

An abstract painting featuring a crowd of figures in various poses and colors, including red, blue, and pink, set against a background of green and yellow. The style is expressive and gestural, with thick brushstrokes and a sense of movement. The figures are rendered in a way that suggests a collective scene, possibly a dance or a gathering, with some figures in the foreground being more prominent than others.

# **POIESIS**

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**Evolution/Revolution: New Directions in Expressive Arts**

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# The Field of Intermodal Expressive Arts During and After the Pandemic

## Notations: From Responding to Corresponding

Margo Fuchs Knill

**W**hat can be certain in times of uncertainty? And how can professionals in the field of expressive arts move forward with a sense of certainty within uncertainty?

Resilience during the pandemic

There is no hiding place  
I am riding the wave that hits us

I cannot take off, I am not a bird  
I fall when I fly, fall in a nest  
to breed and hatch the new.

First the pandemic seemed far away, happening outside of our country, Switzerland, impacting the others, not me, not us. Then our country was hit very strongly. Yet it felt still distant, until friends and colleagues got infected. As I am writing this article, Switzerland is in the grips of the



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second wave, worse than the first one. The BAG (Federal Office of Public Health Switzerland) has ordered a partial lockdown. Working at home is mandatory. Restaurants, museums, cinemas, sports centers and shops are closed for another six weeks.

Since the inception of EGS by the founding rector Paolo Knill, we have been challenged for the very first time by a pandemic. We professionals sit in the same boat as our clients, our students, and our colleagues worldwide. Nobody can draw on research or on previous experience, as when expressive arts professionals treat, for instance, clients who suffer from a trauma, depression, or ADHD. We know of our mutual responsibility to support well-being, worldwide. This calling is not new, yet the pandemic affirms its necessity even more strongly. At this point, I have to admit that we cannot predict where the field is going. Yet as an EXA professional, I can strengthen the conviction that the expressive arts can serve us to transform the lived challenges we face into an affirmative life force.

Today I woke up early  
day light in the room

I reach out and find  
a void  
I reach in and find  
my heart racing

don't we have words  
to talk to us  
don't we have words  
that pierce through fear

we are in it together  
together yet alone  
alone yet together.

Even though it might be too early to make predictions about new directions, we can phenomenologically observe obvious changes. As a poet I am specifically interested to look at our vocabulary.

### I. How the covid-19 pandemic changed our language

Our languages are dynamic, expressions evolve and adapt to new realities and situations, even during the covid-19 pandemic. Language is a lively companion evolving over time,



sometimes ahead of us. We constantly add new words, forget others, and forgotten words surface in a new context. Digital technology has accelerated our communication modes worldwide and we are creating more “content” than ever before, reaching a global audience.

Neologisms, the use of new words, were quickly coined during the pandemic and became quite popular, for example, social distancing, self-isolation, cocooning, excess mortality, home-office, homeschooling, lockdown, quarantine, covid-19-patient, triage. Also the vocabulary around our virtual activities booms with neologisms, such as the verbs, to instagram, to skype, to niksen (to do nothing), to netflixen (to chill); digital wellbeing, zoom-room, infodemic (overabundance of information). Neologisms around climate change and politics surfaced, such as fake news, inclusion, solastalgia (emotional distress caused by climate change).

Crises, such as a pandemic, as painful as they are, force us to be inventive. We develop new words in conjunction with new practices. Other interesting linguistic phenomena to observe are the portmanteaus where you blend two words, like smog (from smoke and fog). During the lockdown people can drink a “quarantini” or a “coronita,” have “covidparties,” or have a “coronacation.”

The post-covid-19 area will create neologisms and portmanteaus, too. Let's listen to them and act as co-creators rather than victims. I imagine a post-covid portmanteau *cheeco* that blends cheers and post-covid. *Cheeco* to the unknown in a fearless, even humorous way. *Cheeco* to a wellbeing that is nourished and cultivated by the trickster and the clown. He playfully reverses and acts innocently upon what is in front of his red clown nose to make discoveries. Through the arts, the not-knowing can be an inspiring resource rather than requiring us to fight against it. We can learn from the trickster who teaches us to wonder, and thus to stay open and lively.

