
Book Review

Lorna Collins. *Making Sense: Art Practice and Transformative Therapeutics*. New York: Bloomsbury: 2014. 280 pp. \$112.00 USD (Hardcover) ISBN 9781472573186.

The demand that philosophy *be relevant* is not new. The book under review, without escaping this outcome, displays constant tension between supporting, on the one hand, a practical agenda with a rich display of deeply philosophic works, and on the other hand demonstrating useful application of those same texts, without compromising their complexity. Despite suggestive links to Nancy, Derrida, and Rancière, not enough attention is paid to the subtlety of deconstruction, and the result is a tenuous mixture of theory oriented toward the fascinating fields of art, psychotherapy, and politics.

Collins begins by building her case from Rancière's notion of '*partage du sensible*', or, distribution of the sensible, and argues for, not necessarily the curative, but *palliative* effects of art therapy, stating in effect that 'artwork makes political sense' (1). Her book is divided into two parts. In the first, Collins seeks to demonstrate the affectivity of art objects and their utility toward healing individuals in a manner that, in bypassing the clinic, also challenges it. Each mode of the triadic structure of aesthetic experience – that is, artwork as aesthetic object, the spectator and their aesthetic encounter, and the relation conjoining artist and their creative art process – sustains the possibility for stimulating a transformative therapeutic. The hope is to cultivate a sense of, and provide a theoretical basis for an art practice that could exist independent of clinical intervention, without substituting it absolutely. Once having established support for an agency of transformative art practice, Collins in the second part works to expand this concept into a critical method of thinking that could institute socio-political change.

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By applying Paul Carter's term *material thinking* (in *Material Thinking* 2004) to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *de-lre-territorialization* (*What is Philosophy* 1994), Collins argues that a distribution of (art) materials in space can create the micropolitical conditions for collaborative aesthetic experience, and thus can create the conditions for political healing.

In Chapter one Collins describes her first encounter with the artworks of Jean-Bernard Chardel, reflecting upon the attitude and haptic depth expressed in the fabric and material in his works. The paintings, she notes, were composed variously of flour, sand, and wood bark, as well as pigment, giving the work a 'terrestrial' feel. Taking Freud's concepts of transference and counter-transference as a model, Collins demonstrates how the artwork operates as a mediating apparatus for both the artist (creating the work) and the spectator (viewing the work). In both instances, a projection of states, moods, and attributes are transferred onto the material and its respective colors, shapes, and textures. The artwork, now assuming a talismanic posture, absorbs any negativity or crisis transferred by the artist/viewer, rendering the experience intensely personal, yet simultaneously transcending the merely personal. The resulting interaction, as between patient and analyst, thus constitutes something like a dialogue between a questioning and answering self, through which it is understood that an artwork can 'have a transformative effect', that is, the artwork exists as a channel through which inner and outer worlds may communicate, inflecting emotional transformation of the subject.

Collins furthermore adopts Jean-Luc Nancy's neologism 'transimmanence' to give sense to the multiple experiences afforded by the art object. Transimmanence denotes the 'transcendence of immanence' whereby immanence does not *escape*, or go outside itself in transcending. The *spacing*, in which the artwork *ek-sists*, creates also the possibility for the work to break free of its status as object, in order for it to participate in the dimension of time. Hereby can one encounter the 'artwork *as* an event of experience', open to a wide host of impressions that alter with time (Nancy, *The Muses* 1996, 29).

Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic reversibility of flesh receives a meager nod of acknowledgment. Collins' point is clear, though, *flesh* seems to 'capture a sense of the haptic materiality that is involved in this [aesthetic] encounter' (34). Yet the same encounter is described elsewhere as 'invaginating my vision', again appropriating Merleau-Ponty's terminology from *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). Aesthetic experience is invariably a feast for all senses; that goes without question.

However, hastening past an opportunity to critically inhabit the optic/haptic controversy, an issue to which Derrida gives consummate attention in his *On Touching–Jean-Luc Nancy*, Collins relegates this very discussion to a footnote, purely conceding Derrida’s criticism, that is, that despite Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to divest ‘phenomenological discourse from its oculo-centric emphasis, and privilege *touch*’, he nevertheless ‘still privileges *sight* over touch’, appointing this dispute as ‘a battle for the democracy of the senses’ (237 n. 7.). Exactly when Collins addresses the aesthetic experience in terms that are both visual and haptic, she diffuses any potential thought that might carry the discussion forward.

