that embraces fluidity, non-linearity, and multiplicity. The act of making a mark, whether with paint, gesture, or presence, becomes both a trace of this movement and a declaration of existence. A turning point in this evolving movement came in 2014 when I entered the Living Museum in Queens Village, New York.

But the story of that space began much earlier. In 1983, forty patients from Creedmoor Psychiatric Center, accompanied by artist Bolek Greczynski and psychologist Dr. Janos Marton, stepped into a long-abandoned kitchen and dining hall. What followed was a transformation: From dust and silence emerged a vibrant sanctuary where art could be made, seen, and shared. The space became The Living Museum, an art asylum, a community, a radical reimagining of what mental health and creative expression could look like (Poser, 2014). From these abandoned ruins, a living, breathing creative ecosystem was born.

Decades later, as a doctoral student at Mount Mary University, under the mentorship of Dr. Bruce Moon and Dr. Lynn Kapitan, I volunteered at the Living Museum as an artist-in-residence. My path there had already been forming, influenced by earlier class discussions, during which we watched a powerful documentary about the museum, and as I learned about a past

exhibition at the university featuring works from Living Museum artists. Encouraged by Dr. Bruce Moon, I reached out to Dr. Janos Marton, who would become both a mentor and a dear friend, and found myself deeply immersed in the museum's ethos.

What I encountered within those walls resonated powerfully with the themes I had been researching: The nomadic, the relational, the de-territorialized art therapist. The Living Museum was not merely a physical site; it embodied a nomadic art therapy space—unbounded, fluid, and resistant to the hierarchical structures and diagnostic frameworks of traditional mental health systems. It fostered relational aesthetics (C. H. Moon, 2002), intersubjectivity (Skaife, 2001), co-consciousness (Fonagy et al., 2005; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015), and an ecology of multisensory, lived experience (Kapitan, 2014; Gerber, 2016). Here, knowledge did not descend from above but emerged through spontaneous, collaborative, and intersubjective exchanges. The museum created space for art to be not only made but felt, where individuals could explore new identities, break away from institutional labels, and engage in authentic, creative encounters.

This book is a reflection on movements that transcend borders, ideas, bodies, and spaces. It is also a tribute to the Living Museum and to all the many nomadic territories of creativity that exist quietly across the world. I hope that the ideas presented here might encourage others to recognize, nurture, and build such spaces: Living Museums of their own, wherever they may be.

NOMADISM IN ART THERAPY AND THE ACT OF MAKING A MARK: TOWARDS A CREATIVE- RELATIONAL ARTS-BASED INQUIRY

*Ποταμοῖς τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἐμβαίνομέν τε καὶ οὐκ ἐμβαίνομεν, εἶμέν
τε καὶ οὐκ εἶμεν. (We both step and do not step in the same rivers.
We are and are not.)*

Heraclitus 540 B.C.

The question of the trajectories we create and follow, as artists and art therapists, has been of primary importance to me for as long as I can remember. Whether these paths lead us into various cultural realms, physical spaces, the unique worlds of individual clients, artworks, phenomenological space-times, or theoretical territories, they shape the way we navigate, interpret, and engage with the creative and therapeutic process.

This book presents a contemporary perspective on art therapy, framing it as a practice where art serves as the primary mode of movement, becoming, and positive identity change. My work is inspired by the philosophical concepts of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), particularly their figurations of the nomad and the rhizome, which I integrate into what I refer to as *nomadism in art therapy*.

Nomadism in art therapy brings a clear awareness of territorial influences of central systems, pointing out that the ecology of art therapy is a *happening* where kinesthetic and sensory contacts are interchanged within multiple surfaces consisting of environments within environments, and heterogeneous contexts for expressing lived experience (Whitaker, 2010). In a nomadic framework, certain concepts within art therapy such as intersubjectivity (Skaife, 2001), relational aesthetics (Moon, 2002), co-consciousness (Fonagy et al., 2005; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015), multiple realities (Gerber, 2016), and multisensory terrains (Kapitan, 2014) are especially important, as they help articulate the relational, fluid,

and embodied dimensions of meaning-making in artistic practice. This framework draws from their vision of knowledge as something that flows through networks, connections, and movements, rather than being fixed or forming in a linear way. Building on these concepts, I advocate for a radical and critical approach to art therapy, one that exists at the intersection of art, philosophy, and the sciences. In this approach, knowledge is not confined to traditional boundaries; instead, it emerges through communication and nonlinear, lateral, or zigzag-like connections between disciplines, constantly evolving and reconfiguring.

