

Drawing Together

*How collaborative art-making can
create a place of belonging*

Leah Sands



***Drawing Together: How collaborative art-making
can create a place of belonging***

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Preface

Welcome to my two-year exploration of the practice of drawing together, which investigates how collaborative drawing can help build community within my art mentorship program. Within this research, I explored how drawing can be a means to foster vulnerability, conversation, agency and creativity. It involved investigating ways of drawing, exploring the ethical considerations and developing an overall framework for collaborative art-making. The culmination of my research is presented in the form of five sketchbooks – a format which symbolizes the dynamic nature of drawing together: a process which encourages change, defies perfectionism, cherishes experimentation and is never finished.

These sketchbooks have been written with a lot of care and effort. As the reader, I hope you can see these books as insights into my practice which could possibly help you in your own. They are a collection of my thoughts and practices – with this in mind, read them as journals, field notes, musings and experimentations. Bell hooks gave me the courage to write this in my own way – in a democratic way – so that anyone can access this research. As she says in *Teaching to Transgress*, “any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public.” Therefore my greatest aim is to inspire, educate and invite you to walk alongside me in a journey that has taken my whole life and has culminated to this point – a point in time where the experiences and ponderings come together in the form of a master’s thesis. A “point” however does not signify a conclusive end, but merely a marker in time.

Within the five sketchbooks outlined below, drawing is explored as the method, the mentorship role establishes the framework and the personal ethics are the posture within the research:

The Orienting Sketchbook

An introduction to me, Redefine Arts and the research

The Grounding Sketchbook

An exploration into Community Art and after-school art programs and how Redefine Arts blends these two

The Sowing Sketchbook

An overview of an ethical posture I use while drawing together

The Nurturing Sketchbook

The research into drawing together as well as reflections and next steps

The Harvesting Sketchbook

An instruction on drawing exercises which can be practiced with others

The sketchbooks utilize an underpinning metaphor – the process of a garden: orienting ourselves to the land, grounding ourselves in the chosen soil, sowing essential values, nurturing the garden to provide growth, and ultimately reaping a harvest which provides seeds for future cycles. This metaphor is a cyclical one which spirals upwards, returning to the same but transformed grounds. Like a cycle, which does not adhere to linearity, you have the freedom to engage with these sketchbooks in any order and over a longer period of time. However, the sketchbook you are currently reading offers crucial context for the others—it serves as a point of departure.

Within these pages you'll also find drawing prompts: if you feel inclined to partake in the invitation to draw, please do so. Your drawings don't have to be perfect, representational or even directly responding to the prompt. Drawing can be a means of reflection that quiets the mind, offering itself as an invitation to take a deep breath between the reading, perhaps even prompting you to close the sketchbook and reopen it later.

Note: in the digital version of these sketchbooks, the highlighted sketchbooks are links between books to make non-linear navigation easier. To return to this page to access all books, simply select "Drawing Together" in the header of every book. Selecting the sketchbook title in the header returns you the beginning of that sketchbook.



The Orienting Sketchbook

Providing context for understanding

Prologue

My aim in this sketchbook is to provide you with the necessary context to fully engage with the remaining four books. Within the gardening metaphor explained in the preface, this particular book serves as a means to find your location and familiarize yourself with the context in which the garden is situated: what is the climate? What are the indigenous plants that have already seeded and grown in the surroundings? Understanding the context is essential to understand the process and growth that has taken place over these past two years. In order to provide this, I will be introducing myself, my motivations and my project called Redefine Arts, along with its contextual background. Additionally, I will provide an overview of the research I've undertaken and outline my approach to practicing this research which revolves around drawing together.

This is the space in which my exploration of drawing together finds its roots.

Orienting to the Practitioner

First and foremost, let me introduce myself: my name is Leah, I am an illustrator and designer, and I'm an American who has become a Dutch citizen after years of living in the Netherlands. My life and practice is currently based out of Amsterdam, but I have called many places home: Minneapolis, London and Perth, Australia. Art was a constant companion growing up; my sister and I would often be found drawing together on a Saturday morning. As my sister took on a studio practice as we grew older, I personally could not find comfort in working alone in a studio – I wanted to create with others. It is after my Bachelor's and a job as a graphic designer that I spent time in Australia and China with the question of: how do I create with others in a way that brings about transformational ways of being together? That journey started in 2015 and brought me to Amsterdam in 2016 where I started Redefine Arts: an art mentorship program for children in Amsterdam-Zuidoost which will be explained more expansively later on.

Self-portrait





Students practicing portraits while I keep time

The drive to create with others in a way that fosters community, culminating in the establishment of Redefine Arts, is an integral part of my personal history and convictions. I had never wanted to become an art teacher in a primary school system because I could not see the end to number- or letter-based grades placed upon subjective works of the soul. While the systems are slowly changing, they are not changing quick enough for this generation at school. As I would distance myself from the traditional education system, I would equally not identify as a political artist who tends to create short-term projects in order to raise awareness to a larger issue. My motivation has less emphasis in raising awareness of an issue and bolstering support to change the system through legislation. It is more about working alongside a community long-term where transformation takes place through a slow process of raising personal awareness of our own position and agency to make small, personal differences. It is a much quieter and benign place of existence, away from any spotlight or crowd.

