

Information about Work at the Clay Field® (Arbeit am Tonfeld®)

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Translation: Cornelia Elbrecht

Work at the Clay Field was conceptualized in 1972 by Heinz Deuser, ever since he has steadily continued to develop it further. It has been proven as an effective method over the past 40 years, in particular in therapeutic and pedagogic environments. It can assist in completing developmental needs, bringing behavioral difficulties into balance and allowing the innermost potential of an individual to unfold. The simple setting appeals to children of all ages as well as adolescents and adult.

The effectiveness of the method is based on haptic perception, the perception through touch. To date, haptic perception has hardly been recognized for its psychological and therapeutic significance. Work at the Clay Field focuses on our innate ability to discover relational and experience-based events, in which individuals understand themselves and their world.

Such experiences, even those of an earliest nature, are stored in the body-mind and find individual expression within movement. Each movement with touching the clay field contains and repeats biographical relationship patterns - patterns of encountering the world and of relating to it.

“Movement becomes form” is one of the underlying principles of this method. Whatever movement gains shape in the clay can be followed up again as a movement and in the course of the process can be further developed and changed.

Work at the Clay Field is not symptom-oriented but development-oriented. This means that the specific problem or crisis is not the focal point, rather the option to discover new awareness and solutions through ones own inner movements.

The Setting

Offered is a flat wooden box filled with clay: the clay field. Next to it sits a bowl of water. There are no specific instructions except the encouragement to make contact with and perceive the clay field with the hands. Adults mostly work with their eyes closed in order to allow the perception of touch to fully unfold. Children follow their needs with open eyes and allow figures and stories to emerge.

The clay field can be perceived, touched and experienced with the hands. The pliable material invites experiment; it receives every movement and is available for endless possibilities. The containing box communicates a hold to the hands while the flat expanse offers freedom of space. Forms emerge from the movements of the hands as they leave marks in the clay. The presence of a trained accompanier is crucial, someone who can verbally support the hands process of movement based on skilled perception and understanding.

It becomes apparent within the setting of Work at the Clay Field there are three core elements of human development: First there is the clay field, a symbolic world, as something available to grasp, to grab and understand. Secondly there are the hands, filled with life's potential and urge to do and grasp. Thirdly there is the unfolding process of this encounter, which is supported and confirmed through a human 'you' as a relational experience.

The Method

The haptic sense is a core sense relating us to both the external world and to our selves, our interior world. It encompasses the skin sense, depth sensibility and balance. These three haptic senses aid us to experience ourselves, to orient and express ourselves in the world.

When we touch something with the hands, we are also being touched by it. Every movement of haptic grasping will reciprocate through movements of internal awareness and further explorations with hand movements. Even here, the first infant experience of the world creates body-mind imprints and shapes an individual's expression in movement. Every gesture in which we express ourselves contains the personal, biographical and relational experience of the world.

In the clay field it is possible to encounter oneself in the traces of one's own becoming. But it does not remain with this encounter. The opposites of touching and being touched inevitably demand a response and thus open up a forth-rolling process of creation and recreation where the hands follow the urge to move, until this movement finds fulfillment in a new balance between afference and reafference, of cause and effect.

Whatever was not possible in the individuals biographical can now be retraced and rebalanced in a physical-sensory process at the clay field. The clay is unendingly available for this. It is pliable, feeds back the own touch and thus enables change and development. What was modeled here as a movement of the hands, simultaneously encompasses the profound unfolding movement of life itself.

Who benefits from Work at the Clay Field?

This sensorimotor approach appeals to children of all ages as well as to adolescents and adults alike. Because Work at the Clay Field appeals to the human tendency of growth and self-realization, it can be effective for a wide range of problems. Even the traces of preverbal developmental stages can be reached in the haptic process and be incorporated in the general growth development at a larger age.

Work at the Clay Field appeals to children's and adolescents spontaneous urge to grasp the world and find a place in it, to understand and to discover their identity and self-worth. Often children are overly challenged in a too complex daily life and this can manifest as developmental problems. They then require targeted support to be able to develop to the best to their abilities and access their talents.

In this context Work at the Clay Field effectively assists to catch up on developmental set backs and to address emotional and social needs in a child or adolescent. A multitude of behavioral problems and obstacles can be balanced out in this way. Over many years the method has shown good results in kindergartens, schools, aid agencies and psychotherapy settings.