This process fosters innovative thinking and understanding in both creative and therapeutic contexts. To this end, this work re-examines the current epistemology of creative arts therapy, particularly through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's major philosophical concepts, while also briefly touching on Deleuze's transcendental empiricism as it can be applied to art therapy. The aim is to broaden the scope of understanding within art therapy, pushing it beyond the constraints of traditional psychological theories that have been dominating the field since its inception. By incorporating Deleuze and Guattari's ideas, specifically their notions of the nomad and the rhizome, this work encourages a more dynamic, fluid, and expansive approach to therapeutic practice. These concepts challenge the fixed, hierarchical structures often found in therapeutic settings, offering instead a way of thinking that embraces multiplicity, change, and movement. Drawing on these philosophical frameworks, this work seeks to open new possibilities for art therapy, where knowledge and therapeutic practices emerge through fluid, nonlinear connections, much like the nomadic journey or the rhizomatic growth, always shifting, branching, and transforming. Through these ideas, art therapy is envisioned as a practice that is not confined to one direction or discipline but is constantly evolving through the multiplicities of experience, connection, and creation.

I have been deeply engaged with the processes and workings of human perception as a central area of interest. Each person's perception is shaped by their unique visual apparatus, as well as the workings of personal memory and history. I have come to recognize the importance of emphasizing the complexity of human perception, particularly as it is revealed through the fluid and ever-changing nature of emotional, psychological, and social realities. This fluidity of perception is something that constantly evolves and adapts, often reflected and made visible through artworks and artistic concepts. Art, as a form of expression, is a powerful medium through which these changing perceptions can be explored, understood, and conveyed.

As our understanding deepens, we begin to see that the complexities of perception, shaped by an individual's unique experiences, conditioning, and sensory processing, pose significant ethical questions when it comes to the valuation and assessment of artwork. This becomes even more pertinent in the context of art therapy and other evaluative practices, where the clinician's own perceptual framework and biases play a major role in interpreting and assessing art.

There is a fascinating intersection between perception and art therapy, one that benefits greatly from an interdisciplinary approach. By re-examining perceptual experience through the lenses of psychology, but also philosophy, neuroscience, and the arts, we may gain deeper insights into how art making can facilitate emotional and cognitive growth. This interdisciplinary perspective allows us to rethink not only how we understand the act of creation but also how it can be used as a tool for personal transformation and improved mental health. In psychology, art making is often seen as a therapeutic means of accessing emotions that might be difficult to express verbally. Art therapy helps individuals externalize internal conflicts, enabling them to process complex feelings in a non-verbal format (Cattafesta et al., 2023). The process of creating art can also enhance self-awareness, improve emotional regulation, and foster resilience. As Freud and Jung proposed, the symbolic language of art taps into unconscious processes, helping individuals confront repressed thoughts and emotions in a safe environment (Schaverien, 2019). Philosophically, art making can be viewed through the lens of aesthetic experience, which explores how individuals experience and derive meaning from art. Neuroscience offers compelling evidence of the brain's response to art. Research suggests that engaging in creative practices can stimulate brain regions involved in emotional regulation, memory, and cognitive flexibility. Art making, through its engagement of both hemispheres of the brain, is thought to enhance neuroplasticity, fostering new connections between neural circuits (Gazzaniga et al., 2022). Studies have found that regular art making can improve the brain's capacity for emotional processing, enhancing one's ability to manage stress and cope with trauma (Cattafesta et al., 2023). This neurological activation supports the therapeutic potential of art making, demonstrating its capacity to engage brain systems critical for emotional and cognitive well-being. Neuroaesthetic theories suggest that our perception of art is rooted in neural mechanisms that evolved to process beauty and emotion (Zeki, 2020). The creation of art can evoke profound shifts in perception, both in terms of how the artist perceives their emotions and how they interact with the external world. By engaging in the creative process,

individuals can alter their perception of themselves and their environment, ultimately leading to a greater sense of agency and improved self-concept.

