

MotherArt© and Maternal Health *Transformation from Grief to Compassion*

MotherArt© describes a form of feminist art dealing with mother–daughter relationships, and the effect the creation of the art has on the artist’s mental well-being. This paper explores how three women artists deal with intense issues of loss, and how each artist—after dealing with these issues through the creation of art—is then able to move into more expansive realms of expression and toward broader themes of social justice. The artists include: Mary Oestereicher Hamill, a visual artist; Emily Corbató, a photographer; and Nurit Eini-Pindyck, a visual and performance artist. They all transform their experiences of loss and suffering in their relationships with their mothers into powerful representations of the healing power of art. To deal with MotherArt© as therapy, the field of art therapy will be considered within the paper and compared to pure artistic endeavor as the natural evolution of a positive mental health model for growth. MotherArt© is a natural form of therapy with the capacity to enable personal growth and transformation, which allows the artist to let go of suffering through the experience of her own creations. In addition, MotherArt© has the power to transform not only the artist but also the viewers, who, in their own lives, were enabled to move forward from suffering. This transformation then has the capacity to open the heart to other experiences and other places where compassion can be exercised.

Mothers and daughters have creatively expressed and healed various aspects of their relationship in art for eons. This paper will demonstrate how art, through the work of three artists dealing with their mother–daughter relationship, can be a transformative process of healing for the mental well-being of the artist. Regardless of the quality of one’s relationship with one’s parent, the loss of a mother can awaken deep, sometimes crippling emotions. Artists who can express their grieving fully give themselves the healthy opportunity to examine

this natural process through the creation of art, thus putting their experiences of grief in a broader societal perspective, which in turn allows the artist to contribute to larger missions in society. This self-nurturing is implied in their term “MotherArt©,” coined by the author to signify the experience of motherhood as represented in the daughter’s work as an artist. This includes not only the content of the art work itself, but also the art work’s transformational effect on the mental well-being of the artist herself. MotherArt© is a healing sequence of creation that reveals the artist’s movement toward transformation. It serves as a guard against morbid depression that can cripple someone in the face of a wrenching loss. While individual pieces can be examples of MotherArt©, it is the sequence of this kind of creation that demonstrates the artist’s movement toward opening the heart to a larger context. This paper deals with the intense mother-daughter issues of loss, and how the artist, after exploring these issues through art, moves into more expansive realms of expression.

The artists in this paper include:

- Mary Oestereicher Hamill, a visual artist, whose exhibit *Constructs of Frailty* was derived from her experiences during her mother’s debilitating illness late in life;
- Emily Corbató, a photographer, whose poignant documentation of her mother’s vibrant intellectual life is contrasted with the absence of her presence in her home; and
- Nurit Eini-Pindyck, a visual and performance artist, who elicits the drama of her artistic mother using her mom’s suitcase full of clothes in public and in exhibition settings for interaction with others.

Each artist deals with the loss of her mother in unique and personal ways, and demonstrates how artistic expression of this loss can offer a positive model for growth and make an important contribution to the larger society. In this article, the field of art therapy will be examined and compared to MotherArt© as a positive therapeutic model that enhances mental well-being. Art therapy is in fact a growing therapeutic movement used with individuals and groups in various settings. As Cathy Malchiodi (1998) states, art therapy

involves a belief in the inherent healing power of the creative process of art making ... [because art is] seen as a opportunity to express oneself imaginatively, authentically, and spontaneously, an experience that, over time, can lead to personal fulfillment, emotional reparation, and transformation. This view also holds that the creative process, in and of itself, can be a health-enhancing and growth-producing experience. (5)

Malchiodi does not imply that the art is the therapy, but rather underscores how the artist’s process becomes the path-maker that constitutes the therapy.



Close-up of "Hospital Bed of Latex Gloves" by Mary Oestereicher Hamill from the "Constructs of Frailty" Exhibit.



"Hospital Bed of Latex Gloves" by Mary Oestereicher Hamill from the "Constructs of Frailty" Exhibit, with interior lighting during a concert by the Boston Secession Group.

