Constructing Creative Community: Reviving Health and Justice Through Community Arts

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Abstract

When public spaces gentrify, become exclusive, or overly consumer driven, citizens naturally become interested in having more input into the construction of creative places that will nurture their own (and their children's) well being. Art therapists, artists, educators, students, and ironically, people experiencing homelessness, are in a unique position to respond to this need for safe public space, which assists all of us in reclaiming our collective power to create the world, we want to live in. This article explores the importance of collaboratively constructing small and sustainable "public home places," promoting creative thought, dialogue and community art making.

Introduction

> The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living. (Winnicott, 1988, p.121)

When public spaces gentrify, become exclusive, or overly consumer driven, citizens naturally become interested in having more input into the construction of creative places that will nurture their own (and their children's) well being (Murphy & Cunningham, 2003; Solnit, 2000; Jacobs, 1999; Smith, 1994; Kasinitz, 1984; Palen, J. & London B. (eds), 1984). Art therapists, artists, educators, students, and ironically, people experiencing homelessness, are in a unique position to respond to this need for safe public space which assists all of us in reclaiming our collective power to create the world we want to live in (Timm-Bottos, 2005).

Dedication

This paper is dedicated in honor of Fannie Lou Hamer, born October 6, 1917, the youngest of twenty children born into a family of Mississippi sharecroppers. At the age of 45, Fannie Lou Hamer, a mother concerned about her own rights and the rights of her children, became active in her life's work the day she attempted to register to vote. From that day forward she was committed to creating a better world. She literally risked her life, sustained brutal beatings and worked endlessly to obtain the right for African Americans to participate in their country's democracy. During Freedom Summer 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker founded the Mississippi Freedom Party at the democratic convention. Known as "the lady who sings the hymns" Fannie Lou Hamer died on March 14, 1977 (Roar Foundation, Inc., 2006). One of the many civil rights leaders and workers who spoke at her memorial service was Andrew Young, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and Mayor of Atlanta, Georgia. He

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said, "Women were the spine of our movement. It was women going door-to-door, speaking with their neighbors, meeting in voter-registration classes together, organizing through their churches, which gave the vital momentum and energy to the movement. Mrs. Hamer was special but she was also representative...She shook the foundations of this nation" (Young, 2002, 1). (See also Lee, 1999; Payne, 1995).

Photo 1 Fannie Lou Hamer
Photo by: Charmian Reading

Introduction

I believe art therapists, artists, community activists and educators are being called to creative action in this upside down, off centered world we live in. This article will explore the motivation for collaboratively constructing interactive spaces of inventive thought and practice. This investigation requires an interdisciplinary approach, including current neuroscience findings and attachment theory in order to substantiate a significant social need, as well as introducing an underutilized social history, which when explored further, could be used to underpin methods for the development of creative spaces in our communities.

Therapeutic and political community art making can become both the method or practice and the goal. People come together with a desire for community and at the same time create it. This ongoing participatory public art process leads to enhanced personal and public health, healthier families and a provocative borderland, a community, in which individuals practice participating in the decisions that affect their lives.

Early in her lecture at the "Art and Soul" conference held at Bishops Lodge, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Mary Watkins called forth images of "the Splendid City," a place Martin Luther King Jr. referred to as "the Beloved Community," in hopes of awakening a longing for "communities of peace and justice, where love flourishes and needs are met" (Watkins 2004, 2). "Such images," Watkins reminded us, "orient us toward the deeply desired, revealing the gap between how things are and how they could be" (2004, 2).

These communal art sites can vary in size and complexity. It begins as simply as offering two or three children a shoebox full of art supplies in the park and making art and conversation together. Or it can become as elaborate as establishing a collective free art studio on "Main Street." This studio could be in a large rented space or a small borrowed one. The message of this text is going to be simple—begin today, even in some small way, constructing spaces that evoke creativity in your self and in others because quite literally "art saves lives."

