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Case study

A Beam of Light in the Darkness
Safe Space Open studio: An Art-Based Community Intervention in a Shared Traumatic Reality

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Abstract

*A massive terrorist attack that occurred in Israel on October 7th 2023. undermined feelings of security and trust that resulted in an experience of abandonment and collapse. The forced evacuation of tens of thousands from their homes for a long period of uncertainty, required the immediate construction of therapeutic interventions. One of them, led by art therapists, was the establishment of dozens of 'Safe Studios', a unique model of the Open Studio, designed to provide initial emotional support to displaced communities.**

This article seeks to describe the unique qualities that the Safe Studio enabled as an art-based community intervention in circumstances of a collective, ongoing and shared trauma. We will dwell on the ways in which the abnormal reality affected the processes that took place in the studio, between and among the two groups that took part in it - an evacuee community and a group of art therapists. We will propose that the Safe Studio embodied aspects of a transitional space (Winnicott, 1971) as well as a liminal space (Turner, 1969), and as such, allowed contact with the feelings of detachment and transience as well as with the potential to transform them towards a renewed connection with personal and communal strengths and resources. The studio released from feelings of stagnation and helplessness, regulating emotional excesses and overload,

* *Editor's Note: Open Studio in Hebrew reads Studio Patuach; Studio Batuach means Safe Studio. Thus, by a game of words a name and a character of a new form of Open Studio in times of collective trauma is created.*

protected from their destructive influence and nourished the triangular relation of art-therapists-community. The creation of aesthetic objects spurred action and emotional involvement, restored vitality and meaning, trust in the good object (Klein, 1937) and in the possibility of recovery and growth.

***Keywords**: safe studio, transitional space, liminal space*

Introduction

The unusual and challenging circumstances that brought us, a group of art therapists, to engage with an evacuated kibbutz community and support them from displacement to returning home stemmed from a national disaster of unprecedented magnitude. This collective trauma left us in a continuous state of crisis. During this period, life as we knew it halted, plunging us into a threatening and destabilizing space of uncertainty.

The violent attack by terrorist organizations on Israeli communities on October 7th was marked by extreme brutality that was unprecedented in the context of ongoing regional tensions. Private homes were invaded and heinous crimes against humanity were committed, leading to the tragic loss of countless lives and to the abduction of many others. Due to considerable lapses in political and military response, those affected received no support during that harrowing day and were left to fend for themselves.

These events and the subsequent war became a pivotal and shocking moment in Israeli society's history. They eroded the basic sense of security in the state's authorities, leading to a collapse of trust in human systems and the concept of a safe place. The disaster and its impact on various kinship circles necessitated the immediate development of therapeutic intervention plans for many victims, spanning a wide age range. One of the therapeutic initiatives organized shortly after the disaster was the establishment of more than forty community creative spaces by art therapists. These Safe Studios were created to provide initial mental support, aimed at encouraging recovery and fostering resilience.

In this article, we aim to observe, from the perspective of participant-observers, the processes that unfolded among and between the two groups involved in the Safe Studio: the evacuated community and the group of therapists. We will examine the unique qualities that the Safe Studio enabled as an art-based community intervention in the context of a collective, ongoing and shared trauma.

Collective Trauma

Trauma arises from a threat to life, evoking extreme experiences of helplessness, lack of control and fear of extinction. When the trauma is inflicted by another person, it undermines the belief system that gives meaning to human experience, shaking the victim's faith in a natural or divine order, plunging him into an existential crisis (Herman, 1992). Physiological hyperarousal creates a disconnection between body and mind, establishing defensive-survival reaction patterns and preventing the transformation and developmental assimilation of the raw traumatic memory (Van der Kolk, 2014, Perryman et al., 2019).

Collective trauma is an event that threatens the existence of people from the same identity or affinity group, undermining their basic assumptions and creating a crisis of meaning (Hirschberger, 2018). The events of October 7th created a complex collective trauma, combining several traumatic focal points (Greenwald, 2023): atrocities and brutal acts witnessed by the public through victim testimonies, collective grief over numerous bereavements, and a loss of trust in the authorities. The sense of abandonment intensified when it became clear that the government was not doing everything possible to rescue the abductees. An attachment trauma emerged, as the inability to rely on and trust a protective political entity became evident.