Mary Oestereicher Hamill dealt with the medical aspects of her mother's painful dying in an exhibit she called, *Constructs of Frailty*. Above is a close-up photograph an element in the installation, namely a modified hospital bed covered with a quilting of stuffed latex gloves. This bed was displayed



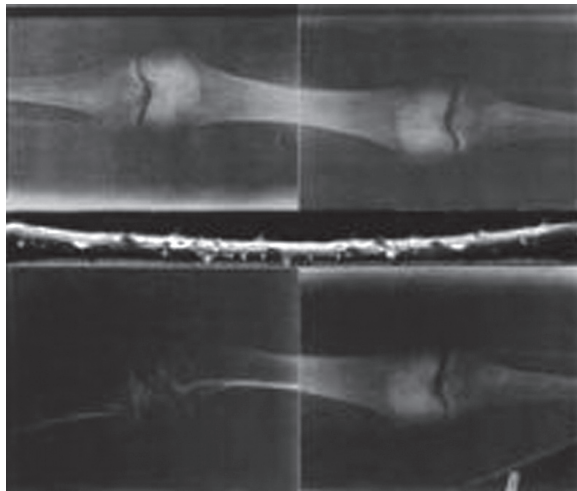
Mary Oestereicher Hamill, "Easel of Crutches"

in the Brandeis University Rose Art Museum while Jane Ring Franks' choral group—The Boston Secession—performed around it, thus adding another dimension to Hamill's installation. The other photos of her work in this exhibit include a tripod constructed from crutches, which according to Hamill, "took on a life of its own" (Hamill, 2002). This "life of its own" process appears to be a trait of the creative process when it is fully focused. Additionally, the piece that depicts an x-ray of a bone juxtaposed to thorns, emphasizes life's frailty, poignantly illustrates the main point of her work. This piece is 18" x 24" and is comprised of photocopied bone x-rays and an embedded rod cane.

Hamill's *Constructs of Frailty* (1999) is, according to her, "more than a statement about my own

personal experiences and the experiences of family members' illness. This statement ... grew out of my thinking of how patients—their bodies and

their minds—are treated in contemporary systems of medical care. So in th[is] project as in other projects I ... begin with things of daily life. I seek to have them speak to a broad range of audiences; these go beyond the particulars of my own first-hand experiences. Hopefully, they will say something larger to many people" (Hamill, 2002).



Mary Oestereicher Hamill, "Bone X-Ray with Embedded Rod Cane"

Loss and suffering are common but often unarticulated experiences. Almost everyone has experienced the loss of the idealized notion of the mother-daughter relationship, if not the actual loss of a mother. Hamill, formerly a developmental psychologist, discusses the idea of therapy as a quick fix: resolving a problem with a quick solution. The path of her art, however, is something more enduring that evolves into deep philosophical, psychological, and spiritual inner growth. Art, and the creation of art, is transformational, and MotherArt©, as Hamill will demonstrate, serves as more than a catharsis for the artist, but for the participant/viewer as well. This catharsis must occur before the transformation occurs. But what is the trajectory of this transformation? The next phase of Hamill's art demonstrates this path.

After her mother's death, Hamill took the compassion evident in *Constructs of Frailty* and expanded it to social causes. Emphasizing the idealism and the self-esteem taught to her as a child, she gave video cameras to Boston's homeless and asked them to interview one another and tell their stories. Using these videos in an installation about Boston's Homeless, at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, entitled *regard/disregard*, she constructed a walk-in house with transparent walls of film. The various interviews played in surround-sound inside the house (Sweeney, 2003). As a viewer and participant, sitting inside the house and listening to the interviews infused with the courage of interrupted lives, was an extremely moving experience.

Initially Hamill had little interest in showing the videos of Boston's homeless as a conventional film. She stated her intent to create something that would express the larger theme of social conscience clearly:

I didn't want people to look at separate frames [of the film] like something to just hang on the wall. I wanted somehow to get the contents of the filmstrip into an aesthetic whole with the shape that the filmstrips would take. I wanted the images to be of people who were homeless, and that the shape [of the installation] should be the shape of a house; this came out of my profound concern with the widening gap between the rich and poor, especially on a global basis. (Hamill, 2008)

Afterwards, Hamill also contributed to Coalition for the Homeless Lobby Day in Boston, Massachusetts, by passing out pictures of the homeless for demonstrators to wear around their necks so that they would, in effect, display the real face of a homeless person. Hamill's *regard/disregard* was also displayed in Washington D.C. at the Institute for Women's Policy Research international conference (Ericson, 2004). Hamill used her art to speak to the need for social justice and change in the world.

