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# The Virtual Response Art Method: Managing Countertransference in Art-based Research

Carol Hodson

Lesley University, [chodson@lesley.edu](mailto:chodson@lesley.edu)

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The Virtual Response Art Method:  
Managing Countertransference in Art-based Research  
Capstone Thesis

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Carol P. Hodson

Expressive Arts Therapy

Krystal Demaine

### Abstract

This thesis describes the application of an original approach to *art-based research* (ABR) developed by Carol P. Hodson and used in collaboration with two participants. In this method, called the Virtual Response Art (VRA) method, the researcher created digital response art based on participants' original art and wrote in self-reflective prose during and after the digital art process. Results in this study illustrate how the researcher's use of the VRA method over six months allowed her to gain increased empathy for the participants and identify, process, and manage the countertransference she experienced in response to each participant and their art. Because the research on which this thesis is based was focused on the effect of the VRA Method upon the countertransference management of the researcher herself, the introduction, results, and discussion sections of this paper were deliberately written by Hodson from a first-person, singular point of view.

*Keywords:* VRA method, response art, virtual art, digital art, countertransference, ABR, art-based research, ABR

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The method and results described in this paper are the product of art-based research, an intuitive blending of skills from this author's life practice as an artist, mission as an educator, and current education as an Expressive Arts therapist. In the introduction to *Art as Research: Opportunities and Challenges*, one of the founders of the field of Expressive Arts Therapy and Lesley University professor, Shaun McNiff defined arts-based research (ABR) as, "the use of artistic expression by researchers as a primary mode of enquiry" and discussed the need for "applied arts and health disciplines to understand, support, and perfect methods of artistic enquiry, thus applying their unique resources to realizing the opportunities proffered by the arts as ways of understanding and communicating human experience" (2013, p.3). This thesis documents a single phase in a life-time of ABR by which this author has chosen to view universal themes of interpersonal connection, compassion, and empathy through an autobiographical narrative lens. For this reason, the remainder of this introduction, as well as the results and discussion sections of this paper are written in the first person singular tense.

As a mid-life artist and professor of art entering graduate school for a second degree, I sought a genre of professional work that might parallel my innate approach to art-based research as a way of exploring life itself and my commitment to guiding others to making art *with therapeutic intention*. Now, as I complete an MA in Mental Health Counseling as an Expressive Arts Therapist, I can confidently state *I have found what I had been searching for*. Throughout my graduate work at Lesley University, I have been motivated by a few simple objectives. Could I, as an artist, teacher, and therapist combine my skills to better 'know' any individual on an empathic level? Could my commitment to making art as a means of understanding another

individual possibly enable that individual to find some personal validation within the art I produce? As a therapist, how might such an arts-based approach strengthen the alliance required for psychological healing? Could I create art based on another individual's art, be able to manage my countertransference, *and* still accomplish the other objectives mentioned above?

McNiff wrote, "art can be pursued scientifically but it will always assert its unique nature through the spontaneous emergence of discovery, often contrary to plans and the most carefully developed strategies" (2013, p. 7). In preliminary research for this study I felt the same sense of innate curiosity and drive that has always been at the heart of my art and teaching careers. So, with the permission of Shaun McNiff and a strong sense of intuition, I engaged two individuals to work with me as participants in the research that followed. Next, I embarked on an improvised, inspiring, and indirect path to develop a therapeutic expressive art method that I hoped might achieve some of the objectives I had set.

As I reviewed the literature relating to arts-based research in general and the inevitability of countertransference specifically, I simplified objectives for this particular study to a single query, "Could I develop a unique approach to creating *response art* that would enable me to recognize and manage any countertransference I might experience in an art-based research collaboration with participants?"

### **Literature Review**

The precedent and purpose of using art-based research in the service of psychotherapy has been well documented. In his 1965 memoir *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung described the period of time when he immersed himself in dialogue with his own art images through the creation of *The Red Book* (Allen, 2012, p.15). Jung wrote,

That is why I speak chiefly of inner experiences, amongst which I include my dreams and visions. These form the *prima materia* of my scientific work. They were the fiery magma out of which the stone that had to be worked was crystallized. (p.17)

### **Response Art in Art Therapy Literature**

Allen traced the development of ABR as it was foreshadowed by Jung's work in *The Red Book* noting, "There is a partnership between the thinking and feeling aspects of self, nourished by careful attention to sensation and intuition. There is a co-relationship between the researcher and the material under study that can be described as a joint endeavor between one's soul and the soul of the world (2012, p. 14). Allen observed that complex meaning that is often the result of ABR may accommodate our enlarged capacity for understanding the world and each other and that through ABR, "the [art] image and its information are vetted through not only the mind but also through the heart and gut" (2012, p. 19).

While Allen claimed that art as a form of enquiry may forge a link between self and the world, McNiff offered a more pragmatic definition when he discussed ABR as "involving the researcher in some form of direct art-making as a primary mode of systematic inquiry with a significant commitment to personal inquiry on the part of the researcher" (2011, p. 385).

Moon coined the term *responsive art* (later shortened to *response art*) to describe his use of personal artmaking as an expressive outlet for the powerful feelings that are often stirred up for an art therapist in the clinical context (1999, p. 80). Fish described her use of response art in session to communicate empathy to an adolescent client when she wrote, "[I] picked up colored pencils and drew a representation of [his] longing and loss as [I] had perceived" (2012, p. 140).

Kapitan proposed that we not lose sight of the fact that “the ability of an art therapist to creatively imagine into another’s state of being is at the heart of art therapy” (2010, p.159).