The devastating terrorist attack and the ensuing war led to the evacuation of residents from dozens of settlements, disrupting their lives' continuity and routine, and resulting in a prolonged period of uncertainty. These events struck deep primal fears within the Israeli social unconscious (Weinberg, 2009), where many traumatic events involving continuous existential threats, terror, displacement, and loss of home are etched.

An Ongoing Traumatic Reality

An ongoing traumatic reality describes the experience of living under a continuous threat. This term aptly describes the current situation in Israel, where the state of war and emergency, along with ongoing stress, erodes personal and community resources (Greenwald, 2023). The abductees remain in captivity with their fate unknown, and tens of thousands of families are displaced from their homes.

A Shared Traumatic Reality

In a shared traumatic reality, both the therapist and the patient experience the trauma simultaneously or are exposed to a reality that threatens both parties. Gampel (2010) describes this as a "falling wall," revealing the therapist's vulnerability, anxieties and fears, and therefore highlighting their shared fate with the patient. This reality can diminish the therapeutic space, challenge the



Figure 1 Safe studio space

asymmetry essential to the therapeutic dyad, and trigger defensive mechanisms in both the therapist and the patient, complicating the therapeutic process. However, once recognizing their own vulnerability and developing compassion, therapists can enable an authentic dialogue, fostering a sense of partnership and advancing the therapeutic process.

Art Therapy in Trauma Situations

Art therapy offers a safe space for spontaneous and authentic expression, which can restore feelings of competence, autonomy, and control critical for those experiencing extreme helplessness (Sommer, 2015). Art materials, as part of a universal language, have diverse structural properties and operational possibilities, holding the potential for various manifestations of internal forces. Direct contact with these materials evokes different layers of the soul within a unique interpersonal relationship. The tangible and active transfer of bodily sensations to the material, can help release excess tension and promote emotional and sensory regulation (Gantt & Tripp, 2016).

The transformation of the soul's materials through art within a benevolent therapeutic relationship experience, contributes to the internalization of a safe attachment experience, promoting psychological change and growth. The repetitive movement between creation and observation relies on primary and secondary thought processes, thus promoting mentalization processes, insight, and internal organization (Hass-Cohen & Clyde-Findlay, 2015).

The Safe Studio as a Community Intervention in Crisis Situations

The Safe Studio is a unique model developed for communities in crisis by Yahat, the Israeli Art Therapy Association. First successfully implemented for refugees of the war in Ukraine, it was adapted in October 2023 to the unique situation in Israel following the October 7th terrorist attack. The term "safe" describes the therapists' focus on maintaining participants' mental safety during a collective trauma (Lakh et. al., 2023). The model grew out of the Open Studio model, centering on the art as therapy approach, viewing art as a universal human need and the healing potential deriving from free work with diverse creative materials, presented and mediated by art therapists. Shapira (2014) emphasized that art is fundamentally related to the energy of life. She described the Open studio as an active, living, and emerging entity, a joint and ongoing creative project with a mutual and cross-fertilizing effect between the space and its participants. In the Open studio model, the studio space serves as an environmental co-therapist, significantly contributing to the healing processes.

The ecological approach to collective trauma centers on a community's self-restoration resources after a crisis, recognizing the mental, social, and phy-sical trauma contexts. In this model, the therapist joins the community and harnesses it through the creative process, allowing space for expressing difficulty and pain and therefore encouraging change and growth processes (Huss, 2023).

The case study presented here will delineate a portrayal of a Safe Studio in which we partook as art therapists. We shall elucidate the intricate circumstances that precipitated its establishment and under whose shadow it functioned, focusing on the manners in which the collective, ongoing and shared trauma impacted and catalyzed significant processes within its confines.

Case Study

The events of October 7th, along with the ongoing hostilities and existential threats, generated feelings of tension and vigilance within the Israeli public. Among care workers, these feelings were channeled into a strong urge for reaction. The speed and efficiency with which the Safe Studio was organized, alongside dozens of other studios across the country, and the general wave of mobilization, which included numerous exciting initiatives and generous civic donations, testified to the enormous need of a large community to act. They aimed to create a corrective countermovement to balance the intensity of the evil and cruelty to which they were exposed. They sought to restore, through acts of caregiving and compassion, the belief in human goodness, to balance a world whose order had been violated and was leaning on its dark side.