A Personal Drive

I hope to give the reader a sense of how timely it is for each of us to take our particular creative vision into the world as collaborators in constructing creative communities. In order to do this, I believe we have to set aside our roles as experts and professionals and begin to rely more on our everyday knowledge. I fondly remember post-Jungian psychologist James Hillman (1992) in a lecture once saying, "Trust the hand that makes it round." I like to think of the community studio based on the human attributes we each bring to it, rather than our trained or untrained status. We are each artists, teachers and students for each other.

When we allow ourselves to see each other as equal players, each in need of healing and leading, we discover amazing new ways of working. We become a group of interdisciplinary and interdependent human beings, a group of eccentric bricoleurs, who reach for things at hand, trusting in lived experiences, and using this knowledge, to come up with something new. When a bricoleur asks a question, an action is taken. Together we practice trying things out, making a lot of mistakes, until we figure out how to do something.

I became interested in creating shared art spaces when I had been working as a physical therapist with babies who were born to families with addiction problems. It didn't take long before I met people who were struggling to keep a roof over their heads. The overly specialized professional home health care I was providing for the infant seemed insignificant in light of the tremendous poverty and the lack of opportunity the families were facing. At some point I noticed an interesting phenomenon. The families who were clearly more connected with their babies usually had art on their apartment walls, and if they also had older children, they had their child's art posted on the refrigerator door. This became a significant sign when I would go into homes in high risk neighborhoods and over time I developed a belief that a relationship with art and beauty may actually save these kids lives one day. This experience led to initiating a pilot project in 1994 with my friend Louise Kahn, a Nurse Practitioner, in a homeless shelter on the outskirts of Albuquerque. This experience inspired the creation of a community art studio called ArtStreet, weekly family "Lunch, Art and Play," and "KidStreet," in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Timm-Bottos, 1995; 2001).

With the encouragement of the ArtStreet artist's community and an intention to practice a solidarity model – paying attention to how power is distributed- of non-profit organization, it was necessary to take a next step toward increasing the participant control of the art studio. Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969, p. 2) (Figure 1) though continues to be a helpful and powerful tool in evaluating community projects. The rungs on her almost forty-year-old ladder remains relevant and provoking, ranging from institutional manipulation to full citizen control. It is important because it demonstrates the gradation of direct participation. When this participation is limited as diagramed in the lower rungs, no change in status quo can occur. Redistribution of power and a movement towards social justice occurs when citizen participation is achieved.

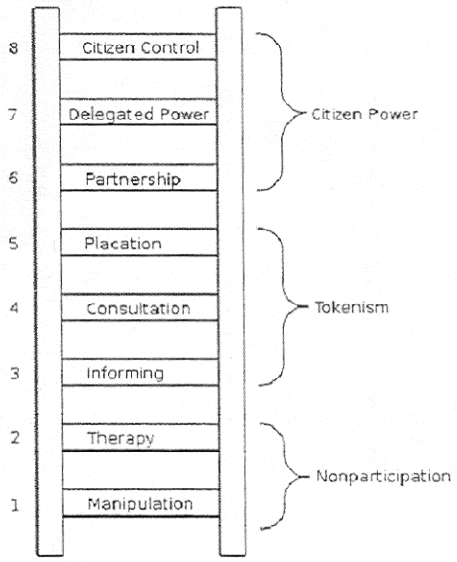

Figure 1 (Arnstein, 1969, p.217)

It was the week of September 11, 2001 when there was sudden urgency for setting up a site for community building, expressive art making and social dialogue. A small group of us who had been making art together in our living rooms for several months signed a lease on a storefront studio in downtown Albuquerque. OFFCenter Community Arts Project (www.offecnterarts.org) is a non-profit organization where everyone, including individuals labeled, "homeless mental health," clients can direct their own healing

and have opportunities to be the instigators of the activities that occur there. It is a place where "we realize the center of the universe is not the institution but the community" (McNichol, 2006, p.4). Not surprisingly the act of intentional art-making quickly supports "patients" into expanded identities, into roles of citizen artists and community leaders. Since the end of that successful first year approximately 8,000 annual visits are made to the welcoming free studio space.

