

**ART(ISTS) IN THE MAKING:**

**EXPLORING NARRATIVES OF COMING TO ART IN LATER LIFE**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on John Dewey's aesthetic theory, this inquiry was undertaken to explore the experience and significance of "coming to art" in later life. Eight women and three men participated in two in-depth conversational interviews. The participants' average age at the time of our first interview was 71.6 years. Seven participants described a serious commitment to art. The remaining participants described a somewhat more casual visual art practice. A narrative approach supported a close reading of the participants' stories which led to the identification of three primary storylines: 1) "Coming to Art," 2) "Flourishing through Art," and 3) "Art as Identity." The first storyline considered the role of chance and different influencing conditions, including how various structures and routines served to sustain the participants' focus on art. Ways in which art contributed to how the participants' enjoyed their lives comprised the second storyline, which encompassed such aspects as enhanced perception, creative excitement, flow, and feelings of intrinsic satisfaction, as well as expanding worlds of experience (through travel and new social connections). Conditional and relational aspects of the participants' art-based identity constructions are described in the last storyline. In addition, reflections on the significance of art making as a casual leisure pursuit, and music as a form of serious leisure, along with advantages and constraints of coming to art in later life, are described.

This inquiry offers a site for developing new understandings regarding the possibilities of aging, and the ways that art can contribute to an ongoing process of growth and expansion in later life. Although a common view is that artists *are born* as such, compelled to express their talents from an early point in life, the accounts shared by the participants in this inquiry suggest that at least for some coming to art may also be a developmental opportunity that emerges with age. In addition, while health benefits have been associated with involvement in art in later life, this inquiry suggests that arts-based involvement in later life can also be about creative excitement, feeling enlivened, and vitally involved ... and also about becoming an artist.

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I dedicate this work to all of those who are exploring, or are looking forward to exploring, the creative possibilities of ongoing human development. I dedicate this work to my grandparents, Verona and Steve Sabjan, and also to my four-year old son Caleb who reminds me of the moment-to-moment play of possibility every moment of every day.

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Art is a normal and necessary behaviour of human beings that like other common and universal human occupations and preoccupations such as talking, working, exercising, playing, socializing, learning, loving, and caring should be recognized, encouraged, and developed in everyone.

- Ellen Dissanayake, 1992, p. 225

## **PREAMBLE**

### **ENTERING INTO STORIES OF EXPERIENCE –**

### **ALREADY UNDERWAY, AND ONGOING**

*It is difficult to know sometimes how to begin; how to enter into the telling of a story. And then, slowly, I do ...*

For the most part, I have followed a traditionally accepted format in writing this dissertation. An introductory chapter and overview of relevant literature provide an orientation to the text. Subsequent chapters describe the approach I have taken to this inquiry, and what I have come to understand about coming to art in later life. I offer additional commentary and reflection in the discussion chapter. I perform the understandings I have come to through what I hope will be considered a richly integrated and developed text. At the same time, I offer this work in the spirit of an ongoing conversation rather than a “solo performance.”

I have had the privilege of connecting with numerous individuals working in different aspects of aging and the arts over the many years of this inquiry – artists, scholars, program participants and administrators – all of whom have enriched my appreciation of the possibilities and artistry of life. I owe an even greater debt to the men and women who participated in this inquiry. This dissertation is based on conversations that occurred over an extended period of time. In the following paragraphs, I present excerpts taken from these conversational interviews. These excerpts are not meant to foreshadow or outline the understandings that I came to through the course of this inquiry. Rather, the participants’ voices are presented here to emphasize the uniqueness and diversity of their lives, and also to recall the primacy of story as a lived experience, by real people.<sup>1</sup>

*You know, all artists are poor. You don’t quit your day job when you’re an artist.  
Helen (1,175)*

*Just before I retired I enrolled in a few watercolour classes.  
Joyce (1,6)*

*You will always feel that you can do better, that you can do more, and that you can  
learn more. You’ll never know it all. Terry (2,715)*

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<sup>1</sup> I have used italics to indicate the voices of the participants that I extracted from interview transcripts. The paired numbers that appear in parenthesis indicate the interview (Interview 1 or 2), and the sequential number used to identify the location of the text segment from that interview transcript (1 upward to 10,000).

*I just found out last year that Michelangelo and Raphael and Rembrandt were using the technique of Chiaroscuro to give a sense of depth of perception.*  
Malcolm (2,225)

*There is all this stuff you can use in your art, you know, you see the potential. One of the classes I've taken is "Trash to Treasure." People bring all kinds of things and then we incorporate that into our art.*  
Lynda (2,468)

*I think retirement is the best time of life. There is all that time you have, to do what you darn well feel like doing.*  
Gail (1,390)

*To learn the flute at my age is extremely satisfying. I never think, "Oh, gosh! I have got to practice that darn flute." Just talking about it makes me want to get my hands on it!*  
Gail (1,232)

*I never had any trouble with composing a piece, but the colour and where the light is coming from, that got to me a little bit. That was the thing that I found a bit hard. But then you can learn that. You learn that from experience. You don't learn everything all at once. You definitely don't. It took a while. It took a lot, a lot of time.*  
Lillian (1,951)

*When I walk down to our soapstone class, it is as if I've got a backpack on my back. You know, after you have been diagnosed with cancer you've always got this thing on your back. When I get to the room, I feel I can take my backpack off and leave it outside.*  
Madeline (1,625)

*If you're looking for something to do, just try it. Don't think you have to have a lot of talent. Don't think "Well nobody in my family ever did it, so I can't." Just do it. You might surprise yourself, and find that you can do it and that you really like it.*  
Lillian (2,1298)

*I started doing portraits as an experiment because I'd never heard of watercolour portraits before. It was really more or less the challenge that got me going on watercolour portraits.*  
Bernard (2,201)

*Our soapstone instructor makes you feel like you're so talented. He makes you feel like you could be Michelangelo.*  
William (2,824)

*I've had two different instructors - our soapstone instructor and a painting instructor. You know I'd love to be able to paint a bouquet of flowers but there's no way. I tried. I can't seem to get it together. I wasn't told how to do it. I was just told to do it, and I couldn't.*  
Madeline (2,833)

*I can go out to my garage studio and be there for a long time, and be very, very, happy.*  
Mary (1,355)

*If you don't say "Yes" and do things, interesting things won't happen to you.  
Helen (2,90)*

*You should put at the very end, "You don't make much money. But you do have a lot of  
fun!"  
Helen (2,931)*

As I reflect on the participants' voices presented above, I am acutely aware (as I have been through much of the writing of this text) that I cannot offer a final, true account of what it means to "come to art in later life." Through the experience of this inquiry, I have learned that stories and narratives incorporate a multiplicity of texts, oriented to different reference points that will be understood in different ways by different people across time. There is no one "fixed" meaning that can be identified in a set of narratives. Rather, as observed by Denzin (1999), qualitative research texts "are dialogical, the site at which multiple voices commingle" (p. 33).

I have presented the voices of the participants, and myself as researcher, here primarily to invite you – the reader – to enter into the text. I invite you to take your place in the midst of our ongoing conversations, to appreciatively attend to the meanings we may develop, and possibly share, even for a while, as we go along together.

*... to perceive a beholder must create his (sic) own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent.*

*... Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art. The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed according to his (sic) point of view and interest. The beholder must go through these operations according to his point of view and interest. In both, an act of abstraction, that is of extraction of what is significant, takes place. In both there is comprehension in its literal signification – that is, a gathering together of details and particulars physically scattered into an experienced whole.*

*- John Dewey, 1934, p. 54*

As I write this, I imagine you the reader – text in hand – about to turn the page. I imagine that you will consider this account according to your own point of view and interest, and those standards and practices you may use to evaluate this as a dissertation text. I hope you also approach it as a site for developing new understandings of the possibilities of later life, including *our own future aging*... an open, forward looking temporality. As Ray (2000) has suggested, by sharing stories we may "come to see them in the light of other

possible stories” (p. 28), and may be inspired to create new worlds of possibility both for ourselves and others.

*Whatever artform one chooses, whatever materials and ideas, the creative siege is the same. One always finds rules, always tremendous concentration, entrancement, and exaltation, always the tension of spontaneity caged by restriction, always risk ... the willingness to be shaken to the core ... The world is drenched with color, and nature is full of spectacles. You would think that would be enough. Yet we are driven to add even more sensations to the world, to make our thoughts and feelings visible through works of art. We create art for many reasons. As a form of praise and celebration. To impose an order on the formless clamour of the world ... To help locate ourselves in nature, and give us a sense of home. Art brings pattern, meaning and perspective to life.*  
- Diane Ackerman, 1999, p. 136

I was interested in the stories that older people have to share about becoming involved in art making in later life. Although interest in the arts is often limited to the early years of our lives, I undertook this inquiry in the hope of supporting a beginning understanding of some of the ways in which art can contribute to an ongoing process of growth and expansion across all the years of our life, and in particular, the latter years.

Before continuing, additional commentary regarding the organization of this text is in order. In Chapter 1, I consider population aging trends in Canada, and describe various theories that emphasize the dynamic, relational, and aesthetic aspects of human development. I also offer information about my background, my interests and desires, and some of the historical contingencies that contributed to the path I followed in undertaking this inquiry. In Chapter 2, I cover a broad expanse of literature (theoretical and empirical) to further contextualize the potential of aging, and the limits of what is known regarding late-life involvement in the arts. I also consider a variety of perspectives regarding the value of art that might inspire a more sensitive understanding of the significance arts-based involvement in later life. I then turn, in Chapter 3, to a discussion of the narrative inquiry approach I followed. In Chapter 4, I describe the individuals who participated in this inquiry to provide an overall sense of their stories, against which the storylines I present in Chapter 5 can be considered. Against this backdrop of orienting literature and “findings,” I consider the idea of art as a mode of development, and ways in which art and aesthetic experience are not only health promoting but *life* promoting in Chapter 6. I also consider future directions for this area with respect to both inquiry and the need to develop “leading structures” to

support recognition and development of the arts and aging as a field of inquiry and practice in Canada. In Chapter 7, I present examples of the artwork of the participants.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In Canada, as in many other countries, we are living longer and retiring earlier. Given additional years of retirement that many can look forward to, *later life offers an opportunity to consider new beginnings*. In her long treatise on aging, *The Fountain of Age*, Betty Friedan (1993) pointed to the “developmental possibilities of age as a unique period of life” (p. 49). Although scholarly work has considered different aspects of retirement, little research has considered those activities that inspire a deeply absorbing and meaningful, continuing engagement with the world. Some investigators have considered continuity and change in longstanding interests and involvements (e.g., Nakamura, 2002). However, little research has considered the emergence of *new* sustaining interests in later life, including interest in the arts. Friedan refers to the emergence of new interests and passions in later life as “the uncharted terrain in studies of human aging” (p. 85).

In this inquiry I explore the experience of “coming to art” among older adults who became passionately committed to art following, or just prior to “retiring.” I was aware that art courses, workshops and other less formal educational offerings seemed to attract a great deal of interest and enthusiasm among older adults. However, few studies have focused on the origins, sustaining conditions, and benefits of coming to art in later life. As I considered this, I wondered if the standard account of artistic development – that artistic interest emerges early in life, is realized during adulthood, and then declines with age – had limited inquiry in this area. I wondered if this reflected not only other overriding concerns within gerontology, but also the marginalization of the amateur arts and creative activity within the hegemony of the elite “art world” (Sholette, 2005). I felt that this seeming doubling (or tripling) of prejudice might suggest that there was in fact much to be learned from attending to this understudied area.

Being familiar with the book *Art and Experience* (1934), I was aware that the American philosopher John Dewey considered aesthetic experience to be the ideal for all experience. According to Dewey, “art in its form, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy that makes an experience to be *an experience*” (italics added, p. 48). He described experience (to the extent it is realized as such) as being “heightened vitality” (p. 19), and a “complete experience” to be one that was “intensely and

concentratedly felt” (p. 52). Dewey attributed significant developmental consequences to “being fully alive” (p. 18) in and to the world through aesthetic experience. I elaborate on these connections in later sections of this text, but first want to consider population aging trends in Canada and the potentials associated therein.

### Population Aging and the Potential of Later Life

The proportion of Canadians aged 65 years and older has grown significantly over the past 80 or so years (see Health Canada, 2002; National Advisory Council on Aging, 1999; Novak & Campbell, 2006; and Turcotte & Schellenberg, 2007). Population aging, which will continue to accelerate in the coming years, has been influenced by advances in healthcare, decreasing fertility rates and an aging “baby boomer” population. In 2001, 3.92 million Canadians (or one in eight) were aged 65 years and over. It is projected that older Canadians will number 6.7 million in 2021 and 9.2 million in 2041, or about one in four Canadians (Health Canada, 2002). Those aged 85 years and older are the fastest growing segment of the population. With more people taking early retirement, these trends suggest that a good proportion of Canadians can expect to spend a third or more of their adult life in retirement. Although older people have more education, better health and greater financial security than in previous periods (see Health Canada, 2002), little is known about those interests that older people are passionate about, that provide ongoing opportunities for learning, growing and enjoying their lives.

Although the health status of most seniors compares well with younger people (Turcotte & Schellenberg, 2007, p. 44), and their self-reported well-being exceeds that of younger cohorts (p. 51), much of the gerontological literature is based on an “aging as decline” model. In 1986, K. Gergen observed that:

Generally the aged are viewed as a culture of unfortunates - beset by illness, poor housing, low income, bereft of social function, and facing social isolation and imminent death. Since they are unable to help themselves, it is the challenge of the social sciences to clarify and publicize the conditions of the aged and to aid in generating policies that will improve or alleviate these conditions. (p. 68)

The proceedings of the International Congress of Gerontology held in Vancouver in 2001 suggested little change in this focus. A columnist for the Vancouver Sun described the conference agenda as “an unsettling catalogue of the ways a human body might wither ... [the session titles] go on and on, [there are] hundreds of papers and seminars on the

decrepitude of advanced age” (K. Gergen & M. Gergen, 2001a, para 1). Katz (1996) has attributed the construction of aging as a “problem” to a biomedical view that has equated “pathological disease, decline, and incapacity with the normality of the aged body” (p. 47). Patterns of healthy aging are defined as the absence of chronic illness, functional and cognitive impairments, and sometimes in relation to preventive or risk-reducing behaviors (e.g., Guralnik & Kaplan, 1989; Khaw, 1997; Rowe & Kahn, 1987, 1998). Psychosocial perspectives have tended to emphasize adjustment to decline and loss (Hansen-Kyle, 2005).

Recalling Gidden’s (1991) reminder about the “reluctance of most progressivist thinkers since the Enlightenment to think in utopian terms” (p. 213), Gullette (1999) suggests that in aging studies (as in other areas of cultural theorizing) “it’s not chic to be optimistic” (p. 241). Further to this, in Canada the fields of health promotion and gerontology have evolved to have a more collectivist and macro-focused orientation than exists in other countries. Raeburn and Rootman (1998) describe a shift away from the role of individuals in health promotion efforts, noting that social scientists “preferred to operate in broad terms of ‘society,’ ‘structures,’ ‘policy,’ ‘populations,’ and the like, rather than in terms of the individual” (p. 7). They also note that “holistic” or “high level” health is not a concept favoured by those working in the public health sector. Chappell, Gee, McDonald, and Stones (2003) note that “the political economy of aging has been a more important and more used perspective in Canada than in the United States” (p. 50). Although research on “problems of aging” conducted within this context has contributed to policy, programs and interventions that have benefited older people, there remains a need to explore the complex relationships that exist between such intersecting social divisions as class, gender, age, ethnicity, and *individual biography*. That is, there is a need to consider the personal and social meanings of growing older to illuminate the abundant possibilities of aging. As Manheimer (2000) has argued there is “too narrow an appreciation for the lived experience of growing old” (p. 88).

*Once human life becomes the object of technical- scientific reconceptualization, the difficulties of that life become understandable only as technical problems requiring technical solutions. Being alive becomes something to solve, and finding one’s life difficult, ... is a mistake to be corrected ... [we find that] there is no ‘play’ left in life, [such that] ... new life, liveliness, some ‘movement’ might be possible.*

- David Jardine, 1992, pp. 122-123

O'Hanlon and Coleman (2004) attribute the paucity of research into the positive potentials of aging to "researchers and gerontologists (who) themselves view old age in threatening and aversive ways" (p. 33). Friedan (1993) also suggested that "the image of age as inevitable decline and deterioration . . . (is) a mystique of sorts, but one emanating not an aura of desirability, but a miasma of dread" (p. 41). Likewise, Hazan (1994), differentiating between "experience-near" (old age as self-awareness) and "experience-distance" ("objective," or scientific) approaches to aging, as perspectives "construed respectively by those on its verge and those desperate to avoid it" (p. 5). In his critique, Hazan concludes that older people "are seen as representatives of an abnormal social condition" (p. 20). He suggests that "the aged" have been constructed as "other" (see p. 18), with "deterioration and maladjustment" (p. 93) viewed as a *universal* process.

Somewhat more optimistically, Katz (2001-2002) has observed that the postmodern life course "has created new avenues for self-care and self-definition in later life thus empowering elders to innovate resourceful roles and ways of life both for themselves and for those who will follow" (p. 28). K. Gergen and M. Gergen (2000) have also suggested that we are experiencing an increasing number of individuals "with enormous potential for self-construction, for generating and sharing conceptions of self, age, and personal value . . . a population that can increasingly resist the constructions of others" (p. 290). In relation to this, the concept of "positive aging" has developed as part of a nascent "positive psychology" movement that has focused on healthy human functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; see also Williamson, 2002; Vaillant, 2004), and also has longstanding proponents in Ken Gergen and Mary Gergen who have explored the potential of later life from a social constructionist perspective (see above, and M. Gergen & K. Gergen, 2001, 2003).

### Ongoing Positioning

Social constructionism provides yet another frame, then, that I have used to position and enter into this inquiry. That is, I understand meanings and understandings of age, and the possibilities of aging, as deriving from and being a function of social interaction.<sup>2</sup> This view

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<sup>2</sup> This theoretical frame is also connected to the early work of Berger and Luckmann (1966; see Gubrium & Holstein, 1999), and Blumer (1969). For example, Blumer (1969) and other symbolic interactionists (who were influenced by Dewey) focused on the social construction of meaning and ways in which meanings are modified through interpersonal, interpretive processes.

concorde well with notions developed above regarding the possibilities of “positive aging,” and it will come as no surprise that Kenneth Gergen and Mary Gergen are leading proponents of social constructionism (see K. Gergen, 1994a; 1994b; K. Gergen, 1999; K. Gergen, 2001, M. Gergen, 2001). They describe social constructionism as not being concerned with identifying universal truths as an outcome of inquiry, but rather as offering an orientation that fosters reflexivity and dialogue.

Following from this, they suggest “there is no one ‘theory of social construction,’ nor a set of prescribed ‘constructionist practices’” (K. Gergen & M. Gergen, 1997). Gergen recently described social construction “as a set of dialogues – spanning the sciences and humanities – and primarily concerned with the collaborative constitution of meaning, the historical and cultural lodgement of science, and the ethico-political dimensions of knowledge generation and dissemination” (Mattes & Schraube, 2004, para 4). Inquiry influenced by social constructionism encompasses: 1) ideological critiques of institutional knowledge; 2) inquiry into the ways that “people achieve understanding, how failures in understanding occur, etc.,” and 3) analyses that consider the variability and diversity of people’s accounts of their everyday lives, and destabilize what is “taken-for-granted” (K. Gergen, 1994a, pp. 130-141). In relation to “methods,” K. Gergen includes qualitative approaches that emphasize “participation, narration, polyvocality, discourse, performance, social action, and the like” (para 18) as methods which recognize the constructed nature of knowledge claims, although not constructionist methods, *per se* (Mattes & Schraube, 2004).

In undertaking this inquiry, I was also influenced by a constellation of dynamic theories of human development that offer an alternative view to those emphasizing orderly progression toward defined end-points. The following is not meant to be a comprehensive review of relevant theories, but to suggest a foregrounding thread of interest and awareness. For example, I was influenced by models of human development which emphasize the continuously emergent, and relational, aspects of human experience. These include K. Gergen’s (1994b) aleatory account of development in which individuals grow, or develop within a “confluence of changing and potentially interacting factors” (p. 153). In this account, Gergen emphasizes the number of possibilities that exist for “multiple symbolic translations of the same experiential conditions” (p. 161). He also recognizes that development depends on such factors as opportunity, ability to consider alternate paths, and

one's relationships with others. Still, an individual may "move in any number of directions at any time" (p. 161). Gergen's aleatory account appreciates the remarkable variability within and between individuals across the lifespan.

Other theoretical work has also conceptualized development as complex, open-ended and relational. A leading perspective in contemporary developmental studies, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory considers the means of development as originating in, and depending on social interaction and experience within a specific culture (see Berk, 2001). Vygotsky (1981) considered language as being a pre-eminent culturally generated, symbolic tool for representing experience and communicating with others. In addition, he coined the phrase "zone of proximal development" to describe "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Thus, development occurs within a context of learning, and dynamic collaboration. Interests lead individuals to engage in activities suited to their potential development, thereby providing a frame for and promoting development.

Bakhtin (1981, 1986, 1993) has also offered an explicitly relational and dialogical conception of development in which we are always in the process of "becoming." Bakhtin's (1986) notion of a "polyphonic novel" has served to develop the idea of the self as a multiplicity of voices that is contextually constituted through interaction, moment by moment (also see Denzin, 1997: p. 36). Development occurs not as a process of "individual emergence" but is more so considered "a story of persons-in-relation, persons in inescapable dialogue with one another over the course of the entire lifespan" (Tappan, 1998: p. 393). There is what is given, and what we create in response to this. We change and develop as a result of our encounters "when we are in a state of responsive or answerable involvement" (Bakhtin, 1993, cited in Shotter, 2000a, p. 111), creatively open to the possibilities of experience.

Much of Shotter's work has explored dialogical aspects of human development, based on Bakhtin's work. For example, Shotter (2000b) asks: "What must be the nature of our everyday activities that we can ... sustain this flow routinely in our actions?" (p. 120), and suggests that we must adopt a responsively-expectant attitude, a way of responding creatively and imaginatively within a context of anticipations and possible emergent relationships. For

instance, he suggests that the everyday “inexhaustible richness of connection between details in our immediate surroundings and the rest of our lives, leaves us always with a sense of ‘something more’ to come” (p. 125). It is in how we engage with others, and the life-world in which we are immersed that we display our relationally-responsive understandings (this is contrasted with an instrumentalist representational-referential orientation to being). Newman and Holzman (1997b) have proposed that development involves moving about around where one is at, moving from “product to process, from fixed mental states and identities to relational possibilities with others” (p. 131). Their conceptualization focuses on the ongoing creation of “new forms of life” through relational play and the ongoing performance of subjectivity. They refer to development as being “continuously and nonpragmatically emergent” (p. 137), and refer to meaning-making as a key to development as we attempt to live “a head taller than ourselves” (p. 159).

Freeman and Robinson (1990) conceptualize development as occurring through individual desires, goals and strivings rather than a universal set of motivational concerns. They suggest that development occurs “within individuals” (p. 60). It begins with recognizing a disjunction between what is and another “more ideal state of knowing or being” (p. 64), which allows for developmental movement. It occurs through a self-perpetuating transformation of ends, “by being predicted neither upon preconceived ends nor the absence of ends, but upon the revision of ends, it is a process that sows the seeds of its own perpetuation” (p. 61). As ends are revised, so are the narratives of our lives. Likewise in Brandtstädter’s (1984, 1998) action-theoretical account, development is conceptualized as being more intentional than functional, involving both “tenacious goal pursuit and flexible goal adjustment.” Brandtstädter maintains that development occurs through emergence of interest and the arrangement of “developmental affordances and constraints prevailing in a given sociohistorical context ... (and reflects) the ways in which individuals, through constructive and selective activity, make use of and act on these contextual conditions” (1998, p. 847).

Overall, Berk (2001) describes the study of human development as having evolved from a small number of core theories, through diverse fragmentation, with the field currently characterized by “powerful theoretical models involving multiple interacting variables at several levels of influence--biological, psychological, proximal environmental (family,

child-care centre, school, neighbourhood), and distal environmental (community, society, cultural, historical)” (see *The Field Today*, para 1). Social constructionism, along with the array of transactional models of human development outlined above (that emphasize continuous emergence, interest and intention, relationships with others and the larger environment as contributing to development), has features in common with the interactionist perspective Dewey (1934) outlined in his text *Art as Experience*. Social constructionism holds that what is taken as “real” (knowledge) is based on social interaction. Dewey describes development as occurring through “active and alert commerce with the world; ... (through the) complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events” (p. 19). In this, Dewey presents an understanding of human experience that is developmentally realized when a “consummatory” harmonization of meaning occurs. He writes: “Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ. Even in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is aesthetic experience” (p. 19).

Experience takes on an aesthetic quality when a coalescence of meanings occurs, referenced across the past, present, and future. A positive spiral of influence is suggested between aesthetic experience, imaginative reconstruction of meaning, and human development. That is, “imagining weaves the flux of experience into a meaningful continuity by constantly organizing and reconstructing the situational event” (Alexander, 1987: p. 261), so that it becomes familiar. People grow not deterministically because of experience, but *through* experience and an “an expanded meaning scape” (p. 4). We create our lives through the *way* we experience the world, and make meaning of our experience. Development occurs through the integration of the old and new, is ongoing and interpretive. Social constructionism and dynamic, relational theories of human development have informed this inquiry .... but then, so have I.

#### Why this Study?

This inquiry has arisen from my own interest in art and aesthetic experience. As I “place pen to paper” (I am actually sitting at a computer, keyboard at hand), I find I am writing from a position of frustrated desire. Denzin (1997) writes that researchers “work outward from their own biographies to the worlds of experience that surround them” (p. 87). *Who am I? How have I arrived at this page?*

Keating (2005) recently noted, somewhat wryly, that “baby boom” researchers in the field of gerontology are themselves growing older, and that “contemporary interest in positive aspects of aging is probably not a coincidence” (p. 3). Hendricks (1992) has also described generational influences on questions and concerns addressed over time in studies of aging. This is one of the positions I claim in relation to this inquiry. I am also aging. I am aware that I am growing into middle-age. I am caught at the end of the post-war baby boom that is disrupting accepted expectations of what it means to grow into old age. I began an interdisciplinary doctoral program when I was 36 years old, a biographical moment that constituted a “coming home to myself.” I married my husband when I was 38 years old. I gave birth to our son just months before I turned 41. I look forward to beginning “a career,” finally, upon the completion of this dissertation. I am living forward into the fullness of my own life within the crags and crannies and liminal spaces that exist outside of “normative” expectations of my age. My husband has experienced his own path. We are both somewhat “out-of-step” with our contemporaries. I imagine that my husband and I will continue to be involved in some form of paid employment beyond the age of “retirement.” I feel mostly appreciative of all that is, and all that has yet to come into being, trusting, ...and yet, sometimes troubled by the extent to which I have “played” with time, dancing on the outside edges of life-course expectations, defined by such markers as education, marriage, pregnancy, birth, and career, many of which I should have properly (or normatively) accomplished, or set in course before mid-life. Of course, a diversity of experience is found within and across lives. Thankfully, this is becoming increasingly recognized.

As early as 1980, Bernice Neugarten suggested that “we are becoming accustomed to the 28 year old mayor ... the 50 year old retiree, the 65 year old father of a preschooler and the 70 year old student” (cited in K. Gergen & M. Gergen, 2000, p. 283). Likewise, Katz (1996) describes later life as being less determinant than in earlier periods, with a “blurring of traditional chronological boundaries and the integration of formerly segregated periods of life” (p. 6). Hazan (1994) describes old age as “a form of post-modern existence in which the mobilization of meaning is fluid and constant and confrontation with the self is continuous” (p. 92). Still, I believe that we can only begin to grapple with the multifarious meanings of growing older when we have faced the process of aging directly, from within our own personal experience. Often such moments catch us unaware.



*of the everyday  
 and high religious holidays,  
 celebrated around my grandparents' dining room table,  
 and experienced in the gardens,  
 woods and fields  
 surrounding their  
 old farmhouse,  
 in southwestern Ontario.*

*In the midst of this,  
 within this everyday life world,  
 care and concern was woven into presence and beingness,  
 into things and occasions,  
 within a relational web that held, sustained and renewed all of us.*

*I have been sensitive to the ways that a poeticizing or storying of our lives  
 draws us into the present moment,  
 and engenders an expansion of hope,  
 a coming together that might – connect us –  
 for a moment  
 in mutually benefiting ways.*

Preliminary proposals that I developed for my doctoral research focused on the impact of arts programming on the lives and health of frail seniors living in the community. I hoped to conduct an ethnography of an exemplary, community-based arts program in San Francisco. Given my experience of an arts program offered in a veterans' health care facility, and having worked as a researcher in the area of care of the elderly, I was interested in exploring the impact of arts-based experiences on senior's health and quality of life. I only began to consider *the developmental possibilities of coming to art in later life* when anticipated funding for my project failed to materialize and I found myself in need of *a new question*.

I reflected on the number of older artists that had been profiled in newspapers, usually in the "lifestyles" section, in a number of Canadian cities that I had lived in and visited over the early years of my doctoral program. These articles included stories of both emerging artists and the accomplishments of long-established artists. Friends and colleagues told me stories about parents and grandparents who had taken up art after they had retired. I was also aware of prominent folk artists who began to create art in later life, such as "Grandma" Moses who began to paint in her mid-seventies (see Edelson, 1995). In her study of aging, Friedan (1993) provides numerous examples of people who became painters and

writers following retirement.<sup>3</sup> I had also come across (and continue to come across) other such biographical accounts in different studies of aging (e.g., Kaufman, 1986; Savishinsky, 2000; Vaillant, 2002). A recently published book has profiled the lives of visual and performing female artists (aged 85-105 years), some of whom took up their art form in later life (Gorman, 2006). Gill (1996) includes additional examples in her book *Late Bloomers*. The book *If I Live to be 100* by Ellis (2002) includes a profile of a man whose passion for art was realized only in his later years. At 100, Harry Shapiro was concerned about producing “some decent paintings” in the four or five years he felt he had left to him. These stories suggest the possibility of growing into age by continuing to explore new vital dimensions of one’s being.

My grandparents and my mother have also inspired this work, by offering me models of a vital and strong aging. Through the many years of my relationship with both my grandparents, I had been struck by the magnificence and power of all that they have shared with me over the course of their long lives. They offered me their commitment to family and community, a strong sense of place and love of the land, following the rhythms of nature, as gifts that have inspired my work. My mother also has a strong sense of family. In addition, she has begun to enjoy a great sense of adventure and personal freedom through world travel and other new “adventures of age” she has embarked on following her retirement. Inspired by a “strong face” of age (Friedan, 1993), from a relatively early age I can remember looking forward to growing older. I remember discussing the prospect of aging with girlhood friends, and sharing how I looked forward to each decade, reflecting on the different opportunities I might embrace. What might my life be like in my 30s and 40s? What new adventures would I embrace in my 60s? How would I grow through my 70s?

These “wondering” questions continue to engage me, if not “delight and excite me” as they once did when I stood at a farther reach from this approaching horizon. As witness to the startling rate at which my son continues to grow older, I am now more worried about remaining aware of each present moment. I am attempting to best experience and enjoy my life at this time, while attending to needs, demands, and the day-to-dayness of everyday life. At bottom, I believe my interest in this area has been inspired by my own frustrated desire. I

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<sup>3</sup> These examples are profiled along with examples of older adults who embarked on other new life adventures, and others who continued to pursue lifelong interests, often following new directions in their work.

confess to an abiding interest in art making which I have been able to indulge only infrequently when I have had time and opportunity. I know the significance of art in my life by a felt absence. In the midst of the ongoing “busyness” of my life, I hold onto the idea of immersing myself in art – *at some future point*. Given this, I was keen to learn about the stories of those who had taken up art in later life to realize a longstanding dream deferred until after retirement, or that emerged only after retirement.

These then are some of the beginning points of this long journey: a great respect for the strong face of age, an interest in the potential of later life as a period of growth and development, an artistic sensibility, and *desire*, ... as I have followed my own wondering, and wandering, curiosity.

#### Transition 1 ...

I have undertaken this inquiry not to develop a fixed, explanatory theory, but to explore *the stories of older adult artists who have come to art in later life*. In the next chapter I review some additional background contexts of understanding that helped me to appreciate different aspects of the stories that the participants shared. These contexts include some of the literature on retirement and “successful aging,” as well as research on leisure on involvement in the arts in later life. I also consider various overlapping art worlds that exist in our culture, including those that are “largely hidden from view” (Wali, Severson, & Longoni, 2002). Before continuing, I offer a few more sign posts that may be helpful as we begin this journey.

The terms *art and art making* are among some of those I have used to refer to the creation of visual images (drawings, paintings, sculpture, etc.). Recognizing that the word “aesthetics” derives from the Greek word for perception, and following Eisner (2002), I use the term *aesthetic* primarily in the sense of that which does not *anaesthetize* one to the potential for engaging and interacting with others and the phenomenal world, and to refer to the developmental potential that may inhere within any moment. Eisner notes that “an anesthetic suppresses feeling; it dulls the senses. It renders you numb to feeling” (p. 81). As I use the term, “aesthetics” does not refer to philosophical theorizing focused on conceptions of beauty or assessing the quality of a particular artwork, but rather should be taken to reflect a felt quality of experience. I use the term *development* to refer to a process of

expansion that emerges from following a sense of “‘something more’ to come” (Shotter, 2000b, p. 125). I understand development as occurring through goals and strivings, and meaning-making that supports movement toward enhanced or more desired ways of enjoying life (see Freeman & Robinson, 1990). That is, people develop in response to both challenge, and interests that they find engaging and meaningful. I understand *creativity* to be fundamental to the developmental process of human life. Much of the psychological literature on “creativity” has focused on the invention of “things” (e.g., tools, concepts, etc.) that transform the larger culture. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) refers to this as large “C” creativity. Small “c,” or personal creativity is associated with fresh perception, an attitude of curiosity, wonder and excitement that may engender new understandings about the world, and thus growth and development - a view which concords more closely with the perspectives that have informed this inquiry.

In this inquiry I am more interested in the developmental affordances of art making than the way art directed to “troubled individuals” (see Kramer, 1980) may be used to effect therapeutic ends. Packard and Anderson note that federal funding policies in the United States in the 1970s led to “use of therapeutic terminology to describe traditional art programs for exceptional populations” (p. 21) such as “the elderly.” This has continued in a relatively unexamined way until the present day. My interest lies more so in healthy, relatively well-functioning individuals and their experience of arts-based involvement.

I might add as a final statement that, in this inquiry, I understand that who we are and what we invite into being through our relationship with others and the world around us is always “in play.”

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### Contextualizing Understanding(s) of the Potential of Later Life

In the first part of this literature review, I touch on various meanings of “retirement,” and accounts of late life development. I consider notions related to “serious leisure,” and vital engagement that have been used to conceptualize and explore optimal approaches to aging. I also review the literature that has focused on art and aging with a view to identifying areas that have been emphasized, relative to others that have been overlooked. I then consider the social construction of art and “art worlds,” and various perspectives on the value of art and art making. I also describe empirical findings and anecdotal reports of the benefits associated with arts-based involvement in later life. Finally, I offer excerpts from Winston Churchill’s essays regarding his experience of taking up painting in later life – in part, to suggest the rich insights that personal narratives can offer in expanding appreciative understandings of human experience. (In Chapter 3, I expand on narrative as an approach to inquiry as used in the present study).

#### Retirement and the Construction of Later Life

Retirement has emerged as a social institution only in the last half century or so. Ekerdt (1986) offers that, compared to earlier periods, “our cultural map of the life course ... (now includes) a separate stage of life called retirement” (p. 239). The construction of retirement as a significant life period in Canada occurred as a result of national policies that began to be introduced after World War I (Moody, 2006; Phillipson, 1998). The Old Age Pensions Act was introduced in 1927 to provide modest support to those aged 70 years and older with little or no income. After World War II, the Old Age Security Act provided a pension to all Canadians aged 70 years and older. It was at this point that retirement began to assume the status of a social institution. This act, along with subsequent policy programs and legislative amendments, has helped to reduce the incidence of poverty among older Canadians (see Chappell, Gee, McDonald, & Stones, 2003; McDonald & Wanner, 1990; McPherson, 2004). More recently, legislation has focused on banning mandatory retirement (Klassen & Gillin, 1999). In 1974, Manitoba outlawed mandatory retirement on the basis of discrimination based on age. Most Canadian provinces and territories have followed suit, with some allowing exceptions for specific labour force sectors. Thus, most Canadians are able to

choose when they want to retire based on their lifestyles, financial circumstances and priorities. Although some controversy exists about the adequacy of retirement pensions, it is generally agreed that older people enjoy greater financial security than in earlier periods (Health Canada, 2002).

Retirement is often defined as having left the paid labour force, with no intention of returning, in receipt of retirement income, and of advanced age. The age of retirement is often considered to be 65, when a person becomes eligible for government pension benefits. However, complex transitions characterizing this period of life makes it difficult to define “retirement” in any absolute sense. In 1976, the average age of retirement in Canada was 65.3 years of age for men, and 63.9 years for women. In 2005, the mean age was 62.0 and 60.6 years of age, respectively (Statistics Canada, n.d.).<sup>4</sup> As McDonald and Wanner (1990) have noted, pathways leading to retirement have become “increasingly complex and variable” (p. 382; also see Moody, 2006). Transitions leading to retirement, include gradual reduction in hours worked, part-time work (sometimes in another area), and sometimes commitment to a new career path (Stone, 2006). Further to this, meanings associated with the term “retirement” may shape the way that people may claim or refuse it as a status. One may not have been, or only have been inconsistently employed in the labour force, but still look forward to, or consider themselves to be retired. The concept of retirement developed primarily in relation to male employment, with early research on retirement focused primarily on male samples (see Stewart, 2004). Historically, women through their role as wives would have “adjusted” to their husbands’ retirement. However, as more women have gained entry into the labour force, retirement has increasingly become personally relevant both as a transitional experience and identity status (for a discussion of the gendered aspects of retirement experience, see McDonald, 2006a, 2006b). A decision to continue working after age 65 may reflect financial need, a desire to remain connected to a lifelong passion, need for structure, or desire for work-based social connections. On the other hand, an age discriminatory workplace, physical job demands, and retirement of one’s spouse may contribute to a decision to leave the labour force (see Chappell, Gee, McDonald, & Stones, 2003; Stewart, 2004). Likewise, retirement may occur as a result of lay-offs and prolonged

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<sup>4</sup> On the annual Labour Force Survey, respondents who are not working, and who left their last job in the past year, are asked why they left their job. A response option is “retired.”

unsuccessful job seeking, or result as an outcome of illness or disability of oneself, one's spouse or other family members. For women, in particular, the need to provide caregiving may precipitate the decision to retire and require deferment of retirement plans and interests.

Given this very brief overview, it is clear that retirement may not mean the same thing to people, and may mean different things at different points in time. The changing meaning of different patterns of transitioning to retirement, among both men and women, remains an understudied topic. Nevertheless, the development of retirement as a social institution has had a significant influence on the possibilities that older people may enjoy in later life. It has also significantly influenced the field of gerontology, contributing to the construction of later life primarily as "a problem in need of a solution."

#### Late-life Development and "Successful" Aging

##### *Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Human Development*

Despite the great variability that exists within and across individual lives (Mishler, 1999; also see developmental theories reviewed in the previous chapter), stage-based theories of human development have tended to emphasize early developmental milestones. For example, only three of eight life stages outlined in Erikson's (1959) psychosocial theory of development are concerned with adult development beyond adolescence and only two focus on mid- to late-life periods. The challenge of early adulthood (19-25 years) involves resolving intimacy needs. During adulthood (ages 25-65 years) the challenge is one of generativity, understood as encompassing "procreation, productivity and creativity" (p. 67). The final stage of life (65 years and older) involves facing the inevitability of the end of life with despair or integrity. Although demographic changes that have occurred over the past half century or so would suggest a need for a revised set of age ranges (as outlined above), for his time Erikson offered a vision of continuing developmental growth over the life course that continues to influence gerontological theorizing (see Katz, 1996, pp. 60-61).

As important as this contribution may have been, however, a developmental model of ordered change can no longer be considered viable. As previously noted, "human developmental trajectories may be virtually infinite in their variation" (Gergen, 1994b, p. 156), and normative lifespan developmental expectations have broken down. Evidence also shows that many older people view aging as a *positive period of life*. In a chapter entitled "Human aging: Why is even good news taken as bad?," Carstensen and Charles (2003)

reviewed findings that suggest older people are less depressed than younger people, have strong bonds with close friends, and experience emotional closeness with family members. Katz (2005) notes that after World War II gerontologists “adapted social science perspectives to the study of aging to expand it beyond medical and social welfare models” (p. 123). Much of this research focused on how older people might best adjust to deterioration and decline, which worked to reinforce the hold of the biomedical paradigm in gerontology. It is noteworthy that theories that developed during this period focused on the significance of retirement as a defining stage of later life.

#### *Other Influential and Emergent Theories of Aging*

The following theories are not inclusive of all those proposed, but cover some of the frequently cited theoretical work in this area. For example, Havighurst and Albrecht (1953) introduced the idea of *activity theory* by emphasizing ongoing engagement (mental and physical) as a means of enhancing life satisfaction and maintaining self-esteem in retirement. According to activity theory, successful adjustment to old age depends on adapting one’s activities, or substituting new activities for those that one may have to let go of (also see Lemon, Bengtson, & Peterson, 1972). *Disengagement theory* proposes that awareness of impending death in old age involves “an inevitable process in which many of the relationships between a person and other members of society are severed, and those remaining are altered in quality” (Cumming & Henry, 1961, p. 210). The primary tasks of older people are “to be rather than do, to maintain his [sic] equilibrium, *to symbolize the past*, rather than to change and learn and create a new history” (p. 223, italics added). A reduced level of expectation was considered mutually beneficial for both the larger society, and for older individuals as they prepared for death. Erickson (1959) in his psychosocial theory of development also suggested that “burdened by physical limitations and confronting a personal future that may seem more inescapably finite ..., those nearing the end of the life cycle find themselves struggling to accept the inalterability of the past” (p. 56). In both of these theories, “life review” is considered an important developmental task, a notion which was subsequently elaborated by Butler (1963) in his *theory of life review*.

Butler defined life review as involving a “return to consciousness of past experience, (in particular) ... unresolved conflicts; (which are) ... surveyed and reintegrated .... prompted by the realization of approaching dissolution and death” (p. 66). According to

Butler, life review as a naturally occurring process is often manifested as reminiscence. This may occur unconsciously and consciously in various forms (oral, written, etc.). However, Hyland and Ackerman (1988) found that both older and younger adults engaged in frequent reminiscence, relative to those in middle-age. These findings, which were confirmed by Webster (1995; Webster & McCall, 1999), suggest that reminiscence requires having available time, and in addition, may contribute to self-identity and self-esteem *across* the life span, and not solely in preparation for one's impending death. To the extent that old age is conflated with death, life review theory can be critiqued as being based on a view of older people as "finished entities," limiting appreciation of the ways in which we continue to grow in later life (also see Cohen & Taylor, 1998). This critique can likewise be applied to dying. Palliative care pioneer, Dr. Balfour Mount, speaking from 30 years of experience of caring for the dying, and his own experience of cancer, described the experience of preparing for death as an "extraordinarily productive and valuable" period of life. He suggests that we search not for the meaning of our lives, but for "connectedness, ... to ourselves, to others, to the cosmos, however conceived" (Scott, 2002, p. B2).

Along these lines, Joseph Campbell (1988) has suggested that it is not meaning that people are seeking, but rather it is "an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive" (p. 5). Dissanayake (2000) recalls the former American poet laureate Robert Hass as saying that people die every day from "the lack of what is in poetry." She writes, "I assume he was referring to sense of meaning, of connectedness, of seriousness, the validity and momentousness of one's sense of being," adding, "if our society does not sufficiently provide such things, our arts - at least some of our arts - can. They allow us to show how much we care .... They encourage attention to and involvement with the most abiding and affecting part of human life" (p. 192). These ideas recall Dewey's (1934) work on art and experience, in which he describes dynamic transactions between the self and environment through which heightened vitality is experienced, and there is "complete interpenetration of self and the world" (p. 19). As described earlier, the interplay between experience and having *an experience* is influenced by the quality of attending that we bring to our experience, as informed by our senses. According to Dewey, we can intensify our openness to, and deepen our awareness of the

world, such that the most mundane and routine of our doings become infused with significance. For Dewey “art is not a specific category of human experience,” but rather is “a way of articulating experience so that it realizes expressive meaning and value” (Alexander, 1987, p. 250). It is realized in the integration of experience and embodies what may be described as “a life well-lived,” and by extension ... *a good old age*.

Returning to developmental theories that have been proposed to describe the possibilities of later life, activity theory has often been prescriptively interpreted to suggest the frequency of “activity” will help older people to adjust to the “emptiness” of later life, without considering the quality or meaning of these involvements. Likewise, disengagement theory does not take into account the different meanings that some people may associate with letting go of different roles and activities. For example, some people may prefer a less structured life while others may prefer to embrace a quiet contemplative lifestyle. In sum, early theories can be criticized for being failing to capture the diversity of experience, and the significance and meaning of people’s various involvements at different points in time.

