

# Viewpoints

## ArtStreet: Joining Community Through Art

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A psychotherapist, and especially an art therapist, should dive deep into the wrecks of psychic disasters, not merely skim the surface to look down from a distance at the barnacled, dismembered vessels on the bottom of the sea. (Wadeson, 1994, p. 153)

Perhaps because I do not swim very well, I was comforted by John Perry's (1993) lecture to our art therapy class several years ago. He said that we work according to how we are made. I was interested in his advice because I had been studying movement therapy for the past 15 years, working as a physical therapist, and through the Feldenkrais® Professional Training Program (Feldenkrais, 1977), I wanted to find new employment and a new way of working that bridged physical therapy and art therapy. I wanted to change the professional/client working climate that came with being an "expert," with the responsibility for fixing what was not working for someone else. I wanted to explore what was working in my own life and in those lives around me, and move, if possible, in that direction. I also wanted to have time to wait, if necessary, to hold and appreciate that which was not moving. Perhaps there are other art therapists who are "made" similarly. We don't swim that well in deep water or feel comfortable wading alone in the darkness of someone else's unconscious.

During winter break before my final semester in graduate school, Louise Kahn and I wrote a grant to combine an open art therapy studio with the teaching of parenting skills at a shelter for homeless families in Albuquerque, NM. Louise, a nurse practitioner for Albuquerque Health Care for the Homeless, had been providing health care at this family shelter for about six months. The proposal was accepted and we began our ten-week parenting/art therapy classes. The course followed the developmental sequence of growing-up, from infancy through taking care of ourselves, as adults. Our weekly discussions of particular phases of childhood were matched with appropriate art materials that served as catalysts to aid discussion. Often we just made art together and talked. The course ended with an unplanned art exhibit, "Roses Aren't Red," at the local library. This small project provided one avenue to the project ArtStreet.

During the period of the parenting/art therapy group, I attended a meeting of the Leadership Albuquerque Group Project as an art therapist who worked with "the homeless." The civic group, made up of leaders chosen from around the community, was interested in a project that promoted economic development within a community of homeless people. This project, chosen to produce a tangible result that would benefit a spe-

cific group, invited street people to meetings for relevant input. The consistent members happened to be artists who were homeless.

The group discussed a community-wide art marketing event and a permanent art gallery space, where artists who were homeless could sell their work. One way to explore ideas was to make art together during our meetings. It became my job to provide art materials, a direction in which to move, and witness the emergence of very powerful art-making. The diversity of the group and their visual art contributions enriched the discussions by identifying strengths that were not available through verbal sharing. Eventually, more grants were written by others and "ArtStreet: Joining Community Through Art" was created.

ArtStreet is a group of artists, art therapists, and interested community members who want to use art to build community and increase personal self-esteem, self-sufficiency, and hope among individuals and families who are dealing with homelessness.

ArtStreet found its home with the Albuquerque Health Care for the Homeless. The spacious art studio receives its funding, in part, from Save the Children Foundation. An Albuquerque Community Foundation and a private local foundation grant help to provide abundant materials at each studio session. Although all materials in the studio are available at each studio session (which run about 6 hours, 3 days a week), there is also an area set up to help guide newcomers. Materials change monthly; examples include printmaking, paper making, bee's wax sculpture, felt making, and photography. Artists from the community share their expertise in these speciality areas and everyone is invited to share ideas and skills. I am present to witness the process of artmaking, facilitate the practical workings of the studio, and plan, arrange, and install art exhibits. The directive in the studio is simple: Using the materials in this room, make something.

