

The “Five and Dime”

Developing a Community’s Access to Art-Based Research

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It was in those few precious moments before the start of the public event that I found myself alone, standing inside the large darkened shell of the Kress store building. My husband and daughters had run off to grab fast food, before the downtown art and jazz night was to begin, and left me inside the Great Depression façade, located on the main mother road in the center of Albuquerque, New Mexico. I knew the other artists would be arriving soon to set up tables for this evening’s event, which included our window art exhibit and an outdoor art and bake sale.

The two-storey grand yellow-brick Kress building was built in 1925 when the country’s economy was on an upswing, and, unlike other historic buildings in the city, it had been spared demolition during the overzealous urban renewal of the 1970s. In its heyday, this building was one of the finest examples of the “Five and Dime” store phenomenon in the US. Far grander than the ubiquitous dollar stores that occupy strip malls today, the “Five and Ten Cent” store of the 1920s and 1930s was one of *the* destinations of most American downtowns. It was much more of a gathering place than commercial stores have become today. S.H. Kress & Co. assured their customers of “cornucopias of merchandise” displayed in large repetitive, geometric groupings reflecting their merchandising creed: “more is more” (Thomas 1997, p.7). From a colorful, sanitized candy counter to birds and pet accessories, the inventive merchandise included framed photographs of movie stars, housewares, plants, fabrics, toys, clothing, shampoo, and cosmetics. The products were artfully displayed in open counters to ensure curiosity and ease of selection. The Kress stores throughout the nation also promoted a “Soda and Lunch Department,” which served simple food at modest prices consistent with the stores’ overall selling strategy. The strategy seemed to work well because the Kress stores were very popular and invited daily congregations of repeat customers.

The intention of the original Kress Five and Dime Store—to become a fashionable, inexpensive, and exciting place to spend money, meet new people, and

have coffee with friends—shifted dramatically in 1929. The stock market crash that signaled that buying power would be plummeting in the US was followed by a devastating economic depression. The Great Depression lasted from October 1929 until the start of the Second World War in 1942 and was a time when the entire country was affected by poverty. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1937) announced in his second inaugural address, “I see one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.” As many as one in four workers lost their jobs and countless more were forced into a state of homelessness. Former millionaires, who had become rich through heavy investing in the stock market, also suddenly experienced scarcity. Fifteen million citizens were forced to survive without bare necessities. Food lines extended around city blocks, and cardboard shelter camps called “Hoovervilles” sprang up across the country (Birmingham 1980, p.4).

Our small arts community, made up of individuals currently experiencing homelessness, many of whom were also patients of our supporting organization, Albuquerque Health Centre for the Homeless, had an affinity with this era in American history and subsequently had many discussions about it. In our preparation for installing an art exhibit into the Kress Five and Dime, we found ourselves in a period of daily conversations about the lack of current economic viability and rising homelessness in our own community. We imagined citizens in the 1930s also finding themselves in deep discussion, with hope for the government’s creative response. For those most affected by the sudden severe despair, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), with its New Deal and the Federal Arts Project, was heralded as an amazing, albeit brief, life-saving program. To many political conservatives, it was a complete waste of federal money, and to others it was nothing short of a communist plot (Contreras 1983). The fact remains that the WPA Federal Arts Project put thousands of hungry artists to work and established over 100 community art studios/galleries across the country to help bring relief from the numbing effects of poverty (Harris 1995; O’Connor 1973).

The Albuquerque Kress building owners continued to protect this building long after it closed, through the 1970s demolition craze until 1984, when new owners cleaned it up and the exterior was renovated to its original beauty (Ehn 1984, p.4). This building, however, like the rest of downtown Albuquerque, had less success coming fully back to life. On this day—October 1, 1999—the building remained in virtual hibernation. Lodged in an ongoing era of downtown decline, the Kress building was being leased by the city for storage of theater props because of its convenient location across from the historic Kimo Theater. Presently, I was standing among the large labeled crates, thinking how lucky our small arts community was to be able to use the massive curved-glass floor-to-ceiling display windows that ran the entire length of the building’s impressive front.

This was the fourth year our arts community had been invited to participate in the annual Albuquerque Festival of the Arts. This year the annual regional juried exhibition and its array of arts events and displays would be exploring the city's identity in the theme "Why Albuquerque? An Inquiry into Art and Place." Each of the previous years, we took this opportunity to tackle together a tough issue facing the artists among us who were homeless. The first year, we made visible the resilience of the increasing numbers of homeless children in Albuquerque schools by featuring the art made by our own artist children who were living homeless. This exhibit inspired an early exhibit called *The Doors of Albuquerque* held in the Kress windows (Figure 6.1).