Other theories developed during this early period offered a somewhat expanded, although still limited view of the potentials of later life. For example, Atchley’s (1971) *continuity theory* suggests that people adapt to change in relation to what they have experienced in the past. Lifestyle patterns, values and preferences established prior to retirement are viewed as resources that are used to meet challenges associated with aging. In 1999, Atchley presented a body of research that indicated considerable consistency over time in thought patterns, lifestyle, personal goals, and capacity to adapt to changing circumstances in later life. Baltes and Baltes (1990) offer a theoretical framework of *selective optimization with compensation* by which older adults strategically select different approaches to achieving their social, economic, and personal aspirations. These theories have not been subject to much empirical testing, but along with theories previously described attest to a long and abiding interest in adaptive aging processes in the face of declining physical and other capacities.

In recent years, the notion of “successful aging” has captured the gerontological imagination. Havighurst (1961) coined the phrase “successful aging” in an article he wrote for the first issue of *The Gerontologist*. “Successful aging” subsequently developed into a focus for research following its introduction as a theme at the 1986 annual meeting of the

Gerontological Society of America (Fisher, 1995). Rowe and Kahn initially presented an argument for studying those with better physiological and psychosocial characteristics in late life, or “successful agers” compared to average or “usual agers” in 1987. The results of their landmark study suggested that those who age successfully have a “low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life” (Rowe & Kahn, 1997, p. 433; also see Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Based primarily on a biomedical perspective, their model suggests a number of health promoting approaches for staying healthy. However, just as quickly as it gained a pre-eminent position within gerontology, critical discussion emerged that questioned the very notion of “successful aging.” For example, Holstein and Minkler (2003) suggest that only at an objective distance could one conclude that “a disease-resistant 80 year old man playing golf at Augusta or skiing at Aspen is aging more successfully than a woman in a wheelchair who tutors inner city children or writes poetry or feels a passionate energy that she is too fragile to enact (Maxwell, 1968)” (p. 792). Scheidt, Humphreys, and Yorgason (1999) likewise argue:

The paradigm is parochial with respect to defining criteria; fails to incorporate adequately life course dynamics, particularly the multiple meanings of age-related losses and dependency; fails to address the generalizability of assumptions and findings to heterogeneous populations of elders; ignores evidence indicating numerous routes to aging well; and fails to consider the implications for elders who cannot age “successfully” due to incapacitation or lack of access to environmental resources (p. 277).

Others, such as Hepworth (1999) and Katz (2000) have made similar criticisms.

Despite these critiques, the idea of “successful aging” has gained substantial recognition. It has proved a catalyst for research, including studies conducted by Rowe and Kahn (1997, 1998) that have been funded by the MacArthur Foundation. Related terms such as “healthy aging” (Guralnik & Kaplan, 1989), “productive aging” (Bass, Caro, & Chen, 1993; Bond, Cutler, & Grams, 1995; Butler, Oberlink, & Schechter, 1990; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sherraden, 2001), “active aging” (WHO, 2002), “optimal aging” (Aldwin & Gilmer, 2004), and “aging well” (e.g. Chapman, 2005; Vaillant, 2002) have been proposed and studied. Although not well-differentiated, these terms suggest interest in different aspects of positive aging. Only infrequently have these studies considered opportunities that may be realized and enjoyed only *later in life*.

### *The Question of Unfolding Capacities*

... A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belonged. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life's morning.

- Carl Jung, 1933, p. 109

What may be gained *because of age* that serves to enlarge and enrich our lives? What about the “progressive and cumulatively unfolding of capacities” (Moody, 1988a, p. 34), and realization of newly emergent interests and abilities? Offering a somewhat sardonic observation, Ryff (1989a) has observed: “Ponce de Leon may have missed the point. Instead of searching for the fountain of youth, which would have arrested human experience in an incomplete, unfinished form, a greater quest would have been to discover the richness and rewards of life lived fully to the end” (p. 35). Drawing on life-span developmental theory (e.g., Erikson’s [1959] psychosocial stage model), personal growth theories proposed by Maslow, Rogers, Jung and Allport, and Jahoda’s (1958) model of positive mental health, she proposed an early, integrative model of successful aging which focuses on wellness and continued development, and emphasizes self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff, 1982).

Building on this, Ryff and Singer (1998) have offered a philosophically grounded formulation of positive human health, which they define as the “life course unfolding of well-being.” This is conceived as a dynamic process, rather than an achieved end-state. Two core components are outlined: 1) leading a life of purpose, which encompasses “the autonomy to choose and then actively pursue projects that give value to one’s life” (p. 7); and 2) quality connections to others. Positive self-regard and mastery are also described as important elements of positive human health. Ryff and Singer suggest that “it is one’s sense of purposefulness and deep connection to others that likely builds and maintains positive self-regard, sense of self-realization, personal growth, and mastery, with the latter serving to enhance the pursuit of life goals and quality relations with others” (p. 10). Further, difficult life experiences are viewed as offering opportunities for enriching one’s engagement with life, deepening relationships with others, and heightening one’s self-regard and mastery.

In keeping with the positive and expansive models of development outlined above, various theoretical standpoints have emerged that offer promise for exploring the potential of

aging. For example, the life course perspective views development as an ongoing process which is contextualized in relation to one's overall life course (see Elder, 1998; Giele & Elder, 1999; Settersten, 2003). According to this perspective, development occurs through the experience of trajectories, transitions, continuities and discontinuities, and related meanings that individuals develop as they live their lives over time. It is viewed as multidimensional (involving biological, social, psychological and other dimensions), multispherical (occurring in family, work, education, leisure and other spheres), and multidirectional (with simultaneously occurring gains and losses). This perspective focuses on the life course within the context of history and prevailing social structures, and considers how individual lives are embedded and shaped by their experience of a particular time and place, and how individual lives also shape the larger society (see Setterston, 2003, p. 17). Recognizing that prior experiences, imagined futures, and current social contexts influence development, this perspective also appreciates the great variability that is found within stories told about human lives.

As a critique of mainstream inquiry, critical gerontology offers an approach to exploring the potential of later life which focuses on unsettling conventional understandings regarding aging. Murphy and Longino (1997) have described old age as no longer representing "a place on a temporal trajectory" but as simply being an "existential construct" that is referenced in relation to various life possibilities that may be considered along the life course (p. 90). Resignifying the "aging process as heterogeneous and indeterminate," critical gerontologists "advocate stronger ties to the humanities, endorse reflexive methodologies, historicize ideological attributes of old age, and promote radical political engagement" (Katz, 1996, p. 4). In doing so, they hope to expand awareness and appreciation of what has been hidden from view. A sampling of this work would include: Baars (1991); Featherstone and Wernick (1995); Katz (1996; 2005); Kenyon, Birren, and Schroots (1991); Moody (1988a, 1988b, 1989, 1991, 1993, 2006); Murphy and Longino (1997; Phillipson (1998); Tornstam (1992); Weiland (1995); and Woodward (2003). Contributions have also appeared in texts edited by Cole, Achenbaum, Jakobi, and Kastenbaum (1993) and Cole, Kastenbaum, and Ray (2000), and a special issue of the *Canadian Journal on Aging* (see Kenyon, 1993). Representatives of this movement would also include K. Gergen and M. Gergen (2000; M. Gergen & K. Gergen, 2001), Gubrium, Holstein and Buckholdt (1994), as well as scholars

who have contributed to a developing “feminist gerontology,” such as Garner (1999), Kunneman (1997), Neysmith (1995) and Ray (1996, 1999). Critical gerontology encompasses the study of how older people themselves interpret and describe their lives, an area that has been called *narrative gerontology* (Kenyon, Clark, & de Vries, 2001; also see Chapter 3). In contrast to earlier, more limited accounts of aging, development is viewed as an ongoing, open-ended process. Emphasis is placed on the plurality of meanings associated with older people’s ongoing experience of life. In addition, Moody (1988a) suggests that critical gerontology should also reveal the potential of later life, of “what it means for the last stage of life to be a period of freedom and fulfillment” (p. 28).

*A Good Old Age: How Older People View “Successful Aging”*

Various theoretical formulations of “successful” aging as outlined in the previous section have led to an increase in concern for well-being in later life, including interest in how older people themselves describe their views or experiences of “a good old age.” Yielding to a resonant synchronicity, I begin with a work that Erik Erikson published in 1986 with his wife, Joan Erikson, and Helen Kivnik, when he was 84 years old. In their text, *Vital Involvement in Old Age*, they considered the experience of later life by interviewing 29 octogenarians living in Berkeley, California. Based on these interviews, the term “vital involvement” was coined to mean “to be alive and to stimulate the environment even as it stimulates us, to challenge the environment to involve us” (p. 33). Relationships with family and friends, as well as meaningful activity were identified as important in the experience of a vital aging. The authors suggest that “the satisfaction of those who are enjoying their retirement does not come from an ‘open-ended vacation,’ but from new expressions of skilfulness and perseverance, from pursuing new and modified hobbies, from turning old skills and interests in new directions” (p. 159).

A sampling of subsequent interview-based studies also suggest a variety of themes that older people (mostly community-dwelling) associate with the idea of “successful aging.” Ryff (1989b) interviewed 102 older Americans (with an average age of 73.5 years), and identified the following as factors associated with well-being: 1) being “other”-oriented (having positive relationships with others, caring about others); 2) being able to accept change; 3) continued growth; 4) enjoying life; and 5) having a sense of humour. Likewise, Fisher (1992) asked 19 older men and women (aged 62-85 years) about the meanings they

associated with “life satisfaction” and “successful aging.” Life satisfaction was described in relation to having generally fulfilled their earlier expectations of life. In contrast, understandings of successful aging were based on developmental considerations. Successful aging was associated with a “present-future orientation about what they were doing and hoped to do” (p. 196). In a subsequent study with 40 older people (aged 61-92 years), Fisher (1995) identified interactions with others, a sense of purpose, self-acceptance, personal growth, and autonomy as central aspects of “successful aging.”

Nilsson, Ekman and Sarvimaki (1998) interviewed 30 older community-dwelling Swedes aged 82-92 years about their experiences of aging and identified a “successful aging, or enjoying life” pattern. Six of the participants described a great zest for life, and “did not view themselves as old ... despite the presence of disease and impairments” (p. 98). They enjoyed an active social life and had close, affectionate relationships with family and friends, including relationships with younger people. They were involved in meaningful activities, caring for others or practicing interests or hobbies. They did not spend time reminiscing about their earlier life. They viewed the past positively, and considered their life to be good overall. Further, they viewed the future “as something in which they will be a part” (p. 99). Additional patterns included: a good old age; a comparatively good life in old age; bad aging; and a miserable life in old age. A “good old age” was also associated with commitment to meaningful pursuits or hobbies. Passive or idle levels of activity engagement were associated with other patterns.

Bryant, Corbett, and Kutner (2001) conducted a grounded theory study of 22 older people selected from a larger survey sample regarding their perspectives on healthy aging. They found that health meant being able to go and do something, which included both physical activities and those that were mentally stimulating. Having goals that were viewed as worthwhile and desirable, sufficient independence and ability, along with various supportive resources and a positive attitude, all contributed to perceptions of healthy aging. Interviews that Knight and Ricciardelli (2003) conducted with 60 participants (aged 70-101 years old) yielded health, activity, personal growth, happiness, close relationships, independence and an appreciation of life as themes related to successful aging. They found that although many of the participants had experienced physical decline or health setbacks “there was still a tendency to see themselves as quite healthy and active” (p. 238). In their

qualitative study, Duay and Bryan (2006) found that their participants (n=18) viewed engaging with others, positive coping (or adjustment to changes), maintaining physical and mental health, financial security, and new learning as important elements of successful aging. Guse and Masesar (1999) found that for 32 long-term care residents in Winnipeg, Manitoba aging successfully involved “being friendly, having a sense of humour, being interested in and willing to help others, adapting to changes, never giving up or letting things get you down, and enjoying yourself as much as you possibly can” (p. 534).

As suggested by many of the foregoing studies, as well as Ryff and Singer’s (1998) model of positive human health (outlined earlier), health and well-being need not be discounted even when illness or disability is experienced. Similarly, McWilliam, Stewart, Brown, Desai, and Codere (1996) found that older people with chronic illness experience health as a process that involves struggling with what is and what will be, creatively balancing resources, responding positively to challenges by realizing their aspirations, and otherwise accepting their life experience. Some strategies for promoting health included creating a sense of purpose, goal setting, and learning about one’s self. Moch (1989, 1998) studied the phenomenon of “health-within-illness” within the nursing literature and described the opportunity for increased meaningfulness of life, through relationships with others and awareness of self.

The conceptions outlined above are, of course, culturally and historically bound. Nevertheless, the studies described above offer a counterpoint to formulations of positive functioning developed by researchers and theorists from an “objective,” or external standpoint, outside of the experience of old age. Unlike Rowe and Kahn’s definition of “successful aging,” older people’s conceptions of well-being do not require the absence of disease, or maintenance of functional capacities. From the perspective of older people, there is no single way of aging “successfully.” Bryant, Corbett, and Kutner (2001) observe that health and well-being are viewed “as a reflection of the lived experience of daily life, as a capacity to engage meaningfully with and respond to the contingencies of daily life regardless of afflictions and (dis)abilities” (p. 940). Fisher (1995) concluded that “the heart of successful aging – (is) learning about one’s self and growing, staying active and involved, reaching out to others, and trying to make a difference” (p. 249). Overall, these studies challenge ideas of predictable stages of human development in later life, and extend

understanding of aging in relation to positive aspects of aging, and the potential of later life. In addition, a more involved, subjective, dynamic, and meaningful engagement with life is suggested than that conveyed in many of the theoretical formulations outlined earlier.

### Activity and Leisure in Later Life

Insights and perspectives into successful aging, as described above, represent the beginning points of understanding of how later life might be fully experienced and well-lived, as we grow into “a good old age.” What can be taken from the foregoing sections is that: 1) retirement affords an expansion of available time; and 2) that leisure involvement can contribute to the experience of “aging well.” However, understanding of connections between these areas – leisure, health and well-being, and aging – is for the most part underdeveloped.

#### *Research on Leisure Involvement: Approaches and Findings*

A review of three major Canadian texts in gerontology suggests somewhat uneven concern for leisure and activity in later life. McPherson’s (2004) and Novak and Campbell’s (2006) texts on aging in Canada both cover this topic, and suggest that older people can develop new interests, although physical fitness and other “productive” activities (such as volunteering) are emphasized. Chappell, Gee, McDonald, and Stones (2003) do not consider leisure as an explicit aspect of retirement or as a component of health and well-being in their text. None of these texts includes consideration of the arts in later life. Much of the leisure and aging literature, and literature on health promotion and aging, has focused on physical activity as a central leisure activity. In a situation that may be unique to Canada, the term “active living” is often conflated with physical activity (see, for example, Cousins & Horne, 1999). This has followed from Fitness Canada’s (1991) influential definition of “active living” as “a way of life in which physical activity is valued and integrated into daily living” (p. 3), which has served to cast physical activity as providing a singularly optimal means of enhancing health and well-being in later life.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, research in this area has shown significant positive relationships between exercise, health and well-being (Bassey, 2005; also see Wister, 2003). But what about the benefits of the other activities and involvement in later life?

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<sup>5</sup> The emphasis on physical activity programs has even influenced description of educational programs for seniors. For example, lifelong learning programs are described as “mental fitness” programs (see Cusack & Thompson, 2003).

Research on patterns of leisure involvement in later life has tended to focus on simple frequency counts, or “time use” patterns to document the impact of involvement in different kinds of activities. Analysis approaches typically consider the differential influence of “active leisure” (such as physical activity, volunteering, hobbies) compared to “passive leisure” (watching television, listening to the radio). “Social activity” is also sometimes compared to other kinds of activities. For example, Zimmer, Hickey, and Serale (1995) explored relationships between different kinds of activity and well-being among older people with arthritis and found a significant relationship for social activities. In contrast, solitary and physical activities had little impact on overall well-being. Based on a six-year longitudinal study, Menec (2003) found that greater overall activity levels, and in particular, social and productive work (including volunteer work, housework, and yard work) were associated with happiness, better physical function, and reduced mortality. Stobart, Dosman, and Keating (2006) found that older people who were less healthy and less satisfied with their lives spent more time on passive leisure.

Several longitudinal studies have associated activity involvement with reduced cognitive impairment. The relationship between activity and survival rates in later life has also been examined. Bassuk, Glass, and Berkman (1999) found that regular social activities protected against cognitive decline among 2,812 community-dwelling older people who were assessed over a 12-year period. A longitudinal study of 732 older adults followed over a three-year period in Sweden found that mentally stimulating and socially-oriented activity appeared to be associated with maintaining cognitive function (Wang, Karp, Winblad, & Fratiglioni, 2002). Based on a study of 469 older people who were followed over a five-year period, Verghese, Lipton, Katz, Hall, Derby, Kuslansky, Ambrose, Sliwinski, and Buschke (2003) found that reading, playing board games, playing a musical instrument, and dancing were associated with a lower risk of dementia. Finally, Glass, Mendes de Leon, Marottoli, and Berkman (1999) showed that social, productive and physical activities were independently associated with survival, even after controlling for pre-existing health status and history of disease. They suggest that social and productive activities are as effective as fitness activities in lowering the risk of death.

What can be concluded from these studies is that how we spend our time significantly influences our experience of life, and thus our experience of “aging well.” However, there

has been little discussion or agreement on critical dimensions of leisure. Usually a limited number and varying assortment of activities are considered from study to study. The meanings that older people associate with different leisure activities are also rarely explored (Freysinger, 1995 and Kleiber, 1999 provide exceptions). Rather, more interest has focused on changing patterns of leisure involvement in later life, with many studies concerned with, a now familiar theme, documenting loss and decline. For example, Strain, Grabusic, Searle, and Dunn (2002) using longitudinal data from Manitoba focused on patterns of continuing or ceasing a number of leisure activities, such as watching television, reading, shopping, playing cards, travel, attending spectator events (theatre, movies, sports), etc. They found that passive activities (television viewing, reading) were more likely to be continued over time, and that being younger, having more education, and better health was associated with more active leisure involvement. Articulating what appears in this literature to be an accepted understanding, Stebbins (2001) suggests that “elderly retirees tend to continue with the leisure they have come to enjoy in their earlier years” (p. 136) until declines associated with aging eventually limit their participation.

Although leisure interests are for the most part viewed as a stable trait, or innate predisposition (see Roadburg, 1985), some studies have explored the development of new leisure interests following retirement. For example, McGuire, Dottavio, and O’Leary (1987) studied older outdoor enthusiasts and identified two groups: “leisure contractors,” those who demonstrated focused commitment and continuity over time; and “leisure expanders,” individuals who continued to explore new activities throughout their lives. Iso-Ahola, Jackson, and Dunn (1994) considered patterns of engaging in different leisure activities over the life span (based on 1984/1985 Alberta survey data) and found that although “overall quantity of leisure participation may decrease with years, ... there was a significant increase in the number of people starting ‘hobbies’ and ‘home-based’ activities over the life cycle” (p. 227). Based on longitudinal data from Ontario, Singleton, Forbes, and Agwani (1993) documented relatively stable activity patterns over the life course, along with a tendency among older men with more education and higher income to explore new activities following retirement.

*“Optimal” Forms of Leisure: Developmental and Other Benefits*

In this inquiry, I am assuming the position that simple involvement in many different activities *does not* directly enhance the experience of aging well. Rather, benefits that may be experienced occur more so through the meaning that such involvement holds for an individual, and how it contributes to their enjoyment of the world. Hendricks and Cutler (2003) assert that “leisure is not merely a listing of activities,” that are restorative in some way, “but has meaning that is inordinately more phenomenological than any binary definition can convey” (p. 110). Recalling concepts developed by Huizinga (1955) in his classic study of “play” in Western culture, Hendricks and Cutler suggest that:

it is through play, in one form or another, that all of us, ... find relatively low-risk opportunities to try out alternative self-concepts, modes or styles of interaction, personas, capabilities, and competencies. In the event of failure the only response required is that one was merely playing .... In the face of success, new experiences are ... assimilated into a person’s identity and presentation. (p. 115)

According to this account, play provides a context for development. Huizinga described play as involving a “stepping out of ‘real life’ into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own” (p. 8). In play “there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action” (p. 1). Playfulness refers to a way of being in the world, an imaginative orientation that allows us to remain open to exploring varying perspectives, and relational engagements that may be calling one “into play.” Compared to the play of children which is described as being integral to their “development,” adult play is most often identified as “leisure.”

It has been proposed that the kinds of leisure in adulthood that provide the conditions for enjoyment and well-being are those pursuits that hold great personal interest, are challenging, require commitment, and development of skill. Mannell (1993), following from the earlier work of Kelly and his colleagues (e.g., Kelly & Ross, 1989, p. 57), uses the term “high investment leisure” to describe these kinds of activities. Mannell describes “a growing belief among researchers that leisure needs to be more than simply a pleasant, diversionary, escape-oriented experience if it is to contribute substantially to quality of life” (p. 127). Leisure that is good for you, then, begins to sound a lot like work! These ideas also recall theories touched on in Chapter 1 that suggest that development occurs through individual desires, goals, and strivings. Interest in forms of leisure that contribute to well-being has also

led to the development of such concepts as “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 1982, 1992, 1997, 2001) and “flow” (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990, 1996).

Stebbins has differentiated between “serious” and “casual” leisure based on ethnographic studies he conducted of professional and amateur involvement in such areas as music, theatre, sport, astronomy, community volunteering, and the like. While casual leisure includes spectator sports and other activities that are engaged in to pass the time, “serious leisure” refers to the pursuit of an activity in which those involved substantively “launch themselves on a career centred on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience” (Stebbins, 1992, p. 126). “Serious leisure” involves commitment and perseverance. Stebbins (2001) notes the “fundamentally populist character of serious leisure; it is an activity pursued by ordinary people who recognize it as special” (p. 21). Typically, participants strongly identify with their chosen pursuit. In addition, a distinctive social world often develops around the activity, which helps to structure and support it.

According to Stebbins (1992), benefits of serious leisure include: self-actualization (opportunity to develop one’s talents, knowledge; fulfill an aspect of one’s potential); self-expression (durable benefits, reflecting one’s skills); self-conception (formation of an identity around the leisure activity); self-gratification (enjoyment); self-enrichment (attainment of memorable experiences as a resource for living); re-creation (regeneration, through a focus of concentration, or absorption); and monetary awards (see pp. 94-95). In addition, he identifies “comraderie” as an important aspect of serious leisure, noting “the appeal of talking about it (the activity), and being part of the scene” (p. 95). Those involved in serious leisure interact with each other, with their various “publics” (which can include family and friends, and those buying their work), and their professional counterparts (including instructors, association members, and the like). Stebbins notes that those involved in serious leisure associate strong ideals and values with their pursuits, in part as a way of accounting for their interest and investment in these pursuits (see p. 90).

The subjective experiential aspects of serious leisure involvement have most frequently been described in relation to the concept of “flow” as introduced by Csikszentmihalyi (1975), and expanded upon in his later work (1990, 1996). Flow is used to describe a “state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the

sheer sake of doing it” (1990, p. 4). Csikszentmihalyi associates flow with optimal experience, characterized by feelings of “joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life” (p. xi). Flow is initiated by focusing one’s attention and energy on achieving a challenging, yet realistic, goal-directed activity, such that there is a merging of attention and action. The level of challenge is comparable to, or is gauged at a level slightly higher than one’s level of skill or ability. During flow there is a loss of awareness of self, time, one’s worries and preoccupations. Csikszentmihalyi suggests that by “integrating one’s actions into a unified flow experience” (p. 216), flow contributes to an overall sense of wholeness and personal meaning. These notions again recall those that Dewey (1934) developed in *Art as Experience*, described earlier.

Developing the notion of flow in relation to those activities that support an absorbing and meaningful relationship to the world, Nakamura (2002; also see Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) introduced the concept of “vital engagement” in her study of continuing creative engagement of eminent older adults involved in artistic, scientific, and social scientific domains. Key features of vital engagement include enjoyed absorption (or “flow”), in an activity that is sustained over time, provides a link with the outside world, and is considered meaningful and significant. Another aspect of such involvement is that it is “structured,” and is engaged in with a specific purpose in mind. In her study, Nakamura (2002) focused primarily on the continuation of engagement in longstanding domains of interest. Other ethnographic work in this area has looked at development of *new* leisure interests following retirement. For example Weiss’ (2005) *The Experience of Retirement* offers insights into new worlds of experience and engagement that may open up to people following retirement. On the basis of interviews with 89 people, Weiss offers the following advice: “Whatever retirees choose to do, in the time they once gave to work, the activities should, ideally, sustain their feelings of worth, be intellectually and emotionally rewarding, and reduce their vulnerability to isolation” (p. 113). He also identifies several characteristics of activities that contribute to one’s enjoyment of retirement, including “flow,” as well as opportunities for recognition (see p. 131).

The narrative portrayals of 26 recent retirees living in a rural community developed by Joel Savishinsky (2000) in *Breaking the Watch: The meanings of retirement in America* underscore the diverse ways people experience retirement. Whether pursuits involved newly

discovered or resurrected interests, Savishinsky describes two distinct approaches to retirement: “One was a well-planned process that emphasized carefully laid out purposes, reasons, and agendas, and the other a philosophy that stressed a Zen-like mind-frame of openness, uncertainty, and expectation” (p. 84). In a subsequent article, Savishinsky (2001) identified three dominant “American” approaches to adjusting to retirement, including: *deep involvement in art*, public service, and self exploration (italics added). These patterns were associated with attempts to reconcile “passion and purpose ... self-fulfillment and social responsibility” (p. 41). He describes a man who by accident “found himself launched, unwittingly, on a new passion for sculpture – what he later came to call ‘the poetry of the matter’” (p. 42). Another participant wrote and illustrated poetry about her Jewish heritage, her life as a daughter, teacher, mother, wife, and lover. After losing a leg in a car accident she wrote: “*Who are you/ when some parts/ are missing, and/ you question what is left?*” She had taken a creative writing course after her retirement, and discovered a passion for words. At this stage, she considered her life to be her work: “She wanted to understand it, and play with it, to paint and put words to it” (pp. 48-49). Another participant became involved in painting after a hiatus of 45 years “because this was finally her chance, as she put it, ‘to go looking for the light’” (p. 49).

#### Art in Later Life: Engaging and Creating “Art Worlds”

It is clear from much of the foregoing that late-life leisure can provide opportunities for purpose and enjoyment, growth, development, and well-being. In locating inquiry into art in later life I found it helpful to consider various intersecting areas of scholarship, such as writing on the nature and structure of “art worlds,” and the value of the arts. Although there has been interest in the *emergence* of involvement in art making and the influence of arts-based pursuits on one’s enjoyment of later life, many studies in this area have considered the effects of aging on the artistic output of eminent artists – and this is where I begin.

#### *Continuity, Change and Emergence of Interest*

In an early study Lehman (1953) concluded that eminent artists, scientists, and other cultural contributors experienced their “greatest” achievements before mid-life, with declines in achievement noted thereafter. Other historical evidence, however, attests to the continued growth of many long-lived artists, such as Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Picasso, and Georgia O’Keefe (see for example, Antonini & Magnolfi, 1992; Cohen, 2000; Friedan,

1993; Osgood, 1993; and others). Lindauer's (1993, 2003) research suggests that artistic creativity continues into the later years. In terms of creative output, he identified master works that were completed by artists in their 40s and 50s. He also found that artists who continued with their art beyond "retirement" age, often worked into their late old age. Munsterberg (1983) showed that many great artists completed their most profound and aesthetically successful works late in life. Other studies also suggest a positive or null effect of aging on the work achieved by artists. Lindauer, Orwoll, and Kelley (1997) considered the relation between aging and creativity based on questionnaire responses of 88 graphic artists 60 years or older, who were nominated as creative by recognized artists. In terms of the quality, quantity, and originality of their work, a positive portrayal of the influence of aging was obtained. Physical and sensory losses of aging were described as largely irrelevant, as they could strategically be overcome.

Likewise, studies of the self-perceptions of artists (including those who became involved in art in later life) suggest that creativity does not decline over time (see Dohr & Forbess, 1986; Lorenzen-Huber, 1991; Reed, 2005). Mishler's (1999) study of the lives of five craft artists revealed various career pathways, including movement from casual involvement to serious engagement in later life when other responsibilities and commitments have subsided. Others have also made note of "late bloomers" who became involved in art, and known for their artistic achievements only in later life. An oft-cited example, Anna Mary Robertson (Grandma Moses) took up painting at 78 years of age and continued with art past her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday (Marling, 2006). Elizabeth Layton enrolled in an art class at the age of 68 to help her deal with depression. Even after her depression lifted, she continued to paint and experienced significant success with her work (Lambert, 1994). Her paintings were exhibited in art museums throughout United States, as well as internationally (Lambert, 1995). Noted as a gifted amateur artist, Winston Churchill began painting at the age of 42. He devoted much of his time in his later years to painting, ultimately producing more than 500 canvases. When he was 84 the Royal Academy of Arts in London held a retrospective exhibit of his work (see Gombrich, 1965; Soames, 1990).

Simonton (1988, 1998) addressed a number of weaknesses in Lehman's early, foundational work (such as ignoring the artists' "age of death" and found that the relationship between age and creative output was dependent on the domain of creative

activity. Simonton concluded that artistic creativity can continue until very late periods, and that “late bloomers may attain career peaks at ages at which their colleagues may be well past their prime” (1998, p. 13). Simonton suggests that this may be due in part to differences in motivation, more clearly articulated goals, and desire. What can be taken from this overview is that there are many ways individuals may “come to art” and experience artistic creativity over their life. Many artists, of course, achieve recognition only after devoting many years to their art. Some patterns that may be usefully explored in relation to pathways described above include those narrative forms Gergen (1994a) has proposed to describe the unfolding of individual lives, including: the stability narrative (consistent over time); progressive and regressive narratives; tragic narrative (rapid downfall); comedy-romance (downfall, followed by progress); “happily ever after;” and “heroic saga” narratives.

Recognizing that the notion of decline (and likewise, the notion of “growth”) is socially constructed, it is instructive to consider Hendricks’ (1999) relational analysis of “creativity.” Similar to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) systems model which conceptualizes creativity as occurring at the intersection of the person (individual-level interest and capacity), domain (constitutive rules and regulations) and field (constituted by domain gatekeepers), Hendricks suggests the need to view creativity “as an outcome of a recursive sweep of social roles, norms and expectations that yield cognitive maps of shared meanings.” He maintains that “creativity is woven from many threads to be sure, but none are dissociated from referential communities that mediate meaning” (p. 96). Although much of the literature reinforces “a presumption that social context plays little if any role” (p. 102), Hendricks argues that creativity cannot be understood separate from “the frames of reference of actors themselves insofar as meanings are emergent properties negotiated, renegotiated and fused from social and individual resources” (p. 102). In addition, recognizing that “decline” is a socially constructed notion that may be viewed in different ways, including positive ways, Hendricks suggests that some artists may turn away from their own career building pursuits, and turn to the nurturing of others in later life, or they may begin to explore other forms of creative expression or engagement.

Katz and Campbell (2005) suggest the need to consider the material contexts and conditions in which artistic creativity develops, noting that “a narrative of creativity across the life span that supersedes individual differences, artistic traditions,

and historical contexts” has developed in the field of gerontology (p. 106). They note as problematic a broad focus on creativity that:

shifts it from artistic products and collections to the adaptive human capacity for imaginative problem-solving and coping with the physical and cognitive challenges of aging. For example, in their examination of successful aging and creativity, Fisher and Specht interview older artists and observe, “creative activity is less about the products resulting from the process as it is about the process itself” (1999, p. 467). Artwork, when defined as an expression of self, means that older artists are “less afraid of challenge and the associated frustration” (p. 469) and thus become “role models of successful aging” (p. 470; also see McLeish, 1976). ( p. 106)

Katz and Campbell argue that this narrative ignores the “often contradictory conditions of production and the historically situated lives of the heroic artists themselves.” Further they suggest “where gerontological and historical writers on art venture beyond these narratives on creativity, they offer new interpretive directions” (p. 107), at which point they turn their attention to question of the “late-life style” of aging eminent artists.

In relation to this inquiry, my interest was not on established, elite artists. Rather, my interest was focused on older people who came to art in later life, who, while positioned at some distance from, nevertheless related to, various art worlds (local, regional, and canonical). I was not interested in the arts considered as a “frill,” or as diversionary, busy work, or even art as therapy. The wondering, wandering interest and questions I followed as part of this inquiry journey led me to consider the role of art as a serious, highly meaningful activity in the lives of older people. My interest came to focus on amateur arts involvement in later life. Given an awareness of Dewey’s (1934) writing on “art as experience,” I somehow felt that there was more to understand about the possibilities of art and aging. I wondered if new ways of thinking about art as contributing to the experience of aging might be suggested when the experience of those who became passionately involved in art in later life was considered. Although little hard evidence exists, I was also impressed by the sheer number of older people that seemed to be interested in exploring art as a serious late life interest.

Little empirical data exists in Canada regarding the involvement of older people in art. Surveys in this area focus primarily on attendance, and appreciation of arts and culture, rather than *involvement* in the arts as a participant or creator. Recent national General Social Surveys, for example, ask about “attendance at art galleries” (see Statistics Canada, 1998,

2002, 2003). When more active, creative and participatory involvement in the arts is considered (which is sometimes the case with provincial surveys), large, relatively undifferentiated categories are used, such as “Are you involved in – ‘doing a craft or hobby (e.g., photography, woodwork, sewing)’?”, “Taking part in the arts (e.g., drama, music, drawing, writing)?” (Alberta Community Development, 2004). Likewise, research conducted within the cultural sector regarding the arts has focused on the availability of the arts, arts attendance (see Decima Research, 2004; Hill Strategies, 2002), the economic impact of the arts, and role of the arts in transforming neighbourhoods (see Hill, 2004; also see Florida, 2002). In other jurisdictions surveys of adult participation in the arts have been undertaken, such as the National Endowment for the Arts’ 1982, 1992, and 1997 surveys of public participation in the arts (see Beisgen & Kraitchman, 2003; Cherbo & Wyszomirski, 2000; Peters & Cherbo, 1996), although making sense of this data is sometimes difficult as a wide variety of art forms, and forms or levels of involvement are collapsed into general categories.

*Nevertheless*, consider the following observations that have been offered by different people involved in this area. As early as 1982, Jones identified that in the United States (and the same would hold for Canada):

The name of one or more of the arts can be found in the listing of courses or “activities” offered by any well-established educational, recreational, or therapeutic program for the elderly. Although interest and participation in the arts is strong among the elderly, gerontology and arts professionals in the field are working from a nearly nonexistent information base. (p. iii)

In 1990, Saranson offered the following:

Unless my observations are grossly atypical, there has been a startling increase in the number of older people who seek and decide to engage in some form of artistic activity, especially women. I have spoken to scores of such people, and one theme runs through their responses: ‘I have always wanted to do something creative ... (but) who was I to regard myself as an artist? As the years went by, as I began to ask what I wanted to do with my time and myself, I knew I had to do something about that empty feeling, that sense of unfulfillment.’ In most of these instances the decision to act was facilitated by a friend’s action or by receiving a brochure of adult education courses offered in local schools, or at a local ‘creative arts workshop.’ If their responses to my queries varied somewhat, there was no variation in the degree of satisfaction they voiced about engaging in artistic activity. (p. 106)

Edelson (1995) writing from the perspective of his own experience of beginning to take art classes in mid-life notes the striking “dissimilarity between the importance attached to learning art by adult students and the relative disinterest and lack of enthusiasm accorded to this phenomenon by members of the traditional educational establishment” (p. 230). Grant (2001) also describes a growing trend of older people enrolling in art school degree programs. He quotes Samuel Hope, executive director of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design who observed: “Where once you only had the 18- to 22-year old cohort, now you see people in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and even 60s.” Grant notes “Many of these older artists are either nonmatriculated students-at-large or are enrolled in continuing education courses. For example, almost half of the students at the non-degree granting Art Students League of New York in Manhattan are 50 or older” (para 2).

Sargant, Field, Francis, Schuller, and Tuckett (1997) in the United Kingdom state that: “Many people have not had an adequate arts education when they were younger, and come to such activities later in life, often as the Open College of the Arts notes, ‘as something they have always wanted to do’” p. 78). McLeish (1981), a Canadian, relates a story about Barker Fairley, a noted Goethe scholar, who was actively painting and exhibiting his work in Toronto at age 93, but who refrained from painting until mid-life because he had been told that he had no talent in school. McLeish suggests that many individuals in their later years “feel the need to engage in some form of creativity in dozens of possible channels, in order to directly or indirectly change their own lives and their selves” (p. 101).

McLeish had previously held a number of academic posts at different universities, including Dean of Education at Brandon University. When he taught extension courses at the University of Toronto during his retirement, he was struck by the creative learning ability of the mature students that attended his course. This led him to undertake a review of the literature that had been published on the topic of “creative aging.” Using the ancient Ulysses as an archetype of a vibrant, creative, and active older individual, he wrote *The Ulyssean Adult: Creativity in the middle and later years* (1976). He described such older people as having an acceptance of aging, an “openness of mind, ... (and need for) new experiences,” and an appreciation of the “kaleidoscopic beauty and mystery of the world and the cosmos.” Later in *The Challenge of Aging: Ulyssean paths to creative living* (1983), McLeish suggested five core elements of creative living in later life: learning, insight and creativity;

self-exploration; growth and development; ability to adapt to change; and a zest for living. Contributions which have subsequently focused on creativity as a general orientation to, or means of approaching and shaping one's life include *Creative Aging: A meaning-making approach* by Mary Baird Carlsen (1996), and Gene Cohen's (2000) *The Creative Age: Awakening human potential in the second half of life*

Many have suggested that artistic involvement provides a particularly effective means of creatively engaging life, and that later life is conducive to realizing one's artistic interests. Joan Erikson (1988) observed that "art is a hard way of life in our technological world, where success is measured by economic standards and few aspirants achieve acclaim" (p. 13). Stebbins (1992) also describes commitment to the arts, particularly in earlier periods, as "a hard life, poorly remunerated life – done for the profound love of the pursuit" (p. 30). Osgood (1993) likewise points to a lessening of career demands and family commitments as facilitating conditions that contribute to increasing interest in the arts:

The Ulyssean life is possible for older individuals because in many ways the conditions required for the creative life are more available in the later years of adulthood than earlier. Older people have more time to rest and to think; they also possess a rich storehouse of experiences accumulated through life and are more free to adapt unorthodox concepts. (p. 176)

It may also be easier to explore and become committed to art in later life when one's identity may not be as bound up with the need to achieve success as an artist. Having a lifetime of experiences to draw on, having achieved a level of economic security, and having more time, there may be an emboldened sense of what is considered possible, and a willingness to try something and persevere at it, in later life.

Cohen (1998, 2000) has observed that the majority of the artists who were included in a major exhibit of folk art in the United States (covering a 50 year period from 1930-1980) had started their work in later life (this exhibit was held at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC in 1980). Likewise, Kaufman and Barrett (1985) organized an exhibit of "late blooming" folk artists at the Folk Art Institute in New York City. The majority of the artists included in a more recent exhibit of "Self-taught Artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," organized by the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City, also appear to have developed a focus on their art making in later life (see Wertkin, Longhauser, Szeemann, & Kogan, 1998). Roedheaver, Emmons, and Powers (1998) also describe a number of folk

artists who were “latecomers to artistic expression” (p. 214). At one point, I thought that exploring the experience of folk artists who came to art in later life would offer an interesting inquiry path, but in the end this was not the path I followed. As it turned out, those I met as part of this inquiry tended to be oriented to formalized art worlds. It is to this literature that I turn, to explore landscapes of knowledge that may be helpful in understanding their experience.

*On Art Worlds Inconspicuous and Overlooked*

Those who are interested in art or becoming an artist find themselves situated in the midst of a system of art worlds which, according to Becker (1982), are known in relation to shared conventions related to the creation, presentation, valuation, and sale of art. There are no clear boundaries between art worlds – rather, groups of people who work together to bring artworks into existence comprise an art world. Individual artists are recognized as having a “special gift,” and thus, are recognized as making “a unique and indispensable contribution to the work” (p. 35). In the end, however, art worlds produce “art.” Becker states that “the interaction of all the involved parties produces a shared sense of the worth of what they collectively produce. ...If they act under the definition of ‘art,’ their interaction convinces them that what they produce are valid works of art” (p. 39).

Becker (1982) distinguishes between “integrated professionals, mavericks, folk artists, and naïve artists” (see Chapter 8, pp. 226-271). Integrated professionals participate in formal, institutionalized art worlds. They have skills, abilities, and knowledge, and are recognized by “large and responsive audiences” (p. 229). Mavericks, similar to integrated arts professionals, circumvent the constraints of established art worlds by creating their own organizations and exhibit spaces. Becker describes folk art as “work done by ordinary people, in the course of their ordinary lives, work seldom thought of by those who make or use it as art at all, even though, as often happens, others from outside the community it is produced in find artistic value in it” (p. 246). They may become involved in art because it is something that is done by those in their community, or at their age. They tend “to belong to and produce their work as part of a well-organized community” (p. 248), for example, quilting communities. Another category that Becker considers is primitive, or naïve artists, who may later be discovered and incorporated into the formal art world. Such artists (Becker refers to the case of Grandma Moses) “know very little about the medium they are working

in – about its history, conventions, or the kind of work ordinarily produced in it. ... Most frequently, they at best succeed in recruiting a few people to play the role of appreciators of the work” (pp. 258-259). Becker describes amateur painters as being similar to naïve artists, although they tend to have had “classes in painting, belong to clubs of similar amateurs, and participate in a world of Sunday painters” (p. 260). Other types of artists have also been described, including “craft artists,” “picture painters,” “hobbyists,” “commercial artists,” and “academic artists” (also see Ethridge & Neapolitan, 1985; Mishler, 1999; Stebbins, 1992).

Similar to Becker’s (1982) observation that “art worlds typically have intimate and extensive relations with the worlds from which they try to distinguish themselves” (p. 36), Stebbins’ work on serious leisure suggests a close relationship between amateur and professional artists (in particular, see 1992, p. 20; also pp. 23, 40-42). Amateurs are oriented toward standards of excellence set by professionals who are viewed as role models. They complete special training, and continue to study and practice to attain expert levels of knowledge and skill. They often interact with professionals, and engage in similar activities, such as teaching, exhibiting and selling their work. Although he cautions against clear and firm distinctions between amateur and professional artists, Stebbins suggests amateurs are somewhat less dedicated to art making as the central or focal interest in their lives compared to professional artists. In addition, their involvement in more formalized art worlds is “incompletely institutionalized” (see Stebbins, 1992, pp. 120-121). Further, he suggests that the artwork of amateurs is not scrutinized, or critiqued in the same way as professional or integrated artists. He states that “on the rare occasion that an amateur product is considered in the press, the treatment is largely descriptive. What evaluation there is, is likely to be charitable” (p. 63). Stebbins (1982, 1992) notes that while hobbyists may be just as serious and dedicated about their involvement in art, they tend to be less oriented to professional art worlds than amateurs.

The need to be cautious about these distinctions, however, is suggested by the category of “outsider art” which refers to art which is ostensibly raw, unrefined or untutored. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, avante garde painters such as Picasso became interested in “primitive” or tribal art. Jean Dubuffet, who viewed artistic creativity as a universal human gift, described the artwork of those living in asylums as “art

brut,” or raw art (Maizels, 1996). In addition to these groups, Zolberg and Cherbo (1997) identify that “outsider artists came to encompass folk and ethnic artists, the homeless, prison inmates, elderly people in nursing homes, hospice patients, and others, confined or isolated, who produce objects or performances of aesthetic interest” (p. 1). Further, they note that many “outsiders” are no longer completely detached from recognized “art worlds.” Many receive instruction of some kind, and aspire to recognition and remuneration. Zolberg and Cherbo state that “the barriers between high and low art, ... art and emotional expression, art and therapy, art and life itself have been significantly breached. Led by a changing body of practitioners, art can be intended or unintended, made by professionals or non-professionals” (p. 2). Thus, the rigidity of established “high art” worlds has evolved and developed more permeable boundaries. Nevertheless, practices associated with “insider art,” continue to define how art is evaluated and understood. While there is space for outsider art within the sphere of “high art worlds,” gatekeepers and other aspects of the social fabric of art worlds contribute to how and when and *if* such artwork is received or recognized as art.

Zolberg and Cherbo (1997) suggest that what social scientists interested in art have in common is an appreciation of art as a social construction, and interest “in influences in the making and unmaking of artists, art, and art worlds” (p. 6). Further, Peters and Cherbo (1998) suggest that there is a need to attend to the wide range of “unincorporated arts” (para 1), to grasp art as a “universal characteristic,” and consider the associated “programmatic and policy implications” such an awareness entails (final para). In a paper published in 2005, but which was circulated on-line as early as 2002, Sholette (2005) called for an appreciation of the “art producing masses” (p. 92), relative to the few that are recognized within formalized institutions associated with “high art.” Within these masses, he includes those who have completed fine art degrees and certificate programs, as well as amateur and self-trained practitioners. Sholette poses the question:

How would the hegemony of the art world be affected if scholars began to discuss, classify and assess the work of “Sunday” painters, amateur artists and hobbyists in terms similar to those used for “professional” artists? It is worth noting that specific examples of this work are far from invisible, we encounter them far more often than we do “serious” art. Rather what remains out of bounds is any consideration of this work as complex or compelling or forming its own cultural category. (p. 92)

In presenting this challenge, Sholette hopes not to expand “the hegemony of the art world into this shadow zone,” instead he hopes “to find within this nether world what Walter Benjamin understood as the explosive power of the inconspicuous and overlooked” (p. 92). Similarly, Wali, Marcheschi, Severson, and Longoni (2001) suggest that in order to “develop a more accurate portrait of the complex nature of arts production, we need empirical data on the intersection between art and everyday life” (p. 213). Wali, Severson, and Longino (2002) conducted an in-depth investigation of adult participation in informal, “unincorporated,” and amateur arts. They found that individuals engaged in informal arts activities acquire a wide range of skills, and interact with a wide variety of people. Given this, they suggest that informal arts activities serve to contribute to social capacity and civic engagement. They also suggest that art considered as an expressive behaviour across the life span, and not as a separate and distinct sphere, will help to illuminate the significance of the various ways people engage with art and art making.