Addressing community: a place of belonging

“The challenge these days is to be somewhere, to belong to some particular place, invest oneself in it, draw strength and courage from it, to dwell in a community”

bell hooks (Belonging: a Culture of Place 68)

This quiet yet radical transformation for me finds its depths in nurturing community. I use the word “nurture” here because I believe community is not something that can be forced into existence with either sheer will-power or immaculate planning. I find community to be so fundamental in my project because, as an American citizen, I learned throughout my life that one cannot simply expect that the government’s institutions will take care of you. Rather, care and transformation is found in neighborhoods and community organizations where no one falls through the cracks due to their local nature. This way of caring for others has been melded into my being, and I seek community wherever I may find it. It is because community is so important to me that I also live in an artist living community with eight others in Amsterdam, where we create space for the neighborhood to come together. Combining art and community is a long-term practice where self, others and hope for a better future are intricately woven together.

The term “community” is a grand idea that often gets idealized, making it impossible to synthesize a single definition. For some, it may represent a marketing strategy, while for others, it may symbolize a closely-knit group of individuals. Therefore, I would like to take a moment to share my personal understanding of the concept of community to ensure that it is clear throughout the remainder of these sketchbooks.

What is community?

While the necessary components of community, such as a shared purpose, collaboration and support, are almost too obvious to mention, they do not quite capture the full depth and complexity of what community can mean. For me, community means creating a place of *belonging* where members form an interconnectedness with each other in a safe environment. This definition delves into the very nature of relation and interdependence and touches on the deeper, more ineffable aspects of what it means to be part of a community.

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According to Jean-Luc Nancy's definition, "community is not only intimate communication between its members, but also its organic communion with its own essence... it is made up principally of the sharing, diffusion or impregnation of an identity by a plurality wherein each member identifies himself only through the supplementary mediation of his identification with the living body of the community" (Bishop, Participation 60). Community is not about the juxtaposition of "you" and "me," but rather the representation of "you" and "me" (67). This highlights the codependency that exists within a community, emphasizing that the creation and existence of a community are dependent on the interdependence and interconnectedness of its members.

How does community come about?

Community cannot be created as a product or as an aim, but it is in proxy created as a result. With the aims of establishing trust, acting in love and working out of care, community begins to grow. It is almost as if trust is the ground, love is the light and care is the attention that allows the garden of community to grow – it is a long process, with quiet growth. Just as one cannot force a plant to grow taller, one cannot force the creation of a community nor the necessary components. It all depends on the conditions that are provided. While we all share the responsibility of creating an environment that nurtures the community, if members of the group are not willing to trust, care for, and love one another, the growth of the community will be stunted. The seeds that I find important to building community and a place of belonging are further elaborated on in the [Sowing Sketchbook](#).

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Drawing Prompt: make a visual representation of what “community” means to you.

Try making it with your non-dominant hand!



Outside the Redefine Arts studio

In beginning of Redefine Arts, the focus was far more on accessibility of art: students were given technical classes as well as open studio classes similar to what one might find in university. By using the format of an art class, the students were learning lots of techniques, and the project could handle about eight to twelve students. The role of the adult in this context was that of a teacher who helped students in their journey of creating art. While the opportunities to explore art, develop their own artistic practice and the subversion of societal systems were present, I slowly started to feel constrained by the traditional method of teaching and felt out of place as a “teacher” solely sharing my knowledge to students from the front of the room. This ultimately compelled me to evaluate and reformat how Redefine Arts operated. I wanted incorporate more mentorship and foster a sense of community within the program, where participants’ personal development took center stage alongside their artistic growth. The reformatting of Redefine Arts to become more focused on mentorship and community-building was the starting point of my research.

Context of Amsterdam-Zuidoost

Throughout its history beginning in the 1970's, Amsterdam-Zuidoost has been subject to neglect by the municipality of Amsterdam, resulting in a lack of support from the city center and leaving the collection of neighborhoods vulnerable to difficult living conditions. In recent years, there has been a notable shift, with Amsterdam-Zuidoost garnering increased attention, funding, and inclusion from the larger municipality, yet the recent past still affects the neighborhood. I share this not to exploit, sensationalize, or isolate this region of the city but rather to provide an essential socio-economic context and recognition of the lived experiences of my students.

