



BOOK REVIEW OF ART-CARE PRACTICES FOR RESTORING THE COMMUNAL: EDUCATION, CO-INQUIRY, AND HEALING

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Abstract: Barbara Bickel and R. Michael Fisher, through their co-creative life-partnership, have composed in their book *Art-Care Practices for Restoring the Communal: Education, Co-inquiry, and Healing*, a beneficial guide (project) for research, education, academe, and art. They provocatively decentre deep-rooted beliefs in individualism and competition— aspects that dominate today's academic life, promotion, publishing quotas, and journal rankings. In their thoughtful tarrying, they offer the reader three equally important text sections: "Communidreaming on Theory"; "Spontaneous Creating on Practice"; and "Gestating on Service." Opening this collective is a detailed glossary, followed by a foreword of poetry, psalm, and photographed process which introduces Bracha Ettinger and her guiding Matrixial theory. Thereafter, Bickel and Fisher's story of inspiration transports us into their intimate and courageous practice of Spontaneous Creation-Making (SCM) with 35 co-creatives—"an invitational way to make and re-make sense of the troubling times" (p. xxxv) which unfolded during the pandemic and shutdown in North America.

Keywords: art-care; co-creative; communal; nature; Matrixial theory

When a dedication is made to “the artworkings of ancestral and future motherers of the kinship way of Life” (Bickel & Fisher, 2023, p. x), you know you are entering a vital realm, albeit one not often considered nor attended to in scholarly work. Barbara Bickel and R. Michael Fisher, through their co-creative life-partnership, have composed in their book *Art-care Practices for Restoring the Communal: Education, Co-inquiry, and Healing*, a long-needed guide (project) for research, education, academe, and art. It is needed because their “what” and “how” return us (readers) to communal engagement—the foundation and source of collective life. Bickel and Fisher (2023) thoughtfully decentre deep-rooted beliefs in (and commitments to) individualism and competition—aspects that dominate today’s academic life, publishing quotas, and journal rankings. In their thoughtful tarrying, they offer the reader three equally important text sections: “Communidreaming on Theory”; “Spontaneous Creating on Practice”; and “Gestating on Service.”

To navigate this rich terrain, a detailed glossary heralds the forthcoming topographia—a cartos-of-sorts to ready the reader for a fresh, even foreign arts-creation-traversing. Like any new way-finding, we are best prepared if we have a sense of the *topos*, the land. As instructive companion, a provocative foreword of poetry, psalm, and photographed process introduces Bracha Ettinger and her Matrixial theory—a steady compass for the journey ahead. Following Ettinger’s gifting of her notebook images, Bickel and Fisher’s story of inspiration transports us into their intimate and courageous practice of Spontaneous Creation-Making (SCM) with 35 co-creatives—“an invitational way to make and re-make sense of the troubling times” which unfolded during the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown in North America (Bickel & Fisher, 2023, p. xxxv).

As artists, researchers, and teachers, embodying care in unique yet ancient-ways-modernized, Bickel and Fisher (p. xxxv) intuitively birthed and tended “art-care” practices as sacred space through their virtual “Studio M* Research Creation Lab”. That is, their orientation constellated sacred *communitatem*, a “fellowship, a community of relations or feelings” (Latin), and “common enjoyment” (English circa 1400) (Harper, n.d.). Like “land held in common” (English c 1600) (Harper, n.d.), the people shared a familial root that fed them. The time-tested and timely experiences and stories of learning and unlearning supported their artist-coupleship and leadership with an enthusiastically growing group of artists, activists, educators, caregivers, and friends.

The feeling-tone of their unfolding community-building reminds me of the vitality of rural cooperatives who ritually gathered for food preparation, socials (quilt-making, dances with midnight lunch, card playing . . .), and farm-work (seeding, harvesting, barn building, fixing . . .) where life depended on neighbours’ unspoken commitment, care, and participation. Here, there was a reverence for life that honoured the interconnectivity of people, place, and local inhabitants—a reverence that acknowledged a creative impulse at the centre of existence and a trust in reciprocity that extended beyond the human-individual.

In traditional and rural communities, across seasons and hardships, especially during crises, people endured and flourished by coming together as cooperatives and by co-creating. These communities survived (even thrived) through knowledges which honoured collective rhythm, hand-work, emergent creative engagement, working with-in-place, deep play, vulnerability, and sharing in food, song, and dance.

In the critical chronicling of their art-caring, I am struck by a sense of centring, a centre that goes unnamed, yet holds imperative in its containing and holding and birthing capacities. In “The Art of Storying a Life” (Fidyk, 2021), I describe the silence at the centre of the arts (be they visual, performative, contemplative, or poetic) that can serve as a curative. Centring, gathering in deep attendance with intention, conjoining hand, head, heart while in-feeling heals—the witness that appears when ego consciousness quiets. “Art is like that. It has always resided at the centre of life. . . . Making, attending, and studying (gathering, sorting, interpreting), art sophisticates thought, heart-seeing, body-turning” (p. 69). As prophetically demonstrated across Bickel and Fisher’s book, “art, *poiesis*, dwells at the centre coursing as it symbolically mediates all knowing and learning” (Fidyk, 2021, p. 69). Such creating is “kin to curing, re-generating,” (p. 69) and reconciling—“hence the necessity for the family and or the community to cooperate, partake in, and witness the recovery” (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 140). Across Bickel and Fisher’s book sections on theory, practice, and service, we witness art-care “transforming us through the tangible unseen” (Fidyk, 2021, p. 69). It is in this way that we are shepherded back to the core of traditional and rural gatherings, back to *communitas*.

When seeking to restore the communal: Do not read this collection of art-care practices as a handbook of stand-alone arts-based methods and activities. Do not perceive this online creating initiative as a closed gathering of experienced artists. And, do not read the project as a series of recurring structured lessons and meetings to be replicated in others’ research projects. Importantly, read this original work of “*communicating*” as Bickel and Fisher read the pandemic—as an unfamiliar, unexpected, yet inspirational teacher with its own agency that enfolds both death and birth within a greater, rhythmic round.

Receptivity to emergent and fluid creation-making requires trust—in each other and in process-becoming; curiosity—a willingness to respond to an invitation beyond the “I’s” wantings and doings; and, relatedness—a being open to relational-becoming and the not-yet. The characteristic spirit of Bickel and Fisher’s communal, and by extension, their offering, carries forward the mystery that is so often forgotten, and lost, in the technical, rational, and expertly defined planning of much education and research. By meeting with wonder that which arrived unbeckoned, they nurtured a most precious gift, illustrating ways to face grief, loss, and sorrow. Following their lead and their practices, we can become better prepared to tend the things we love *and* we grieve because we have forgotten that

grief is akin to love. Relearning the world through arting and relating can steady our own responses when familiar ground trembles and quakes. For the very ethos that imbues their project, found through reverence to one another, to nature, to dialogue, and to gratitude, runs through each practice and culminates in the compiling of their collection, *Art-Care Practices for Restoring the Communal: Education, Co-Inquiry, and Healing*. Across a diverse disciplinary readership, this work captures and resounds something rarely found among the halls and projects of higher education—love and faith (as in to believe in something without knowing that something). Love and faith, companioned by healing, and with creativity and caring at their centre, have the potential to usher in transformative change.

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