I had originally considered the experience of coming to art in later life as providing a unique focus for exploring the developmental potential of aging relative to that which had been portrayed in the gerontological literature. After considering some of the literature on art worlds, I have expanded my view to consider the experience of coming to art in later life as also being a special case within another largely overlooked cultural phenomenon – the amateur arts.

### *Perspectives on the Value of Art*

People have needed to think that there needs to be direct or obvious benefits of the arts. If it is not obvious then they consider the arts to be a frill.  
- Margaret Atwood in conversation with Daniel Richler, on “Richler, Ink”  
(2006)

In Canada, Max Wyman has offered a passionate argument for arts and culture funding to ensure public access to the arts. In his book *The Defiant Imagination: Why culture matters* (2004), Wyman asserts the relevance of art in all of our lives. Consider a few introductory excerpts from this text:

Without the inspiration that contact with creative activity can give us, we risk short changing ourselves in becoming the fully developed human spirit. We risk becoming less than what is possible for us to be (p. 3).

Our artists supply the raw materials of the imagination, the foundations on which wisdom and hope are built, for our young people and for Canadians everywhere.

The stories we tell each other—in our plays, our books, our films—affirm the importance of the human, the local, the specific (p. 5).

Cultural activity belongs to everyone. It is simply an essential part of what it means to be human (pp. 9-10).

Wyman describes the “creative impulse [as being] part of what makes us who we are ... [it contributes] to social health – through the therapeutic values of art, through art’s value as an educational tool and through art’s ability to advance a more compassionate society” (p. 30). Still, rather than arguing for support for “ordinary art” activities, Wyman argues for sustained funding for professional arts organizations and artists, and an ongoing “commitment to creative excellence” (p. 181) as foundational to ensuring the essential role of art in contributing to Canada’s economic, social, and cultural capital. Concern for quality, in the end, is presented as the primary justification for public support of the arts, a value that imbues much of Canada’s arts scene.

There are cultural theorists and commentators, however, who have countered this view. Leo Tolstoy (1995/ 1898) dedicated much of his later life to considering the meaning and value of art. In *What is Art?*, which he completed when he was 70 years old, Tolstoy argues against the valorization of what is sometimes called “high art.” He wrote:

We are accustomed to regard as art only what we read, hear and see in theaters, concerts, and exhibitions, together with buildings, statues, poems, novels. . . . But all this is but a small portion of the art by which we communicate with one another in life. The whole of human life is filled with works of art of various kinds, from lullabies, jokes, mimicry, home decoration, clothing, utensils, to church services and solemn processions. All this is the activity of art. Thus we call art, in the narrow sense of the word, not the entire human activity that conveys feelings, but only that which we for some reason single out from all this activity and to which we give special significance. (p. 41)

Tolstoy described art to be “one of the conditions of human life.” He described art as providing a means of communication and “communion among people” (p. 37), across cultures and historical periods. He offers the following: “*To call up in oneself a feeling once experienced and, having called it up, to convey it by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, images expressed in words, so that others experience the same feeling – in this consists the activity of art*” (pp. 39-40; italics in original).

Ellen Dissanyake in her text *What is Art For?* (1988) also argues that art making functions as a basic aspect of human behaviour. Writing from an ethological perspective, Dissanyake suggests that the role of the arts is to highlight behaviours and events that

emphasize and strengthen communal values. Art functions to “make special,” to make ordinary experience *extraordinary*, through formalization, exaggeration, repetition, patterning, and other related means. She provides examples of ways in which painting, song, dance, and drama have served to shape knowledge and feelings, and reinforce communal values and facts of life in pre-literate societies, and “provide access to a supramundane world, a level of reality different from everyday immediacy” (p. 67). In a subsequent work, *Homo Aestheticus: Where art comes from and why* (1992), Dissanayake considers ways in which we are inherently aesthetic and artistic human beings, and suggests that:

When we expand our vision to include *all* examples of societies, past and present, we discover that people do a number of things that are artlike ... they explore, they play, they shape and embellish, they formalize and order. These ways of doing are inherent in human activity ...

Regarding art as a behaviour – an instance of “making special” – shifts the emphasis from the modernists’ view of art as object or quality or the postmodernists’ view of it as text or commodity to the *activity* itself (the making or doing or appreciating). (pp. 222-223)

In addition to describing art as a fundamental aspect of our lives, Dissanayake (1992) describes how consideration of prevailing standards can reflect the degree of care taken with one’s work. She writes: “To make something special generally implies taking care and doing one’s best so as to produce a result that is – to a greater or lesser extent – accessible, striking, resonant, and satisfying to those who take the time to appreciate it” (p. 224).

Although Dissanayake makes little mention of his work, her conclusions seem to be compatible with John Dewey’s (1934) writing on art as a means of heightening of one’s lived experience. Dewey considered the arts as offering a more intense, vivid, and lively experience of the world. According to Dewey:

art throws off the covers that hide the expressiveness of experienced things; it quickens us from the slackness of routine and enables us to forget ourselves by finding ourselves in the delight of experiencing the world around us in its varied qualities and forms. It intercepts every shade of expressiveness found in objects and orders them in a new experience of life. (p. 104)

He described art as having the unique purpose of “clarifying and concentrating meanings contained in scattered and weakened ways in the material of other experiences” (p. 84).

Further, Dewey describes the arts as offering “a manifestation, a record and a celebration of the life of a civilization, (and) a means of promoting its development” (p. 326).

In *Is Art Good For Us: Beliefs about high culture in American life* (2002), Jolie Jensen draws on Dewey's work to develop an argument in support of art as a means of experiencing our lives and the world around us. She strikes a challenge against an instrumental view of high culture as "good medicine" that can be passively ingested to "counterbalance the bad effects of mass media" (p. 2). Jensen argues that if art is good for us it's because of what it affords us not in terms of instrumental, direct effects, but in relation to its "expressive" functions. She writes, "Dewey does not imagine the arts instrumentally, as social medicine, although he values them as social experiences ... Dewey presumes that everyone has aesthetic impulses, and takes delight in aesthetic experiences" (p. 169).

Compared to Dewey's writing in this area, Vygotsky's contributions are only now becoming recognized. As described earlier, Vygotsky developed a dialectical view of human development. What is less well known is that Vygotsky's career began with the dissertation he completed in 1925 on aesthetic response to literary works, which was later published as *The Psychology of Art* (1965/ 1971; see Moran & John-Steiner, 2003, p. 61). One of the ideas that he developed in this early work was that creative expression and art are profoundly social. Vygotsky advocated a dynamic interplay between the individual and social/ relational arenas, stating that "art is ... a tool of society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life" (p. 249). He also emphasized the mobilizing role of art, stating that "art is the organization of our future behaviour. It is a requirement that may never be fulfilled but that forces us to strive beyond our life toward all that lies beyond it" (p. 253). Moran and John-Steiner explicitly link Vygotsky's theoretical work on development to his writing on art, by citing a quote from his early work that suggests "development never ends its creative work" (p. 63).

Most recently, in *What Good are the Arts?*, John Carey (2005) describes the constructed nature of "high art" by noting that what is taken to be art are those objects and performances that are recognized as such "by the right people" (p. 15). He savages the argument that art appreciation creates empathic and thoughtful people by pointing to the superiority that can follow from its exclusionary practices. In an extended passage he outlines how in Nazi Germany "worship of art made human beings expendable" (p. 143). He concludes: "The religion of art makes people worse, because it encourages contempt for those considered inartistic. We now know that it can foster hideous and earth-shattering evil."

It is time we gave *active art* a chance to make us better” (p. 167, italics added). Influenced by writing by Tolstoy and Dissanayake, Carey argues for a reevaluation of art done by ordinary people. He calls for interdisciplinary research that would include contributions from sociology, psychology, and public health, to “create a body of knowledge about what the arts actually do to people” (p. 168).

*Research on Arts-based Involvement in Later Life*

In 1982, Jones referred to an almost nonexistent knowledge base regarding the involvement of older adults in the arts. For the purposes of this inquiry, I have bracketed literature on art therapy, experience of “ordinary creativity” in later life (with some exceptions), intergenerational arts activities, and arts activities directed to those with dementia or cognitive impairment. In the following overview, I have focused primarily on literature that has considered learning/ skills development, or leisure-focused arts engagement directed to primarily healthy (that is not frail, or cognitively-impaired) older adults to illustrate some of the major themes addressed in this area. Given that literature in this area is relatively sparse, I have included studies published in the early 1970s (which continue to be cited) until the present.

Dawson and Baller (1972) conducted a study of the effects of participating in an 18-week oil painting class for older adults. Two years following the class, 72% of the participants were still involved in painting, and 50% were active in other creative activities. Analysis of 10-year follow-up data found that of those involved in the art class, 67% were still living compared to 38% of a matched control group. In addition, all were “mentally alert” and physically active compared to 62% of those still living who had been assigned to the control group condition. In the same year, Hearn (1972) published a study in which he explored how aging affected the lives of first-career artists, and the influence of art on the lives of second-career artists, or those who came to art in later life. He found that for both groups art offered “income, sociability, and a positive self-image” (p. 357).

Sarkisian (1982) interviewed three older people about their reasons for taking art classes in later life and found great diversity in the personal meanings they attached to their art making. After the death of her husband, one woman explored a number of interests and when she finally focused on metal sculpture felt that she was linked again “to society, making a contribution” (p. 188). Another participant, described as a “returning art student,”

reconnected with an early interest and training in art when he was recovering from major heart surgery. The third participant valued the new social connections she experienced, but was noncommittal about taking further classes as she valued having a sense of freedom regarding her time. Lieberman and Lieberman (1983) explored the experience of 70 individuals who developed a second career as a craft artist following retirement. In general, these individuals reported enhanced levels of personal satisfaction and quality of life in their new careers compared to their earlier occupations. The experience of being self-directed, being able to take pride in their artistry and craft, and the opportunity to meet others with similar interests contributed to their satisfaction. The experience of occupational independence and enjoyment of new relationships were identified as important factors contributing to satisfaction in a second career as a craft artist.

Dohr and Forbess (1986) explored lifespan patterns of creative involvement among older adults involved in both community-based arts programming, and on their own. They noted “consistent,” “up-early/ up-late,” and “rising” patterns of involvement. Lorenzen-Huber (1991) confirmed Dohr and Forbess’ three patterns of life-span creativity. These patterns would conform to the stability, comedy-romance, and progressive life narratives described by Gergen (1994a), noted earlier. In relation to associated benefits, Dohr and Forbess found that late life involvement in art yielded: 1) social benefits; 2) personal benefits (cognitive stimulation, self-actualization, well-being); 3) product-related benefits (the “simple need to manipulate materials,” p. 131, which recalls the importance Dissanayake [1995, 2000] has placed on the pleasures of “making” as an integral and vital aspect of being human); and 4) expressive benefits. Based on a sample of 20 artists who were “past winners of the Annual Art Show for Older Nebraskans” (p. 384), Lorenzen-Huber (1991) also found that her participants felt that having time available was critical to their involvement in art. Other factors identified as important to their experience of art included “teachers, rewards and recognition, selling, and clubs and organizations” (p. 385), as well as their own commitment to realizing their artistic interests and talents.

Fisher and Specht (1999) explored the benefits of creative activity in relation to “successful aging” among 36 older adults (aged 60-93 years) who had participated in a seniors’ art exhibition, most of whom had previously retired from professional occupations. Benefits associated with being engaged in art making included: self-transcendence, in large

part through “flow” experiences; a sense of accomplishment; and positive connections with others. Fisher and Specht suggest a connection between creative activity and development in that art making fostered “a perception of circumstances as opportunities for growth, ... openness to challenges ... the practice and development of skills that facilitate practical creativity in other areas” (p. 469) of life. Further, “their artwork draws them onward, does not permit disengagement, and demands active involvement in both the cognitive realm of their inner being and the physical world manipulating resources into unique expressions of self” (p. 469). As noted by Katz and Campbell (2005) (described earlier), the authors do not consider the historical contexts and artistic traditions that inform their involvement in art.

Most recently, Cohen (2006; Cohen, Perlstein, Chapline, Kelly, Firth, & Simmens, 2006) reported on a study of 300 older men and women (with an average age of 80) distributed across three study sites – San Francisco, Washington and New York – in which half of the participants were engaged in community-based “cultural” programs, such as music, writing, painting, and jewelry-making. The remaining participants were assigned to a “control condition.” He found that those involved in “cultural activities” had better overall health. Specifically, they experienced fewer falls, reported less use of medication, and had fewer doctor visits. They also showed improvement over baseline on depression, loneliness, and morale scales, and reported an increase in the number of activities in which they were involved. Cohen attributed the positive impact of the arts on health and well-being in later life to having an increased “sense of mastery.” He also referred to the positive benefits of social engagement, citing findings published by Glass, Mendes de Leon, Marottoli, and Berkman (1999) and Verghese, Lipton, Katz, Hall, Derby, Kuslansky, Ambrose, Sliwinski, and Buschke (2003) (also described earlier).

Indeed, an emerging trend in this area has been to focus on the health promoting benefits of *cultural participation*. Although not solely focused on older people, these findings suggest that live arts experiences may be both health protective and health promoting. An eight-year prospective study of 12,982 Swedes (aged 16-74 years) found that after controlling for other determinants of survival, those who participated in cultural events (such as attending the cinema, art exhibits, other cultural events, sports events, reading, or playing music) lived longer than those who did not (Bygren, Konlaan, & Johansson, 1996). At the 14-year follow-up period mortality risk was again assessed, but in relation to specific forms

of cultural engagement. Attending films, concerts, museums, and art exhibits were all associated with reduced mortality rates (Konlaan, Bygren, & Johansson, 2000). The investigators found it “noteworthy that the effects were most obvious in non-verbal stimulation through pictures, objects and music” (p. 178). In a parallel study, Konlaan, Bjorby, Bygren, Weissglas, Karlsson, and Widmark (2000) conducted a randomized-control study of the health impact of attending cultural events (such as movies, opera, music concerts, theatre performances, art exhibits) compared to structured weekly physical activity, both of which occurred on a weekly basis over a two-month period. They found that diastolic blood pressure was significantly reduced among those who participated in the “cultural stimulation” condition. A subsequent longitudinal study of 3,793 survey respondents suggested that those who became more culturally active over the eight year study period, had the same degree of perceived health risk as those active at both baseline and follow-up periods (Johansson, Konlaan, & Bygren, 2001). Clow and Fredhoi (2006) found that stress levels (as measured by saliva cortisol samples) fell by 32% among participants after office workers spent 40 minutes viewing paintings and sculpture in art galleries in London, England. In contrast to these studies, Michalos (2005) using a social indicators approach found that relative to other domains of life, self-reported cultural engagement had a “very small impact on the quality of life ... (of those) who generally cared about the arts” (p. 12) in Prince George, BC.

More recently, a number of sponsored projects have attempted to articulate the benefits of the active arts participation. Matarasso (1997) undertook a study on the participation of non-professionals in the arts on behalf of Comedia.<sup>6</sup> He found that active involvement in the arts contributed to personal growth, enhanced confidence, skill-building, educational enhancements, increased social contacts, as well as development of networks and social cohesion. He also described a range of benefits related to community development. In this report, Matarasso suggests that in addition to contributing to the economic revitalization of communities, the arts also “contribute to a stable, confident and creative society” (p. v). A monograph sponsored by the RAND Corporation along with the

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<sup>6</sup> From COMEDIA’s website: “...[COMEDIA] is linked to the idea of ‘The Creative City’ and now the notion of ‘The Art of City Making’ and how people and cities can make the most of their possibilities. ‘The Intercultural City’ adds another concept and focuses on how cities can live well with their multicultural diversity. Our philosophy is that there is always more potential in any place than any of us would think at first sight (see <http://www.comedia.org.uk/pages/home.htm>, retrieved on March 12, 2007).

Wallace Foundation begins with an explicit recognition of the pressures exerted on arts advocates during the “culture wars” in the United States in the early 1990s (which also occurred in Canada, but to a lesser extent) which resulted in a wide-range of benefits being identified. In this overview, McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks (2004) present a critique of what they view to be an overemphasis on instrumental benefits of the arts, suggesting that attention should be given to “other, *intrinsic* benefits” (p. xi). They call for greater recognition of a continuum of arts-based benefits, including intrinsic individual benefits (captivation and pleasure), relational benefits (expanded capacity for empathy), and public benefits (expression of communal meaning) (see p. 44). Referring to the work of Dewey, Dissanayake, and Csikszentmihalyi, among others, they also suggest that the realization of these benefits is linked to sustained involvement in the arts.

In Canada, Cooley (2003) reviewed literature on the benefits of the arts in relation to both illness and disease, and the promotion of health and well-being, and concluded that “the arts can contribute to promoting both individual and community health” (p. 6). Cooley refers to research on psychoneuroimmunology to suggest a range of physiological effects that may be associated with art making and live arts experiences and may promote enhanced immune function. She further suggests that these outcomes may most effectively be obtained not through passive reception to art but through the active pursuit of growth enhancing activities (see p. 30). Significantly, she considered benefits identified in the literature in relation to seven of the 12 determinants of health used by Health Canada as a basis for developing health policy, such as the opportunity that the arts provide for social connection and engagement. Noting that cultural and arts-based activities are effective in “reaching out and engaging the elderly,” Cooley draws on ideas developed by Cohen (2000) to suggest that the arts may provide an opportunity for older people “to learn new skills, discover new aspects of themselves, and find new ways to express and perceive the world” (p. 41). Although they did not specifically consider the arts, Lapierre, Bouffard, Dubé, Labelle, and Bastin (2001) found a significant relationship between positive aspirations and goal setting directed to *self-development*, and well-being among older Canadians in a series of studies that they conducted.

The significance of the arts for older adults is, however, suggested by studies of the impact of arts-based activities on identity. Howie, Coulter, and Feldman (2004) explored the

experience of being involved in craft-based artistic pursuits on identity among six retired individuals aged 78 to 87 years old. They suggest four processes as influencing changes in sense of identity: 1) relational practice (sense of self is shaped in and through interactions with others); 2) changing self-awareness (awareness of the self as always evolving); 3) enduring qualities (those more constant or stable, qualities of self); and 4) reflective processes (thoughts, values, enjoyment of the process of “crafting”). Benefits of developing an identity as an “artist” included opportunities to relate to others about common areas of interest, and developing an identity in addition to, for example, being known as a mother or wife. Schofield-Tomschin & Littrell (2005) offer a similar observation in relation to involvement in textile crafts in later life. One of their participants offered that, “most women grow up being somebody’s daughter or somebody’s wife, or somebody’s mother .... (in taking up art) you’re a weaver or a spinner, as well as a mother and wife, grandmother or whatever” (p. 46). The participants also described a sense of pride and identification with their accomplishments as textile artists.

Other articles and texts have also considered the role of artistic creativity in the lives of older adults, and the ways in which art making as experienced within both community and continuing care settings can be beneficial to one’s health and well-being. Based on anecdotal accounts and program descriptions, these works tend to focus on the potential that age brings for ongoing learning and growth, and the benefits of art making as a means of fostering well-being. Examples include articles included in special issues of *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* which focused on “creativity in later life” (Kastenbaum, 1991) and “aging and the arts” (Perlstein, 2006), respectively. Other examples include Fitzner and Rugh (1998), Harris, Hays, Kottler, Minichiello, Olohan, and Wright (2005), Hart (1992), Hickson and Housely (1997), Hoffman (1992), Kastenbaum (2000), Meltzer (1996), Osgood (1993), and Weisberg and Wilder (2001). Among these contributors, Osgood (1993) offers the following observation:

Through participating in creative activities, the older adult comes to view him- or herself as an active, vital, useful, human being. .... The arts are inspirational, infusing the older adult with a spirit or zest. Older individuals can be liberated in spirit from poverty, pain, and loneliness, and lifted out of the doldrums of depression when they find creative powers in themselves. The role of creative arts activities is significant as a potential contributor to life satisfaction and psychological health for the elderly. (p. 177)

Perlstein (1996) describes a range of benefits of arts programming for older adults, including “building self-esteem and a sense of identity and belonging, connecting people and celebrating life.” She adds, “arts programs can create positive, invigorating, life-giving, and life-sustaining activities that, again, make those human connections. In a caring, connected community, people are more likely to stay healthy because they look out for one another” (p. 24). Contributions such as these offer the important perspective of those who are actively engaged in developing or promoting creative arts programming for older adults. Thus, both studies and program descriptions point to the life-inspiring and developmental value of the arts for older people.

*Another Perspective: Sir Winston Churchill*

As noted earlier, Churchill was recognized as being a gifted amateur artist who enjoyed painting throughout his later years. In addition to the literature described above, his exceptionally expressive writing on his experience of painting (published when he was 68 years old) provide another source of insight into the experience of coming to art in later life.

From the essay “Hobbies” (Churchill, 1932):

Many men (sic) have found great advantage in practicing a handicraft for pleasure .... But, best of all and easiest to procure are sketching and painting in all their forms .... Painting is a companion with whom one may hope to walk a great part of life’s journey .... Painting is a friend who makes no undue demands, excites to no exhausting pursuits, keeps faithful pace even with feeble steps, and holds her canvas as a screen between us and the envious eyes of Time or the surly advance of Decrepitude. ...

Happy are the painters, for they shall not be lonely. Light and colour, peace and hope, will keep them company to the end, or almost to the end, of the day. (p. 302)

From the essay “Painting as a Pastime” (Churchill, 1932):

... to find oneself plunged in the middle of a new and intense form of interest and action with paints and palettes and canvases, and not to be discouraged by the results, is an astonishing and enriching experience. I hope it may be shared by others .... Do not turn the superior eye of passivity upon these efforts. Buy a paint-box and have a try. .... do not be too ready to believe that you cannot find what you want here. (p. 305)

... Inexpensive independence, a mobile and perennial pleasure apparatus, new mental food and exercise, the old harmonies and symmetries in an entirely different language, an added interest to every common scene, an occupation for every idle hour – an unceasing voyage of entrancing discovery – these are high prizes. ... a joy ride in a paint-box. (p. 306)

... how varied are the delights which may be gained by those who enter hopefully and thoughtfully upon the pathway of painting; how enriched they will be in their daily vision, how fortified in their independence, how happy in their leisure. Whether you feel that your soul is pleased by the conception or contemplation of harmonies, or that your mind is stimulated by the aspect of magnificent problems, or whether you are content to find fun in trying to observe and depict the jolly things you see, the vistas of possibility are limited only by the shortness of life. Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path. You know that you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb. (pp. 312-313)

### Transition 2 ...

In this chapter, I have described an expanding segment of the Canadian population that is looking forward to an extended period of retirement. I have also covered a broad expanse of literature to outline “a recognizable but (largely) unmapped terrain” in the area of aging studies (Moody, 1989, p. 227). I have done so in an attempt to suggest ways in which gerontology could be expanded and reframed to support the study of positive and passionate involvement in later life. Nakamura (2002) states that “standing out within each person’s life are moments, periods, and spheres of intense engagement with the world .... when an individual is ‘engaged, engrossed, or entirely taken up with some activity because of its recognized worth’ (Dewey, 1913, p. 17)” (p. 1). She has also observed that most of those who study processes of aging and human development have aimed at understanding “normative experience ... or else to illuminate the ways in which adversity and pathological societal conditions distort lives. ...there has been little systematic research on lives that are distinguished by positive experience” (p. 1). These observations echo much of what has been presented in the foregoing.

Although an increasingly prominent aspect of one’s experience, much remains unknown about leisure in later life. In addition, little is known about unique spheres of leisure involvement and how they may contribute to aging well. Simple activity counts have obscured the significance of absorbing, meaning-centred pursuits in later life. What is needed, I believe, is a re-positioning that returns us to an interest in older people as people (and not just as bodies), and further, an interest in their lives as a creative unfolding of being, growth and development – not conservation of abilities, or worse, simply decline. Hendricks

and Cutler (2003) describe different leisure activities as providing a socially constructed action space that provides the conditions for promoting developmental meaning and personal growth. They argue that different leisure domains provide opportunities “for experimentation and integration of identity; ... emotionally meaningful bonds; ... ideational flexibility giving rise to ... meaningful experience” (p. 111). As a specific domain, K. Gergen and M. Gergen (2001b) have suggested that the arts provide an important mode or frame of “play” in adult life. They suggest that the “arts are particularly rich in offering opportunities for experimenting with realities, with identities, with expressive potentials.”

Despite the existence of older artists, and the establishment of arts programs for seniors in community and continuing care settings, the role of art in later life has not been widely researched and remains poorly understood. Interest in the arts in later life exists on the periphery of a gerontological knowledge base. Stebbins (1992) has noted, “People tend to be in the dark about what older artists do, and why they pursue their activity with such passion” (pp. 120-121). This might be related to a view of older people as being “incapable of creativity, of making progress, of starting afresh” (Hazan, 1994, p. 28). This may also be related to the marginal status of related areas that could also contribute to an understanding of art as a means of growth and development. For example, the “amateur arts” have been marginalized within the realm of “the arts,” and art education as a field of practice and inquiry has tended to ignore the developmental potential of art beyond childhood (see Gardner, 1990). Matarasso (1997) has stated that “evaluating the social impact of participating in the arts has long been a sort of terra incognita, a continent whose existence is known, but which remains unexplored” (p. i). With respect to social indicators research, Michalos (2005) has stated that “the impact of the arts broadly construed on the overall quality of people’s lives is both under-rated and understudied” (p. 12).

I undertook this inquiry hoping to enrich the repertoire of understandings that are available to appreciate the significance of coming to art in later life. This inquiry has necessarily been exploratory. Following a line of inquiry informed by literature in the areas of aging, leisure and health, I hope it may begin to articulate that which has largely gone unrecognized and untheorized across all of these areas in relation to art and human development in later life. I also hope to suggest a reevaluation of the significance of art as an action domain within the lives of “ordinary people.”

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **INQUIRY APPROACH**

#### A Narrative, Interpretive Perspective

James Birren (2001) describes narrative as offering a methodological approach for exploring “personal experiences of and interpretations of... growing old” (p. vii). Interest in narrative studies of aging has developed within a context of increasing appreciation of the role of narrative as a basic mode of human experience in the social and human sciences. Compared to ready-at-hand, surface understandings, narrative offers an approach that privileges subjectivity, and fosters a close attending to the particularity of experience. Stories can help us appreciate aspects of experiences that otherwise might be overlooked. Richardson (1990) states, “When people are asked why they do what they do, they provide narrative explanations, not logico-scientific categorical ones. It is the way individuals understand their own lives and best understand the lives of others” (p. 126). Bruner (1986, 1990, 1991) has argued that personal narratives provide a valuable source of insight into ways in which we make sense, clarify, and come to understand our lives. Freeman (1997) also maintains that “narrative is the basic medium in which human beings speak, think, grow into selves and understand others” (p. 175). K. Gergen and M. Gergen (2002) offer a similar description of the significance of stories:

We understand our lives through stories. These stories can lend order to the past, significance to the present, and direction to the future. On a personal level our lives acquire meaning through narrative. They inform us that we have participated significantly in the world, that we have witnessed, and possibly achieved something of value. On a social level our stories are a major means of forging and sustaining connection with others. They bring others into our lives; they allow us to share our lives with others. (para 1)

Narrative helps us to bring our experiences into view in the midst of our continually, unfolding lives. Narrative also helps us to come to other (often more complex) understandings of our experiences through the stories we may share with others, and through our experience of others responses to these tellings (also see Frank, 2002).

While generalizations based on “objective findings” may offer valuable insights, they fail to convey the developmental contours of experience and meaning, shaped in relation to what may be remembered from the past, ever changing present contexts and circumstances, and imagined possible futures (see Denzin, 1997, p. 33). The details of

individual experience, expressed in human terms, remain invisible. In this, narrative can be recognized as an approach consistent with critical gerontology. Gubrium and Holstein (2000) have argued that “what is missing (in gerontology) is a distinct view of the everyday life of older people ... based on the stories told of older people in their own right” (p. 3). Manheimer (2000) also argues for the inclusion of personal accounts of old age, to gain a better appreciation of the experience of growing old. He states, “empiricism based on a biomedical paradigm of later life restricts researchers to too narrow an appreciation for the lived experience of growing old, an appreciation better served by inclusion of personal accounts of old age in written, spoken and visual forms” (p. 88).

Although not a central methodological approach in gerontology, insights that have emerged from such studies have been influential. Early examples include Gubrium’s (1997/1973) study of the experience of living and dying at Murray Manor as revealed through the stories of the residents, and Myerhoff’s (1978) study of experience and identity as revealed in the narratives of residents living at a Jewish seniors’ centre. Another significant early study would be Kaufman’s (1986) research involving older individuals and the ways in which they described their sense of self, not in relation to age but through a sense of continuity, that is, “in being themselves in old age” (p. 6). Additional examples include (in chronological order): Gubrium’s (1993) study of the life narratives of seniors living in a continuing care setting; Berman’s (1994) study of personal journals of later life, including those of May Sarton and Florida Scott-Maxwell; Gullette’s (1997) autobiographical narrative that challenges ideologies of aging within the mainstream culture; Basting’s (1998) study of the performativity of age, which involved analysis of the theatrical performances of older adults presented as dialogue across generations; Ray’s (2000) study of aging and life-story writing; and Savishinsky’s (2000) narrative portrayal of the diverse retirement experiences of seniors’ living in a rural community in upper New York State (described earlier). Key texts that have outlined elements and potential contributions of narrative to the study of aging include Birren, Kenyon, Ruth, Schroots, and Svensson’s (1996) *Aging and Biography: Explorations in adult development*, and Randall and Kenyon’s (2001) *Ordinary Wisdom: Biographical aging and the journey of life*. In 2001, Kenyon, Clark, and de Vries proposed the term “narrative gerontology” to describe those approaches that explore the meanings and experience of aging from the perspective of older adults as

they describe the significance of different events they have experienced through stories and narratives. Glover (2003) has also considered the relevance and value of narrative as a way of exploring the diverse and unique ways in which we make sense of our leisure experience.

Narrative approaches described in these texts and the research studies cited above vary widely. Mishler (1999) states that the “diversity of studies that fall under the ‘narrative’ rubric confounds any attempt to specify a canonical definition of what it is and how to analyze it” (p. 17). Different approaches are framed in relation to guiding research questions, the disciplinary location(s), and perhaps most importantly, the personal meaning-making horizon of the inquirer. Given this, narrative can be viewed as a noncategorical qualitative approach, similar to “interpretive description” which “provides direction in the creation of an interpretive account that is generated on the basis of informed questioning, using techniques of reflective, critical examination, ... (to) guide and inform disciplinary thought in some manner” (Thorne, Kirkham, & O’Flynn-Magee, 2004, p. 6). As observed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the researcher’s own narrative of experience provides an important starting point for narrative inquiry. They suggest that “these narrative beginnings ... help us deal with questions of who we are in the field and who we are in the texts we write on our experience of the field experience” (p. 70). In the work cited above, most of the researchers recognized and drew attention to the constructed nature of their work, at least to some degree. In Chapter 1, I began to articulate some of the narrative beginnings that brought me to this inquiry. In subsequent chapters I attempt to continue integrating my experience of living this inquiry. In this chapter, I offer an account of the interpretive, narrative approach I followed, presented in some ways out of temporal sequence, known only “after the fact.” Before doing so, it may be helpful to review the research questions that guided me in this inquiry.

#### Guiding Questions and Underlying Assumptions

I was interested in learning how older adults came to art in later life, and the place and significance of art in their lives. *What are the stories of older adults who took up art making following retirement? How do they make meaning of the significance of art making in their lives?* Drawing on Dewey’s (1934) writing in this area, I have described ways in which art and aesthetic experience can help us to become aware of our experience. I have suggested that adoption of an aesthetic frame of reference can suggest new ideas regarding

possibilities for growth that may be enjoyed in later life. With a view to sharing, and in some cases restating, some of the guiding assumptions that informed my journey through this inquiry, I offer the following:

- Throughout our lives, we strive to provide meaningful account(s) of our experience, through the stories we share (Bruner, 1986, 1990, 1991; K. Gergen & M. Gergen, 2002);
- The development of meaning is continually evolving; it evolves from, and is expressed through narratives that are partial, situated, and shifting; we are always in the process of “storying” our lives (see Freeman, 1998, pp. 42-43);
- Meaning develops through some form of interchange, including the interplay of self, other, and material contexts; dialogue provides a means of both developing and articulating meaning (K. Gergen, 1999, 2001; Mishler, 1999);
- An interview follows a dialogical process in which meanings are co-constructed “in the ongoing process of our trying to make sense to one another” (Mishler, 1999, p. 15).
- A research text can provide a space for exploring meaning and significance; as a reflexive text that recognizes its own partial nature, it can work to engage others’ interpretations and perspectives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Richardson, 2000).
- In relation to a research text (and other texts), both readers and writers co-produce or perform the meaning of a text (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2002; also see Denzin, 1997); this reflects, and contributes to, the complexity and multiplicity of understandings that may be considered in relation to human experience.
- *And, we can never finally determine what things mean; there is no end to meaning...*

I returned to these guiding assumptions again and again, as “touch stones” or openings along the path when I found myself lost along the way in the mist/ midst of evolving (mis)understandings.

I use the term “narrative” to refer to description of, and reflection on lived experience. Denzin (1989a, 1989b, 1999) suggests a close connection between experience, narrative, and story. He writes “narrators report stories as narratives. A story is told in and through discourse, or talk” (1989a, p. 41). He suggests that “self stories” are told “in the context of a specific set of experiences” (1989b, p. 186) given to the narrator to reflect on. Events that are described are chosen as significant for the narrator, and appropriate for the person(s) to whom the story is told. Denzin suggests that “the self story is made up as it is told. It does not exist as a story independent of its telling; although, after it has been told, it can take on the status of a story that can be retold” (1989a, p. 43). A story often involves an initial situation which changes over time, culminating in a resolution which may be characterized as regression, progression, or continuity (see Denzin, 1999, p. 158).

My use of the term “narrative” is inclusive of partial, fragmented story segments, and also refers to the way a story is told. As pointed out by Bloom (1996, 1998), among others, linear coherence and unitary subjectivity are not always characteristic of stories that are told. Rather, stories and interpretation are “always in process.” Bloom suggests that multiple storytelling offers an opportunity for enhanced understanding for participants and researchers as they attempt to “make sense” of their experience. Following Mishler (1999), I use the term “research account” to reflect my attempt at making sense of the narrative materials I collected through the course of this inquiry, with a view to sharing my efforts with others (and in this particular instance, an academic audience with the hoped for outcome of obtaining a doctoral degree). Again, following from Mishler, I use the term “storyline” to refer to configurations of meaning that I identified within the participants’ narratives, and refined through continuing dialogue.

#### Inviting and Attending to Stories

The process of undertaking a narrative inquiry is, of course, rarely straightforward. In this section, I briefly outline the journey I followed from the beginning of my dissertation research, to this point, still in the midst of coming to new understandings. As I write about this, the inquiry design gains *a sense of clarity* which was often elusive, and *solidity*, which in truth I only sometimes experienced. Rather than offering a straightforward, linear approach, I found that narrative offered a *path of inquiry* that became articulated only as I moved forward (in fits and starts) hoping/ attempting to iteratively make sense of both the participants’ accounts and their reflections on the understandings I shared with them over time, “in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20) our stories and emerging understandings. The path I followed has been rendered most visible in the process and completion of writing this text – and yet understandings continue to develop.

#### *Setting*

I chose Edmonton as the setting for my inquiry after moving to the city from Vancouver. Although I was not very familiar with Edmonton, I was aware that it had a rich and diverse arts community, and so was hopeful that there would be many seniors who would have been attracted to becoming involved in the arts as they approached retirement.

As a new Edmontonian, I also looked forward to learning more about the city and its arts community, through the stories and experiences of the participants.

### *Inviting Participation*

Purposive sampling guided my approach to inviting participation in the inquiry. Participants were required to be competent to give consent, able to communicate in English, and be living on their own, or with family in the community (that is, were not living in an institutional care facility). In addition, I was interested in learning about the experiences of those “55 years or older,” “non-professional older artists,” who had “established a serious commitment to art making in later life.”

Most of the participants were identified through a process of third party recruitment. I approached a number of individuals who, because of their occupation and position, I expected might be aware of older adults who had become involved in art in a serious way in later life. These included administrators and coordinators with responsibility for a wide variety of arts programming including: classes and workshops offered by art galleries and seniors’ centres; and other classes offered in the community, including classes offered through the University of Alberta, and an “arts in medicine” program. I presented information about the inquiry to these individuals. If they felt that they knew someone who met the “inclusion criteria” (described above) and might be interested in participating, I provided a letter of information (see Appendix A) that they could pass onto the potential participant. With the exception of one individual, all of those who were contacted agreed to participate (no reason was offered by the one individual who declined to participate).

When I learned of a potential participant’s interest in being approached, I contacted them by telephone. I provided a brief overview of the study and arranged for a convenient time and place to meet. There were a few individuals who learned of my study informally, often through conversations that we had when I was unaware of their involvement in art. When they expressed an interest in sharing their experiences of coming to art in later life, and the significance of art in their lives, I assured them that they were not obligated to participate. If they continued to express interest in participating, I presented information about the project for them to review. Some of the participants also suggested others who might be interested in being involved. Although I had originally intended to focus on the narratives and stories of only three to five individuals, depending on the stage of the

research, some of these individuals were also approached as I was concerned about including a sufficient range and diversity of experience that would help to outline some of what might be important in appreciating the experience of coming to art in later life. I was surprised by the relative ease with which I met and connected with older adults who had come to art in later life. I was also impressed by their enthusiasm for sharing their experiences with me.

### *The Participants*

A total of 11 people agreed to participate in this inquiry. A description of each of the participants is presented in the Chapter 4. Some of the participants had dabbled in art making earlier in their lives, and then reconnected with art around the time of, or following their retirement. For most of the participants (but not all), a serious commitment to art was indicated by the fact that they had sustained an art making practice over several years. Although I had originally planned on including only those who had publicly exhibited their artwork, believing that experiencing an “audience” was important in relation to having a significant realization of themselves as an “artist,” I became aware that a serious commitment to art could occur in the absence of actively exhibiting one’s work. Given this, I dropped this as a requirement for participation. In addition, I made an exception regarding the 55 year age limit I had set when I learned of a woman who had first become involved in art at 52 years of age, and had completed an arts certificate in her early eighties.

### *Beginning the Interviews*

Kvale (1996) suggests that at their most basic level, interviews can be considered conversations. He describes qualitative research interviews as “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples’ experiences, to uncover their lived world” (p. 1). He views the interviewer as a “traveling companion,” who invites “stories of the lived world” (p. 4), and explores an individual’s stories, thoughts, and insights into their experience. According to Kvale, interviewers encourage the interviewee to describe what is meaningful or important to them using their own words as the interviewer attempts to understand and construct meaning within the context of conversation.

The current inquiry was framed as *an extended conversation* over time. I intended to interview each participant three to four times each, over a relatively short period of time (e.g., a couple of months). However, I underestimated the amount of time I would need to

work with the interview transcripts (reading and rereading, working with individual storylines, etc.) and failed to appreciate how useful it would be to compare and contrast storylines across different participants' interviews as a means of discerning patterns in their narratives. After interviewing the first two individuals who agreed to participate in the study (following the accelerated interview timeline that I had hoped to follow for all of the participants), I learned that I needed a longer period of time to work with the transcripts, to more deeply engage in a sensitive listening to, and appreciation of the accounts that they had shared with me. Subsequent to this, I organized the interviews in successive waves.

At the beginning of the *first interview* I reviewed the Letter of Information, and obtained informed consent from each participant (see Appendix B). I elaborated on various details of the study such as my role and intentions, the open-ended nature of the inquiry, and outlined what would be involved in terms of participation. I also responded to any concerns or questions they may have had. In general, I presented myself to all the participants as having great interest in the area of art and aging, and also having some knowledge about the role of the arts in society. The following offers an example:

*As I mentioned to you earlier, on the phone, I've had a longstanding interest in art in general, how people become involved in art, and what it means to them. My own background is in psychology, and I've also worked in health and aging research. So I am sort of bringing all of that together. And, I also have an interest in art in my own life, not one that I've had a lot time to develop although I'm thinking about trying to do that, to realize my dream of getting involved in art myself sooner than later. That is also part of the reason I've chosen to do this. So that's a little bit about me. I've had the privilege now of interviewing several people already as part of this study, and now you today. I'm looking forward to learning about your experience of coming to art later in life. [PBM-Joyce (1,1)]*

I often related that although I had taken art classes earlier in my adult life, I only had limited experience with art, *per se*, and shared that I was interested in immersing myself in the world of art and art making when time and opportunity might permit. I also offered that I was interested in the opportunity that later life offers for becoming involved in new or deferred interests. This beginning account follows the approach used by Mishler (1999) in his study of the lives and work of craft artists to establish a provisional basis for understanding and trust (see pp. 26-27).

In relation to leisure in later life, Kelly (1993) has suggested that inquiry should be directed to contexts, barriers, and facilitating factors, as well as “the process of activity, both

in the discrete experience and in the longer term line of action” (p. 265). Following a general introduction to the inquiry, I invited the participants to share how they came to take up a serious art making practice in later life, and the place or significance of art making in their lives. I followed the stories the participants as they told them. I also had a list of questions on hand to refer to as a guide (see Appendix C), but only posed a question as seemed appropriate as the participant and I “wandered together” within a space of narrative storytelling, and attentive listening (Kvale, 1996). I followed an open-ended approach which allowed me to explore interesting and unexpected ideas and insights that emerged through the interview process. Most of the interviews (which were audio-taped with permission) lasted from just over an hour to over two hours. All of our conversations took place within the participants’ homes, which also provided the space in which most of them created and stored their art.

#### *Adrift in a Swirl of Stories*

The challenge of holding onto the tension of “knowing” and “not knowing”, which defined the space of this inquiry, was most pronounced when I first began interviewing the participants. Despite the relatively sure, solid outline suggested in materials I had prepared to describe the study to participants (and implied in the preceding paragraphs), I found myself adrift after completing interviews with the first two participants. I believe that the participants sensed my genuine interest in their experiences and my appreciation of their art. I recall these initial interviews as being good-hearted, mutually-engaging, creative conversations. Still, I felt lost at times in the swirl of all that the first two participants shared with me. They offered different reference points that I often didn’t understand. While they trusted me to guide them through the interview process, I struggled to hold onto the objectives guiding the inquiry. I believe that they sensed this at times. A couple of times through the course of our conversation they wondered if what they were sharing was helpful to me (also see Mishler, 1999, p. 30). At times they asked me to prompt them with questions, seemingly to gain some assurance that they were providing me with helpful information.

Feeling unsure of my ability to responsively attend to all the participants had to share about their experiences of coming to art in later life, I returned to explore new areas of the literature, many of which I covered in the previous chapter – retirement as a significant life

stage, art worlds, amateur artists, serious leisure, etc. In doing so, I hoped to achieve a more sensitive ability to understand the manifold meanings of the participants' stories. At this stage, I became increasingly aware that I was identifying the value of my inquiry in relation to suggestive connections between artistic creativity and healing revealing an implicit grounding construction of aging as a "problem." Recognizing this, I endeavoured to honour the participants' own focus on coming to art in relation to creative excitement, being active and engaged, and the momentum that entailed. I was relieved that I had "built-in" an opportunity to explore significant aspects of the participants' experience over the course of *successive* interviews.

Reflecting on the experience of this early "pilot" stage of the inquiry I also decided to modify my inquiry approach slightly. I had originally planned on sharing the audio-taped transcript of our previous interview with each participant for review and discussion when we met for our next interview. Indeed, I did share transcripts of my first interviews with the first two participants. However, what I quickly learned is that a transcript offers an awkward translation of the original interview as one moves from speech to text, noting hesitations, repetitions, incomplete sentences, digressions, etc. (accepted features of spoken language). As such, my interview transcripts did not serve as a particularly useful tool for engaging participants in the process of reflecting on the stories they had related in the previous interview (also see Kvale, 1996, pp. 163-165). Having reviewed his transcript, the first participant described feeling embarrassed by the documentation of sounds and phrases such as "ah," "umm," "hmm," and "you know," etc. His self-consciousness made him question how valuable the information was that he had shared with me. Having reviewed a book chapter this participant had written about his academic life and accomplishments, I was aware that the transcript failed to reflect his usual standards of written prose.

I asked the second participant about her reaction to the transcript of our first interview. She responded that she hadn't had time to closely review it, however, a quick glance had led her to wonder if the interview had been helpful to me as she worried that she had rambled at different points. I suggested that it wasn't necessary to closely read the transcript (I hoped, in fact, that she wouldn't, and believe that her busy schedule precluded anything more than a cursory review of it). I reassured the two participants that our conversations had been *very* helpful to me in beginning to appreciate the scope of the

inquiry. I assured them that I was interested in the overall stories that they had to tell me, and emphasized that I was not particularly concerned about pauses, hesitations, or other extra-linguistic features embedded in the transcripts. I promised that I would provide the interview excerpts I included in the final research text for them to consider in relation to both accuracy, and how well they felt the content portrayed them and their experience. I promised I would not include any material that they were not comfortable with in the final research text. Indeed at this final stage of the inquiry the participants suggested additional changes that helped them to feel more comfortable with how I represented them in the text.

