An Online Art Exchange Group: 14 Secrets for a Happy Artist's Life

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Abstract

14 Secrets for a Happy Artist's Life is an online art exchange group founded by Gerity in 2006 as an egalitarian virtual community art studio. The online and mail art format provides a safe arena to create, view, and generously exchange artwork of all kinds. Ideas discovered within the virtual art studio have been applied to art therapy settings. The exchange of messages in the form of art objects enhanced predominantly online relationships and ameliorated the sense of unreality produced by rarely or never meeting online partners. This article outlines the many benefits and challenges of online art exchange and acknowledges the art therapists who have become Internet content creators building an online culture and community that reflects the ideals of the field of art therapy.

Introduction

Art therapists are skilled in creating art and promoting art-making communities. One such community that exploits the global possibilities of the Internet is the group 14 Secrets for a Happy Artist's Life (14 Secrets). Founded in 2006 by art therapist Lani Gerity, 14 Secrets is a unique community of 150 artists who share, exchange, and help inspire all things artistic through the Internet. Although most members have never met in person, their exchange is building rich relationships and inspiring a flourishing of creativity.

Art and gift exchanges currently are being conducted throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe via the 14 Secrets group. These types of exchanges were difficult to organize until the emergence of the user-friendly Internet group structure offered by Yahoo!,™ Google,™ and other

Internet portals. Yahoo!'s group structure allows members to post notices for viewing by all group members and to create and access databases that serve to organize participants in the exchange. Members can post files of art instructions, templates, and "e-zines" (electronic self-published magazines), as well as digital photographs of the results of the art exchanges. This paper describes the 14 Secrets group and identifies aspects of this techno-digital artist's community that art therapists can apply in their practices.

The History of the 14 Secrets Online Group

The name for the group, "14 Secrets for a Happy Artist's Life," comes from the title of a self-published magazine (or "zine") with a similar name (Gerity, 2006; Figure 1). In early 2006, Gerity was participating in a mail art group organized by art therapist Melissa Chapin. Each artist created an art journal that was passed from artist to artist, to be added to and passed on. One of the artists told the group that her sister was dying of cancer; Gerity had just received the young woman's journal at the time of the disclosure. It was Gerity's desire to create an art piece in the journal to remind the young woman of her own strength and resilience during a time of stress and sorrow. Gerity wove together ideas from positive psychology (Buchanan, Gardenswartz, & Seligman,1999; Seligman, Schulman, & Tyron, 2007), resilience research (Figley, 1995), nuggets of art therapy wisdom absorbed over the years from Edith Kramer and Cathy Moon, and from accounts of self-taught artists in Mississippi, into a zine that identified 14 "secrets" for a happy artist's life. As Gerity looked at the pages she had created before sending them on to the young woman, it occurred to her that everyone could use more strength and resilience. Gerity created an electronic copy of the art work and sent it to all the participants in Melissa Chapin's art exchange, as well as making it available on her personal website.

In her zine (available at http://www.lanipuppetmaker .com), each "secret" is paired with a related collage or drawing. Gerity's (2006) 14 secrets are:

1. Find three good things every day, whether they are experiences, objects, or both. Find a way to use them in art.
2. Make everything special. Embellish your life.
3. Look for fairy godmothers and angels. Be ready for experiences that will delight and surprise you.
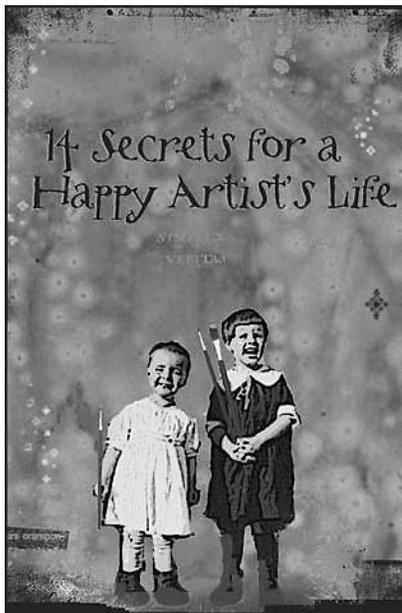4. Play more often.

