

Fall 2004

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### Recommended Citation

Kapitan, Lynn (2004) "Artist Disenchantment and the Collaborative Witness Project," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol3/iss1/7>

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# Artist Disenchantment and the Collaborative Witness Project

Lynn Kapitan

My research sought to address the function of creative vitality in professional life, particularly among art therapists whose work depends upon it. My focus was on the disenchanted professional coping with a toxic work environment. I used art based methods with two purposes in mind: 1) to reveal aesthetically the phenomena of artist disenchantment and 2) to transform it in ways that would help art therapists reclaim what had been lost. In essence, my research method was that of an artist whose works serve as objects of intense, aesthetic reflection and subsequent creative action (Kapitan, 2003). Disciplined artistic practice is both a way of knowing and a means of discovery. While scientists use research to build models that describe and account for natural laws, artists use research in their seeking to comment on certain aspects of the world and their subjective experience of it, vivifying them rather than reducing them to fundamentals (Gardner, 1973).

I hypothesized that when art therapists artistically engage the phenomenon of their disenchantment, a deep connection with the essential nature of their art form would be kindled. If disenchantment is the result of disconnection, then artistic practice would be an appropriate method for both discovering the roots of disenchantment and transforming them with creative vitality.

The “Collaborative Witness Project” was one of several distinct modes of art-based research that I organized to address these questions. In the method of collaborative witness, my role as a researcher was to listen in a pre-reflective state with no agenda of my own as each of my collaborators told me her experience of the toxic work environment. After an hour or so in this partnership of telling and attentive listening, a natural pause would occur where we shifted to art-making. In silence, she created a visual picture that focused on the essence of her interview story. As her witness, I did the same, drawing from my own internal imagery that was stirred in hearing her story, in order to capture visually what she had told me. Then we exchanged pictures: She looked at the image I made and created a picture in response by silently asking herself “How does this image want to be held?” I did the same with hers.

“How does the image want to be held?” To be held is to be touched with caring and compassion. I chose this question deliberately, for its phrasing allows the dispirited image to be approached as though it were a living entity wanting understanding and compassionate relationship. My collaborator beheld the art image I created from witnessing her story. I beheld the image she had created and asked myself the same

question – how does it want to be held? The art work that followed from this contemplative question furthered the witness by responding compassionately, having been moved by it. In that process, the art maker can see more clearly and respond creatively to something that earlier had existed only as a narrative about a painful experience. The art we created in this mutual encounter also functioned as a living witness to that relationship. To be a witness, in this sense, was to take in the story and to reconstruct the imagery in each other's own mind, forming a narrative that involves the imagery and elements of the disenchantment as well as the source of my partner's knowledge (Kapitan, 2003). This shared, co-created experience uses art to knit a part of the world back together again into wholeness and invest it with new understanding.

To illustrate, one artist, whom I will call Kari, told me she had become disenchanted from having moved in and out of various jobs, with none that valued her unique skills and training as an art therapist. “Wherever I go, it's like I'm banging, banging – I have been boxed in,” she said. “But I am pushing the walls and I'm getting out. That's my goal. That I'll break through. I will not give up and throw everything away or sit in a box with that heaviness pushing down and squashing me. I have given a hundred and ten per cent and I just get stomped on.” Kari created an art work to express the essence of her disenchantment by showing a little person stuck inside a tiny square surrounded by a chaotically charged atmosphere extending out from all around her

**(Figure 1). Figure 1 Kari's First Image Witnessing Her Interview Story**

When I beheld the image and reflected on how it “wanted to be held,” it seemed to be asking for more space, less chaos, and to have something solid to stand upon (Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Lynn's response to Kari's Figure 1**

Likewise, Kari beheld the image I created as a witness to her story: it showed what seemed to be the same little person, squashed flat by a heavy solid square (Figure 3).

**Figure 3 Lynn's First Image Witnessing Kari's Interview Story**

She responded to this image by changing the perspective, giving the person greater volume and form and the strength to lift up the object that had been oppressing her, now transformed into a globe or mirror (Figure 4).