Photo 2 OFFCenter Arts, Albuquerque, NM
Photo by: Clint Bergum

OFFCenter is an unusual place. It straddles a border between different health care and social therapy disciplines, between activities of the home and the world-at-large, and between the private world of the artist and public art. Susan Hogan in her book *Healing Arts: The History of Art Therapy* (2001), reminds us that art therapy claims a history that privileges the importance of a sense of place. Examples she discusses are the egalitarian experiments conducted at the therapeutic community, Withymead and Edward Adamson's (1984) painting studio at Netherne, a psychiatric hospital in England. In both environments, representing different ends of art therapy practices, the "enabling space" held great potential for the patient/student/future therapist.

D.W. Winnicott (1965), a psychoanalytic theorist, described a psychologically protected, reliable space, as a "transitional space," where liminal experiences are given a place of potential. According to Winnicott this space is first experienced between the infant and the mother and later between the individual and society. "A space that welcomes what is neither wholly private or public, inner or outer" (Watkins, 2004, 20), where the creative life is played out and eventually leads to cultural interactivity. Evans and Boyte (1986) stated "that it is in the spaces between private and public life where people develop the freedom to gaze on old arrangements with a critical eye, dream of better ways, and actually build new models for living" (1986, cited in Belenky et al 1997, pps. 163-164).

In his book *The Location of Culture*, scholar Homi Bhabha (1994) writes about the need for adequate private spaces, accessible public spaces as well as these bridging spaces, or public homeplaces, such as a community art studio. "These inbetween spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal– that initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha, 1994, 2).

Sara Evans and Harry Boyte (1986) refer to safe places for community building as "free spaces," a particular type of public gathering place.

> Environments in which people are able to learn a new self- respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue. Put simply, free spaces are settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence, and vision. (Evans & Boyte 1986, p. 15).

Why is this type of in-between space so important today?

Health and Wealth

In the United States the top 20% of Americans receive half the income in the country, while 50 percent of the American families have less than $1,000 in financial assets. Bill Gates alone is richer than one half of the American people put together (Rifkin 2000, 230). His vision of a wireless world is meaningless to more than 7 million American families who are without basic phone service (Rifkin 2000, 232). While the more affluent portion of the population is moving to gated communities, many of the nations poorest and least educated citizens are behind bars, "making the U.S. the most incarcerated population in the world" (Rifkin 2000, 231). California now spends more public funds on prisons than on higher education. Globally one third of the world's three billion workers are unemployed (Rifkin 2000, 230).

> The result is that while the wealthiest human beings on earth are increasingly preoccupied with entertainment and living creative and expressive lives, nearly one billion other human beings are living in poverty and several billion more are barely making ends meet. (Rifkin 2000, 231).

Poverty and homelessness increases one's vulnerability to all types of mental and physical health problems (O'Sullivan, 2004; Casanova, 1996). Worldwide there are more than 600 million people homeless. In the United States there are an estimated 1 million children without homes. Studies indicate that a lack of a home contributes to increased developmental delays, increased illness and increase absences from school (Katz, 1989).

Also in the United States, studies show that 50% of Americans will develop a mental illness at some point in their lives and most will not receive the proper treatment. Mental illness has not been on the decline despite the treatments that are available and the first symptoms of mental illness are beginning earlier than expected, generally during the teenage years (Talan 2005, A-7).

Unfortunately, the story gets worse—because as a wealthy culture we also have the power to voluntarily choose to fight wars over providing basic health care and housing for our selves and each other. Consequently, as a society we also tolerate the imposed effects of trauma associated not only with poverty but also with war.

Dr. Stephen Bezruchka, (2003) a proactive emergency room doctor stated in his article entitled "Health and Wealth," "We need to shape the world that creates our life experiences and, hence, shapes our health" (p.7). How do we begin? Dr. Allan Schore, author of landmark books including *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self* (2003) tells us to look to the right brain for answers. His collection of a decade of relevant brain research culminates in an exciting theory of social interactive regulation that happens to support the need for relational models of community health and well-being.