### *Ongoing Interviewing: Developing Understandings*

Having enhanced my awareness of the range of storylines and other thematic meaning dimensions that the first two participants had introduced me to, I continued on with the first wave of interviews with an additional nine participants. Compared with my experience of interviewing the first two participants, I was more confident about my ability to responsively attend to the participants' stories as they related these through our ongoing conversations. Recognizing that stories are often shared in fragments, and that the meaning of an ongoing, developing story is situated in relation to the moment in which it is told and the overall story coming into view, I became more comfortable with the different forms and rhythms of the interviews. I attempted to respect the participants' own sensitivities and silences when asking them to elaborate on a particular storyline. Sometimes a participant would indicate interest in "moving along," suggesting that they had completed, or were tired of exploring a particular story or question. When a participant asked me to clarify what I hoped to achieve, or otherwise asked for assurance that they were providing information that was helpful to me, I affirmed my open interest in their stories and experiences as these related to the broad objectives of the inquiry. I reassured the participants that all that they had shared with me was helpful.

The inquiry involved three phases of "inviting and attending to stories." During the *initial interviews*, accounts about their early lives provided a context for understanding how the participants came to art in later life, and the place of art in their lives. Questions during this phase were directed to gaining additional details about the participants' stories, rather than analyzing their stories. I presented a short, written summary of our first interview to each participant during the *second interview* (which typically occurred about 10 to 13

months later), and invited each of the participants to clarify or elaborate on my understanding of the stories they had shared with me. In addition, I developed an early, tentative outline of the storylines I had identified to that point of the inquiry and asked the participants for their comments and feedback. I also began to focus on particular questions, such as how the participants' maintained a serious commitment to art making, identified themselves as an artist, etc. There were times that I worried that my questioning was too directive. Other times I regretted not having asked about particular aspects of the participants' stories. What I was most concerned about was being responsive to what the participants had to say.

I presented a final analytic model of the significant storylines and meaning dimensions I had discerned within and across the interview transcripts to each of the participants, including illustrative excerpts I had used from my interviews with them. I left this material with the participants to review, at which point we arranged to meet for a final interview, usually within a couple of weeks. During our *third interview*, I asked each participant to comment on how well I had understood, and represented their stories, which sometimes resulted in changes (primarily of an editorial nature) being made in the research text. I had used first and last initials to identify the participants in preliminary research texts. At this point, I asked each participant if they preferred to be personally identified in the final text, or wanted to suggest a pseudonym that I would use to identify them.

*Other Empirical Materials: Field Notes, Artefacts, Photographs*

Sandelowski (2002) has suggested that researchers need to nurture the conditions that help them to “deeply engage the world. To read into, between and over the lines – and not just the surface of words” (p. 107; also see Greene, 1978, p. 163). I wrote field notes immediately following each interview, and elaborated on them following my return home. These notes documented what had transpired during the interview that would not be apparent from the transcript, including different impressions and feelings that I was left with following the interview. In addition, I took photographs of selected artworks chosen by the participants as being particularly significant to them, and collected artefacts as supplementary empirical materials.

One of my early intentions was to explore the experience of coming to art in later life through *both* oral and visual narratives of older artists. I soon realized that this was too

ambitious an aim. Preoccupied by the complexity of the interview process and the amount of rich, in-depth information I obtained through successive interview waves, I became aware that achieving this two-fold objective would be an overly complex undertaking. I decided to focus primarily on the participants' stories and narratives regarding their involvement in art making. I did, however, collect artefacts that the participants shared with me (including life history materials, descriptions of art programs and classes that they had attended, pamphlets describing their art shows, etc.) which was helpful in supporting and stimulating the interpretive work of the inquiry. In addition, I explored local art worlds within the Edmonton area by attending workshops, galleries, and special exhibits, and striking up casual conversations with other amateur artists. I maintained an inquiry journal which over time helped me to become comfortable with the open-ended nature of this inquiry, and helped me to slowly develop the understandings that I used to compose the research text.

#### In the Midst/ Mist: Developing the Research Text

As I worked through the process of developing a "final" research text, I returned again and again to the question of what I hoped to accomplish as I attempted to discern storylines that were most relevant to this inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the move from field texts to final research texts as being "layered in complexity ... there is no smooth transition, no one gathering of the field texts, sorting them through, and analyzing them. Field texts have a vast and rich potential" (p. 132). Mishler (1999) suggests that a "radical reduction of available 'data' is an omnipresent feature of narrative studies" (p. 153). There is always the challenge of discerning and distilling a meaningful research story, and no one standard approach to analysis. In attempting to "make sense" of all that the participants shared with me about their experience of art making in later life, I began by considering the participants' interview transcripts individually, and then as a set. Similar to Freeman (1997), I found that I was inclined to "see actions together, as temporal patterns, configurations of meaning, and to situate these configurations within larger wholes" (p. 175), while noting variation within the participants' accounts. I followed a thematic, or *holistic-content* approach (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) to reading the interview transcripts. I considered both the overall life story of an individual, and the "meaning of the part in light of content that emerges from the rest of the narrative, or in the context of the story in its entirety" (p. 13). I also found that I was drawn to the stories and

experiences of the participants who had developed a deep and abiding interest in, and commitment to, art making as a serious leisure pursuit. Perhaps because of the depth of their ongoing involvement and identification with art, these participants seemingly offered more “well-formed” narratives of their experience.

Following the initial interviews, I developed an overall impression of each participant’s story. I began by reading each transcript freely, jotting notes and questions as they occurred. During additional readings, I developed an overall sense of the participants’ narrative by noting starting points, transitions, and shifting storylines. I also noted ideas and phrases that caused me to think more deeply about the participants’ stories. As described earlier, I developed a brief synthesis of each participant’s overall story as well as common storylines I had tentatively identified across the participants’ accounts which I presented to participants for their comments and feedback during the second interview. During the stage of “sustained analysis” (following the second interviews), I considered new ideas and stories shared by the participants. I reconsidered the storylines and themes I had initially proposed to the participants, through a process of reading and re-reading transcripts and other narrative materials. I attempted to develop an interpretive account that would be both parsimonious and embracing of the participants’ stories, as well as offer a framework of understanding that would be meaningful to both the participants and others beyond the scope of the inquiry. I selected and analyzed excerpts from the interview transcripts with a view to identifying exemplar “text segments” that would serve to maintain the visibility of individual stories and experience (see Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997).

In truth, the preceding provides a more pre-determined sense of the process than I actually experienced. I experienced more of a sense of moving forward, back, and sideways, sometimes slowly and other times more quickly, as I lived through the experience of this inquiry. I constructed my understandings through the process of reading and writing, and then re-reading and re-writing. I was aware of parameters that set bounds on what I might include in this account (such as conventions related to length, relevance, and potential contribution). Based on his inquiry of craft artists’ stories, Mishler (1999) offered that “just as respondents include only a small sample of their life experiences, selecting what seems appropriate ... as the researcher, I followed a similar path ... I am also trying to tell a coherent story. But ...there is no specific set of rules for this” (p. 110).

And so it went. The “final” research account is presented in Chapter 5.

### Transition 3 ...

The present inquiry was designed, redesigned, and lived over time. The foregoing offers some insight into the ways I approached, engaged, struggled along, and ultimately constructed the inquiry. In attempting to ensure confidence in the understandings that I developed, I repeatedly immersed myself in the data as I worked to synthesize and abstract an analytic framework. I attempted to represent the participants’ experience in a way that would feel “true” to them, at the same time as developing a text that would allow others to learn, see or feel something “that might have gone unnoticed or unexplicated” (Freeman, 1993, p. 222; also see Mishler, 1999, p. 157). I shared my narrative interpretations with the participants, and asked them to consider the degree to which my analysis framework “fit” with their understanding of their experiences. Given this, I am hopeful that I have developed an interpretation of the participants’ stories that may be interesting and compelling, if only because the participants have endorsed it. Excerpts from the interview transcripts have been included in the final text so that you, the reader, can also consider the narrative materials on which I based my interpretations.

Having conducted the interviews which informed this inquiry, and having composed this research account - I recognize that I am embedded in the text that follows. After reading this text, this “dissertation story” may also live on in your life as you consider some of the ways that the participants and I made sense of their stories through the course of this inquiry... *recognizing that we can never finally determine what things mean ... recognizing that there is no end to meaning.*

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE PARTICIPANTS**

The participants, eight women and three men, ranged in age from 59 to 89 years of age at the time of our first interview in 2004. All of the participants were Caucasian. Eight of the participants were married (two were married to each other). Three were widowed. All lived independently in their own homes. The participants characterized themselves as being relatively healthy. Most of the participants also appeared to enjoy a financially secure retirement, with the exception of one woman who shared that she was facing some financial difficulties. Most of the participants mentioned that they had children and grandchildren. Most had lived in Canada all of their lives. During the time of the study, all of the participants lived within or near Edmonton, Alberta. Not selected to be representative of the older adult population, the participants can best be characterized as having unique work, family, educational, and retirement experiences.

With regard to the present inquiry, the participants were all involved in the visual arts in some way. The majority painted. Although all became involved in art following retirement, there was a diversity of experience, skill, and commitment to art making among the participants. Seven could be characterized as being involved in art making as a “serious leisure” pursuit. They wanted to accomplish good work and devoted a great deal of time to their art. They hoped that their work would be considered accomplished and successful - not only from the perspective of family and friends, but also by their instructors and various public audiences that might view and buy their work. Their artwork was expressive, revealing considerable technical skill. Many of the participants were engaged in different ways with various art worlds, both local and beyond.

The following portrayals outline the participants’ personal life histories and art making experiences. These are offered to provide a context for the storylines and themes that I describe in the next chapter. When I asked how they wanted to be identified, eight participants chose to be identified by their real names. These included Malcolm McPhee, Lillian Carleton, Bernard Wood, Mary Topping, Helen Richards, Joyce Bjerke, Gail Lane, and Lynda Barnhard. Three participants preferred to use a pseudonym: Terry Dean, and Madeline and William Litwin. In the following, I first introduce the seven participants who

described having a serious commitment to art making in later life. I then introduce the participants who were involved in art making on a more “casual” basis.<sup>7</sup>

#### Malcolm McPhee

As neighbours, Malcolm McPhee and I had discussed his painting on several occasions. Born in 1940, he had undertaken a serious course of study in painting following his retirement. Many of the walls of his home, including those in the vibrant art studio he had constructed in his basement, were used to exhibit many of the 40 to 50 paintings he had created over the past 10 years.

He recalled always having an interest in art, sharing that *“It’s certainly always been in the background”* (2,52). When he was seven years old he was invited to join a prominent Anglican choir in Kingston, Ontario as a boy “treble.” He continued with the choir until he was 17 years old, singing counter tenor and then bass. It was during this time that he learned to play the piano by ear. During a choir visit to Westminster Abbey an archdeacon noticed that Malcolm also had an interest in art, and introduced him to oil painting. Art was not his first choice for a career; rather, he had wanted to become a professional pilot. When he failed the Ishi Hari colour test due to red-green colour blindness he decided to go into medicine. He stated: *I’m not even sure how that happened. I’m not sure why I decided on medicine, but I’m glad I did* (2,194). A strong parental influence that may have encouraged or discouraged Malcolm from considering art or music as a career is not apparent in his story.

Malcolm enjoyed a successful career as a surgeon in urological oncology. He initiated one of the earliest laser technology programs for cancer treatment and palliation in North America. In addition, he was committed to the human side of medicine, including end of life care. He openly cared for, and supported his patients throughout their lives. Malcolm emphasized his wife’s contribution to his career. She managed his practice, took care of their finances, and raised their three children. She was also a weaver. In addition to stories about his patients, some of the most moving stories Malcolm shared were those that involved his first wife. He described the times when he would play the piano as she sat near

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<sup>7</sup> As noted earlier, I have used italics to indicate the voices of the participants that I extracted from interview transcripts. The paired numbers that appear in parenthesis indicate the interview (Interview 1 or 2), and the sequential number used to identify the location of the text segment from that interview transcript (numbering from 1 upward to 10,000).

him at her spinning wheel, listening and spinning, while he played a piece he had composed for her. Art and music remained strong interests throughout his career. He also enjoyed being a hobby pilot.

Following his retirement, after he experienced several serious health challenges and the unexpected death of his first wife, Malcolm began a formal study of painting. An excerpt from an artist's statement he prepared for one of his early art classes follows:

*Mankind's greatest gift is the potential ability to transcend the structural reality of the world to experience and explore life more meaningfully through intellectual and emotional venues beyond our senses of sight and sound. Art to me is very much like my love of music and aviation because it allows me to escape some of my worldly confines to experience emotional (and sometimes philosophical) adventures where I can become part of the process. I want to learn more of the technique and philosophy of art so that I can more fully appreciate the works of others and facilitate my own efforts at creative expression. I want to learn to "feel" and "experience" art, which I now know is possible.*

Malcolm paints from sketches and photographs he has taken in the countryside, wilderness and aerial vistas. In addition to painting, he enjoys travelling and spending time with his children and grandchildren. Classical piano also continues to be an important part of his life. Following our second interview, I learned that Malcolm had remarried. His second wife, a dynamic woman and retired nurse, shares many of his interests.

#### Lillian Carleton

Lillian Carleton was 84 years of age when we first met. Although she experienced a number of health ailments, what I was most struck by was her buoyant energy. Lillian had been diagnosed with breast cancer in her early seventies, but was successfully treated at that time. She had also had cataracts removed from her eyes, and had arthritis in both of her hands. Her health concerns had, however, not swayed her from maintaining a strong connection to her art. When I arrived at her home for our first interview, she invited me to see her artwork and led me from room to room to show me all of the work she had on hand. Lillian frequently used the phrase "*Oh, I love this one*" (e.g., "*I love this one of the poppies*" [1,2]) as she introduced me to a new painting. I was very impressed by her work, and said so. Over a period of about 35 years, she estimated that she had created over 800 paintings and drawings. I soon learned that Lillian was recognized as one of Alberta's finest community artists. Her paintings had been included in a multi-city tour of the work of the "best sketch artists in Alberta" that travelled to seven cities in Alberta and British Columbia.

Lillian described herself as being a landscape artist and a “colourist:” *Oh, landscape is my thing. That’s really what I love doing. I love doing landscape (1,1222); I’m a colourist, see, I love colour (1,1346); I use a lot more colour than some people do. I love bright colours (2,1218).* She worked primarily in oils and pastels. She completed the Fine Arts Certificate Program offered by the University of Alberta’s Faculty of Extension when she was 82 years of age. In the artist statement she prepared for her graduation exhibit she wrote:

*This exhibition is a small part of what there is to observe in the Alberta landscape. There is a lifetime of subject matter for the artist to choose from, only momentarily touching upon some of the highlights in the landscape that I am most familiar with. I have endeavoured to paint some of what I know best, that is central Alberta. I feel that through working hard and by consistency of observation, I have developed good technical skills that have allowed me to give form to my vision. Please enjoy my view of the Alberta landscape.*

Lillian attributed her appreciation of landscape to the time she and her husband raised their two children on their farm in the midst of the beautiful vistas of north-central Alberta. It was only after retiring from farming that she became involved in a community art club. This signalled the beginning of a significant new chapter in Lillian’s life that centred on art making. I was struck by Lillian’s passion for art, the creative explorations that informed her art, and the luminous qualities of her work. Her paintings helped me to enhance my appreciation of the northern Alberta landscape. In addition to her painting, Lillian enjoyed spending time with her family and friends. She was also a great fan of the Toronto Blue Jays, and worked out at a fitness centre three times a week.

Bernard Wood

When I first met Bernard Wood he provided me with a tour of the numerous paintings and sketches that he had on display throughout his home. He was 76 years old. Our conversation alternated between art making, his other current involvements, and his earlier life experiences. Bernard was born in 1928, in Sackville, New Brunswick as the youngest son of a large family. His father died when he was nine years old. Seven years later when his mother was about to remarry, he recalled that she presented him with a long list of career possibilities. Knowing nothing about the profession, he decided on architecture which he came to view as a fortuitous career choice. He completed his degree in 1950 at the

University of Manitoba where he met his future wife. After visiting her family in Edmonton, he shared *“the next thing I knew, I had a job, and I stayed here”* (1,730).

In time, he established a successful architectural firm that specialized in the design and construction of corporate and public buildings. Bernard made significant contributions to the profession of architecture, serving in a number of provincial and national offices, including President of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. He was also the Canadian representative for the Commonwealth Board of Architectural Education. I asked him about other life interests he had at that time, and he said, *“I never had time for interests. I worked very hard”* (1,867). When he was 65, he passed his business on to his successors. Although he continued to work part-time for a few years to ensure a smooth transition, he experienced a sense of loss, which he countered with a seeming characteristic positive coping response: *I would have liked to have stayed on, but it was better for the firm not to. I didn’t suffer over it. I got busy with other things that I enjoy. I started fly fishing a great deal. I got into art. I started playing golf when I turned 70. I played at it before then, but now I really play golf* (1,951).

Bernard estimated that he completes about 25 to 30 paintings a year. He primarily focuses on landscape and portraiture, working with both pastels and watercolours. He works from sketches and from photographs he has taken. He also paints from memory. He has exhibited his work at different local venues. He used effusive language to describe his experience of coming to art following retirement: *It’s all fun. I think it’s really fun. I love it* (1,72); *It’s marvellous* (1,808); *It’s just lovely* (1,818). He associated his love of art with his love for people and the interest he has always taken in life.

#### Mary Topping

I met Mary Topping by chance at the McMullen Gallery at the University of Alberta Hospital. She was the guest instructor for the drop-in art session at the gallery that week and a number of her works were on exhibit. When she learned about my project she offered to participate; I met with her at her home a few weeks later. Mary had been born into a large farm family in 1915, in the hamlet of Kennedy, Saskatchewan. She moved to Edmonton after graduating from high school to care for an invalid aunt, and a few years later began training to become a nurse. She met her husband soon after she started nursing and after the birth of their son stayed home to raise him. She returned to nursing in 1962, and while she

enjoyed her work over time found the responsibilities of being a nurse manager to be more than she wanted to handle: *In those days you didn't have help like you get today. There weren't ward clerks or people like that. You had to do so much* (1,297). She retired from nursing when she was about 57 years old.

Mary shared that she had been involved in crafts and art classes in different ways throughout her life. Following her retirement, she was *"looking forward to a slower pace, you know. I just followed different ideas of things to do"* (1,303). She also looked forward to having more time to study art, hoping to take her interest in art to another level. However, the realization of her dream was delayed for close to two and half decades. At 92 years of age, Mary currently paints and exhibits, both on her own, and as part of a collective comprised of seven women artists who met as mature students when Mary was enrolled in a fine arts degree at the University of Alberta. Her paintings are primarily oil on masonite, acrylics, and collage. She enjoys experimenting with mixed media such as twigs, barks, dried flowers, sand, and other natural forms and objects, along with glue, and paper maché. In an artist statement she wrote that working in collage *"provides a three-dimensional effect that adds a sense of realism to her memory"* and experience of things. In terms of subject matter, her work *"focuses on the transient qualities of the natural world."* Her subject matter includes landscape, portraiture, and events across time, near and far. She often works from photographs, but sometimes works *"on things just as I go, just from how I am thinking about it"* (1,1019).

Mary described her health as excellent, having only a few aches and pains. She felt fortunate that she was *"able to read and see enough to live comfortably"* (1,87) and was still able to paint. Mary was happy to attest to the fact that it is possible to realize a dream, even late in life. She said that people had been *"so very kind"* (1,190) to her throughout her life. From what I came to learn about her, I was confident that Mary both through her own inimitable being and her powerful and evocative artwork had touched the hearts, minds, and spirits of many.

#### Helen Richards

When I first met Helen Richards she was 76. Her husband, Tom Richards, was 88 years old. Although Helen described having an early interest in art, her first love was skating. She taught both ice dancing and artistic roller skating for many years. After

marrying and having a child she directed her energy to her home and family, as well as a number of different community organizations and events. For example, from 1965 until 1983 she organized the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues “Ice Show.” She initiated the idea of the ice show and worked to ensure the participation of any child who wanted to be involved. There were over 500 children in the largest of the shows she organized. She had received a number of awards in recognition of her service to the community.

When she was 55 years of age she enrolled in art classes offered as part of the Edmonton Lifelong Learners Association’s (ELLA) 3-week “Spring Session for Seniors,” in partnership with the Faculty of Extension.<sup>8</sup> A few years later, she founded the Laurier Heights Artists Society which, at the moment of this writing, is holding its 16<sup>th</sup> annual art show. At one point, her husband Tom joined our conversation. Following his retirement as Director of Stocks for the Alberta Liquor Control Board, he taught courses, wrote a book, and prepared daily radio commentaries on wine for many years. In time, he became involved in the Laurier Heights Artists Society and soon came to share Helen’s passion for painting. He attested to the value of becoming involved in the group, for the friends that he had made as well as all that he had learned and experienced. He was proud of Helen’s continuing role as organizer, promoter, and motivator of the group.

At this point in her life, Helen’s energy is mostly focused on her art. Although she said that she was not all that prolific, she completed upwards to 10 oil paintings a year. In an artist statement she wrote: *Although I have been going to the mountains since childhood, I have never tired of their majesty. Using a palette knife I try to bring out their rugged grandeur, and the flowing color of the rocks and foliage. I also enjoy the challenge of painting still life and flowers.* Many of her paintings are based on watercolour sketches she completes when she is in the mountains, as well as scenes captured in photographs. She cited the Group of Seven and her Latvian heritage as an influence on her work. After visiting her native Latvia in 1990, she “*felt a need to illustrate and record my emotions.*” She enjoyed learning about her Latvian heritage, and experimenting with the bold, stylistic

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<sup>8</sup> ELLA, the Edmonton Lifelong Learners Association, in partnership with the Faculty of Extension, offers a Spring Session for Seniors that makes available a wide variety of non-credit courses in the fine arts, liberal arts, science and humanities, as well as those focused on well-being (see <http://www3.extension.ualberta.ca/ella/>, retrieved on June 11, 2006).

approach of noted Latvian artists. She often felt a sense of surprise when she completes a work: *I will look at something that I've done and I think, "Did I actually do that?"* (1,308). She also experienced great satisfaction in having created a social world focused on art that is experienced and enjoyed by seniors and others within the community. Her motivation for doing what she does is to help others, to help to make things happen, and *"have fun"* (1,392). In addition to her painting and organizing efforts, Helen enjoys golf, curling, trips to the mountains, more distant travel, and visiting with her son and his family. When I asked Helen about when she had retired, she responded, *"I don't think I'm retired yet. I don't feel retired, maybe when my body's starting to give out"* (1,262).

#### Joyce Bjerke

Joyce Bjerke was 65 years old when I first met her. Joyce had been suggested as a potential participant by a senior staff person at the Strathcona Place Senior Centre. She had recently exhibited her work at the art gallery at the centre, and understood that I hoped to promote the benefits of the arts for seniors through my research, which she wanted to support. After we spoke on the phone, she invited me to come to her home and meet with her over coffee.

Joyce had been born into a large farming family in Saskatchewan in 1939, the youngest of 10 children. Although she had little early exposure, she felt that she had always been drawn to art. As a young woman she completed specialty training in public health nursing. When she graduated she felt that she had *"the world by the tail."* She described herself as being a young woman who was *"full of energy and ideas"* (1,94). She worked for many years on First Nations reserves, and then moved to Alberta after she met and married her husband. Together, they raised their daughter. Joyce worked as a community health nurse for the City of Edmonton until she retired at 55 years of age, and then continued to work part-time for a few more years. She said, *"It takes about a year or two before you feel that you're really retired"* (1,178). At the time of our interview, she described herself as being fully retired, but stated that she was *"as busy now as I was when I was working"* (1,190).

Joyce's energy and interest was distributed across a number of activities, many of which she enjoyed with her husband: *We are in a community choir. We rehearse every Monday evening. Tuesday and Friday mornings, I do pottery. Monday and Wednesday*

*mornings I go to the gym to power walk. Wednesday evenings I play my clarinet in the advanced community band. On Thursday, I'm in the intermediate band on flute. Saturday morning we go out for breakfast with the neighbours. Sunday morning we go to church. We sing in the church choir. And I also visit and spend time with family (1,190).* She and her husband also curled in the winter, and were involved in photography as a hobby. Joyce's account of coming to art focused on chance, going with the flow, and committed determination.

I was impressed by the evocative and compelling composition of Joyce's artwork. She prepared the following "artist statement" for an exhibit at a local senior centre:

*Although she always had a keen interest in painting, it was not until the fall of 1994, after retiring from the nursing profession that she actually picked up a brush. Joyce received inspiration along the way from [a number of well-known] Edmonton artists. Her watercolour paintings consist of a wide variety of subjects including old buildings, landscapes, animals, and flowers...*

Regardless of her connection to art, she did not want to be solely focused on art. She was following a deeply held interest in art, but wanted to be free to experience it, not as a commitment or because she was following a plan, but just as she liked. She valued having self-directed free time, and a satisfactory balance of different leisure options. She stated, "*if I want to do it, I do it, that's by my choice*" (1,202). For Joyce, this was her ideal. This is what retirement represented to her – freedom (see Gibson, Ashton-Shaeffer, Green, & Corbin, 2002, for more on the theme of "retirement as freedom").

Terry Dean

*Ah, but a man's (sic) reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?*  
– Robert Browning

When I first met Terry Dean, I marvelled at how her home seemed to celebrate the beauty of art and nature as a unity. Her loft art studio overlooked her living room, and expansive windows provided an unobstructed view of a nearby forested ravine. I was surprised when she told me that she and her husband were planning to move to a new house in south Edmonton later that fall, only to find myself similarly impressed by the view of the countryside that her new home offered. Following many delays and disruptions that she had experienced with moving to her new home, she was looking forward to enjoying the large art studio that had been specially constructed in the basement of her new home, complete with a large window, full spectrum lighting, and storage space for completed artwork.

Terry was born in London, England in 1936. She had an early, longstanding interest in art, but her father had discouraged her from pursuing a career as an artist. Instead she trained to become a teacher. After a few years she decided that there would not be much of a future for her in England: *I would be a classroom teacher all my life. I just couldn't face that, so I applied to Canada to get a teaching post here on the assumption that there would be more room for advancement* (1,7). In 1961 she obtained a teaching position in Calgary where she taught for several years. She sketched and painted during the summer. In addition, to fulfill the requirements of her Bachelor of Education program she completed painting and drawing courses, and a visual arts instruction course. In 1964, after finding that *"Calgary was too controlled somehow"* (1,9), she moved to Edmonton. Within a few years she accepted a position teaching art in a junior high school. She found the classes *"exhausting but good, they were satisfying ... the kids enjoyed the art classes ... and I had great fun with it"* (1,13).

In the early 1970s, she married her husband. Feeling a need for a career change she also completed a Library Science degree. Although she enjoyed working as a university librarian for the next 20 years, she found that she had little time or energy she could give to painting and drawing. Terry looked forward to retirement as a time she could immerse herself in her painting, and took early retirement at the age of 55. An excerpt from one of her "artist statements" reads:

*I came to painting with enthusiasm, excitement and pent up desire, suddenly unleashed. So many years later, they are still in full flood. Originally, the subjects I chose appealed to me for their aesthetic qualities, especially rich colour, sensual shape, and the play of light and shadow. My paintings were realistic and I worked in several media including pastel and watercolour (sometimes in combination with ink), oil and acrylic. For some time now, I have been focused on abstract and non-objective painting in acrylic.... My inspiration still comes mainly from nature's drama. I take hundreds of photographs, many of which I use as a starting point for sketches that I can develop into a painting. It is my goal to produce a series of truly original and beautiful paintings that will reach out and touch you.*

In addition to painting, she is interested in photography, working with computers, and reading. She swims for exercise. She and her husband live in Arizona during the winter where she also paints. She also frequently visits with friends and family in England.

Gail Lane

A neighbour of mine had suggested that her mother-in-law would be a wonderful candidate to participate in my inquiry. After reading background materials about my study, Gail Lane agreed to participate. A large bay window off of her living room gave way to a forested front yard, offering a view that I imagined was similar to those she had enjoyed growing up as a child in mining camps in the interior of British Columbia. Born in 1941, Gail had completed training as a medical technologist at Vancouver General Hospital when she met her husband. They had one son, and spent a few years living in different cities before they finally settled in St. Albert, just north of Edmonton.

Her engagement with art had ebbed and flowed over the years. She recalled that she had enjoyed drawing as a girl. In her thirties, she enrolled in a few art classes and learned that she had a talent for drawing. When she moved to St. Albert, she considered joining a community art group, but found that those involved with the group were primarily focused on selling and exhibiting their artwork. Following this, she placed her interest in art aside - at least temporarily. She became increasingly involved with raising her son, getting him to his various sports practices and school events. She also served as a volunteer and executive member of different community organizations, including Meals on Wheels. Then, in the late 1980s when their health began to decline, she persuaded her parents to move to Alberta so she could support and care for them during their last years.

It was only after her parents' death, when she was in her early 60s, that Gail again became involved in art. She received a gift certificate for an art class as a Christmas gift, and subsequently enrolled in a few art classes with her daughter-in-law. Gail enjoyed drawing on her own, and often created portraits of her grandchildren. She preferred the immediacy of sketching and drawing compared to painting, and described her art making efforts as "*very satisfying*" (1,439). However, as we were finalizing a date to meet following her summer holidays, I learned that her interest in art had been displaced by a new love for music that had recently taken hold of her life. While drawing was an interest she had, the flute was a consuming passion that had enraptured her: *It's taken over, it's just so delightful the joyous sound it makes* (1,537). This was a surprising twist, which I thought offered a potentially interesting variation on the theme of "coming to art" in later life. Over the course of the study Gail described a non-wavering enthusiasm for learning to play the flute.

Lynda Barnhard

At 59 years old when we met, Lynda Barnhard was the youngest study participant. An art education program coordinator I had contacted at the Art Gallery of Alberta had passed on information about my study to Lynda, and she subsequently called me to say that she was interested in being interviewed. Lynda had experienced a somewhat difficult life. She had her first two children when she was quite young during a marriage that ended in divorce. When she married her second husband a decade later, things became a bit easier for her financially. She had her third child at 39. She didn't know if she would claim the label "retired." Although she had never held a long-term position, as a woman she felt that *"you're always cooking, you're always cleaning... there is a lot on the financial end I find hard to deal with"* (1,239). At the same time, she wanted to *"just kind of enjoy myself, because now I have a life. My husband is in a nursing home, and my youngest can fend for himself for the most part"* (1,321). Her husband had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's 10 years earlier. The year before our first interview, he had fallen, broken his hip, and subsequently moved into a continuing care facility. Lynda visited him about once a week, travelling back and forth by city bus. She missed her husband, and often felt overwhelmed by maintaining her home and managing their finances. Her youngest son was unemployed. She hoped he would find a job to provide him with some direction, adding that the additional income would also be of help. At the time we first met, she was being treated for depression and anxiety. Although things had improved somewhat in her life when we met the second time (her son had just started a new job), she still occasionally attended a support group to help her deal with feelings of depression.

Her mother had taught her to knit as a young girl. However, she didn't recall being very interested in art when she was younger, and only began to explore other crafts after marrying her second husband. At this point in her life, she described art making as one of her central interests. She began to take art classes at the Art Gallery of Alberta when she was 55 years old, after her youngest son had been awarded a series of art lessons from a well-known, professional cartoonist. It was at this point that Lynda learned about the weekly drop-in classes the gallery offered. The fee for each class was less than \$10 a class (including all materials), which she felt was affordable. She said: *The sessions are two hours long. I try to go every week. There are some classes that I miss because I'm not interested in what they are covering, or something comes up that is more important, or sometimes I just*

*feel tired and say, “Oh, I don’t think I’ll go tonight.” Different topics are covered over and over so if I miss a class I don’t really miss too much, but it’s not very often I actually don’t go (2,490). Lynda sometimes worked on art projects at night, if she had the energy: I try to paint about once a week outside of class. That’s what one of the instructors says, if I paint once a week then I’ll be able to keep my skills up, otherwise I won’t. I know I’m a bit rusty right now because they’re doing some painting and I felt I was kind of awkward with the brush ... I was kind of struggling with it. I am thinking that I am going to have to start doing a little bit more painting (2,810).*

Although she had a consistent art practice, her work was not focused on a particular area or subject matter. She said, *“I like to experiment, just putting things down and seeing what turns up, play around with it and then see that ‘Oh, that doesn’t look too bad, you know, having put things together like that’” (1,985).* She had learned about a wide variety of art media and techniques – acrylics, watercolours, gel transfer, collage, Chinese brush painting, printmaking, frottage rubbing, charcoals, pen and ink, sculpture, and clay. What she most enjoyed was oil painting: *With painting if you don’t like it you can paint over it. It gives you more freedom of expression, so it’s more relaxing actually to paint (1,813).* Lynda showed me many of the projects she had completed which she had signed and dated. She had also begun to explore the viability of making cards, and selling them at her husband’s long-term care facility. She planned on continuing with her art classes *“as long as I can afford it. Right now, the price is right. It’s \$36 for six classes” (1,823).* In addition to art, she also continued to enjoy such crafts as knitting, stamping, and plastic canvas.

#### Madeline and William Litwin

At the time of our first interview, Madeline Litwin was 72, and her husband, William, was 71 years old. They were suggested as participants by the director of an “arts in medicine” program at a local health care institution. Although they had no previous interest in art making prior to their involvement in the program, I was impressed by the power and beauty of the soapstone sculpture they had on hand to show me. I asked if others in their class had completed carvings of the same calibre. They responded affirmatively, with William offering the sage insight that *“it is quite amazing, what’s inside of a person with a little bit of instruction” (1,1332).*

Earlier in their lives they had been busy with work and raising their three sons. The challenge of facing a number of serious health issues had kept them busy later in life. After beginning to work part-time when he was 59, William fully retired at 66 years of age after experiencing a heart attack. Madeline retired at 60 when she began to suffer from a debilitating neuralgia. She also suffered from a number of other painful ailments and conditions, including plantar fasciitis. She recalled the anger she experienced as she struggled with the pain. A year long pain management course had been helpful to her. However, when she was diagnosed with breast cancer at 69 she *“got angry all over again”* (1,38). For many months she had worried that something was wrong. Repeated mammogram and ultrasound examinations failed to identify the underlying tumour. When she finally received a positive diagnosis, she had a mastectomy, lymph node surgery, and radiation. When depression later led her to contemplate suicide, she decided she needed additional help and was encouraged to participate in the “arts in medicine” program. William, wanting to support Madeline during this difficult period, also enrolled in the arts program.

Of the different options available, they chose to take the soapstone carving class together. They attended a 6-week session, a longer 6-month session a year and half later, and then a supplementary 3-week session several months after that. A professional soapstone sculptor provided instruction, and a psychologist facilitated the group. Following their first session, while on a waiting list for their second session, they attended a 3-day soapstone course offered in the community that their son bought them as a Christmas present. Their story was less focused on art as a way of life, but more so as a means of coping with anxiety and uncertainty. William was glad to be supportive of his wife, and learn more about her struggles. Working alongside others in a similar situation, the art classes helped Madeline to cope with her feelings of anger, depression and, at times, hopelessness. As a cancer survivor for three and half years, the arts program has helped her to access the strength she needed to deal with the prospect of recurrence, along with her other health problems. She has also gained insight into her husband’s experience of her illness. Together they have connected with a community of others who are also coping with cancer.

However, while others have continued on with soapstone carving on their own outside of the “arts in medicine” program, William and Madeline were not interested in doing so. Madeline planned on taking some of the other classes offered through the “arts in

medicine program,” such as photography, life-sized doll making, and possibly, watercolour and acrylic painting, but these did not appeal to William. Rather, he listed health care appointments and funerals, family and friends as being the main activities that filled their lives. In addition, both Madeline and William enthusiastically described their regular “coffee club” outings that they enjoyed with friends. Twice-weekly they went to the local mall to enjoy morning coffee, good conversation, and have fun. Their stories put me in mind of Cheang’s (2002) study of social interaction and “play” among seniors who also regularly gathered at a shopping centre food court.

#### Transition 4 ...

All of the participants who contributed to this inquiry were generous with their time, and appeared comfortable talking about their art making experiences. They thought my research topic was an important one. They appreciated my interest in their stories. Several of the participants offered that they had developed new insights into their experience of coming to art in later life. As for me, I was fascinated by the participants’ stories. I was also impressed by the creative artistry and output of the participants, and the pleasure they described in creating their art. Although none of the participants had been vaulted “into the limelight, illuminating (them as an icon) in the popular culture of the day” (Stebbins, 1992, p. 68), aesthetic considerations were of prime importance (see Dalley, 1984, p. xii). They were concerned about accomplishing “good work,” and many of the participants had acquired sufficient theoretical knowledge and attained levels of ability that enabled them to successfully exhibit and sell their artwork.

What the participants also had in common was that they did not depend on the remuneration they received from their involvement in art. For example, Mary said: *It’s not a business with me, it’s just my enjoyment (2,590)*. She also said that if she had to do art for her living, *“I might not be as happy about it as I am now, because mostly you don’t feel pressured to do this for others, or because you have to (2,1018)*. Still, many of the participants viewed their involvement as a serious commitment in their lives. I asked Mary if she considered her art to be a primary activity in her life, and she replied, *“It sure is” (2,596)*. Gail, Madeline, William, and Lynda described a less serious, ongoing commitment to art. Gail, Madeline and William were ambivalent about developing their art making skills

much beyond what they had already achieved. Lynda described a more casual and less sustained, or focused visual arts practice. As noted earlier, Stebbins (1992) uses the term “serious leisure” to refer to activity that people find so substantially interesting that their involvement resembles a career “in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge” (p. 3). My analysis focused primarily on the stories of the seven participants who were involved in art making as a “serious leisure” pursuit. I did so as an analytic approach that assisted in highlighting prominent meaning dimensions of their narrative accounts. I also considered other significant aspects of their experiences, and the experiences of the remaining four participants.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **STORYLINES AND RELATED MEANING DIMENSIONS**

Stories circulate, they are told again and again, changing over time, creating possibility, bringing things into being. In this inquiry, I derived three primary storylines as characterizing ways in which the participants made sense of their experience of coming to art in later life: 1) “Coming to Art;” 2) “Flourishing through Art;” and 3) “Art as Identity.” The first two of these address the meaning of engaging in art in relation to the participants’ initial and emergent motivation, or how they experienced art making as rewarding. The third storyline considers the conditional and relational aspects of the participants’ identity constructions in relation to their involvement in art making. The participant descriptions in the previous chapter touched on these storylines. In this chapter I offer a more detailed description. Excerpts from the transcripts were chosen to illuminate relevant thematic content. Following Katz (1996), I am aware that the “meanings of aging and old age are scattered, plural, contradictory and enigmatic” (p. 1). In the final section of this chapter, I consider some additional thematic aspects of the participants’ narratives, and offer reflections on the significance of art making as a casual leisure pursuit, and music as a form of serious leisure.

#### Coming To Art

As is often the way with narrative, the participants and I found ourselves focused on “beginnings” at some point during our conversations. Typically, I asked the participants how they had come to art in later life, whether they had been involved in art at different times in their life before retirement, and what inspired them to pursue an interest in art around the time or after they retired. Meaning dimensions that I came to identify with the “Coming to Art” storyline included: *emergence of interest, early learning experiences, and art as life structure.*

#### *Early Beginnings*

Beginning points in the participants’ stories of “coming to art” included: 1) early, intrinsic interest; 2) encouraged by others to explore art as an interest later in life; and 3) otherwise becoming interested in art in later life. In relation to the first developmental pattern, several of the participants recalled having an interest in art from early childhood. Different life experiences, however, had discouraged or thwarted them from making a firm

commitment to art earlier in their lives. For example, Terry and Mary emphasized their *early interest* in art, and their *ongoing hope or intention* of seriously exploring their interest in a committed way in later life.

### *Early, Intrinsic Interest*

*Terry: "This had been in my mind all through my life."* In relation to her "coming to art" story, Terry described having an interest in art from the time she was young: *My mother told me once that when I first went to school the teacher told her that I had a talent for art. I would have been five then. So it's always been there. It's just that it's been frustrated for many years (1,504); I just liked to paint. I drew and painted a lot in my teenage years. Art was always my favourite lesson of the week (2,330).* She described her interest in art as originating in childhood, and also as being embedded within a larger family context. She said, *"I think it came from both parents" (2,358).* She recalled: *My mother did beautiful embroidery. And from the little I remember of her drawings and paintings, she knew what she was doing. I mean she knew how to suggest flowers without having to go through every single one and so on (2,304); I can remember my mother showing me how to draw a cup and saucer when I was quite young (1,75).* She believed that her skill at drawing came from her father: *He had this more technical approach (2,310).* Still, a sense of regret threaded through much of her otherwise spirited and energetic narrative. She shared: *This had been in my mind all through my life (1,75); It's just been one thing after another that has diverted me. When I was in secondary school, which would be like junior high here, there was an opportunity to transfer to a technical college where I could have studied art. My father worried that I would never make a living at art. So that was the end of that. It was a pity, you know. I wish I had had a bit more gumption. But when you are 12 you are not going to argue too much with your dad, are you? I mean, not really. He wanted me to be a teacher and pushed me in that direction (1,77).*

Her narrative encompassed repeated movement toward and then away from art as a career. She stated: *It has been the story of my life. There have been several opportunities for me to get into art and each time there's been a reason why I've said no (2,262).* In attempting to honour her deep and enduring interest in art, she explored various compromise options, which at different points were interesting and agreeable enough, but none of which she found wholly satisfying. Although Terry had taken art classes from time to time, and

taught art in junior high school for a few years, she focused on retirement as that period in her life when she would have the time, energy and means to devote to art. She said: *I knew I was going to paint ... A lot of people say, "Oh, I don't want to retire, I don't know what I'll do," but I knew what I was going to do. I looked forward to doing my own thing – painting, drawing, and studying* (1,400). At the end of our first interview I invited Terry to share any additional thoughts or information she might have. She offered the following to ensure that I understood the primary storyline of her narrative: *I'm coming to art in later life only in a sense because I've always loved to paint and draw for as long as I can remember. It's just that my desire has been frustrated for many years* (1,504).

Mary: "Art was an ongoing thing, all my life." Mary emphasized the "always," ongoing nature of her interest in art. She felt that she *"must have had something of an idea about wanting to do art, probably from the time I was a child, because of how I enjoyed it"* (1,309). She stated: *I have always been interested in art, painting, drawing and things like that* (1,55); *It has been there all through my life* (2,438). But having grown up during the Depression, she hadn't been able to consider pursuing her interest. Her interest in art had not been encouraged when she was young. She said that she was *"lucky to just have crayons or a piece of paper to draw on"* (1,152). After she married, she became involved in such "everyday arts" as sewing and quilting, and had taken courses in millinery, copper tooling, and other crafts. She talked about *"taking these little community courses. You know, the ones they offer in community halls and places like that"* (1,67); *Art was an ongoing thing, all my life* (2,464). After retiring, Mary looked forward to pursuing her interest in art more seriously. She stated, *"For years I had it in my mind that I would do art after I retired. When you're nursing and looking after your house, you just haven't got much time for art"* (2,1069). However, her intention to explore art more seriously was delayed for another 25 years. Following her retirement, Mary provided her mother-in-law with caregiving until she was admitted to a nursing home. After her husband's death (a year following the death of her mother-in-law), she continued to quilt, and take various courses with a friend who was interested in crafts. Mary also enrolled in drawing and painting courses offered by the Faculty of Extension at that time. She enjoyed these courses, but felt that she required a more sustained course of study to progress with her art.

Ten years after her husband died, and a few years following the death of her friend, Mary decided to enrol in a visual arts degree program at the University of Alberta as a part-time student. She was 80 years old. Of the many pre-beginnings, beginnings, short-stops and delays suggested in her narrative, this was a particularly important event. In retrospect, she reflected, *“I must have wanted to do it badly, to be brave enough to ask at my age to get in”* (2,988). She was delighted to be accepted into the program: *I was just thrilled, you know. I enjoyed every day of my university studies* (1,103); *It was just such a great thing that that happened to me, my painting, and my studies, and everything* (1,111). Mary’s decision to enrol in this program led to the realization of a long-held dream to attend university, and to devote her time to the study of art: *My parents weren’t able to give us that opportunity. We didn’t have the money* (1,142); *Going to university after being away from everything so long meant quite a bit to me* (1,127); *That they admitted me was a big thing* (1,265).

When I asked about what was different about the university program compared to the community courses she had taken, she emphasized the ongoing, sustained nature of study that was afforded by taking a degree program: *Having these professors teaching you and showing you different things, you learn and you improve greatly. You know, just doing crafts, you do your best but it isn’t ongoing like your university studies. You don’t improve ... it’s just a part-time thing. But in university, you are always working to improve. You are always working towards that* (1,311). I suggested that it sounded as if she really wanted understand where she was going with her art. She responded: *Well, I think, I got a lot out of it for my age, you know (laughter). I got enough out of it to make it a real pleasure* (1,319). Through her studies, she learnt *“more about perspective, and colour, and texture, and space, and all that”* (1,618). Being involved with the same learning cohort was also important: *Being there with the same people for six months, or for a year, you learn a lot from the other students as well as the instructor, too* (2,506).

Given macular degeneration she began to experience in her first year, she did not formally graduate with her visual arts degree (she was not able to complete essays required for her art history courses). However she did *“graduate as far as my painting was concerned. My paintings appeared in the grad show”* (1,59). She exhibited her work with the graduating class upon the insistence of the other students. This was another of the many highlights she associated with her university studies: *They didn’t have to bother ... I didn’t*

*complete my degree. But the class all insisted that I show my art, too. So that was nice. It was nice to know they wanted me (1,451).* Since that time, her work has been exhibited in different museums, galleries, and other locations. She is also a member of several artist associations. Mary's story highlights not only what might be achieved when one embraces an opportunity to become an artist, but also the possibilities that may otherwise be missed.