Within an environment of an open art studio, we can learn to value and respect our diversity. We work, as Perry reminds us, according to how we are made. Spending time, slowing down enough to value how one is physically made, can be as difficult as finding time to do art work. This self-knowledge reaps many rewards. An art therapist can draw rich metaphors from guided movement experiences that teach, for example, how your scapula learns to individuate from your shoulder complex by gradually differentiating from a global, unorganized motion, or how your stiff, stuck neck finds respect in the community of other effort-



Figure 1. Artists working at ArtStreet open studio.

lessly moving parts. One important lesson from Feldenkrais® Training (Feldenkrais, 1977, 1981) is how my body's movements, with all its habits and pathology, is similar to a diverse community of people who come together with the same intention: to move and make something. Each person, each movement, functioning optimally or not, has a different important contribution.

At this point, our small community consists of about 25 people who have been art making for 8 months, approximately 20 hours a week. Last month, 290 artists signed our ArtStreet Record book. Since ArtStreet opened, a small core of "regulars" have attended all three weekly sessions. Others are in transition between homes, staying at nearby shelters; coming consistently for 6 or 8 weeks, and then not returning. Others come once and return several months later. We invite all ages, especially mothers and children. ArtStreet "regulars" take time from their own work to help new families feel welcome.

Our grant from Albuquerque Community Foundation includes funds to pay artists who are homeless to teach classes and workshops. Mareshah B. Henderson, a skilled multimedia artist and professional photographer was our first mentor artist to teach a public Saturday workshop. The workshop, "Cardboard Sculpture," was enjoyed by all, including a brownie troop. She does not have a home and has had serious health problems, but her art has found a safe haven at ArtStreet (Figure 2).

Miguel came to ArtStreet to finish a drawing. A woman on the street saw how well he drew faces and asked him to draw a portrait of her son who recently died in a gang fight. He sat at the table with the photograph, and told us this story as he added color to the boy's cheeks. The next day he painted a wood sign for ArtStreet (Figure 3). He proudly hung it outside on the fence and received food voucher payments for his work. Miguel hasn't had a home for a long time. He must take medication for a serious blood disorder that makes his body fragile to the elements. He has consistently struggled with his art work, fighting to appreciate the abilities and style he developed without formal training. Recently, Miguel has received support he needs to seek rehabilitation to continue his recovery from life long addictions and threatening life styles.

Sassy, formerly homeless, works for Health Care for the Homeless as a family advocate. She has an endless supply of creative energy which she shares freely with others. One day, she taught us to sculpt using white bread and glue. Her office, near the studio, is decorated with her own artwork. She was a featured artist at "Roses Aren't Red."

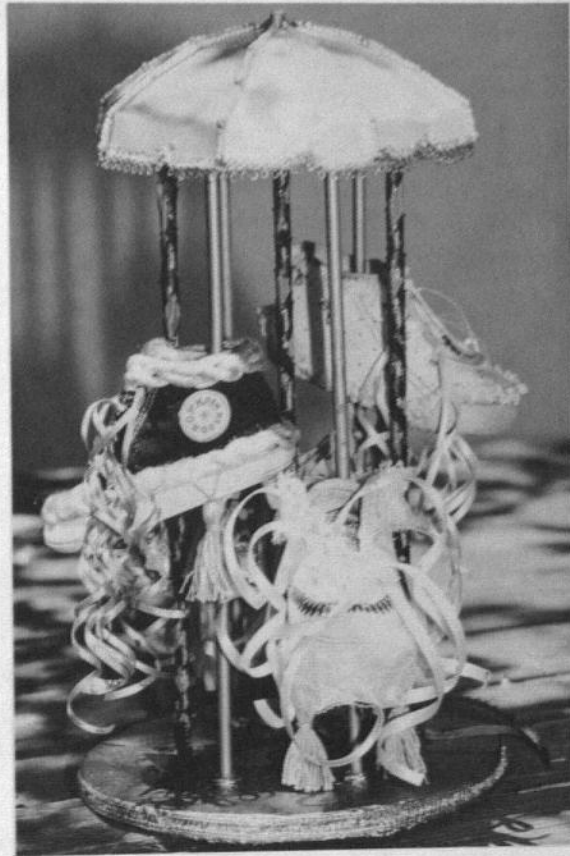


Figure 2. "Faux Dreams" by Mareshah B. Henderson. Shoe art using broken toy, paint, discarded shoes and ribbons. Photograph by Petra Hegger.