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Figure 6.1: *The Doors of Albuquerque* [AQ]

The second year, homeless artists collaborated with two other marginalized art groups and made a literal statement about living on the edges of city life when we hung art outside the "professionally" juried fine-art venue. The third year, we maximized our efforts and combined an outdoor sculptural art exhibit with a fundraiser to support the continuation of the free art studio. Outdoor sculptures were carefully crafted by the artists and then displayed in a funky, well-loved neighborhood miniature golf course. It was an amazing, fun, quirky event.

Two years following the "Five and Dime," 20 of the 40 artists who worked together on this and many subsequent exhibits and events came together to plan and carry out opening another independent community studio, this time with a gallery, a frame shop, and an art sale shop. Located on the main street, several blocks from the Kress Five and Dime store building, OFFCenter Arts (www.offcenterarts.org) provides a free space to make art and sell local artists' wares at reasonable prices (see Figure 6.2). It is my belief that the collaborative work done on the "Five

and Dime” installation, and even its theme revolving around economic issues, prepared this small, colorfully diverse arts community to take the necessary steps toward finding alternative economic methods to sustain ourselves better.



Figure 6.2: OFFCenter Arts

Every year, the group got more creative in getting our message out, culminating ten years later in our own city-wide celebration which we named “We Art the People: Folk Art Festival.” This festival continues to be held annually at the people’s park downtown, directly across from the community studio. Exhibiting art for large interactive audiences became our strength, verifying to our private, corporate, and government funders that, yes, homeless and housed artists, working in solidarity, can and do make the city a more creative and livable place.

Participation through co-creation

Our unusual art-making community emerged from a 1994 Leadership Albuquerque committee on economic development. We were a group of artists (homeless and non-homeless), art therapists, and interested community members who wanted to use art to build community and increase self-efficacy, self-sufficiency, and hope among individuals and families who were dealing with homelessness. To my knowledge, there was no research showing the viability of this plan, but the leadership group was willing to conduct a pilot project. Later, as the project grew and evolved, the mission simplified with a focus of creating a safe place to make art, resulting in building community and increasing awareness of issues of homelessness through making art together (Timm-Bottos 1995).

Collectively exploring the darker sides of consumerism, wealth disparity, the Great Depression, and the roots of poverty and homelessness were themes aligned

with our mission. In best practice, as demonstrated by this free community art studio, diverse participants intentionally came together into a shared space to dream of creating a world we wanted to live in. The studio brought together the best of each person and what was working, setting up a model in which to solve systemic problems creatively. The art making and the by-products acted to inform the process by deliberately including the eccentricities and differences individuals brought to the process. The collaborative art installation “Five and Dime” included 40 artists’ visual, vocal, and written public expressions reflective of a potent era in US history. Several days each week for several months, the planning, preparation, and installation of this exhibit became the art process that supported community art making. Together we developed and told visual stories, participating in a practice of self-describing ourselves to each other.

There were many ways to describe who we were as a group. Some of the artists were as young as five or six, including my youngest daughter, and the oldest participant was in his late 70s. One-third were individuals who had some formal training in the arts and the rest were people who were either self-trained or had just discovered their art abilities in the community studio. Over two-thirds were people who were currently homeless, either actually living on the street or in a shelter, or who were at imminent risk of losing their housing. The other third were well-housed individuals and a few were extremely well-resourced and contributed significantly to the financial support of the studio. Some of us held keys to the studio door and some stood at the door waiting for the studio to open. Ethnic backgrounds included African American, Anglo American, Mexican, Mexican American, Native American, Spanish American, and one artist was from Ireland. In writing about this experience, all of the names of the artists have been changed.

Whose city is it, anyway?

The call to participate in a city-sponsored promotional event with the theme “Why Albuquerque? An Inquiry into Art and Place” was timely. Not surprisingly, this theme was accompanied by a promotional agenda by the city. A new partnership between city officials and private developers announced—oddly enough, through an article in *The Wall Street Journal* (Holt 1999)—that it was gearing up for the thirty-second revitalization plan for Albuquerque’s downtown core. This new and improved plan promised not only to generate pedestrian-oriented entertainment, a vibrant retail district, and additional housing, but also to address tough social issues such as public education and homelessness (Holt 1999). Over time we would slowly learn what “gentrification” meant and what happens when money is put into a forlorn downtown for the benefit of only a small elite group of citizens (Timm-Bottos 2005).