In the area where Redefine Arts is situated, the “H” neighborhood, there are about 1258 children between the ages of four and seventeen (Gebiedsgericht Werken Dashboard), and they often grow up in families burdened by worries, tension, and stress, a reality distinct from that of their counterparts in other parts of Amsterdam. A 2022 report revealed that 19% of the population in Amsterdam-Zuidoost is categorized as “vulnerable,” surpassing the average of 12% for the city as a whole (Gebiedsanalyses 2022). The Bijlmer-Centrum area, which encompasses the H-neighborhood, scored the lowest among all areas in Amsterdam in terms of “neighborhood engagement,” and

while there have been some improvements in social cohesion within the H-neighborhood, local residents still rate it as “below average.” The lack of social cohesion could be in part due to the fact that there is no communal, public indoor space for activities to take place: the only neighborhood in Amsterdam-Zuidoost that lacks one. Paul Chin, the “gebiedsmakelaar”¹ of the H-neighborhood from the municipality, said the following about the neighborhood when he visited Redefine Arts: “There is currently no community center with activities for children in the H-buurt, but there is a great demand for activities in the area.”

Many organizations with roots in the local community have responded to the overall needs of the neighborhood these past years, and many projects have started to assist residents with legal help, meals for school-aged students, coaching, a neighborhood garden and even a Community Land Trust (CLT H-Buurt) has been established in the H-neighborhood. This is to say that the neighborhood isn't in need of a savior from the center of Amsterdam – there are enough initiatives and ideas coming from the neighborhood which carry embodied knowledge about the hardships and wisdom for creating a healthy neighborhood.²

¹ “Neighborhood coordinator” who acts as a professional liaison between the government and residents.

² For the dangers of trying to “fix” a group of people as an outsider, refer to the [Grounding Sketchbook](#).

Relevance and urgencies within the context

While there are several programs focused on the accessibility of art and some programs focused on personal growth in Amsterdam-Zuidoost, I haven't found those two things coincide within the same program. This creates a gap for a practice like Redefine Arts to exist. As mentioned earlier, it hasn't been until recently that the municipality of Amsterdam has been increasing their funding for local projects investing in culture, children and the health of the neighborhoods in Amsterdam-Zuidoost. Since Redefine Arts focuses on artistic and personal development of children in a historically disadvantaged neighborhood, it is relevant as well to the wider context of social art movements that aim to empower people and critically engage with society. This ties into my personal politics and urgencies to see the world as a more equitable place where everyone has the same opportunity to engage with art and grow in community despite their personal circumstances.

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An apartment complex in the H-neighborhood of Amsterdam-Zuidoost

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Drawing Prompt: sit outside in the neighborhood where you work or live. Make a quick sketch of your surroundings.

Orienting to the Research

With the necessary context established about myself, Redefine Arts and Amsterdam-Zuidoost, we will now delve into the heart of the research. The motivation behind pursuing my master's degree was to develop a language around my practice that could explain the essence of Redefine Arts. Redefine Arts has a hard time fitting into an all-encompassing category, whether that be “after-school art program” or “Community Art project.”³ While searching for its correct placement, I realized that I needed to investigate one fundamental aspect of Redefine Arts. While we engage with many mediums, one activity has been a constant throughout the project's existence: drawing together. The act of collaborative drawing seemed to conjure a magical atmosphere, where a sense of community blossomed without clear explanation. All the change, conversations, relationship-building and deconstruction of roles happened while we were drawing. It was this inexplicable phenomenon that guided me to my research question:

How does drawing together create a space of belonging?

3 Read the [Grounding Sketchbook](#) for a more detailed investigation.



In order to answer this question, I knew that I needed to explore three fundamental questions: the how, the where and the why.

- ∂ How do we draw together?
- ∂ Where do we draw together?
- ∂ Why would we draw together?

By investigating these three essential questions, I aimed to not only give words to the magic that unfolds as students' practices and relationships evolve within Redefine Arts but also to situate the project within a broader context. This required exploring the related artistic fields, ethics of working with others and concepts like community and collaboration. Recognizing the interconnectedness of these elements was vital in nourishing the research and providing a comprehensive understanding of the transformative potential inherent in drawing together.



Students exploring various mediums in the studio

Personal positioning as a “participating researcher”

“That’s what I’m interested in making – a safe place to grow and discover themselves artistically. That invisible threshold that kids cross over when they come into the studio. The threshold of potential. I like that word... potential. They all have so much potential.”

Journal Entry

In the context of Redefine Arts and my research, I carried the roles of both observer and active participant, which can be captured in the term “participating researcher.” This fluid research role acknowledges that maintaining complete detachment from the project is not possible, preventing me from claiming an entirely objective perspective in my research. Nonetheless, I try to maintain a critical and reflective approach to my work as a researcher.

Within my role as an observing researcher, I follow and analyze conversations between students or gauge the group’s response to specific actions I take. My participatory role can be broken down into four subroles: teacher, mentor, artist and facilitator. Just as I move between a researcher and participant in a fluid manner, I move through these roles likewise.

Each of these roles also has its place in *how we draw together* which can be read about in the [Nurturing Sketchbook](#).