The process of MotherArt© clearly allows the artist to transform personal experiences of loss and trauma in ways that address larger societal issues and inequities. The creation of the art opens the artist's heart to the needs of others. In addition to Hamill, there are other MotherArt© artists who also exemplify



Mary Oestereicher Hamill, *House of Film* from "regard/disregard" homelessness exhibit.

this premise.

Another example of the practice of MotherArt© is the work of Nurit Eini-Pindyck, a visual and performance artist who examines the shock of her mother's death in Israel and her own powerlessness to cope with it while living a continent away. After finally arriving at her mother's apartment in Israel, Nurit took on the task of packing her mother's clothes in a black wheeler bag. Eini-Pindyck's work-in-progress is called "The Suitcase Project" and, as she states, it "incorporates

performance art, site specific installations, writing and video presentations" (*Brandeis University's Women's Studies Research Center Catalogue of Scholars*, 2008: 46). She would go on to use the symbol of the suitcase in her art and in her performance art.

Eini-Pindyck understands the process of transformation through art as a continuous dialogue between the artist and her work of art. She wrote:

Creating art is a process that allows me to enter a liminal state where everything is art, and art is everything. The transformation occurs in relation to the artwork in this transitional state. The best I can describe this process is as an ongoing dialogue in which listening is of the outmost importance. This relationship, based on engaged listening, becomes a condition for the images to surface. The potential of the image is always there, and I hope that my discourse with the image is carried on in the finished artwork, and continues with the viewers as participants. (email dated Thursday, October 9, 2008)

On the next page is a photo of this luggage in a setting complete with costumes and inviting performance art. Donning these clothes allowed the viewers to collaborate with the artist and include other personal elements usually unexpressed by viewers in a gallery. Sitting opposite these stage furnishings of luggage and costumes and enacting her love of collaboration in art, Eini-Pindyck faced the set, poised to engage in conversations with gallery visitors, perhaps as an expression of another maternal element to her art.

Eini-Pindyck was part of another installation at the Tufts University Gallery (2001) entitled *House of Gender*. Deprived of saying *Kaddish* (the Jewish orphan's prayer) on her mother's grave due to her gender and in accordance with the prevailing religious patriarchy, Eini-Pindyck responded to this exclusion by creating this installation about women silenced by religion. The suitcase was transformed to an operating refrigerator. She designed a way to produce sound when opening the door of a refrigerator, and displayed the "talking"



Nurit Eini-Pindyck, costumes and luggages from "The Suitcase Project."



Nurit Eini-Pindyck, interactive installation "The Suitcase Project" and "The House of Gender." The artist is seated, poised to engage viewers and participants.

refrigerators in the gallery. The refrigerators, stocked with sacred books, encapsulated in ice, became the storytellers about mothers and daughters in the Jewish culture.

During the year of mourning following her mother's death, Eini-Pindyck carried the sealed suitcase in all her travels. The photograph below shows the suitcase in an airport.

Eventually Eini-Pindyck produced a film entitled *Meet My Mom* (2007)



Nurit Eini-Pindyck, luggage from "The Suitcase Project"

documenting her poignant loss as she wheels her mother's luggage through the streets of Boston. As a lonely woman walking the streets without a destination, she engaged a passerby, tourists, local students, and businessmen in conversation on the contents of the bag, their own mother, and the sense of loss. Sometimes she left the suitcase in a public place and watched people relate to it as a seemingly abandoned personal object.

This wrenching film shows the artist in a graveyard with long-bladed uncut grass, singing and possibly praying using the art as a cathartic to deal with her "baggage." The hand-held camera, with its many close ups, draws the viewer inside the artist's grief in a way that is palpable. Eini-Pindyck relates to the theory of flow in creativity postulated by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996). In her own words, Eini-Pindyck states how she expiates any unhealthy attitudes:

Mainly I experience being in the flow as a very active state. You might say a sense of being alive and the issue of urgency. I always considered myself to be an artist, as I considered my mother to be one. [because] ... she made

