



REPORT: ENVIRONMENTAL ART THERAPY—METAPHORS IN THE FIELD

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The Environment

The late afternoon clouds of summer moved in. Like clay, they molded themselves into various forms of fibrous abstract shapes. The long wild grass blew gently back and forth in the mild wind. The clouds and the grass, like a form of protection, created a shield from the naked sky above and the fertile ground below. It hid the surprises we might find. But like pioneers or scientists on an archeological dig, onward we went in search of the past and possible indications of the future. Wild dogs lurked in the distance, many of them maimed but still able to survive.

There before us was a slight rise in the flat terrain. We did not hesitate to traipse towards this mystery hill. Had we been journeying across the western plains or on safari in Southern Africa you might say, “How exciting!”. But we were on another scavenger hunt in a vacant lot in East New York, Brooklyn.

“Hey Jean, did you hear about the lady who was found dead last week wrapped up in a rug in this lot?” said Michelle, one of my clients.

“No,” I said with a tone encompassing many thoughts and emotions.

“I knew her,” Michelle said as she pulled up a large piece of metal from under the ground.

“Hey! Look what I found! Should we keep it?” She asked with an excited chuckle in her voice.

“Can you use it?” I asked.

Hesitation. “Yeah, yeah . . . ummm—hey, I have an idea!”

The Shelter

Michelle is a client at the Transitional Living Community (T.L.C.) of East New York, Brooklyn. Unlike the other shelters housed in the same building, our residential program holds not only 30 homeless women, but women who have Axis I diagnoses—many having had five or more psychiatric hospitalizations. A large number of residents have reported childhood histories of physical and/or sexual abuse and the majority are substance abusers. Women are interviewed before being accepted into the program and can stay up to 18 months. This Transitional Living Community, a program of the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, assists clients in finding permanent housing. The Creative Arts department consists of two dance/movement therapists and two art therapists (including myself). My client contact focuses on individual art therapy with a small amount of group and family work. I have found that in my place of work we must meet clients on a very primitive level in order to make contact. This meeting place is where art lives.

Putting the Inside Out

In the fall of 1997, an article which I wrote entitled “Building from the Scraps; Art Therapy within a Homeless Community” was published in *Art Therapy: The Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* (Davis, 1997). Since that time, I have been patiently and persistently looking for opportunities to continue with the theme of building from scraps. It became clear to me that structures created by the

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women, so indicative of their inner experience, need to actually *live* in the environment. I read the words of Roszak, Gomes and Kanner (1995) who stated that the deepest sense of the soul cannot be contained to “in here” because we can’t be sure it is not also, or even entirely, “out there.” It became apparent to me that in the process of art making, we create what’s *in here* to be put *out there*.

Out there is an interesting space. It is the line where our skin ends and all else begins. For many art therapists like myself, the *out there* is often an art room within the confines of an institution. We are lucky at T.L.C. to have windows that open up to create an *out there* that goes beyond the typical institutional boundaries, both literally and metaphorically. The setting in which I am employed is very real in that there is little separation between our program and the neighborhood surrounding it. For this reason, our clients cannot be studied apart from their environment.

As these concepts gained greater clarity, a window of opportunity opened in the spring of 1997. An employee from our main office came out to the shelter and offered his assistance to acquire land. After working on this idea for several months, the good news came. The empty lot outside the women’s shelter on the corner of Glenmore and Hinsdale was approved and leased to the Transitional Living Community for the purpose of building a community sculpture park.

T.L.C. Sculpture Park

“T.L.C. Sculpture Park,” the new name for the empty lot full of dirt, crack vials, syringes and many other surprises, soon became a subject for many conversations. Client’s were full of questions and ideas. The community became curious about our visibility out in the park. Many of the staff (including myself at times) were apprehensive about this so called “bottomless pit of work.”

“Will our clients actually become motivated enough to partake in this project? How long will it take before we can start planting? Is it safe to be out in a vacant lot where a woman was once decapitated?” Many questions with a wide variety of emotions surfaced. It wasn’t until I started to try to live by the Gestalt concept of the “here and now” that I could apply this to the many concerns associated with the park and our clientele. “If one client becomes involved for an hour, a difference has been made,” I would continually tell myself. Since then, I have seen

many hours of involvement by our clients, the staff and the community at large as well.

“Scavenger Hunt” became the first art therapy group to go off-site into neighborhood lots to scavenge structural materials for making sculptures in the park. Underneath the weeds and long grass that covered the lots, there were usually broken kitchen and bathroom tiles, bricks, stones and scrap metal. Sometimes we would find such rarities as a plastic G.I. Joe doll or an old stuffed animal. We had to wear gloves in order to protect ourselves against syringes that often sat invisibly on the surface of the ground. Sometimes, as we stood there, we contemplated out loud what may have once occupied this ground. However, the ladies were more interested in what horrific things these grounds were used for currently. This would often open up a dialog about the many environmental factors that faced them on a daily basis giving way to feelings of frustration and hopelessness. But the non-verbal communication between environment and participant allowed for play and freedom which often gave a different perspective to feelings of total hopelessness. My motive was never about changing feelings but, rather, opening up a field in which there were opportunities for multi-layered experiences. The kind of scavenger hunt we did, or the particular group that went on a particular day had a great effect on the kinds of things we would haul back to T.L.C. Sculpture Park. Many times we had bags and collected small and delicate items. Once in a while we would all end up carrying one or two very large pieces. Once, it was an awning for a store. Another time, it was a Pontiac’s radiator grill.

There is a theory behind “Scavenger Hunt” and its therapeutic purpose in connection with art therapy. This is my theory based on discoveries of a process that continually emerged during my time at T.L.C. This approach to treatment stems from Gestalt Therapy in that I am looking at phenomenon within the context of the whole. As I enter into a relationship with a client, I accept that the therapeutic process will facilitate changes in both of us and I take in information provided to me through all of my senses. This obviously takes a lot of time, patience and certain amount of “going with the flow” before anything can emerge, but eventually promotes work on a much broader level. Once patterns are discovered, a space is open for clients to play with the metaphors which have arisen, allowing for ways in which to work out underlying issues through a less threatening object. An example of this is the empty lots that surround the

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