Twenty-five art therapists volunteered for the task of establishing this Safe Studio. Despite extensive therapeutic experience in individual and group work in public settings, the preparations for the task were accompanied by feelings of tension and apprehension on both personal and professional levels. On a personal level, the doubts stemmed from the magnitude of the national disaster, which illustrated the fragility of our existence, shaking the ground beneath us. On the professional level we were concerned about our ability to face and bear traumas of such intensity and scope. We wondered if we had the ability to meet victims who had lost so many acquaintances and loved ones. Alongside the strong desire to help and assist, thus transforming feelings of helplessness while recognizing a rescue fantasy, there was fear of over-identification and even of being affected by the toxicity of the traumatic materials (Gampel, 2010), the fear that we might not be able to contain and transform these materials ourselves, leading to countertransference of emotional overload or disconnection.

Realizing that the work would be conducted in a completely different format and setting than what we were used to: simultaneous work with many alternating participants, in a wide age range, from toddlers through teenagers to elderly women, and for an unknown period, aroused more professional questions. The space allocated to us for the studio in the hotel grounds, a huge celebration hall built with a slanted floor, increased feelings of confusion. As advocates of working in an intimate space, we were disconcerted by the spacious, window-surrounded area that lacked privacy, where we tried in vain to demarcate a defined area with wooden trellises.

Becoming aware that the present task requires us to let go of the familiar and embrace the unknown, we channeled our tension and anxiety into proactive action and an attempt to create a structure: organizing the team, connecting with contacts at the hotel and within the evacuated community, arranging the space, collecting and organizing creative materials and sandboxes. The celebrations hall, which normally hosted festive rites of passage in the Israeli circle of life, changed its purpose from a space of concrete nourishment to a transitory space of symbolic nourishment, aimed at evoking a sense of mental aliveness.

The kibbutz community, located a few kilometers from the border with the Gaza Strip, has been exposed to life under rocket fire for years, living in a state of continuous security tension. On October 7th, the terrorists did not break into this settlement, but many of those killed and kidnapped that day were members of the extended community, bound together by thick and close family, study, and work connections. The evacuation and displacement of the kibbutz community interrupted and disrupted a rich and

varied life. They were accompanied by the shock of the attack and massacre, the tension and concern for the fate of the abductees, the anxiety surrounding the ongoing war, and the uncertainty about the future. At the beginning of this journey, an atmosphere of defeat and despair prevailed. The hotel being essentially a temporary, transitory place, located on the border of the desert, contributed to a sense of liminality.

With the opening of the studio, children and adults began to flow in, initially hesitantly, perhaps recognizing upon entering a space that was unusual yet inviting and intriguing. The therapists welcomed them warmly and invited them to explore the tables set up with a variety of creative materials (Fig. 1, 2). Relief resulting from meeting the familiar was evident on the faces of the comers. Hands naturally reached for pencils, paints, brushes, and pages, while legs confidently found their way around the tables. There, they settled down, some sinking into themselves in preliminary reflection, some in experimentation and investigation of the materials, and others searching and groping for inner expression, which was embodied into a visual form.

Within days, in astonishing speed, the studio became a living and bustling creative space. Meanwhile, we were required to rethink our professional role in this setting. As the foundation of our work is rooted in a continuous and deep relationship with regular patients in a reserved and stable setting, we wondered how we would work with many participants, in varied ages and in rotating and changing compositions, and what was the most beneficial way to operate within this dynamic environment.

One of the direct results of the large number of participants and the temporary conditions of their residence, was the accumulation of a huge amount of art works on the tables in the hall. In the absence of storage space, there was a threat of intensifying feelings of confusion and overload. Questions concerning internal and external organization and the maintenance of balance and control, preoccupied us. The use of liquid colors like gouache, was limited, in fear of emotional overflooding. The possible consequences and effects of the presence of art works echoing visible and hidden, personal and collective layers of the soul, raised questions about our ability to take responsibility for this whole.