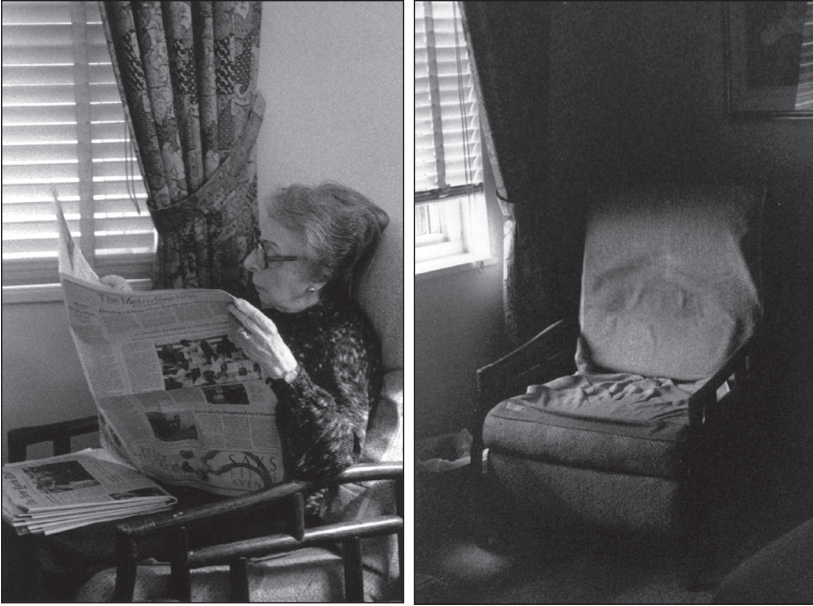
art in her everyday life by decorating and making clothing, even drawing. She enjoyed drawing even if her drawings were “childish.” I took the joy in making art from my mother. (Eini-Pindyck, 2002)

Eini-Pindyck reveals that because her mother had no official training as an artist, she never thought of herself as proficient. Even so, her mother created art in her everyday life. As a result, Eini-Pindyck's identity as an artist is strongly tied to her experiences as a daughter. She expresses a compassionate and heartfelt understanding of the fiber of her mother's endowed artistry.

Imagine yourself coming to a new country, where all opportunities are open—not to you, but to your kids. My mother carried a baggage with her from the old country that deprived her, according to her own perception. She didn't have an adequate formal schooling; therefore [in her own mind] she wasn't a scholar. I believe that my mother was the most resourceful person I have ever met in my life. We were not rich, [but] ... my mother always had a way to decorate our clothes. She added this special touch that made us feel special. I internalized this part of my mother; this desire to beautify things, and aesthetics as something that is warm and nice, not something formally discussed in some theory about art.... I was exposed to the process of joy in doing something, and I think that's what I took from my mother, that's the artistic thing. It's really the process of making art. (Eini-Pindyck, 2002)

Eini-Pindyck is still creatively processing the “baggage” of her life as well as that of her mother. She created a performance piece of women's dancing across generations, where she danced with a woman 25 years younger than her and a woman 25 years older than her. This performance entitled *No Strings Attached: Performing Memories* (2002) included audience participation that involved reading short essays about their personal mother-daughter relations. Expanding her art to larger societal issues, Eini-Pindyck has been directing, editing, and producing videos. In collaboration with WSRC resident scholar Mary Mason, she produced a video entitled *Taking Care: A Disabled Mother's Dialogue with Her Daughter* (2008). The video focuses on the life of a disabled single mother coping to raise her two daughters and son by herself, and dealing with the face of daily challenges of child rearing. With WSRC resident scholar Phyllis Silverman, Eini-Pindyck is presently collaborating and producing a video about bereavement in families. The process of Eini-Pindyck's MotherArt© expresses how the initial portrayal of her own bereavement and suffering was transformed into the broader topic of disabled mothers coping with child care and widowed mothers who confront social and cultural stigma.

Another MotherArt© artist is Emily Corbató, whose photographs of her mother's apartment before and after her mother's death, display a different sense of loss with a similar outcome. On the next page is a candid photograph of Corbató's mother reading the *New York Times* in an armchair, and that same



Emily Corbató, from left to right, "Mother's Apartment no. 1" and "Mother's Apartment no. 2."



Emily Corbató, "Mother's Apartment no. 3."

chair, without her mother this time, in a photograph entitled *Absence*. The imprint of her mother is still held by the chair. Another photograph captures her mother's empty bed left unmade after her death.