“Whose city is it, anyway?” became a common question. It was asked indirectly every time an artist walked out of the warm studio and had no home to retreat

to, or had inadequate transportation, or when a parent had to choose between staying with his or her family or being segregated by gender into limited night-time shelters. The middle-class artists in our group, including myself, were assured of a place in this city, even as it gentrified and became even less affordable. But whose city was it, if individuals and families who have limited financial resources could not access safe private spaces to live in? According to sociologist Sharon Zukin, "To ask 'whose city?' suggests...who has the right to inhabit the dominant image of the city" (Zukin 1996, p.43). Through our work together, artists without homes began asking, "Who are we?" and "Where is my place?" For our group, with many members who were being increasingly targeted and defined negatively by city officials as well as business owners and other city residents, "Who are we?" provided a question that developed art-based research methods based on a newly discovered solidarity.

Over the next six years, as the politicians and the people with power and wealth in the city grappled with how to increase the value of downtown, our group of artists struggled to see any positive changes that might benefit them. The lack of corrective solution that could affect the social dilemma of homelessness was a theme reflected in many subsequent public art exhibits (Timm-Bottos 2001). For example, the exhibit following the "Five and Dime" in the Kress windows was called "Downtown Migration" (1999). The artists were objecting to the increasingly negative language being used to talk about "the homeless," who had to leave the shelters to work or to receive healthcare. This back-and-forth movement across the inner core had been a hot topic, and the urban boosters argued that it could potentially ruin the revitalization process. Downtown merchants complained that the "high concentration of homeless people in their area mars Albuquerque's image and drives away businesses" (Soussan 1996, p.1). The mayor's task force responded to this by "mitigating the migration" (Soussan 1996, p.1) with a plan to centralize homeless services, outside the downtown core. There was talk of banning backpacks and empty strollers from entering the area. Along with these initiatives, many of the lowest-income housing units in the area—the old, run down motels along the main mother road leading to and from the heart of the city—were one by one deemed uninhabitable and consequently destroyed. This action left even more people homeless, especially young families with children, the elderly, poor, and the disabled.

Not only was homelessness on the rise, in part caused by the lack of affordable dwellings, but also the city's answer to addressing issues of homelessness was to begin to make it illegal to exist without a home (Tolme 2003). The 1930s charitable government responses were no longer conceivable. Even the remote possibility of outdoor emergency shelter or camping by the river became illegal as ordinances outlawing loitering and sleeping in public places swept the country, specifically targeting individuals and families trying to survive without homes (O'Sullivan 2004; Ritter 2002).

While the ultimate goal for creating a visual statement was to increase awareness of these issues, we also wanted to demonstrate the kind of city we wanted, as Maxine Greene eloquently elaborates: “a space infused by the kind of imaginative awareness that enables those involved to imagine alternative possibilities for their own becoming and their group’s becoming” (1995, p.39). Our group’s evolving vision was one of a humane city, one that was responsive to the needs of its poorest citizens, providing basic human rights necessary to live, including housing, food, health care, safety, and livable incomes.

Negotiating a process

Deciding on the location for our contribution in 1999 was important in helping the group to explore ideas about the exhibit theme. As a lead organizer, my opinion was to have the exhibit held in our new but unrenovated studio space. I thought the large raw industrial space, slightly out of the inner core, would be ideal to contextualize any message we would send. When this opinion was brought to the ArtStreet Advisory Council, the artists voted against it. They expressed their concerns regarding showing their artwork in an unfinished warehouse; they didn’t want the public to get the wrong impression of their efforts. The group came to a consensus on displaying the exhibit, in my opinion, in a very conservative venue—the downtown public library. The following day, however, we learned the library’s lobby was not available because another group had already reserved it for the same city-wide event. The library offered the use of their basement and I immediately vetoed the idea and the artists agreed. Marginalized maybe, but relegated to the basement, no way. That was when we decided the Kress building, dubbed by the artists “the drive-by gallery,” could offer the best potential for an exhibit related to “Why Albuquerque?”

As soon as the word was out that we were given permission to use the Kress Five and Dime windows, two other art groups immediately requested to participate. Always on the lookout for collaborators, I asked that an installation artist from each group be chosen to consult with our group. I soon realized our intentions did not match the other groups’ ideas. Their idea was that each art group would work separately and display in the three separate windows. With backup from our artists, I graciously said no to a wider collaboration. Our reasoning was that we would be featuring 40 or more artists and needed the entire storefront.

This exhibit theme, “Five and Dime,” required a lot more group effort and buy-in than our usual exhibits. Instead of the artists individually responding to a call for artwork, we would all be responsible for developing the art needed for this public venue. Three artists took the lead in researching and designing the overarching “Five and Dime” idea, which emerged naturally due to the place-based emphasis and our exhibit site. Many artists wrote their own interpretations

of the exhibit and then these statements were later printed and posted on the windows for the public to read.