As if it would be that easy  
to express myself, to say  
what I think and feel  
what I want and don't  
what I wish for -  
especially now  
as the pandemic stuffs me

with new words

while others are hushed up.

Every word has its story  
its rise and fall, its wedding,

wants to love and argue, and  
now and then a word manages

to do a somersault  
right into our hearts.

## II. Messengers and the third

Especially during this pandemic spring

when the buds hide in fear  
when the air stands still  
when the birds fall from their nests  
when the sun is hurt by the light

I need my double face  
eyes and ears of the wolf at night,  
to exorcise fear

Especially during this pandemic spring  
I need you, timeless angel,  
to collect the pits and pieces  
that will hold the world together  
again.

Where to turn to when all humans sit globally in the same mud of uncertainty that the pandemic created (even though there is now a vaccine)? The lockdowns offer enhanced emergency solutions. Online opportunities are booming, and at the same time people report suffering from online fatigue. Professionals who are teaching and practicing the expressive arts were quickly able to turn a challenge into a new opportunity by going online. Yet I am careful to not confuse an emergency solution with a desired development of the field of expressive arts. Rilke (1986) reminds us to have patience with everything unresolved.

I became interested in researching artists who lived around the beginning of the twentieth century during the pandemic of the Spanish flu. Interestingly enough, the pandemic was followed by the aesthetic innovation of the experimental avant-garde movement. After the Spanish flu, a strong movement of perturbing and freeing from given styles began. Poetry, for example, was broken down into its sound quality. Sound poetry and concrete poetry emerged. Old values and meanings didn't hold up anymore. Examples in terms of breaking down conventions were Eugen Gomringer, the father of concrete poetry, Ernst Jandl, the German writer Hugo Ball, to name a few. Rafael Alberti was a Spanish poet, a member of the Generation '27, a literary circle which experimented with avant-garde forms of art and poetry. During a time of anguish, loss and emptiness, Alberti speaks of irresistible forces of the spirit and of a kind of angelic revelation. A notion that something that has been unknown to us can suddenly and unexpectedly act as an eye-opener. That "it" arrives takes work, takes calling, takes shaping, and naming. He metaphorically describes the impact the called one can have when it arrived:

The one I loved came,  
the one I called.  
Not the one who sweeps defenseless skies,  
stars without shelter,  
moons without a home,  
snow.  
...  
Without hurting me, he came  
to dig a river bed of lovely light in  
my chest  
and to make my soul navigable.

–Rafael Alberti  
(translated by Margo Fuchs Knill)



In this example, the right angel came, the one he called. He flooded the chest with light and made the soul navigable. An interesting and unusual image that shakes up the notion of physical limits. What is striking about Rafael Alberti's angel? First, he had to be called, second (luckily), the right one came, the one he loved. Let's remember that angels can be terrifying, as Rilke describes. Shaun McNiff (1998) ascribes both the demons' as well as the angels' participation in the artistic process.

In Rafael Alberti's poem we find Eros, a love for the messenger, for the one who endows the chest with a river bed for the light, so the soul becomes navigable.

In the field of intermodal expressive arts, the angelic with its sudden and awesome appearance does not necessarily have a specific physicality or imagery. Paolo Knill talks about the space in between, the transmuted realm, as a reality to take seriously. Here belong "events" that cannot be precisely foreseen or planned and are not to be enforced, yet arise on their own intent. He coined the term the "third" for this emergent in the situation of two. Even though the third cannot be exactly determined, it can be compared to "pure presence," more precisely "presencing," or to the principle of uncertainty in modern physics (Knill 2004). Even though the third is merciful, it takes committed and disciplined work that it may emerge. We might look at this surprising event as well as a dynamic force and rename it accordingly as a verb: *to third*, or it is *thirding*. This thirding transmuted realm has received much attention, yet at the same time there is no third without a second and a first. Paolo Knill (2004) talks likewise about the mediated and the unmediated realm. The professional prepares, schedules, arranges, prescribes, does what can be done, needs to be done. At the same time, he/she pays attention to the professional relationship or the unmediated realm with its qualitative dimension. We cannot function outside of any relationship.