*Early Orientation, and Encouraged by Others*

Two of the participants, Lillian and Bernard, described having an *early orientation to*, but *not an abiding interest* in art. Rather, their involvement in art later in life was facilitated by others, and motivated by emergent conditions.

*Lillian: "What on earth am I going to do with all my time?"* I asked Lillian if she recalled having an interest in painting when she was young, and she responded: *Oh, I had some interest when I was a kid going to school. But I'm an old girl. I grew up in the "Dirty 30s" when everybody was poor, including us. ... I did do a bit of watercolour at school but there was no way you could ask for paper and watercolours, because if there was any money you bought food with it (1,230).* She recalled winning a prize for drawing in elementary school. After completing high school, she married and began farming with her husband. She described this period in the following way: *It was back in the old thrashing days when you had these 14 men you had to feed when they were pitching bundles, you know. And I had two little kids, and a great big garden. I enjoyed what I saw around me. That's when I learned my appreciation of the landscape. But I had no time to paint. When I lived on a farm I didn't paint. I was busy. I never painted until I moved off the farm. I didn't even know that I wanted to paint (1,226).*

Lillian offered the following account: *I'll tell you how I got started. When we moved into town, after giving the farm to our son, I thought, "What on earth am I going to do with all my time?"* I was talking to one of my friends one day and she said, *"Why don't you join the art club? If you're looking for something to do, we're looking for students. All we're doing this fall is drawing. You'll only have to buy some pencils and paper, and if you don't like it you haven't got much money tied up in it."* She said, *"Why don't you come down and try it?" (1,709).* Lillian said, *"I didn't know where to put the first mark down. A blank piece of white paper just scared me to death" (1,939).* But she *"tried it, and never looked back. It was immediately exciting to me" (1,713).* She was 52 years old. She attributed much of her

early growth as a painter to becoming a member of the Studio 71 Art Club. In the 1970s, the government of Alberta made funding available to community art clubs for art classes and workshops. This was a period some have described as “Alberta’s Camelot” (Fraser, 2003). Lillian related, with some pride, that: *We organized all this, we got instructors from the Faculty of Extension, we recruited all the students, we applied for grants which cut the cost for each student, cut it right down. Everyone was spoiled rotten because they got it cheap (1,779); Back in those days we had 10 classes before Christmas, and then 10 classes after Christmas and that’s when you really learned something (1,823).* She also enrolled in art courses from the university through the Faculty of Extension: *I’ve got a whole list of courses I’ve taken. I’ve got pages of the stuff. I own the place (1,869).* She was surprised by how involved she became in art making: *I had no idea I would keep it up. When you first start out you don’t know. I mean I was over the age of 50. You don’t think you’re going to get a job doing something like this at that age, you know (1,851); I never really thought about it being serious. All I knew at first was that I liked it (1,1077).*

Although she recalled that her mother painted china, she didn’t feel that she inherited her talent from her family. Nor did she place much stock on having an inherent talent for art making. Rather, she suggested all one needed was to have an interest in art: *I’ve had people ... say “Oh, you must have a lot of talent.” And I said, “Well, I’m not sure that it takes a lot of talent. I don’t think it needs to be in your genes. I think all you need is to want to do it. If you want to you will. If you have the interest, you’ll find that out.” I think that applies to anything. If it happens to excite you so much the better (1,975).*

*Bernard: “My daughters ... asked me what I was going to do.”* Bernard did not recall having a defined early interest in art. He said: *We never even called it “art” when I went to school. We called it “drawing.” ... I think I did fairly well in that sort of thing. My older sister who is an artist always felt I was good at sketching people for some reason. I don’t remember that, but that’s what she tells me (1,762).* Born in 1917, his sister had been a successful painter who had specialized in portraiture and landscape. She had participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions, and was a member of the Society of Canadian Artists. I asked if he had ever imagined pursuing art as a career, or as an interest in later in life, and he said *“No, I never thought that I would pursue it as diligently as I do now” (1,766).*

Rather, Bernard's interest in art was mediated by his daughters' concern for how he would cope with all the extra time he would have after retirement. Bernard said: *My daughters knew how involved I was with my firm, and this one time asked me what I was going to do when I retired. I said, "I don't know, draw or take piano lessons or guitar lessons or something like that." Well, then they enrolled me in a watercolour course in the Faculty of Extension, at the university for my birthday. I thought I'd try it. ... It went well, and I was kind of hooked, but it was quite preliminary because I was still working. I'd come home at about 5:30, have a quick supper, and then I had to be over there at 7:00 until 9:00 or 9:30 and I was exhausted. So after that course ended, I just left it (1,58).* In this, Bernard suggests a need for sufficient time before being able to commit to art as a serious life interest. He started taking courses again several years later when he retired: *I thought to do it properly I had better take drawing lessons first. So I started taking drawing lessons (1,62).*

He offered the following reflection: *You know, I think architects are the closest thing to artists. That's the way I see it. And when they retire, if they are financially secure, well I think it's just wonderful to take up art (1,861).* He also described his "coming to art" story in relation to luck. He felt that somehow things had always come easily to him: *Everything has been that way for me, all through my life. Things have happened for me, more than me being someone who was dedicated and determined (1,730); Everything has gone well for me. I adore my family. They've all been very good to me. It was their idea that I get interested in art I thought "Well, I will try it and see," and I was lucky (1,742).*

#### *An Element of Happenstance*

Three participants shared that they had *an early interest in art*, but *did not intend to take up art* in later life. Nor did others encourage them to try art making as had occurred for Lillian and Bernard. Rather, the "coming to art" narratives shared by Helen, Joyce, and Malcolm suggested an *element of chance or happenstance*.

*Helen: "I think it all happened because I want to help people."* Distinctive strands in Helen's "coming to art" story included art as an underlying interest, having a busy life, an interest in helping others, and having fun. Helen described herself as being *"good at art in school" (1,111)*. As a young woman, she took art courses offered by the YWCA and through the art gallery. In her thirties, she organized an art show that profiled the work of several emerging artists in Edmonton, to help two of the artists in particular, a married

couple with three children who had emigrated to Canada after World War II and were struggling to make ends meet. But she did not do much more than that, at least at that time. When I asked why, she responded: *I got married. I was working, curling, and taking ice dance tests, and I was also teaching skating, looking after our home and everything. I had a child. I got involved in the community. You get busy doing all kinds of activities. While teaching ice skating I conceived the idea of reviving a city-wide children's ice show. We involved all 18 of the community leagues in Edmonton. I directed and produced the show. I oversaw the choreography, music, costume design, and all the arrangements!* (1,336). I asked if she planned on focusing on art later in her life, and she replied: *No, skating, that was always my first priority I'd say. Then all of a sudden you can't skate any more, so I had to find something to do. It just sort of happened more than anything, really* (1,340).

She described how she “came to art” in the following story: *Let's see, in 1973 when I was about 55, we had a neighbour who was a veterinarian. He had severed his spine and had to sell his practice because he couldn't operate any more. I used to have coffee with his wife, and I knew he was very depressed. I also knew he liked art and had gone to university and taken painting. So I said, “Ed, let's go to Spring Session at the university offered by the Edmonton Lifelong Learners Association.” It was a 3-week course. You painted every morning for three weeks. The fees were low then. But then I went every year after that even, because I just enjoyed it so much ... that's how I started to paint every summer* (1,157).

A number of years after this she brought together a group of people who would be willing to pay for a series of lessons offered by “*a wonderful artist*” (1,175) who was in need of additional income: *She agreed to give us eight weeks of lessons at the Laurier Heights Community Hall. We had to get at least 10 or 12 people to pay her* (1,175). At that time there was a group of doctors who were taking art classes at a local artist's home: *They were called the “Sunday Morning Doctors Group.” They were all retired, or getting ready to retire, and they had to find a new place when his [their instructor's] health started failing. They formed the nucleus of the group* (1,181); *That's how the group started, the Laurier Heights Artists Society. She taught us for about eight weeks, and then we painted on our own. And we just all kept painting, you know.* (1,175). In existence for over 15 years, the Laurier Heights Artists Society has grown to include upward to 30 people. Helen shared that “*lots of people would like to join, but we just can't handle any more*” (1,224). I asked if it

surprised her that she had become as involved as she had with art in later life. She replied: *No, I never really felt that I was going to, but how I can say it? I've always had a lot of confidence in my ability to do things, and I've never taken no for an answer* (1,370). She summarized her “coming to art” story by saying: *It just happened. You know, it just happened ... I think it all happened because I want to help people* (1,404).

Joyce: *“I had an interest in art and I decided to explore it.”* Joyce had not been exposed to much art as a child: *There were a few crayons and I liked to color, but that's as far as it went* (1,2). However, she recalled when her daughter was young they would *“sit in the backyard, and paint watercolour pictures together. That's the beginning”* (1,4) – or a beginning. She also shared that she had signed up for watercolour classes at a senior citizen's centre when she was 55 years old. I asked if she had planned to become involved in art when she retired. She repeated at different points in our conversation *“I go with the flow”* (1,198). She said: *I take advantage of opportunities that present themselves. When I was working, I had routines, schedules, and deadlines. Now freedom is important to me. I do things only when I want to do them. I like to keep my antennas up and go with my intuition. If something feels right, I do it. If I feel like this might be the time to try something, I'll do it. I'm not afraid to take on a challenge. I don't have a long range plan* (1,200). She didn't feel that she had a natural talent for art. She said: *It was hard to go to that first series of classes. They were directed to seniors and I didn't feel like a senior. I hadn't retired yet. But then, it was also advertised as being for people 55 years or over, so I decided to try it* (1,244).

Even with these details, I still found myself grappling for the “beginning point” of Joyce's “coming to art” narrative. During our second interview, I asked about *how* she came to art, the moment she found herself drawn to enrol in her first course. I asked, “Do you remember telling me about the art class you had signed up for, I think you had signed up for it with a friend?” She responded: *Yes, that was Georgie. That's how it all started, too. It was my brother-in-law's birthday and he had asked us if we would pick Georgie and Ernie up because they're older, they're 80 now, and we said “Oh, sure.” So we picked them up and as we were driving along that time, Georgie was looking at the sky and said, “Look at those clouds, they are just so beautiful. Oh, that would be so nice to paint.” I looked at her and asked, “Are you an artist?” She said, “I work at it.” We talked about the clouds a while longer, and then she asked, “Why don't you come to this class?,” and that's how it*

*happened (2,90). Joyce explained: I had an interest and I decided to explore it (2,116); It is no use just thinking about it. You either do something about it, or forget it. (2,122).*

*Malcolm: “Art helped me get through the horror of Barb’s sudden death.” Malcolm described his interest in art as having been present from an early period: It started way back when I was young (1,2); It seems I always, always had this in the background (1,6). As noted in the previous chapter, Malcolm’s early interest in art was recognized and encouraged by an archdeacon when his choir visited Westminster Abbey on one of its tours. He showed me the painting he completed in the archdeacon’s studio, sharing “That was in 1953, I was 13 years of age, that’s sort of when it started” (1,8). Later when he started his medical practice, he recalled a colleague who advised him to “take a course in anything you like, but the rules are that it can’t have anything to do with medicine” (1,18). He continued, “You just can’t be focused entirely on medicine. You have to have a broader outlook to keep your mind alive” (1,32). Given this advice, Malcolm took two watercolour courses and a life drawing course at the Faculty of Extension which helped him to learn “some perspective and technical understanding” (1,26). Very quickly, however, he became very busy in his career: I was doing all this surgery and I was doing research, teaching, all these things, so I didn’t have time to do much (1,18). He attempted some painting during his holidays, but shared: I only had a few holidays and when I tried to paint, well I wasn’t very good, and I got sort of frustrated, but I just didn’t have any more time (2,285). Malcolm described his connection to art during this period as a continuing interest, but not a consuming passion – at least not until later life. He found an outlet for his creative expression by doodling during meetings and drawing on patient charts: I used to draw on patient charts a lot ... these big fancy operations, you know, I’d draw all the cancer and what I was planning on doing. I would draw it very artistically and some of the nurses would tease me about this. They would take the chart and show it to the patient, and the patient would say, “Oh gee, I want to take that home and frame it” ... it was a fun thing; I was teased about it all the time. ... So the art was always there (1,178).*

In the 1990s, a number of events conspired to shift the focus of his life. In the fall of 1992 he suffered a cardiac arrest, and received an emergency angioplasty and later underwent a triple bypass operation. When he returned to work he faced multi-million dollar cutbacks to the Alberta healthcare system introduced by the Klein government which he

strongly and publicly protested. In early 1995, when he was 55 years old, Malcolm faced the unexpected, traumatic loss of his wife as a result of an apparent major event related to sleep apnea. A few months after returning to work, he experienced a recurrence of his cardiac problems, and in the fall of 1995 was also diagnosed with a brain aneurysm (both were successfully treated). It was at this point that Malcolm elected to take early retirement. Ten months after his wife's death, and two months after he officially retired, he enrolled in painting classes. He explained that *"art helped me get through the horror of Barb's sudden death"* (1,42). Malcolm's account offers an example of a longstanding peripheral life interest that became a central life interest. What is unclear is whether he would have become committed to art in later life, except for the role that it played in helping him cope with the challenges that he faced around the time of his retirement, including the unexpected death of his first wife.

#### *Trajectories of Chance, and Influencing Conditions*

The participants' "coming to art" narratives demonstrate both continuities and discontinuities across lives and time. Although most of the participants recalled having an early interest in art, they became committed to other careers: being a doctor (Malcolm), a farmer (Lillian), architect (Bernard), nurse (Mary and Joyce), a teacher, and then a librarian (Terry), a skating instructor and community volunteer (Helen). None of the participants described themselves as being artists who also had to make a living. Most of the participants enjoyed successful and personally satisfying careers. For example, Mary said: *When I was nursing, I really put myself into it. I enjoyed it* (2,1093). Helen said that she *"always loved skating. Oh, I just loved skating"* (1,336). The participants also described other significant commitments, for example, to their family.

Terry and Mary, who had an ongoing desire to become involved in art throughout their lives, cited competing responsibilities and concerns as inhibiting factors. Committing themselves to art remained a deferred dream. For Lillian and Mary, their interest in art had been muted in part by the historical context of growing up during the Depression. To consider art making as a career would have been beyond their family means. Terry and Mary also referred to conventional gender role expectations as having constrained the range of career options available to them to consider. Terry was encouraged to become a teacher, and Mary chose nursing. Still, while Terry and Mary described feeling compelled to explore

their interest in art (and looked forward to their retirement as a time they could do so), the other participants' interest in art emerged and evolved over time. Malcolm turned to art after the unexpected death of his wife, and his own early retirement. Lillian and Bernard also became involved in art making, in part, because of concern they would have too much time on their hands when they retired. Lillian completed her Fine Arts Certificate only after the program was reinstated, and following the death of her husband. She said: *As long as he was living, well, I wouldn't enrol in the certificate program because I couldn't spend that much time. I would have ignored the poor man and I couldn't do that. He needed me. ... I never regretted anything I did for the man though, because he was such a good man* (2,1206). It was only after her friend died that Mary felt free to finally explore her interest in art by enrolling in a university-based visual arts degree program.

An additional schematic aspect that appeared to influence the progression of this storyline included acquiring skills and knowledge about painting. Many of the participants invested a significant amount of time, effort, and other resources to acquire skills in painting and drawing. Most of the participants followed formal and progressive, or at least reasonably systematic forms of art education, with the aim of mastering different artistic media and techniques. Their interest influenced the effort they expended in learning skills and techniques. In addition, there were rewards they experienced through this process. As Mary noted, becoming skilled at art making helped to make it *"a real pleasure"* (1,321). Likewise, Malcolm attributed his enjoyment of painting to the quality of instruction and lessons he received: *I wasn't very good until I got lessons* (2,100). He took classes with a *"wonderful teacher"* who had exhibited her work in art shows in Europe and New York: *She took me 'under her wing.' I had five years of classes from her, starting with a beginner's class, and after five years I was in a critique class with professional artists. ... It was quite a wonderful time* (1,42).

After he retired, Bernard applied himself to the study of art techniques: *I took three or four courses in drawing, Drawing I, Drawing II, Advanced Drawing, something like that. The same for pastels, and certainly the same for watercolours. So lots of courses* (2,145). Lillian had participated in many art-related workshops and courses. She attested to the benefits of receiving instruction in drawing and painting techniques: *You might learn from trial and error, but you would probably spoil an awful lot of stuff and waste a lot of paint, so*

*it's better to take a course ... so you can practice the right way straight off the bat* (2,951). After retiring, Terry also *"took loads of courses"* (1,87) and studied with many well-known local artists. Helen has participated in art courses offered as part of the 3-week "Spring Session for Seniors" for over 30 years. She shared, *"I do it just because I enjoy it so much"* (1,169). Joyce had taken art classes with friends at senior citizen's centres and community centres from time to time which had helped her to learn *"about watercolour techniques and colour theory, which has contributed to my knowledge, skills, and confidence"* (1,14). She benefited from critiques that the instructors offered: *Sometimes instructors can see things that you can't. Their suggestions often just make the image "pop"* (2,191). She also acknowledged the value of working alongside other students: *They see your work, and you see how they are progressing, and somehow that helps you to understand what works and what doesn't work. Working alongside others can create a real sense of excitement and awe when you see all that can be accomplished* (2,482).

Being pleased with their work, or having their early efforts recognized in some way, also featured as an important aspect in many of the participants' "coming to art" stories. Joyce presented an exception to this. I asked if she found that watercolours came easily to her when she first started. She said: *No, but I am not a quitter. I always find that things get easier with practice. As I have learned more and improved, my love for painting has grown. I find that I enjoy it more and more* (1,270). She allowed that had she made little progress over time, she would likely not have remained committed to watercolour painting. With respect to the other participants, Lillian recognized early on that she *"had a natural ability for composition,"* (2,941). What she *"had to work on was colour"* (2,947). I asked Lillian when it was that she began to create paintings that were of such a quality that she considered exhibiting her work. She replied, *"I would say almost immediately because a year after I started, ... one of my pictures got juried into an Alberta Community Arts Club Association exhibit. ... When that happened, I thought that maybe I had something. My painting looked as good as anybody else's that was there, and I was just starting out after all"* (2,923). When I asked Bernard how long it took before he was pleased with his art such that he felt comfortable exhibiting his work, he responded: *Drawing? Immediate. Pastels? Immediate. Watercolours? A year, a year and a half of trying* (2,538). He also suggested that his continued involvement in art was predicated on his early success at it: *When I signed up for*

*that first course in pastels, I thought, well, I am going to try it and see if I like it. If I am at all successful, I'll stay with it for a little while, otherwise this will be the last day I'll be here* (1,293).

The encouragement of art instructors mattered to the participants and often provided powerful motivation for staying involved in art. The reputation of these noted professional artists served to legitimize and strengthen the encouragement they gave to the participants. Lillian made mention of a local artist known for his work with pastels who *“really liked”* what she *“did with pastels”* (1,893). One well-known artist and art instructor said about one of Bernard’s works, *“Boy, that painting really sparkles”* (1,518). Reflecting on this, Bernard said: *You know, having an instructor looking at the work of a rank beginner and having them see some promise in it, I found that encouraging* (2,544); *When they are encouraging, it certainly keeps you going* (2,442). Bernard took as many courses as he could from instructors who were the most encouraging of his efforts. Helen said: *I really think any success I have had is due to the guidance I received from this one instructor. She is really the one who pushed me on, and encouraged me* (1,576). A noted Edmonton artist also became Terry’s mentor after she took a course with her. She described this event as *“a turning point... she recognized that there was potential in what I was doing and that she could push me farther .... We worked together for many years”* (1,253). Several of the participants shared stories of how their instructors influenced not only their commitment to art, but the direction they followed in their work. Although Malcolm had planned to work with watercolours, his art teacher suggested that she would teach him to work in acrylics *“because it would mean that I would be able to move between watercolours and acrylics, back and forth, and it’s true. I do quick sketches with watercolours, and I paint over them with acrylics. It really works well for me”* (2,287). Bernard said: *I had been drawing for about a year, when this instructor came up to me and suggested that I might want to try pastels. He helped me get into pastels, and I love pastels. Pastels are one of my favourite mediums* (1,68). Terry’s mentor advised her to focus on acrylics: *She said, “Don’t get into all the mediums, stick with one.” I ignored her advice for the longest time but am now working with acrylics* (1,253).

Many of the participants experienced early, substantive recognition for their work. Soon after she enrolled in her fine arts program, Mary completed a series of eight oil and

collage paintings mounted in old window frames that commemorated the experience of those who lived through the Depression. A fellow student suggested the series should be exhibited at the Royal Alberta Museum: *She phoned the museum and they interviewed me, and I had my Great Depression series exhibited there for a month* (1,457). The series was subsequently moved and continues to be on display at the Fairmont Hotel MacDonald in downtown Edmonton. Helen sold her first palette knife painting of the Three Sister mountain range in Banff to the wife of the president of the University of Alberta. Helen said, *“That was at our first show, 15 years ago”* (2,1053), adding *“sometimes you’re just lucky, somebody just likes your paintings”* (2,1061). During one of his early courses, an instructor that taught Bernard liked one of his pastels *“so much that they hung it in a little gallery they have in the Faculty of Extension building”* (1,125).

#### Art/ Learning as Life Structure

In the foregoing, I have described some of the ways the participants *“came to art,”* covering such aspects as how and when their interest originated, pathways leading to, and factors that influenced their commitment to art in later life. The participants’ commitment to art was also supported by what they hoped to achieve. Formal instruction often just provided a starting point as the participants continued on their own “learning path” to develop their artistic vision and stylistic approaches. Art offered an ever-expanding domain for learning that deepened their knowledge of, and interest in art making. The participants’ commitment to art was also supported by how they structured their life. Supporting routines and goal-setting helped to sustain their focus on their art. Their involvement in learning communities also provided an important sense of connection and support for developing their art making skills and abilities.

For example, Lillian described her involvement in the Studio 71 Art Club as being integral to beginning and continuing with her painting over the past 30 years. Although she said, *“There are just us older grey haired ladies now”* (1,791), they continue to meet monthly at each other’s homes. They try to bring a new painting each time: *If we don’t take a painting we get fined 10 cents. ... We have lunch and then we have a critique, and we tell each other what we think might be wrong with a painting, how it could be fixed, or whatever. Sometimes I don’t pay any attention to what they might say. If I like it the way it is, I’ll leave it alone, but sometimes other people see something that you don’t see* (2,264).

She maintained that they weren't "*mean or miserable about the critique*" (1,1136). Rather, Lillian said they had fun. They also shared information about opportunities for promoting their work and participating in different art-related "happenings" in the local art world. For example, Lillian along with several other members of her art group had created panels for the *Buffalo Twins: Alberta/ Saskatchewan Centennial Mural Mosaic* that commemorated the centenary of both Alberta and Saskatchewan.<sup>9</sup> The members of her art club also organized group exhibits together from time to time. Three members had completed fine arts certificates through the Faculty of Extension, and another member was working on her certificate.

Lillian said that she was always noticing things, even when she wasn't working on a specific project: *I think about my art almost all the time, even when I am not working on something, I think about it. I do. I think about things I might start working on. I just notice things, and think about it* (2,1186). She tried to paint at least once a week. She painted at her kitchen table: *I've got two plastic table cloths that I put over this table. Sometimes it doesn't see the light of day for three months if I get really busy* (1,987). She visited art galleries as often as she can, noting that "*there's nothing like going to an art show. Just go to a gallery and look at everything. You know you just get so inspired you want to come home and paint right away*" (1,1140). She was also in the habit of taking her camera with her when she went places: *A few weeks ago, when I was at the cemetery and I was waiting for the others to arrive I thought, "Well, OK, I'll just drive around here and see if I can find some nice trees"* (1,1268). She acknowledged that the "*most difficult thing sometimes is motivating myself. It can be a challenge, no matter who you are or what age you are, sometimes you need to get yourself motivated*" (2,560). Still, she maintained "*once you get the first brush wet then you're not too bad, you get going*" (2,580).

Setting different goals often worked to provide her with the motivation she sometimes needed. She sometimes challenged herself by restricting herself to a "limited palette:" *You can't do just anything with a limited palette. Like, you can't do a spring picture, because you can't get bright green with it. It was a challenge to even try and paint a July scene but I wanted to see what I could do with three colours and white* (1,164). Another time she painted what she envisioned when she read a Robert Frost poem: *It talked about a*

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<sup>9</sup> This massive mural was unveiled in Edmonton in 2005 in the presence of Queen Elizabeth II.

*house with a light on, with the smoke coming out the chimney, and other buildings, and a church... and there was a lake, a frozen lake, but I'll be dashed if I was going to paint a frozen lake – most uninteresting. And I put a little more light in the sky than what the poem suggested* (1,284). The goal of completing her Fine Arts Certificate contributed to one of the most artistically productive periods of Lillian's life. She began the program in 1974, but after a year or so the program was suspended due to funding cutbacks. When it was reinstated many years later she submitted her portfolio, and worked hard on the remaining requirements she needed to complete. During her last year, when she was 82, she completed 26 pastel paintings and drawings in 10 months for her solo, graduation exhibit: *I don't know how I did it. I don't know if I could do it now. That was two years ago. I don't know if I could do it now, or not. I really worked hard. Everybody thought I'd died* (1,441); *...and my house went to pot, you know how that goes* (2,1210).

When we met the second time, she described needing to somehow feel compelled by the subject matter before she started to work on a painting. She recalled how she had planned to paint a Sturgeon River scene. She even *“had the picture picked out”* but perhaps because she *“had painted a lot of pictures of the Sturgeon River”* couldn't seem to make herself do the painting. She decided instead to do a series of flower paintings. She had started exercising regularly again: *It's making me feel more alive, and has helped my art in that way. It's helped a lot of things, except that it's taking time away* (2,874). However, going to her fitness centre often meant that she would not paint that day: *I might go to the grocery store, not every time, but there's always some other little thing that you can do when you're out that you might as well do, like go to the post office, that sort of thing* (2,76).

As described earlier, Helen attended “Spring Session” every year for three weeks of intensive art instruction. Her involvement in the Laurier Heights Artists Society also provided a supportive, non-judgmental forum for developing her painting skills and abilities. Sessions are held twice a week at the community league hall located near her home, with about 15 people attending each of the two days. Two to three 8-week long workshops are organized each year with “good artists” brought in to offer instruction. These opportunities are held on Mondays for those who are interested. Thursdays are reserved for simply painting as some of the members have *“already had their fill of lessons and just want a place to paint”* (1,183). Helen encouraged her husband to become involved in the Laurier

Heights Artists Society, and otherwise organized her life so that she could regularly paint on a twice-weekly basis. She asserted the importance of the art group in maintaining her involvement in painting: *I don't think I would paint if I didn't have this group because something always takes your time, like housework. Or, if you're having somebody for dinner, you feel that you can't paint because you've got to do this and that* (1,187). She reiterated this point when we met the second time: *I wouldn't paint if I didn't go to our Monday and Thursday session. I would find it hard to find the time* (2,487); *A lot of people in the group say they wouldn't be painting if they didn't have the group* (2,495); *The group motivates you* (2,521).

Helen's goal was to create paintings that were not just competently executed, but inspired a visceral response and reflection on the part of those who viewed her work. She said, *"I think that what most artists are trying to accomplish is creating a feeling in the viewer. If an observer can sense the emotion you have attempted to create in a painting, if you can do that, then you are a very, very good artist"* (1,416). Terry also described wanting to create a *"painting that expresses my feeling, and evokes feeling, and has aesthetic qualities"* (1,271). Lillian described how she hoped to *"put some of how I feel about things into my art. ... so someone else might feel it too"* (2,1043). Helen's goal was to create paintings that were more than just *"a pretty picture"* (2,1221), referring to attempts at realistically reproducing a scene that in the end are dull and lifeless. She continued: *I want to create something that makes you want to really look at it* (2,1491). She also wanted *"to create paintings that are good enough to put in our show"* (2,1477).

Helen described her work in relation to different phases. When we first spoke, she shared: *I'm in my Latvian period right now* (1,692). When we met the second time, she noted that: *This year our show's going to be entitled "Our Alberta" so we're trying to get everybody to do a painting of something that relates to Alberta as part of the Centennial celebrations* (2,447). In addition to attending "Spring Session" and her twice-weekly art club sessions, she also attended critique sessions that the Edmonton Art Club organized once a month. Helen said, *"It keeps you sharp, it keeps you on your toes"* (1,322). She continued, *"They are sensitive to people's feelings, you know, they talk about positive aspects of your painting. But they also give you good feedback on your composition, use of colour, and things like that. You learn every time you go to the Edmonton Art Club. I do anyway. Every*

*time I go I learn something. ... I think you have to go and experience lots of critiques, to be able to learn to assess the quality of your work (1,510).* She emphasized this point by stating: *I think you have to keep learning all the time. Especially in art, oh gosh. You just, just have to keep learning (1,518).*

Shortly after he began to take art classes again, following his retirement, Bernard joined the Laurier Heights Artists Society (organized by Helen). He was careful to divert requests *“from friends to meet them, or dental or medical appointments, or anything.”* Rather Bernard would reply, *“‘No, let’s try for Friday morning,’ that sort of thing, to protect that Thursday afternoon” (2,277).* He added: *It’s great because it’s a discipline. It’s a weekly thing. You can’t say, “Oh, I’ll do it next week,” you can’t (2,434).* He also works on his art at home in his basement art studio: *I have a habit, which is quite different from other artists, of cleaning up completely when I’m finished ... so that if I feel like painting ... there’s no preparation time. I go to my drafting table and all my equipment’s laid out and ready to go. It helps me to get at it (2,283).* He described the summer months as being *“pretty slack” (2,275).* He said: *I must admit in the summer time I spend more time thinking about golf than I do about art. But in the winter time, different story (2,522).* While his drafting and illustration experience had been helpful to him, he felt that the greatest challenge he had faced was to move beyond a technical, architectural approach to art and develop his own unique style. When he was talking about his artwork one day, his friend said *“All my life I have never been able to draw a straight line,”* to which Bernard replied *“I have been drawing straight lines all my life, and now I am trying to learn how to undo that,”* an interchange that led to good-humoured laughter. Bernard reflected, *“It was really sort of fun” (1,804).*

Bernard’s artwork was inspired by whatever he found *“intriguing and that draws me to it. You know, whether it’s a still life of a bunch of leaves, or weeds, or a fence post, or whether it’s a panoramic scene, if the composition is there, and the colour is there, and the interest is there, if it attracts me in some way to paint it” (2,299).* He started doing portraits as an experiment. He had never heard of watercolour portraits before, and was interested in the challenge: *I didn’t really care too much for doing portraits in pastel chiefly because I think they become laboured. With watercolours, though, you’ve got to be fast, lightening fast, and that has worked for me (2,211).* He observed that there’s *“a lot of personality in*

*faces. I find a lot of character in each one. That is what attracts my attention. The fact that they're all very different from each other"* (2,210). He had recently also become interested in certain colours: *There are just certain colours that appeal to me. I see them, I don't see shapes or forms. I see these colours and I'd like to start experimenting with that* (2,458); *I can sort of see a transparent emerald green, and a translucent lavender colour, and aqua. All these colours, they sort of intrigue me* (2,470). This led him to take a number of courses with a noted Edmonton artist known for *"the brilliance of colour in her paintings"* (2,442). He has continued to enrol in art courses from time to time.

After five years of taking art courses, Malcolm had not taken any additional classes. He said: *I like being by myself now, and just exploring things, and reading, and studying on my own* (2,287). He sustained a passionate interest in art by exploring new technical and aesthetic challenges following his own learning journey: *I've just taught myself largely how to deal with the water. I can now paint things on the water, in the water, reflections from the water, and things under the water* (1,208). He continued: *I'm at the stage where I know I can paint a barn ... but I don't want to just paint a barn. I want to paint a special barn. It's got to have something more to it.* (1,210). When we met the second time, he described that he had been *"trying to paint three dimensional spaces that you can sort of live in, so, for example, when the light is fixed on the painting you have a feeling of being drawn into it, getting you to feel that you could go right in there"* (2,453). He had searched the Internet to learn more about using "chiaroscuro" as a technique to achieve a heightened illusion of form and depth in his paintings: *This is what has been driving me of late. I've been trying to bring images out of the darkness* (2,218). He continued: *Michelangelo, Raphael, and Rembrandt, they all used chiaroscuro. It's a matter of under painting to get the values down. You quickly just get these movements here, and paint the negative values, and then you just go all around. Then you gradually develop the subject matter* (2,225); *It's sort of magical when at one point the space begins to emerge* (2,469). He had a strong commitment to developing his painting skills, but wanted to follow his own pace in doing so: *I just want to take my time. I like this feeling of being able to experiment. I like to go to art galleries, and read about, and research things ... and not feel that I am under any pressure to create a canvas for next week's lesson, or something like that ... I just want to enjoy it, and be relaxed about it* (2,636). In relation to other supporting routines, he said: *I'm always looking for what I am*

*going to work on next. But I find it much better not to start a painting until I have a fire in my belly. I have a section in my computer where I have all these pictures that I've purposely taken thinking that I might paint them at some point. I go though and keep thinking about it, and when I come to think, "Yeah, that's what I'd like to work on," then I start the process. ... Of course, there are downtimes, and I find the best thing to do then is just to draw. You can't draw too much (2,437).*

After completing her university studies, Mary had not taken any additional art classes or workshops, or participated in critique sessions organized by local art organizations. She had given up her driver's license, when she began to experience impaired vision due to macular degeneration, and found it difficult to get around the city. In response to this constraint, she created an art studio in her garage: *I am really happy about having my studio close at hand. I can go out there and work whenever I choose (1,441); I have a good stove that heats up, so it is only on very cold days that I can't work there (1,975).* Mary had also approached a gallery that was located close to her home about exhibiting her work several years earlier. After showing them her portfolio of work she was invited to exhibit her work once a year as a guest artist. Just a few weeks before our second interview, at 89 years of age, Mary had an exhibit at the Centre D'Arts Visuels de L'Alberta that commemorated Alberta's centennial. Her work included 34 acrylic and mixed media paintings, and several pieces of sculpture which she had created over the winter months. She shared: *I worked on the project pretty well every day unless I was going somewhere, so pretty well every day. That was in the winter. But in the summer, of course, it's a little different ... you're a bit busier (2,668).*

Mary said that she enjoyed *"painting and working with art, experimenting, trying different things"* (1,113). She identified colour and texturing as important elements in her art. Although she was *"always reaching for betterment"* (1,321), she said that *"right now with my art, I just go as I like when I have time or when I feel like it. You know, some days you just don't do it. You've got something else to do, like your housework"* (2,588). Mary liked *"to work from a theme. I work at it, and then I try to perfect it. You know, have all the parts work together"* (1,1090). She went to the library for ideas, and to research whatever theme she has chosen. In addition to her own exhibits and art projects, she has continued on as a member of a collective of women artists: *There are seven of us. We've had two shows*

*together and hope to do more.* (1,196). She described being a member of this collective and participating in their exhibits as *“one of the highlights”* (1,822) of her career in art.

Joyce enrolled in watercolour classes and workshops from time to time on her own, or with one or another of her artist friends. I asked Joyce how she structured her life to support her involvement with watercolours. She referred again to her need to experience a sense of “freedom” in retirement, stating: *If I have some spare time and the desire to do it, then it is just free flow. I want to stay away from being tied to commitments and routines. That was my life for a long time, but I’m not there anymore. If I feel like it, and I have the time, I will do it* (2,518). She described being *“really driven”* when she was first learning different watercolour techniques, but was *“more relaxed about it now.”* In part, this was because she had achieved a certain skill level. She didn’t *“need to spend as much time trying to figure things out, like what’s wet and what isn’t, and colour mixing. Now, I just kind of know”* (2,26). In her paintings she hoped to tell a story; she would begin a new painting when *“something calls out”* (1,477) to her. Sometimes her husband suggested an image that she would decide to work on.

Terry believed it was *“important to have a structure supporting your work”* (2,114). Although she intended *“to paint every morning”* she found that she wasn’t able to *“because things come up which I cannot control. Under normal circumstances, I paint four or five times a week”* (1,179). Terry enrolled in many art classes, including intensive, residential workshops: *I’ve taken courses from many of the better known artists in Alberta* (1,340); *I’ve taken courses and workshops through the University of Alberta’s Faculty of Extension, Red Deer College, the Arizona Artists School, and Central Arizona College. All of these have contributed to my education* (2,270). Although she was happy to work alone for the most part (*I don’t want to be completely isolated of course but I’m quite happy to work alone*; 2,521), she was also a member of a small, informal art group called the Oakwood Studio, and had joined a number of art organizations as a way of learning more about, and becoming connected to the local art scene. She also exhibited her work. She wanted to find out just *“how far she could go”* with her painting (1,239). At this stage of her life, she was focused on creating a body of abstract paintings that she considered to be successful according to her own artistic vision as well as professional art world standards. She wanted to *“achieve the status as an artist”* (1,241).

Nininger (2002) has observed that the flow of much of our life is achievement oriented. We work toward achieving goals. He states, “you develop a rhythm for this type of life, and when you stop working you need to develop a new rhythm” (p. 6). In addition, Newman and Holzman (1997a, 1997b) have described the importance of communities that are filled with play and foster and support development. They also observed that few adults experience environments which support *per-form-ative* development (see p. 182). The community art groups that the participants described in this inquiry appear to provide an important exception to this general observation. Still, many of the participants worked on their art at home on their own, at least part of the time. Our conversations often took place near the dedicated spaces that they had created in their homes, with pencils, brushes, sheaves of paper, and paint neatly arranged on their art tables. In addition, their homes were also used as a gallery setting to display their work, reminding them of what they had done, and other projects they wanted to begin working on. Although the participants spent considerable time on their art, they tended to be less focused on art in the summer compared to the winter months. While the warm summer weather offered an opportunity to paint out of doors, other attractions impeded the participants from maintaining the level of engagement they described during the winter months. For example, Lillian shared that between watching baseball games on television and going out and about, there was simply less time she could give to painting in the summer.

#### Flourishing through Art

The participants’ enjoyment of art making varied in relation to their unique interests, but they also described ways in which art contributed to *how* they enjoyed their lives. In relation to the storyline “Flourishing through Art”, I identified two primary meaning dimensions: 1) creative engagement (or experience of creative aliveness); and 2) expanding worlds of experience. In relation to the first dimension, many of the participants described having enhanced perceptual awareness and “flow” experiences which contributed to a sense of creative excitement and satisfaction. Art making also involved them in “new worlds” of experience that encouraged them to explore local and other art worlds, which in turn also supported the development of new social connections and relationships.

## Creative Engagement

### Enhanced Perception

One is quite astonished to find how many things there are in the landscape .... This is a tremendous new pleasure and interest which invests every walk or drive with an added object. So many colours on the hillside, each different in shadow and in sunlight; such brilliant reflections in the pool, each a key lower than what they repeat; such lovely lights gilding or silvering surface or outline, all tinted exquisitely with pale colour, rose, orange, green or violet .... I think this heightened sense of Nature is one of the chief delights that have come to me through trying to paint.  
- Winston Churchill, 1932, p. 310

Many of the participants referred to always being on the lookout for an image that might inspire their next project. The participants made direct and indirect reference to the ways in which art making fostered an awareness of the visual world in relation to its particularity. They described an enhanced awareness of colour, light, lines, and form. Terry offered the following story in relation to this: *When I was in Arizona this last spring, I looked up at the sky. It was evening and the clouds were scating by, and there was a brilliant moon. The colours were just gorgeous. I stopped and said, "Just look at that, isn't that beautiful?" And one of the other people, who as it turned out, also paints said, "Oh, you must be an artist, too, to notice that." It was really beautiful. I couldn't believe that other people just said, "Oh, yeah," and walked on (1,291).* One of Lillian's art instructors suggested that she would start looking at clouds all the time, even when she was driving: *He said, "You'll be turning your head to look at something, when you should be looking at the road." I find I do that (2,1188).*

Mary said: *When you start studying art you start to appreciate things, nature, I mean you start to see things in a different light. Like the old tree stump in the backyard, I would just love to drag it in here, and work on painting it. That wouldn't have appealed to me before. But now, I just see things differently (1,1201).* Helen made a similar observation: *Oh, you look at things so differently. You have no idea how differently you look at things when you start to paint, trees especially. Painting really makes you look closely at things. You see things you otherwise might not see. It's loads of fun (1,341); Your perception just seems to get better the more you paint (2,899).* Bernard also felt that he had learned to be more perceptive since he began to paint: *I study things a little more thoroughly. If I see a fence*

*post, I really look at it. I see colour, I see shapes, this sort of a thing .... I think I am more perceptive than I used to be even as an architect (1,919). Joyce shared, "I appreciate everything around me in a different way. I am more aware of colour, shapes, movement, just the whole world. I notice things more" (2,748). She described how her heightened appreciation of the visual world sometimes inspired her to paint: I might be looking out the window and see a beautiful flower and I'll sit down and paint it (2,532).*

Nature offered a perennial tapestry of possibilities for painting and sketching. Some of Terry's paintings were based on photographs she had taken of the natural landscape. She sometimes also made use of computer magnification in developing her abstract compositions. In addition to his watercolour portraits, Bernard also painted landscapes. Most of the paintings that Helen, Joyce, and Malcolm created were based on photographs they had taken of the natural environment. Almost all of Lillian's paintings are inspired by what she has seen in nature. She offered keen observations of the natural world as she described her paintings: *You know old poplars are not the most beautiful things. They are old gnarly looking things. The leaves don't even turn nice in the fall. They turn kind of a dirty yellow. But they have huge roots that are fairly close to the surface, and there's a little nub. This is how they have their babies. They don't have cones or seeds. That is how they have their babies. And if you go walking among them you have to be careful not to trip on their roots because they're so close to the surface (1,148); This sky has a slightly green cast to it. You often see that in a winter sky. When you look north you see green (1,240); All the coniferous trees this past summer were absolutely loaded with cones to the point where some of the limbs had tipped like this, and some had even broken off. And that has to tell you that they're suffering. So what nature does is have the trees work twice as hard to reproduce themselves because they might die yet before the year is out. So they're reproducing themselves, this is what they're doing (1,1248).*

London (1984) has characterized art as a means of recording one's aesthetic experience in the moment of perceiving. Indeed, many of the participants created paintings that depicted memorable moments of perception that they had experienced. Describing one of his paintings, Malcolm explained that it had *"happened just because we were driving along and these rain clouds came through. ... It was dark right where we were. It was the middle of the afternoon and the sky was dark, and there was this special moment when the*

*sun came out and illuminated the water splashing on the rocks. We stopped and I took a photograph just to capture that moment, and then I painted it” (2,235). Bernard recalled how he had been inspired to create one of his paintings: I was out hunting with a neighbour. We had great success earlier in the day and were heading back to our car. We came to this spot where some other people we knew had set up, and so we decided to wait there for awhile. Suddenly the sky went black. The sun was behind us and it illuminated the low-lying grain stubble of the field we were in, in a brilliant gold. Then, this cloud formation came rolling in, and there was a blizzard of hail. It was absolutely astounding. We all got soaking wet. When I came home I did this painting, just from memory (1,451).*

#### *Creative Excitement/ Flow Experiences*

Jackson (1998) has noted that “the artist at work is more keenly attentive than usual to the emerging sense of an enveloping whole that guides the artistic process (often appreciating a background of ... conventions and customs associated with an artistic genre)” (p. 37). The process of working with materials, attending to such elements as shape, shadow, colour, and texture, working toward a sense of rightness with the emerging form, was an inherently absorbing activity. Many of the participants described experiencing a state of “flow” as awareness merged with the action of creating the artwork. For example, Terry said: *You really need to be able to just block everything else out and think, and then it’s a joy. You just get lost in it (1,275); I just find myself deeply absorbed in it. When I’m painting I’m not thinking about the rest of the world at all (2,707).*

Lillian remarked that when she is painting “*hours can go by and you won’t even know it” (2,240). Mary said: I sometimes just get lost in a project. Time passes and I’m enjoying it (2,64); I go out to my studio and spend hours there. You know, I find it very relaxing (2,76); I just stay and stay. I just don’t want to leave it. Hours pass and I’m still sitting there, the time just goes. I just can’t explain what a wonderful feeling it is. I just get wrapped up in it (2,934). Noting as an aside that he “probably shouldn’t say this,” Bernard shared that he often completes his work quickly, in “*anywhere from an hour and a half to three to four hours, and then I may touch them up afterwards... but I have done most of them in one fell swoop” (1,325). Other times he has found himself working “half way through the night, like we used to when we were students and then as young architects” (1,965). He recalled finishing one painting at about quarter to four in the morning: I really got into it (1,969).**

Joyce also sometimes found herself working on a painting *“until 2:00 in the morning ...I just get absorbed in it and lose all sense of time”* (2,20). She added: *I’ll work all day and just take breaks to eat* (2,46); *It doesn’t take long for me to complete a painting; often it’s just a day. ... I just get totally absorbed* (2,556). She described the experience of losing herself in *“time and space”* as a *“joy”* (2,604).

### *Intrinsic Satisfaction*

*Just to paint is great fun. The colours are lovely to look at and delicious to squeeze out. Matching them, however crudely, with what you see is fascinating and absolutely absorbing.*  
- Winston Churchill, 1932, p. 309

In addition to offering creative excitement and flow experiences, art making was also described as being inherently rewarding. They described experiencing great enjoyment and pleasure in creating their art. The participants used emphatic and figurative terms to convey their excitement and satisfaction. They repeated words and phrases to emphasize how they experienced art as being both pleasurable and deeply satisfying. They described their experience of art making as *“thrilling,” “exciting,” “fun,” “amazing,”* a *“joy.”* They *“loved it.”* Creating art made them *“happy.”* The participants described feelings of accomplishment as they successfully exploited their medium of expression.