As the exhibit evolved, the group began to work together differently than with previous exhibits—for example, instead of responding, artists began initiating. Artists who were living on the streets every day were beginning to see themselves producing public art together. The staff and artists developed a collaborative working relationship, one based more on shared responsibility, solidarity, and trust. One of the artists stated it this way:

For me, this was a very different ArtStreet show from the start. We all worked together in ways we hadn't before (since I've been attending ArtStreet, anyway). It started with a meeting to decide who wanted to be on what committees. That idea fell apart and we all just pitched in wherever we were asked, invited, and needed to help out, that, before, were the responsibilities of the staff. I liked it.

One of the initial challenges was how to involve as many people as possible in the creation of the “Five and Dime” display with consideration of the varied skills, ages, and diverse interests of the group. It was decided that two public Saturday workshops would be devoted to production of items and to help promote the idea in the daily studio leading up to our deadline. The group decided not to strive for historical accuracy; however, several artists did spend considerable time researching in the library. Importantly, we relied on the memory of Roger, a community artist with a colorful dance career who practically grew up in a Five and Dime store during the Depression. Roger's mother was a Federal Arts Project artist in San Francisco in the mid-1930s. Roger became our resident historian and consultant about period colors, design, fabrics, hairstyles, memorable artists of the era, music, and other contextualizing information.

Don, an exceptionally talented artist struggling with serious chronic mental illness, took the initial measurements of the display space behind the leaded curved-glass windows set between cast-iron pillars and prepared the first large backdrop mural canvas for painting. He taught the group about the “economy of space,” which he felt was something all window dressers throughout history took into consideration. His focus became an issue of accuracy regarding how the original rounded glass windows would have allowed the customer an unobstructed view of the interior merchandise, giving the window display an endless appearance. The windows of a Five and Dime were apt to be filled with carefully placed merchandise, and, according to Don, the rounded windows would have also given the architecture a soft, organic transition from the sidewalk, funneling the customer right into the store. With our use of the windows, the interior of the building would not be opened, so Don surmised that the limited space forced us to use flattened black, gray, and white painted figures for our backdrop murals. This would save the availability of three-dimensional space to highlight the artwork.

With this information, Sean began to design and paint the background murals that served to connect the three large storefront windows. Together, the group decided what items we wanted represented in a 1930s dime store window, and Bob, the lead mentoring artist, created a poster to communicate with anyone who would like to sign up to make art for the dime store. It was understood that the art made, or any money from art sold, would all go back to the artists who made it.

The art planned for the exhibit was decided upon by the interests and art skills of the extended group of about 40 artists and included a wide variety of items: 1920s–1930s dolls, felt college pennants, art nuevo costume jewelry, tourist postcards, fake ice-cream sundaes, art deco frames, decorated perfume bottles and purses, art deco ceramics and souvenirs, 1930s style hats, and finally an open-ended category called “Etc./Your Choice.”

Not surprisingly the last category, the “Etc./Your Choice” category, became a locus of important artwork that stimulated the most conversation in the studio. Artist, author, and art therapist Pat Allen has written about the power of combining disciplines of art making with the intention of inquiry and states, “Art making is a way of dwelling in whatever is before us that needs our attention. There is a universal tendency to turn away from difficulty. Image making allows for staying with something while making that staying bearable through pleasure available in the use of materials” (1995, p.17). Allen goes on to say, “It isn’t necessary to try to make a picture about the problem, you have only to form a clear intention to know something and then simply take up the materials and begin” (p.17).

Ema, a single mom with three daughters who had recently been displaced from the Navajo reservation, shared with us that the poverty experienced in the 1930s was not far from her reality of living homeless today. Ema talked while she carefully painted a series of small ceramic moccasins (Figure 6.3). In her conversations in the studio, it was clear that this art project reminded her of her own family’s economic survival in rural New Mexico when she was growing up. She eloquently wrote the following statement:

My mother taught me most of what I love about art. That you can take some beads and make necklaces, earrings, bracelets and make them beautiful to sell to tourists in Farmington, New Mexico. We used to rise up early to be there by 7 a.m. My brother used to make hundreds of dollars in a few hours and I always thought that was impressive to see so much money at the end of the day... I like how my mother would do beads, baskets, dolls, gardening, and Navajo rugs plus take care of 12 children and 300 sheep and goats. We all did our share. But I liked it. We learned to appreciate art at an early age. I’m only sorry now that I didn’t pay attention when she told the evening story with supper. Those stories would be wonderful to hear again.



Figure 6.3: One pair of Ema's hand-painted moccasins

Ema involved her daughters and other children in the studio in making artful souvenirs that might have been sold at the dime store. My daughter made a hat that was placed on a Styrofoam head that she painted pink.