Mentor

Taking on the role of a mentor, I provide nudges, inspiration and structure to help my students develop. I actively listen rather than give advice, unless it is explicitly asked for. Care and love within this role means that I read between the lines of the questions that students have, support and encourage them in their personal and artistic processes and show vulnerability so they know that they too can be vulnerable. In this role, students and I have a more personal relationship as fellow artists, and although it is still recognized that I have a bit more life experience, that doesn't deter students from offering their own advice or care to me and other students.

Teacher

In the role of a teacher, I offer instruction during workshops. I help generate ideas, drive curiosity, provide resources in the form of inspiration from other artists or materials and provide my expertise via technical skill tutorials when students request this or I feel that it is needed for developing further. Although I would still not like to call myself a "traditional" teacher in the sense of standing in front of the room feeding knowledge to passive students, in these moments, there is much more knowledge and expertise flowing through me to my students than in the other roles.

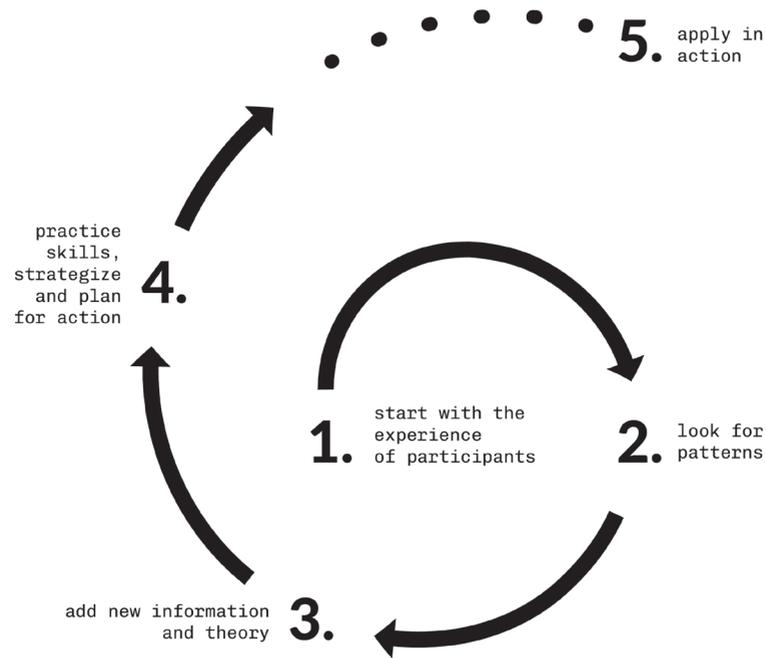
Artist

Having the role of an artist means that I take on much more of a collaborative role myself. This is perhaps the most "flat" role that I carry at Redefine Arts in regards to hierarchies. While also drawing and working on my own project, students and I carry an equal role in offering critique, giving advice or asking questions to help each other's art develop further. Since we all have various interests and possess varying levels of expertise, it allows for a diverse range of perspectives to be offered while looking at someone's artwork. My own work is often enriched in Redefine Arts which shows that I am affected by the group just as much as any of the students.

Facilitator

As a facilitator which organizes different collaborative exercises for students to work on together, this role is an energetic one that explains, guides and keeps time during different activities. There is a lot of observation that happens within this role since we function as a larger, collective group in the activities. Of course, being a facilitator doesn't mean that I abandon the other three roles if they are needed during a collaborative exercise. Sometimes a student needs reassurance, a fight needs to be mediated or I myself join the exercise to stimulate the students creativity.

The Spiral Model



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Methodology of observing change

It has always been my hope throughout my research that theory and practice would hold each other in balance – not to have theory lofty and ungrounded and not to have practice lacking a deeper critical source. This aspiration is reflected in the methods I combined to do research: participation, reading, interviewing, journaling and using Paulo Freire’s Spiral Model as an overarching methodological framework.

Within this model, the starting point of all research is the experience of my students at Redefine Arts. By closely observing our time in the studio, I began to identify patterns and themes that unfolded during our time together which could be important to investigate. These patterns served as a foundation for developing theories on how drawing together could build connection and community. To enrich and support these emerging theories, I engaged with the voices of others, through conducting informal interviews and reading literature related to what I had found within Redefine Arts.

This process allowed me to expand my understanding and refine the theories, often in the form of ethics, that were taking shape. Building on these insights, I utilized different drawing exercises to help provide practical application to the theory. This practical experimentation provided valuable insight and further deepened my understanding of the dynamics at play within our collaborative studio times. These experiences from the students and myself became new starting points for the research process to begin again. It is through this iterative process that theory and practice intertwined and evolved together, forming a dynamic and enriching cycle of inquiry.

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The Spiral Model allowed for a flexible structure, as Redefine Arts meets every Wednesday and Friday, without creating separate workshops for my research. Recognizing the importance of capturing and reflecting on the subtle changes occurring within the studio, I journaled routinely at the end of each week – either in the form of a self-made online survey or by writing journal entries on my phone. This habitual practice of documentation helped me to closely monitor the small changes, much like observing the gradual growth of a plant. One day it seems like there are leaves bursting forth when in fact, the plant has been developing these leaves the whole time – it is a practice of noticing the long-term process.