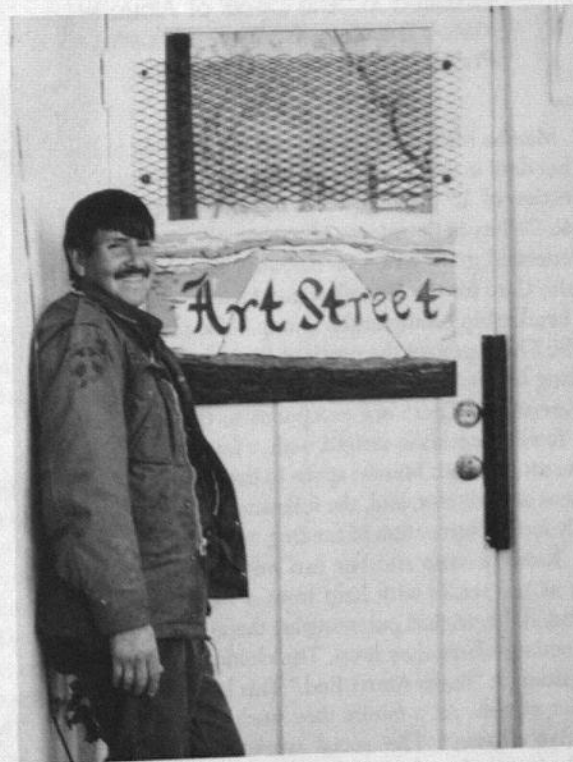


Figure 3. Miguel standing beside his hand-painted ArtStreet sign. Photograph by P. Allen.



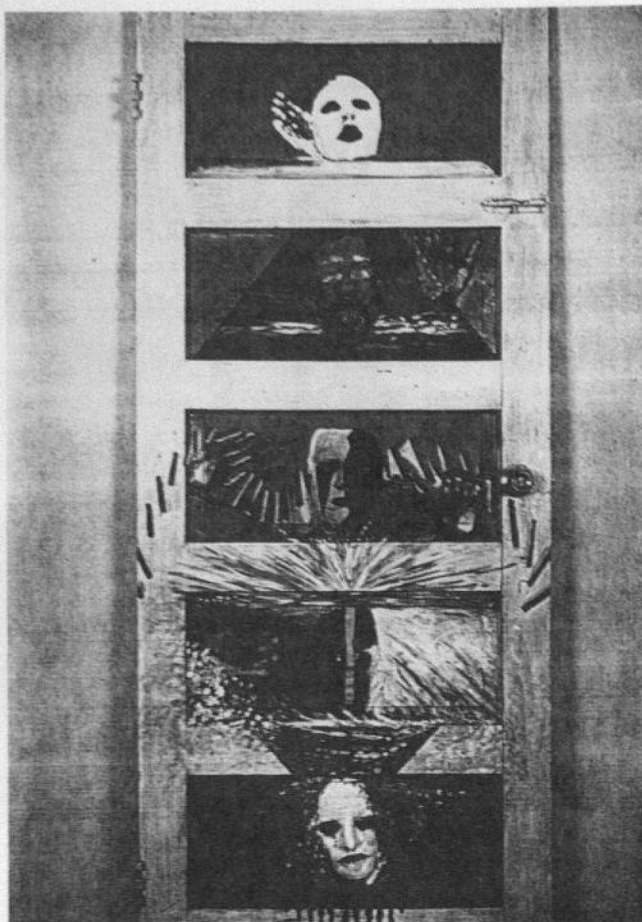


Figure 4. "Isolation...Forgotten" by Steve. Acrylics, collage, plaster masks, discarded door. Exhibited in "The Doors of Albuquerque" at KiMo Theatre Gallery, December 1994. Photograph by Petra Hegger.