Using beads, fabrics, broken dolls, shoes, boxes, Xeroxed photos, discarded books, and plastic flowers, five artists honored artists popular from the 1930s. Josephine Baker emerged from three different perspectives, Carmen Miranda from two different perspectives; Gloria Swanson, Frida Kahlo, and cartoon character Betty Boop were also among the creations. A Charlie McCarthy doll "holding" a small plaid suitcase unexpectedly ended up in the display at the last minute as well, eventually slumping over the soda fountain counter.

As co-creators of a collaborative public project, we were discovering ourselves within a larger context of each other, some familiar with each other and new people continually entering in. As the paid director and as a white, educated, all-time housed participant of this project, I had a lot of responsibility for modeling how other privileged individuals entered the studio. My archetypal art therapy education, with a side of Feldenkrais training, provided the right substance to trust a poetic chaos to emerge, rejecting the need to fix, control, or interpret the welcomed and expected unfolding. Implementing measures such as making my own art and encouraging well-intentioned "volunteers" to make their own art reinforced a sense of personal vulnerability and helped to counteract the misnomer that the well-heeled were "helping the homeless." The artists struggling to survive in an increasingly hostile city were respected as the teachers, and together we were in it for our own healing. My own studio art during this time, as it often did, mirrored the materials and ideas active in the studio. My contribution to the

“Five and Dime” show was a small fragile assemblage honoring Frida Kahlo who was a great inspiration for many women artists. I reattached a small doll head with antlers to the body of a small deer body and placed her in a decorated box tied with a purple ribbon.

Collaborative art making provided an opportunity to see an expression of our own knowledge in relationship to another’s way of seeing. The following example illustrates my point.

Roger, our house historian, was also an accomplished professional artist and former stage dancer of a white middle-class background in his early 1970s. He was currently experiencing bouts of pain due to arthritis in his former dancing hips. While he constructed a 12-inch caricature of a cross-eyed brown doll with a banana skirt (Figure 6.4), he shared his experiences of actually meeting Josephine Baker on stage.



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Figure 6.4: Roger’s Josephine Baker construction [AQ]

He later wrote:

Josephine Baker was probably in her 40s when I first saw her on stage. She was tall, lanky, did eccentric primitive dancing, and crossed her eyes. She exited with a line of boys to a rumba. Reentering after a fast costume change on record, in an emerald green satin gown and diamond and emerald jewels designed by Dior. She sang and moved

majestically with a line of 8 or 10 young men in tails. That was only the beginning of the greatest theatrical experiences of my life.

Bella, also an accomplished middle-aged artist of African-American heritage and struggling with mental illness as well as issues of homelessness, responded to this rendition of Josephine Baker with a portrait of the cartoon character Betty Boop as “Marilyn Monroe.” Bella shared what she had learned about Helen Kane, who was a popular white Vaudeville singer, artist, actress, and recording star in the 1920s and 1930s. Bella described to the group how Kane also served as the inspiration for the cartoon character Betty Boop and sued the giant Paramount Pictures for plagiarism when the cartoon became more popular than the singer. According to the story, the actress was unable to win her case.

Also inspired and seemingly provoked by Roger’s story of Josephine Baker, Lesley, an artist in her early 30s with an aboriginal background, conducted her own research of Josephine Baker. Using carefully selected black and white Xerox images of Baker, Lesley rendered a striking stage tribute to her and wrote about the artists of the Harlem Renaissance who gave voice to cultural criticism by challenging the stereotype of black women as the “mammy” or as someone else’s caretaker. Lesley, like Baker, worked to dispel stereotypes and racism, which were deeply ingrained in the culture in the 1920s and 1930s, and, Lesley believed, were still present today. As Lesley’s art revealed multiple collaged images of Baker, as a dancer, lecturer, political activist, and mother, her research led to lesser-known facts about Josephine Baker. In addition to her stage career that began when she was a child, Baker also became a theater director, author, and activist. In 1940, Baker received the French Legion of Honor for her work during the Second World War. Lesley shared with the group how Josephine Baker adopted 12 children, each from a different country, to demonstrate the virtues of living in harmony across racial divides. Sadly, Baker eventually died in poverty.

A lot more conversations and a flurry of art followed. Roger continued making several more “art boxes” for the Kress windows, each becoming a more serious and shrine-like tribute to dancers from the Depression era who had not received the recognition that he believed they deserved, such as Louise.



Figure 6.5: Roger's tribute to Louise

Louise taught ballet for many years and struggled in Santa Fe not only to organize a company but to eat and pay the rent. A lot of her true talent and devotion to art was overlooked by the conservative and unsophisticated individuals who only casually knew her. She was not glamorous, but her talent as a dancer was great. Never to become a star, she in her own way, was Isadora Duncan, Pavlova, Gloria Swanson, and Clara Bow. They all existed in Louise's dreams and gave her what others lacked—style. She was a class act. She was the real “Million Dollar Baby in a Five and Ten Cent Store.”