It is also important to mention that while I utilized these different methods to conduct research into Redefine Arts, the research was always secondary to the personal growth of the students. If the activities that I had planned got in the way of students' development, I needed to flexibly adjust my plan. My students were also fully aware that I was engaging in research and have read along as I have written these sketchbooks. This has to do with the ethics that I work out of which can be found in the [Sowing Sketchbook](#).



My illustration of the Spiral Model process using materials at Redefine Arts

Epilogue

Throughout this sketchbook, you have become acquainted with me, my motivations, Redefine Arts and the foundation for my research on the transformative power of drawing together. By gaining a deeper understanding of this context, you are better equipped to navigate the forthcoming four books, which delve into various aspects of my research. I encourage you to hold a position of curiosity and playfulness as you learn from, draw in and engage with the other sketchbooks.

As you close this book, you are invited to join me in drawing together by drawing together.



Drawing Prompt: draw out your thoughts as you finish this sketchbook. Make it multi-directional!

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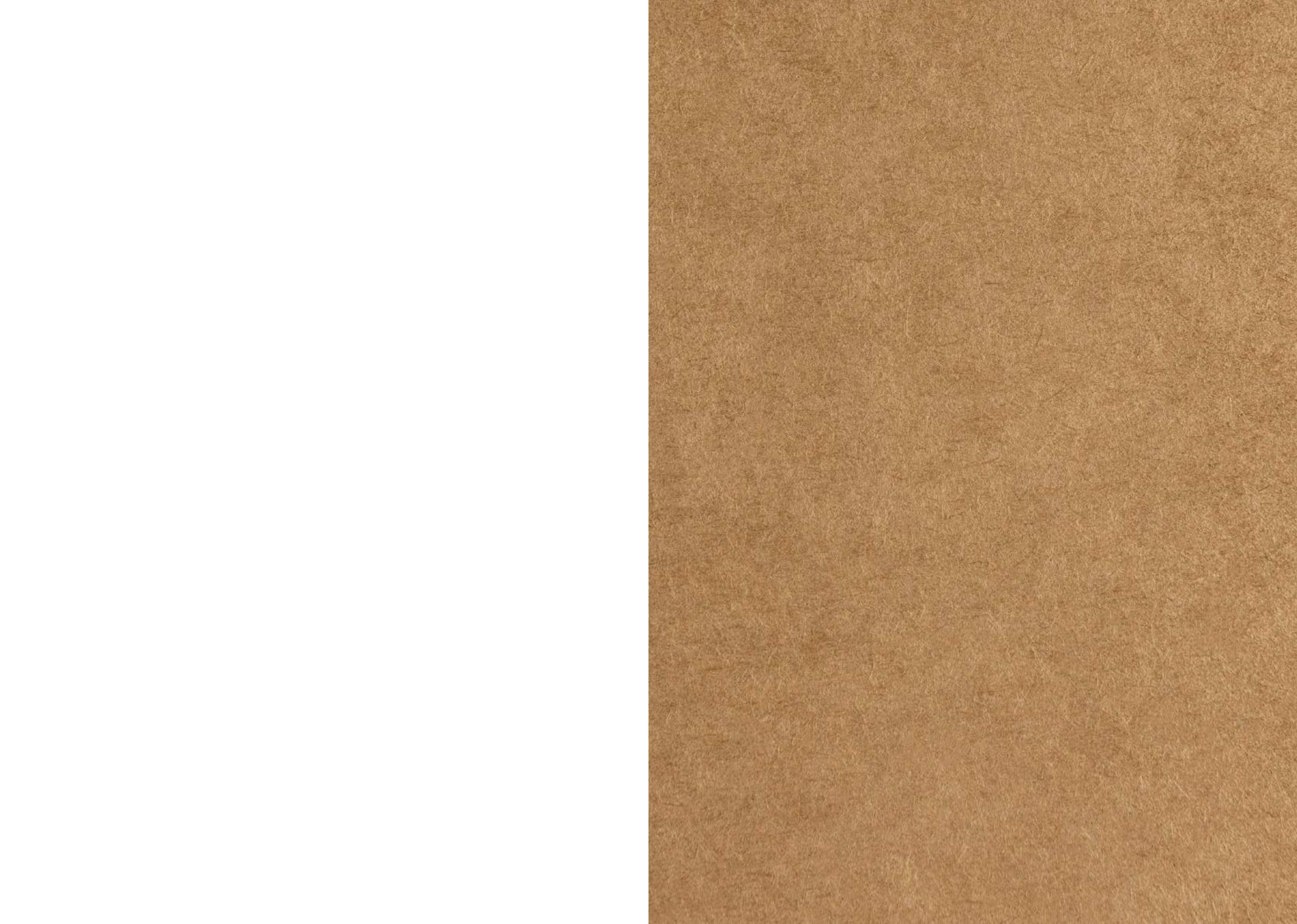