As part of the attempt to hold the studio, we created channels of communication among ourselves, since we were present at different times, thus allowing us to share experiences and impressions, and provide each other with support and guidance. We were attentive to both visible and latent contents in the channels of artistic and verbal expression, while responding to different developmental and emotional needs simultaneously. Reflecting on our role in the space led to the understanding that in the Safe Studio,

a different presence than usual was required of us. We realized that the core of the work in the studio did not rest solely on the relationship created and developed with us, the therapists, but rather lay in the interaction with the studio's materials and the mutual relationships formed between them and inner contents of the participants, both personal and shared. We understood our role as being part of the space, in a unified yet silent presence that allowed these processes to take place. Thus, while the participants became more distinct and familiar, we became one entity, with multiple ears, eyes and arms, leaning towards the participants, making the studio accessible to them, while being an integral part of it. We were like a maternal environment (Winnicott, 1963) that facilitates moments of observation, connection, and meaning. Acknowledging that, allowed us to position ourselves in the space more confidently.

At each session in the studio, dozens of participants of all ages were present, some coming regularly and others occasionally. Sitting together in a variety of multi-age and intergenerational groups created dyadic connections and diverse subgroups, strengthening closeness and reciprocity. Among the participants, some worked alone in the presence of others, while others sought a more isolated personal space. The feeling of domesticity that was created, restored confidence in a parental presence, in which one can relax, imagine and create.

The strength of artistic creation lies in its ability to express, reflect and contain different layers of experience and in its potential to hold multiple meanings. Within the confines of the Safe Studio, it was possible to transform feelings of stagnation that accompanied the trauma and to experience movement and change, through the dynamic interrelationships that existed in the creative processes and human relationships. Many art products[1] resonated with each other regarding home as a nourishing and protective space, and expressing in a wide variety of configurations, a longing for containment, shelter and protection. Other works turned to the realms of imagination and aesthetics, allowing for respite and comfort.

The visual works in the studio were mostly created from light and perishable materials, which through repeated creative processes of connection, union and fusion, led to development from two-dimensional to three-dimensional while building and erecting the works. Symbolically, this movement embodied vitality and continuity, strongly protesting the interruption of going on being, and serving as a living testimony to an inner process of overcoming. At the same time, in their material fragility, the works held a dialectic between transience and permanence, a simultaneity of vulnerability and resilience.

[1] To respect the privacy of the participants, we will not be able to publish pictures of the works.

The threats of war and the death drive in its destructive incarnations, were expressed more directly in the children's play in the sandbox, in scenes that included battle and struggle, as well as the savior appearance of superheroes and rescue forces. In the art field, the children's inclination to work with the hot-glue gun stood out. It seems that the attraction to it stemmed not only from the operation of the tool, which directly simulates a weapon, allowing an outlet and giving an experience of power and control, but also from its charm in melting, fusing, and rejoining materials, thus creating something different and new.

The studio became a central place for the community in its temporary residence and within it, initiatives from within the community itself were born, such as creative groups led by local artists. For us therapists, the challenge was keeping the uniqueness of the Safe Studio hours aside and separate from these activities. Adhering to a work routine within fixed days and hours created for the Safe Studio boundaries of time and space, within which it grew to become a space that could also contain change, flow, and growth. At the same time, this blessed expansion testified to the alluring charm of art, the resilience of the community, and the assimilation of the studio into its life.

At the end of the third month of the studio's activity, the uncertainty surrounding the question of when the community would return home intensified. The intense longing to return to the domestic and family framework of life were clou-ded by the heavy fear of returning to the southern region in the shadow of the ongoing war, and the real danger to the security of the settlements near the border. Repeated discussions about the return date were accompanied by political and economic

