

Tikkun Olam as Cosmic Repair

Book Review for
*Art-Care Practices for Restoring the Communal:
Education, Co-Inquiry, and Healing*
by Barbara A. Bickel & R. Michael Fisher
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Bio

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The compassionate observations about art and *communitas* written down in the pages of this book are meant to re-enchant and even become an oracle song—a sacred message received and co-composed from the experience. It is a gift shared for the purpose of a collective guidance for the future. (Bickel & Fisher, 2023, p. 182)

What do you do about a problem that you find in the modern art world, where art has been separated from the space of sacred or communal work? Barbara A. Bickel and R. Michael Fisher together wrote a book: *Art-Care Practices for Restoring the Communal: Education, Co-Inquiry, and Healing* to expand the imaginaries of artists, researchers, and teachers with the goal that they too facilitate their own creative communal practices. Bickel and Fisher make good on their offer of a sacred message that is meant to re-enchant the community with a “spiritual feminist perspective on art and the creating of art ... (as) an ethically centered relational process” (p. xxxvii) (parenthesis added). With in-depth theoretical reflection and practical tools for their method of *Spontaneous Creation-Making* (SCM), the authors provide practitioners and facilitators with a praxis that aims for personal and communal transformation. Various techniques to practice SCM that align with Bracha L. Ettinger’s paradigm of *matrixial borderspaces* are impressive in the number of methods offered and in their depth of insight into what can feel like an uneasy process. The book also provides an encyclopedic resource for arts-based researchers, facilitators, practitioners, as well as for teachers of various fields who serve these feminist concerns. Together Bickel and Fisher have over 30 years of experience facilitating numerous creation labs that combine culture, arts, and healing. The latest is their Restorative Lab Project that began in 2020 and it so clearly informs the methodologies, theories, and content developed for this book.

Art-Care Practices includes three main parts, which I will address respectively. The first part is titled “Communitreaming on Theory” and provides a rich resource, background, and ground for the use of art in communal healing. The reader is offered an imaginative landscape to spontaneously create an *otherwise*.¹ I use the word *otherwise* because the theoretical backbone of this book stands in proximity to Bracha L. Ettinger’s matrixial aesthetics that values the service of *artworking*. An encounter with what is other, or otherwise-than-what is-known, is needed so that we can birth new creations “to sacredly restore and reunite us aesthetically with universal maternal place-ness on the Earth and healing” (Bickel & Fisher, p. 124). Emphasis in art creation here sheds light on psychic cracks and traumas, on personal fragmentation, and the possibility for co-regulation with past, present, and future others. Art as spiritual activism neither focuses on technical skill, nor seeks to harmonize reality; this art does not focus on aesthetic pleasure. Instead, art-caring calls for radical trust and openness to engage in a practice that is produced in “*communitas*,” a process of copoiesis with others who are working toward a common goal (Bickel & Fisher, pp. 84-85). They draw from Marrie-Dominique Garnier’s notion of *placenterre* as the mediating place from which new life gestates and invites each person to birth new creations through art. Through an exercise facilitated by Bickel and Fisher in the book’s “Turnabout Postscript,” the readers are recruited to create for themselves what is *otherwise*.

The authors provide many examples from their group facilitations of art-making from before and during the Covid-19 lockdown that were made virtually or in-person and the affects will continue to ripple through time in their readers’ engagement. Through different modalities such as dance, painting, poetry, audio-mixing, and photo collage, the authors illustrate how the ethical injunction of care arises through different art-making processes if it comes from a place of relationality that originates for all of us in the womb. One example they provided is in the spontaneous creation of a snow labyrinth for others in the community to walk (Bickel & Fisher, 2003, p. 6). The spiral-art created an unexpected encounter with un-homed residents from the neighborhood and generated a heartfelt exchange, which in the book precedes the authors’ insightful explanation of the theoretical value of their use of public space to engage the borders of their own levels of comfort.

An *arational* approach to what is m/othered, processes of unlearning, and worlding-with-others similarly helped facilitate new creative possibilities for 22 participants of the Restorative Lab whose creations are featured heavily throughout the book, and honestly, they offer an amount of relief to the reader in the very process of wit(h)nessing them. For me personally, the first Covid lockdown in March 2020 coincided with the birth of my first child on March 31, 2020. I often joke that the world shutdown as my partner and I went into hibernation-mode from sleep deprivation, prioritizing new diapers and feeding routines, and the constant care of a new human being. Memories of my first-born child, like their first smile, are bittersweet since they are accompanied by a world that was shut down from the possibility of community.