Brain Research and Attachment Theory

Based on his extensive compilation of brain research, Dr. Schore has made suggestions regarding refocusing psychology with an understanding of implicit relational knowledge, which he believes will ultimately change the way we treat each other. Dr. Schore demonstrates how "various nonconscious mental systems perform the lion's share of the self regulating burden, beneficently keeping the individual grounded in his or her environment" (Bargh & Chartrand quoted in Schore 2003, p. 247).

Although the major brain structures are in place by the time the infant is born, the majority of the brain's structural organization and growth takes place following birth in the early years and continues, especially in the right hemisphere, through out the lifespan (Thatcher, 1994). This slow but ongoing development forms the basis for understanding the implications of

attachment theory and the importance of why we have a life long need to relate to each other as social human beings.

Until recently most brain research focused on cognitive development. Art Therapists and other clinicians are now beginning to have access to research demonstrating the importance of the brain's automatic analysis of information that is directly received by the body that does not initially inform us consciously (Schore 2003, 259). It is this sensory input that literally changes how the brain organizes, forming how we perceive the world and contributing to how we respond each other.

Interestingly, the skin and brain are made from exactly the same primitive ectoderm cells. The skin reflexively and spontaneously expresses emotional events beyond our conscious control (Braun 2000, 2001). A number of studies have demonstrated the impact of the presence or absence of visual, vocal, and tactile emotional stimulation on the infant's developing brain (Hobson, 1993; Preisler, 1995; Wright, 1991). The caregiver reads her baby's cues and responds accordingly, the baby reacts and so on. This face-to-face communication with eye-to-eye orientation, vocalizations, hand gestures, and movements of the arms and head expresses interpersonal awareness and emotions. (Schore 2003,12). This caregiver brain to infant brain interaction especially in the right hemispheres, provide a basis for co-regulation of both nervous systems. Providing a consistent calming effect over time, the dance partners effectively organize each others brain, teaching the infant how to affectively react to others in order to get his or her needs met. This early relational experience is the basis of attachment theory and builds the foundation of receptivity of the developing brain to the world.

Dr. Bob Marvin (2002) of the Circle of Security Project states that the caregiver's job is to make an accurate inference about the needs of their infant and respond appropriately and as quickly as possible. In order to do this the caregiver needs to be in touch with his or her own feelings, attitudes, thoughts and own internal working models. (Marvin, personal communication, September 14, 2005).

A healthy attachment to another human includes many moments when the dance is not smooth and the cues aren't read correctly. The baby cries. This rupture of the attachment bond occurs many times throughout the day. When rupture and then repair of the bond occurs the baby begins to learn how to self regulate. What happens when the caregiver isn't able to respond quickly or accurately or with a kind inference to the baby's cries? The baby becomes dysregulated. If this becomes a chronic state, over time, the infant will not be able to develop the necessary cortical systems to effectively self regulate. Sensory deprivation, extreme neglect, as well as an exposure to family violence have been demonstrated to alter the physical growth and organization of the brain. According to Dr. Bruce Perry of the Child Trauma Academy, an informative nonprofit agency located in Houston, Texas, "Neglect is the absence of critical organizing experience at key times during early development" (Perry, 2001 p. 21). MRI images illustrate the negative impact of neglect on the developing brain. A child suffering from severe sensory-deprivation neglect may exhibit a significantly smaller than average brain size and cortical atrophy with enlarged ventricles (Perry & Pollard, 1997).