### **Figure 4: Kari's Response to Lynn's Figure 3**

Then I asked Kari to contemplate her first picture again and, together with my witness response to it, create a third and final picture to complete the series. I did the same. This interactive, art-based method produced a series of six visual images that amplified the spoken words of her interview and created a silent avenue for further witnessing her experience of disenchantment. Coming back to her first picture of the little person stuck inside the chaos, Kari contemplated both my visual response of the upright figure and, implicitly, the memory of the image she'd just created for me of the same upright person holding the object of her oppression now transformed. For her final piece to complete the series, she decided to re-create the circular frame from my picture that seemed to offer her the space she desired. She then placed within the circle an image of a heart, surrounding it with a golden hue (Figure 5). The image rested on a solid ground line that was bathed in blue waters.

### **Figure 5: Kari's Final Image**

As her witness, I beheld the image that I first created, of the squashed woman, and then reflected on her response to it, which raised the woman to a standing position, holding a large blue globe. In response, and perhaps drawing from the memory of the image I'd also just created –of the standing upright woman in the glowing, circular frame – now I contemplated how to complete the series. My final picture shows the woman lifting up the globe while at the same being lifted by another person who shares the load (Figure 6). This configuration gives balance and extends the sense of her spirit to a place beyond herself.

### **Figure 6: Lynn's Final Image**

With my collaborators' and my allowing presence, from which these pictures were created, this art-based method tapped into the feelings, memories, and images of the toxic experiences described and created a series of art images that was itself both a witness and a transformational act of collaborative artistry. An art image, after all, is not simply a graphic illustration of the spoken word nor a psychological roadmap to be deciphered. It is a material object that mediates the consciousness of its creator. A pure phenomenon of expression not amenable to conceptual interpretation, it is a form of knowing (Schaverien, 1992). As Lipsey writes, images allow us to think silently; they are like 'silent word', or as 'word speaking like image" (1997, p. 52).

Thus, there are many layers of meaning to the images we created in the collaborative witness project. They opened up inner experience, captured the stirred-up toxic memories from what we both had witnessed, and stilled the spoken words of the interview by bringing another kind of knowing and perception into awareness. This in

itself can be described as an active, transformational method of art-based research, with findings that were of value to each participant. But as a researcher, I also discovered these images reverberating in my consciousness long after the interview was over and I had begun my art-based data analysis of the entire series of interviews, about a dozen in all. When I returned to study the images in their entirety, I had the uncanny feeling that some larger, aesthetic truth was still emerging from them. This sense can only be described as knowing there was a deeper, collective story that all the art was pointing to and needing further witness to make the essence of the phenomenon of artist disenchantment in the toxic work environment visible.

I understand the “artist as researcher” as offering an approach to the complexity of truth that has its own logic within an aesthetic matrix of unlimited variations (Robbins, 1998). Artistic practice as a research method is not random, open-ended spontaneous expression. A closer study reveals that artists use a precise tool for creative thinking in the coordination of unconscious mental scanning (intuition) with conscious differentiation (rationality) (Arnheim, 1969). This process brings to the surface what Ehrenzweig (1971) called the “hidden order” in the unconscious; as Jean Paul Sartre wrote, “the imagination gives clarity to perception.” With respect to data analysis in art-based research, the researcher prepares for the illumination of insight while actively engaged and seemingly held captive by a preoccupation long after many cognitively-oriented researchers would have quit or turned elsewhere for verification. Such active intellectual processes force the research concern to deeper and deeper levels of the mind where it can incubate and be infused with the roiling energies of primary process, dreaming, and imagination. Insight emerges out of the sum total of this exceptional interplay between conscious and subconscious processes.

The appearance of what I called the “art-dream story” emerging from the art works we created should not have been a surprise given my research question. In the state of disenchantment, people experience their daily lives as devoid of the meaning that comes from tapping into the mythological level of living through rituals for exploring neglected symbols and emotions (Meade, 1993). The Collaborative Witness Project provided both an encounter with their state of disenchantment and an environment to ritualize its symbols through the creation of art imagery. Campbell writes, “the wonder is that the characteristic efficacy to touch and inspire deep creative centers dwells in the smallest tale as the flavor of the ocean is contained in a droplet” (1949, p. 4). As I describe below, even the most mundane details of someone's daily work life contributed the material for my collaborators' participation in a collective act of art-based myth-making and transformation. Such mythic imagery is not manufactured, ordered, or permanently suppressed but is the spontaneous productions of the psyche (Campbell, 1949).