Wadeson (2011) published reproductions of art created by graduate students that illustrated several ways in which ABR can be used by therapists-in-training to professionally process their personal reactions to working with clients and stated:

Art therapists can be tossed about by tides of feelings and confused perspectives.

The gift of art expression we bring clients can serve us well to ventilate our feelings and to obtain clarity... Spontaneous responses provide insight and recognition of unconscious processes. More methodical work can function as a reflective and soothing process. Utilizing clients’ themes, symbols, and styles can bring us more closely in touch with their feelings. (p. 217)

### **Countertransference (CT) as Concept in ATR Research vs. ABR**

Each of the approaches referenced by Wadeson, attested to what Miller (2007) refers to as the “undeniability” of countertransference (CT) in treatment in an art therapy context. Miller sourced Riley (1999) who simply defined CT as a label ‘given to a human condition common to all relationships, in and out of therapy.’ In a review of empirical CT literature, Rosenberger & Hayes propose an historic, psychoanalytic definition of CT defined as “therapist’s unconscious, inappropriate, and neurotic reactions to a client’s transference” (2002, p. 264).

While the role and utilization of CT in the specific discipline of Art Therapy had been discussed extensively (Miller, 2011), in the literature that discussed ABR more broadly, the term countertransference has been less frequently used. In 2012, Shaun McNiff, along with the Journal of Applied Arts & Health (JAAH) editor, Ross W. Prior, announced a call for articles addressing ABR to be included in a special issue of the JAAH. Later, McNiff compiled twenty-

three articles originally published in two editions (2012, 2013) of the journal, as *Art as Research: Opportunities and Challenges* (2013). Each of the articles included in this book celebrated the potential of ABR in a therapeutic context and focused on the *quality* of encounter experienced in the interstitial space between therapist, the art modality used, and client. Framed by McNiff's charge "to adopt an inclusive and trans-discipline definition of research as a process of systematic enquiry that includes experimentation..." (2013, p.5), several authors included terminology adopted from music, theatre, dance, and other disciplines. Mitchell Kossak (2012) appropriated the term 'attunement', Stephen K. Levine (2013) and Nisha Sajnani (2012) used the term 'improvisation', Nancy Gerber, et. al (2012) referred to 'intersubjectivity.' Others invented poetic terms of their own. Robert E. Innis (2013) described a 'felt perplexity.' Pat Allen suggested (2012) 'soul truth,' and Laurie Rappaport (2013) adopted the term 'felt sense' from Eugene Gendlin (1981). While each term described a subtle difference in concept, depending on the researcher and their own theoretical place within the field of ABR, each represented a deliberate alternative to the historical connotations of CT.

Shifting away from the post-Freudian terminology of CT prioritizes 'tacit subjective knowing' – a perspective offered by Michael Polanyi (1966), an author who influenced Prior's respect for ABR (Prior, 2013, p. 164). This change in language suggested a stance of open curiosity when discussing the influences that can affect a therapeutic relationship. Levine wrote, "Good therapists are open to metaphor and symbol; they listen with the "third ear" that hears what is not said (1997, p.4). Though implied in the work of McNiff and Levine, Paolo Knill directly advocated vigilance in "an environment of intimacy," recommending "a careful watchfulness, ensuring that we don't contaminate the aesthetic response [the process and product of art] with neurotic needs or countertransference" (2003, 82). This caution by Knill

acknowledged that a therapist originally trained as a fine artist, as Knill himself had been, might *prioritize* the aesthetic response that emerged from her unconscious self (CT) over the healing of the client. Knill's referenced "contamination" to suggest that when an artist-turned-therapist adopts an art process to the therapeutic context, she must be careful that her own habits and ego as an artist do not overshadow or conflict with ultimate goal of empowering a client to express themselves artistically (2003, 82-86). Knill suggested a process of "purifying" or cleansing attitude (p.82) that is at the heart of the VRA method as applied to CT management in this study.

### **Evidence for Countertransference Management**

Hayes, Gelso, & Hummel (2011) confirmed the widely held opinion that CT is inevitable and offered a more theoretically integrative definition of CT as that which "incorporates the therapist's reaction to all clinically relevant material, including the patient's personality style, the actual content the patient is presenting, and even the patient's appearance" (Hayes et al., 2011, p. 90). Hayes et al. (2011) conducted three meta-analysis and reported their results/ conclusions based on these hypotheses. **E.g.** CT reactions influenced outcomes in psychotherapy in a detrimental manner and that CT management reduced CT reactions which lead to better therapeutic outcomes. Their evidence pointed to the conclusion that "acting out of CT is harmful and that CT management is likely to promote positive outcomes" (Hayes, et al., 2011, p. 92) adding that the use of "self-insight and self-integration... including work on boundary issues, are fundamental to managing and effectively using one's internal reactions" (Hayes, et al., 2011, p. 96) to clients and their behaviors. Burwell-Pender & Halinski (2008) emphasized "the understanding, identification, and management of the multidimensional intricacies involving issues of countertransference" (p. 38) in graduate programs in counseling and concurred with the

assertion of Hayes et al. that ‘self-insight and self-integration’ are particularly crucial for the beginning therapist.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Two participants were involved in the testing of the VRA method. Each collaborated in a unique dyad with the researcher, offering scanned original art (SOA) to which the researcher responded with virtual response art (VRA). As this method evolved organically from a collaboration with one participant, there had been no predetermined criteria for selection of participants. However, each participant possessed basic drawing skills, were comfortable creating art without specific prompts, and had previously expressed interest in working in artistic collaboration with the researcher.

Participant T was a 22-year-old, female, Caucasian, adopted, only child from an upper-middle-class family in Missouri. T was in her last semester as an undergraduate BA student in English studies when this research began. T met weekly with the researcher in person for 6 months. T offered one or more SOA per week to the researcher for the duration of her participation, totaling 132 drawings total.