Figure 1
Cover by Lani Gerity of the original e-zine and
logo for the 14 Secrets Yahoo group

5. Look for smiling faces.

6. Wish everyone a happy life.

7. Find something to love about where you are every day.

8. Make art every day.

9. Create time for yourself.

10. Honor the grandmothers as much as possible.

11. Play with the grandchildren as much as possible.

12. Create beauty with what you have on hand.

13. Make art with friends. Make art as gifts.

14. Create a list of secrets for a happy life and pass it on.

Some years before, art therapists Franklin, C. Moon, Vance, and Vick (1998, 2000) formed a collaborative group to encourage and inspire each other's art making. They initially exchanged artwork and "art seed packets" of art materials by mail. One year they experimented by sending packets to an expanded group of art therapists and encouraging them to send "art seeds" on to others. Gerity eventually received one of these packets of collage materials and opened it, letting the contents spill onto the floor. As she studied the images and text from magazines, stamps, fibers, and other ephemera, and as she played with these pieces of paper and embellishments, she was amazed at the simple message that came through with this gift: she experienced giddy feelings of happiness, gratitude toward the sender, and excitement about the materials' artistic possibilities. "The message seemed to be that generosity can spark creative work and a sense of connection between people. We can be more creative and connected when we're generous with each other," Gerity said (personal communication, February 1, 2008). Recent research by Emmons (2007) supports this insight about the power of gratitude to increase connection and happiness.

Creating the Virtual Community Art Studio

Because Gerity now lives in a remote area in Canada, getting together with other art therapists does not happen as often as it did when she lived and worked in Manhattan. Gerity began to explore the Internet's potential for connecting with others, creating community, and sharing art and ideas. She found that many artists are providing inspiration to others through blogs (a web-based log or journal), websites, tutorials, vlogs (a video blog), e-zines, and Internet groups. Artists' websites often include opportunities to purchase art, to download zines, and to learn about real-time art retreats and workshops.

Gerity launched her own blog (http://lanipuppetmaker.blogspot.com) to catalogue the inspiration she was finding online. Eventually, a former student inquired about artist communities Gerity might know for exchanging artists' cards. One of these sites belonged to Dale Roberts, an artist from British Columbia, who responded by writing, "Art is a way of being. My way of being. It's who I am. It's how I see and connect with the world" (personal communication, 2006). Gerity asked herself, "why not have our own little art exchange group? There are few things better than opening your mailbox and finding some amazing mail art inside." Consequently, she formed a Yahoo! group and posted an invitation on her blog that read: "Multimedia artists who like binding books, art journaling, creating assemblage art, jewelry making, art dolls, rubber stamping, collage, paper puppet people, fine arts, and fabric arts are all welcome at 14 Secrets for a Happy Artist's Life" (Gerity, 2006).

By Gerity's account, the feeling within this virtual environment is egalitarian, holding many possibilities for art making without concern for cultural or ethnic background, gender, age, ability, or nationality. She felt that there was a good lesson here for creating a sense of community in non-virtual settings as well. This sense of egalitarian community is discussed by Matei (2005) in the context of how the virtual environment may allow for an unrestricted experience to emerge. She noted that in the United States, some countercultural movements have incorporated themselves into cyberculture in ways that are specific to their egalitarian natures. Elements that appeal to individuals seeking a democratic voice in the virtual environment include the non-hierarchical and social structure of computer networks. Such environments do not mask class, gender, and race, and allow for open communication to occur in virtual reality. Matei further explained that as a result, there is an emotional deepening through the process of the interaction that provides a participant with a sense of social freedom and equality.

Morse (2003) described the egalitarian experience that is made possible through a progressive atmosphere that optimally encourages an interaction of women, art, and technology. She viewed the interactivity of art making on the Internet as having a liberating potential. "Interactivity is not just an instrument or a perhaps irritating interval between clicking and getting somewhere else but an event that brings corporal and cognitive awareness of this increas-

Figure 2
Example of 14 Secrets mail art exchange
hosted by Gioia Chilton

Figure 3
"A woman's heArt" altered tin created by
Huyen N. MacMichael

ingly ubiquitous feature of the contemporary world" (Morse, 2003, p. 18). This awareness can increase an individual's sense of agency and ability to feel empowered.

Helm (1996) also viewed the Internet as an egalitarian resource. His emphasis was on the act of turning a once passive reader into an active, vibrant participant. The computer may cue an individual to act, but it is the individual who must decide what action to take. The authority in the relationship between the directive and the response is altered; not only must the recipient decide how to react to a prompt but there must exist a collaborative and supportive arrangement between the computer and the participant.

The above authors lend support to the idea that the Internet can increase individuals' liberation and that resulting social freedom can promote empowerment. Kramer (1994) suggested that the art studio environment is a "space for improvisation, openness to the unexpected, acceptance of the eccentric" (p. 92). We contend that the virtual art studio also can provide this space in an accepting community such as the 14 Secrets group. Because everyone gets to paint in the virtual art studio, it becomes a collaborative and egalitarian effort that is open to new ideas.

