

## Open Art Studio

Artists have long learned, generated inspiration, and created in an open studio, an artists' workroom where ideas can thrive and transform amongst a group. As a therapeutic approach, authors have written that the open art studio provides an active environment of creation in which art is kept central, rather than acting mainly as a tool for verbal therapy (Allen 1992, 1995, 2008; Cahn 2000; McGraw 1995; McNiff 1995; Moon 2002; Wix 1995, 1996). The space that evolves in an open art studio offers the participants personal refuge and a place to venture towards individual goals. At the same time, it is a collaborative community where art is accessible to diverse populations and accommodating to those of differing functioning levels.

There are many open art studio approaches, although most methods agree that participants are able to choose the materials and the creative direction that shape their art (Allen 2001; Block, Harris and Laing 2005; Deco 1998; Moon 2002; Vick and Sexton-Radek 2008). Trial and error are encouraged and modeled by the facilitator who often creates side by side with the group. The facilitator provides support or assistance when requested, or as it appears to be needed by remaining in tune with the group process. Towards the end of the session, the facilitator can approach participants individually, or a group discussion can evolve. In my practice using the open art studio approach with adults diagnosed with a mental illness and often co-occurring addiction, I have found these three factors to be integral: (1) a safe, creative environment, (2) the ability of the group leader to facilitate the use of art materials and techniques in a flexible and often non-traditional manner, and (3) training and experience working with the population involved in the open art studio.<sup>1</sup>

My undertaking is to meet each participant where their art can unfold, whether through fine arts, crafts, modern media, or a blending of the arts. Some participants come into the open art studio and begin with complete independence. However, more often I have found that individuals come in with an intention for creative expression but state that they do not have a clue where to

begin. These participants can be offered starting points from which they can then formulate their own expressions. For this chapter, I have compiled a list of **starting points** that you can make available in the open art studio in addition to your standard art materials. At the end of each starting point I've offered **example applications**.

## **Clay Experimentation<sup>2</sup>**

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### *Materials:*

At least two different types of clay. You may also need paper towels and a container of water depending on the clay used.

### *Procedure:*

Encourage participant to try squeezing, kneading and rolling each type of clay in their hands. Ask them to consider the differences in hardness, moisture, texture and temperature. If interested, the participant can try to create a simple object (such as an apple) out of each type of clay to help them decide which type they prefer.

### *Example Application:*

A participant may state that he wants to create in clay, but fears making a "mess." If given the opportunity to become more familiar with the unique qualities of different types of clay, he may be more comfortable with initiating his own expression.

## **Effects with Water<sup>3</sup>**

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### *Materials:*

At least one of the following: water-soluble oil pastels, watercolor pencils, or watercolor paints. Paper, brushes, a container of water and a spray bottle.

### *Procedure:*

Encourage participant to draw shapes or designs on the paper and to color them in using the water-soluble media. Then ask them to use a brush to add varying amounts of water to the areas they have colored. They can also experiment with spraying water over their art.

### *Example Application:*

A participant may state that he feels comfortable with drawing, but would like to expand on his creative expression. Watercolor paints and water-soluble media offer a wide range of intensity and subtlety in color. These media can also add

spontaneity to one's art process due to the unpredictable manner in which the water affects the art.

## **Jewelry Design**<sup>4</sup>

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### *Materials:*

Beads, monofilament (fishing line), clasps, scissors, needle-nose pliers.

### *Procedure:*

Encourage participants to experiment with different colors and patterns prior to stringing the beads. If participants desire, offer a demonstration for how to complete a bracelet or necklace by adding a clasp.

### *Example Application:*

Often participants suffering from depression will show a lack of interest in personal appearance, and we observe that interest in self-care slowly returns as their mood lifts. I have found that one method of supporting participants in this transition is to offer a way for them to create wearable art. In addition, this currently popular craft often piques the creativity in participants who have an interest in color theory, design, or functional art.