The data analysis which produced the art-dream stories began by surrounding myself with the image series from each witness encounter, reading and re-reading the transcripts from the interview in order to “soak up” the words each of my collaborators had used to describe her experience. I read the transcripts aloud and listened to the rhythm and cadence of the words while gazing at their corresponding art image series. I listened with an open and inquiring mind, and gradually experienced a certain resonance between the spoken words and the silent presence of the images. I took great care not to approach the data with any of my own associations about their meaning, form or structure. As a disciplined, phenomenological inquiry, this required me to 'listen into' and below the surface of the words and image where a larger, mythic-dream story existed, or so I later discovered. To find it, first I had to clear the perceptual field of the specific content from the narrative told to me in the witness encounter. Having faithfully recorded each interview exactly as it was told to me, I went through the transcripts and substituted 'x' for all the particulars. For example, when Kari told me, “I refuse to send out an assessment that is not clear. That's how I was taught as it reflects on me and that reflects my profession.”

I simplified yet kept its essential structure by writing:

“I refused to send out 'x' if it is not 'x.' That's how I was taught as it reflects on 'x' and my 'x'.”

A therapist who wanted a pay raise became “raising the 'x'” ; griping about a nurse who interrupted a session to dispense medicine became “the 'x' came in to dispense the 'x'.” Free of the everyday particulars yet faithful to the underlying form and structure of the text, the dynamic phenomenon of my witnesses' disenchantment gradually came into visible form as I connected the essential structure of the text to the imagery of artworks we had created. It seemed that by having witnessing the art and spoken words of disenchantment with an open, compassionate receptivity, a mutual vulnerability had flowed between us that allowed this mythic imagery to become organized below the conscious content of our interactions. As these images in turn sought expression, new life came to the imagery of what had been deadening disenchantment in the voice of the art-dream story. Once I 'heard' this mythic voice and saw its specific imagery, I could bring back the particulars of what had been told me, now in story form:

“I refused to send out elixir if it wasn't made from clear water. That's how I was taught. That reflects on me and my kind.”

What distinguishes this process from a researcher projecting her own meaning onto her subject's words and images and calling it data analysis? Careful, receptive

attention to the phenomena revealed that there was an inherent order that connected word and image which needed to be revealed, not created. But it was a delicate process. It was hard to hold the creative tension in this act of witnessing the inner landscape of disenchantment and I was especially vulnerable when my own creative impulses were stirred. I could easily imagine “better” endings to the story, for example, specially early in the process when it felt as though I were swimming in the toxins of my collaborators despairing words, magnified by their art imagery, and wanting a quick escape. But any time I tried to impose my own ideas or imagery of what I thought the art was “dreaming“ into a mythic story, it would reject them. Nothing would fit and the story would start to fall apart immediately.

What fascinated me about this method was that once I found the deeper story coming forth from the images, everything – from the myth to the art images to the exact order in which elements appeared in the content of the interview – all clicked together and corresponded precisely. There is an inherent coherence to art-based research when data analysis proceeds undisturbed by the researcher's own drive to shape its meaning. Whenever I lost this stance toward the phenomena, I would have to clear my perceptions again, start over, and listen more carefully until I discovered these right elements and order and mythic images that knit them together. Then everything would come into place again. It actually felt as though I were listening to a voice before it was spoken, and making a space for it with alert awareness, without rushing to fill the space with my own version of aesthetic truth.

The witness –whether researcher, artist, art, or dreaming image –holds the creative encounter in such a way that continuously opens to the phenomenon of what is, suspending the desire to form it prematurely. It will come to form on its own provided the witness is clear and present. Art-based research used in this way requires an ethical balancing between form and formlessness, and an ability to oscillate freely between these two poles (Robbins, 1998). As one of my collaborators described it, the method of collaborative witness was like the practice of sitting meditation. The inquiry became for her a spiritual encounter that gave her experience of disenchantment greater meaning and a new lesson on which to view her suffering. Putting aside the ego and being led by the art and the story renewed her awe in the creative, transformative process that is always there when we seek to find it. Later, when I returned the art and the mythic story created from the data analysis to my collaborators, all verified its authenticity based on their experiences. One art therapist was moved to tears several times when she read the art-dream story, saying, “There are things here that I had not quite been able to articulate but knew that I had lived through and now they were not only witnessed by another but imaged and written about. It documented and further grounded me and my life, my journey, and the ability of images to facilitate this process [of transformation].”