These photographs form part of an exhibit that Corbató had in 2000

called *My Mother's Apartment: The Letting Go*. The title, "Letting Go," is from an Emily Dickenson poem. Corbató wrote her own poem to include in the exhibit.

The Letting Go
by Emily Corbató

Light pours onto these familiar places,
a lonesomeness quiets the scene.

We sense Mother's presence,
place her, as she might have been,
in these empty, silent spaces, and fathom our loss.

Corbató explains how the photo series began on a Valentine's Day's visit to New York in 1999:

Before my mother fell ill, I became aware that I wanted some way to remember her home. Somehow a roll of film found its way into my camera. I 'caught' her sitting in her favorite chair reading the New York Times, as she did every day. When she was not looking or listening I quietly went around and photographed the inanimate objects in her apartment.

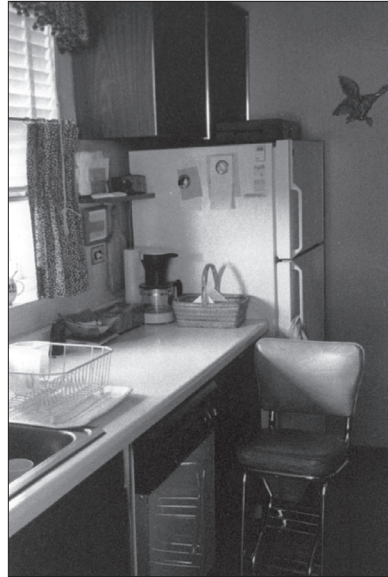
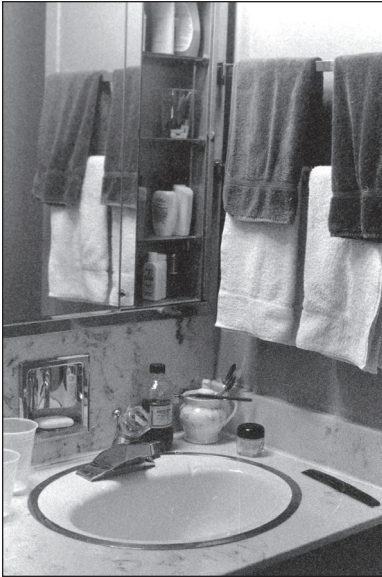
The result is a study of Corbató's mother's apartment—16 photographs taken during the multiple trips to New York while Corbató's mother was battling cancer. The images, in Corbató's words, explore

a woman's relationship, exchanging feelings of love, realizing changes in the emotional balance between us, mother to daughter, daughter as mother and at last as griever. It taps into a very personal part of me, my life as a woman and mother and grandmother, and my sense of abandonment and profound loss. (Corbató, 2002)

In discussing her artwork, Corbató quotes from many writers, including Lucy R. Lippard:

A place can be peopled by ghosts more real than living inhabitants. The lure of the local is not always about home as an expressive place, a place of origin and return. Sometimes it is about the illusion of home, as a memory. If place is defined by memory, but no one who remembers is left to bring these memories to the surface, does a place become no place? ("Lure of the Local," 2005: 16)

Corbató (2008) responds to this more recently: "Now, six years after mother's



Emily Corbató, from left to right, "Mother's Apartment no. 4" and "Mother's Apartment no. 5."



death, I am so glad I have these photographs as a beautiful, tangible personal memory. With them this place does not 'become no place' for me, my siblings or my children." Corbató has also recently expressed the reason for and the result of her photographic exploration:

"The feeling and need for expressing in a public way what lies so deeply within remains the essential driving force of any artist. *My Mother's Apartment* arose from my need to hold dear a remembrance of her world, to focus my emotions and create a 'portrait' of her space. As I worked on these images I lived in their time and place.

My mourning gave way to a powerful creative surge. While printing in my darkroom, moving partially finished images from tray to tray, tears streamed down my face. I wiped them away in welcome relief.

Creating this work was transformative for me, and as art distinguishes itself by its greater relevance, this work, in return, has resonated with many who have seen it" (Corbató 2008).