Learning about each other through what we choose to make visible provides a comfortable distance to reinforce and share our own personal complexities without the necessity of interpretation. According to feminist scholar Gillian Rose, “the process of making an object is in and of itself a radical moment of empowerment and of community” (Rose 1997, p.193). Starting from our own particular vantage points, our conversations and our visual artifacts weaved imaginal, experiential, personal, and historical truths together. Art making and dialogue provided a method to honor and explore our differences and, as Greene states, “to be in touch with our landscapes is to be conscious of our evolving experiences, to be aware of the ways in which we encounter our world” (1978, p.2).

The artists demonstrated that art making is a powerful method to explore contextualized individual worlds that then can bump upon other worlds while respecting each others' standpoints. Informal conversing across the tables while making art served to “interrupt and disrupt preconceived notions, that can open the intermingling of the multiple voices and histories within and between people...talk itself initiates and sets the groundwork for collaboration. It is an art

generating respect for the unknown while illuminating the borders of the known” (Sarris 1993, p.33).

The community art studio became a natural environment for fostering research on many levels. Shaun McNiff, art therapist, author, and practitioner of art-based research, has stated that “the key to keeping the arts as primary modes of psychological inquiry lies in making sure that the research is focused on experiments with media just as the chemist works with physical substances” (1998, p.26). The studio is a tactile laboratory for experimenting while making things. Thicknesses of glues are tested, colors combined, paper made and collaged, metals bent and connected, fabrics cut and stitched, large figures secured in the air. It is also a place, unlike a private art studio, where people ask a lot of questions of each other. “Rick, will you help me cut this mat?” “Marcia, what color should I use here?” “Mark, how are we going to hang this banner from the ceiling?” “Mary, can we find a way to make this puppet lighter? It hurts my back!” The community studio is also a place that invites deeper conversations.

Artistic inquiry within the art studio laboratory provides a reliable way to investigate, extend, and enrich traditional scientific methods while honoring an inherent ambiguity. “After all, embodiment is tactile, it involves an active grip on the world. The body, in other words, is understood in terms of what it can do” (Grosz, cited in Thrift 1997, p.128). Art-based research pushes new knowledge into the realm of praxis, “opening into what has not yet been” (Greene 1971, p.253). The “Five and Dime” art exhibit and event is one such practiced action.

The installation

In September 1999, as the art was being created, the core group tried to visualize the final installation. It was finally narrowed down that the kitchenwares and ceramics would be displayed in the left window and the hats, dolls, and fashion in the right. The large middle window would be the “Kress Luncheonette” with a constructed cardboard waiter, a postcard rack, and one or two “customers” in period dresses displayed on mannequins.

Installing the art took three full days. The first day, a group transported the large mural background panels, the props, and artwork, cleaned the interior window spaces and the large glass windows, and got the interior lights working. The second day, another group of artists started assembling the installation, made a good start, and then got tired and frustrated. The following day, another group, smaller than the first, finished the job. The first group told the second group what they expected. For example, Joan felt strongly that the art was getting too jumbled up and that the multiple items should be displayed in orderly rows as the dime store would have displayed them. Likewise, someone else felt the work with common themes should all be grouped together.



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Figure 6.6: One of the three window installations for the “Five and Dime” Exhibit, Albuquerque, New Mexico [AQ]

As planned, the large black, white, and grey murals held the entire length of the exhibit together. I remembered the day when Sean, a young artist from Ireland, began drawing the backdrop for the soda fountain. A man came into the studio needing 22 hours of community service for driving inebriated and Sean immediately put him to work on the panel. We were not quite sure where we were going to find two other large sheets of canvas that we needed to finish the project, but within a few days a roll of canvas came in as a donation. These examples of synchronicity became a common phenomenon that we began to trust as a group of creative people.

The exhibit was extraordinary. The final touch was to post the text with contributions written by each artist, inside, along the length of the windows at about knee height. I quote from the introduction.

ArtStreet is an open art studio with Albuquerque Health Care for the Homeless. Many of the participants of the studio do not have a home, but through art making and displaying—do have a place. This exhibit is our response to the inquiry “Why Albuquerque?” Many of the artists own little but share with the viewer, an abundance of intelligence, insight, ingenuity, humor, and internal wealth. Through participating in this exhibit, each artist has invited themselves to the

larger community table, next to other important decision makers, to be a part of creating a downtown—a place for everyone. Art is one way each of us can have a voice in the revitalization of a shared place.