## **Wooden Birdhouses**<sup>5</sup>

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### *Materials:*

Pre-assembled wooden birdhouses, sand paper, acrylic paints, brushes, glue. Decorative ideas such as: rub-on transfers, stencils, design stickers and 2D/3D collage items can be useful, but are not necessary.

### *Procedure:*

Offer interested participants their choice of birdhouse. If requested, you can offer some education about sanding, painting and/or design. Encourage participants to complete the birdhouse in any manner that they wish using the materials available in the open art studio.

### *Example Application:*

Often participants enter the studio with the goal of obtaining a leisure skill or practicing stress reduction. Wooden crafts offer a structure and steps that can be done at home, while also offering opportunities for individual expression and design.

## **Emotional States**

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### *Materials:*

Choice.

### *Procedure:*

Create a visual representation of an emotion using any of the materials in the studio.

### *Example Application:*

Visual expression of feelings is often the main task of a structured art therapy session, and in the open art studio it can also be important, if not inevitable! However, the main distinction is that in the open art studio it is the participant who chooses this form of art.

## **Found Object Art/Assemblage**

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### *Materials:*

A collection of clean recyclables in a variety of sizes and interesting remnants (small plastic toys, ticket stubs, packaging materials, old audio-tapes), balsa wood, fabrics, nuts and bolts, glue, wire, string/yarn.

### *Procedure:*

Encourage the interested participant to look through the objects/materials and assemble a number of them in any way that he chooses. The participant can also include other media in the studio such as paint.

### *Example Application:*

A participant may state that he is having trouble focusing his mind on the present. The participant may be able to practice remaining in the here-and-now of the open art studio with art that is physically active and mentally stimulating. Found object art and assemblage art may also engage a participant in gaining more flexible thinking and perspective taking.



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## Projector Drawing<sup>6</sup>

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### *Materials:*

A 2D image or line drawing of the participant's choice, a projector, a wall or screen that paper can be affixed to, paper, pencil.

### *Procedure:*

Assist the participant in setting up the projector as necessary by following your projector's instructions. This may involve hanging the paper on a wall or screen, and adjusting the size and placement of the projected image. Have the participant outline the projected image or draw the portions of the image that are desired.

### *Example Application:*

A participant may bring in a picture or symbol that is meaningful to him and state that he has tried many times to draw it without avail. This technique has been used in art education and graphic design and can assist the participant in recreating the meaningful image. Also, enlarging/reducing an image or images may be just the foundation for a piece of art that may combine or change these images. (Please be aware of copyright laws pertaining to the duplication of images.)

## **Pastel Color Field**<sup>7</sup>

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### *Materials:*

Pastels, paper; paper towels or one's fingers can be used for blending.

### *Procedure:*

Encourage the interested participant to use the pastels to fill the entire paper with large areas of solid color without adding any detail. Encourage the participant to experiment with the range of intensity and subtlety that can be attained with each pastel color.

### *Example Application:*

One participant I worked with, a 56-year-old man diagnosed with bipolar disorder, who was also legally blind due to macular degeneration (a medical condition which results in a loss of vision in the center of the visual field due to damage to the retina), came to the open art studio wondering how he could participate in visual expression. He reported that he could see large areas of color, but that the sharp edges of things were not clear to him. This participant expressed great benefit from using pastels to create color fields and this allowed him to share the way in which he experienced the world with others.

## **Crochet**<sup>8</sup>

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### *Materials:*

Worsted weight yarn and a size H crochet hook are good for beginners, scissors, and a yarn needle.

### *Procedure:*

Offer interested participants a demonstration of the slip knot, starting chain and single or double crochet. Encourage participants to practice rows without the necessity of completing a project. If they feel ready to begin a simple project, a scarf can be suggested.

### *Example Application:*

I have had participants state the desire to learn a type of needlework because of its tie to their family traditions. At other times, participants request needlework because it can be functional, or because they feel that it can be used as a leisure skill and method of relaxation. I find that crochet has been an ideal starting point for these participants because you can begin using just a few materials, and the steps can be demonstrated clearly.