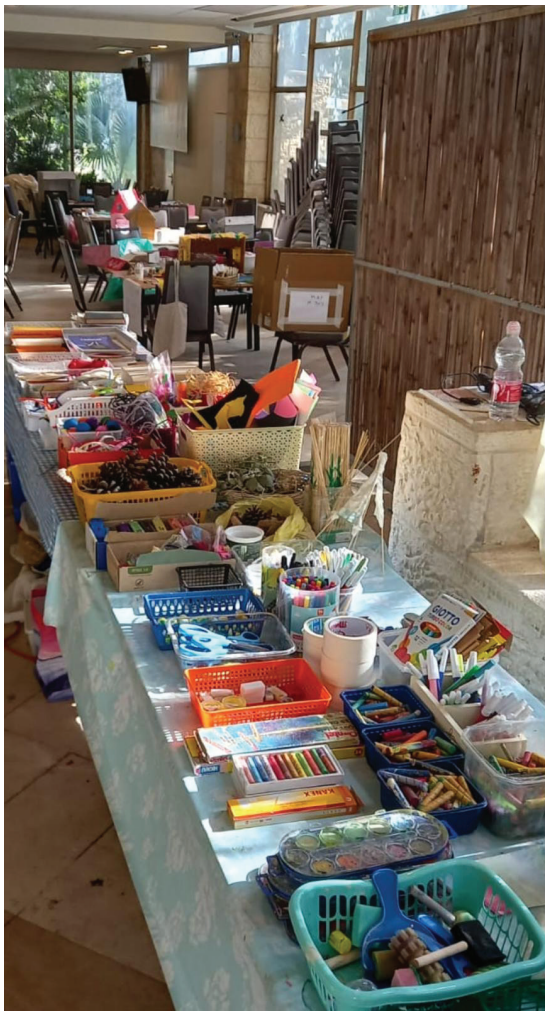


Figure 2 Safe studio space

pressures. We, caregivers, witnessed these struggles and tensions and identified with them. Aside from the desire to manage the separation process gradually, feelings of lack of control and the inability to plan intensified. Dismantling the studio aroused fear of losing the good object that had formed for all of us, the community and the therapists.

However, from the start, a new and exciting horizon was discovered: the community decided to establish, upon its return home, an open art studio led by artists from the kibbutz, thus continuing to develop the fruitful and creative channel of activity. In the Safe Studio a seed was sown, it led to fertilization, an idea to continue working in the spirit of the studio in the community, a movement that will surely nourish strengths and resources and thus support creative processes.

On the eve of the homecoming, we set a time with the community for a final gathering. Amid dismantling and packing, we sat together in the studio for the last time to share concluding words and farewells. We will quote here words shared by one of the mothers:

> *"You were like a beam of light in the darkness, you were a ray of light that kept growing, warming and illuminating the way. Many children, teenagers, adults as well as older women, found great comfort in the studio, a time of silence, quiet, and creativity. Children built, put together, embroidered, threaded, maybe what was unraveled that day... the studio was a safe place for all of us" (Mor Azuales, 28/12/23).*

Discussion

The events of October 7th embodied the deepest anxieties, undermining fundamental feelings of security and trust, and leading to an experience of abandonment and collapse. The intensity and power of the events created panic and helplessness, generating an urge to act. It felt as if time both stood still and moved on. The disruption of life's continuity and the evacuation of large communities for an unknown period, created feelings of tension and despair. The celebrations hall, where tables were left solemnly prepared for a planned feast, provided a surreal backdrop to these emotions.

In his book "The Ritual Process" (1969), Turner described the three stages of social rites of passage: disconnection from daily routine, passing through a liminal state into a ritual world distant and different from familiar concepts of time and place, a space where the usual and known are undermined and basic assumptions are challenged and re-examined. This process leads to a transformation and a renewed entry into the order of life from a different place. In the liminal space in

between, participants in the space are united by a sense of brotherhood and partnership. This conceptualization aptly describes the process that took place in the Safe Studio, beginning with feelings of crisis and upheaval, passing through a space of change and transformation, and culminating in insight and growth.

The events of October 7th were imprinted in the minds of participants and therapists not only as an existential threat but also as an attack on values, perceptions, and ideas such as humanism, universality, and coexistence. The belief in basic human goodness collapsed into an alien and boundless void.

The name 'Safe Studio' embodies the wish to establish a space that provides security and can contain the heavy emotional burden of participants. Initially, we doubted our and the studio's capacity to meet these needs. The physical organization around the studio's construction channeled tension into action, assisting to achieve regulation and balance. The concretization of the Safe Studio idea and its embodiment in physical space created the boundaries of the container. It met the evacuated community's desire to find a safe place and the need to self-express and release tension. The establishment of the studio, along with the community's willingness to participate in it, initiated reciprocal relations of nourishment and mutual regulation between them, the studio and the therapists.