Each year in the United States alone, over 500,000 children suffer from some version of "neglect" (Perry & Pollard, 1997). Trauma impairs the interpretation of the world. During the first two years of life, chronic and cumulative states of overwhelming, hyperaroused affective states, as well as, hypoaroused dissociation have devastating effects on growth of psychic structure. Severe relational trauma leads to right brain self pathologies. Early traumatic environments interfere with the organization of the right hemispheric cortical-subcortical limbic systems causing: diminished affect regulation, a decreased capacity to play, decreased development of empathy and motivation, the

misinterpretation of the intention of others and especially significant to art therapists is the child's diminished capacity to imagine. This early adverse development is a set up for later Adult PTSD, Borderline, and somatoform disorders (Waller, Hamilton, Elliott, Lewendon, Stopa, et al, 2000).

Two memory systems are activated during repeated traumatic experiences. Through the hippocampus the individual remembers who they were with and what they were doing during the trauma and they will also remember that the situation was awful. Through the amygdala system, however, the stimuli will cause muscles to tense up, blood pressure and heart rate to change, and hormones to be released, creating a state of panic. Dr. Schore's collection of brain research demonstrates that it is this nonconscious fear conditioned circuit that must be convinced of safety before the reorganization of the traumatic conscious memory can be accessed. And it is through *this* right amygdala system that I am proposing we are engaging, reorganizing and unhooking trauma within the safe haven of the community art studio setting.

Let's turn to the creative spaces in our community to see how they serve to fill in the gaps, challenge the brain in a welcoming way and help to reorganize the self regulation system. In other words these creative spaces are also places that rebuild the organization of the brain—from the bottom up. I like to think of this process as going through the back door instead of through the front door or the conscious mind.

Unhooking Trauma

The community art studio is a consistent "free and sheltered space" (Kalff 1980), offering a place of safety for positively influencing the "self regulating system" of the right brain. Dr. Schore (2003) tells us it is within the first thirty seconds of meeting someone that the therapy has occurred. This initial encounter triggers all the other moments of meeting. How will the other respond to me? In less than a moment, the unconscious systems of both "the patient" and "the therapist" register the message that this is a safe place and I won't be harmed here. So this moment is one of the most important ones in the studio environment and is usually taken up with a greeting and an informal introduction followed by a tour of the space. The studio staff, including art therapists and regularly participating artists, establishes a base line of security within the creative community atmosphere, nonverbally inviting the visiting child or adult to continue his or her relational attachment work. Safety is also secured through building predictable relationships over time and through the diversity in age and background of the participants. Infants and young children's presence in the studio provides a simple but powerful message to others—this is how safe it is!

Weekly "Lunch, Art and Play" is one example of how to actively bring together a diverse combination of families, especially welcoming families who experience the constant stresses of living in high risk environments, who may also be experiencing the threats of homelessness. In these structured hands-on sessions, families freely make art together and are often more relaxed to be able to receive important infant/child health information.

Photo 3 (Lunch, Art and Play)

Adults benefit from the same type of "kind inference" that we give more effortlessly to young children when their behaviors are irritating or threatening. This

"Lunch, Art and Play" concept plays out in the community studio. We share food, engage in what society calls-- play-- and have serious conversations with each other. In an atmosphere of abundant art materials individuals direct their own art making and generally make what they need to be making for their own healing.

For too long psychology has focused on what is not working well within the individual. The new brain research suggests that positively stimulating the brain structures, especially on the right side of the brain that unconsciously store trauma may be more effective (and far less expensive) than the methods that focus directly on trying to retrieve memory of the traumatic experience itself. In the studio, it is the elevated positive affect that is associated with community art making. Celebrating what is working today within each individual and the potential this creativity can manifest in the world is a central principle of the community studio. Social bonds of attachment help reduce stress over time and begin the long process of repair of an inadequate early attachment experience. Individuals in an empathetic studio relationship co-regulate each other's autonomic activity much like the caregiver and infant do. Social bonds are as important for experiencing a meaningful community as are the earliest attachment bonds. Richard Hugheart, a veteran who had been living homeless for the past 15 years and regular artist at the studio stated, "The studio is like being in a family, only better."