By integrating insights from psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and the arts, we begin to see art making not only as a form of self-expression but also as a powerful tool for cognitive and emotional development. Through this interdisciplinary approach, we can better understand how the act of creating art reshapes both our mental processes and neural networks, leading to therapeutic outcomes. By connecting with various disciplines in this rhizomatic way, and combining these and more perspectives, and moving beyond a singular disciplinary focus, we can cultivate a more holistic understanding of how knowledge develops, one that aligns with posthumanist thoughts and the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari. This approach encourages us to view creative practice not as a symptom of mental illness, but as a dynamic, rhizomatic process that unfolds across multiple, interconnected layers of experience. By embracing the fluidity and multiplicity inherent in creative expression, we can appreciate its broader potential to foster meaning making and transformation, rather than limiting it to static interpretations of pathology. The process of assigning measurable values or judgments to art is inherently subjective, deeply influenced by the personal perceptions, expectations, and experiences of the assessor. This raises concerns about the fairness and accuracy of such assessments, as they are not neutral but shaped by a series of emotional, cultural, and personal filters. Consequently, it is essential to recognize how subjective these processes are and the potential implications they carry, especially when making decisions that impact the life and wellness journey of the individual.

This complexity becomes particularly evident when artworks reflect changing realities or abstract concepts that may not be easily quantifiable. For example, an artwork may evoke different emotions or interpretations in different viewers, and these interpretations can shift based on time, social context, or individual perspective. Art that challenges conventional perceptions or explores complex themes, such as identity, social justice, or existential questions, is especially prone to diverse responses.

As I discuss again later in this book, I suggest that when assigning measured assessment values to artworks, an ethical dimension is involved. We must consider how to ensure that the art assessment process remains fair and unbiased, especially when it is influenced by the art therapist's or art critic's own perceptual conditioning. This raises important questions about who gets to define "value" in art and what criteria are used in making such a determination. It also touches on broader concerns about how systems

like art markets or academic critiques can sometimes elevate or marginalize certain groups while assigning value to artworks or even giving labels to types of artwork.

In my work, I also aim to support a greater focus on the dynamics of intersubjectivity in art therapy practice and research, particularly when the artwork created is either implied or directly used in research in any way. I will begin by exploring how re-examining the process of perceptual experience from an interdisciplinary perspective allows for a redirection of attention toward its implications within art therapy. Drawing on fields such as psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, and the arts, this approach highlights the complex ways in which perceptual processes, including attention, memory, and sensory integration, influence how individuals engage with art-making and interpretation. Art therapy offers a unique space where perception and emotional experience intersect, enabling clients to externalize and process internal states through creative expression. By focusing on perception, we can gain deeper insight into how individuals make sense of trauma, identity, and emotion, and how the act of art making itself can transform or reshape those perceptions. This line of inquiry opens new possibilities for understanding art therapy as a dynamic, perceptually grounded process that supports movement and change, self-awareness, and transformation. The idea that perception is the outcome of gradual processes of linking unique assemblages by the individual has resonance in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) who proposed that personal knowledge is constructed not in a tree-like fashion, but rhizomatically, through horizontal, multidirectional connections that transcend the limits of a single discipline or theoretical orientation, and unfold with a clear sense of real-time emergence. The concept of lateral movement and growth in knowledge development resonates with my ongoing experience of thinking and learning processes, as opposed to building around a single discipline's teaching, particularly in the context of various psychological theories and their complex interconnections.

My observation of uniqueness of each encounter with a client's individual thought process and associations through their acts of artistic and behavioral expression in the real-time of therapy pointed to the importance of exploring creative thinking including when seen as divergent thinking – as a rhizomatic association of each person's history and knowledge – and distancing from the static clinical terminologies, which appeared to be the counter-creative and misleading.

I have always felt a sense of urgency to deterritorialize from the inflexible and categorizing terminologies that lead to finite identification of self,

based on race, nationality, language, diagnosis, or sense of belonging to one community. This need may have been further exacerbated by being multilingual and having left my country of origin twice to live in two other countries. What my lived experiences have taught me about perceptions and identities is that perceptions can often be fluid, and identities aren't fixed, but rather create lines that can correspond to various changing personal, familial, social, and geographical situations. With the phenomenon of multilingualism, we observe that the language used to define life's various events is of great importance, and that it can have either an imprisoning or freeing influence, depending on its use and how a situation is described. As I experience myself being within fluid states of becoming and creating, I follow lines that form trajectories as we move. I avoid fixed definitions, understanding that we are always in a state of change and motion. This notion sharply contrasts with the practice of psychoanalysis, which often revolves around revisiting and revising past trauma and memories, reinforcing rigid definitions of self that are rooted in childhood. In psychoanalysis, the individual is frequently encouraged to trace their issues back to the past, reconstructing a narrative from a history of pain, trauma, and unresolved conflicts. Such an approach tends to fix the subject in a particular identity, forever tied to past events (Freud, 1917).