The community format in which the studio operated, and the possibility to work within it in different compositions, created an abundance of expressions that nourished and fertilized each other. These processes in turn, fueled the dynamic relationship between therapists, studio, and participants. Meeting with family and community members in a new context, while creating and working together, strengthened family, peer ties, and the feeling of belonging to the community. The grouping of the community as a whole organism greater than the sum of its parts (Bion, 1961) activated processes of resonance (Foulkes, 1977) in the group space. Different levels of awareness allowed each participant to respond in their own language, style and expression, thereby releasing the self-healing powers of the group organism (Pines, 1989).

The cyclical organization of materials and arrangement of the busy and overflowing space, as a metaphorical "white page" before each session, provided the Safe Studio with the base level of the matrix, serving as a compassionate container for individuals and the community. Contact with materials and the creation of diverse images by different participants activated the dynamic level of the matrix, where raw ideas and feelings resonated, were absorbed, developed and crystallized into patterns of thinking and understanding, both as individual representations and as parts of the community's structural fabric.

Working with various creative materials enabled physical and emotional movement, creating a potential transitional space (Winnicott, 1971) both personally and for the community. This allowed for playfulness, spontaneity, and imagination, pulling participants out of the stagnant areas of trauma. Art's power was realized through connection to a primary experiential layer and familiar, homely experiences. On another level, art provided a channel for the symbolic expression of inner contents in a visual language. The potential for initiating transmuting processes of emotional and mental materials through creative processes established the studio as a transformative space. Actions of fusing, gluing, rejoining and building, embodied attempts to connect parts that had fallen apart, to reorganize and rebuild.

The frequent changes in the composition of participants led to a continuous renewal and expansion of the intersubjective dimension in the studio. This process was further strengthened by the presence of therapists, who maintained the integrity and boundaries of the container while being present at different times and guiding in various formations at each meeting.

The activities in the studio primarily served to calm, regulate and restore security. Concurrently, the studio's mission to develop as an analytical third (Ogden, 1994) was realized, enabling transformative happenings akin to alchemy, fostering growth and new developments.

As participants' subjectivity embodied, expanded and were validated through connections and creations, the studio's essence as a container for being, imagining, dreaming, creating, seeing and being seen, also expanded. The existence of diverse and sometimes, opposing modes of accumulation in the studio, created a mental movement. Patterns of understanding and meaning arose and dissolved alternately. Ideas and thoughts moved through the space in a spiral motion, merging the concrete and the symbolic. Raw materials became representations and images, transitioning between interior and exterior, self and other, individual and community.

Within the studio's interrelationships, the possibility of being for the other emerged, giving the meetings a restorative quality. The studio as a selfobject (Kohut, 1977) addressed countless needs, reviving



Figure 3 Materials in Safe studio

the maternal and empathic essence of the matrix. Wounded areas of both participants and therapists met an empathetic and human response. This created selfobject relationships between therapists and participants, providing and restoring a coherent and continuous self-experience.

For both participants and therapists, the Safe Studio prevented collapse into a limited and fragmented existence. Exposure to the language of art and creation, both concrete and abstract, personal and universal, comprehensible and enigmatic, returned a richer and more alive emotional spectrum to those affected by trauma. The Safe Studio offered an opportunity to re-enter the unknown safely and protected. Creative processes embodied multiple layers, softening and dimming enough to reconnect with aspects of being human, such as playfulness, discovery, invention, originality, and creativity.

Conclusion

Amidst a collective, continuous, and shared trauma, the Safe Studio emerged as an art-based community intervention providing a strengthening, nourishing and healing space for both participants and therapists. The studio embodied aspects of a transitional space (Winnicott, 1971) and a liminal space (Turner, 1969), thus allowing individuals to be in touch with feelings of detachment and transience and to facilitate their transformation towards renewed connections with personal and communal resources. The studio offered a regulating and organizing environment, enabling participants a transition from feelings of falling and abandonment to an experience of grounding ang holding.

Therapists' attention to elements of time, material organization, and spatial arrangement contributed to a formation of a maternal and empathetic matrix, restoring attachment security, and reinforcing belief in a benevolent presence. This allowed the studio to evolve into a transitional space where participants could safely engage with the unknown. Facilitating exploration, play and creation, the studio functioned as an analytical third (Ogden, 1994), fostering a dynamic intersubjective movement that provided vitality and gave birth to hope.

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