

Book review

Trauma healing at the Clay Field: A sensorimotor art therapy approach

Foreword: Heinz Deuser

Author: Cornelia Elbrecht

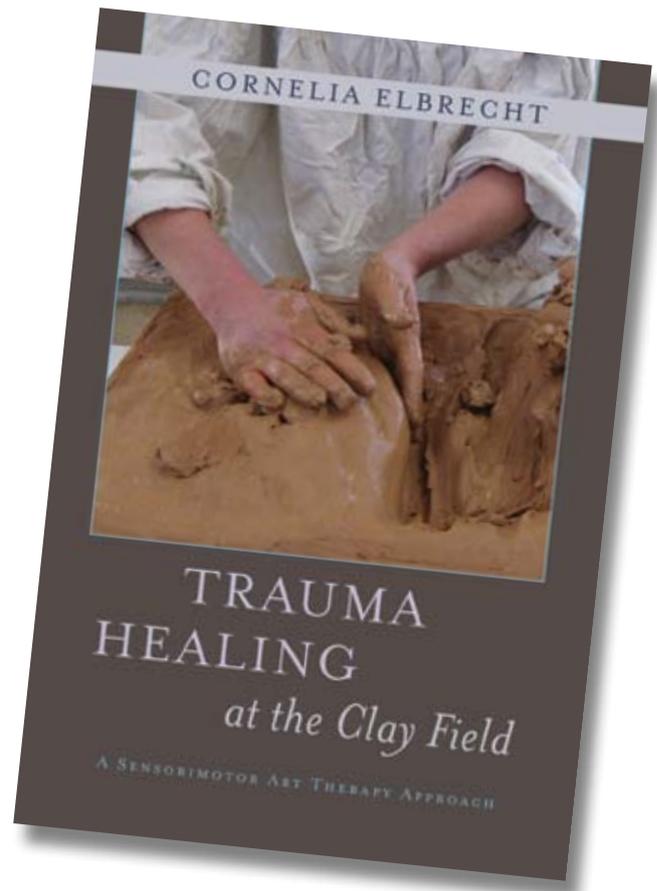
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Reviewed by Maggie Wilson

This is a full-bodied work with a focus on trauma and early infant development. The metaphors of 'clay for attachment', the box as a container of emotions, and water as a purifying cleanser, come together with vignettes and case studies to illuminate an in-depth observation of the human body and how it responds to work at the Clay Field. Just as examining attachment relationships can lead to insight into the self, likewise, clay as the 'therapeutic medium', and work at the Clay Field can lead to self-discovery. The layering of attachment theories onto the Clay Field experience is at times complex, and does need attentive reading, but I found the illustrations of Clay Field work and case vignettes assisted in my understanding of the book.

Work at the Clay Field originated in Germany in 1972, with Professor Heinz Deuser. In this book, Deuser's collaborator, Australian art psychotherapist, Cornelia Elbrecht, has provided clinicians and students with the first Clay Field English text. Based on her forty years as an art therapist, Elbrecht uses an initiatic art therapy approach involving a mixed framework of bioenergetics, transpersonal body work, gestalt, attachment theory, and psychoanalytic theory.

'Part I: Understanding the hands' contains two chapters, 'The hands and the brain' and 'The language of our hands'. In the first chapter, scientific theories of the development of the brain hemispheres are linked to the development of touch in the newborn and



the subsequent development of language. To support this, Elbrecht quotes the work of Levine and Kline (2007), Rothchild (2000) and Winnicott (1964). In Chapter 2, the reader is introduced to the language of the hands, with the concept of haptic activity, resulting in 'haptic perception' (sense of touch), suggesting we "become aware of the relationship of the hands with the material or object they have created" (p.39). Skin sense, a sense of balance and a sense of depth are all described within an object relations framework. That is, the skin acts as a container and it is through observing the client's therapeutic dialogue with their

hands in the Clay Field, and acknowledging the kinaesthetic process of the body, that the therapist works as a witness to assist the client.

