

## Commentary on Community-Based Art Studios: Underlying Principles

Pat B. Allen, Chicago, IL

When we founded the Open Studio Project in 1995, Dayna Block, Deborah Gadiel, and I agreed to state unequivocally that the work we were doing was not art therapy. This choice stemmed from a respect for the intention of the Ethical Guidelines of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) to protect the recipient of art therapy services from the potential harm that is inherent in any non-equal relationship, for example, by protecting confidentiality and the like. However, our choice was also influenced by my understanding, after over 20 years of clinical practice, of how profoundly “linked to the medical concepts of identifying and treating pathology” (Vick, 2008, p. 4) art therapy practice was at that time. By stepping out of the world of art therapy and its language of “treatment,” “therapy,” and “diagnosis,” we were making an essentially political statement that creativity is more closely aligned to an individual’s health than to any disease process. Additionally, we were stating our willingness to abandon the role of expert by eschewing the role of therapist in favor of the role of artist-in-residence. We viewed the latter role as that of a kind of fellow traveler whose primary contribution was to “hold the space” by being fully present in his or her own creative process while cultivating a relaxed awareness, or compassionate disinterest, in what others were doing (Gadiel, 1992).

In this view, the healing aspects of art making arise from the making and doing, the trying and failing, the experimenting and succeeding, alongside others. Rather than focusing on the therapeutic relationship, the open studio process seeks to promote the relationship between each of us and the artist within, or the self with the soul. We believe creative expression is something to be engaged in autonomously and ideally while in the company of others who would provide the witnessing community that supports our shared engagement with the stuff of life. The community studio, as we conceive it, is a place of all possibility, where anything can be expressed as a moment on life’s continuum. Never evidence of a fixed condition, art is an inquiry where the self is lost and found and lost again, over and over, and meaning is renewed in the process. For this reason, there are no efforts to fix, cure, change, or interpret but merely to witness the flow of expression in the images that arrive and to learn from

them. The healing occurs as a natural unfolding of the artist’s truth as expressed through the images; the more fully these artists come to know themselves, the more they are able to authentically participate in life and community (Allen, 2005).

Vick’s paper clearly shows that AATA’s ethical and practice guidelines are more elastic and adaptable than we gave them credit for a mere 15 years ago. Art therapists now embrace and endorse numerous variations of the community studio, often from free standing models such as the Open Studio Project and OffCenter Community Arts, as well as those such as Artworks,<sup>1</sup> a new storefront studio that is linked to a traditional mental health agency headed by art therapist Valery Schuman in collaboration with Cathy Moon, faculty member of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Community studios vary in terms of which customs and procedures of a mental health program they retain, if any. Future studies might be devoted to describing and assessing these decisions and whether they affect the nature of the artists’ experiences.

The comparison of the U.S. and European studios affords us a wonderful opportunity to look more closely at the underlying beliefs that hold different models in place. We can continue to question, to tinker, or to critique our work with an eye to efficacy and innovation. Although the similarity of the programs in both places is interesting, it is the subtle differences between them that fascinate me. One such difference that is implied, if not directly stated, is that the European studios serve a relatively stable and fixed population that may also be comparatively homogeneous and long term. From the beginning of the U.S. community studio movement, there has been an emphasis on the studio as a “mixing place,” (a term used by OffCenter founder Janis Timm-Bottos) of different kinds of people. Studios often have as a stated goal the mixing of the “socially marginalized” with members of the mainstream, as a means to enliven both and to create opportunities for a true sense of community and a shared purpose to grow. The work of cultural critic and writer Arlene Goldbard supports the idea that every citizen has the right to be involved in the creation of culture, not merely to be the passive recipient of cultural forms created by an elite. She wrote, “Community cultural development practice is marked by a willingness to draw on the entire cultural vocabulary of a community, from

**Editor’s note:** Pat B. Allen, PhD, ATR, co-founder of the Open Studio Project, is an adjunct associate professor of art therapy at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to the author at [pallen@artic.edu](mailto:pallen@artic.edu)

<sup>1</sup>Open Studio Project is located in Evanston, IL, OffCenter Community Arts is located in Albuquerque, NM, and Artworks is located in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago.

esoteric crafts to comic books—whatever resonates with community members’ desire to achieve full expression” (Adams & Goldbard, 2001, p. 24).

The democratic ideal of the U.S. community studio movement owes much to the early work of Henry Schafer-Simmern (1948), an art educator whose research, supported by the Russell Sage Foundation, showed that engaging in art making increased the awareness of ordinary citizens, causing them to become more sensitive to the aesthetic dimensions of daily life. From this awareness, then, may grow a critique of mass culture and, as a cherished ideal of some of us who have participated in the community studio movement, even a kind of cultural activism to counter and transform the rampant materialism and shallowness of modern U.S. culture. These underlying issues do not appear to me to trouble our European counterparts, who seem content with maintaining the traditional roles of artist and audience—many of them focus considerable attention on exhibits, sales, and even creating permanent collections.

This leads to a consideration of the term “talent,” another distinction that was found in Vick’s study. The European programs, as Vick points out, actively recruit talented individuals and see the purpose of the studio as providing a workspace for those who are qualified for the job of artist but who may need special support and consideration. This focus is another way of emphasizing a paradigm of expertise, where the artist is considered a special being. The U.S. studio practitioners generally see art making itself as a basic human right in which the “artist in each of us,” to quote Florence Cane (1951), comes alive for the betterment not only of one’s self but of one’s community as well. Not having quite as long and rich a cultural heritage as our European colleagues, we in the United States may have an inherent longing for cultural sharing that is more meaningful and unique than our commercial icons and TV show jingles embody.

In summary, another way to express a subtle difference between studio-based programs in Europe and those in the United States may be that a community studio in Europe, where culture may be somewhat more homogenous, might seek to exalt the individual, whereas in the United States, where our cultural stew is continually roiled with new additions struggling to attain the heroic individualist

American ideal, a community studio counters with an egalitarian model emphasizing the importance of the group and community as a refuge from the competition of daily life. In both cases, the community studio deals with many who are at least a step or two away from the mainstream and keeps alive some important minority values as a balance to the main cultural thrust. The goal of the European community studio may be to create a dignified place in the culture for an artist who, due to disability or limitation, would otherwise remain unvalued. In the United States, the community studio may invite a wider range of individuals who are estranged from mainstream culture to have a place to create meaning in their own lives or envision images of social change and well being.

All the programs and indeed, I suspect, all cultural workers—whether more closely aligned to health care or to the art world—have the capacity to increase our mutual recognition of one another as valued members of our respective societies. Art can hold and express all that it means to be human. We should embrace and aid in the proliferation of places—of all varieties—where the basic human right of artistic self-expression is cherished and enjoyed.

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