

IF YOU TOUCH, YOU ARE TOUCHED

Work at the clay-field / Arbeit am Tonfeld®

Here and now, I should like to make you acquainted with a creative therapeutic method which has far reaching implications and great effects. It is called **Arbeit am Tonfeld**, (Work at the clay - field). It was created in the 1970-ies by Heinz Deuser, nowadays professor at the department of art therapy at the university of Nürtingen in Germany. This method is like a living organism; it is being developed and differentiated and it grows all the time.

However before discussing the main issues of work in the clay-field, I would like to introduce myself. I have been accompanying patients in their process in the clay-field for twenty years. Basically I was trained in Adlerian depth psychology. Later I got into touch with the centre of Karlfried Graf Dürkheim in the Black Forest and it was in this context that I met Heinz Deuser and became thoroughly involved in his method. Actually I work in private practice in Munich, doing group work and individual work. For seven years I have now been training therapists in Germany, Switzerland and France in work at the clay-field.

“In order to study life, one must take part in life.” This is a quotation from “The Circle of Gestalt” (Der Gestaltkreis) by Viktor von Weizsäcker, a German biologist, researcher and the founder of psycho-somatics in Germany. Taking part in LIFE is exactly what is happening when working at the clay-field. If someone sits down to touch the surface of this field with his (or her) eyes closed, his hands will irresistibly start to move. His spontaneous movements are a reflection of an inner movement whose basis is the movement of life itself, the dynamics of the Self according to C.G.Jung. Deuser calls what moves the hands in the clay-field, “life movement”.

Consequently, if the hands are not able to move freely or to move at all, there is absence of life, there is standstill, restraint, numbness. Life movement is fettered and/or defeated and the person himself will feel terribly depressed or constrained or he won't feel anything at all. Movement and Life are one .

So if one lets one's spontaneous movements take shape in the clay-field, one yields to life in its transpersonal as well as its personal, individual aspect, namely to one's creative, vital and intuitive potential.

Besides the transpersonal aspect of the dynamics of life, there is another aspect that transcends the individual psyche, that of the structure and process of Gestalt underlying any truly creative expression. In German the word “Gestalt” means the exterior shape, mostly of persons; in a psychological connotation it means a holistic relationship based on a balanced energetic field.

“Every movement becomes Gestalt” - is the main principle of work at the clay-field. Concretely, each movement of someone's hands creates a corresponding shape in the plastic material which has the advantage of offering resistance and constancy at the same time. These are qualities that answer basic vital and emotional needs of persons having experienced very early frustrations. You can easily imagine that a hand passing rather softly over the clay will produce round, sensuous forms, whereas a hand that hits or

claws at the clay will produce a kind of torn surface or a form full of holes and cracks.

Since in the Gestalt process movement will necessarily lead to perception, the person touching these different forms will immediately perceive their qualities, not their form. For the perception of form through haptical experience needs a long process of exploration, distinction, error, maybe anxiety, endurance, until finally the form will become clear to the touching hand and the attentive mind. Therefore it is quality rather than form that is in the foreground of haptical experience and the steps towards perceiving form are the steps of the evolution of the Gestalt itself

With regard to the two examples mentioned before, the first form, round and sensuous, may be felt to be agreeable and inviting long caresses, whereas the second form, torn and full of craters may be perceived as complicated, perplexing and chaotic. Therefore, in the latter case, the person will try to simplify these forms in order to have a better control and a better feeling, which is at the same time a demand of Gestalt structure: complicated forms tend to simple and clear forms.

However, the caressing movements of the first person will not continue endlessly either. For on the sensory level of Gestalt work, caressing the clay or gently touching it, putting clay all around one or both of your hands or arms, rubbing clay on your face or your neck - all these actions serve to satisfy basic sensory needs, to still the very great early hunger for being touched, being well fed, being held and thus being recognized as a valuable, loveable being. Working in the clay-field can, indeed, make good for primary frustrations and may even heal them.

(Example: after struggling for quite a time with the depressive control in her way of touching and working in the field, where she creates narrow, straight ditches, a 45-year old woman finally starts moving her hands in a playful way, throws out all the material, takes intense possession of the ground and after that is able to create a wide open bowl, which she fills with an abundance of little round forms, which she calls fruit. She is delighted by the richness, and the qualities of succulence and ripeness she touches. So am I. She has finally managed to create the Gestalt of her own sensuality.)

These few examples may show that the creative process in the clay-field, although being closely bound to the personality of those who work, is nevertheless subject to the archetypal order and structure inherent in any Gestalt process. The dynamics of the Self or the life movement evoked by the first touch of the field, by the first step towards a relationship with it, reconnect the person straight to the archetypal tradition and the archetypal conditions of humanity.

And the deepest need is to become himself, to find his own, individual Gestalt. Therefore the most important aspect of the Gestalt process in the clay-field is that of individuation. This method goes further than allowing someone to give authentic expression to his needs, problems or his biographical experiences. Just because it refers the person working to his creative potential and the order of the Self, it provides the possibility of integrating into the ego ancient, often traumatic experiences and/or to rediscover possibilities that were always there, but that could not be seized or admitted by the ego. The very nature of touch, namely the paradoxical juxtaposition of its creating great closeness and, at the same time, of producing separation, is one of the agents of individuation and evolution of a creative ego.

The other agent is the particular relationship established in the clay-field between he who works and the clay-field itself. - Here I shall leave out the question of the relationship with the therapist, which brings about

a special triangular therapeutic setting. - The relationship in the work at the clay-field is of a circular nature as described in "Der Gestaltkreis" (The Circle of Gestalt) by Viktor von Weizsäcker. In itself it confronts the person working with the claim of individuation. In this relationship, the clay-field is the unfailing, ever-present partner whom the person who touches it perceives as his object, a YOU that always maintains its separate identity, its otherness. Therefore it provides for the subject the existential possibility to experience himself as separate, different and unique: "I am other than You". As Martin Buber states in his book "I and You": "I cannot become I myself without a You".

But here self-perception goes still one step further. Beyond my perception of the other one and the qualities of the clay-field, as "my" other one, I give shape to my way of reacting to or handling the challenge that the other one presents to me. My individual response finds its expression in a corresponding form in the plastic material. Through touch, it gives me the information not only of "who I am", but also of "how I am" and of "how I am doing". Consequently there is no dissociation in perception. It remains entirely on the level of sensation and insight.

As a final particularity of individuation work at the clay-field, I should like to mention that it demands activity. Once you have got into touch and have established a relationship with the field, you *must* act according to the unconscious claim of the Self. You *must* take risks, you *must* take what you need or desire, you *must* find and take your position or standpoint, - very concretely and tangibly by doing so. This inner urge means a great challenge throughout nearly any working process and often leads to crisis, which is a crisis of the long-known and securing ego patterns. It is the ego that is confronted with the demands of individuation and with the necessity of letting go without being able to control anymore. Therefore the grounding in previous sensory experiences or in one's own vitality or in spontaneous ritual create for the ego the basis to take the risk, to jump and thus to find itself in another space of possibility and potential. There the person concerned will be able to take his life into his hands and to fulfill the demands of Life with body and soul, just as he did in his work at the clay-field.

Barbara Osterwald

Preysingstr. 3

D - 81667 München

Tel 0049. 89. 448. 28. 27.

Mobil 0173.94.23.526

Fax 0049.89. 44 45 48 18

Email. barbara.osterwald@gmx.de