However, even to read retroactively about this group of “22 spontaneous creators,” who came together to co-create through various art practices, such as poetry, image manipulation, dance, and cooking, prove to me that interconnectivity persisted during such an isolated, but beautiful, time in my life (Bickel & Fisher, p. 11). Diane’s story about cooking mushrooms from a delivery that arrived just before their first online “Happening” was particularly moving for me (Barbara & Fisher, pp. 32-33). She offered a manipulated image of the meal she cooked to the group as part of her creative art-making. An image of the meal

is offered in the book to the reader, and it brought tears to my eyes. Meals and breaking bread still happened in our isolation. Even if I didn't know about this group or the first online "Happening" in March of 2020, the sense of community I felt helped to re-signify the isolation I often project back to that time. The authors' offer of art-care is still generating interconnectivity within a *communitas* of readers now who seek to heal from the Covid-19 pandemic.

For the most enriching experience with the first part of Bickel's and Fisher's book on theory, an acquaintance with Ettinger's book *The Matrixial Borderspace* (2006) would be helpful. Particularly the first chapter titled "The Maternal Gaze" develops key concepts that are generative for Bickel's and Fisher's art-care practices, such as how co-origination in a *matrixial* womb activates art and art-making processes. According to these insights, the ethical burden in art-creation and copoiesis that enables the therapeutic potential to see and have one's trauma wit(h)nessed, calls for a safe context to hold another with empathy and compassion (Bickel & Fisher, 2023). Advice is offered on how to create this holding space as a facilitator of SCM. To be clear, Bickel's and Fisher's book provides a glossary of key terms, relevant quotes, and sufficient context for those unfamiliar with Ettinger's work, but it was a unique delight to read them side-by-side. It is noteworthy that Ettinger endorsed *Art-Care Practices* both with her art which is featured as the book's cover, by writing a touching Foreword, and through her participation in an event for the book's launch. Bickel's and Fisher's book is where Ettinger's revolutionary ideas gain legs and walks into art as a healing practice.

The second part is titled "Spontaneous Creating on Practice" and focuses on how to put into practice Ettinger's matrixial insights. Rich details are provided on how to use ritual and grounding exercises to create a sacred space for art-making and healing. Detailed instructions and scripts, guidelines and examples illustrate how to practice and facilitate SCM sessions. While never overlooking feelings of vulnerability and fear that this process inspires, steps to gestate and transform them illustrate how aesthetics are the foundation of the ethical encounter for these co-authors. In addition to SCM, thirteen *Matrixial Aesthetic Practices* (MAPs) are introduced in Chapter 2 and fully explained in Appendix 1. These MAPs aim to foster creative encounters in community with others and each one offers a unique imaginary to re-enter a field of care through art-making. A few notable MAPs that move aesthetics into ethics and politics include the hospitable welcoming of the other (MAP #1), forming and accessing caring fields with ancestral lines and allies (MAP #2), following *arational* threads in intuition and dreams (MAP #6), and art-inquiry into the unknown for a living encounter-event (MAP #7). The book's form puts into practice MAP #12 that asks to commit to a field of maternal care. The authors have not trademarked their SCM method. The book's foundation in gift-giving arrests my curiosity about how the authors will measure and quantify the ways these methods are used for collective healing. But therein lies the way this book presses on its reader in its thoughtful form to challenge the economic exchange of value for a matrixial one. The rest will follow.

"Gestating on Service" is the third and concluding part of the book that really puts into practice the idea of a matrixial paradigm. The gift is the authors' careful and meticulous development of art-care as a communal service. In a relation that is asymmetrical between authors and readers, Bickel and Fisher provide sample posters from their workshops, exercise examples, and email templates for SCM practitioners and facilitators. Without the expectation of monetary payment in the traditional spirit of an "exchange econ-

onomy,” these materials are all gifted to readers without the expectation of a fair return (Bickel & Fisher, 2023, p. xxxix, p. 106). Through and through the message of ethical relationality and art-making for curative possibilities is enacted. From the images and exercises that worked on me just by reading them, to the groups of people that can facilitate more SCM workshops, and the scholars and teachers who can now ground their research in a paradigm that challenges Western colonial practices (Bickel & Fisher, 2023), I can say that this invaluable book in content and form offers an amount of Tikkun Olam that aims to repair the cosmos through communal and personal acts of healing.²

Note: To see a video of the book launch and conversation between the book authors and Bracha L. Ettinger and others go to <https://studiom.space/books/>

References

- Bickel, B. A., & Fisher, R. M. (2023). *Art-care practices for restoring the communal: Education, co-inquiry, and healing*. Routledge.
- Ettinger, B. (2006). *The matrixial borderspace*. University of Minnesota Press.

Endnotes

- ¹ Levinas, E. (2009). *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Duquesne University Press.
- ² See Isaac Luria’s teachings in Gershom Scholem’s book *Kabbalah* (1974).

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