For example, Malcolm described art making as imbuing his life with energy and excitement: *I really get a thrill out of the painting when it’s finished and I’ve accomplished what I set out to do. ... I love painting in this new way where I develop the value rhythms and the negative spaces first... It really gives you a freedom that is quite extraordinary because you can do it very quickly, just the values, never mind the colour or anything like that. You do it quickly, and there’s an energy when you’re doing that. ...it’s much freer. You’re not drawing trees, you’re just drawing directions and values and it’s exciting to see it come together quickly and even though it’s only one, mono-colour you can really see the painting the way you want it to go at that stage* (1,204); *It excites me. It is really a fun thing. I did that in about an hour, and you can see how the light and the dark colours organize the whole thing. And then, here, you can see the development of a three dimensional quality which is fun to explore. It’s been so thrilling for me to do these* (2,220); *It’s exciting to me because I really feel very confident about painting this way* (2,267); *My paintings have much more life to them because of this, and so I feel happy* (2,287); *There is no question, if*

*everything goes right with the painting it's a wonderful feeling. ... If I can get it to a point where I can see it working, it's very exciting (2,325).*

When I asked Terry what she most enjoyed about the experience of painting, she replied: *It's the involvement, the tactile pleasure of paint on canvas ... the actual involvement with the painting, trying to make the painting work, trying to stay with the abstracts but not abandon the basic principles of painting. There's just a pleasure in working with colours and paint. There is the feeling of satisfaction when you've completed a painting. Quite often it is not finished, but at that point you are happy. The painting is coming together. Later, I may see flaws and make changes. Then, there is the pleasure of somebody else saying that the painting is good (2,703).* Lillian described her experience of painting as both “calming” and “satisfying.” She said: *There's a feeling of achievement especially if it goes quickly and you don't struggle with it. It gives you a feeling of euphoria, you feel really happy (2,1144); You know, I even looked at a couple of things this morning that I had done, and I was kind of amazed. I thought “Gee, that's good!” (2,993).* Helen had begun to work more with a palette knife, because of the “nice, loose, easy feeling” that it provided. She said, *“Just squishing around all that wonderful colour and paint. Oh, it is just so neat! You know, putting it on it just takes on such wonderful shapes, and just seems to work” (2,1515).* Mary shared: *You know how it feels when you work to achieve something, and it works? Doesn't it give you a sense of satisfaction and happiness? “I've got it!,” you think. You know, that's the way it affects me. Sometimes it can be frustrating. Sometimes you throw your paintings aside because you can't make them work. But then you go back. There is something inside you that makes you want it to work. And then when you do get it to work, when I have got it just the way I want it, it “pops,” it just gives you a great feeling, it gives me a great sense of satisfaction (1,401).*

### *Expanding Worlds of Experience*

A sense of openness to possibility as occasioned through enhanced perception appeared to influence the participants' “way of being in the world.” They seemed to open up to “new lines of action” not previously conceived of (Shotter, 1999, p. 125). The participants described new worlds of experience that opened to them, and that they participated in, as they became more and more involved with art. These new experiential spheres were

described primarily in relation to travel, appreciation of art and art worlds, and social connections.

### *Travel*

... on painting as a spur to travel. There is really nothing like it. Everyday and all day is provided with its expedition and its occupation – cheap, attainable, innocent, absorbing, recuperative. The vain racket of the tourist gives place to the calm enjoyment of the philosopher ... The painter wanders and loiters contentedly from place to place, always on the look out for some brilliant butterfly of a picture which can be caught and set up and carried safely home.

- Winston Churchill, 1932, p. 319

As described earlier, many of the artworks the participants completed were inspired by the natural landscape. The participants frequently drove to the mountains, and otherwise looked out for images they could use in their painting. Malcolm said: *I think you have to look for inspiration sometimes. So I go to the mountains, I love being in the mountains (2,439); I've got the Eurovan here and if I want to go and paint on site then I have an opportunity to do that. I'm looking forward to getting back to the mountains soon (2,138).*

Helen, along with other members of the Laurier Heights Artists Society, also planned painting trips: *We get to the mountains maybe two or three times a year to sketch and take photographs (2,453).* Specific paintings they were working on also inspired the participants to explore locations somewhat closer to home. Lillian went to the Ukrainian Village to find sheaves of wheat that she could photograph: *That's the only place I could find any. I went there looking for sheaves (1,543).* Joyce related the following story: *I wanted to paint cattle, so we drove into the countryside, and found this herd of cows. The cows watched my husband as he approached them. But then, just as he got close, they took off! Away they went. My husband started chasing them. I wish I had a video camera, it was so funny! When they finally stopped to take a look at this character running after them, he managed to take this photograph, and I developed this painting from it (1,493).*

A number of participants traveled out of town to take in art shows, art courses, and other arts-related activities. Lillian shared the following story: *About four or five of us went together to Hinton to see this art show. We got a motel room and stayed overnight. We played cards all night and that kind of stuff. We had a lot of fun. Anyway, one of the ladies' daughters was living in the area, and she said to us, "Have you been to the Indian cemetery?" There was an Indian cemetery in that area and also a place nearby where they*

*have their pow wows, you know, and their sweat lodges, and they leave these poles and everything up all the time. There were all these ribbons hanging on the trees. I don't know what it all means, but we went to the cemetery and it was an interesting thing to see and I took quite a few photographs. I started working on this painting based on some of the photographs I took (1,1166). She was planning a trip with her friends to see the Buffalo Twins: Alberta/ Saskatchewan Centennial Mural Mosaic when it was finally installed: It's two stories tall, and is supposed to be in Lloydminster by the middle of September, that's going to be its final home. A bunch of us are going to go and stay a couple of days. We are going to bring our cameras and our drawing pads and go and see it (2,620). Terry described a week-long art course at Red Deer College she had taken with other members of her art club. They had also made several trips to Canmore to paint "en plein air."*

#### *Appreciation of Art and Involvement in Art Worlds*

*Then the galleries of Europe take on a new – and to me at least a severely practical – interest. ... you look at the masterpieces of art with an analysing and comprehending eye. The whole world is open with all its treasures. The simplest objects have their beauty. ...armed with a paint-box, one cannot be bored, one cannot be left at a loose end .... Good gracious! What there is to admire and how little time there is to see it in!*  
 - Winston Churchill, 1932, p. 311

The various learning communities in which the participants were involved provided a conduit to local and other art worlds. Conversation among members often focused on local art organizations, opportunities for participating in or attending arts-related events, festivals, workshops and courses, exhibits and gallery showings. The participants also came to appreciate art and various art worlds by reading books and magazines. Some also became involved in local and regional art organizations. As suggested in the following, these learning communities fostered an increasing appreciation of art which also served to sustain the participants' interest and continuing involvement in art: *One of my friends has some of her work on exhibit at the new art gallery in St. Albert so we went to her show the other day (Lillian; 2,1027); I go to exhibits whenever I can. This past June I went to an Art Gallery of Alberta exhibit, and I went to one at McMullen Gallery called "Under the Dress." I really liked that exhibit! A member of our Drawing Breath group was in that exhibit (Mary; 2,870). Joyce and her husband often visited art galleries when they travelled. Terry also often visited major art galleries in London when she visited her family in England. Helen also said that*

when she and her husband traveled in Europe they “*always visited the art galleries*” (2,1603). She shared: *It just gives you such a good feeling when you go to a gallery. You see a lot of really nice work because there are some wonderful painters. And because you do it, you know what it takes to get to that level, to be in a gallery in Jasper, or one of the galleries downtown. I have certainly come to appreciate the skill it takes. You know, you work at it, and so you appreciate it* (2,1555).

Not only did their involvement in art serve to increase their expanding appreciation of art, but it also involved them in contributing to, as well creating different art worlds. For example, with the help of a friend, Helen invited and selected work from artists in Edmonton to exhibit at a local hospital: *We exhibit work in two hallways at the Misericordia Hospital. We’re in our fourth year. It’s called the “Art Enrichment Program,” which profiles emerging artists. We have different exhibits every month* (1,268). Their program had received accolades from patients, staff and visitors to the hospital. Helen also held the position of workshop director for the Society of Western Canadian Artists for several years: *I brought in different artists from all over* (1,282). After her exhibit, Joyce was invited to join the Art Committee at Strathcona Place Senior Centre.

### *Social Connections*

My French friend ... after looking at some of my daubs, took me round the galleries of Paris, pausing here and there. Whenever he paused, I found myself before a picture which I particularly admired.  
- Winston Churchill, 1932, p. 316

Through their connection to art they met others who also had an intimate understanding of the attractions of art. Lillian said: *One of the bonuses is all the interesting people you meet. I’ve met so many other artists. They look at life, they look at the world, they look at the sky, they look at everything differently than everybody else* (1,721); *I find the conversation when I go to a meeting with a bunch of artists is just great!* (2,1236). She offered the following: *It’s very nice to visit an art gallery with somebody who’s another artist. ... No matter their age you can talk about what you see in a painting. It’s the interaction with other people who think the same way as you do. You come away feeling good because you were with this person. I think that’s good for you at any age, isn’t it? That’s good for you at any age!* (2,540).

Many of the participants described similar thoughts and experiences. Joyce shared: *Through the art courses I have taken, I have met a lot of nice people that have similar interests (1,16); There's bonding, support, and fellowship (1,282); The people I meet are upbeat and interested in learning. They are the kind of people I want to be around. They give you energy (2,148).* She attributed this energy to experiencing a sense of freedom that comes with creative expression (2,152). She also suggested that a sense of bonding can occur between people as they are working on their art: *You can sit next to another person painting for an hour, and be totally absorbed in what you are doing, but then when you look at what they are doing you are often drawn to some aspect of their work and so might say, "Wow, I like that! Could you teach me how to do that?" You can develop a strong bond through your common interest in, and love for painting (2,156).*

Helen said: *Everyone is so interesting. This is what you find in art. You meet interesting people (1,406).* Terry offered the following: *One of the joys of being involved with the arts is that you get to know new people, make new friends with people you have something in common with (1,322).* Various "learning communities" featured as being significant in this regard for at least some of the participants. For example, Mary described being involved with her art group *"as quite a highlight, going and having meetings, and having people to work with on projects, you know" (1,439).* She had also met *"lots of friends at university, some very nice friends" (2,580).* As noted earlier, some of the participants described how they went on trips with their artist friends to sketch and paint, visit a gallery exhibit, or take a course. They also valued the friends they had met, and social interaction that featured as a key aspect of their involvement in various art groups. The following offers a sampling:

*Lillian: You know, the social part of it is what we like (1,1132); It's gotten to be a social thing with us, once a month (2,270).*

*Terry: We keep the Oakwood Studio group going, in part, because we enjoy the social aspect of it (2,402); It has been six or seven years now that we have been getting together on Wednesdays. In addition to seeing other people's work and getting some feedback on my paintings, what I really enjoy about the group is the social aspect. It's pleasant. We're friends (2,479); If you're beginning you'll meet lots of other people who are also in that stage. So you have something in common. You sketch and paint, and then that leads to other things. You have lunches, there are Christmas parties - there is lots of social interaction (2,713).*

*Helen: I think it's just such a good outing for everybody. You're doing something, creating something, and the sociability is there. The conversation sometimes*

*focuses on a good book that somebody's read, or somebody's seen a good movie. You know, you just keep up with things. And then you have coffee, and somebody brings good cinnamon buns. It's just a wonderful atmosphere (2,1763).*

*Bernard: I love the social aspect, working with people who are all interested in art. We are all as different as can be. We are a small group, and we are all very good friends (1,812); Maybe it's the social aspect of it, I don't know, but over the years I've missed very few Thursdays (2,277).*

Malcolm did not offer stories or observations regarding how art had contributed to new social connections in his life.

### Art as Identity

At the end of my initial conversation with Terry, I happened to share that many of the participants had shown me their studio or work space, and invited me to tour their home to view their artwork. She responded with a knowing grin, *"Oh, artists will always do that. That's who they are."* I developed the final storyline, "Art as Identity" to recognize the high biographical relevance of coming to art for the participants, and the centrality of art making in their lives. The participants' "artist identity" claims, as such, were often ambivalent. Their shifting identity claims seemed to reflect the lack of "hard-and-fast definitions" regarding what may be taken as art (see Mishler, 1999, p. 102), and for some, their own uncertainty regarding what constitutes an artist.

For example, Bernard found the idea of calling himself an artist humorous. Laughing, he said, *"When you talk about 'my work,' I am rather amused because I am not very serious, I am just having fun"* (1,544). For Malcolm, five years of intense instruction culminated in his participation in *"a professional critique class with professional artists"* (1,42). With a light sense of irony, he said *"I am supposed to be an artist now, and I'm not supposed to be able to see red and green"* (1,70). He tended to play with the idea of being an artist, rather than claim an identity as an artist. He referred to himself primarily as being an *"old retired plumber"* (2,711). Mary wasn't sure she would call herself an artist: *I don't know. I really don't know whether I am an artist. Well, I guess anybody that pursues art can call themselves an artist, but I don't believe that I am a good artist. I have got a long way to go, let's say, before I achieve what I want to achieve* (1,419). Helen was also somewhat hesitant about claiming an artist identity: *I don't feel I'm, maybe I'm too hard on myself but I don't feel I, well maybe the last five years I feel I've, I'm an artist* (1,298). I asked Joyce how she would describe herself as an artist, if she felt comfortable with the term. She replied

that she'd rather be known as watercolourist than an artist: *To me an "artist" is an individual who is highly accomplished in most or all aspects of painting. I am good, and I will get better, but I'm not there yet. I don't know, artist to me is too formal, too, hmm... I'd rather just be me. I don't need the title "artist," I'm not comfortable with it* (2,219). When I asked if she viewed her art "seriously," as I searched to clarify the meanings she associated with being called an artist, she replied, *"Oh yes, I'm engaged and involved in art, I interact with art. I guess that is one definition of an artist. Perhaps I am an artist in the making"* (2,231).

Terry *"had visions of making this a third career"* (2,551). She wanted to be a recognized and culturally relevant artist. She was working on developing her own original abstract style and was *"looking for an entrée to the professional world. I feel that I'm on the edge of everything. I haven't got into the real art world yet, but I'm on the edge"* (2,741). Lillian did consider herself to be an artist: *I feel that I am now, but if you had asked me that a few years ago I may not have called myself an artist. You always think that you haven't done enough, or you could be better. But I don't feel like that now* (2,492). She added: *I called myself an artist a couple of times among some of my friends, and they said "Gee, I don't call myself an artist." I said, "You should because you're very good." They didn't do it, but I do. So I think that told me something about how I feel about myself* (2,1085).

The foregoing suggests the variable, sometimes tentative, self-conceptions that the participants held in relation to their involvement in art. In part, this can be attributed to the fact that their livelihood did not wholly depend on their art making. Their self-characterizations were also often referenced in relation to technical competency and proficiency. For example, Lillian felt that she had achieved a level of competence where she doesn't *"have the same struggle when I begin something, like all the technical things, I think I know now"* (2,498). Mary suggested that she felt that "a real artist" not only has achieved a certain level of competency, but also has knowledge of contemporary currents in art: *I don't know. I'm not acquainted with some of the modern art, the modern type of art* (2,820). She also shared: *Sometimes getting your art to work is difficult. That's why I wonder if I am an artist, really an artist* (2,928). Helen suggested a distinction between being *an artist*, and being *a professional artist* in the following: *I'd never quit my job as a housewife, because I wouldn't make enough money. No, it's really hard for an artist now. You have to be very,*

*very good* (1,292). Many of the participants compared themselves with other recognized artists, and also described various forms of recognition that they had received for their work, which served to condition or temper their identity conceptions in relation to art. As I explored the participants' self-conceptions and identification with art, I came to recognize that I perceived them as being "artists" in relation to the artworks they had created (which provided evidence of their art making skills and abilities), and also given the matrix of "professional" art making activities in which they were involved. I consider these "spaces" of experience and identity construction in the following sections.

#### *Identity Space I: Art Making Practices*

I came to recognize the participants' knowledge, activity, and involvement in various art worlds as a space within which they could be considered to be artists. Many of the participants wrote artist statements, and maintained a practice of cataloguing their work. I incorporated material from many of the artist statements the participants had prepared at various points in their "art careers" in the participant descriptions in the previous chapter. Although Bernard did not believe in writing an artist statement, he did maintain a complete catalogue of photographs of all his completed artwork. Helen had completed an artist statement that appeared on her member webpage on the Edmonton Art Society's website, but had never catalogued her work: *I've never made a portfolio of my work. I just do it* (2,1035). Both Terry and Lillian were vigilant in maintaining a complete catalogue of their work. Lillian catalogued her work, and recorded her art sales: *I write it down where, how, and what I sold it for, who got it, and when, so that I know. I have to do that for income tax* (2,776). Terry also photographed her art, "*so I have a record*" (1,530), and had created a website to promote her work.

They were also *members of different art clubs and associations*. Lillian listed the following associations she was involved with: *I am a member of Studio 71 Art Club, and the ACACA, the Alberta Community Arts Club Association. I belong to some galleries. I belong to VAA, Visual Arts Alberta, and submit work to some of their juried exhibits, and I also submit work to the Profiles Gallery in St. Albert* (2,798). In addition to organizing the Laurier Heights Arts Society, Helen was also a member of the Society of Western Canadian Artists and a member of the Edmonton Art Club. Terry was also a member of the Edmonton Art Club, and had considered applying for membership in the Alberta Society of Artists as

she felt that being a member of this association would help to confirm her artist status. In addition to opportunities for networking that membership in clubs and associations offered, these organizations also provided information about opportunities to exhibit their artwork. For example, Lillian said that the *“VAA sends out a really good newsletter that lists different places that are accepting submissions for work all across the province”* (2,848). Likewise, the Edmonton Art Club offered its members an opportunity to promote their work on its’ website. Many organizations also offered professional critiques of members’ artwork at their meetings. However, not all of the participants were members of these associations. For example, Bernard had been encouraged to join a number of local art associations, but after learning that a primary activity of many of these associations was to offer a monthly meeting he declined to become involved: *All the societies here in Edmonton that I have been invited to join, I always ask them what do you do? Well, we have meetings. Well meetings are the last things I want. I have had a lifetime of meetings. You know as an architect, I bet you fifty percent of my time was taken up in meetings. Uhhh! Never again. I am not interested in meetings* (1,820).

All of these practices, creating and cataloguing their work, belonging to various arts organizations, receiving monthly newsletters and attending meetings, provided the material conditions for constructing a sense of their self-identity in relation to art. Their knowledge of art techniques also contributed to how others would view the participants in relation to art. For example, during our second interview, Malcolm patiently described how he developed colour values to achieve a greater sense of depth, touching on different teaching points: *It’s properly pronounced “Cheeroskure.” The word comes from Latin, and it’s spelled c-h-i-a-r-o-s-c-u-r-o. You just don’t worry about anything except the value of a colour. ... I have done a lot of demonstration canvases, I have taken pictures of it to show you how it develops, how you get the values and the depth in the canvas* (2,2). Terry described acrylics as being *“a really complex medium. You can treat acrylics like oils, you can treat it like watercolour, you can treat it in its own way as an acrylic”* (1,255). She elaborated on this, adding: *It’s really a plastic. I mean, you can use it as an impasto. You can also put glazes one on top of the other and get incredibly subtle, interesting colours* (1,334); *There must be a million ways you can do acrylic. I think I’m just scraping the surface really at the moment* (2,693). Lillian offered the following advice: *You’re better if you make your own green, or make*

*your own black. I never use black paint out of a tube. I make it myself, with two colours. If you use a red and a green together you can get a very, very vibrant black. If you put a little more red in it, it's warm. Put a little more green with it, and it's a cool black (1,955).* The participants' also described great affection for their art materials. Bernard showed me some of the art materials he works with: *That is a soft pastel pencil. All these boxes are full of stuff. This I just couldn't resist, it is all just lovely stuff (1,648); Now watch [fans the brush], isn't that nice? All of these are sable brushes, and most of them are Winston Newton. These great big ones are by a German company. That is a #20 I think. There is a #24, and I think there is a #16 in there somewhere (1,662).*

Many of the participants had *donated their work* to support various causes. For example, Malcolm had donated two of his paintings to the Royal Alexandra Hospital: *The first major canvas that I did hangs on the wall by the operating room on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, and there's another one in the boardroom that I did of Lake Superior (1,222).* Helen and Lillian had also donated their artwork to different charitable organizations. All of the participants had *exhibited their work*. With the exception of Malcolm, all of the participants had *sold* at least a few of their paintings. Malcolm offered that: *I'll probably have to start selling some of them, I've been under a bit of pressure to do that (2,536); I'm not in a big rush about it. I mean, I guess my big problem is that I'm not a starving artist. Maybe I'd be a little more anxious to get started in that but, partly, I like living with them (2,640).* Bernard also had a relaxed attitude about exhibiting and selling his work. He participated in the annual Laurier Heights Artists Society exhibit as well as exhibits Helen organized at a local hospital. He responded to opportunities that came his way, but was not looking to create other opportunities. The other participants were more active in responding to, and creating opportunities to exhibit and sell their work.

### *Identity Space II: Spheres and Forms of Recognition*

Sharing one's art as part of an exhibit and having it positively received contributed the participants' experience and sense of being "an artist." For example, when I asked Helen to recall a particularly significant highlight in relation to her involvement in art, she replied, *"The times when you get recognition for what you've done" (2,1403).* She recalled when a millionaire bought one of her paintings at a silent auction for \$400 *"which now hangs in his house, beside the paintings of other famous artists" (2,1393).* Helen began to feel she was

an artist when she reached a level of competence that was valued by others: *I don't think I became an artist until I started to sell more of my work* (1,286). Helen said: *If people like your work and you sell it, that lets you know you're on the right track. To me, there is a validation in it, that somebody else likes your work* (1,430). She related the following story about an early Laurier Heights Art Society exhibit: *When I think back now, some of our work was not really what we're doing now, but we had the guts to say, "Come and look at our work." I can remember there was this terrible snowstorm, but the caretaker came and cleared the whole parking lot for us. You'd be amazed at how many people came. I bet there were 125, maybe 150 people that came. It was really great!* (1,208). She estimated that she had sold over 30 paintings "to friends and at art shows" (2,799), but at this point was not all that interested in selling her work: *I'm not really painting to sell. I've gotten to the point that I don't worry whether I sell or not* (2,809).

Joyce described her first exhibit as being a significant highlight. She recalled: *I had 80 paintings that I had stored under the beds upstairs when my friend had an exhibit that I attended. She encouraged me to have an exhibit as well. She said, "Even if you don't sell any paintings, it doesn't matter, people will appreciate what you have done. They'll look at your paintings, and you'll make somebody happy by having your paintings hanging there." Then one of the ladies at the Strathcona Place Senior Centre had an exhibit, which provided me with another opportunity to learn what was involved. Soon after that, the Centre asked me if I would exhibit my artwork. Although I was concerned that my paintings might not be good enough, I agreed to have an exhibit. It was very exciting. It was a real highlight of my life* (1,334); *Before my exhibit, when I was picking up some of my paintings from my framer, he said, "Don't be surprised if you don't sell very many, because I am aware of a well-known artist who only sold two paintings when she had an exhibit." Well, there were about a 100 people that came to my exhibit* (1,354); *I sold 17 paintings ranging in price from \$85 to \$285* (1,370). Joyce has continued to exhibit and sell her work, primarily at seniors' centres and local hospitals. When we first met she told me that she had sold 52 paintings the previous year. She had also given her paintings away to family members and in support of different fundraising efforts.

Lillian had sold, given away and donated over a hundred of her works. Her work has appeared in group and touring exhibits. She has also had a few solo exhibits: *It's very hard*

*to get a solo show anywhere, you know* (1,1340). Several of her paintings had been included in public collections, including those maintained by the City of St. Albert, the Extension Gallery at the University of Alberta, and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. The following suggests some of the ways in which she positioned herself in relation to opportunities to exhibit her work: *The Alberta Community Arts Club Association has been around for a long time. It's a very grass roots thing. You can paint for three months and still show in an ACACA art show* (2,842); *If you're a member of the Profiles Gallery for a couple of years they'll include your work in one of the gallery shows. They might hang two of your paintings, but they'll guarantee that they'll hang one of them for sure. It's juried. I usually have one painting in that exhibit, and sometimes they pick two of my paintings* (2,848).

Terry “*spent quite a bit of time chasing around to galleries, taking the paintings, and picking them up*” (1,314) – time she would have preferred to devote to her painting. Still, the following suggests the seriousness of her commitment to promoting her work: *I've shown my work at the Edmonton Art Club's annual show at City Hall. I've also exhibited with the EAC in other places, and with the Society of Western Canadian Artists. I've shown my work with the Allied Arts Council in Spruce Grove, and when I was a member, with the Art Society of Strathcona County. I also showed my work in various offices for a while, but nothing sold and I gave that up. It just seemed to be a bit pointless. A lot of work for nothing. ... I showed my work at the Sussex Gallery, but they are no longer in existence. I've shown my work at the Art Beat Gallery in St. Albert, The Little Church Gallery in Spruce Grove, and have shown several times at the Johnson Gallery in Edmonton. There are exhibits at the Misericordia Hospital, and I'll probably show there again this year* (1,460). She had not yet developed a continuing relationship with a professional art gallery. She estimated that she had sold about 10% of her paintings, although she had not sold as much of her work since she began to create abstract paintings.

Mary had “*given a lot of work away,*” and had “*sold a few paintings, too*” (1,552). From time to time, she exhibited her work with her women artists collective. In addition, she has had an annual exhibit at a local community gallery as a guest artist for the past four or five years. I asked how this came about. She said, “*At first I thought it would be kind of nice, seeing that this art place was close by, to see if they would take some of my art on consignment, but she told me I would have to be a member, and have to be French, or have*

*a French connection, to be a member. But then after I showed her my portfolio she said, 'Well, we're having this opening and we'll have a guest artist and you'll be the guest artist.' So that's how I started with the gallery, and then she said that I could have a show as a guest artist every year" (2,136).*

Exhibits appeared to provide a “performative” experience that validated an expanding sense of artist identity among some of the participants. In addition to selling their work, and having their work appreciated those who viewed it, some of the participants had also received special commendations and awards which served to further validate their work and sense of identity as an artist. Lillian had received a number of awards and scholarships that she has used to further her art through the Alberta Community Art Clubs Association and the Faculty of Extension, for demonstrated excellence as a visual artist. One of Helen’s paintings had been selected for the cover of the Society of Western Canadian Artists’ newsletter: *My painting “A Winter in Old Riga” was one of the six that were chosen (2,320).* Terry was awarded second place in a Golden Brush competition organized by the Edmonton Art Club, among other awards.

The degrees and certificates that some of the participants had achieved also contributed to their sense of being an artist. For example, although Lillian felt that she was an artist before she completed her certificate, her story of being involved in the fine arts program served to augment her identity claim: *I’ve got my certificate from the university in art, you know. ...I got that two years ago at the age of 82 (1,433).* At 80 years of age Mary enrolled in a credential-oriented university-degree program to finally realize her dream of *really* learning art. She distinguished between the short community-based arts courses she had taken earlier in her life, and the sustained course of study that the degree program offered. Terry described the challenges she faced in *“trying to achieve the status of being an artist.”* She noted that: *There’s politics involved. If you don’t have a fine arts degree, that’s a major barrier to overcome. Other practising artists don’t accept you because you don’t have a degree and you haven’t spent your life at it (1,241); I’ve come to realize what a barrier it is not having professional qualifications. You’re not going to be taken seriously without credentials, I think. Being accepted within the art community as a qualified artist is important in the sense of being recognized and achieving sales and publicity. A few make it, but most don’t (2,551).* Terry was considering going back to university to complete a

Bachelor of Fine Arts. She was also hopeful (and fearful) about the outcomes of applying to become a member of the Alberta Society of Artists. The jury selection process that was followed to select new members considered evidence of high level competence and the assessed “professionalism” of potential applicants. Not all of the participants were interested in completing certificates or degrees, or receiving awards and commendations, or being recognized as “an artist.” For example, Joyce said: *I’m not interested in climbing a “social ladder” in the art world. I don’t want or need that pressure. I paint for the love of it* (2,432).

### *Identity Space III: Cultural and Relational Understandings*

The participants’ identity constructions were described in relation to different cultural understandings and relational comparisons regarding what can be taken to be “art,” and who can claim to be “an artist” (also see Mishler, 1999, p. 135). Their art instructors contributed to their knowledge of good art, and many of the participants referenced their work in relation to these various role models as they attempted to articulate their own sense of self as an artist.

When I asked Lillian if she considered her various instructors as her peers at this point in her career, she replied, *“Oh, absolutely! I’ve even had paintings in shows with them. I figured I was in awful good company”* (1,1099). She had decided against taking further art classes a few years ago when her mentor said, *“Why are you spending the money? Why don’t you just paint?”* (1,839). Helen said: *“Honestly, sometimes when I talk about painting I think, ‘Oh, my god! I’m talking like they talk,’ you know, other artists, like the instructors we’ve had”* (1,414). Bernard argued against being considered an artist by contrasting his skills and knowledge with that of art instructors he had worked with: *There are instructors I have had who have studied the difference between the qualities of the paints. ... For example, this one instructor can say that 005-2 by Daniel Smith is slightly different from the 9074 Windsor Newton, you know, this sort of thing. Well, when people get into it that far it leaves me a little cold. That’s the science of it, or the technology part. But boy, when he takes a brush and paints, he knows what he’s doing. ... That to me is an artist. I’m not an artist* (2,488). Although he did not feel that he was “an artist,” Bernard shared that he felt more secure about his commitment to art when one of his art instructors told him: *You may not realize it, but you have developed a style all of your own. It is very distinctive. I could look at any one of your drawings and know they are Bernard Wood drawings”* (1,806).

Bernard said, *“I felt a little bit more confident in everything I did after that, he was so complimentary about my progress”* (1,806).

In addition to their instructors (local, contemporary artists who had received recognition for their work), the participants’ valued the contributions, skills, and abilities of historical and cultural icons. For example, Mary said: *I don’t know whether I could call myself an artist, a real artist. You know, those artists that are really well known, I will never be that* (1,427); *You know, I started seriously at 80 and I am 89. So, I mean I don’t profess to be famous, let’s say* (1,431). In attempting to respond to my question about her sense of identity as an artist, Joyce stated: *It depends on how the word is defined* (2,237). As she continued on, she clarified: *I can do some of the things that famous artists can do. Like Vincent van Gogh, I can do some things that are similar to what he did, but I’d see him as a real artist, and see myself as a watercolour painter. I don’t know, maybe it’s a status thing. You know, when you’re well known and are very good, you’re on a pedestal* (2,239). When I asked Terry if she would call herself an artist, she said, *“You have to be a little careful with that. You know, to say that you are ‘an artist’ implies a great deal of ability and having achieved a great deal. For example, Rembrandt was an artist. I am working on becoming an artist. I’m on the path but I’ve a long way to go”* (2,539).

The participants’ identity constructions were also embedded within, and distributed across, their social relationships. Their involvement in art was often recognized by their family and friends. Malcolm said: *My whole life is now, I mean, sort of everybody’s asking me, “Well, how’s the painting going?” So I sort of end up always carrying around some pictures in my pocket* (2,295). Mary also had people who asked her *“Are you still painting?”* and *“What are you doing now?”* (2,896). One of her friends had approached her for art lessons: *I don’t know if I am much of a teacher but we’re painting all the same* (2,708). Her church had commissioned her to complete an interpretive work of art for an upcoming retreat. Lillian’s family and friends also inquired about her art: *They often ask, “Are you still painting? What are you painting?”* (1,1128). People also asked her if they could come over to her house to *“learn how to paint?”* (1,1093).

One of Joyce’s friends who worked with oils had phoned her to ask her for a quick lesson in watercolours: *She said, “I’ve got this course coming up and I don’t know very much about watercolour.” ... When she left she said, “You know, I learned so much. I was*

*going to ask someone I know who is a professional artist to give me a lesson but I'm glad I didn't because I learned so much from you tonight" - not putting the artist down, of course (2,2); That was exciting, and then my other friend, the lady that inspired me to do my art exhibit, phoned me a couple of times saying "I need another pair of eyes, I want to finish this painting, can I come over?" (2,12). I asked Joyce if she felt comfortable describing herself as being an artist. She replied, "Sometimes, but I don't say it, other people say it" (2,255). She presented her involvement in art in different ways depending on how receptive, or interested she felt the recipient was. She didn't talk about her art a lot with her family members: *I don't bring it up because there are so many other things to talk about. Still, some will ask "Are you painting? What have you painted recently?" (2,345); It's not that my family and friends aren't interested, they're not involved (2,347); I try not bring it up too often because they might get tired of it. Nobody's actually said "There she goes again!" but I don't want them to say that either (2,359).* Joyce's involvement in art was recognized more explicitly by her "artist friends" and those who attended her exhibits.*

Although Terry's family and friends all viewed her as "an artist," she felt that different art instructors, albeit supportive, still considered her to be primarily a student. She said: *My teacher last week said I was the most accomplished painter in the group. So, I'm thinking, "This is great! Maybe I should push a bit further" (2,601).* I asked if she had ever experienced a condescending attitude on the part of her art instructors. She said, *"No, not really. Most of the time I'm ahead of the majority of the class. The teachers like to have somebody in the class who can do what they want them to do" (2,669).* I asked if they accepted her as a peer. When she replied, *"No" (2,671),* I asked if she felt that her instructors viewed her primarily as an art student, she responded affirmatively, *"Yes, as a student" (2,675).* As noted earlier, Terry considered credentials to be an important social "marker" in being recognized as an artist.

#### *Giving Form to Experience: A Gift of Self*

A significant way in which I came to view the participants' as being "identified" with art included the ways in which art offered a means of making their personality, interests, and experience visible. For example, Helen described herself as a colourist: *I like intense colour. That's me, that's my personality (1,442).* She said: *I really think you see how people are. It's funny how people's personalities come out, in a group, especially. You can learn something*

*about someone's personality by their paintings. There's this one gal. She does watercolours, and she paints lovely, beautiful flowers. But that's the kind of a person she is. She's a lovely person and she loves doing flowers. See how the personalities come out (1,564); It just comes from within you, you know (2,174); We get some really good people in to give workshops. You always learn something at their workshops, don't get me wrong, you always learn something, but people tend to go back to their own style within a couple of months. It's just what comes out of you. That is what is so interesting about art (2,292).* Lillian cautioned, *"You should never let anybody tell you that your method of doing something isn't good, because everybody puts marks on a piece of paper differently. It's like your fingerprints. They're unique to you. How you put your marks down, whether it's with a paint brush, or whether it's with a pencil, it's unique to you. Not that there aren't some basic rules that you should learn"* (1,949). Mary said: *I think that art kind of brings out your personality. I think it brings out what I feel about something (1,775).*

Others have also described ways in which art helps to "develop" the self. Eisner (2002) has suggested that "the works we create speak back to us, and we become in their presence a part of a conversation that enables us 'to see what we have said.' ... and discover what it is that we are capable of experiencing" (p. 11). Dissanayake (2000) has similarly observed that "when we make or do something ... it mirrors us back" (p. 196). In a similar vein, Bernard shared: *I think that art makes people. ... I don't know how to describe that, but I really do (1,746).* I asked how he thought that happened. He replied, *"Well, there has to be first of all some quality in the person to make them sensitive to art and I think it's that sensitivity that allows the real person comes out. I mean there are people who like to sit down and express themselves through art. Art is a form of communication. The person may not be trying to say something specific in their art, but something always comes out, and you understand what you like about the person through their art. I don't know how else to describe it"* (1,748). Wanting to explore this idea, I asked, "Is it that they are communicating something to you about what they are seeing, and what they value about what they see?" Bernard suggested that something more was involved: *I think the thing about art is that you see the best in people. Whether they are thinking about themselves that way may be unimportant. It's just that you can gather something about what a person appreciates, or understands, or is sensitive to, I think that's what I mean. It brings the person out (1,756).*

Sense impressions, memories, and feelings are often fleeting. Art not only enhanced an attending to aesthetic and perceptual experience, but also provided a means of “giving form” to special memories. In addition to depicting special moments in which the participants were struck by the beauty of the phenomenal world (described earlier), they also created paintings of significant moments they had experienced often based on their travels, and other special experiences. For example, Helen said: *You know, like that painting. I was there. I was in that big dome in Riga. I've heard the wonderful music they played on the organ in that cathedral. It is one of the largest organs in the world. That painting reminds me of that ...* (2,412). Bernard shared the following: *This reminds me of this place we visited in Italy, quite far north, up the west coast. These five villages are all built on the side of this cliff. It's just amazing. They've built all these buildings such that you can enter on a level down here, and then walk up five stories, and go out the door at the back, and you are still at street level. It's a fascinating place, and so isolated from the rest of the world. When we were there it was pouring rain. I loved the feeling of the rain and the brightness of the umbrellas. It just caught me, I loved it. Every time Alta comes in here she looks at it, and says, "Let's go again!"* (2,587).

Malcolm's passion for flying gliders and other small motorized vehicles had inspired a number of his larger artworks. The following provides an example: *I was telling you that I've been to 30,000 feet in a motor glider. So here we are landing the motor glider. This is a rocky mountain wave cloud, and they say if you get your glider right on a leading edge of that wave cloud you might get a 2,000 or 3,000 feet a minute lift. That's how you get way up so high. That is pretty advanced soaring, you know. This is the rocky mountain wave, and there are certain areas in here which are really turbulent ... and so you make sure you avoid those. And these little lens-shaped clouds are working when the wave is working. You see, the wet air from British Columbia comes over the Livingston mountain range, falls off, hits the prairies, and then goes into a wave pattern with the air mass continuing on for 80 or 90 miles eastward. And so you get the primary wave, this is the primary wave cloud, and here is the secondary wave. And it goes on, and on, and on* (1,108); *So there's a big story associated with that painting. ... You have to get your oxygen going as you're going through 10,000 feet. At one point I was 20,000 feet above the mountains, and this is in a motorless airplane. It was a very exciting thing to do, and that's why I wanted to paint it* (1,118);

Bernard shared the following story about a pastel he had completed: *My younger daughter was taking her Bachelor of Arts and she got the whole thing except for her first year English and that held her up for years. I kept after her to go back and finish it. Finally she did, but when it came to completing her final essay she would just stare at the wall. I don't know what the heck was going on in her head. I had no idea. So, one day I said, "Look, you sit down and work on this essay, and I'll work on a drawing and then I'll paint it." So I did this painting in the same room that she was working on her essay, and we both finished at the same time. It was marvellous! And after that she got her degree, and that was it. But everybody likes that painting. Everybody wants to buy it. I have made it very clear that it's not for sale. It's just that it has such an interesting story behind it (1,106).*

Mary also described having an enduring connection to some of her artwork. For example, she had declined offers to sell the Depression paintings that she had on permanent exhibit at the Fairmont Hotel MacDonald: *A lot of times you don't like to sell your paintings because you just have a special feeling for them. They asked me if I wanted to sell them, and I said no. I didn't want to part with them, because it was part of my history. It was part of my growing up. It was part of my life as a child (1,782).* I suggested that the series of paintings were also important in terms of her "coming to art story," as they had been exhibited at the Royal Alberta Museum when she was in her first year of her visual arts degree program, and she agreed.

However the participants viewed themselves in relation to their art, their involvement in art can be considered a gift of self. Many of the participants shared their work with friends and family as gifts. A story that Bernard shared illustrates this: *I received this card from a friend of ours. A couple of years ago she was at one of our exhibitions and I had a painting of a water lily which she obviously liked. She came in, looked at it, and when she saw the "Sold" sign on it, she turned on her heel and just left, and that was it. She never came back. So I happened to do another painting of the same water lily, but a different painting, and when I heard that her daughter had cancer, I thought, "Gee whiz, I have got to do something." So I thought, "What about that painting?" So I packed it up and took it over to her house and she was thrilled. I thought that was the end of it, and then the day before yesterday this card and a case of wine was sent to the house. I couldn't believe it*

(1,119). I read the card aloud, “Thank you for the beautiful painting. You are so generous and thoughtful. Thank you.” Bernard said, “*Yeah, I couldn’t believe it*” (1,121).

Joyce valued having “*others appreciate my paintings, enjoy the beauty of them, or identify with them*” (1,439). At her solo exhibit a lot of the seniors at the seniors’ center came to view the paintings: *Not very many bought my paintings, but I could see them looking at them, and talking to each other about them, saying “Oh, this reminds me of ...” this or that. And then a gentleman came up to me and said, “You know that painting of the Bessborough Hotel in Saskatoon? When I got married I wanted to take my bride to the Bessborough Hotel, so I sold my bicycle for \$40, and I still couldn’t afford to stay there.” He said, “I’m thinking about buying that painting.” Later when I was off in the distance straightening a painting, I heard him tell the same story to another friend as he continued to look at it. In my guestbook he wrote, “Thank you for the memories.” I gave this gentleman a card with a print of my Bessborough Hotel painting. He was surprised. He thanked me and said he was going to frame the card. So what my friend had said about other people being able to enjoy and appreciate something in my work was true*” (1,445). Joyce assigned low prices to her work to make them affordable, and sold cards with print reproductions of her paintings with the thought that they might “*give somebody a little bit of joy*” (2,874).

#### *Enduring Commitment*

Just as the participants described having a special connection to particular artworks, they also described an enduring commitment *to art*. Periods of creative stagnation were sometimes experienced by the participants, but none considered not painting. They were not able to conceive of retiring from art – they had retired to art! Retirement was viewed as a significant beginning point in what they viewed as a long-term, and life-changing, commitment to art.

When I spoke with Mary, she said: *I haven’t retired from art. I don’t think I ever will. I hope I die with a paintbrush in my hand* (1,281). When I repeated her words to clarify her statement, saying “so you retired from nursing in your mid-fifties, but you are not going to retire from art,” she clearly confirmed, “*Never!*” (1,291), and we both laughed. Helen also confirmed that she could “*not imagine not painting, I’ll always do it*” (2,1077). She said: *I have never thought of giving it up because it gives me something to do, so why quit? We’re having fun!* (2,1071). I asked Joyce if she envisioned herself continuing on with art

for a long time. She confirmed that she would continue with art *“probably as long as I live, a long time. It’s part of me”* (2,450). She said: *I found a part of me that I didn’t know I had before. So now I can claim it* (2,456). She could not imagine never painting again: *I’ll paint with my feet if my hands go. Some people do* (2,464).

Lillian also described art as being a core part of her being. When I asked how much she would miss art if she was no longer involved in art, she replied: *I would think half my life was gone. Half my reason for living would be gone, I think. I’d feel half my life was gone, I really would* (2,1220). She planned on continuing with her art career as long as her health and stamina supported her work, declaring that *“nothing will ever stop me from painting, I don’t care what happens”* (1,1043). I asked Bernard if he could ever imagine himself not painting. He said: *No, I can’t imagine doing anything else, or enjoying anything more than painting. I love it* (2,532). He continued: *I think art means more to me than it does to the average person. I am very comfortable in the world of art* (2,642).

The participants’ enduring commitment to art making underscored the significance of their involvement in art as part of their identity. Just as art making worked to effect a change in how they experienced and appreciated the world, their involvement in art also changed their world, and also changed how they viewed themselves. Connected to this discussion of identity, their artwork can be considered as a contribution to the “social life” of the community and the larger culture. Their artwork can be considered a “gift of self” to the world, both directly in terms of the artwork they have created, and also because their art makes the creative energy and artistic visions of older people visible.

#### On Coming to Art in Later Life: Other Variations and Themes

Before ending this chapter, I offer a few additional reflections on coming to art in later life. The storylines and meaning-making dimensions I have described in the foregoing sections were based on the “coming to art” narratives shared by those participants who described a serious, sustained involvement in art patterned, in part, on models offered by professional arts practitioners. The participants that I have focused on in this inquiry participated in arts organizations. They exhibited and sold their work. They identified strongly with their art making pursuits. Some even identified themselves as being artists, or hoped to become recognized as an “artist.” Compared to their stories, somewhat less depth and narrative detail was provided by Lynda, Madeline, William, and – at least in relation to

the visual arts – Gail. These participants described a less focused or sustained connection to art than the other participants. Additional thematic aspects that I touch on in this final section consider their narratives and stories, and thematic content common across all of the participants. These include: the significance of art making as a casual leisure pursuit; music as a form of serious leisure; arts involvement in the midst of difficulty; agelessness and vital aliveness; and advantages and constraints of coming to art in later life.

#### *Art Making As Casual Leisure in Later Life*

As described earlier, Stebbins (1997) associates casual leisure with relatively short-lived pleasurable activity that requires little or no special training. Although he suggests that the greatest benefits of arts-based leisure will be enjoyed only if “considerable skill and knowledge ... is approached and maintained” (p. 55), benefits are also associated with more casual involvement. For example, Lynda still enjoyed significant benefits from her somewhat more casual engagement in art. She saw *“the potential for art in everything”* (2,482). She viewed the world differently since she became involved in art making. She said: *The sky is not one shade of blue. It’s different shades of blue* (2,194); *When you look at a tree, you see there’s a shadow. It’s not just a tree standing in the middle of nowhere. You look at where the light is, and where the shadows are* (2,874). Her involvement in art inspired new learning and ideas. She described a collage project she had worked on: *The whole thing is about power, there is the power of the atom bomb, and Napoleon had power, and a car has power. A cello has a lot of power; music has power. So basically the whole thing is about power. I have written that here in these letters I stuck on* (1,433). I asked how she had decided to explore the idea of “power” for her collage. She replied, *“Well, actually I was thinking about it for weeks ahead of time .... It was interesting working on this, planning it out and making a statement. I got a book on collage, and so I knew that I needed to have a theme for it”* (1,435).