Sociology Professor Claude Fisher writes, "Individuals' bonds to one another are the essence of society. Our day-to-day lives are preoccupied with people, with seeking approval, providing affection, exchanging gossip, falling in love, soliciting advice, giving opinions, soothing anger, teaching manners, providing aid, making impressions, keeping in touch—or worrying about why we are not doing these things. By doing all these things we create community" (Fischer 1982, 2). By establishing a creative community we heal as individuals and as a group.

Simply, the normal chatter of the participants in the studio provides a healing effect. By being somewhat distracted, the conscious mind relaxes while the brain is also taking in information through the playful manipulation of the novel art materials. It is an excellent skill to become aware of and practice. Have you had this experience? For example, when you are trying really hard to figure out a problem or remember a name, only to find the answer comes while being distracted, while day dreaming, driving a car or taking a shower? Some of the greatest inventors have expressed this phenomenon. There is also a significant back and forth attending going on as the art maker becomes engrossed in his or her own art production while maintaining a heightened awareness within his or her surroundings. People who have experienced trauma are often good at this back and forth attending behavior.

The brain modifies its functioning in response to specific patterns of activation. Hands-on creative experiences with novel art materials provide a unique situation, stimulating the visually dominant brain and the limbic areas in a non-habitual way, allowing the brain to take in new information in a fashion to form new internal representations. The brain processes and reorganizes using these therapeutic experiences as a template. The studio promotes a positive affect through increasing familiarity over time with a soothing, sensory rich environment and with practice these experiences serve to unhook the original trauma, reorganizing and replacing it with new information. The more frequent a set of patterns of brain are activated, the more deep-seated the reorganization will be.

And finally, "The brain does not live inside the head, even though that is its formal habitat. It reaches out to the body and with the body it reaches out to the world" (Wilson, 1998, p. 307).

Spaces for Personal Healing / Political Expression

Art making articulates and strengthens our personal voice because it is a primary mode of human behavior and expression. But art made in community can quickly go beyond an individual's self expression by providing an object to look at, write about and share with others. The neighborhood studio soon becomes a place to mobilize human and group capacity, instigating a feeling of being connected to a larger, meaningful community.

In his book *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits* (1995) John McKnight writes about the importance of remembering the civil rights movement in order to reclaim our power as a people today. He stated, "Revolutions begin when people who are defined as problems achieve the power to redefine the problem" (p. 16). He continues to explain that a critical point in the development of the civil rights struggle which teaches us so much about our political situation today, was the black movement's capacity to recognize that the power to label people deficient and declare them in need is a basic tool of control and oppression (McKnight, 1995).

African American women have historically led the way for the creative development of the individual, and of the group as a whole, towards a more democratic society. Their numerous contributions, including the first settlement houses based on principles of solidarity, the first all women's neighborhood associations, the creation of the first integrated boards of non profit organizations, the creation of citizenship schools and the establishment of countless informal sites of creativity within individual's homes, churches and neighborhoods, have been extremely under documented in the literature. These are the traditions that have no name, and have been given little historical importance (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Ransby , 2003). It benefits us today to retrieve and study these methods. These public homeplaces—were set up throughout the South providing an extensive grass roots network to support the successes leading up to the civil rights movement.

Mary Field Belenky, Lynne A. Bond and Jacqueline S. Weinstock's (1997) research unearthed important traditions of African American women's leadership devoted to promoting the development of people and communities. "We came to see that women of all colors often become community leaders who sponsor the development of the most vulnerable members of the community, even if this form of leadership goes unrecognized" (Belenky et al. 1997, p. 13). The studies showed that "when women's leadership is supported, whole communities begin to thrive in ways that are not seen with modes of leadership that emphasize hierarchical forms of decision making" (Belenky et al. 1997, p. 10).

Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker (1973), two women leaders of the civil rights movement, established youth led organizations based on the ideals of a nurturing home. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960's prepared youth for participation in the larger movement.

> By rejecting the dominant values of society and the elitist markers of supposed success, -the women- encouraged young people to wrap themselves in a different culture, not as an escape but as a part of their re-visioning and redefining a new form of social relations that prioritized cooperation and collectivism over competition and individualism. (Ransby 2003, p. 364).