## **Starting With Pre-Drawn Outlines and Designs<sup>9</sup>**

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### *Materials:*

Pre-printed outlines and designs, colored pencils, markers (pastels, watercolor pencils and paints can also be offered).

### *Procedure:*

Allow the participant to choose an outline or pre-drawn design that he has an interest in completing. Have the participant fill in the outline in any way that he chooses.

### *Example Application:*

This starting point can help a participant who is new to art and the open art studio to overcome the initial anxiety of being in a foreign environment. Often if they are able to begin with a pre-drawn structure, participants can experience the relaxation and grounding that art activity can bring forth with less self-judgment. As they do this, they may also become aware of other types of art available and they may observe how other participants express themselves. The utilization of pre-drawn outlines in the open art studio is one method of experimenting with color and image awareness that may help participants gain the confidence to formulate their own expression.

## **Signs and Plaques<sup>10</sup>**

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### *Materials:*

A piece of wood, cardboard or paper (any surface on which you can create a sign or a plaque). The participant's choice of additional materials available in the open art studio.

### *Procedure:*

Encourage the participant to put a written expression onto the sign/plaque in some manner. It can be in any format (e.g. a phrase, a quote, poetry, or by stringing words together randomly).

### *Example Application:*

Some participants state discomfort with visual art expression, but feel strength in their written expression. It may help for them to begin by bridging the written and visual in this manner. Participants can also be encouraged to illustrate or create a visual image to go with the written material on the plaque.

## Create a Zine<sup>11</sup>

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A zine is a hand-made booklet combining the idea of a newsletter, personal journals, collage, drawing, doodling, etc.

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### *Materials:*

A pen/pencil, photocopy paper. Other media can be incorporated as the participant chooses.

### *Procedure:*

Encourage the participant to begin by journaling, doodling or creating a magazine collage. It may be helpful to suggest that the participant create a border around a blank piece of paper and then fill in the space with writing, drawing or collage.

### *Example Application:*

This activity would be suitable for a participant who comes in feeling heightened emotions or having strong opinions on a subject and has the desire to vent in a quick, free-flowing and often unedited expression. Teenagers and participants who enjoy comic/cartoon drawing or graffiti art have gravitated to this

starting point. It is important for the facilitator to be aware of the participant's ability to contain him or herself and be safe, and for the participant to have an understanding of how the material may impact others who read it.

## **Color Mixing**<sup>12</sup>

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### *Materials:*

Acrylic paints in a variety of colors, a palette, wooden craft sticks, water containers, brushes, paper.

### *Procedure:*

Have the participant experiment with mixing colors freely. Encourage him to choose at least two colors and to mix them together with a craft stick. If requested, demonstrate simple color mixing. The participant can be encouraged to remember or write down the formula he used to make colors that he may want to use in the future. If the participant desires, he can create a painting or design using the colors he has mixed.

### *Example Application:*

A participant may enter the studio with the desire to use certain colors connected to a thought, feeling or memory. He may want to use these specific colors in his art. Another application may be for a participant who has an interest using colors, highlights and shadows in his art, but has not had a chance to experiment with color mixing and shading for its own sake.

## **Community Bulletin Board**<sup>13</sup>

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### *Materials:*

A cork board or other type of bulletin board hung on the wall of the open art studio. Art materials are chosen by the participant.

### *Procedure:*

Encourage the participant to create a piece of 2D art, a sign, or a flyer that he feels would be appropriate for the community bulletin board. If he wishes, he can post his creation.

### *Example Application:*

Having a community bulletin board can be a way to unify the community that develops in the open art studio over time. Participants who feel certain types of art making have been valuable can share their ideas, feelings and inspirations on the bulletin board. In addition, those who are new to the open art studio will have the community board as a resource and a starting point of their own art.