The public event

A locus of activity was created in front of the Kress Drive-by Gallery at 414–416 Central Avenue on October 1, 1999, from 7 to 9 p.m. The city closed the street to traffic between Fourth and Sixth Street for the city-wide event involving many galleries downtown. The sidewalk reception on our block included our “Five and Dime” window installation, as well as jazz street musicians, buskers performing across the street, and a snazzy green and black 1927 Ford Model A car parked in front of the Kress. The driver and his family enjoyed answering questions from the people walking by. ArtStreet artists and staff dressed in period clothes, talked to visitors, and sold baked goods and art on a table along the street, in front of the window display.

Later in the evening, as my five-year-old daughter was getting tired, one of the artists plopped her inside the “Kress Luncheonette” depicted in the middle store window, in order to keep an eye on her as the crowds walked by. Dressed in period clothing, she immediately responded to the opportunity by becoming a live mannequin in the brightly lit exhibit windows. Everyone agreed she livened up the display, so we decided on the spot to rotate costumed artists into the windows. The response from the audience was surprising. Many of the hundreds of people who passed by that evening stopped and stood motionless in front of the “actors” for several minutes at a time. A group of Japanese tourists, especially fascinated by the people in the window, took many photographs. Other viewers tried unsuccessfully to interact with the motionless actors in the window display. People walking by would come to an abrupt stop, take a second look, and then try to make the artists smile or laugh and move out of their “frozen” postures. It was not long before other kids from families walking by were asking to join in. By the end of the evening, the artists were escorting audience members in and out of the window display. They took turns “performing.” The carefully crafted artwork became the background for a spontaneous live performance in which many people were seen. What was it about this impromptu activity that captivated the audience to join in the performance?

Celeste Snowber, assistant professor of dance education at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, uses movement and improvisation with her students as a form of research, creating what she calls “a paradigm for theorizing the body,” providing “a way of examining the value of our multiple lives, roles, and responsibilities and multiple ways of knowing” (cited in Bagley and Cancienne 2002, p.20). Beyond having fun inside the windows of the Kress building,

Snowber's research insinuates that something else may have been happening. Snowber states, "Improvisation alerts one to the present, and it is often in this space of not knowing what may happen next that one learns ways to develop a physicality of knowing—a thinking on the feet" (in Bagley and Cancienne 2002, p.20). Spontaneity becomes a welcomed visitor in the realm of community studio work.

The following week, it was clear that we had to make time for a spur-of-the-moment community meeting in order to provide a forum for everyone to ask questions and review the success and challenges of the evening. Interestingly, over half the artists who had contributed art for the "Five and Dime" had not attended the public event at all. On this day, however, everyone was in the studio and participated in a lively conversation, which pulled in the artists who had been unable to attend but who were vital to the success, adding yet another layer of meaning to the exhibit and the event.

Research that brews and moves us into action

In this chapter, I have shared some of the processes and unexpected results of an unusual art-based research method of an evolving group of artists who, as of 2010, have been working together in one configuration or another in a community studio for over 16 years. This is a story about how collaborative inquiry over time seeks relationships between the intuition, experience, and knowledge and attempts to build with others a sense of where we each are in the world, embracing a sensory type of "passibility," which according to Lyotard is "a certain way of coming to what is unknown, a sort of patience with the necessity to answer, rejecting the necessity to have results immediately or as soon as possible" (cited in Olson and Hirsch 1995, p.188).

Feminist-standpoint theory (Harding 1986; Hartsock 1998) reminds us that we can legitimately begin our research from our own particular place in the world. Even though this way of working has inherent limitations and implies a partial postmodern perspective, it is also a valuable place to ask questions and construct possible answers about the world. Dorothy Smith, a Canadian sociologist, writes that investigating *the world* as "the problem," instead of each other, offers "a mode of discovering or rediscovering society from within" (2004, p.29). Donna Haraway takes it a step further: "My standpoint theory is that since we're in the belly of the monster, we can't avoid the dangers, so we may as well jump in and try to reconfigure the terrain" (cited in Olson and Hirsch 1995, p.60). She also states, "For me the political project, the freedom project, the democracy project... is about the engagement of people whose ways of life are at stake in the apparatus of the production of knowledge and systems of action" (p.54).

Clearing a space for research that begins with ourselves in relationships located in a particular place provides a means to access and contextualize a collective

struggle with people from diverse perspectives while experiencing the pleasures of community art making. Research that culminates in a celebratory public art event actually reaches back to an original etymological definition of *re-search*: “to explore, to go round, a ring, a *circus*” (Skeat 1963, p.472). It is a fully embodied inquiry that upholds a lively intention of each member’s contribution, to what Giroux calls “the ongoing struggle for the expansion and deepening of democratic public life” (cited in Olson and Hirsch 1995, p.195). Simply put, “You build with others a sense of where you are in the world” (Haraway in Olson and Hirsch 1995, p.55).