Fear belongs to us humans, as does joy, jealousy, anger, boredom, sadness. During crises such as a pandemic, securities shatter, fear tightens its grip. How to tame fear, so we, especially

health professionals, can do the job whenever possible? There is a basic rule in times of crisis: bring first yourself into safety and then (only then) you can help others. To tend to the mediated and unmediated realm asks for cultivating self-care. (And as we have seen, as long as a crisis cannot be turned into a difficulty, many health professionals had to overwork to save lives.)

*The fear*

Fear not, says the night  
to the day.  
Join in joy, says the day  
to the night.  
I am your consolation,  
says the light  
I hold the moment  
colorfully bright.

For B.

In this poem we find three voices. A threefold component is personified; fear received a voice, as did the day and light. The "third" (the voice) can be helpful in breaking open the dialogical back and forth which may become an endless loop.

Rafael Alberti's angel is not somewhere above or behind the human being, he digs a river bed of light right into the chest to make the soul navigable. In a similar way the third is "thirding" among us, not outside. Paolo Knill (2004) used the following comparison: For where

two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them (Matthew: 18,20). And yet ... then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight (Luke 24.31). The third cannot be exactly determined because we cannot predict it. The third in its thirthing appears unexpectedly and affects us. We notice it when something changes (Knill 2004). The other metaphor Paolo Knill uses for the third is the emerging art work arriving in an encounter between two. What startles me is that all the examples illustrate that it takes a relationship, an encounter between two for the third to possibly arrive.

This we know: crisis—such as the pandemic—changed our lives, and changed, we go on living with the changing.

Still in quarantine, week three

We had to stop, all of us around the globe  
lock the door, stay indoors and put the TV on  
with the curve of the infected and dead,  
world-wide omen for the day

stillness in the pollution-free air  
fallen stars, each of them  
shows the way to the day  
where we hug and kiss again.

### III. The liberating force of the expressive arts

In creating art, as for instance in an expressive arts session, we are in an alternative reality actively in touch with the emerging. Through the arts we create otherness, an otherness that we cannot completely understand, that is existentially different from us (Fuchs Knill and Atkins 2020). Even though we don't know the future direction, we always know that with each shaping we create something uniquely new that is ahead of our full comprehension. It is our aesthetic responsibility to respect the new, not to try to pull it backwards and squeeze it into a known box in which we categorize the world.

*Credo*

I believe the word  
the Amen  
the "so be it" implanted–  
and I repeat the letters, the utterance,  
for the unspeakable other is always ahead of us.

–Margo Fuchs Knill (2020, p.112)

I am still intrigued by Hilde Domin's (1998) enigmatic notion of "I set the foot in the air and it carried." To set the foot in the air–what a paradoxical first step. The next step is unknown. However, the air holds. Gravity ceased to hold down and something else comes into play. *We set a foot in the air*, and "something is in the air" – this phrase also means that something is going to happen. Hilde Domin (1984) encourages us to have courage *and* to call, namely to be courageous enough to believe that the call can be received and heard by the other one, by an other.

There are many ways to shape the call. The psalm is for instance an ancient calling that prevailed. Moreover, a psalm works as a directed call and response. A call itself is void—it needs to be heard and responded to in order to have its impact. This is intrinsically given by the composition of a psalm in its poetic responsorial form. Each first line is followed by a response throughout. Types of psalms might be songs of praise or hymns, of individual or communal lament, or of thanksgiving. Originally the psalms were not reduced to written poetry, they were songs.

Phenomenologically speaking, the ending (such as that of a pandemic) corresponds with its new beginning, and we are amidst. In my work as an expressive arts professional I like to include the poetic corresponding to a new “beginning,” no matter how old I am, or how old a client is. There is – even it might be – a placebo effect, something strong about the notion of “beginning,” such as a new year, a new week, another year after a birthday, the first moment out of the hospital, the first day of spring, the first time without wearing a mask after the pandemic.

As an expressive arts professional and poet, I stay with the practice of (almost) daily writing. During the pandemic, I developed a series called “resilience poems.” When my beloved husband Paolo Knill passed away last fall, I continued with resilience poems and gave myself a clear frame. The notion of resilience adds a third element while allowing us to face what is fallen or lost. Resilience as a persona has the writer speaking back and gets the poem back on its feet. This gives the writer the permission to face the challenge, the difficulty, the thing that frightens us, such as a pandemic, a loss, an illness. And the poem wants the writer to find the twist. At least on paper, the writer is saved, a first step in the air is made. The following resilience poem speaks of a sense of new beginning during the pandemic, thus we might say it speaks of a “nevertheless hope.”