Participant B was a 16-year-old, Caucasian, daughter, of long time friends of the researcher. She was the youngest of four children and the last to be living at home. At the time of this research, B was a sophomore in high school in Connecticut. B participated in testing the VRA method in a dyad with the researcher for 5 months, during which time she engaged with the researcher solely by email with no predetermined number of exchanges or meeting schedule. B offered 5 SOA over the 5 months of participation.

### **Procedure for Participants**

To test the VRA method, participants were asked to create an original drawing using paper, drawing materials, and subject of their choice during *a time of emotional need*. A time of emotional need was defined as any period of time when the participant felt emotionally distressed and/or wished for a means by which she might share her emotional state confidentially. Participants were invited, but not required, to write in any style throughout the research process and were welcomed to share any of their written material with the researcher at any time. Both participants created art privately at home, without supervision of the researcher. Participant T handed her drawing(s) to the researcher at their weekly meeting and the researcher then created a digital scan of the original art. Participant B photographed each original drawing she created and sent the digital photograph to the researcher electronically. Both participants received a written commitment that the VRA created by the researcher would only be printed as reproductions in diminished size within the context of this capstone thesis and that neither their original art, SOA or the researcher's VRA would be exhibited or sold at any time.

### **Procedure for Researcher**

The researcher studied each SOA privately over an open period of time, then using Adobe Photoshop, a SOA was transformed into a unique VRA according to the following guidelines 1) The design elements (lines, shapes, marks, textures, etc.) that made up my VRA were limited to those design elements originally found in the SOA. 2) The design principles (contrast, scale, composition, value, etc.) that organized each VRA could vary from those design principles in the SOA. 3) Color could be added to the VRA if it was not present in the SOA.

Additionally, this researcher engaged in reflective writing at various times before and after using the VRA method with each SOA. Finally, some but not all of the VRA were shared in person or electronically with the participant on whose work a specific VRA was based. On

occasion, a VRA shared with a participant was accompanied with an excerpt of reflective writing by the researcher.

### **Method of Evaluation**

As this method developed organically within a pre-existing mentorship between the researcher and participant T, no specific method for evaluating success had been determined. Additionally, no method had been established to evaluate the effect of this method on the countertransference management of the researcher as this hypothesis had not been conscious at the beginning of the research process. Fortunately, this research process did include a commitment to document and organize all visual, verbal, and reflective writing produced by both researcher and participants. Upon narrowing of multiple initial hypothesis to a single one - “Could I develop a unique approach to creating *response art* that would enable me to recognize and manage any countertransference I might experience in an art-based research collaboration with participants?” – the review, analysis, and summary of this documentation became an effective, though unplanned method by which the accuracy of this hypothesis was evaluated (see Results).

### **Documentation & Organization**

Digital copies of all images, reflective writing, research notes, and correspondence were collected and filed chronologically throughout testing of the VRA method. With participant confidentiality as a priority, all images and writing created by participants has been excluded from the results. Editing and organization of remaining results followed Lesley University’s Capstone Thesis Guidelines.

In the results section, the researcher’s written description of a participant’s SOA is presented, followed by a reproduction of the researcher’s VRA. A summary of the researcher’s findings

through the two-step application of this method - digital art making and reflective writing – follow each VRA. Selections of the reflective writing generated by the researcher as part of the VRA method testing are *italicized* and included as block quotes within each summary.

## Results

### Sample #1

#### Researcher description of SOA by T.

On a piece of 8.5 x 11 copy paper, T had drawn a profile of a dragon in #2 pencil. The slightly wavy line that represented the dragon's mouth was hatched over by short diagonal lines. Crossing over and in front of the dragon eye that was visible, were more diagonal lines. A wisp of smoke rose from the nostrils. Where the neck of the dragon was most vulnerable, just under the jaw, there was a ring of grey smudge as if something had been drawn there and then poorly erased.

#### Researcher VRA to SOA by participant T (below)



Figure 1. Sample #1, Researcher VRA to SOA by T.

### Researcher Summary of Findings

T's first drawing evoked a somatic response in me that caused me to remember a mural-sized dragon painting I had created on the bottom a built-in swimming pool when I was a teen. After finding a photograph that depicted the mural and me at age 15, I reflected extensively in writing on the possible interpretations of dragon imagery in my life and in the life of participant T. Through the creation of three digital variations on T's drawing and four pages of reflective writing, I considered themes that had been present in my early mural work. I wondered if the presence of similar themes in T's original drawing was a simple coincidental, or proof of a commonality between us. In my third and final VRA (seen above), I digitally enhanced the color and texture in my response art to acknowledge the themes of power and frustration that I interpreted in the bruised neck, stitched mouth, and scarred eyes represented in T's SOA. Through this initial application of the VRA method, I recognized that while this process might allow me more accurate empathy for T, strict guidelines within the application of the VRA method were important to protect and respect the trust T and B had placed in me.

*As I worked on my response to T's dragon, I was very aware of being wary that altering her art in any way might be construed by her as a form of correction. To an outsider, the same act might appear to be hubris. For my responses to be useful for the participant in any way, I feel that anything I offer in my virtual response art must be based in my respect for each participant's original art. I set deliberate limitations... I would only work digitally, that would grant me some emotional distance from the intensity of any specific image. Also, intuitively, I sensed it was important for my virtual response art to be impermanent, an acknowledging mirror of the participant's expression, a 'ghost*

*in the machine'. I wondered, would such a fleeting digital gesture be too little, too late? Could my VRA dragon become an empathic spirit, an extension of me that might at least accompany T for a while on her journey?*

## **Sample #2**

### **Researcher description of SOA by B**

On the left half of B's drawing, an image of a girl in profile with long, straggly hair had been drawn in pencil and oil crayons. From the girl's open red lips, smudges of pencil and red pastel implied breath or wordless sound. To the right of the smudges, a few inches of paper had been left blank, then the remainder of the horizontal page was filled with a profile drawing of a large wolf facing the girl. The wolf was depicted in front of a backdrop of flames rendered in heavy marks of red, orange, yellow, and black oil pastel. While the girl's lips had been colored red, the wolf's lips were drawn in solid greasy black.