Chapter two primarily involves personal testimony of the author’s experience with psychiatric illness. Having been detained in various clinics for periods lasting 12 years battling anorexia and schizoaffective disorder, Collins reflects on the instrumentality of artistic practice to transformatively heal her own self-image. This touching account, providing direct evidence to the therapeutic benefits of art practice, lends credible weight to her argument.

Chapter three breaks into Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* in order to deploy schizoanalysis as a means to contest the clinic, while chapter four recruits the artwork of schizophrenic artist Kyle Reynolds to see how schizophrenic discourse manifests along the surface and edges of sense. Reynolds’ art, born from his illness, has helped him evade hospitalization for over a decade, and Collins is interested to see what can be learned from his situation. *Art Brut*, a genre of art coined in 1948, denotes any art created by trauma survivors or the mentally ill; however, it more generally may refer to artists that have no background training or do not participate in mainstream circles. Collins explores this type of art in connection with schizoanalysis to demonstrate how the mentally estranged may cope and make sense of their fractured worlds.

When the sensory motor skills at the service of discerning perception from hallucination collapses, direct and unmediated experience reveals its raw core as multiple and bifurcated. Paranoiac images proliferate where neurological filters are absent. The transference of these traumatic images into artwork may stand in place of the analyst, acting, as Collins argues, as a kind of *sinthome* – Lacan’s neologism enclosing upon a wide set of associations: ‘synthetic-artificial man, synthesis between symptom and fantasy, Saint Thomas, the saint’ (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso 2008, 81, see also Lacan’s ‘Joyce le symptôme’ in *Joyce avec Lacan*, Paris: Navarin Editeur, 1987). *Sinthome* universalizes the

symptom, affording it a certain ontological status. Providing the only positive substrate of our being it becomes a way for the subject to avoid madness such that, by choosing something instead of nothing, we have ensured a minimum of symbolic consistency. Lacan's work on James Joyce inspired Collins to make sense of the *sinthome* as an ethical approach to thinking about, and treating the symptom. For individuals like Reynolds, therapeutic art practice becomes, in Collins' words, 'a proactive method of managing to live' (100).

Collins acknowledges the danger of setting Lacanian theory alongside Deleuze and Guattari. Most notably, their respective understanding of desire are at odds—desire is characterized as lack for Lacan, while Deleuze and Guattari define it in terms of production. Her attempt to allay this doubt is hasty, but it hinges on the argument that *sinthome* 'realigns Lacan's definition of subjectivity as lack', displacing the lack, as it were, onto the limit point of the symbolic, and not desire itself (115). However the worry still remains that, in harnessing the productive machinery of schizoanalysis, one runs the risk of bringing about real effects of schizophrenia.

By chapters five and six, Collins is ready to put the political benefits of transformative art therapy to trial. At once engaging the material thinking of Paul Carter while also examining the effects of the use and dispersion of art materials for radically de-/re-territorializing our political space, Collins forwards her argument that artwork *makes* political sense. She introduces the case of Canadian artist Vera Frenkel's 1974 *String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video*. During this live-active artwork, participants from two different cities (Toronto and Montreal) exchanged gestures, words, and other personal improvisational antics via telecom in a manner resembling the childhood game of Cat's Cradle, where five participants from each city represented five fingers of a hand involved in manipulating the 'string'. As she described the rules to this game—which sounded awfully intricate and not at all fun to play—I momentarily lost touch with the force of her agenda. Behind vacuous, repetitive platitudes conscripting sentimental notions of how this 'helps us make sense of the world', one is overwhelmed by Collins' insistence to make sense of this example.

Chapters seven and eight deal with the limit and the *pharmakon*, à la Nancy and Derrida, respectively. In the vicinity of addressing Nancy's claim that 'sense *is* touching', Collins expresses the stark concern for modeling aesthetic encounters in terms of '*communion* or merging', because that would 'disallow the central notion of *touch*' (36, my italics).

Since touch implies some degree of separation, distance, or difference, total communion or merging is, in her words, ‘politically dangerous’ due to potential threats of ‘homogony’, ‘teleology’, and even ‘totalitarianism’.