Creating artwork was a central, and much valued activity in Lynda’s life: *There’s always a feeling of being drawn into the feeling of it, of creating, and thinking what else can I make* (2,808). Art making offered her something to be involved in, “something to do.” She said: *I enjoy being busy with my hands. I don’t like when I’m just not doing anything. I’m more tired if I do nothing* (2,626). She sometimes stayed up *“until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning”* (1,988). She said: *You know, when I finish painting I usually just go to bed or*

*whatever, but I feel like I have completed my day. I feel like I've done something (2,924). Art making provided Lynda with a sense of accomplishment in another way as well: My artwork is actually improving quite a bit (2,190); I've been doing more detailed work of late. It's not so much straight lines and such. I've actually got more shading in it now (2,196); That painting was quite significant for me because it was actually the first time I had ever worked on a canvas (2,694); I think that was my best. I was really surprised at that one, when I did that (2,726). Lynda spoke with excitement about her art. Art making provided a way of being connected to the larger culture, and being with other people who were also interested in art. She shared: I enjoy making art. The classes at the art gallery are really interesting because, first of all, you get to see the art gallery, and secondly, you get to learn about art. ... You learn about famous artists, when they painted, how they painted and why they changed their way of doing things. You get to study art, as well as create it. The material is presented in a very interesting way, and it's only two hours long. ... They actually give you all the materials that you need, and you can bring everything home (1,877).*

She also strongly identified with her involvement in art. When I asked Lynda how she would describe herself as an artist, she replied: *I would probably be considered an art student because I'm only actually learning art, but I do know that I think of my art in serious terms, because it really upset me when I told someone I was an artist, and she said, "Oh, you're an artist are you?," like "Oh, you are just playing around with it." Well, I don't really play around with it. ...I am really very serious about it. I'm a very serious-minded person. She continued: I would say that I'm an art student, but I don't think of art as a hobby. My painting isn't really a hobby. I take my painting seriously. I'm not that great an artist, but I'd say I'm an artist that's a very serious person (2,638). Lynda's art making contributed significantly to her sense of identity: *I think as a wife you're thought of as being connected to your husband, like you're "Mr. and Mrs." And then when a husband dies, or say is separated from the family, a wife becomes an individual once more. She becomes a person in her own right. You know, my husband is in a nursing home, he's being taken care of, but I still have my life to live, and maybe I don't want to be known as Mrs. Raymond Barnhard. Maybe I want to be known as Lynda Barnhard, the painter, or somebody with qualities or talents of my own (2,342). She added: When you're a regular person and decide that you want to do something later in life, these are your accomplishments, not his. It's**

*something you're doing for you. ... You are making your own mark in life.... Although it's nice to have a husband and be married, there comes a point in time when you just kind of want to have time to be yourself" (2,354).*

For Lynda, art making offered a means of developing her own sense of self-identity. She said, *"You know, when you do art you feel like you've made something special because no one else can make it quite like you. They can do what you do, but it wouldn't be the same because everybody's art turns out different. So it's your own personal work" (2,938).* As noted by Stebbins (1982), casual leisure may be as serious as "serious leisure," especially in relation to the "earnestness, sincerity, importance" and care given to the activity (p. 258). Lynda's narrative supports this, and underscores the need to recognize that "seriousness and casualness as personal approaches to leisure are merely the poles of a [more] complicated dimension" (p. 255).

#### *Music as a "Serious Leisure" Pursuit*

Although we had originally connected in relation to her interest in art, much of the conversation that Gail and I enjoyed was focused on her experience of playing the flute. She said: *I have a talent for art, I do, but since the flute came along, I haven't made time for art (1,439).* She has always been attracted to the "happy" sound of the flute, and approached a flautist one night at a restaurant to ask if he thought she might *"ever be able to learn to play the flute?"* When he encouraged her to try, she resolved to *"just grab the chance and do it!" (1,98).* Gail looked in a weekly community paper, found an advertisement for flute lessons that included the line *"All ages welcome,"* and thought, *"that's me!" (1,471).* Gail spoke with great excitement about the flute. She described the immediacy and simple joy of creating beautiful music. She devoted at least an hour a day to practicing the flute in preparation for her weekly tutoring session. She wanted to play recognizable selections of music, and *"play them with the feeling that belongs to the piece" (1,166).*

Her capacity to learn amazed her: *It's just fantastic. I want to learn how to play properly and Sarah is a wonderful teacher. She is very encouraging, very positive, and very patient. I want to play stuff, and lately I have been going through music books of the 50s, 60s, and the 70s. I can play them and I just love it (1,475); I keep saying to Sarah, "Do you think you can poke any more information into this head of mine?" After the first two or three months, I thought, "We are going too fast. I can't do this. We are going to have to slow*

down.” *But I didn’t say that out loud, and we didn’t slow down. And I don’t feel that way anymore* (1,489). She elaborated on this: *I just get kind of lost in it and everything else gets out. ... It’s a very happy feeling, letting all the other stuff out trying to reach, maybe not perfection, but just to know I am doing my best, and that I am trying to get better. It makes me so happy. It just makes me feel happy* (2,132); *When I’ve done well, I feel really, really wonderful* (2,198). Gail said: *My friends and family think it’s really, really cool that I’m doing this. They ask me about it, and if they don’t ask, I tell them. It gives me self confidence really. There are a lot of things I have in common with everyone, the things I do with my family, and other friends, but nobody else plays the flute. It’s my special thing. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I think highly of myself, but it’s given me such delight and pride in myself and my ability to learn all that stuff* (2,224).

A new world had opened up to her, one that Gail enjoyed in a deep and satisfying way, and felt a part of: *I was watching a concert on television the other night, and you know I felt a kinship with the musicians. I felt, “I can do that too, we belong together, I understand you”* (1,234). She takes her flute everywhere. She played it at a memorial service that commemorated her mother-in-law’s life. She takes it on camping trips, enjoying its light and happy trilling sounds set against the sounds of nature. She described a passionate commitment to playing the flute: *I just can’t imagine not playing the flute. ... It would be a big, big hole in life. I would even miss cleaning my flute, you know. I would miss everything about it* (2,270); *... It’s just completed something for me, I’m not sure what, but it has* (2,286). Gail viewed music as being more than a hobby, both because of the seriousness of her commitment and because of how it contributed to her enjoyment of life in retirement. Gail’s story suggests that various spheres of engagement exist in which we may realize our interests and talents.

#### *Arts Involvement in the Midst of Difficult Experiences*

Although my focus was not on the use of art as a means of psychosocial support or therapy *per se*, several of the participants offered insights into therapeutic aspects that may sometimes be associated with art making. Madeline and William experienced art making as a means of coping with difficult challenges they faced in later life related to cancer and other illnesses. They became involved in an “arts in medicine” program when it was suggested as an adjunctive component of Madeline’s cancer treatment. Art making helped Madeline and

William connect with others whose lives had been touched by cancer, for support, meaning-making, and creating a sense of well-being in the midst of their illness experience. Art making also helped them to connect to one another. They shared the following to provide some insights into their experience:

Madeline (1,1254): *We have cookies. We have tea time and cookies. I don't know what it is, but you just get in that room and start your recovery.*

William (1,1255): *Yeah, I think to some degree it's done two things. You know there are the other people who are also involved in this, and you get a chance to cry and laugh, and vent your anger, and then things settle down and you do your carving. And the whole thing, everything changes. It's utterly amazing. I'm always amazed at how it turns ...*

Madeline (1,1262): *There's laughter.*

William (1,1263): *You know, I don't know for what period of time, but everybody's kind of very sad and sombre and crying. Then all of a sudden you get to this point, where it's over, and now we're going to do the soapstone. And the whole thing just changes one hundred percent – everyone is laughing and giggling. They're happy. It's quite amazing, actually, quite amazing. When the carving starts, holy smokes! You'd think it was Christmas, and everybody got presents! ...*

William (1,1316): *It's just utterly amazing. I can't explain it. It amazes me every time this happens. We have this book, they call it a journal, and what you're supposed to do each day that you go to this class is write down how you felt during the week, or how you felt during the class, or whatever. And I don't how many times I wrote in that I just found it unbelievable how the mood changes. And it's just like that - it's instant. As soon as the time comes to start carving, everyone is smiling and talking.*

Madeline (1,1323): *We get involved in what we're doing, and we laugh at our carvings, and we look at each other's carvings, and say "What's that going to be?" You know? Of course, we laugh away at it, and eventually we're all praising each other because, hey, we've done this great job.*

Excerpts taken from short essays they had written about their carvings suggest that William found a sense of peace creating his polar bear carvings: *Whenever I look at Amah (Friend) I feel a sense of peacefulness and know that whatever the future may hold he will always be there to assist and guide me.* Madeline also described her carving as an object that had protective powers: *Bringing my bear, Elunun (Hope), to life made me realize that I had put so much of myself into this carving. The time for anger, grieving, and depression must be laid to rest. I began to read and sew again, picking up where I had left off so many months ago. There may be days when I become lost again, but I know if I reach out there is a hand waiting to help me find my way back.* Madeline felt strongly about the benefits of the “arts in medicine” program. She made soapstone carvings for one of her physicians: *I made two*

*brown bears for him. I took them to his office, and he said, “Do you want me to take them home?,” and I said, “No, I want you to have them in your office so when you have other cancer patients who are not familiar with the ‘arts in medicine’ program you can show them the carvings” (2,58).*

Some other participants also shared stories about how art helped them to adapt to difficult life transitions. For example, having just lost his wife, and having to retire from a busy and successful career as a surgeon due to health problems, Malcolm found that art helped him to regain a sense of coherence: *Art helped me get through the horror of Barb’s sudden death. ... It was just horrible. I was very depressed. And I was fighting with Ralph Klein and the cutbacks he was introducing to the health system ... He was destroying just about everything he touched. ... My art helped to keep me focused on something that was very enjoyable to me (1,42).* Art making sustained Malcolm as he struggled to find ground to stand on through an emotionally devastating time: *I went through a phase where I was doing a lot of black canvasses. I was in a depressive mode. ... I really enjoyed the thrill of bringing an image out of the darkness. It’s a whole reversal of your thinking process. I went through a phase where I was really concentrating on this technique. It was very therapeutic, and although I don’t paint that way now, I’ve certainly been building on it. ... The art particularly, and my flying buddies also, helped tremendously to get me out of the depression (1,56).*

Likewise, Lynda described the sense of relief that art making offered her from worrying about her problems. She found art relaxing in that it helped her to forget her everyday worries and concerns, and immerse herself in the release and satisfaction of creating something. She said, *“It makes me feel kind of happy because when I paint I’m just actually not thinking about what’s bothering me. I’m just painting” (1,977).* She described the meaning of art for her in the following way: *Art to me is a lot like butterflies. You know how butterflies are free? Well I feel that art somehow frees you, from your frustrations or whatever. You kind of lose yourself, you know, and are free just like the butterflies to fly around exploring (1,593).*

Helen also described relief from worry and concern, and an enveloping sense of comfort and well-being as important aspects of being involved in the Laurier Heights Art Society: *Everybody just seems to fit in. I don’t know, it’s just a nice comfortable group*

(1,193). Some members of the group had died over the years, others had lost their spouse, and several members had health problems. Still, she said: *Even though you have worries and problems, you go there and your problems just seem to float away when you paint. It's wonderful. You just don't think about anything else* (1,195); *You forget everything. You just focus on your painting and what's going on* (1,362). Helen described the benefits of art making in terms of respite from worry. Although she and her husband both enjoyed good health during the time of our interviews, Helen had been diagnosed with breast cancer a year prior to our first meeting. During that period, radiation treatment had dampened her enthusiasm for painting: *I didn't have as much enthusiasm for painting, but I still went twice a week* (1,584). She found the group helpful in taking her mind off of her worries, and providing support: *If I didn't feel like painting, I'd still go and have a coffee, and somebody would have a joke to share in the coffee room, or we'd just catch up on what's going on. That was group therapy for me* (1,578).

Art making as respite did not feature as a strong aspect of Lillian's experience when her daughter was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumour (shortly after Lillian's graduation exhibit). During this period Lillian dedicated much of her time to caring for her daughter, and also her son-in-law who had been sick for a long time. Then, following her daughter's death, and then her son-in-law's death (19 days after her daughter died), Lillian found that she wasn't able to commit the same energy to her art for a long while. Somewhat earlier when she had been diagnosed with breast cancer she had continued to paint but at a slower rate: *I painted some. I wouldn't call those paintings the best I have ever done, because I was doctoring more than I was painting. That was 16 years ago* (2,454). The remaining participants made no mention of art functioning as a respite for worries and concerns. Their narratives were focused more on an ongoing expansion of experience, and identification with art as they learned more about, and became more involved in art.

#### *Agelessness and Vital Engagement*

I was impressed by the sense of "agelessness" I experienced in relation to the participants. The participants only rarely characterized themselves as being older, or being limited by age. I found myself appreciating them more in relation to the keen sense of aliveness they effused, which was suggested by references they made to having a sense of purpose and ongoing learning. The participants described art making as involving a

continuing learning process which sometimes included enrolling in more formalized programs of study. For example, Lillian is known as the oldest student to ever graduate from the Fine Arts Certificate program. When it was reintroduced, Lillian thought, “*OK, why don’t I do it? ...I could have used it more to my advantage when I was younger. But I thought, ‘It’s an achievement! At 82, that is an achievement! It’s something that I did that I was successful at, and why not?’*” (2,1069). In addition, she shared: *You’re never too old to learn something. It makes your life more interesting, you know, it makes your life more interesting* (1,394); *The idea that I’ve been doing this for over 30 years ... what a wonderful, wonderful journey it’s been. I have found it a really lovely journey, just a very exciting journey* (1,721); *I don’t think too much about age. I never thought much about age until I reached the age of 80, and then for a little while nobody would let me forget that I was 80. ...So I think about age a little bit more than I used to, but ...* (2,552); *I think for me it’s been a very good thing. I think it’s helped to keep me young* (2,588).

The participants’ accounts suggested that they were oriented to the present and future, more so than the past. Mary said: *The idea that I am getting old, that I am just about at the end of it all, doesn’t bother me a bit. I don’t know what it is. Is it something spiritual you’re given or that you connect with, with art? I don’t know. I can’t explain it, but I can say that art certainly helped me to age. I don’t know if I had been the same person if I hadn’t taken art. I don’t think I would, I don’t think I would be as happy* (1,365); *When you retire, I think you have to have an interest. If I hadn’t had an interest, I think I would have just been an old grouchy lady complaining about this, that, and the other thing. And now I don’t have time to complain, you don’t, do you?* (1,1195). She elaborated on how art contributed to a sense of youthfulness: *I think it gives you a young attitude, a young feeling* (2,2); *Health-wise I think it makes you forget that you’re becoming old. ... You mix with a lot of younger people and that helps too. They have so much that they can contribute to you, ... I feel when you are with younger people and share interests with them, you feel more involved in what’s going on today* (2,10); *I think if you are involved in things and achieve things too, life is interesting* (2,28). Helen made similar statements: *I think it really keeps us young. It really does. I think it keeps me on my toes, you know, you’re still kind of with it. You’re still connected to everything that’s going on around you* (1,314); *We have a very interesting life. We’ve made it interesting with art and the groups that we belong to. I think*

*that's what keeps us young. It is the things you do, and the things you're interested in... and the art group has just been absolutely fabulous for us in that way (1,486). Joyce stated, "I'm 65, but I don't feel old" (1,174). She later added: I've always thought that learning was important. I think when you stop learning you stop living (2,130); You grow, you develop in relation to your art ... and it makes you feel good (2,506).*

I experienced the participants as being very alive and excited when they talked about their art and showed me examples of their work. They effused a sense of joy, creative energy, and enthusiasm for life as they described their experiences. In her study of aging, Kaufman (1986) observed that people maintain a sense of self over their lifetime, and do not relate to age as a category of experience. That is, people do not perceive meaning in being old, but rather perceive meaning in being *themselves* across all of the years they have lived. They may variably describe themselves as feeling old, not feeling old, or feeling young in different contexts, situations, and points of time. What is of interest is how experience and identity serves as a source of meaning, and provides a means of youthful engagement with life. At the end of our first interview Terry proclaimed that she planned on maintaining a youthful attitude throughout her life: *I'm not letting go of it! I'll fight the aging process all the way (1,605).* What I came to understand over the course of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts was that although some of the participants did not enjoy the best health or financial circumstances, they were all living richly creative lives within their means and capacities. Even as they were aging, they were eng/aging life. Art making offered a resource for creatively engaging life, and fostering an enlivened, continuously developing sense of an "ageless" self.

*On Advantages, Constraints, Barriers, and Facilitators, etc.*

The storylines that I have outlined in the preceding sections provide a descriptive overview of thematic content that characterized the narratives and stories that the participants shared with me. In this section, I suggest additional aspects of the experience of coming to art in later life that might be explored in future research. In relation to coming to art *in later life*, some of the participants observed that art was easier to pursue, and something they could enjoy in later life:

*Helen (1,350): As a younger artist, you have to work too hard to make a living. There are so many good painters out there, even in Edmonton, and they really have a hard time making a living. It's a bit easier to get involved in art and to*

*enjoy it when you don't have to worry about making a living ... because most people have got their pension and so they can just relax and enjoy it.*

Helen (2,1623): *You have the time and money.*

Joyce (2,692): *I have the freedom and time to take courses.*

Joyce (2,720): *I have many life experiences I can incorporate in my artwork.*

Joyce (2,680): *I'm glad it happened when it did. It's something new and exciting that I can enjoy in later life.*

Bernard (2,642): *I think it's a wonderful pastime for anybody just to try to develop. There's nothing holding them back. It's not competitive. It's very relaxing.*

Mary (2,1101): *I can be passionate about art, and just do it as I wish. It's freer than my nursing when I had to be there.*

Other benefits of *coming to art* in later life that the participants mentioned included having something to do and feeling like they had accomplished something:

Mary (2,52): *Even now I like to feel that I've accomplished something.*

Terry (1,237): *When you retire, what are you going to do? You can't just sit and say, "Now it's a holiday," and twiddle your thumbs. You have to have some purpose, some goal, something worthwhile to do.*

Lillian (2,1154): *It certainly helps to pass the time!*

Lillian (2,1160): *You get a great feeling of achievement. I think everybody needs that. You need to achieve something. I don't care what age you are. You need to achieve something.*

Lillian (2,1242): *Painting has really contributed to the way that I've enjoyed my life, not that I haven't enjoyed my family and the fact that I have grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but ... they're all busy. They work, and live some distance away, and they're not old yet, so they don't know what it's like.*

Limited energy was described by some of the participants as constraining factor:

Mary (2,640): *Sometimes it's hard getting art in. There are things going on with the church that I am involved in, you know, and I can only do one thing, one real thing a day.*

Mary (2,652): *Your energy, you just realize that you're not able to do as much as you used to be able.*

Terry (1,283): *After a day of painting I often don't want to do much in the evening. Maybe if I were younger I would, but you tire out by the time it gets to supper time.*

Lillian (2,886): *The thing is, when you get to be my age sometimes if you do two things in a day you're doing pretty good. When you're 40, you can work all day and accomplish all sorts of things and probably not even feel tired at the end of the day. I have to pace myself so it takes me longer to do things.*

Mention was also made of other limitations related to mobility and "hardiness:"

Lillian (1,725): *I don't drive at night any more. I choose not to do it. I don't feel that comfortable doing it any more. I had two cataracts removed and the lights bother me at night.*

Lillian (1,855): *Going out and sitting in a field somewhere and painting, I haven't done that for a long time because of my age and carrying stuff. It's hard work carrying stuff around. It's a whole different thing doing it outside. It's a whole different ball game than doing it in your house.*

Helen (1,310): *We used to go to the mountains and paint outdoors for a good week, but you know as you get older it's harder to go and sit in the cold and paint.*

Although many of the participants enjoyed a comfortable financial situation, some of the participants *did* make mention of the costs associated with art making:

Lillian (1,1490): *Stretched canvases are not cheap. This was \$34.49 for a 24x36 canvas.*

Lillian (2,816): *I find this slide business a very expensive thing to get into. You can spend hundreds of dollars on that kind of stuff and not reap anything from it. It's very costly to do.*

Terry (1,352): *It's not a cheap hobby. You think, "Oh, you just need a few watercolour paints and a piece of paper and a brush," but even that is not cheap because you need a good brush for a start, and good paper runs at about \$22 a sheet. You can buy student quality paints, but you'll never be satisfied with them. So you know that limits the number of people who are going to really get into it because it's expensive. I'm lucky. I have a pension, and my husband has a pension, so if I want a frame I can have it. But I do think twice about it. I think "Do I really want to frame this? Is this good enough?"*

Lynda said that she couldn't "afford anything other than classes at the art gallery" (1,1000). Her story reminds us that interest in art also exists among those with limited means that may restrict their ability to enrol in a wide range of course-based experiences (see Austin, 1991).

Both Lillian and Mary cited having their health, and the support of their family as facilitating their involvement in art:

Mary (1,349): *They've been behind me all the way, my son and my grandson. My grandson, he did some of my framing. The whole family has been supportive of me. They help me. When I have to take my paintings to a gallery, they help me to do that. I don't drive anymore because of my eyes so they transport my work around.*

Mary (1,369): *You know I have been blessed to be as healthy as I am, so that's part of it, too. I've got a bit of pain here and there, arthritis and stuff. But I have been very healthy.*

Lillian (1,985): *I had the best husband. He didn't mind if I painted at the kitchen table and he ate at a TV tray. He never minded. He liked it if I painted.*

Lillian (1,1334): *My son helped me hang my graduation exhibit. When they weren't going to hang this one, he said, "Oh, yes." He waited until my mentor left the room and then he rearranged my paintings a bit, and put it in the exhibit.*

Lillian (2,124): *I think for my age my health is pretty good. I have a lot of arthritis, I was told that I have rheumatoid arthritis in my hands now which disappointed*

*me a bit, but I'm still doing it. And I think it helps because I still have my head, I can still think.*

Although not “age-related” *per se*, another challenge that the participants identified was the accumulation of artwork. Lynda said that she hoped to show some of her work “*to see if some of it would actually sell because I've been making all these things*” (2,288). The number of paintings she was storing in her home motivated Joyce to accept an invitation to exhibit her work, which led to her successful solo exhibit. Lillian and Terry described challenges related to exposure and marketing. Lillian identified that the promotion of young emerging artists sometimes made it more difficult to have her work included in exhibits: (reading from a pamphlet) “*This exhibition will highlight new and younger professional artists just beginning their careers.*” *Well, that eliminates me right there* (1,1518). She refers to the constraints of age on her art career in the following: *The certificate would have meant a lot more to somebody younger, and to me had I done it at a younger age because I could have done more with it afterwards. I wasn't thinking of using it to make money, although I might have at a younger age. I think I would have used it more to promote myself, to exhibit more if I had it earlier in my life. I think I would have done more with it* (2,1065). She offered this more as a statement of fact, than regret. What she hoped for at this stage of her career was simply to have more opportunities to exhibit her work.

Terry expressed concern that she would not gain acceptance as an artist by the professional art world, but might remain peripheral to that world, consigned to an amateur artist status. She expressed a sense of regret in the following: *It's hard to break in if you started when you retired* (1,241); *Age has disadvantages because you don't have the same opportunity for a 40-year career during which you can develop, learn, experience, and improve your capabilities* (2,40); *I think I have talent and I think I can develop my talent further, but not as far as I could have if I had started at the beginning of my working life instead of after retirement* (2,527). Mary wished she had enrolled in her visual arts degree program earlier: *I should have started as soon as my husband died* (2,1046). Joyce said: *I have no regrets. I feel that if you get it all in one package, all at once, there might not be anything left down the road*” (2,456).

## Transition 5 ...

It is important to note that just as many of the participants led busy lives prior to retirement, they continued to have many interests and involvements during their retirement. Such everyday activities as shopping, banking, appointments with doctors, visits with family and friends, and exercise engaged their time. As Kelly (1997) has observed:

‘serious leisure’ is not the whole story of anyone’s retirement activity. In the balance of a leisure style there is also disengagement and relaxation, low-intensity as well as demanding activity, appreciation as well as creation, being alone as well as sharing. The ordinary patterns of living are there as well, especially in the day-to-day associations of home, family, neighbourhood and friends. But the extraordinary is the ‘something more’ that highlights the ordinary, that makes the self someone special – a person of ability sharing with others. And it is the highlights that produce extraordinary enjoyment in the routines of retirement. (p. 176)

What this inquiry suggests is that whether they had an abiding or emergent interest in art, art making only became a way of life when the participants had *sufficient time* to focus on their art. There was also a need to somehow ensure their continuing commitment to reduce the risk that their involvement might fade. The participants’ commitment to art was supported not only by how they structured their life, but also by what they hoped to achieve. The participants were motivated to progress in their work. They took advantage of opportunities to gain knowledge, skills, and experience that helped them to enjoy the array of benefits that they enjoyed.

The participants appeared to be “flourishing,” at least in part because of their involvement in art. They enjoyed art making as an inherently creative process. Art making influenced the way they related to the world. It enhanced their awareness and appreciation of the aesthetic aspects of the visual world. Art provided a vehicle through which they articulated and explored the meanings that they associated with their experiences. The participants spoke excitedly and proudly about their art; it was difficult for them to part with their art at times. Art making intensified and enlivened their experience, which contributed to their identification with art and ongoing involvement. In addition, their various accomplishments strengthened their commitment to art, and promoted their ongoing learning (see Shamir, 1992).

Through the work they created, the rewards and recognition they received, their connections with various art worlds and other social relationships, many of the participants

came to describe themselves as being an “artist” of some kind. They distinguished themselves from contemporary, professional artists and recognized cultural icons. Rather, their involvement in art served to enhance their appreciation of the contributions of “recognized” artists. Jensen (2002) has suggested that hierarchical, art world distinctions “are *important to the participants*” (p. 198; italics in the original), and indeed the participants’ directed their efforts to developing their skills and abilities in relation to professional art world standards. Although their identity constructions were dependent on available cultural discourses, as well as time, place, and the network of social relations involved, the participants considered their involvement in art to be “more than a just a hobby.” They strongly identified with art making as an important aspect of their being.

Although a common view is that artists *are born* as such, compelled to express their talents from an early point in life, the accounts shared by the participants suggest that, at least for some, coming to art is a developmental opportunity that emerges with age. An early study by Hearn (1972) found that “first career” artists had parents and teachers who supported and encouraged their interest in art, as well as early formal training that served to socialize them into art as a profession, while “second career” artists placed their interest in art as “secondary to economic or familial considerations ... until circumstances later in life allowed them to return to their youthful interest on a more permanent and full-time basis.” Hearn suggested that “their self-identification with, and commitment to art was apparently not felt to be as strong as outside considerations” (p. 359). With the exception of Terry (who was conflicted about delaying her ambition to become an artist until after retirement), this statement concurs with stories shared by many of the participants in this study. While family, work, and community obligations claimed the participants’ time and energy during earlier periods, retirement offered an opportunity to explore a new realm of experience in art that was found to be both absorbing and rewarding.

Those participants who engaged in art making as a serious leisure activity recognized a fit between their interests, temperament, skills and ability, and the activity of art making. This occurred in relation to the progress that they made, and also the recognition they received from their art instructors, various art associations they belonged to, and the buying public. Overall, however, the participants’ involvement in art was uniquely patterned to each. They followed various trajectories into art. Some of the participants systematically

pursued specific goals they had for their art. Others realized their interest in art by engaging with it just as something they wanted, or felt inspired, to do. The benefits they associated with art making, and their identification with art also varied across individual participants, and over time. Nevertheless, the participants' narratives support a model of art as providing a means of developing oneself. Art making appeared to effect a developmental change in how the participants' experienced and appreciated the world. For most of them, aging in later life was indeed experienced as a moveable feast!

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **STORIES TOLD AND SHARED: A DISCUSSION**

*... that act of creation that engages us all – the composition of our lives.*  
- Mary Catherine Bateson, 1989, p. 1

*The highest art is the art of life.*  
- Leo Tolstoy (1995/ 1898), p. 22

#### On “Findings” and the Nature of Possibility

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that the intent of narrative inquiry is to develop “a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic” (p. 42). In this inquiry I explored the emergence, and experience of artistic engagement in later life among 11 participants, focusing on seven who had fully embraced art as a way of life following their retirement. The participants had varied backgrounds and described various leisure interests, including those that related to art. Together, however, their experiences suggest a view of retirement as a period that afforded them an opportunity to explore and realize an abiding or newly emergent interest in art making. They described lives made “more-than-ordinary” through art; they enjoyed a “quality of life that (art) makes possible” (Eisner, 2002, p. 203). With or without health issues, problems or losses they may have been facing at different points, the participants in this study were leading vital, interesting lives. A close reading of the participants’ narratives offered a means of recognizing patterns and complexities, including the always, ongoing expansion of *possibility* (or “sense of ‘something more’ to come,” Shotter, 2000b, p. 125), associated with the experience of coming to art in later life.

Three primary storylines were identified: 1) “Coming to Art;” 2) “Flourishing through Art;” and 3) “Art as Identity.” The first storyline encompassed a variety of pathways that the participants followed in “coming to art.” The role of chance and different influencing conditions were described, including how various structures and routines sustained their focus on art. Various ways in which art contributed to how the participants’ enjoyed their lives comprised the second storyline. Art making offered a means of heightening the participants’ receptiveness to the phenomenal world, vitalizing their experience of life. Involvement in art contributed to new ways “of seeing, of hearing, of thinking, of feeling.” It

provided a sphere of being “where different rules apply: the rules of rhythm, colour, line, form, movement, melody, harmony” (Nolan, 1996, p. 48). All that the participants had known, were interested in, and were newly learning about contributed to their art. In addition to engendering deep personal satisfaction and new social connections, art also provided a valued source of identity in later life – the final storyline that was described. Shotter (1999) has suggested it may be our response to the “‘calls’ exerted upon us by events in our environment ... that we come to be the kind of people we become” – at any point in our lives. That many said they would never retire from art making suggests the significance of coming to art in later life.

This inquiry provides an admittedly partial view of the experience and meanings of associated with becoming involved in art in later life. The participants were purposively sampled on a relatively ad hoc basis, and are not representative of all of those who develop a serious commitment to art making in later life. In addition, in offering a view of the experience of “coming to art in later life,” this inquiry was in fact tacitly restricted to the visual arts. As I worked on developing this research text, I also recognized that other inquirers (and indeed, perhaps the readers of this text) may have discerned other meaningful research stories that could fruitfully be shared with different research communities and readers. Nonetheless, I hope that this text, as it stands, might inspire new understandings of the possibilities of aging, and the ways that art can contribute to an ongoing process of growth and development.

In terms of the significance of this inquiry, I believe this inquiry offers evidence of “continued human development” (Friedan, 1993, p. 51) through art, as reflected in ongoing learning, a continuing openness to experience, and the fashioning of new identities in later life. Another contribution is that it describes the ways in which art provides an action space that provides the conditions for promoting growth and development in later life through ongoing learning, goal-setting, connections to new worlds, and development of new relationships. As a final point, I would offer that the experience of art does not have to be “therapeutic” to be significant. Art considered in relation to aging or later life is often rationalized, or thought of in relation to health-related and therapeutic impacts. While such outcomes are both valuable and important, an exclusive focus on these effects contributes to the idea of older adults as needing to be taken care of, and being “unhealthy, even if from a

strictly physiological point of view, they are well” (Hazan, 1994, p. 20). Such a view also limits the ways we understand the experience of being involved in the arts in later life. Although health benefits may be associated with involvement in art, and the arts may also be used to facilitate therapeutic ends, I believe that this study shows that art in later life can also be about vital engagement, creative excitement, momentum, feeling enlivened, a sense of being enraptured, of feeling alive ... and also about becoming an artist. Given this, ideas related to the creative unfolding of being, growth and development across the life course could usefully be included in an encompassing model of arts and aging.

Following Eisner (1979), I have been more concerned about illuminating or “opening up attractive vantage points than in arriving at a destination” (p. viii). Moody (1988a) argues that “critical gerontology” should help to frame new questions for gerontology, to expose “horizons that lie beyond the limits of existing methods and results in the empirical sciences” (p. 22). K. Gergen (1994b) suggests that a theoretical account should be considered in relation to its “generativity,” or the extent to which “it challenges the guiding assumptions of the culture, raises fundamental questions regarding contemporary life, fosters reconsideration of existing constructions of reality, and, by doing so, furnishes new alternatives for action” (p. 168). Following from this, I offer this research text as a creative project that might work to cultivate an appreciation of the creative worlds that older people are creating and engaging in, and also lead – I hope – to both enhanced activity in this area, and other inquiries and interpretations.

*Meaning is always in process. Understandings are always unfolding.*

In the following sections, I offer additional reflections on the notion of art as a mode of development, and consider some relationships between “positive aging,” health and art making in later life. I also suggest some directions for future inquiry, and development of “leading structures” that might support inquiry and practice in this area.

#### Late Life Potential: The Art of Development

##### *Art as a Mode of Development*

Using a phrase coined by Newman and Holzman (1997b), art making can be considered a developmental “*form of life*” (also see Eisner, 2002). Art making offered a continuing learning journey. Stebbins (1992) writes, “the artist knows the basics, having learned them in earlier developmental stages, but improvement beyond that base is infinitely

possible and a measure of one's standing in the field" (p. 84). Dissanayake (2000) states that, "as well as aiding learning about the world, the arts are intrinsically motivating to the activity of learning itself" (p. 192). The participants' desire to perfect their skills and realize their artistic visions was strongly motivating over time. For many of the participants, their initial involvement in art was motivated by simple interest and enjoyment of creative expression, and then later, the satisfaction of rendering increasingly complex or subtle qualities in their work. Specific goals they hoped to achieve also sometimes motivated their ongoing involvement in art. The participants also described having an enhanced aesthetic awareness of the world around them that inspired them to create their work. Dewey (1934) described art as working to encourage a suspension of one's habitual "self," and an enlivening of the senses that serves to promote awareness. Dissanayake (2000) has also observed that artists are "ever alert to details and connections that arise unexpectedly in daily life and contain the promise of elaboration" (p. 197).

The participants' experience of art making served to deepen their interest in, and ways that they engaged the world. Their involvement in art encouraged them to pay attention to the moment. Through their art making experiences, the participants explored new images and ideas. The participants took an interest in nature and the world around them. They travelled. They developed significant relationships with others, and new connections within the community because of their art. Their involvement served to inspire and organize related activities. Although the subject matter of some of the participants' artwork was sometimes based on earlier periods of their lives, there was little sense of art making functioning in a closed-ended way to help them prepare for the inevitable end of their lives. Rather, their art offered a way for the participants to explore, develop, and commemorate the significance of things that mattered to them.

Fisher (1995) has described older people who are aging successfully as those who are "addressing current problems of identity and development ... (they) continue to grow and learn as they use past experiences to cope with the present and set goals for future development" (p. 240). The developmental significance of the arts is suggested also then by the influence of arts-based involvement on the identity of the participants. In addition to offering a means of deeply engaging the world, their involvement in art contributed to maintaining, and fashioning new positive identities. The participants grew through risks they

took in creating their art, and then later the sharing of their art which served to deepen their experience and identification with art. Their stories encourage us to attend to the positive possibilities of aging that recognizes “all the years they have lived, the things they have learned, the selves they have evolved from, and the selves they are becoming” (Andrews, 1999, p. 309). What is suggested is that identity is a dynamic process that evolves over time, and that an ongoing, creative emergence of developmental meaning may be cultivated through arts-based engagement.

Dewey (1934) describes an understanding of human growth as a “form of development that involves an opening up or unfolding of potentialities” and “an expansion of meaning and value” (Jackson, 1998, p.47). He suggests that having an experience of being fully alive, stirred by energy and anticipation, alert and open to the possibilities of the world is an aesthetic experience, can be enhanced by art and other creative processes. That is, art and aesthetic experience can draw us into a state of a living relational-responsiveness that leads to new understandings, and ongoing openness to the embodied, sensual aspects of our lives. Thus, art and aesthetic experience can enrich the range of our developmental potentials – which is significant at all stages of our life, but perhaps even more so in later life, when other life-serving domains of experience may have eroded or may no longer be available.

Reynolds (2003) makes a similar point in relation to those who became involved in textile artwork following the onset of chronic illness. She observed that “an artistic identity seemed to have become a major positive source of self-image. ... Despite changes in roles and loss of paid work, continuities of self and identity were maintained by expressing skills and interests” (p. 123) through art. Her participants also described experiencing a sense of growth that occurred through the realization of “long-standing personal aspirations” (p. 124). Berger (2006) introduced her study of “aging” identities of unemployed 45 to 65 year olds as they looked for employment by suggesting that “as individuals age and are faced with declining physical abilities, those who are able to negotiate their lives to tolerate these changes (and avoid being preoccupied with them) will be able to maintain a positive identity (Breytspraak, 1984)” (p. 304). Such positive identities can stimulate interest, anticipation, and an array of ongoing commitments and goals that reciprocally cultivates and reinforces a positive orientation to art as a way of life.

What possibilities might be suggested for developmental theory? I would propose there is a need to consider life span models that “view experience as socially constructed,” articulated and known within specific social contexts, yet “as prologue to successive developments” (Hendricks, 1999, p. 102). Such a schema should also recognize art as a means of engaging “directly in the play of life, (such that) new life, liveliness, some ‘movement’ might be possible” (Jardine, 1992, pp. 122-123), and allow for the many varied experiences of aging “centred on how people *themselves* interpret and discern what it’s like to grow older” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, p. 3). Work contributed by Ryff and Singer (2003) on the “life course unfolding of well-being,” likewise supports the need to explore “more complex processes by which we come to know and accept ourselves, find meaning in life struggles, realize our talents, love and care for those dear to us, manage complex lives, and be true to our own inner convictions” (p. 282). Any of the dynamic, relational conceptions of human development outlined in Chapter 1 would also offer a generative starting point for grounding future inquiry in the area of arts and aging. Other harmonious formulations are those that have emphasized “doing, being, and becoming” as important aspects of health and wellness in the field of occupational science (see Hammell, 2004; Wilcock, 1998), and the notion of “positive health promotion” (see Raeburn, 1992; Raeburn & Rootman, 1998).

*“Positive Aging,” Health and Art Making in Later Life*

In positioning this inquiry within a positive aging framework, I have rejected an understanding of aging framed primarily in relation to deterioration and decline. In doing so I am not trying to advance a simplistic notion of “positive aging” as the only experience of aging, or contribute to pressures toward “keeping busy” or “urged embrace of activity for activity’s sake” (see Ekerdt, 1986; Hepworth, 1999; Holstein & Minkler, 2003; Katz, 2000, 2005). Rather I have hoped to outline various possibilities for growth in later life. Critics of “positive aging” discourse decry the commodification of the aging body as a site for self-improvement, including development of new aspirations. They point to the economic and political interests such discourse supports. For example, Katz (1999) suggests that overly positive frameworks for understanding aging may constrain “the freedom of older individuals by imposing unrealistic expectations on them ... ignoring the material realities of aging that (can) include poverty, loneliness, and poor health” (p. 2). Likewise Moody’s

(1988a) vision of a critical gerontology supports “a positive ideal of human development: that is, aging as movement toward freedom” (p. 33). In this inquiry, it was interesting that “freedom” featured as an aspect of the participants’ experience of art in later life. Some of the participants emphasized their desire to feel free to be involved in art just as they wished, as they assessed this in an ongoing way over time. Given this, I want to add that I have not intended to suggest in this inquiry that all older people *should* take up art making. Older people vary in terms of their needs and interests, and what they desire of old age.

I offer additional reflections on this idea in a later section (see “Growing into a Good Old Age”), but first want to consider connections between art, aging and health. Health Canada (1998) has recognized that health “is a capacity or resource rather than a state” which is associated with the idea of being able “to pursue one’s goals, to acquire skills and education, and to grow” (p. 7). However, research on health and aging has focused on physical activity which is often described as a primary means of fostering health and wellness in later life. I want to suggest that while arts-based engagement may be a *less active* means of promoting health and well-being, it might be considered *more expansive*. Engagement in the arts involves cognitive stimulation, social connections (through involvement in classes, and community organizations), and physical activity (going out to arts classes, art stores, galleries, etc.) – all of which have been associated with health and well-being. Cognitive forms of leisure involvement have been found to be protective against dementia (Verghese, Lipton, Katz, Hall, Derby, Kuslansky, Ambrose, Sliwinski, & Buschke, 2003), those engaged in social activities tend to live longer than others not so involved (Glass, Mendes de Leon, Marottoli, & Berkman, 1999), and physical activity has been associated with reduced risk of disease and illness (Bassegy, 2005).

The stories and experiences that the participants shared suggest that art making was not only health promoting, rather it was *life promoting*. The participants described a sense of joy and excitement as they enjoyed new possibilities in their lives that they were passionate about. Other benefits included having something to do, the visceral enjoyment of the process, and enjoyment of the durable, material products they created, that were also very often appreciated by others.

## Going Forward from Here

### *Future Inquiry*

There is a need to explore “what people are doing to make the later years ‘satisfying,’ ‘productive,’ ‘positive,’ ‘creative,’ ‘graceful,’ and ‘successful,’” to understand the “unique developmental work of later life” (Fisher, 1992, p. 201). Additional knowledge is needed about those factors or conditions that lead people to begin new activities in later life, and the meanings they associate with their involvement in these activities. The ease with which I recruited older artists to participate in this inquiry suggests that there are many who come to art in later life. This study only touched on selected aspects of their experience and the meanings they may associate with engaging in art in later life. Future inquiry might also consider the arts-based experiences of other groups, such as the experience of frail seniors, those living in rural settings or connected with refugee or immigrant communities, or First Nations elders. Likewise, those participating in arts-based programming offered by various care facilities, including those experiencing cognitive impairment, such as Alzheimer’s disease, will have experiences to share that are different from those described here. In addition, while I focused primarily on those who became involved in the visual arts, as suggested by Gail’s story other art forms also offer distinct spheres of aesthetic possibility in later life. Recalling Lynda’s story, Stebbins (1982) suggested that early exploratory research on serious leisure might most effectively examine seriousness “as a dichotomous quality, with casual or unserious leisure as its opposite.” At the same time he imagined that “a more sophisticated, research-informed construct will likely eventually abandon this primitive categorical terminology for terminology conveying continuousness” (p. 255). Future research might also explore more nuanced continuities and distinctions between different levels and forms of arts-based engagement.

The participants’ stories draw attention not only to the significance of lifelong learning, but also the role of interested and supportive art instructors – which suggests the need to consider the *nature* of arts-based learning experiences. Professional artists, art educators, recreational therapists and activity workers, as well as a wide range of health professionals, all work in this area. They might want to consider the extent to which their programs and courses recognize and reflect the vitalizing and life-enhancing aspects of the arts, and ways in which they can support the artistic development of older people as they

continue to grow and lead creative lives. Those with arts training might aim to enhance visual perception, encourage students or program participants to take risks, to consider approaching different media in exploratory and experimental ways, “to produce more than a conventional response to new stimuli” (Lynch, 1996, p. 133). Inadequate training, limited resources, and lack of appreciation of the aesthetic potentials of arts-based involvement may offer a less enriching experience of art than might otherwise be obtained (see Edelson, 1995). Jensen (2002) refers to Dewey in relation to this: “Dewey criticizes art that is shoddily made, dishonestly offered, or designed to pander, because he presumes that it offers a degraded experience with less potential for imaginative growth. .... (it is) a missed opportunity – a possibility deflected or denied” (p. 188). Given this, what kind of instruction is preferred by those living independently in the community who attend art courses and workshops in different settings? What kind of instruction is preferred by those living in, or participating in programming offered by different kinds of assisted living or continuing care facilities? What kind of supports are required? How often are the abilities and experience of frail older adults underestimated? How can art instructors’ foster creativity, including opportunities to experiment? There is a need for research that considers these dimensions of art programs and instruction in relation to the participants’ experience of them.

From a material culture perspective, it would be interesting to explore the meanings associated with one’s artwork, along with the feelings evoked, and identifications and actions supported through a relationship with one’s art (see Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Tilley, Keane, Kuechler-Fogden, Rowlands, & Spyer, 2006). The special relationship between the participants and the images they created recalls Freeman’s (1998) suggestion that the narrative fabric of the self relies on our ability to orient ourselves to “devotional objects.” In exploring the experience of coming to art in later life, the participants’ stories also suggest that it would be helpful to explore this not just as an individual pursuit but also to explore how others perceive or value the artistic contributions of older artists, such as their art instructors, family and friends. The benefits of being involved in art making in later life are also experienced within the larger community. As Alexander (1987) has observed, “the work of art is a social event, and it lives a life within a culture” (p. xx). As such, it would be interesting to explore the contributions of older people’s involvement in art in relation to social and cultural capital. It would be helpful to

create models regarding the economic value of older people's involvement in the arts, including the economic benefits of incorporating arts programs in different care facilities.