For adults Work at the Clay Field offers the opportunity to work through difficulties, which in part may result from setbacks or challenging events during their childhood. Since Work at the Clay Field repeats all the developmental stages from earliest infant experiences onwards, it is possible to acquire what could not be gained then, and to move forward to face new challenges.

Primarily the focus is on finding a hold and new orientation in the relationship with oneself and the world, to gain social competence and self-value as well as maturity and letting go. In the second half of life it is important to find an inner ground. This may include the acceptance that certain conditions are part of us and have inherently shaped us.

History and Theoretical Background

In 1970/71 Heinz Deuser conducted a study into Haptic Perception where a calcified shell was explored with the hands and closed eyes and then named. This study eventually led to the development of Work at the Clay Field.

What stood out from this study into haptic perception with the calcified shell was the difference in the "things" the research subjects discovered - for example a hand axe, something precious and in need of protection, a landscape - and in addition that the naming was determined by the way how the shell was held and touched. Thus the quality of the movement became objective and turned it into a symbolic object that grew beyond itself into an acquired life story. The tactile sense opened up a unique dimension in which important events of one's biography were remembered.

In order to allow the movements of the hands to become visible and develop into a creative process, Heinz Deuser invented the clay field. With the evolution of the clay field something was found, in which all could shape their own story according to their life's needs. As a compassionate observer he has since developed the theoretical concepts and applications of this method.

An important aspect of his theoretical background was the Analytical Depth Psychology of C. G. Jung, in particular its specifications by E. Neumann. The creations with the material and the individual organization gained clarity through the understanding the world of archetypes and symbols of transformation as they emerge during the individuation process.

Further insights were obtained from the observation that there was a tendency in the hands to complete whatever unfolded in the clay field. The manifesto "Movement becomes Gestalt" was coined. Touching and being touched, movement and sensory perception merged in the Gestalt Process, the process of creating form. These "cyclomorph" events reflected the Gestalt Circle of a dynamic order described by V. v. Weizsäcker, or what E. von Holst and H. Mittelstaedt called the Reafferenz Principle (1950) and which P. Anochin named Functional System. Every organismic unit develops in this manner. The creative process could from now on be related to the movement through which it had occurred. The Gestalt Process could be understood as actualgenetic in the way F. Krueger and F. Sander proposed.

The next evolutionary focus shifted to the formation of the ego and the unfolding of identity, the structure and building blocks of the developmental stages. The earliest stage became the sensorimotor organization in the core senses. Self-realization emerged as an Intelligent Act ((J. Piaget), as an Emotional Act (M. Klein and D. W. Winnicott) and a Social-Anthropological Act (A. Gehlen). Orientation for these insights was found in particular in the work of W. Dilthey, H. Plessners, M. Buber, E. Husserl and M. Heidegger.

The formerly held perspectives that were based on Depth Psychology were now transformed into a phenomenological one. The perceptual intention no longer concerned 'the consciousness', but the individual and his/her sensorimotor realization in the world. The focus was no longer on the process of creating shapes and forms, but on how this was achieved, which place within a structural build and in the context of human development it held. Today Work at the Clay Field opens the perspective onto a process that - reduced to its foundational elements - offers the conditions and possibilities for development.

Curriculum Vitae:

Heinz Deuser, born in 1944, studied German, Education and Psychology. Being a co-worker at the Therapy Centre in Todtmoos-Rütte (Directors: Prof. Dürckheim/Dr. Hippus) and the open-minded atmosphere of the 1970ies offered the framework for many creative ideas. In this context experiments with the sense of touch could become the basis for the concept of Work at the Clay Field. In 1972 Heinz Deuser began his practice with first sessions at the clay field. Further development and the differentiation of the method happened through emphatic observations and research. Since 1984 Heinz Deuser has been teaching Work at the Clay Field in training courses. He founded the Institute for Haptic Gestalt Formation in Cologne. From 1989 until 2005 he lectured as Art Therapy Professor at the University for Art Therapy in Nürtingen. Since 1993 he offers training courses, supervision and individual sessions at the Institute for Haptic Gestalt Formation in Hinterzarten, Germany.