Marsha McMurray-Avila worked weekends to finish painting her door in time for the exhibit "Doors of Albuquerque." This collection of 25 painted, decorated doors was exhibited at the KiMo Gallery in downtown Albuquerque (Figure 4). Marsha, an experienced grant writer, is executive director of Albuquerque Health Care for the Homeless and former member of the original Leadership Albuquerque Group. When Marsha works in the studio I help protect the precious time she has with her own art making by reminding others that it is not time for work-related conversations. There are exceptions to this, however. One day our funding agencies arrived with a feast to share and time to make art together. Marsha spoke to the agencies about her experiences at ArtStreet, and, the following week, we were invited to apply for a continuation of funding.

Karen Barnes and her two middle schoolers arrived on their own at the studio with help from a social worker. The family attended the original parenting/art therapy class at the shelter in the county where they lived. The children sold their first painting, titling it "Roses Aren't Red." This later became the name of an art exhibit. As a family they worked on a door titled "The Hidden House." The social worker sometimes stayed and worked, played, and ate with us in the studio.

Louise Kahn exhibited and sold her door, "Only You Can

Prevent Forest Fires." She is co-creator of "Family Lunch, Art and Play" held at ArtStreet and funded by a grant from a private local foundation. Families who are staying in the shelters are invited to have lunch and make an art project with their children. The nutritious lunches are provided by a day school cook who donates her time and food each Wednesday. For children who are recently traumatized and uprooted, the studio provides a place to unwind and play freely and safely. Ms. Kahn and I frequently combine skills. This collaboration enables Louise to occasionally take time from her schedule to make her own art. She has exhibited in all three ArtStreet exhibits.

Kate Rogers, an art therapist who recently moved to Albuquerque, decorated a tennis shoe for our spring exhibit, "Hats and Shoes: Community Sole Work." Kate brought her adolescent art therapy group, who had decorated their shoes, to see the shoes displayed along with 200 other shoes at the downtown show, ArtsCrawl.

Shirley heard about ArtStreet from other women who were staying at a domestic violence shelter. During her first visits to the studio, she was very quiet. Using old shoes, she began a series of provocative sculptures. While some artists at the studio questioned the violent nature of her art statements, others supported her candid expression. Discussions about "what is beauty?" naturally arose. We agreed to allow everyone's voice to be heard. Sometime later, I suggested to Shirley that, in addition to coming to ArtStreet, she might want to work privately with an art therapist where she could have individual time to talk about her powerful artwork.

Community art making in an open studio environment is a way I have decided to work. The importance of this work is found in the experiences of people who came through the studio doors looking for a community to validate their abilities to make something. This approach is not limited to "art therapy for people who are homeless." We have adapted according to funding sources and dealt with serious issues of homelessness and embraced the "homelessness" lurking in many souls. Most important, this special environment has nurtured creative expression for everyone who has had the courage to make art.

Perhaps there is a biological human necessity satisfied in this act of community art making. Ellen Dissanayake wrote, "Art can be considered as a behavior (a 'need,' fulfillment of which feels good) like play, like food sharing, like howling, that is something humans do because it helps them survive, and to survive better than they would without it" (1992, p. 34).

There have been days at ArtStreet when someone has reminded me to slow down, find space, and make something, because I needed "a little art therapy." Living in a desert landscape and being a lousy swimmer motivates me to find options for working, besides making a living by diving alone toward the bottom of the sea.

**Author's Note:** I would like to thank my teachers: Pat Allen, Linney Wix, Josie Abbenante, and to Gaby Yaron (who is recently deceased). I would also like to thank the American Association of University Women.

**Associate Editor's Note:** Ms. Timm-Bottos invites you to respond to her work and the ideas presented in this paper. Correspondence may be sent to: Janis Timm-Bottos, ArtStreet, Health Care for the Homeless—Women and Children's Outreach, 805 Tijeras N.W., Albuquerque, NM 87102.

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