Specific aspects of the virtual art studio can be applied to art therapy settings. For example, the following directions for "tag art" were posted by 14 Secrets member Lumbroso with an emphasis on healing:

> On one side, the tags will have a sort of recipe, something like "remedy for sore joints," remedy for loss of appetite, encouraging words for [grappling] with loss, etc. The tags can be little healing stories, meditations or jokes—illustrating the healing power of laughter! Write things that have worked for you. They can be anything that comes from your heart. The heart is the mind-body-soul-healer, so it knows these things. What brings you solace when all about you is crumbling? How do you cope with pain? chronic disease? depression? What sort of soul vitamins do you recommend to ensure the sun shines regardless? Be thoughtful and heartful. On the opposite side of the recipe/remedy, you will do some art of a healing sort, something that backs up or inspires your heart's remedy, again, art from the heart. (14 Secrets, 2008a)

Art therapists could reconfigure this art directive to address the needs of clients in therapy, empowering clients to access their own strengths and wisdom.

In the online group, reflection comes through the written words attached to each art piece freely exchanged with fellow participants. The art piece itself is an intervention that allows catharsis through its creation. The humanitarian gesture of releasing the product to a fellow artist strengthens and liberates each individual, who receives in return the many canvasses of other artists. The art exchange is an egalitarian act with the unknown coming back to the artist as a gift of fellowship and support. These lessons in the power of art gift giving from the virtual studio can influence art therapy practices. Gerity has commented that "something magical happens in the art making, having to do with feeling validated by the work."

> Art making can give a deep feeling of self-worth, and even self-love. For many artists in the virtual art room, the feeling of growing esteem towards the self is entwined with mastery, empowerment, pleasure, and inner satisfaction gained from self-expression. This may be what we strive for in any therapeutic relationship—to help the individual work towards valuing the self and functioning independently. As art therapists we look for ways to help people bring what is within them out into the world so that they can recognize a deeper sense of self, a greater opportunity for reflective distance and in some cases delight in discovery of how miraculous they really are. What better place to do that than 14 Secrets for a Happy Artist's Life? (Gerity, personal communication, January 29, 2008)

The 14 Secrets group is also an example of how the Internet has shaped the continuation of the mail art movement (Figure 2). Exchanges organized online have broadened and diversified to incorporate art therapists and others who had not previously participated in mail art. Also called correspondence art or postal art, mail art uses the postal system as an artistic forum. In a dissertation on the effects of the Internet on artists who have exchanged art through postal systems for 40 years, Starbuck (2003) defined and summarized the history of mail art and shared mail artists'

Figure 4
Faux postage by Gioia Chilton from the
"Land of 14 Secrets"

concerns for how new technological developments such as the Internet would affect the future of the movement. Starbuck described numerous benefits of the Internet, such as global networking, timely online memorial and mourning of artists' deaths, and the capability to establish archives. On a website featuring his 2003–2004 *Fractal Portrait* mail art project, Ryosuke Cohen (n.d.), a Japanese mail artist and teacher, concurred that artists can exchange ideas by networking and collaborating in mail art.

Playing in the Virtual Art Studio

An advantage of the virtual studio is that it is asynchronous, allowing participation from individuals with a variety of schedules and geographical locations. For people without access to a community of artists, the Internet provides a convenient connection with others who have similar interests (Malchiodi, 2000). In the virtual studio, members of the 14 Secrets group also can document projects in the photo album section of the Yahoo! group and descriptions of many exchange projects remain on file, along with resources for techniques and links to other websites.

More than 40 exchanges have taken place over the short lifespan of the 14 Secrets group. Projects have ranged from the exchange of small "artist trading cards" and decorated matchbooks to altered antique photographs and handmade paper and fabric dolls. Exchange themes have emerged from specific media such as paper, beads, and fabric postcards to more unusual material such as plastic "Baggies of Possibilities" (14 Secrets, 2006). Other art exchanges focus on altered media such as miniature toy cars, candy tins (Figure 3), or altered books and book page projects used in some art therapy settings (Chilton, 2007). Many exchanges introduce participants to new techniques such as the Little Zine Swap (14 Secrets, 2007a) in which members wrote, illustrated, and exchanged small self-

published magazines. A charming exchange that was so popular it was conducted twice was the 14 Secrets Art Stamp Swap (14 Secrets, 2007b), in which artists created faux postal stamps from the "Land of 14 Secrets" (Figure 4).