In Kari's art-dream story (for complete text, see Kapitan, 2003), all of the images and narrative pointed to the mythic search for the key that would open the door to the clear pool of the Source, her desire. Her role was to produce and give to others the elixir or pure balm of creative expression. She described her vision of beautiful blue, clear water, the source of her grounding and power. The dream she held in her heart was like perfection itself and was unbearably beautiful, made more so in the face of the world's stark realities. I could trace through the image series, words and feeling, Kari's desire for healing waters, the perfect embrace, and the promise of transformation that seemed beyond her and longed to be released.

Kari had split her reality between a belief in a perfect place in which to work and all the evil she saw in her surrounding environment, and this compelled her toward illusions of desire, power, and escape that were threaded through her art and story. On one level, her disenchantment seemed a struggle with letting go when feeling driven or crushed by the weight of the past, heedlessly rushing toward a hoped-for future, or awaiting for someone to magically transform her life. On another level, Kari's story is a familiar one of petitioning the gods for the magic elixir of immortality to ward off the pain of suffering and death. Or wrestling the magic boon from undeserving, brutish ogres. In her daily life, the myth made perfect sense: as an experienced drug and alcohol counselor, Kari was having difficulty breaking into a field that was controlled by cost-cutting, government-funded providers and their attendant abuses of the system. The essence of her disenchantment arrived in the image of "poisoned waters," resonating in like manner with the toxic effects of drug and alcohol on any living system, whether individual or organizational. Her story also closely paralleled the spiritual searching behind much addiction, the effects of which she had to work with on a daily basis. Yet the glow of her inner light was strong. Her creative vitality came of her courage to maintain this cosmic standpoint in the face of earthly pains and joys, accepting that the enchanting balance of perfection must be released in order to live her life fully.

There were many universally recognizable themes that emerged from all the art and stories in the project, but the most striking research finding was that the imagery of disenchantment always included the primordial image of water that must reach the soul before perishing of thirst. The unifying theme was that of pollution or sealing off of their creative functioning, disabling their ability to create or act with clarity in the world and making them toxic to others. After completing the series, I turned to professional literature to verify this finding and found many references to the waters of renewal and creative life. Throughout the world's mythologies, the creative force of life is described as a flow: a circulating substance, a streaming of energy or a manifestation of grace. Like the flow of a wild river, we can expect our creative lives to fill and empty with the rise and fall of life's seasons, and this insight that arose in my collaborators when they witnessed their disenchantment. As one art therapist wrote



after reflecting on her art-dream story, “I love how the creative process, like a river, shifts and turns along the way. I am reminded that the power of creation opens me to a larger energy.” In witnessing the art and resonant spaces we created together, my collaborators affirmed for themselves that their creative vitality can never be lost. It is always there, filling or colliding with obstacles placed in their way.

Consistent with Braud and Anderson's (1998) description of transpersonal research, simultaneous roles and functions occurred in synergistic ways in this art-based inquiry. All my interactions were research sessions that provided new information to contribute to theory development. They also were clinical sessions in that my collaborators and I accepted the opportunity to bring to consciousness important issues and give them voice and image. Although art-based methods typically emphasize the researcher's relationship to the image, the intention of this inquiry to use art to intervene and transform my collaborators' experience of disenchantment also places this artistic inquiry in a context of social action. As such, it builds upon and extends feminist and transpersonal research in their emphasis on the sacred, inclusive, subjective, experiential and contextual, transformational, individual and understandable features of the research project (Clements, et. al, 1998; Valle & Mohs, 1998). It honors the plurality of voices with other ways of knowing and offers the added benefit of artistic practice that not only embraces what has been unspoken but also provides a visual, tangible means for making visible what is unseen, for both the art image and the person who creates the art image. Becoming seen is a powerful means of verifying research and honoring existence.

When opened to the sources of their disenchantment, my collaborators revealed that in losing their connection to the reciprocating force of creativity in their lives, they lose a vital part of themselves. The research process and findings contributed greater clarity for contemplating how the presence and absence of creative vitality affects life functioning among a group of professionals who use it in their daily practice. This art-based research project revealed the phenomenon as multi-faceted with collective and individual, nuanced levels of truth. But over the course of the research it also became evident that the key for resolving the problem was to be able to see it very clearly and use it as a source for creative transformation. For the co-researchers in the Collaborative Witness Project, this realization transformed their relationship to creativity and made possible new attitudes, perceptions, and meanings.

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