

Artists in Community
by Carol Sexton

Artists come in all personality types. Some prefer to work in isolation from others, some thrive in the environment of a shared studio space, and some enjoy being part of a creative team working primarily on collaborative projects. But one thing that many artists have in common is the desire for connection to some kind of artist community.

Artist communities may vary widely, from small, intimate groups of friends to large, professional organizations. Typically an artist community is organized around a particular purpose that serves the needs of its members, such as social, spiritual or professional networks of support, mutual offering of skills and information, shared management of studio or gallery space, joint marketing or business ventures, participation in public art events, civic engagement, activism through the arts, etc. At the recent FQA annual conference, a small group met to share their experiences of artist community and to explore how FQA might meet the desire for artist community among Quaker artists.

Carol Sexton spoke about the creative energy that is produced in a shared space such as the Pendle Hill art studio, where creativity can be encouraged and explored without the pressure of grades or judgment that often exists in the traditional classroom. Blair Seitz reflected on the importance of the two terms he spent living in community at Pendle Hill while making the transition from a career as a photojournalist to identifying himself as an artist. Time away from the normal routine to reflect on images and journals from his travels was invaluable.

Blair told us about a Cape May art/spirit group which meets on Fridays once a month. Members of the group, who come from a variety of religious backgrounds, all have a desire to go deeper and to experience art as a part of their spirituality. New themes are chosen each year and members take turns leading monthly sessions on topics related to the theme. The all-day sessions include morning meditation, a presentation, lunch, art making in the afternoon and group sharing of work produced during the previous month. Blair also described the transformation that has been taking place in Millville, NJ over the past few years, where an infusion of public grant funding has revitalized the downtown and attracted many artists to establish galleries and studios in the area. A group of artists in Millville meet for breakfast once a month for social networking.

Larry and Carol Sexton described their experience with the Whitewater Valley Artist Consortium, a Richmond, Indiana-based group that began as a social network and has evolved over several years into a mutual support organization. The group meets every month or two at members' homes to share good food and conversation, exchange ideas and information, and plan group activities such as figure drawing with a live model, art work photo sessions, participation at local arts festivals, etc. The members of the group have exhibited together twice so far and have developed a web site.

Nan Morrisey is a member of Art Plus Gallery in her home town of Reading, PA. The gallery is a non-profit organization that acquired its own building with 3 to 4 rooms providing exhibit space. All artists are screened by a jury before becoming members of the group, and they must commit to help run the gallery one day per month in addition to performing other tasks such as housekeeping and advertising. Members contribute to the monthly costs of maintaining the building and donate 20% of any art sales back to the organization. Approximately every two months, artists bring in new work and host an opening reception. In addition, one gallery space is set aside for work by a guest artist, and another room showcases art work from local schools. Nan reports that a real sense of community has developed among the artists who work together to manage this gallery.

Maura Williams has been involved with an arts festival that takes place annually in Lansdowne, PA. The event draws many artists and musicians who all have some connection to Lansdowne. Civic officials recognize the importance of arts events like this to the economic vitality of the community.

Francis Elling shared about his experience with several different shared studio environments. While living in Kansas, he enjoyed working in a community art studio which was highly subsidized, making it possible for many people to participate at a low cost. He has had a positive experience at the Community Art Center in Wallingford, though the fees there are much higher. He has also spent time in the Pendle Hill art studio as a student and as a teacher. Currently, he is assistant teaching at Fleischer Art Memorial in Philadelphia, where the free classes are in high demand and fill up very quickly. Francis appreciates connecting with other artists who invite each other into their homes to experiment with collaborative work. For support and accountability, he finds it helpful to meet regularly with a small group to work through the book *The Artist's Way*.

Carolyn Keys lives in St Croix, Virgin Islands which she describes as an “artist haven.” An old fort in the city has been converted into galleries, and the Caribbean Center for the Arts offers classes and artist residencies. She is part of a Friday morning plein air group that goes out painting together as well as gathering for “show and tell” and group critiques of art work. The Starving Artist show is a highlight each year.

Ann Sundberg, of Sarasota, Florida, spoke about her background and interests in community-based art and action projects, such as documentary videos, radio broadcasts, and other forms of media art for social change.

The Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts can also be considered as a kind of artist community. While most of the leadership and events are based in the Philadelphia area, the organization does have national and international members. Perhaps there is more that can be done to promote artist community by creating regional FQA groups, or developing an online artist community through the FQA web site.

Near the end of our sharing session, someone raised the question “What does it mean to be a Quaker artist? Here are some of the responses:

Art can be used for social change. More than just being pretty, art needs to have a message.

Spreading beauty in the world is important too.

We may not always know what effect it will have or what good it will do, but our art needs to come from a deep place, not a superficial one.

Art can play an important role in healing and therapy. Art can be a form of prayer.

In the art world and in the general population, there seems to be a taboo about talking about spirituality. As Quaker artists, we can move beyond this to explore the real connections between art and the spiritual life.

Having read this article, what reflections do you have about artist community? What would meet the need for artist community in your life? Do you have experience with another model of community that you would like to share? How can FQA play a larger role in creating community among Quaker artists? If you feel moved to write something for the next issue of Types and Shadows, please email your submission to Elke Muller at elkem@pym.org by deadline?