To begin an art exchange, a member of 14 Secrets posts a note to the online group to see if there is interest in a particular idea. If there is, the host posts the project details in a file on the group site. Details usually include a description of the project, when it is due, and any special instructions such as a reminder to include return postage or a self-addressed stamped envelope. The host then starts a database where people can sign up for the exchange online.

There are two main methods of trading the art produced. The first is a simple exchange where all artists send artwork to a central person or host who then sends art made by a different member back to each participant. For small items, often more than one artwork is exchanged at a time, allowing each artist to make several items, mail them to the host, and receive back art pieces created by different individuals. The other method is the round robin in which a list of participants is made and the art objects are mailed in turn to each person on the list. This exchange allows each participant to physically handle and co-create each of the artworks that are circulated through the group. A round robin can take some time and is more expensive in terms of postage and handling. This method allows many group members to work on one another's art pieces for more extensive projects such as altered books.

An example of a round robin project was called "Prayer Bead" and was intended to carry spiritual references and help people access strength. Each of the 12 artists participating in this exchange started a strand of beads and had the option of writing an intention, prayer, or mantra to accompany it. Members added hand-made, found, or purchased beads to the strand. Once completed and returned to the original owners, participants could use the final strands of beads for meditation or for fun (Figure 5). Another popular round robin project engaged 14 participants in decorating and filling an art journaling bag (14 Secrets, 2008b). The finished bags provided each participant with an embellished container that served as a functional and symbolic object; it became a concrete reminder of the artist-to-artist exchange and the encouragement and support received from its members. For the 14 Secrets Coping Kit (14 Secrets, 2007c), members entered into a database their personal issues of concern that they were coping with on a daily basis. Each artist then decorated or created a container to be their Art Emergency Coping Kit. The kits were mailed out so that others could add items and art intended to help the individual cope with his or her challenges.

Art making is central to the well-being of art therapists (Allen, 1992; Kapitan, 2003; B. Moon, 2003; C. Moon, 2002; Wadeson, 2003). Members of the 14 Secrets group who are both artists and art therapists agree that the group's most important feature may be the inspiration and structure that the online art exchanges provide. Chilton noted that the themed exchanges helped her to structure her art-making experiences. She reported, "I would feel extra motivation to do art—I've got a swap due!" (personal

Figure 5
Prayer Bead exchange, from the collection of Gioia
Chilton (top) and Huyen N. MacMichael (bottom)

communication, November 14, 2008). By organizing the experience and focusing creativity, the art-making structure of the online exchange functions like an educational assignment or an art therapy theme in a clinical setting.

Several of the "secrets" for happiness in the 14 Secrets group encourage art-making as a form of play. Jacobs and Jacobs (2003) commented:

> The real art of creative playing around is knowing how to jump right in. Children do it every day; we big kids sometimes need a little nudging to actually do something that's …just for fun. Luckily paper makes it easy to play…and [its] interactive nature…gives us the nudge to jump in and rediscover that "child" as artist. (p. 21)

This "play" is often the therapy that adults need to destress from the responsibilities of daily life. 14 Secrets member Richardson wrote that she was in danger of losing her playful inner child but now she's "back and eager to play!" (personal communication, January 10, 2008). Many art therapists have a need to re-engage in art making and

play to balance particularly stressful workplaces (Kapitan, 2003). Mail art through the 14 Secrets group provides one avenue of self-care for participants. The artist or art therapist who "plays" with art materials can experience happiness in the process (Hallowell, 2002; Elkind, 2007).

The 14 Secrets Community

A round robin exchange that took place early in the life of the group was a series of large collages. 14 Secrets member and art therapist Kliman described getting involved in the group collage after some initial reluctance:

> The round robin took place over several months, during which time I would receive a collage, add to it, and send it on to the next person. After several months, I received back my collage, which was more beautiful than anything I could have created. I was very touched by people's stories about their own families and [the images that were] added to my artwork. I framed the artwork and have it hanging in a place in my home where I look at it often. It reminds me that I am not alone, and that others' experiences and interests are similar to my own. (personal communication, January 14, 2008)

Kliman's remarks highlight how art exchanges can reduce isolation and how the joint art-making process can build community, foster connection, and motivate participants to make art. Other 14 Secrets group members found that their isolation was reduced via the social aspect of the online group. MacMichael affirmed that since she had left her art therapy job to be a stay-at-home-mother, she has felt very much connected to the artist group exchange and much less empty in the arena of professional identity. Getting art mail is like receiving gifts from far-away friends and has often been a highlight for the day (personal communication, January 18, 2008). Group member LaVorgna-Smith further described the social benefits:

> I anticipate receiving messages from the group each day for I feel a comradeship with everyone in the group. And although I have not met each person face to face, I feel that I am getting to know people more and more through their emails and artwork. In essence, this group represents a friendship and art circle that I otherwise would not form in my very hectic world. (personal communication, October 16, 2007)

Wenger (n.d.), a specialist in the theory of communities of practice, observed that new technologies have "extended the reach of our interactions beyond the geographical limitations of traditional communities," yet the increase in this flow of information "does not obviate the need for community. In fact, it expands the possibilities for community and calls for new kinds of communities based on shared practice" (¶ 14). The members of the 14 Secrets group seem to have formed such a community. Art made in community settings is important to art therapists because it goes beyond self-expression and becomes "a place to mobilize human and group capacity, instigating a feeling of being connected to a larger, meaningful community" (Timm-Bottos, 2006, p. 20).

Group members commented that the online atmosphere of 14 Secrets seemed infused with feelings of connectedness and optimism. Wilkinson commented that the group was wonderful not only for the soul but also for helping her stretch as an artist. She values the group's lighthearted nature that seems to embrace enthusiasm and creativity to a higher degree than other online groups (D. Wilkinson, personal communication, October 17, 2007). Wilkinson's experience suggests that art therapists are bringing some of the same skills to the techno-digital culture that they bring to the art therapy studio. Art therapists who create warm and welcoming physical art-making environments have found that they can create similar spaces online. In this way, art therapists have become Internet content creators, building an online culture that reflects the values of inclusion, empowerment, and the promotion of creativity.

Working in a virtual studio can offer participants limited anonymity, which provides a sense of safety and promotes creativity. However, anonymity can also be isolating due to a lack of physical contact. Important communication cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and proxemics are absent. Thus, communicating via computer is paradoxically both intimate and distant. Rubin (1984) described the ideal art space as having this same "possibility of both closeness and distance, openness and privacy" (p. 51). We believe that 14 Secret's virtual studio provides a similar space in that the participants themselves determine how much interaction they would like to engage in. In an art therapy studio, Levine (1995) also observed the paradox of minimal interaction and connectedness:

> It was in and through the texture of relationships within the group that creativity and artistic vision could emerge. Although there was not much interaction among group members, being present together and creating a holding space of mutual witnessing seemed to be where the creative fire burned. (p. 152)

For the 14 Secrets group, the virtual art studio is the holding space and meeting ground where mutual witnessing can arise, building global relationships. Individuals witness each other through sending and receiving art and messages in the mail, posting photos, or viewing member web pages. Mailed artwork is a bridge for maintaining an intimate connection with other participants. Although artists in the virtual studio may not physically interact with each other, they physically interact with each other's art and thus communicate intimately. The 14 Secrets mail artists found that the exchange of messages in the form of art objects enhanced the predominantly online relationships, combating the sense of unreality produced by rarely or never meeting the people who interact virtually.

To provide a safe structure for the virtual art environment, several moderators are called upon if there is miscommunication or need for clarification or mediation. They have needed to set clear limits several times, for example, when some group members were advertising products, which was prohibited, or were months late exchanging art.

By the nature of the group, full participation is limited to those who have both the time and the ability to participate. It should not be assumed that all potential artists have the necessary computer literacy and access, e-mail account, mailing address, art supplies, workspace, and funds for postage. Although the intent of the group is to be inclusive to all interested art makers, the reality may be that online group membership remains a small subgroup of the art therapist population. Although the democratic vision of art for all held by many in the art therapy field is not completely realized through this process, the Internet has proven to be a useful tool for including some otherwise physically or socially isolated individuals, as evidenced by the above self-reports. Our vision is that art therapists can use techniques developed in online communities to work with individuals without computer access in non-virtual art therapy studios.

Conclusion

Inspired by Kapitan's assertion that "there is so much room for art in the larger practice of living" (2003, p. 95), Chilton believes that the co-creation of the 14 Secrets for a Happy Artist's Life group may be in itself an example of a living artwork. Perhaps 14 Secrets is a form of performance art only recently enabled by combining instant Internet communication and the passion of artists and art therapists. Through this lens, every step of the process—from reading online postings to creating art to decorating packages before mailing them—is part of transformational art making in the 21st century.

Regarding the use of computers as an art material in art therapy, Thong (2007) recently wrote that in order "to take art therapy into future generations, we must be open to new areas of image-making and new creative tools" (p. 52). Art therapists are now using the new creative tool of the Internet to create virtual studios where artists can gather, create, and share their work. Art therapists and artists have created this welcoming online environment to foster opportunities for expression and generosity. Through groups like these, art therapists themselves have become architects of the techno-digital culture, building online communities that encourage creativity and happiness.

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