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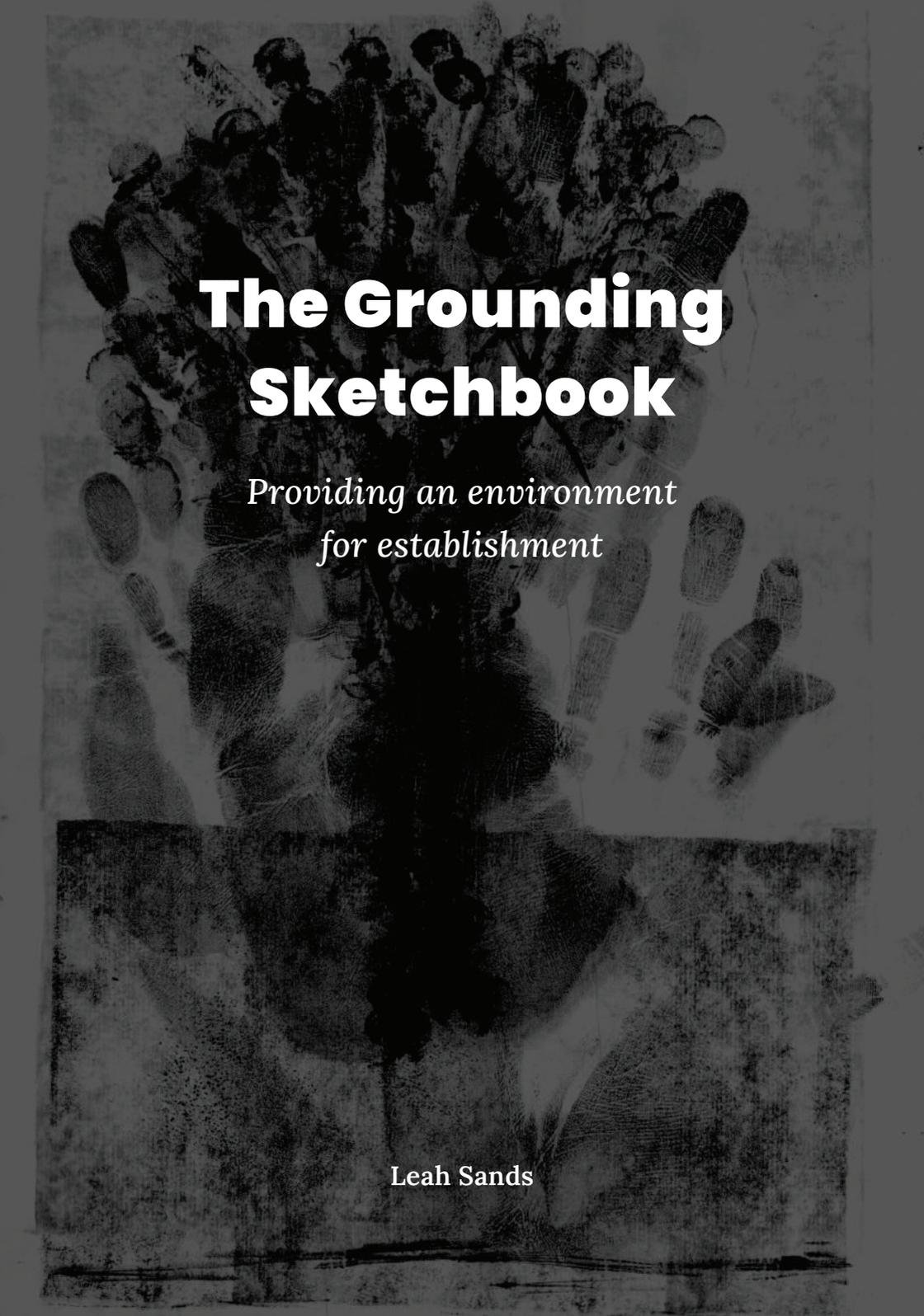
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The Grounding Sketchbook

*Providing an environment
for establishment*

Leah Sands



Prologue

Welcome to the **Grounding Sketchbook** where you will be introduced to the two artistic environments that feed my practice at and research into Redefine Arts. As with any garden, it is important to learn about the composition of the earth where I am in order to grow my practice. My practice finds its place between two different environments: Community (Engaged) Art and after-school art programs. I say “between” because Redefine Arts is both of these and neither: just as one mixes soils for different potted plants, so my practice is a blend of these two. Both spaces were investigated as a part of my research: Community Art through a literary review and after-school art programs through visits, informal interviews and providing workshops at three different locations.

I invite you to explore both environments and learn how I have mixed the two together to gain inspiration for your practice.

The Ground of Community Art

“How do we go about learning how to live, make art, and engage in social action and community building when the world around us is in free fall?”