*New Year's Day*

The bread tastes sweeter,  
the neighbor smiles  
a little longer than usual.  
I can begin all over, I tell myself,  
open an empty agenda.

But the pandemic remains  
and has us endure uncertainty.

And still, who would I be without  
having held the glass in my hand  
toasting to the bells,  
their good bye and hello

the same bells my parents heard,  
and parents before  
the same bells that warned of danger  
and rang for peace  
these same bells want us  
to be safe and saved.

–Margo Fuchs Knill



Calling and responding until it corresponds. This kind of third or thirding liberates us for a second from our common sense of space and time. Space and the space in between are intertwined. Time isn't anymore an issue, there is no what is first or second, nor who went first, and who was last – when it is corresponding, another sense of time is at work, like a timelessness within time. *Tell Me, She Said* is a beautiful responsorial poem by Sally Atkins (2018, p.133) that gives the caller and the responder a voice. The story-teller confirms that it matters what we did and do. Not necessarily because we are important, but because we are in this story together.

...

Listen:

In the silence between there is music

In the spaces between there is story.

Pay attention.

We are listening each other into being.

–Sally Atkins (2005)

#### IV. Rite of Passage

We usually connect rites of passage with ceremonies marking a transition in someone's life, like marriage, or the transition from childhood to adulthood. But what about transitioning from a crisis like the pandemic to a healthy, pandemic-free life? It took me a while to realize that something we might call a virtual rite of passage is already happening worldwide, for example, the upbeat song "Jerusalema," which South African DJ Master KG and the singer

Nomcebo Nkwanyana made during the pandemic 2019-2020. People around the world dance to the song, and these intermodal videos are shown online. Dancers are nurses and doctors in hospitals, nuns and monks do the dance in the courtyard, the sellers of a super-market dance on the parking lot, tourists at the beach, pilots and stewards on the airplane runway, policemen on sidewalks, firefighters, kids, school classes, people in the office, even paraplegics in wheelchairs dance to "Jeruselema," no matter what age, profession or cultural background somebody might have. The video encourages everybody to dance and has had over 300 million views. The choreography is easy to learn, similar to the low skill-high sensitivity approach in expressive arts. A few steps can be repeated, and each dance ensemble does its own exploration within the same given frame.

The call of the lyrics by Nomcebo Nkwanyana is simple and clear: "Jerusalem, my home. / Rescue me, / Join me, / Don't leave me here!" The repetition is doubled, not only is the phrase "save me" repeated within the same line, also the stanza is repeated.

...  
Save me, save me, save me,  
Don't leave me here,  
Save me, save me, save me,  
Don't leave me here!

—Nomcebo Nkwanyana

Nothing else can be more energizing than dancing, dancing to a prayer that has a ripple impact worldwide. I have no stronger word for this autopoietic emergence than to say—a third arrived. People (of the global village) are listening and dancing each other into being. New directions in expressive arts? This is a beautiful example of how the notion of "community art"

is expanding to a global virtual community art. Let's build on it. Let's respond to the save me, save me—yes, I save you, yes I save you, yes, we save each other, yes, we are, we are saved.

Paolo Knill would say—the expressive arts are not exotic, they are mainstream. He is right.

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**Margo Fuchs Knill** is a professor, psychotherapist, expressive arts professional and poet. She is the Dean of the Division of Arts, Health and Society at EGS, and a member of the original Core Faculty of the European Graduate School (EGS). She was an Assistant Professor at Lesley University, Cambridge, MA. Margo works in private practice and teaches expressive arts internationally at training institutes in Europe, Russia, Asia, Latin America and the US. She is the author of numerous poetry books, such as *Von nun an* and has contributed numerous book chapters on poetry, poetics and expressive arts. She is co-author of *Minstrels of Soul: Intermodal Expressive Therapy*, as well as a contributor to *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives*. Her latest book together with Sally Atkins is titled *Poetry in Expressive Arts: Supporting Resilience through Poetic Writing*.

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COVER ART: *Dance*, by Shaun McNiff, circa 2004, 19" x 24", tempera on paper.