In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari challenge this by emphasizing the landscapes of desire and the processes of becoming, concepts that are not confined by linear, past-oriented narratives. They argue that rather than being anchored in the past, the individual should be viewed as in a constant state of transformation, constantly moving and reconfiguring. Desire, in their framework, is not a response to past lacks but a force that propels the individual forward, creating new paths, new lines of flight. Psychoanalysis, by focusing too heavily on the past, often limits the individual's potential for becoming and transformation. It risks trapping them in a loop of re-examining trauma, unable to move beyond predefined definitions and static self-images (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Becoming, as Deleuze and Guattari propose, encourages a way of thinking that is not limited by fixed identities or historical explanations. It is about movement, flow, and the creation of new possibilities, not a return to an old, preexisting self (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In creative practice, whether in art therapy or otherwise, we find the freedom to escape the confines of linear causality, offering a path for moving beyond psychoanalysis' fixation on the past. Through creativity, we become something new, constantly shifting and reshaping ourselves, free from the weight of fixed definitions

and historical baggage (Kapitan, 2014). Psychoanalysis not only conflicts with the concept of becoming and fluid states but also fails to align with the idea of “helping” clients define their identity as if it were a fixed, unchanging entity. The problem with analyzing a patient is that we should not engage in a psychoanalysis of a person, but rather a geo-analysis (Deleuze, 1980). Deleuze emphasizes that psychoanalysis often reduces individuals to a set of fixed interpretations based on their past, while a geo-analysis focuses on the dynamic, fluid, and relational aspects of a person’s experience. In his work, Deleuze draws a vivid analogy, describing how we can read the lines in the palm of the hand, not as something predetermined, but as an unfolding map of the individual’s becoming. Just as the lines on a hand are constantly shifting and evolving, so too is the subject always in motion, constantly forming new connections and lines of flight.

By adopting this perspective, Deleuze invites us to approach a person not as a fixed subject defined by trauma or past experiences but as a multiplicity of potentialities, an open field of becoming. This geo-analytical approach is concerned with how individuals are in a state of continuous transformation, rejecting the psychoanalytical focus on rooted, static identity. Instead, we should engage with individuals as they are now, in their present conditions, and explore the potential pathways their desires and experiences might take. This emphasis on movement and change contrasts sharply with the static, past-focused lens of psychoanalysis, which often confines a person to their childhood experiences, rendering them fixed and unchanging (Deleuze, 1980; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). We can analyze these states of becoming as process-based, changing perceptual situations and events when we reflect on negative symptomatology. Reducing the analysis to a process confined within a closed family unit distorts the perception of individual experiences, neglecting the ongoing process of becoming for each family member. This approach overlooks the broader social, political, health, and other influences involved in shaping their identities and experiences. With this concept of fluidity notions such as being in therapy for identity formation or for achieving healing as it was a finite state become questionable. At the same time, with this approach human issues and difficult psychological states are made part of fluid, moving and changing states of being that are not stalled and finite. The concept of nomadic organization can be explained as being able to continuously experience *otherness* in various contexts by being able to move in and out of changing territories. The *other*, not the *stranger*, is the *nomad*.

The concept of otherness has shaped my art therapy practice by helping me recognize clients and patients as individuals who experience being

in diverse and unique ways. With the concept of otherness, I am able to consider ethical questions concerning the application of theory or paradigm from *outside* to the territory of the client/*other*.

Ultimately, I am most interested in learning about the process of client's relationship with the world and their thoughts at the time of the encounter with the therapist. The concept of nomad has added a powerful element to my practice: As a figuration working in a shared territory with clients, where perceptions of therapists and clients meet and connect, allowing for improvisational creative exchanges.

In changing historical times and institutional spaces, the power structures of institutions can greatly affect perceptions of illness and sanity by imposing the time's socially constructed realities onto patients. In their work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) opposed the authority of the mental health profession as it is imposed in the psychiatric clinic because of the ways that its structure and power operate and affects the social field in general, as well as affecting all of us (Collins, 2014). A study of their philosophy and their propositions is shifting professionals' perspectives in many fields within the humanities/post-humanities and social sciences. Their work has been particularly influential for those in helping or educational professions, where giving an account of processes during encounters with students or clients is essential (Masny & Cole, 2009). Professionals who work with perceptions and intersubjective experiences may adopt new perspectives for understanding human behavior through diversities and differences of subjective realities.