Gregory Sholette (292)

Depending on the author, this environment often gets the names of: socially engaged art (Helguera), art as social action (Sholette), participatory art (Bishop) or Community Art (Gielen). It is an expansive terrain which can have any level of relationship between a local group and an artist, for any length of time and contain any traditional disciplines (for example: dance, theater, music, fine arts) or nontraditional disciplines (for example: cooking together, impromptu encounters, activist actions). There are many resources that delve into the history of this type of art form, *Artificial Hells* by Claire Bishop being a staple along with *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* by Pablo Helguera, so I will instead be focusing on important conversations within this art discipline and how they relate to my practice.

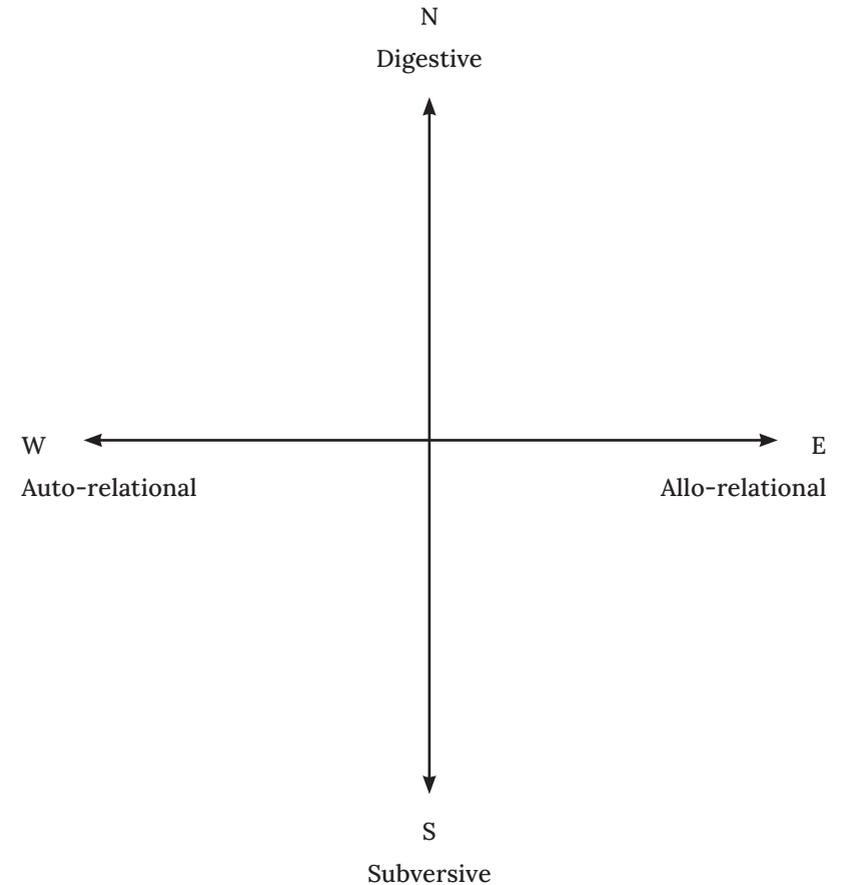
I will be referring to this discipline as “Community Art” as, for me, the entanglement between the artist and the group of people with which they work should attempt as much as possible to form community and understanding. In the next section, I will go further into the different practices where artists and participants relate to each other in various ways.

Drawing Prompt: place your own practice on the map with a cheeky symbol.

Defining the undefined

One thing is certain about “Community Art”: there are very few borders surrounding what it is. Already confusion is brought about by the numerous names it is given, yet the one thing that most scholars and historians agree on is that Community Art is a multi-disciplinary activity that hovers between art and non-art while some kind of social interaction stands at its core – it cannot be considered “community” or “socially engaged” without involving people outside of the artist (Helguera 8). As Gielen puts it, “The community is at least as crucial as the art” (20).

The level of community involvement and the use of traditional art forms in Community Art projects exist on a sliding scale, contributing to its ambiguity. Ulbricht identifies two extremes on this spectrum: programs that focus on teaching traditional art skills and knowledge, and projects aiming for social change (10). Gielen refers to these extremes as “digestive” and “subversive,” where the former accepts dominant values and systems while the latter challenges them (21). Additionally, Gielen introduces another axis between individually made art, “auto-relational,” and community-made art, “allo-relational.” These sliding spectrums allow for a wide range of project types within the realm of Community Art.



Helguera creates more nuance in the scale of participation by introducing three types: directed participation, creative participation, and collaborative participation (15). Directed participation involves participants contributing to an artist's pre-designed work. Bishop calls this form of participation "delegated performance" as the artist in a way hires the participants as actors in their play (Artificial Hells 219). Creative participation involves the participants providing content for a component of the work of the artist. Collaborative participation entails participants sharing responsibility in developing the project's structure and providing input in all aspects, from location to completion.

Community Art projects typically exist in the complex middle ground, rather than at extreme ends of the four axes. Many projects may address and question one value of dominant society while embracing another. Gielen also acknowledges that most Community Art projects reside in this ambiguous

space, which can change purpose and their location on this grid over time (22). As these projects are built on relationships and collaboration, they naturally adapt, contradict themselves and transform based on their participants and context. They are constantly in a vulnerable place of change in order to best serve their communities.