### **Researcher VRA to SOA by B (below)**



*Figure 2. Sample #2, Researcher VRA to SOA by B*

## Researcher Summary of Findings

When I first looked at B's SOA, I was struck that both T & B had used animal imagery to represent their state of mind during a time of emotional need. For me, the duality of the two figures in B's SOA referenced good and evil, or victim and perpetrator. They reminded me of something from one of the original Grimm's fairy tales or Gothic literature. As I worked, I wondered if B would be able to accept a less judgmental, more ambiguous rendering of her original image.

*I attempt to integrate the two halves of B's drawing into one and to add color and vibrancy but find my response more unsettling than her original. I am tempted to work further into my response with a clearer intent to say something specific - possible hopeful - to B through my VRA, but this feels false to my aesthetic response. I decide to offer my image as it is - provocative and unsettling - and trust that B can and will see what she most needs to see.*

Working on my VRA for B activated a memory of a dream I had years earlier at a time when I had been struggling with bouts of depression. That dream had been important in providing me with a metaphor of illness and healing that was outside of diagnostic language.

*I used to dream of an angry black dog trapped in a house with a white picket fence. One night I dreamed the dog escaped, was transformed into a white wolf, ran into the ocean, and into the water and was gone.*

Creating the two-faced creature that filled the frame of my VRA, I wondered about the red lips of the girl in B's SOA and considered the symbolism of red lips in general. I wondered how my perspective as a post-menopausal female researcher would affect my

artistic responses to either of the two young female participants whose drawings were at the center of this research.

*Red lips are everything in interpretation - fresh wound, fertile vagina, mark of the tramp, epitome of the classic untouchable beauty. In my image, the two-faced dog-woman has black lips. What should I make of this?*

### **Samples #3**

#### **Researcher Description of SOA by T**

The digital scan of T's pencil drawing depicted a single, dragon floating awkwardly mid-page. The dragon leaned back at a kilter, as if it might topple backwards from the weight of the wings and its short, back-bending legs. I surmised that this young dragon represented T, not fully formed - incapable of bearing the weight of oversized wings.

#### **Researcher VRA SOA by T (next page)**

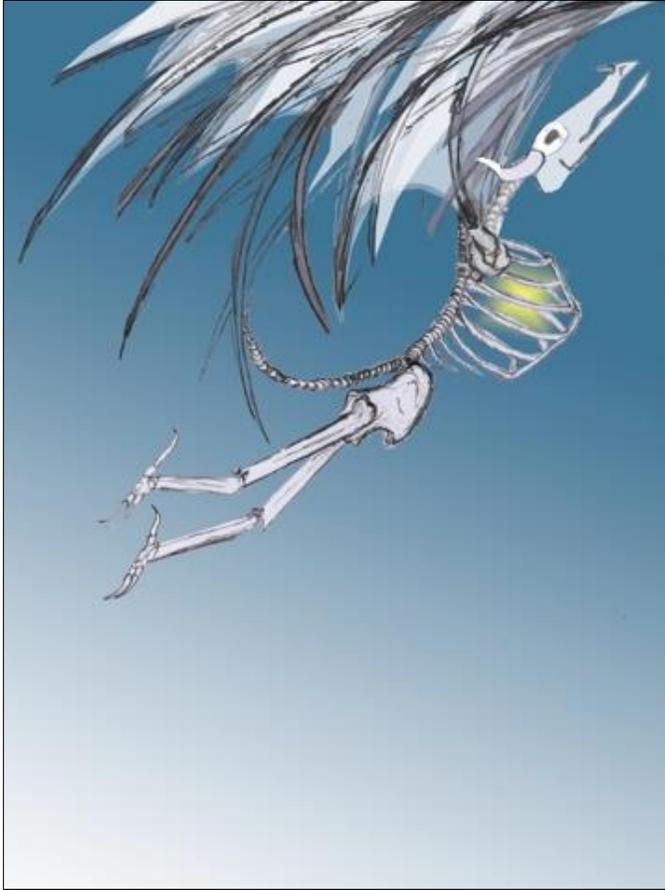


Figure 3. Sample #3, Researcher VRA to SOA by T

### **Researchers Summary of Findings**

My hunch that T perceives herself as a disempowered, possibly incomplete creature is reinforced by her drawing of a single, awkward dragon. Stitches, bruises, and scars in sample #1, along with the awkward stance, torn wings, and blackened eyes in this recent drawing hint at psychological or physical harm T may have endured. I am saddened by the persistence of T's depiction of self as damaged and I cannot resist the urge to "fix" the skeletal dragon in SOA #3.