Bernice Reagon (1983), one of Ella Baker's youngest students later started an all women a cappella quintet, "Sweet Honey in the Rock," describes a safe imaginary place, free of exploitation and exclusion, claiming that if she were running the world this is the way it would be.

> That space while it lasts should be a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are. And you take the time to try to construct within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society. In fact, in that little barred room where you check everyone at the door, you act out community. You pretend that your room is a world. It's almost like a play, and in some cases you actually grow food, you learn to have clean water and all of that stuff, you just try to do it all. (Reagon 1983, p. 358)

Watkins (2004) argues that, "Without any gap between us and the collective images produced for us, there is no public space opened to call forth alternative images or to even create images that reflect back everyday life so that it can be grasped on a more conscious level" (p. 7). Watkins states (2004), "Our own vital capacities for imagining would need to replace those of the state and the market, reawakening the springs of our own visioning together" (6). A public space that encourages public dreaming is also a "temple ...where the poor and marginalized can feel at home" (Rodriguez 1994, p. 162), "a space of radical openness," (hooks 1990, p. 31), a "homeplace" (hooks, 1990, p.42). where innovative happenings can collectively occur.

Aldon Morris (1984) refers to these politically charged spaces as, "movement halfway houses" and describes them as follows, "A movement halfway house is an established group or organization that is only partially integrated into the larger society because its participants are actively involved in efforts to bring about a desired change in society" (p. 139). There is power in place construction, providing a stage for understanding each other and acting collectively for positive social change, "to cultivate more powerful ways of knowing, a greater sense of self, and a connectedness to others" (Belenky et al 1997, p. 8).

These sites of creativity can be found in everyday neighborhood places -- a cooperative preschool, an after-school music club, a radical theater, a graduate class, a weaving co-operative – any place in which every voice is being drawn out and heard and collective projects are designed and presented in order to respond to the group's most driving concerns and questions (Payne 1995, p. 418). The community art studio is a public homeplace, providing a safe incubator for examining personal and collective injustices.

Researcher Mary Field Belenky and her partners provide a thorough description of the qualities of people centered places and the type of leadership involved. This description applies directly to the qualities of leadership needed for the community art studio.

> These leaders want to know each person, what they care about, and where they are trying to go. They also work to articulate the goals that people in the group have in common. They look for each person's strong points, for the things already in place upon which the person could build. They also look for the strengths in the people's culture as a building foundation for the whole community. They ask good questions and draw out people's thinking. They listen with care. To better understand what they are hearing they try to step into the people's shoes and see the world through their eyes. Then they look for ways to mirror what they have seen, giving people a chance to take a new look at themselves and see the strengths that have not been well recognized or articulated. Because these leaders open themselves so fully to others... they enable the community to give birth to fledgling ideas and nurture the ideas along until they have become powerful ways of knowing. (Belenky et al. 1997, 14-15).

Getting Started/ Inspiration

The inspiration for getting started can be found just about everywhere. Yard art and graffiti located in almost every neighborhood can connect the work of individual artists with the revitalization of the community and provide inspiration for communal art making. These artists freely contribute their vision, sometime to the chagrin of their neighbors, by disrupting the over-commercialization of shared spaces. A youth service group in our area found motivation for their community art project in the trash they collected while exploring a neighborhood located around the OFFCenter studio.

Photo 3 (Community Learning and Public Service Youth Group at OFFCenter) – Photo by: Jeremy Lewis

Sometimes simply the location and/or the type of art material that an artist uses can inspire us. Artist Cheryl Capezzuti set up in the SudsNDuds Laundromat located geographically between four economically distinct Pittsburg, Pennsylvania communities. The adjacent neighbors met at some point in the laundry mat and were invited to make art out of dryer lint. Capezzuti's popular interactive art projects developed into community theater productions (LaRussa, 2002).