This book describes how, in increasingly complex social and professional landscapes, the processes of meaning-making and understanding unique human experiences, particularly as they shape our shared psychological, emotional, cultural, and perceptual orientations, can be reimaged through contemporary philosophical concepts. Rather than relying on narrow, pathologizing paradigms of mental health and disability, it advocates for a more expansive, dynamic, and relational approach to interpreting human differences. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notions of multiplicity, becoming, and assemblage, the authors propose that educational and therapeutic engagements can move beyond deficit models to embrace the fluid, context-dependent nature of subjectivity and learning (Masny & Cole, 2009).

Nomadism in art therapy, as presented in this book, is an account of a creative relational study that is based on an arts-based inquiry. I have used multiple concepts from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) to offer a new approach to the therapist-client encounter. I have

explored art therapy relations through a careful consideration of language, perception, intersubjectivity, creativity, dominant cultures' effects, and social action.

I hope to increase awareness of the act of art making, or being part of Beuysian Social sculpture as human marks on territories based on *assemblages*, or links of subjective perceptions and the process of their formations, resulting in meaning-making or changing interpretations of art.

The Book Chapters

Chapter 1 is an introduction to two main inspirational figurations of *Nomad* and *Rhizome* as applied to my work. I explore how Nomadism serves both as figurative metaphor and a philosophical concept by Deleuze and Guattari, in their work *War Machine: Treatise on Nomadology* (1986). I identify parallels between the figuration of nomad, and the work of the art therapist encountering new realities in various territories with each different therapy relationship. I briefly explore Deleuze's concept of *geo-analysis* to explore meanings in art therapy encounters with clients.

Chapter 2 gives a brief overview of the historical formation of current art therapy epistemology, outlining its trajectory, with its origins in the fields of psychology and art, to our day when disciplines of art, social action and social science intersect. I examine how, in the era of emerging *neuroculture* (Frazzetto and Anker 2009), the epistemology can be further developed. A deconstruction of the current epistemology is especially useful as a step to expand contemporary practice to be open to interdisciplinary perspectives. This chapter connects Neuroculture in the way it aligns with nomadism in art therapy, where the art therapist navigates interdisciplinary terrains, encountering a myriad of beliefs and perceptions. The therapist helps clients in their journey of *becoming* during art therapy sessions in an era of emerging *neuroculture* and *neurodiversity*.

In **Chapter 3**, I examine art therapy through a new epistemological perspective and organization. Art therapy relations are conceived of as phenomena that affect both art therapists and the communities they interact with. I identify key conceptual compounds that influence the work of art therapists as they trace and interpret the dynamic psychological, relational, and cultural lines expressed by clients. These apply across diverse settings, populations, and shifting historical contexts. The five central themes are:

1. Perception and Intersubjectivity
2. Language and the Unconscious

3. The Effect of Dominant Culture
4. Relationship and Creativity – Relational Aesthetics
5. Art Therapy in the Community – Social Action

Looking at how intentionality in perceptions, intersubjectivity, and language at conscious and unconscious levels may shape various meanings in relational forms of therapy, I briefly review the way perception, language, and art can highlight the multiple dimensions of these exchanges. Next, I consider the impact of dominant trends and cultures, including those of healthcare systems, on the work of art therapists and their assessments. Finally, I present social action and community art therapy, highlighting their ongoing role since the field's inception. Art comes from the depth of human experiences (Moon, 1995), and, like philosophy, art thinks with affects and percepts.

In **Chapter 4**, I provide a brief introduction to Deleuze's Transcendental Empiricism and examine how it relates to my arts-based research experience, aiming to elucidate the fact that all art-making is an exploration of truth within the context of the subject's world. Art therapists conducting arts-based research studies combine this empirical study founded on the experience of art with individual truths that essentially transcend the limits of macro-social studies on health and illness.

In **Chapter 5**, I first explain how arts therapists face the challenge of distinguishing whose truth they are dealing with – their own or their patients' (Moon, 1995) – and then propose how art therapists can nomadically deterritorialize from linear trajectories built around macro-social inquiries, to create new concepts or select existing concepts to apply to their practice. The chapter features my arts-based study of rhizomatic nomadic approach in art therapy, including general observation of the therapy relationship, as well as case examples and narratives of clients reflecting unique assemblages and associations of thoughts, where the art therapist nomadically enters a zone that phenomenologists refer to as the a *life world*, an intersubjective world where objects, images and events appear meaningful prior to theorizations, and they engage with them (Brinkman, 2012). To avoid the finite connotation that the widely used word 'healing' carries, I propose the concept of becoming to be in alignment with the constantly changing conditions in one's personal and social lives. This will be with a creative freedom of thinking beyond theoretical channeling: I offer novel insights for art and the act of making a mark in contemporary art therapy practice.