*In Photoshop, I carefully detach each stunted leg bone, bending each section of bone back and stretching them further so my Icarus dragon can fly... I wonder about T's decision to redraw this dragon so frequently with such slight changes. Is this dragon like a mantra that needed to be repeated with minor variation for T*

*to remain present? Or is she testing me to see if I am really looking and whether or not I could detect and respond to the subtle changes in each drawing?*

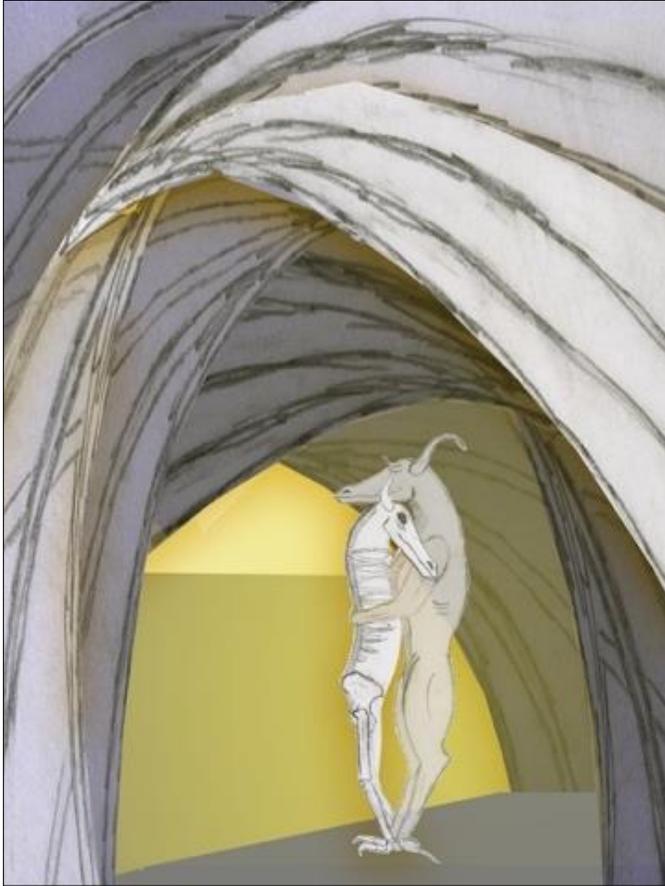
When my euphoric dragon is complete, I sent it to T, telling myself that it might bring her hope. Only later, through reflective writing did I recognize that my VRA was primarily a response to my own discomfort at being the witness to T's repeated depiction, in drawing after drawing, of herself as damaged.

#### **Sample #4**

##### **Researcher Description of SOA by T**

After months of working together, T gave me a drawing that depicted two dragons face to face. The taller of the two looks down with concern on the smaller, who is evidently younger. The younger looks up tentatively, its eyes are blackened holes, as if ashamed.

##### **Researcher VRA to SOA by T (next page)**



*Figure 4. Sample #4, Researcher VRA to SOA by T*

Upon seeing a pair of dragons depicted a relational way, I was at first heartened. T is so immersed in her own pain. I had wondered if the metaphor of dragon that she used so often (T had offered over 60 images by this time, almost all dragons in pain or torture) allowed room for the reality of our time together to even register with her inner world. As I examined T's SOA more closely on my computer screen, I realized that the dragon pair that T has depicted seems to represent a parent/child or teacher/student in a dominant/submissive relationship. I feel both concerned and slightly annoyed.

*I cannot help but interpret this recent SOA as a depiction of how T sees our relationship. Her images spark in me conflicting urges to step in and rescue, or step back and create distance from her. I upload T's SOA and begin to work,*

*feeling an intense pull from the image which I interpret as illustrating T's desperate need for approval by me, coupled with her constant fear that any misbehavior on her part might lead to my abandonment of her. Her need to see me as a mentor or hero pushes on my own fears of intimacy and attachment. I am intensely worried of responding out of countertransference as I did with my euphoric dragon. As I work, I am cautious and self-conscious, wanting to reinforce that our relationship, though meaningful, must be temporary. I let my VRA sit for a day or two before sending it to T.*

In deliberately crafting my VRA to T, I consciously tried to negotiate what I saw as her transference - T was becoming inappropriately attached to me - and my own countertransference.

#### **Sample #5**

#### **Researcher description of SOA by B**

The sky was white with a vague indication of a dark gray shape that resembled a shadow of a large flying bird. On the ground there was a female angel, awkwardly posed as if trying to sit properly despite the tight short black dress she was wearing. Her huge wings were curved as if partially open or closed. The wing one on the right side created a graceful sort of awning over the fallen figure.

#### **Researcher VRA to on SOA by B (next page)**



*Figure 5. Sample #5, Researcher VRA to SOA by B*

### **Researcher Summary of Findings**

Looking at this image by B, I experienced a profound sense of déjà vu. Not only had I tried to give flight to T's immature dragon (sample #3), B's self-representation as a fallen angel was not dissimilar to images of injured birds and oversized butterflies that I had created as a late teen. While I worked on my VRA above left, I was conscious that the shell form I created from a B's angel's wing, might be seen as a vaginal form. In my response, I sought to offer an alternate depiction of the female protagonist in B's drawing. I crafted my VRA to depict not a young woman who had tried and fallen, but instead one who might gradually emerge into sexuality with tentative curiosity from her place of shelter. The young woman in my VRA cautiously reached out to test the salt water that ebbed to and from her place on the shore. I finished my VRA and

sent it to B, thinking this time I had taken the time to notice and process my CT. It was not until the following morning that I became aware of another personal factor that had unknowingly influenced my VRA to B.