## Notes

1. These three factors are of key importance in the open art studio because, as the facilitator, you are responsible for offering safe and appropriate media choices specific to the population, and you will need to anticipate the potential for adverse responses or regression by individuals during the art-making process.
2. I have found it ideal to have the following types of clay available in the studio: (1) air-drying clay such as Creative Paperclay or Model Magic by Crayola, (2) polymer clay such as Sculpey or Fimo, (3) non-drying modeling clay such as Plasticine, and (4) pottery clay such as NASCO earthenware.
3. Brands that offer water-soluble supplies include Portfolio Series and Loew-Cornell. For more information on watercolor techniques, see Metzger (1996).
4. Additional supplies that I have found useful in my work with adults include: an assortment of glass and ceramic beads, beading wire, crimping tubes and crimping pliers. These materials can be purchased at reasonable prices through the NASCO catalog, or at art stores such as Pearl Paint, Michaels, and A.C. Moore.

Websites such as Fire Mountain Gems ([www.firemountaingems.com](http://www.firemountaingems.com)) and Beadage ([www.beadage.net](http://www.beadage.net)) can offer the facilitator more information on creating jewelry.

5. The use of wooden birdhouses in the open art studio at Princeton House Behavioral Health partial hospitalization program in Princeton, NJ was first implemented by art therapist, Jill Gardner.

Pre-assembled birdhouses come in a variety of sizes and styles. I have found that they regularly go on sale at arts and crafts stores such as Michaels and A.C. Moore. In addition, variations of this starting point can utilize wooden boxes, shelves, plaques, frames, model kits, etc.

6. Variations of this starting point may include the use of grid drawings and charcoal or carbon transfers.

Prism, Tracer and DesignMaster are art projectors that can be purchased through the Artograph at [www.artgraph.com](http://www.artgraph.com) website.

7. Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still were prominent color field artists if you would like to learn more refer to the book, *Colour as Field* (Belz and Wilkin 2007), or do an online search using the artists names.

8. Variations of this activity may include other types of needlework such as knitting, embroidery, cross stitch, latch-hook, etc. Plastic lacing (also known as lanyard and gimp) is another technique that does not require a needlework tool.

Instructional videos such as *Crochet Made Easy*, an interactive CD-ROM (available from Coats and Clark at [www.coatsandclark.com/Products/Publications/Learn+How](http://www.coatsandclark.com/Products/Publications/Learn+How)) can help you get started. Also, various websites such as that of Lion Brand Yarn (see <http://Learntocrochet.lionbrand.com>) may have additional information that will assist you.

9. Variations of this starting point could be to offer velvet posters, stained glass art or plastic sun catchers.

Pre-printed outlines or designs can be drawn by the therapist, printed off the internet, or obtained from design books. Dover Publications has an excellent range of coloring books for participants of all ages and backgrounds (see <http://storedpublications.com/by-subject-coloring-books.html>).

10. A variation of this starting point can be done using photography. Photographs taken by participants or brought in by participants can be affixed to painted plaques with glue and clear varnish. This can be applied as a starting point for individuals who come in with an interest in photography, and a desire to connect this interest with different types of visual art expression. Please be aware of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and confidentiality regulations if using any type of photography in the open art studio.
11. It is possible for individuals to photocopy and share their zines if appropriate. To learn more about creating zines, see Block and Carlip (1998).
12. If you are not sure what colors to offer, the simplest would be to offer the primary colors (red, blue and yellow), black and white. Any type of paint can be substituted for this starting point.

Many materials can be used as a palette; it does not have to be store bought. Options include plates (plastic, Styrofoam, ceramic), waxed paper or palette paper, or scraps of your cardboard recycling.

Simple color mixing would include: mixing of primary colors to get secondary colors, mixing secondary colors to get tertiary colors, adding white to create tints, and adding black to create shades.

13. Other methods of celebrating and acknowledging the community that develops in the open art studio could be to have an open studio community exhibit or art slideshow. Please be aware of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and confidentiality regulations that may apply when photographing or displaying an individual's artwork.

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