In **Chapter 6**, I revisit the core inquiries that have shaped this book, beginning with exploring how perception, intersubjectivity, and the layered

nature of both conscious and unconscious language inform meaning-making within relational forms of art therapy. I stress again the importance of philosophical engagements with art, language, and embodiment, and the use of a perspective that interrogates how therapeutic encounters are shaped by epistemic structures. By integrating philosophical insights into practice, this closing chapter reaffirms the generative power of the ‘spaces between’—between art and therapy, theory and practice, self and other, as vital, transformative sites of ethical and creative potential.

M.R.G.

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Preface</i>	v
<i>Nomadism in Art Therapy and the Act of Making a Mark</i>	vii
 <i>Chapter</i>	
1. THE ART THERAPIST AS A NOMADIC FORCE: METAPHOR AND CONCEPT	3
A Nomadic Force.....	6
2. DECONSTRUCTING THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ART THERAPY IN THE CONTEXT OF NEUROCULTURE	11
Contemporary Landscapes of Art Therapy.....	22
3. NOMADIC, RHIZOMATIC APPROACH IN ART THERAPY: A CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGY FOR RENEWED PRACTICE	26
From Psychoanalysis to Geoanalysis.....	26
A New Agency in Art Therapy: Rhizomatic Thought.....	28
1. Perception and Intersubjectivity	31
2. Language and the Unconscious.....	42
Lacanian Concepts	43
The Chain of Signifiers and the Symbolic Order.....	44
The Imaginary and Visual Representation.....	44
The <i>Real</i> and the Limits of Representation	45
Language and Thought.....	46
Language, an Assemblage of Utterances and Signifiers.....	49
Language and the Flow of Intensities.....	50

3. The Effect of Dominant Culture.....	54
4. Relationship and Creativity: Relational Aesthetics	58
5. Art Therapy in the Community: Social Action	66
4. TRANSCENDENTAL EMPIRICISM: EXPANDING THE HORIZONS OF RESEARCH	72
Empiricism and Subjectivity in Art Therapy.....	76
5. NOMADIC ART THERAPY AND THE ACT OF MAKING A MARK	80
Arts-Based Inquiry.....	90
Part 1: Arts-Based Self-Study.....	90
Part 2: Encounters—People, Concepts.....	96
1. Encounter with Artist: David	100
2. Encounter with Artist: Ed.....	112
3. Encounter with Artist: Elle.....	119
4. Encounter with Artist: Ryan	125
Creating Trajectories for Collaboration	130
Part 3: Videography	134
Phase 1	135
Project 1—Trajectories	136
Project 2—The Stage.....	137
Phase 2.....	139
Phase 3.....	140
Healing vs. Becoming	141
Rhizome: Connecting Knowledge with Experience.....	145
Environment and Space.....	147
6. IN CLOSING: ART, THERAPY, AND THE SPACES BETWEEN	151
<i>From the Author</i>	157
<i>References</i>	161
<i>Name Index</i>	173
<i>Subject Index</i>	177

**NOMADISM IN ART THERAPY AND
THE ACT OF MAKING A MARK**

Chapter 1

THE ART THERAPIST AS A NOMADIC FORCE: METAPHOR AND CONCEPT

As art therapists, when we approach a picture with openness, we try not to project our own psychology onto client/artists' works (Furth, 2002). However, as often witnessed, either due to theoretical conditioning, or when art is used for “standardized” assessments tool, art therapy theorists as well as other mental health practitioners have projected their own (their field's) theoretical orientations onto artworks and creative expressions of their clients to develop their case examples.

Throughout the history of art therapy, professionals have developed theories that reflect philosophical and art-based responses to the unique needs and experiences of their clients (Wadson, 2010). Most often, dominant trends in the field of clinical psychology have informed and continue to inform their work. Over the years, the practice has been identified along a spectrum of approaches, ranging from clinical to community-based art therapy. Many art therapists may describe their approach to clinical work as falling somewhere in between the *art psychotherapy* and *art as therapy* theoretical poles, varying based on the site and clients (B. L. Moon, 2016). Both of these early approaches are founded on Freudian theories, the former focusing on a three way psychodynamic analysis between therapist, artwork and patient, and involving psychodynamic methods in which the meaning of artwork(s) created by the client is discussed and analyzed (see Margaret Naumburg, 1966); the latter, keeping a clear distance from analyzing the artwork, adopted the Freudian concept of *sublimation* as the active element for healing in art therapy (see Edith Kramer, 1971).