*What I remember now in a flash, is that when I had sat down yesterday to B's image and immersed myself in the VRA method, I had just returned from an appointment with my OB/GYN, who had given me a diagnosis of post-menopausal uterine complications. I was shocked that in rushing from my appointment back to my email where B's image had been waiting, I had been oblivious to how my doctor's diagnosis would affect my vision. Was the VRA I sent to B an authentic response to her? or was it only a message in a bottle sent by an older woman long past fertility, to anyone who might find it on another shore?*

This had been the second time I had recognized an important part of my CT *after* I had sent my VRA to a participant. While this method was revealing layers of CT for me and providing me with a method by which to process and manage this CT, I felt concerned it would be impossible to ever become fully aware of all the CT activated within me as a researcher. I began to doubt if it was ethical, at this early stage of research, to send any of my VRA images to either participant. Since my method design had not included a consistent way to test the effect of my VRA on each participant, how would I know if my VRA inadvertently caused harm for T or B? I Had been pondering this question for days when I recalled the advice given by Ranier Maria Rilke in his collection of *Letters to a Young Poet*:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to **love the questions themselves**... Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. (1929)

Years of teaching art led me to trust that T and B would see only that which they needed or wanted to see in the response art I sent. What I had not anticipated, though, was how B's image, my VRA, and subsequent reflective writing would affect my self-insight in a post-dream, hypnagogic state the next night.

*Something in my mind had shifted and I re-remembered the memory of the day I had lost my virginity as a young teen. I write "I re-remember the memory" because that is how it has always been. I usually recall that day and other events from my youth or adolescence as still photos, no sound, or smell, no sensation. When I awoke last night though, my memory had changed. ... Though rarely thought of at this stage of my life, my snapshot of that day had always been bathed in romantic light. Sunshine, a handsome man with golden curls and green eyes, a young girl wanting. Now, alone in my bedroom I wondered, "...wanting what? Where had my parents been? Or any of my siblings? Why hadn't there been an adult around to watch out for me?" I remembered the man's first name because it had been tattooed on his arm. Boys didn't have tattoos in the 70's, especially not boys staying at a family campground in Connecticut. Why did I go with him? What did I expect? What did I feel afterwards? I remember telling no one.*

### **Sample #6, #7**

#### **Researcher Description of Two Consecutive SOA by T**

After several more SOA that included pairs of dragons in differing power relationships, T gave me a stack of drawings that included two new images that deeply disturbed me. In the first of the two new images, T had drawn an image of a cell phone with a single line of text reading,

“It will be okay”. Just below the phone, T had drawn a razor blade covered with a solid smear of graphite that undoubtedly represented blood. The front of the cellphone screen and the white background of the paper showed smears and fingerprints of gray where T had handled the paper with graphite smudged fingers.

The second SOA that created a visceral response in me was that of a female body wearing panties and bra depicted close-up from the front. The head and lower legs of the figure were cropped by the edge of the paper. The woman’s elbows were bent, suggesting her hands were behind her back, as if she were either demure or bound at the wrist. Across the panties of the headless torso, the words #metoo were scrawled. Across the left hip of the figure were lines that suggested the fresh marks of razor cuts.

#### Researcher VRAs on two consecutive SOA by T (next page)



Figure 6 & 7. Sample #6, #7, Researcher VRAs to two consecutive SOA by T

#### Summary of findings by researcher

When I first had scanned these two drawings by T, I experienced a sharp pain in my chest followed by a feeling like a punch in my gut. That evening, in the privacy of my home, I looked closely at the first of the two SOA's. Immediately, I felt the same the same somatic stab become reactivated, followed by a flash of anger. I sat with my heart beating wildly, reading the single line of text, "It will be okay" over and over. I quickly engaged in the VRA method with speed and blind instinct, aware of little except that I knew I *would not* send this VRA when it was complete.

*I feel manipulated by this image and the smears of blood like a threat. I suspect T made it soon after she had been manically texting me the day after our last meeting, and I had asked her to not. Does this drawing depict a text she had written to me and did not send? Even though I can't be sure of T's intention, I resent it. How strange it is to resent an image. Do I resent T? No, not really. I feel her desperation - trapped in a cycle of push-pull, hurt or be hurt... and I am more disturbed by my own anger than I am by T's drawing... (later) ... as I process my emotional reactions through this writing and rework T's image through the VRA method, I gradually become grateful that T's drawings and my responses make it possible for both of us to depict any possible thought or interpretation that life or art can evoke. I can sit with T's SOA, late on a Saturday evening, and be angry, annoyed, or empathic. I can process these thoughts and exaggerate her fingerprints in virtual space until I am reminded that T is inevitably responsible for her actions in life. I can transform the graphite shape into a brownish-red puddle of blood and be both concerned and repulsed by the digital effect. Repeatedly, I cut and paste the words from the text bubble on T's drawn phone.*

*Now, the words are both ironic and comforting. Ironic because my rendition of the phone appears to be streaked with more blood than graphite. Comforting because my hands are clean as I work on my laptop – I know that the cuts and scratches in my VRA are only digitally deep. I wonder if this method is allowing T a similar opportunity to manifest taboo images through art and if in doing so, she has less need to make this image real in the flesh?*

The headless torso depicted in T's other drawing, tugged at me differently. I felt less anger than I did guilt, accompanied by a sinking feeling in my stomach. Seeing the roughly rendered #metoo, I recalled the media buzz that had just begun. A week earlier, the actress Alyssa Milano had used the twitter tag, started by Turana Burke in 2007, to give a voice to sexual abuse victims after accusations of sexual harassment and assault were leveled against the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (N. Sayej, 2017).

*Now I am reading the same hashtag hastily printed across the panties of a faceless woman depicted in a digital scan on my computer screen. I can barely describe the complexity of how this makes me feel. The news article, like the drawing, gnaws at me in an uncomfortable way. How many women have been sexually used in their lifetime? How many of us had cast ourselves in a two-dimensional role, expecting and believing this was the only way to be seen? What assumptions did I have about sexuality that were specific to my generation or to me? Did I risk imposing these assumptions on T or B by seeing them through my own personal lens? But how could I see them otherwise?*

I continued to work quickly and instinctively on my VRA. I copied the layer of exaggerated scratches and fingerprints from my previous VRA based on T's phone drawing and

superimposed it on the headless figure now on my screen. I noticed a ghost shape then, a rectangular shaped space with rounder corners, from where I had separated the smudged background from the phone image. Now layered onto this VRA in process, the empty rectangle suggested a rectangular flash of light across the upper arm and breast of the figure, as if there was glare from a nearby window or the reflection of light in a mirror.