In relation to this last suggestion, I offer some cautionary comments. Outcomes and cost-effectiveness research tends to be cast within a biomedical model of health functioning. Ryff and Singer (1998) include the following among such indicators: mortality, morbidity, disease, illness, pain, mental problems, etc. Other instrumental benefits of the arts that have been proposed include increased self-esteem, health benefits, improved educational outcomes among children and youth, etc. All of these are important. However, an overemphasis on instrumental benefits has served to mask awareness of the intrinsic/experiential (absorption, pleasure, expanded development of meaning), and social benefits of the arts (see McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2005). Likewise, Jensen (2002) has argued against conceptualizing the arts as functioning like a hypodermic needle that directly injects instrumental benefits into bodies, without concern for experiential aspects of arts engagement. She asks what might be gained if we “valued artistic experience, but did *not* imagine art as an ‘intervention’?” (p. 171). Eisner (2002), among others, has suggested that “a tendency toward technical rationalism ... is problematic as a primary justification for the arts, (as) the arts have distinctive contributions to make” (p. xiii). What I would argue for is a body of research that considers *both* subjective, qualitative experience and instrumental benefits that might be associated with the arts. Evidence based on outcomes studies would be helpful in advocating for policies supportive of arts education, access to arts funding, exhibit space, and other kinds of arts programming for older people. However, I would suggest that this research should also consider those expressive and developmental dimensions that are associated with the flourishing of individuals, communities, and societies.

It would also be helpful to consider a variety of theoretical perspectives in relation to the benefits of engaging in the arts – not to weigh the balance of possible versions of the “truth,” but to articulate new ways of appreciating or thinking about the benefits of arts engagement. A variety of social science perspectives, for example, might consider experience of art in relation to various historical, economic, and cultural policy contexts, as well as its social dimensions. Different approaches to conceptualizing involvement in art in later life can also be considered – as leisure, serious leisure, lifelong learning, a second (or

third) career, a life-enhancing occupation, as an amateur creative arts involvement, an avocation, as an identity. The implications of these various emphases and why these distinctions might matter should also be considered. This activity would serve to expand the range of “discursive reflections that may be brought to bear on human development over the life course,” (Katz, 1996, p. 4; also see Gergen, 1994a, 1994b), and in particular, in relation to the arts in later life. Such attempts should resist the idea that we might be able to “decode” the meaning or significance of art in later life. Rather, by remaining open to exploring the ambiguity and possibilities of experience we may gain a greater appreciation of the continuously emerging diversity of worlds that we may contribute to creating, for ourselves and others. In doing so, we may help to effect a reevaluation of artistic involvement in later life that inspires both an expanded horizon of concern within gerontological discourse, and within the meaning-determining contexts of the larger culture.

An emphasis on problems associated with aging has obscured the positive potentials of aging, and ways in which older people enjoy later life. Likewise research that considers only a limited range of spheres and ends to which one’s energy may be directed in later life (e.g., spirituality, volunteerism, wisdom) has resulted in a narrow, if not stereotypical, portrayal of aging (see Woodward, 2003). McGuire (2000) states that “the easy work in leisure and aging focused on ... activity change and continuity, but now is the time for deeper thought” (p. 99). Noting that the aspirations and enthusiasms of older people have been inadequately studied, Savishinsky (2001) has asked “what role does passion play in people’s sense of self and their positive adaptations to later life?” (p. 44). There is great potential for future inquiry in this area. The suggestions that I have outlined above are meant to illustrate, not exhaust, the range of possibilities that exist for inquiry in the area of arts and aging. We need to claim a space for inquiry in the area of the arts and aging. There is limited research and documentation related to this area, particularly in Canada. We need a body of literature that promotes awareness and appreciation of the value of the arts in later life. I have outlined some starting points that might inform future inquiry in this area. However I believe that “leading structures” are also needed to secure a place for the arts and aesthetic experience and “aging well” – *that is relevant to the Canadian context*

### *Developing Leading Structures*

Despite the fact that older adults become involved in art in later life, and the existence of arts programs in both seniors' centres and continuing care settings, people remain largely unaware of the vital role of the arts in the lives of older adults. Although recognized as being important for societal, community and personal enrichment, the arts tend to be relegated to the periphery of what we value in our culture. Compared to a concern for physical activity, the arts have not been recognized as a focus for research, program or policy development in Canada. Newman and Holzman (1997a) ask "how can we further develop from where we are to where we collectively choose to go. How do we get 'from here to there'?" (p. 156). In answering this question, it is useful to consider models in other countries where substantive recognition of the importance of the arts in later life has developed.

In the United States, for example, there has been awareness and support for the importance of the arts for "ordinary" Americans in both everyday life and health care settings for close to a half century. This movement appears to have been set in place, and its momentum sustained, through the interwoven effort of organizations and structures that do not seem to have an equivalent in Canada. A paper jointly prepared by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Society for the Arts in Healthcare (2003) identifies a Depression-era policy that employed artists to paint murals, and donations of private art collections to hospitals beginning in the 1950s as early modern roots of the arts in healthcare movement in the United States. Levine (1997) links arts programming associated with social service and health to President Johnson's "Great Society" program of the 1960s (also see Blanchard, 2006). A number of national organizations were established around this time to offer opportunities for ordinary American citizens to participate in and appreciate the arts, including the National Endowment for the Arts (and somewhat later its' Office for AccessAbility<sup>10</sup>), and Americans for the Arts. Set against this backdrop of support, there has also been a longstanding arts and aging advocacy movement in the United States.

In 1972, an investigation of the benefits of the arts experienced by older people was undertaken by the National Council on Aging, funded by the Administration on Aging of the

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<sup>10</sup>The Office for AccessAbility is aimed at making "the arts accessible for people with disabilities, older adults, veterans, and people living in institutions" by offering advocacy and support (see <http://www.nea.gov/resources/Accessibility/office.html>, retrieved on May 2, 2007).

US Department of Health and Human Services. This resulted in a published report (see Sunderland, 1973), and the subsequent founding of the National Centre on Arts and Aging. As a program of the National Council on Aging, this centre supported the creation of programs, resources, and services to ensure that older artists had an opportunity to continue working in their profession, and older adults had access to the arts (also see Sunderland, 1977, 1982; Sunderland, Traylor, & Smith, 1977, 1979). Funding support for this program shifted, and in 2001 this program was reincarnated as the National Centre on Creative Aging under the leadership of Susan Perlstein, a long-time leader in the arts and aging movement and founder of the New York-based “Elders Share the Arts” program. A number of other organizations and programs are known nationally for their work in this area, such as “Stagebridge,” “Center for Elders and Youth in the Arts,” and the “Liz Lerman Dance Exchange” (Liz Lerman was recognized with a MacArthur Foundation award for her creative work in 2002). In addition to these programs, arts councils at a variety of levels also sponsor and support arts programs for the elderly. As well, community arts programs often partner with senior centres and retirement homes. Innovative projects undertaken by these programs are often described at the annual meeting of the American Society for the Arts which organizes a regular stream on “Humanities, Arts, and Creativity.” This society also sponsors a summer intensive each year focused on “creative aging.”

Recalling that Dewey wrote the book *Art and Experience* in 1934 (following his “retirement”), I was fascinated to learn that he had been asked to write an introduction to Cowdry’s (1939) *Problems of Aging: Biological and medical aspects* (Polisar, Wygant, Cole, & Perdo, 1988). In his introduction to this text, Dewey outlined disciplinary, and cross-disciplinary research agendas, as well as an *interdisciplinary* research agenda which incorporated *humanistic* perspectives, for the field of aging. Dewey wrote “science and philosophy meet on common ground in their joint interest in discovering the processes of normal growth and in the institution of conditions which will favor and support ever continued growth” (p. v). In his preface to an annotated bibliography of aging and the humanities published by the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), Achenbaum noted that in the early decades of the society biomedical scientists joined as members. Somewhat later behavioral and social scientists joined the organization. Then, in the 1970s, increasing numbers of arts and humanities scholars became members of the GSA. In 1975 a

Humanities and Arts committee was established to integrate “these new perspectives into existing sections” (Polisar, Wygant, Cole, & Perdo, 1988, p. v). Each year, a special presidential symposium is organized that brings arts and humanities scholars together to address a major topic of interest. In 2006, the symposium was entitled, “Historical Gems of the Gerontological Imagination: Celebrating 30 years of the Humanities and the Arts in the GSA.” This committee, currently comprised of over 20 members, introduced the *Journal of Aging, Humanities and the Arts* in June, 2007. Finally, Gene Cohen, past president of the GSA, is the director of the Center on Aging, Health and Humanities at George Washington University. He led the multi-site study of professionally conducted arts programs for older adults, described earlier, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, among other organizations (Cohen, 2006; Cohen, Perlstein, Chapline, Kelly, Firth, & Simmens, 2006).

Through the support of such organizations and the work of committed advocates, substantial gains have been made in recognizing the field of arts and aging as a significant area of practice and research in the United States. In addition to the above, also consider the following events. In 1992, the US Senate struck a Special Committee on Aging to consider testimonials and witness reports on the health benefits of art and dance for older people (US Senate, Special Committee on Aging, 1993). In 1995, Jean Alexander, Chair of the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) addressed the “White House Conference on Aging” (WHCoA) on the arts and lifelong learning (Hanna, 2006). In 2005, a “mini-conference” on creativity and aging (sponsored by the NEA and the AARP, previously the American Association of Retired Persons) developed policy recommendations to be considered at the 2005 WHCoA. At this meeting, the resolution to “increase awareness of the positive physical and psychological impact that arts participation can have on older Americans” was among the 73 resolutions voted on. Although not included in the final set of 50 resolutions that are to be integrated into policy and law, this accomplishment will be used to continue efforts to obtain increased support for arts and aging (Blanchard, 2006). All of these activities have served to promote an appreciation of the arts in later life, and has fostered development of resources. For example, the US-based National Art Education Association through its Committee on Lifelong Learning, has recognized the significance of involvement in the arts throughout the life course, and has developed guidelines and publications in support of this area (see Jefferson, 1987; Fitzner & Rugh, 1998; LaPorte, 2004).

Although Martin-Matthews and Béland (2001) have observed that “policies, practices, training, and research on aging in Canada are strongly influenced by our powerful neighbour to the south, the United States” (p. vi), with respect to the area of arts and aging it is difficult to discern a parallel set of activities and supportive structures (as outlined in the previous paragraphs) in Canada. While the National Endowment for the Arts, among its many mandates, “seeks to make the arts more widely accessible to older adults by engaging them in professional and participatory art programs and increasing awareness among arts and aging professionals and practitioners on the link between the arts and wellness” (Thomas & Lyles, 2006), the Canada Council for the Arts (2006) “fosters the development of the arts in Canada through grants, services and awards to *professional* Canadian artists and arts organizations” (italics added). Likewise, the Canadian Conference for the Arts, an independent cultural organization, advocates for professional artists and cultural institutions. No substantive linkage exists between these organizations and those involved at the intersections of the arts and health, or arts and aging. It follows, then, that while there is interest in Canadians *attending* at arts events (as noted in reports described earlier), their active engagement in the arts appears to be largely located outside of this sphere of interest. An exception in this regard, the Canadian Association for Education through Art (2006) explicitly recognizes “art education as a fundamental part of the human growth and development” and suggests that various community, educational, and cultural organizations “have a responsibility to promote art education as part of a lifelong process of education ... (and that, in addition to children) no adult should be denied access to art resources and services, or to instruction where it is feasible or available.” Although it has not yet done so, an opportunity exists for this organization to create a strategic plan and develop resources to support lifelong learning in the arts in Canada.

Still, while informal searching and networking suggests that there is significant activity in this area, there have been few opportunities to meet, network, and learn from one another in Canada. There is little to no infrastructure in place to harness and utilize the experience and passion of those working in this area in Canada. John McLeish’s effort to gain recognition of the creative possibilities of aging in the 1970s through the early 1990s (see McLeish, 1976, 1981, 1983, 1992) continues on in the form of two community-based chapters of the Ulyssean Society he founded (with one in Toronto, and another operating in

Niagara-on-the-Lake). Although arts programming has been offered for many years to aging veterans in long term care facilities run by the Department of Veteran's Affairs, only one conference, "Creating a Self-Portrait" organized in 1989, brought staff representatives of art programs operating at 14 veteran's health centre sites together to discuss their programs (M. Magid, personal communication, September 28, 1999). Since that time, funding has shifted from a centralized source to regional funding allocations, and networking and information sharing between the programs has been hampered. Likewise, although different therapeutic arts practitioners (art, music, dance, etc.), and educational, occupational, recreational, and other health professionals present their work in this area at their respective annual meetings, there are few opportunities for those working in this area to discuss "best practices" and innovative approaches across their professions.

In Canada, policy documents on aging have not directly considered the benefits of the arts and culture in the lives of older adults. A core principle identified in the National Framework on Aging (Division of Aging & Seniors, 1999) emphasized participation as a way in which Canada can promote the well-being and contributions of older people. The National Advisory Council on Aging (1999) published a report the same year which also identified activity-related initiatives as important for seniors' well-being. More recently, Tony Ianno, past Minister of State for Families and Caregivers with Social Development Canada, was tasked to create a "national seniors agenda." Most of the recommendations in this report focused on income and housing. Other recommendations addressed the need to support enhanced levels seniors' participation in Canadian society (Ianno, 2004). On the basis of these reports, one might assume support of arts and culture involvement in later life. However, in terms of specific areas discussed, no mention is made of the arts. Rather, emphasis is placed on physical activity and volunteering.

Still, some positive developments can be noted. Between 1994 and 2005 a strategic research and analysis directorate within the Department of Canadian Heritage focused on the social effects of culture, including recognition of amateur creative arts (Stanley, 2004, 2006). In 2001, a successful 5-day conference track on arts and aging was organized as part of the International Association on Gerontology's World Congress in Vancouver, British Columbia. Another development has been the emergence of provincial and local arts and health networks, including the BC Artists in Healthcare Society, and the Manitoba Artists in

Healthcare Society. In 2005 the Canadian Forum on Arts and Health brought over 100 invited representatives of these organizations, along with other participants, to consider research and experience in the area of arts and health. This was the first meeting of its kind in Canada. The Canadian Cultural Observatory within the Department of Canadian Heritage, which exists to observe and share information relevant to the cultural sector, is currently introducing a focus on arts and health. The Alberta Foundation for the Arts has completed a provincial directory of arts and health activities listing programs, activities and practitioners working in the area.

There is, nevertheless, a continuing need to foster recognition of *arts and aging* as a valued social category in Canada. Key informant interviews I conducted prior to the Canadian Forum on Arts and Health suggested that many working in the area of arts and aging feel isolated. Those I spoke with, government representatives, program managers, and gerontologists, identified few resources and limited funding in this area. It was noted that educational and professional development opportunities were limited in Canada, compared to what was offered in the US and UK (see Cooley, 2005). A challenge faced by those interested in arts and aging is the lack of networks and infrastructure to share and develop knowledge. There is hope that this might yet happen. The Canadian Association on Gerontology's (CAG) "Division of Educational Gerontology" was created as recently as 1996. Relative to concern for educating future gerontologists, interest in lifelong learning and the education of older adults has not yet emerged as an emphasis within the division (see Macpherson, 1997; Martin-Matthews & Béland, 2001). Although a formal "arts and humanities" interest group (or other organizational presence) does not yet exist within CAG, the creation of the Institute on Aging in 2000 as part of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research introduced increased funding support for a broadened range of aging research priorities including concern for healthy and successful aging, and leisure in later life (Institute on Aging, 2006).

Other organizations that might take on a catalytic role in developing this area include the Division of Aging (Public Health Agency of Canada) and the National Advisory Council on Aging. National, provincial, and local organizations and networks also appear to have some overlapping interests with a nascent arts and aging movement in Canada, including: governmental offices, agencies, and advisory councils concerned with the health and well-

being of seniors; the New Horizons for Seniors program; the Active Living Coalition for Older Adults; local and provincial gerontology associations, arts and culture organizations; other associations representing various health professions, and therapeutic arts modalities; seniors' centres, retirement organizations, and care facilities and their associations; "Catalist," the Canadian Network for Third Age Learning; the Canadian Association for Education through Art; the Canadian Association on Leisure Studies; the Canada Council for the Arts, and Canadian Conference of the Arts; the Canadian Museum Association; philanthropic foundations, and on and on. Recently, in 2006 the Society for the Arts in Dementia Care was created to provide "an interdisciplinary forum for creative expression in dementia care, bringing together academic research and practical knowledge through collaboration between the medical profession and the creative arts" (para 2). This society sponsors international conferences as well as training workshops related to use of the arts in dementia care in British Columbia. University-based researchers can also contribute to exploring the impact of arts-based involvement in the lives of older people (an example of this was described by Phinney, Perry, Solorzano, Weaving, Gram, and Small, 2007, in their presentation describing the Vancouver-based "Arts, Health and Seniors Project").

There is a need to map the landscape of arts and aging in Canada, to explore the range and diversity of arts-related experiences in later life. What is also needed is a back and forth process of dialogue to foster the growth of knowledge, and inspire consideration of new possibilities involving the arts in enhancing quality of life. What is needed is a strategic focus directed to: 1) promoting recognition of this area; 2) establishing a presence within, as well as linkages and networking opportunities between, different organizations; 3) developing a common ground of knowledge that academics, practitioners, participants, and policymakers can access; and 4) identifying best practices and encouraging research in this area. What would be helpful is the creation of a centre or organization directed to developing a virtual "community of practice" that would document ongoing praxis and needs in this area, and explore benefits of involvement with the arts – broadly conceived, and from multiple perspectives – but most importantly, *within a Canadian context*.

Specific initiatives that could be introduced to support recognition and development of the arts and aging in Canada include:

- 1) *Create a national “arts and aging” organization* to raise public, professional, and academic awareness of this area in Canada, and develop a foundation for ongoing growth and development through a number of key activities:
  - gathering of stakeholders to promote information sharing, resource and knowledge development, and identify needs as a basis for going forward with resource and knowledge development, and capacity building;
  - development of a web portal as a clearinghouse of information, to include:
    - a comprehensive inventory of Canadian “arts and aging” programs and initiatives.
    - a database of media stories on older adults who have continued on, or became involved in the arts in later life, to provide inspiration to others; develop a resource outlining ways in becoming involved in the arts in later life (e.g., credit and non-credit courses, independent study, participation in learning communities), and approaches to exhibiting and marketing their work.
    - a database of published work on the arts and aging, including empirical research, and arts and humanities-based literature on arts and aging, with an emphasis placed on locating all available Canadian content.
    - listing of organizations directly related to, or connected to the area of arts and aging.
    - creation of an e-listserve to support discussions among individuals working in this area, including academics and researchers, integrated artists (as art instructors, mentors), program practitioners, older people involved in the area (as teachers/ mentors, and learners).
    - on-line “journal club” to provide a structured opportunity to discuss varied aspects of arts and aging, including recent research and scholarly work in the field.
    - e-newsletter to share information about programs and initiatives across Canada, as well as recent publications, upcoming events, resources, and other newsworthy events.
  - institute a cross-Canada speaker series that would support discussions between researchers, older artists, artists and art educators, recreational therapists and others working in the arts with older people; to be organized around different arts modalities (such as drama, creative writing, dance, visual arts, etc.), and the different settings in which engagement in the arts takes place (community, assisted retirement living, continuing care, hospital-based, etc.);
  - develop strong links with relevant local, regional, provincial, and national organizations;
  - advocate for support for, and recognition of the significance of *participatory* engagement in the arts for “ordinary Canadians” of all ages, across all sectors of society;
  - develop a critical mass of scholars and researchers in this area; create opportunities for cross-institution and interdisciplinary collaboration; undertake research and scholarly inquiry focused on arts and aging.
- 2) *Develop a presence for the arts, humanities and aging within scholarly, governmental, professional practice, and advocacy communities*, for example: Canadian Association on Gerontology (CAG)

- introduce an interest group on the arts, humanities and aging as part of CAG's organizational structure; publish a CAG-endorsed policy statement;
- feature a distinguished speaker, and/ or organize a special panel on the arts and humanities at the annual scientific meeting of the CAG.
- introduce a dedicated conference session on the arts and aging, as part of the CAG's annual meeting to highlight emerging research, as well as developments occurring in different cities and regions of Canada.

Other professional associations

- encourage presentations on arts and aging at other professional associations, relevant to their mandates and interests.

Canadian Journal on Aging (CJA)

- encourage publication of presentations relevant to arts and aging in the CJA, and other relevant Canadian journals.

National Advisory Council on Aging (NACA)

- publish papers on arts and aging.
- 3) Include content on creativity, and the significance of arts and aging across the life course in aging courses, health studies, and curriculum directed to the health professions.
  - 4) In addition, retirement planning resources, workshops, and courses might cover the vitalizing aspects of leisure, the importance of new learning, and opportunities following one's dreams and passionate interests, including the deeply satisfying rewards associated with "coming to art" in later life.
  - 5) Much of the art of older Canadians remains overlooked and uncelebrated. Exhibit spaces and opportunities should be created to recognize the artwork of older artists; a listing of online websites profiling the activities and accomplishments of older artists would also help promote awareness of their inspirational contributions. In addition, to avoid ageism in funding support, arts funding should be made available to support not only young, emerging artists but also those who are older.

All of these leading structures, along with those that others might suggest, would help to "embody and give potency to cultural meaning systems" (Jackson, 1996, p. 26) that will inform how we view the possibilities of a "creative aging."

### Growing into "A Good Old Age"

When I began this inquiry I had a hazy intuition about the significance of art in the lives of older people. I believed that art and aging was an important, albeit undertheorized and for the most part, marginalized area of experience and practice. On the basis of chance and circumstance, I solidified my research interest into one focused on older people who developed a serious commitment to art making during their retirement. While there is much more that can be explored in relation to the experience of those who become involved in art in later life, at this point I would like to relax the parameters of what I hope will be an ongoing conversation. For a moment (and perhaps longer) let us not think about the arts in a

narrow way that may constrain how we might understand and enact the potential of the arts in our lives. I would like to suggest a flexible and congenial openness to all manner of possibilities of aging through the arts and aesthetic experience, including considering how we live our lives as an art form. What might contribute to growing into a “good old age,” with life and aging considered as an aesthetic project? This is both an open, and I feel, inviting question.

Ken and Mary Gergen (2001b) suggest that “the arts should not be circumscribed in terms of place and time,” but rather should be considered as “a mode of being, that circulates within and inspires the everyday life world with creative reconstructions of possibility.” Dewey (1934) likewise argued for recovering “the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living” (p. 10). He defined art in relation to that which “develops and accentuates what is characteristically valuable in things of everyday enjoyment” (p. 11), and described aesthetic experience as arising in response to nature and material objects that one simply finds pleasing. Alexander (1987) offers the following regarding Dewey’s reflections on this idea: “When the self-conscious attitude of the artist toward his material has been extended to all experience, to the whole range of human life, then life itself is capable of becoming art” (p. 185). Shotter (2000a) describes the emergence of developmental meaning as occurring through our “living, bodily responsiveness to events in our surroundings” (p. 113). In *Art and Answerability*, Bakhtin (1990) suggests a connection between art and life when he describes a need to develop the meaning of our always partial, or limited experience of the world through aesthetic and relational engagement with others (and likewise, other media).

Earlier in this dissertation I described my grandparents as inspiring me to explore “the strong face of age.” Beyond enjoying the natural beauty of the countryside, and caring for their family and home, their well-tended gardens, orchards and fields – neither of my grandparents had artistic aspirations. They did not aspire to create a painting, nor attempted a poem. Still, my grandfather carried an artistry about him in the very corporeality of his body, in all he did as a farmer. I remember this one day I was reading Pearl S. Buck’s (1931) *The Good Earth* when I happened to glance out the kitchen window. I was stilled in awe as I watched my small-framed grandfather walk across the neatly cut green lawn at the back of the house, surrounded by orchards, near the garden that was framed by grapes hanging on

the vine, with potatoes growing underground - his prized white roses in the distance, wafting in the breeze. He was wearing black rubber boots, a straw hat, green work shirt and pants, tidy and clean. As I watched him, I noticed the tin pail he was carrying as it reflected the bright, mid-morning sun back to me.

After my grandfather died, my grandmother moved “into town” – a small village populated by just over 1,000 people. She lives in a large, century old home surrounded by rolling farm land. Much of her time is spent at home in prayerful meditation. In addition, she tends to her (now small) garden, watches television, talks on the phone with family and friends. She naps, reads the paper, walks to the post office, and sometimes does a bit of shopping at the supermarket down the street. She gets her hair done once a week. She regularly buys lottery tickets, and imagines how she could help all of us should she win a large prize. She sometimes cooks cabbage rolls and bakes pies when my mother visits her. When friends or family come by to visit she always likes to offer a little something to eat. Her meals are simple now, compared to the elaborate feasts she was once famous for. In addition to visiting, she enjoys going for drives and outings, but not as far or for as long as she once was able. She is almost always kind, generous, and caring. There are times she is sad and grieves the losses that have come with her long life. She sometimes feels lonely. My grandmother’s many years of hard work as a farmer have resulted in a number of health ailments. She has a chronic heart condition, painful arthritis, and fused vertebrae in her spine. She finds it difficult to hear. Over the years she has become frailer. She uses a walker to get about. She is ready to die, and indeed, looks forward to when the “good Lord might take her.” In the midst of all of this, she remains interested in knowing how we are doing, and what is going on in our lives. She radiates a love for people that touches them deeply. In the everyday “ordinariness” of her life, my grandmother has always been an artist of her own life, and truthfully, an artist of our lives as well.

Just as there are those who may be particularly interested in rendering artistic images, and others who given time and opportunity will enhance their perception of the world, and develop skills to render their artistic visions, not all of us are interested in becoming involved in art, or music, or other artistic forms. Also, as noted by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), “having achieved flow in one activity does not necessarily guarantee that it will be carried over to the rest of life” (p. 214). Given this, there may be a

benefit to considering our lives as *our own great work of art*, and appreciate all of our day to day experience as an aesthetic project. We can challenge ourselves to create an aesthetically harmonious life that is focused on achieving a unified sense of flow. We can cultivate aesthetic practices, insight and awareness that can support our growth, our interests and passions, and other ways we may experience our lives as fulfilling, as we go on living our lives together – *growing older*.

### Reflections on “Ending” an Ongoing Inquiry

Artists are generally understood as those who “break rules,” or challenge what is traditionally accepted in society, which can serve to expand our ways of thinking about and expressing our potential. So it is with older adults who have followed their passion for art making in later life. The artists who participated in this inquiry provide evidence that retirement is not an ending. Rather, their stories suggest that later life offers an opportunity for significant learning, growth, and accomplishment in relation to both long held, and newly discovered interest in art.

As suggested earlier, in this now long treatise, gerontology has remained largely isolated from much of the theorizing about human development that has emerged in the past number of decades. Likewise, there has been little consideration of the developmental potentials of art in later life. By associating health and well-being with physical activity (exercise), or even overall active engagement in life, rather than also being concerned about involvement in those interests that they may be most passionately interested in is to limit how we think about older people. By doing so we project a message that may in turn influence older people to underestimate and undervalue their own passions.

I might note, as well, that while positive experience is recognized as providing the best foundation for development, there remains a preponderance of interest in negative experiences and developmental outcomes. Perhaps this relates to something Tolstoy was alluding to when he wrote “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Tolstoy, 2005/ 1912, p. 1). Applying this idea to development and narratives, it might be proposed that compromised development might be assumed to be more variously and complexly experienced compared to more positive states of “being” and thus, more interesting. However, as noted earlier at various points in this dissertation, failing to attend

to positive experiences of aging in fact risks a simplistic, if not negative and misleading, portrayal of the possibilities of later life.

Moody (1993) refers to a “cultural lag” to explain why “positive images of aging remain marginal or nostalgic rather than serving as politically potent symbols for transforming society” (p. xviii). In this inquiry I considered understandings that have accumulated in a number of areas, as well as the stories the participants related about their experience, and other discourses and structures, to suggest directions for research and organizational development to redress this lag. It is significant that a positive aging perspective was used to frame this inquiry, and that a variety of scholarly perspectives were considered in developing insights into the benefits of becoming involved in art in later life. As Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) has observed “the most creative thinking occurs at the meeting places of disciplines ... at the edges where the lines are blurred, it is easier to imagine that the world might be different” (p. 73).

I embarked on this inquiry from the vantage point of “the world of still-youngness” (Sheehy, 1995, p. xvi), hoping to contribute to an awareness of the possibilities of aging by considering the experience of older people who came to art in later life. I looked forward to gaining hope that I might someday realize a long-held desire of becoming “an artist.” And I have. I am less anxious about the narrowing range of years. I have learned to appreciate the preciousness of time, and the need to attend to that which needs tending to at this time of my life. I recall more often that I can take in the aesthetic qualities of any moment, to enjoy the qualitative immediacy and richness of life. I find myself even more interested in people, and the worlds they create for themselves and others. I am keenly aware of the possibilities that arise limitlessly, within the everyday of our lives. Given that what we attend to, and invest energy in, necessarily shapes the trajectories we may follow as we create ourselves and the world, I hope this inquiry may contribute to an appreciative awareness of some of the ways in which we may continue to grow and develop in later life, ... *through art*. I hope that it will also serve to remind us of the aesthetic potential that inheres in any moment of life.

Still, what is the value of bringing this overlooked sphere into view? What would need to take place to consider the creative expression and artistic efforts of older adults seriously, both within gerontology and the larger culture? What might the impact be? I have touched on some of these questions, but also consider them to be open-ended. There are a

diversity of experiences and stories related to aging and the arts which we may consider, celebrate, and critique. The story that I have shared about my long journey through this inquiry is necessarily partial and incomplete. Nevertheless, I hope that this work might help to rewrite the text of what may be possible to experience in later life in more hopeful, positive, and artful ways. I also hope that ongoing exploration and conversation regarding the possibilities of art and aging will contribute to the development of new understandings, better practices, more aesthetically engaged lives, and an enlivened world that we may all contribute to and enjoy as we age together through the years. I hope that it may also inspire the activity of creating new structures and opportunities that might support us in going forward “from here to there” – to a period in time when the arts and aging is recognized as a significant area of interest and concern in Canada.

In writing these words, I am recalling that as we live, we also “recreate reality ... (and) reinvent culture” which Bruner (1986) argues, is “where a theory of development must begin” (p. 149).

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **THE FINE ART OF RETIREMENT**

I have written this dissertation with an awareness of the “always in process, ongoing” nature of stories. Although a narrative such as this research text provides a means of developing and stabilizing a particular understanding, such clarity can also suppress “the inherent ambiguity of human existence as an intrinsic element of its own practice” (Alexander, 1987, p. 275). Recognizing that this dissertation exists as an open-ended “story,” I asked the participants if I could reproduce one of their paintings in the final chapter of my dissertation. The participants’ stories and artwork invited me into a space of an enhanced awareness of the world, and appreciation of the possibilities of later life ... and so may they invite you.

A Dewey scholar, Alexander (1987) suggests that it is possible for a *community* of people to be dedicated to experiencing life as art. He notes that Dewey sought to offer a sense of positive possibility for *reconstruction*, or a “meaningful response to the world” through arts as experience (see pp. xx-xxi). How we all continue on beyond this inquiry will suggest the ways in which we might continue to explore the creative possibilities of human life, and engage the question of the significance of coming to art in later life.

So ...

As I draw this text to a close I invite you, the reader, to consider the artworks of the participants. These works offer a view of the lives and experience of older people that circulates within our communities. I believe they attest to the expressive and creative vitality of those who have come to art in later life.

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The Art of Aging:  
An Exhibit

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*In celebration of the creative visions of artists*

*who came to art in later life*

Malcolm McPhee

Lillian Carleton

Bernard Wood

Mary Topping

Helen Richards

Joyce Bjerke

Terry Dean

Gail Lane

Lynda Barnhard

Madeline and William Litwin

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**Num Ti Jah**  
*(Triptych of Bow Lake)*  
30" x 84"  
Acrylic on Canvas  
*Malcolm McPhee, 1999*



**Trees On A Hillside**  
18" x 24"  
Oil on Canvas  
*Lillian Carleton, 2002*



**Joyce**  
26" x 20"  
Watercolour on Paper  
*Bernard Wood, 2003*



**The Dust Storm #2**  
5" x 7"  
Mixed Media (Acrylics,  
Wood, Sand, Glue)  
*Mary Topping, 2004*



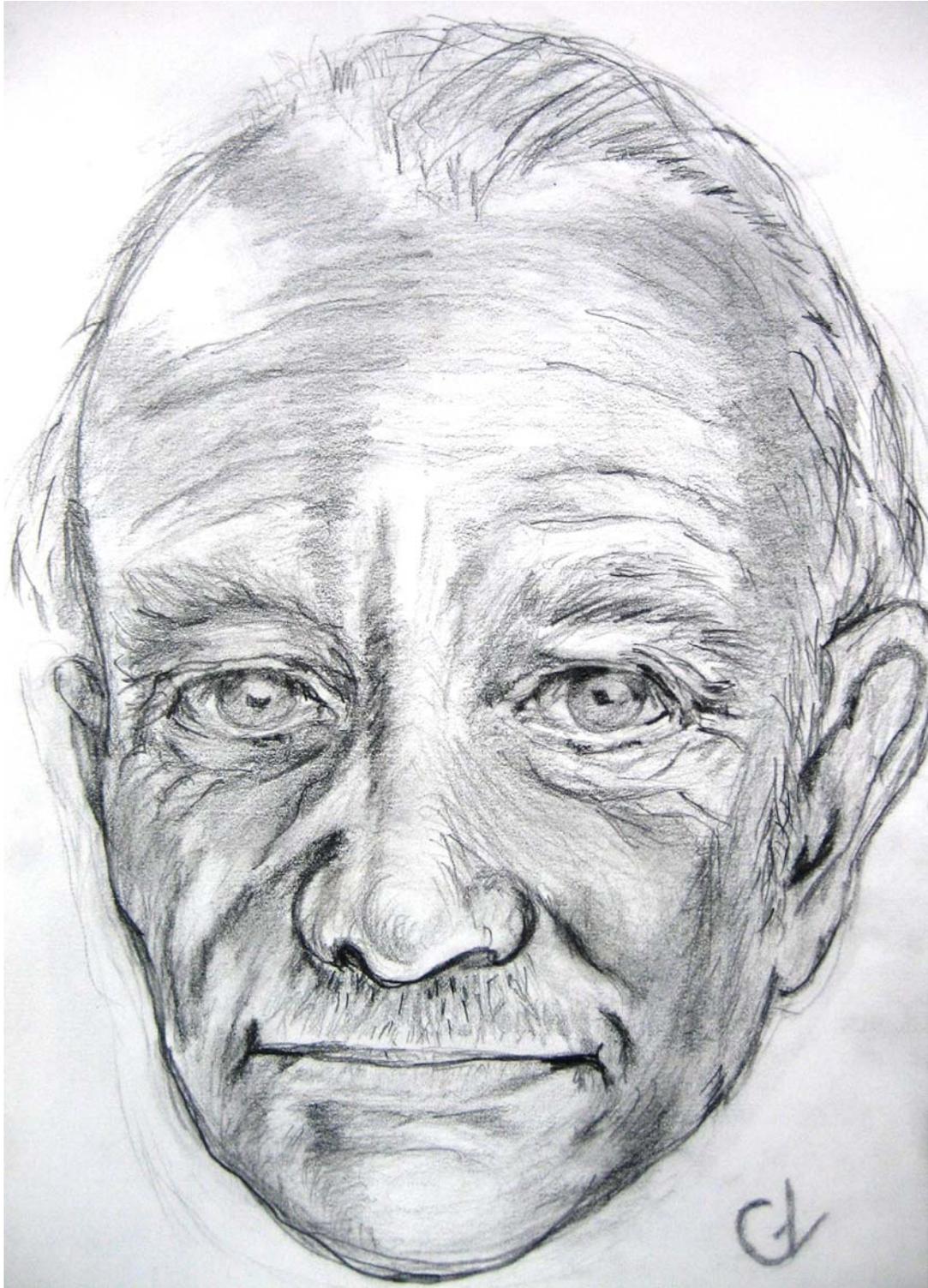
**Fishing Hut on the  
Baltic Sea**  
12" x 16"  
Oil on Canvas  
*Helen Richards, 2005*



**Attentive Cows**  
20" x 16"  
Watercolour on Paper  
*Joyce Bjerke, 2000*



**Phoenix Rising**  
20" x 16"  
Acrylics on Canvas  
*Terry Dean, 2005*



**Untitled**  
12" x 9"  
Pencil on Paper  
*Gail Lane, 2001*



**Still Life**  
8" x 10"  
Oil on Canvas  
*Lynda Barnhard, 2006*



**Elunun (Hope)**  
7" x 3"  
Soapstone Carving  
*Madeline Litwin, 2002*



**Amah (Friend)**  
7" x 3"  
Soapstone Carving  
*John Litwin, 2002*

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## APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INFORMATION



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



### *Letter of Information (Initial Contact)*

#### ***RE: Art and Aging - Experiencing later life in/ through art and narrative***

Dear *Potential Research Participant*:

I am currently beginning my dissertation for my Interdisciplinary Studies doctoral program at the University of British Columbia, and am interested in talking with older adults (55 years of age and older) who have developed a serious interest in art making, following periods when they may have been involved in other careers, or commitments. You were suggested as someone who might potentially be interested in participating in my study by \_\_\_\_\_, when I described my study to her/ him. Upon hearing about my research project, s/ he thought that you might be interested in participating, and I was glad to learn that this may indeed be the case.

I have had a longstanding interest in the significance of art and aesthetic experience in later periods of life. What I am currently interested in exploring in this particular study is how special periods of our lives, like later life, can offer an opportunity to engage in art making and other aesthetic experiences that we may not have previously been interested in, or had delayed pursuing. I am interested in how you have experienced this, including 1) the meanings or sense you have made of your art making experience, as well as 2) the impact or influence of art making on other aspects of your life (for example, your relationships with others, experience of growth and development, and health and well-being).

I would like to formally invite you to join me in a focused inquiry into the significance of art and aesthetic experience in later life. Your involvement in this study may entail 3 to 4 conversational interviews over a 2-3 month period, with each interview lasting 1 to 2 hours. However, this time frame would be flexible. The amount of time that I would spend with you would ultimately depend on your needs, interests, obligations, etc. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to theory related to the art and aesthetics of later life. It is also hoped that the findings of the inquiry will help others to become more responsive to, and appreciative of, the art making of older, nonprofessional artists.

You may contact me via telephone or email with any questions you may have, and/ or to express your interest in becoming involved in this study. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

All the best,

Pamela Brett-MacLean, PhD (C)  
Individual Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program  
The University of British Columbia

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

 THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA 
<b><i>Consent Form</i></b>
<i>Title of Project</i> <b>Art and Aging - Experiencing later life in/ through art and narrative</b>
<i>Investigator Conducting the Research, and Primary Contact Person</i> <b>Pamela Brett-MacLean, PhD (C)</b> (Doctoral Candidate) Interdisciplinary Studies/ Institute of Health Promotion Research
<i>Principal Investigator/Supervisor</i> <b>Dr. Rita Irwin</b> , Professor, & Head, Dept. of Curriculum Studies
<i>This consent form describes the purpose of the current research inquiry, and outlines what your participation will involve. Please take the time to read the following carefully. If you would like additional information or clarification about any aspect of the study, please feel free to ask</i>
<b>#1/ Purpose of the Research:</b> The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of art and aging through the oral and visual narratives of non-professional older artists who have undertaken a serious art making practice in later life. I am interested in exploring the meanings older adults' construct in relation to their art making experiences, as developed and expressed through stories that inspire, or are inspired, by their artwork. I am particularly interested in exploring the ways art making may: enhance an aesthetic experiencing of the world, contribute to growth and development in later life, bear on your personal relationships, and influence your health and well-being.  You were suggested as someone who might potentially be interested in participating in this research project by _____. I (Pamela Brett-MacLean) approached _____, and asked her/ him if they knew of anyone 55 years or older who had established a serious commitment to art making in later life, and who might be interested in sharing their experience with me, within the context of a focused research study on this topic.  This research inquiry is being undertaken in partial fulfillment of requirements for Pamela Brett-MacLean's Doctoral Program (Ph.D.) in Interdisciplinary Studies at The University of British Columbia. The development of this project has been supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Fellowship.
<b>#2/ Study Procedures:</b> The study is being conducted as a "narrative" inquiry, and will focus on the stories that participants share with me regarding their art making experiences. Your involvement would entail 3 to 4 conversational interviews over a 2 month period, with each interview lasting 1 to 2 hours. The amount of time that I spend with you is flexible and negotiable, depending on your needs, interests, obligations, etc.  The initial interview will provide an opportunity for us to discuss details of the inquiry (background, etc.) and address any questions or concerns you may have about the study. It will also provide an opportunity for you to begin to share stories of how you came to take up a serious art making

practice in later life, and the different ways you consider art making to be important in your life. During subsequent interviews you will be invited to share new ideas, thoughts and feelings you may have experienced after the initial interview. This interview will also allow you to clarify and elaborate on stories you shared in the first interview, and allow us to explore the influence of your art making on other aspects of your life (relationships, health and well-being, etc.). If you were willing, I would also be interested in seeing some of your artwork and learning about the creative process you followed in creating these works. During the final interview I will share some of my preliminary interpretations of the narratives and stories you have shared with me, and invite you to comment on how well I have understood your stories. Our discussion may lead to new interpretations and understandings of your experience of art making in later life.

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews will be made available to you. You will be able to review your transcripts, and request removal of any excerpts that you feel uncomfortable in sharing, even if this material is not personally identifiable. I would also be interested in any artifacts that you might like to share with me (e.g., portfolios of your artwork, newspaper clippings of any exhibits you may have participated in, etc.) that you believe would be helpful to me in this project. Finally, with your consent, I will audiotape our conversation. With your permission I may also be interested in taking photographs of some of your artwork.

I will follow your lead in determining when and where you would like to schedule in an interview. It is important that the interview setting is one that you feel comfortable with, and is convenient for you (whether we meet at your home, a coffee shop, gallery space, etc.). You will also determine how long you would like to spend with me during each interview, and how much you would like to share.

**#3/ Risks and Benefits:**

There is minimal risk that you will experience harm as a result of participating in this study. Potentially, you may experience some fatigue due to length of interviews. I will ask you about your fatigue and should you report feeling tired, we will conclude the interview early. I will also invite you to share any other concerns you may have during the course of the study, and will work to resolve them.

With regard to potential benefits, this study will contribute to theory related to the art and aesthetics of later life. It is also hoped that the findings of the inquiry will help others to become more responsive to and appreciative of the art making of older, nonprofessional artists, and contribute to the development of arts programming for older adults in community and other settings.

**#4/ Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate in any or all parts of this study, or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy or consequence.

**#5/ Confidentiality:**

All effort will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of project materials. Project records, including audiotapes, photographs and other artifacts will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet. Computer files will be stored on a password-protected hard drive. All documents will be identified only by code number. Only myself (Pamela Brett-MacLean) and a transcriptionist (to be hired) will have access to the audiotaped interviews (segments of which may include identifying information, prior to editing and removal). Both will agree to abide by the Tri-Council Policy for Ethical Conduct for Research involving Human Subjects.

You may choose to remain anonymous, or you may choose to be identified in reports based on this research. If you choose to remain anonymous identifying information will be removed from all project materials. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the study findings. A pseudonym will be used and timeframes will be blurred to ensure that you will not be identifiable in any document based on the findings of this study. If you wish, you may choose a pseudonym for use in the final report and data files.

Alternatively, you may wish to be identified in this research in relation to your personal information and artwork.

You may advise me of your decision at the end of our series of interviews. Rest assured that no information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your signed consent to disclosure.

**#6/ For Further Information:**

Please feel free to ask me (Pamela Brett-MacLean) any questions you may have about the study, during our scheduled interviews or at any other time. I currently reside in Edmonton; my home phone number is 780-454-6999. You may also contact Dr. Rita Irwin (my research supervisor at The University of British Columbia) if you have any questions or want more information about the study. Her number is 604-822-5337. Please feel free to call either of us collect, at any time.

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Services at The University of British Columbia, at 604-822-8598.

**#7/ Consent:**

I am satisfied that I fully understand the information that has been provided to me regarding my participation in this study.

I understand that my participation in this study is *completely voluntary* and that I may refuse to participate in any or all parts of this study, or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy or consequence.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

CONSENT

I consent to participate in this study (*please sign below*):

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

SUPPLEMENTARY CONSENT (following completion of interviews)

Having completed my involvement in this study I am in favour of, and consent to, having my name disclosed in relation to written reports and presentations based on the findings of this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**\*\* Please note:**

Your consent to participate in this study does not waive any of your legal rights to privacy, or other relevant concerns.

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/ GUIDE

### Background (brief overview)

- Can you tell me about your earlier life? Can you describe what your life was like before retirement? When did you retire?
- How did you view retirement, as you approached it?

### **Stories of coming to art in later life**

- Can you tell me how you came to take up a serious art making practice in later life? Why you wanted to become involved in art making?
- Were you involved in art an early age?
- What precipitated your interest in taking up art in later life?
- Did you take courses or instruction in art?
- What motivates you? Where do your ideas for your work generally come from?
- Are there some things that you have created that have been particularly special, or meaningful to you?
- Do you have a routine you follow, goals you hope to achieve?
- What are you working on at the moment?
- Do you share your work with friends, family, others? How?
- Would you call yourself as an artist? Do you feel that others view you as an artist?
- Would you describe yourself as being passionate about your work, in the way you were about your earlier career?
- How has art making contributed to your life? How is it significant?
- How does art making make you feel?
- Has the significance or meaning of art in your life changed over time?
- Has being involved in art influenced the way you experience the world?
- Do you spend more time in nature, because of your art? What is that like?
- Has art making affected your relationships with others? How?
- Has art helped you through other difficult or challenging times in your life?
- How has art making affected your experience of health and well-being?
- Has art making helped you through illness, difficulties, or other challenges?
- Do you feel art making has helped you to grow or change as a person? How?
- Have you ever experienced difficulties, challenges or negative experiences in relation to your art making?
- Has being older presented any particular challenges?
- Do you anticipate slowing down in terms of your art making at some point? Can you conceive a time when you might not paint?
- Have there been things that you have experienced that have surprised you?
- What are some things that you would like people to take away from learning about or hearing your story?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know?