Other theories, based on Jungian, Gestalt, Humanistic, and Phenomenological philosophies, as well as more recent trends in

the field of mental health counseling, such as cognitive-behavioral and dialectical behavior therapy models, have been adapted for use in art therapy. Each one of these theories may also operate within another sub-level of binary structure, that is clinic vs. community-based art therapy. A third position was also explored beyond those polarities, which is art therapy as a form of socially responsive art (Kapitan, 2003).

Socially responsive art refers to artistic practices that actively engage with social issues, aiming to provoke dialogue, raise awareness, or contribute to social change. Unlike purely aesthetic or therapeutic approaches, socially responsive art often occurs in community settings and involves collaboration with individuals or groups affected by the issues being addressed. In this context, art therapy is positioned not only as a means of personal wellbeing and personal growth but also as a vehicle for community empowerment and social justice. By integrating therapeutic practices with socially engaged art, it supports both individual well-being and collective transformation.

As art therapy evolves into a growing phenomenon for community care and wellness, it must be closely connected to the social realities of one's era and to contemporary philosophical responses to those realities. The philosophical work of Deleuze and Guattari has gained increasing popularity in areas such as cultural studies, education, politics, gender studies, and others (Semetsky & Masny, 2013), but is less frequently applied in psychology or art therapy. As art therapy is a socially engaged practice, it becomes necessary to consider how knowledge is constructed and accessed in the contemporary space-time, beyond existing theoretical poles. Through deterritorialization from the limits of knowledge-territories derived from psychological and psychotherapeutic paradigms, we can employ new vocabularies that may shift perceptions within therapeutic relationships.

Through the act of making a mark in the creative-relational context of art therapy within the contained space of a clinical setting or on broader community platforms, we engage in a powerful process of meaning-making and knowledge formation. This seemingly simple act of mark-making transcends its physical gesture, becoming a symbolic expression of inner experiences, emotions, and personal narratives. Within the relational dynamic of art therapy, where the therapeutic alliance and creative process intertwine, each mark contributes to a dialogue between the self, the artwork, and the other. In community

contexts, this act also becomes a shared language, fostering collective reflection and understanding.

Thus, mark-making is not only a therapeutic outlet but also a way of constructing and communicating knowledge that is embodied, emotional, and socially informed. Readers will find that I deconstruct traditional narratives on illness and healing, and introduce an approach based on the philosophical work of Deleuze and Guattari (1972/2009, 1980/1987, 1991/1994) and Deleuze (1968/1994). In this approach, multiplicity and plurality are viewed as ways of being in the world that can be incompatible yet can coexist.

Through the act of deterritorializing from projections derived from theoretical orientations that exist within professions, we may reach the goal of approaching clients' art with a different kind of openness and conceive their work as *purely creative acts*. Breaking away from the exclusive -and at times obsessive-application of theoretical "models" based on fields of psychiatry and psychology, also and particularly psychoanalysis, all transferring beliefs and theories from the *outside* onto the artistic territories of artists/clients, I like to explore art therapy through the work of select continental philosophers that specifically emphasize persons' subjectivities, based on creative conceptualizations of perceptions, affect, and the process of meaning formation, desire, and continuous *becoming*.

I propose that in the act of making art, the client/artist actualizes blocs of affect, intensities that are not yet codified by language or representation, which become visible in the artwork as a new empirical mark. This mark functions not as a static symbol but as a trace of becoming, a site where affect and sensation are deterritorialized from the body and reterritorialized onto the plane of the image, opening up new possibilities for meaning, subjectivity, and transformation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The becoming visible of blocs of affect and percept is the primary source that inspires the development of new meanings, thoughts, realities, and feelings in viewers, and a source of empowerment for the client as they become an artist.

This book offers a unique view to the dynamic relations with clients and their artworks, with the clear hope of bringing awareness to existing theoretically informed biases and avoiding incorrect judgments while working with various artist-client populations in therapy.

A NOMADIC FORCE

The figurations of *nomad* and *rhizome*, conceived by Deleuze and Guattari (1989), are philosophical concepts with relevance in the creative, metaphorical, and therapeutic experiences that occur in the realm of human interactions across various art therapy contexts. Several concepts from their work, and specifically these figurations, will be utilized to convey my intentions and desire to propose new ways of thinking and writing about artworks created by ourselves and others. Moon (2007) stated that “When people explore the world metaphorically through art making, they gradually learn to rely on their intuitive understandings of situations and experiences and open themselves to multiple meanings that coexist” (p. 6). Following my experience as an art therapist and artist, the figuration of *nomad* surfaced as a metaphor that clearly conveyed my experience as an art therapist and my aspiration to share what I experienced.