*I realize that if T's SOA depicts a sort of bathroom selfie seen in a mirror shot, the hashtag would be reversed. I flip the #metoo text so it reads backwards, then sit stunned. "If this is a mirror shot," I think, "this figure is me. Oh my god...." If T's original drawing is that of a self-image she has been secretly carrying until this research collaboration, then my VRA also depicts a past version of myself with whom I have never reconciled... I wonder aloud, "When you have been sexually abused, how weak and inadequate must it be to have someone, anyone, tell you that 'it will be okay'?"*

### **Sample #8**

#### **Researcher Description of SOA by B**

B's next image was a close-cropped drawing of a girl with golden eyes turning away from the viewer. A frame of black, drawn fast and heavy in oil crayon bracketed the partial view of the girl's face, trapping her in a backward glance, as if in an old film still or behind the window of a prison cell.

#### **Researcher VRA to SOA by B (next page)**



Figure 8. Sample #8, Researcher VRA to SOA by participant B

### Researcher Summary of Findings

As soon as I opened B's SOA on my screen, I recognized an innate desire in me to offer comfort both to the real B and to the virtual girl depicted in her drawing. Remembering my hasty response in sending my sea-shell girl (VRA in sample #5) and the desire to "fix" T's awkward dragon (VRA in sample #3), I resist the temptation to create a response that attempts to repair or reassure. Instead, I surrender myself wholly to the VRA method, and trust that my artistic integrity will lead me. I am confident that the digital stage of VRA method and the reflective writing that precedes and follows this stage will reveal any CT that I may experience and will enable me to become conscious of when and *if* it is appropriate for my own personal past to influence my response to this image.

*I spend hours on this response image, the elusive completion repeatedly slipping just out of reach. The Photoshop layers window on my screen indicate I have made over 25 layers, each true to the VRA method as I had defined it months prior... As*

*I work I am swept into the familiar 'flow' of creative process but this flow is different than when I work on images that are entirely my own. This flow is mixed with liquid honey and amber, Egyptian incense, B's tears and T's blood. I feel myself swimming in a sadness that is older than time. I imagine the swampy water from which the first creatures crawled, the thin layer of cerebrospinal fluid that surrounds the human brain, and the future of psychology, technology, & art. I pull swatches of color from the SOA, rasterize, isolate, and magnify spots of vibrant color until they resemble the activated colors on a digital MRI. I attempt to give B a mouth, a moon, a lens, a reflective mirror that might allow her to find herself in my VRA. My computer screen flashes and glows as I make change after change in my VRA. I surrender to the process and feel as if I am witnessing my efforts from a distance - as if T & B's drawings, my virtual responses, and the increased understanding I have gained of myself through this research amounts to no more than fleeting electronic signals in the space of eternity.*

### **Discussion**

By utilizing the VRA method in response to the art of two participants in this study, and subsequently choosing to present results that exclusively demonstrated the VRA method's effect on my countertransference management, I knowingly blurred the roles of researcher, facilitator, artist, and participant. While the blending of roles in scientific research is discouraged, the opposite is true in ABR. Patricia Allen (2012) warns, "By remaining tied to academic forms in either our methods or our presentation of outcomes, researchers disable the emergence of new knowing and diminish the possibility of change and transformation. (p. 13) In concluding this research, I stand with Allen's charge, "... not for a simplification but a complication of the

narratives to accommodate our enlarged capacity for understanding the world and each other... It is after all, meaning that research seeks (p. 19).”

By creating VRA to SOA by two participants, my empathy was highly engaged, though initially mixed with intense unconscious CT. As I developed new insights into my past, I applied the art and writing components of the VRA method to better integrate my new understanding of past events into my sense of self in the present. The application of the VRA method improved self-awareness and increased both my capacity for accurate empathy and patience. Gradually, I was better able to accept and understand the powerful effect each participant’s drawings had on me. To be able to acknowledge T’s intense need to be seen as a victim of abuse, I had to acknowledge pain I had thought I had put behind me. To empathize with B’s sadness, I had to remember that while I could relate to her sadness now, at the time in my life when I was depressed, I too had believed I was alone in my pain. With both participants, I experienced strong reminders of the expressive power that the artistic process and its symbolic imagery held for me as I navigated my way from teen to adult. The hours spent contemplating and responding to drawings by both T and B reached deeply into my days and my dreams and eventually enabled me to re-vision my personal narrative. As I built up layer after layer on each of the virtual response art works that I created, I felt as if I were peeling off layer after layer of CT. My application of the VRA Method with two participants over the period of six months has greatly contributed to my becoming more aware of the ways in which my sexual identity has been affected by events in my past and how this fact can affect my perception of the participants and their art. My VRA, the excerpts of reflective writing, and summaries included in the results section of this paper illustrate this claim.

The summaries that accompany these ABR results support the primary hypothesis of this paper but perhaps oversimplify the complexity of my psychological and artistic responses to the drawings of the participants. As I condensed eight months of material into this five-part template, I feared my final draft might suggest a linear clarity that would present an inaccurate representation of the untidy and intuitive process of this research. Writing exclusively in unbiased, second person voice, as recommended by APA guidelines, seemed both inauthentic and at odds with my intention to explore countertransference. While I am confident that the results, discussion, and appendix sections of this paper speak with a level of poetic and aesthetic integrity acceptable for the intention of this paper, I look forward to re-examining the VRA method and its results within a less restrictive ABR format in the future.