Emily Corbató, "Esther Moiseevana Nechas,"
Rubishne, Ukraine

Emily Corbató later traveled, on a grant from Hadasah Brandeis Institute, with the non-profit human rights organization, Action for Post Soviet Jewry (APSJ) Inc., which since 1975 has offered general humanitarian aid to Jews in the Former Soviet Union. This included work with the "Adopt a Bubbe and Zaide (grandmother and grandfather) Program" for the elderly Jews of Ukraine. Her black and white photographic essay, *Vsevo Khorashevo: All Good Things: A Black and White Essay of the Jews of Ukraine*, was first shown at the Kniznick Gallery, Women's Studies Research Center (WSRC), Brandeis University, and was part of the 2007 Bernstein Festival of the Arts at Brandeis.

On the left, is a photograph from that exhibit of the elderly Esther Moiseevna Nechas, whose entire family was murdered in the Holocaust. Corbató visited the Jewish Girl's Home in Dnepropetrovsk, making contact through gesture so that they could gather round in a spontaneous pose. The photograph of the girls (on the next page) is hanging in the Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center and represents how by nurturing and expressing her own personal grief Corbató was able to open herself to empathy with others.

I believe that MotherArt© allows the artist to let go of suffering and grief through the experience of making art. Hamil, Corbató, and Eini-Pindyck, each mourned through the poor health and deaths of their mothers, expressed their sadness and grief in artistic forms to arrive at a more expansive sense of personal well-being. Art, by capturing the details of loss in all its ramifications of emptiness, can transform not only the artist but also the viewers. This transformation can also open the heart to compassion and to other experiences and other places that take place outside of the artist's family domain.

To return to the original reference and comparison, what then is the difference between MotherArt© and traditional art therapy? It seems that art therapy has formulized and generalized the process of MotherArt© to treat patients in a therapeutic setting giving them a process to foster their own well-being. Historically, art therapy was a child of the Freudian idea



*Emily Corbató, "The Jewish Girls' Home,"
Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine*

that unconscious thoughts are expressed symbolically in our dreams. Sigmund Freud himself refers to more than one patient who is unable to verbalize these thoughts but who claim to be able to draw them. This provides the basic rationale for art therapy, with Carl Jung subsequently urging his patients to paint (Jung and Asawa, 1994: 2-3). Subsequent therapists would claim that art therapy was a superior form of treatment because Freudians would insist on the "unvarying meaning of so-called universal symbols [which were] too narrow" (Jung and Asawa, 1994: 160).

Art therapy is practiced with individuals, in groups, in family therapy, in schools, and in institutional settings, (the same settings for conventional psychotherapy) where art is used as a therapeutic tool to uncover disturbing memories, issues,

and unconscious trauma so that the individual can function in the world more easily. Art therapy played a role in developing the Rorschach test first developed in 1921 (Jung and Asawa, 1994: 6). All these may seem foreign to the artist who merely follows the artistic instinct to express. The artists interviewed for the annual Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center's panel on creativity (Rose Art Museum, October 2001) never addressed the idea of art as either a diagnostic tool nor as a therapeutic tool. Art was mainly their creative focus and the art product was rarely interpreted psychoanalytically. The content and the style of the artwork were the main topics of discussions. The artists who expressed themselves through MotherArt© described the technique, the finished product, and the content without reference to unconscious inclinations. They worked in none of the settings of the art therapist, but followed the solitary route of creative expression.

MotherArt© diverges from the field of art therapy in that transformation is evident and the process involves not just one work in a therapeutic setting, but a trajectory of works that evolve from an exploration of the mother-daughter relationship to a more compassionate involvement in the needs of the suffering world. It is natural form of therapy with the capacity to enable personal growth and transformation, and which allows the artist to let go of suffering through the experience of her own creations, and the viewer through the experience

of the art. It is a transformation that goes from inner involvement to a contributory participation in social actions. With the capacity to open the heart to other experiences and other places where compassion can be enacted, this is a transformation that bears further investigation into the process of making art, regardless of its subject matter.

As Cathy Malchiodi (1998) states,

Art making is seen as an opportunity to express oneself imaginatively, authentically, and spontaneously, an experience that, over time, can lead to personal fulfillment, emotional reparation, and transformation. The view also holds that the creative process, in and of itself, can be a health-enhancing and growth-producing experience. (5)

The basic tenet of art therapy—an established field of healing—thus demonstrates the natural trajectory of MotherArt©, which goes beyond the process of creating art to document personal experience to an encouragement to make a broader contribution to society as a whole.

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