Preparing for an art exhibit as a community takes a proactive and positive approach of keeping in view the strengths, insights, and viewpoints of individual artists dealing with homelessness. I was particularly interested in exploring the stories of people who did not fit the city’s systems of commensurability that continue to normalize insidious economic measures permitting privileged people’s vision of a city to dominate. Speaking of the ignorance of an elite class, Alison Jaggar states:

Because their class position insulates them from the suffering of the oppressed, many members of the ruling class are likely to be convinced by their own ideology; either they fail to perceive the suffering of the oppressed or they believe that it is freely chosen, deserved, or inevitable. They experience the current organization of society as basically satisfactory and so they accept the interpretation of reality that justifies that system of organization. They encounter little in their daily lives that conflicts with that interpretation. Oppressed groups, by contrast, suffer directly from the system that oppresses them. (Jaggar in Harding 2004, p.5)

Through listening and collaborating with artists who have direct experience of living in poverty without homes, I have learned much about survival and social democracy. As our current economy continues to experience unexpected shifts, learning how to survive from those who have had to find alternative means to endure helps to re-examine how we use things and what it takes to live a meaningful life. When everyone’s basic rights are met, we all are freed up to develop collaboratively an ability to connect with something bigger than ourselves. Today, as the division between the rich and the poor widens, the US has lost the ranking it had 60 years ago as a healthy place to live. Stephen Bezruchka, an emergency room doctor who studied the relationship between health and wealth, confirms this phenomenon. He found that being poor in today’s society is unlike the poverty experienced in the Great Depression when a large portion of the population shared the solidarity of the effects of the negative economy; today there is wide acceptance of a very large discrepancy between the rich and the poor. It is this discrepancy that makes all of us sick. Bezruchka states, “When the playing field is more level, it is easier to

play. This is what justice is all about, avoiding having one part of society bear the entire burden but reaping none of the benefits" (2003, p.6).

I add Donna Haraway's statement:

So it's not simply that you're marginal or outside—quite the opposite. The interesting epistemological, emotional, political position is from the point of view of those who must live in relation to systems of commensurability that cannot be theirs, ever. The practical political question becomes, "What would it take to make them theirs?" (cited in Olson and Hirsch 1995, p.55)

Concluding remarks

Through a description of a collective process, I have demonstrated how art-based inquiry can lead to community dialogue and action and, most importantly, provide an avenue for concrete steps towards social and cultural competence. My hope is that, by illustrating a collective interactive art-based investigation within a given context, these methods will contribute additional tools for liberatory struggles. Notably, this project forged an unexpected new way of working together. Unknowingly at the time, this artist collective was experimenting with new solidarity models of interaction. Instead of continuing the traditional top-down charity form of the non-profit organization, we began to articulate a bridge between the non-profit and traditional grassroots community organizing methods. By making art together and sharing our understanding of the experiences of others, we attempt to loosen the rigid labels that keep our identities fixed in a monotonous, unequal status quo.

Intentional community art making that freely combines and acts out feminist-initiated theories such as art as therapy, standpoint theory, "womens' ways of knowing" (Belenky *et al.* 1986), and cultural geography (Mitchell 2000) offers a postmodern springboard to co-constructing emerging art therapy actions. These creative methods and theories become a powerful process that access unused sensory pathways in order to see differently while supporting a collective collaborative construction of new knowledges. Such work leads us back to noticing forgotten things about ourselves and each other and about the world we live in, while providing methods for moving forward to effect change in our environment.

Participatory community art making and arts-based research engage the imagination through the creation of visual vehicles for critical inquiry, offer a powerful interdisciplinary process that invites an exchange of ideas, and subsequently provide a much-needed forum to formulate new ways of doing things. A community art studio can be thought of as an intentional bus stop, a place-based community organization located in a borderland between neighborhoods or in a busy downtown area where diverse people who would not normally interact gather

and work with dynamic materials. A community art studio is a public homeplace, or “an undefined space that is consistently in the process of becoming” (Springgay in Irwin 2004, p.65) with borders that do not dissolve differences but define lines of divergence and offer methods for creating a just world.

Community art and its associated research methods will not fix the devastating effects of poverty, but—like the noble efforts made in the 1930s by the US federal government not only to provide jobs to thousands of artists who were trapped in a social cycle of poverty (Harris 1995) but also to initiate over 100 free community art studios (O’Connor 1973)—art, space, and the urban context do awaken the heart to hope, bridge worlds that separate people, and provide a safe place for developing strong individual voices.

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