As I grappled to respond empathically to unique works of art from two very different participants, it became essential that, in addition to the literature review at the beginning of this thesis, I needed to engage in an ongoing review of additional literature throughout the eight-month period of research. As the VRA exchange within each dyad became more unique, new hypotheses were prompted. Additional hypotheses surfaced as I considered the potential of the VRA method in different clinical contexts. I wondered 1) How might this digitally based method strengthen the therapeutic alliance between therapist and client between sessions? 2) How might this virtual process be used within the context of telehealth? 3) How might the delay of image and text exchange inherent in the VRA Method be used with clients who experience alexythymia in moments of intense dysregulation? 4) How might the VRA method be used with a client with Borderline Personality Disorder who possess limited mentalization skills? 5) Would the use of client art as the primary source of a therapist VRA acknowledge a client's internal experience and allow her to feel seen? and 6) Could the exchange of art-making at the center of

the VRA method become an alternate form of dialogue that might empower a client to creatively communicate her inner experience externally?

A wealth of published articles (Zilcha-Mano, et al. 2016, Norton, 2011, Bateman & Fonagy, 2010, Stewart & Schroeder, 2015) suggested these questions are worth pursuing in future research. Zilcha-Mano, et al. published results from an intensive study that considered the perspective of both therapist and client on the relationship between alliance and outcome. Their results illuminated and confirmed the impact of therapeutic alliance on positive outcomes in individual psychotherapy. (2016). I suggest the capacity of the VRA to contribute to the therapeutic alliance of therapist and client be further explored.

Bateman & Fonagy clarified mentalization as the important ability to envision mental images prior to taking action which enables appropriate action to follow emotional activation. Bateman & Fonagy discussed the benefits of mentalization based treatment (MBT) for clients with borderline personality disorder (2010). I propose that the delay of image exchange that is inherent in the VRA method might be effectively utilized with persons diagnosed with BPD to enhance mentalization skills.

Stewart & Schroeder produced a comprehensive literature review that examined the effect of emotional homework between sessions and the effect on client's intersession experience (2015). Digital image and text exchange within a virtual space, such as that in utilized in the VRA method, could be used effectively as a platform for emotional homework and consequently increase a client's ability to focus on treatment goals in between sessions.

In closing this discussion, I invite the authors cited in this discussion, as well as all readers of this thesis, to freely adopt the VRA method as outlined in this thesis within the spirit of ethical ABR in which it was developed. It is my hope that further acceptance of and respect

for intuitive ABR *within* and *parallel to* traditional psychotherapy research will continue. I anticipate the results that such transdisciplinary work will inevitably produce will lead to increased creative and psychological growth for all involved.

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## Appendix

In completing my penultimate draft of this discussion section, I wondered if my open-ended improvisatory approach to research had offered anything of worth to my participants. Though the primary text for this paper had been completed, I reviewed the original images, written comments, and personal notes from discussions with each participant for further evidence. Once again, the words of German poet Rainer Maria Rilke offered me perspective.

*Things aren't all so tangible and sayable as people would usually have us believe; most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered, and more unsayable than all other things are works of art, these mysterious existences, whose life endures beyond our small, transitory life. (1929)*

My review of the material that had been excluded from this paper indicated that both participants felt 'understood' and 'seen' by me through this process. Out of consideration for their confidentiality though, I will simply say that my support for this particular claim is, at this time, "unsayable." Nevertheless, in honor of these two brave young women, I hereby contribute the term "unsayable" to the poetic lexicon of ABR.

Another result from this research which did not fit neatly into this format was my realization that the paths that both T and B must travel are uniquely their own and, as yet, remain unknown to all. In concluding this research, I am more aware than ever that while any person may be welcomed as an empathic witness for another a brief part of their journey, no adult - be she artist, researcher, therapist, friend, or family - can protect another individual from the inevitable challenges of self-actualization. Perhaps the best any one of us can offer is a sincere effort to witness, accurately empathize, and respect where the space in between two humans

overlaps and where it separates each of us. It is my hope that the gift of honesty that both T and B offered unselfishly throughout this process will eventually be 'paid forward'; guiding me and others who may expand on this work, to empower other young men and women to express themselves artistically - and be seen.

I am also extremely grateful for the permission that this research and my return to graduate school a second time have given me to re-vision my past and reinvent myself as an Expressive Art Therapist for the future. Special thanks are due to Tom & John Hodson both of whom have supported me in their own way through each stage of this journey.

Throughout this course of study as an online graduate student at Lesley University, a specific memory has sustained me. I still recall the day my father and seven Hodson children including me stood up on folding chairs on the lawn of Sacred Heart University in Bridgeport, CT to watch my mother, Marge Hodson, receive her BA in Psychology in 1978. Thanks Mom for modelling what it means to be a life-long learner and a loving mother at the same time.

I also want to thank my daughter, Li Hodson, who has sat patiently near me, as she and I have worked back to back at our respective desks over the past three years. Just now, as I look up and see you there, I am proud to witness the independent and kind young woman you have become.

Finally, permit me the indulgence of thanking my younger self (see Figure 9, next page) - a teenage girl whose intense need to be seen and held lovingly allowed her to suppress the imperfect details of her emergence into womanhood until a lifetime of ABR empowered her - me - to survive, thrive, and eventually, with the help of the VRA method, heal.



*Figure 9.* Carol Hodson with untitled pool mural, 1975, Stratford, CT.