Artist Lily Yeh has been working with communities in need since the early 1980's to help transform areas of broken places. The Village of Arts and Humanities builds up community involvement through innovative arts projects such as an extensive afterschool art and a dance program. Lily and her neighborhood crew initially targeted a three-block area in northern Philadelphia. Together they converted 83 rubble-littered lots into gardens with courtyards of inlaid tiles. One abandoned house was fixed up for offices, another for art making and another for a silk-screen studio. Lily Yeh said, "They were a part of an old life-style that we've replaced. Art can have a magical effect on human nature—and that's what happened here" (cited in Michelmore, 1998, p.112).

Project RowHouse founded in 1993 was a result of conversations among African American artists who wanted to establish a positive creative presence in their own neighborhood. Artist and community leader Rick Lowe pursued this vision when he discovered the abandoned one and a half block site of 22 shotgun style houses in Houston's Third Ward. Inspired by the history and cultural ties of the Freedman's Town communities located throughout the south, Low helped form Project RowHouses in order to celebrate the arts of African American culture (Johnson, 2005). Similar to Yeh's project, Project RowHouse is also rooted in public art education programs that include neighborhood revitalization, low-income housing, historic preservation and community service.

I am daily inspired by the local artists living and making art in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Recently musical performer, Daddy Long Loins helped his friend, Steve White set up the "Pez Theater" at OFFCenter on a Wednesday evening during the studio hours. Self described outsider artist Steve White educates his audience about racism, domestic violence and immigration issues and other topics that are important to him through the creation of a little theater and reconstituted Pez art figures.

Steve White was also an inspiration for creating a community wide folk art festival held every summer in Robinson park downtown. White's art inspired other artists as he initiated a Folk Farm Festival in his

front yard (www.folkfarm.com). When White temporarily moved to the southeastern, United States, OFFCenter decided to build on his efforts and host a larger event, "We Art the People Folk Art Festival" in the downtown park (Allen, 2006). (PHOTO 5)

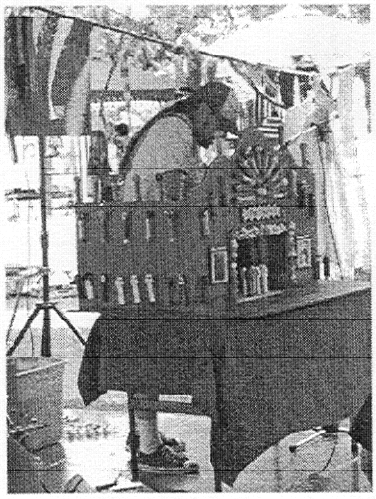

Photo 4 (Artist Steve White presenting his Pez Theatre)
Photo by: Janet Hoelzel

We have endless opportunities to learn from each other in a creative public mixing ground such as a main street community studio. When we practice being artists-bricoleurs we have everything we need to make a more inclusive, equitable world. I'll end this article with a quote by Martha Graham, handed to me one day by art therapist, Claudia Reiter, a co-worker at OFFCenter.

> There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. If you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is; nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep open and aware to the urges that motivate you (Cited in De Mille, 1952, p.256).

We Art the People and it is up to us!

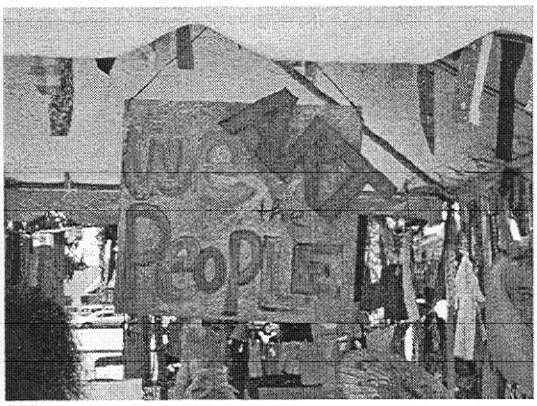

Photo 5 (Folk Fest Sign)
Photo by: Cricket Appel

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