The metaphor of *Nomad* was indicative of a movement and a force: the art therapist stepping into various spaces where they meet patients and make new connections with individuals or communities. Parallel to this physical movement through space, a cognitive movement also unfolds: nomadism reflects an intellectual process of continually entering, traversing, and departing various theoretical territories, without settling into fixed positions. It is not uncommon for therapists to be parenthetically conditioned to take paradigms as central power sources. The figuration of *Nomad* became a descriptive image for both processes of literally stepping into various spaces and communities, as well as entering the client’s world-territory in that space/time. The concept of connection through the metaphor of *rhizomes* represents a perception of art therapy practice as it is shaped by an interdisciplinary body of knowledge including disciplines of arts, philosophy, literature, sociology, science, politics, and more.

Over a period of several months, through art making, I explored the two figurations of *nomad* and *rhizome*, which are discussed in this book. I explored these metaphors as concepts by creating artworks using various media. Through an arts-based inquiry, my art became a primary site for investigating several questions, mainly regarding the analysis of artworks of clients, as well as relational activities in the therapy context.

I artistically and professionally explored *nomadism* as a way of thinking and being in the world. Nomadism was a useful concept for my

art therapy practice, presenting as a force generated through deterritorializing from arborescent and centralizing power formations of paradigms (that can become oppressive power structures) in art therapy.

The energy of the nomadic art therapist can be described as one that cultivates rhizomatic connections in concrete social and territorial terms, as well as through abstract and improvisational ways of thinking. This involves being open to input from all disciplines. More interested in lateral than vertical growth, and independent from centralized systems or frameworks in art therapy or psychology, rhizomes can grow in both lateral and vertical directions, from any knot point to any area where knowledge may be constructed within a person's thoughts or complex psychic experiences. The inclusion of these views is significant and emancipatory for the clinical practitioner. Case study insights into what occurs for the client or the therapist during therapy sessions should not be predetermined by centralized systemic theories. Instead, they should emerge laterally, from any point to any other, incorporating interdisciplinary interests that allow for the exploration of matters of personal life and professional practice independently of mental health power structures. This perspective requires relational dynamics grounded in the real presence of both art therapist and client within the improvisational and fluid space-time of therapeutic encounters.

Intersubjective relations and interactions with artist-clients in art therapy reflect a dynamic flow with complexities beyond a set of theories created by a person or people for their own practice. The concept of Nomadism in art therapy seeks to expand the scope of practice beyond theoretical determinism by advocating for an ongoing critical perspective on the applicability and usefulness of paradigms or models. It also calls for an awareness of ethical concerns regarding the application/generalization of any given theory.

For half a century, the development of art therapy theories has been described with their arborescent formation, adapting to and growing around Western psychology and psychiatry. By challenging linear paradigms, we can move beyond a single disciplinary area or culture to construct new forms of knowledge. When art therapist Bruce Moon uncovered reasons why for half a century art therapy has identified exclusively through the field of psychology, he pointed to the fact that there had been a desire to be regarded as "truly professional" by colleagues in other disciplines, the need to be recognized by governmental and insurance related authorities, and a degree of reluctance toward identifying too closely with the art world (2002).

This book centers on the concept of nomadism in art therapy, not simply as a physical act, but as a way of being, a relational and philosophical stance that embraces fluidity, non-linearity, and multiplicity. The act of making a mark, whether with paint, gesture, or presence, becomes both a trace of this movement and a declaration of existence. *Nomadism in Art Therapy and the Act of Making a Mark* offers a fresh perspective on the current epistemology of Creative Arts Therapy, drawing on several recent developments in continental philosophy, particularly the major conceptual ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Deleuze's transcendental empiricism. It strives to expand perceptions within art therapy relations beyond the limited spectrum of psychological theories. The author aims to connect this contemporary philosophical approach to current therapeutic methods in ways that will enhance professionals' understanding and application of creative, relational arts-based inquiries. It is intended for all contemporary therapists and mental health professionals, as well as current art therapy undergraduate and graduate students, and art therapy graduates seeking to complete post-graduate practice hours for licensure. It will be a valuable resource for all contemporary-minded mental health professionals and therapists who work with individuals with mental illness and disabilities, individuals in special situations, older adults experiencing life changes, and professionals who are interested in improving healthcare systems and organizational structures using contemporary ethics, and for students and researchers interested in exploring the application of creative, relational arts-based inquiry.

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ISBN 978-0-398-09491-1



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