Nancy bears substantial weight throughout Collins’ study; and yet a crucial text of his, regarding sense, touch, and the political, drops from view, that is, *Corpus. Hoc est enim corpus meum* will have been the phrase ‘tirelessly uttered by millions’ that names the intersection (or even incarnation) of sense, the body, and the signifying space of sense opened in touch: ‘sense making sense where sense meets its limit’ (Nancy, *Corpus*, Fordham University Press, p. 13). The political ramifications are unmistakable. Insofar as the ‘body politic’ is tautological, Collins misses an opportunity to cut her argument with greater rigor and sway. ‘The political foundation’, as Nancy writes, ‘rests on this absolute signifying circularity: that the community should have body as its sense, and that the body should have community as its sense’ (Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 71). If Collins wishes to equate sense with touch, yet fears that an aesthetic experience bereft of touch would result in the dangerous collapsing of the political body into totalitarianism, then this triggers, on the one hand, a suspicion both that the visual aspect of aesthetic experience would escape, or fall prey to, the aforementioned political threat, and on the other hand, raise the question of whether Collins’ fear is even warranted on her terms, given that *sense* and *touch*, for Nancy, harbor a richness of paradox that is not gleaned in Collins’ own thinking. For as Nancy claims, a thought *touching* on the body ‘does not refer to an immediacy preceding or exceeding sense. On the contrary, it is the very limit of sense – and the limit of sense taken in every sense’ (43). In thus may we ask if the interplay of sense and touch would ever ‘merge’ in undifferentiated agreement.

Collins’ worry is in fact misdirected. Political threats yet persist, no doubt, but not in the way Collins has intended. Total communion or merging of artist and artwork would, on Nancy’s account, constitute a non-threat, since gaps are always opened up and *de-limiting* sense by virtue of touch. Her real worry ought to be whether political sense, and sense in general (which, for Nancy, is always political) is rather *unmade*; a devastating possibility for her thesis, nonetheless.

I grant Collins a considerably wide margin of flexibility whilst she applies a vast and complex host of thinkers toward the intention of developing palliative art techniques that would not only address the concern of individuals in need of psychic therapy, but would indeed take the further step in effecting political transformation. To flip a

tired expression, it might well be the case that that which is not theoretically sound may yet work in practice. It would be on these terms that Collins' work would prove its merit. For often it seems, on the one hand, that Collins' argument would have been more effective had she trimmed down the immensity of theoretical concepts that were confusedly applied at the service of her thesis. On the other hand, the attempt to wrest (in a synchronous and unified manner) applicatory value from the texts of Deleuze and Guattari, Rancière, Lacan, Blanchot, Nancy, Derrida, and Freud (among others), more often than not over-simplifies many of the claims made by these key figures. 'De-/re-territorialization', 'schizoanalysis', 'chaosmosis', 'flesh', '*sinthome*', '*objet petit a*', '*transimmanence*', 'pharmakon', etc.: each concept in their turn enjoys its moment of recognition on Collins' palette, and her argument is entirely compelling. However, the radical complexity of such a theoretical bulwark gets lost in the fray of practical application, concepts losing their distinction as they are deployed wholesale to the field of art therapeutics.

Moreover, despite an undeniable integrity of aim in promoting political wellness through instillations of art therapy, one pernicious snag concerning inexcusable generalizations unfavorably colors Collins' argument. Sporadically succumbing to utopian biases, both naïve and insidious, Collins extols 'oriental sensibilities and [a] meditative lifestyle', while condemning Western 'oppression and violence', a claim too general to be taken in earnest (19, 24).

I see this book being of great interest for health professionals who routinely care for patients with psychic illness. It holds less import for professional artists (unless they, too, have interest in therapeutic work). Its appeal to philosophers is less immediate, but still pronounced. In making respectable strides to demonstrate how a complicated and controversial field, such as psychoanalysis (a field that is routinely criticized for its impractical nature), can actually have tremendous import for the political scene (the very domain of *praxis*), Collins paves a way for establishing philosophy's relevance. However, a patent weakness develops insofar as the issues that invite dynamic deconstructive analysis severely bypass the difficult questions in favor of keeping her thesis streamlined and free of complication – an obstacle, no doubt, to the practical nature of her argument, which ultimately fails to persuade readers that one can make sense of the argument.

Without risk of overstatement, one could feasibly assert Collins' trajectory as invoking the very schizophrenic territory that she herself

analyzes in the book's course, a basic temper of writing akin to saturation—the breadth and variety of thinkers and contemporary artists blend together in a crowded solution to a pervasive problem, that of psycho-social infirmity.

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