'Setting the scene for work at the Clay Field' in Part II includes three chapters. Firstly, 'The work set up at the Clay Field' is outlined, with fifteen kilos of clay, a bowl of warm water and the function of the box clearly described. Unlike other therapists who describe the practical applications of clay work (Henley, 1988), and the objects that can be created from clay in therapy (Sherwood, 2004), for Elbrecht, "clay work based entirely on our sense of touch has the ability to reconnect us with the core of our identity" (p.19). It is explained that work in the Clay Field holds limitless opportunities for mirroring and reflecting back information to the client.

The work described is in individual client-therapist sessions, rather than group work, with the individual client working directly with the clay. It is the client who is in charge of the therapy, and the therapist works as the accompanier, with the Clay Field acting as a buffer for emotions that might otherwise be transferred to the therapist. This has the advantage of minimising the possibility of transference and countertransference between client and therapist.

The process issues when working at the Clay Field are outlined in Chapter 4. The felt sense, the interconnections between bioenergetics and somatic experiencing are for Elbrecht a way of accessing the bodily physiological remembering; they are not a cognitive storytelling. Emotions in Clay Field work are expressed as kinaesthetic action. Bodily sensations are projected onto the clay, the clay representing the client's life. The client experiences "'reafference' sensory awareness" as a result of poking and filling the clay, a felt sense. The libido is activated by the Clay Field process and a wholeness can be experienced. The importance of gestalt as a basic theoretical concept is discussed, noting the gestalt circle as "the cornerstone of psychosomatics"(p.122). The gestalt process intention (formation stages in the process of individuation), the

primary gestalt (the client's conflict revealed via the clay) and the optimal gestalt (the self-realisation that completes the creative process) become clearer when aligned with the tools used in the Clay Field. This is a dense chapter and may need reading several times.

In Chapter 5, 'Trauma healing', the sensorimotor art therapy approach is integrated with well-known trauma theories (Levine, 1997, 2003; Rothschild, 2002) which explain how clients presenting with dissociation, panic attacks, or avoidance can be brought back into the present moment by focusing on the senses. In this way the Clay Field assists clients to remain in the here-and-now by focusing on bodily awareness of the Clay Field and their own internal experience. The sensorimotor process, its links with kinaesthetic involvement, and the 'expressive therapies continuum' knowledge of the limbic system all seem to sum up the advantages of working with trauma-related problems at the Clay Field.

In Chapter 6, 'Working at the Clay Field with adults', Elbrecht provides a conceptual framework with nine situations: presentation of reliability, being reliable to me, being reliable on me, finding orientation, reaching object constancy, reaching subject constancy, finding one's own ground, shadow integration, destruction as self-realisation and accepting one's humanity.

Case studies in Chapter 7 assist the reader to understand the processes involved. Elbrecht explains in Part IV that working with children in the Clay Field follows a different pattern than with adults. Differences noted are that children work with eyes open, objects can be included in the field and photographs of the finished product are permitted. The developmental stages of children are clearly outlined and would be valuable reading for students and beginning practitioners.

Chapter 9, 'Working with traumatized children', illustrates the stages of working with children in three case studies. Attachment and recent neurological theories confirm that damaged neurological pathways can be repaired through haptic activity. Using games and

transitional objects can lead to integration in the Clay Field.

In conclusion, some of the theoretical discussion relating to the Clay Field work requires careful reading, but our understanding is assisted by the case studies. The excellent descriptions of the stages of the work provide real-life examples of individual therapeutic sessions with traumatised adults and children. Elbrecht's sensitive and thorough approach to haptic connection with clay, via the Clay Field, fills a gap in art therapy literature, and, in offering a sensorimotor approach to the treatment of trauma or trauma-related problems in work with adults and children, provides inspiration and guidance to therapists. From a personal perspective, my experience of training in Clay Field work with Cornelia Elbrecht and Heinz Deuser led me to gain a greater understanding and to integrate previously unrecognised personal trauma issues that thirty-five years of creative therapies had not revealed.