Redefine Arts has also changed over time because my own positioning and outworking of values as well as external factors like how the students respond to the program, which children come, how relationships develop and how the neighborhood has changed over the years. I have seen that it is the nature of working with other people that the journey will be messy, imperfect, full of learning moments and constantly changing.¹

The likelihood of change in community-based projects is closely tied to the theory and practice of *radical pedagogy*, which focuses on empowering individuals through education for social transformation (Sholette 281). Paulo Freire describes this as "empowering education [which] affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality ... The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity" (57). While some Community Artists may prefer a more individualistic approach with "directed" participation, the foundational principle of radical pedagogy remains crucial in any artist's practice when working in a community, recognizing the constant state of becoming for both individuals and the project itself.

¹ If you would like to read more about how I navigate the mess and change, see the [Sowing Sketchbook](#).



**Drawing Prompt: take a break and doodle
what comes to your mind when you read about
radical pedagogy.** Preferably with your eyes closed.



The conversations around Community Art

Community Art as “art” or the space between

The question of whether community-based art is considered “art” has been a longstanding debate among art critics who try to navigate the aesthetics and students who “often find themselves wondering whether it would be more useful to abandon art altogether and instead become professional community organizers, activists, politicians, ethnographers, or sociologists” (Helguera 4). Participatory art often gets convoluted with social work since it subscribes to the same values. However, it brings about subjects in nuanced and indirect ways utilizing the self-reflexivity and criticality of its participants that isn’t always present in social work (Helguera 25). Since art is about lived experience expressed in a medium by an artist, the answer to whether Community Art is “art” depends on *how* that experience can be expressed. John Dewey believed that the art can be found in the experience of the practice, and all art is social (Sholette 9). Of course not all people will agree that this can be classified as “art,” but whether or not Community Art wins the semantic wrestling match has little impact on the work that is being done inside of communities.

The danger of correctional help

The next conversation about Community Art is tied to the motivation of all stakeholders in the community project. Often governments and funding parties have different interests for engaging in Community Art than the community itself, asking an artist to step in to enact change. With the artist being the non-expert² and lacking the skills of a social worker, what impact can a community-based project actually make for the community and for the artist? I believe that Community Art can be beneficial exactly when it serves not only the community but the artist as well.

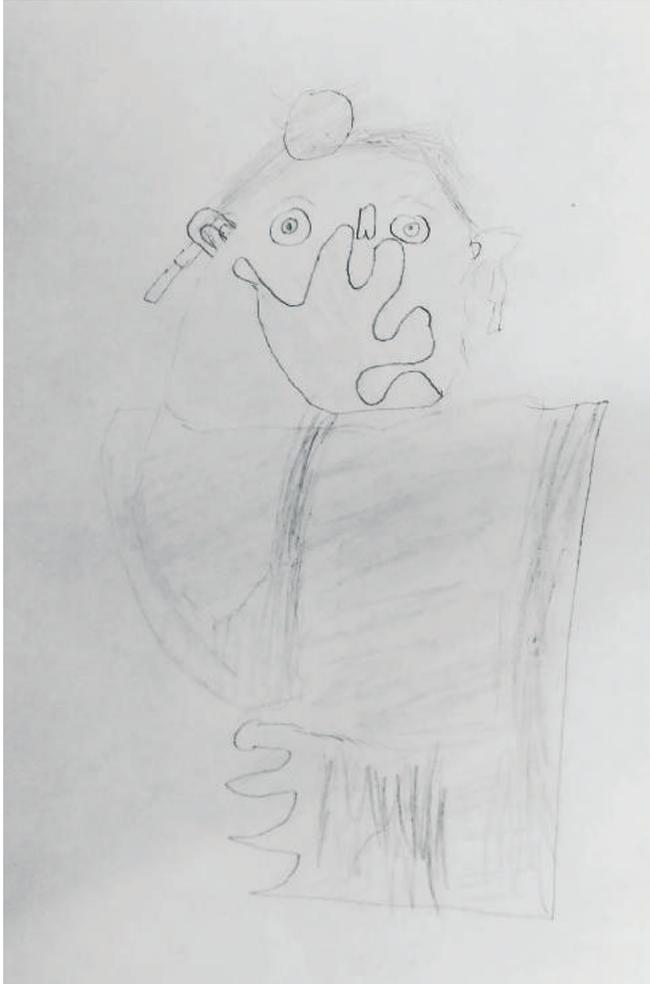
When Community Art only benefits the community where the artist is an unaffected, vigilante hero, it is only another form of hierarchical, correctional work. From this view of an unaffected artist, the message is clear: the community needs help, and they are incapable of helping themselves without a hero. Even though this analogy is exaggerated, it unfortunately is a common occurrence that an artist takes on this redemptive role. As Gielen states, “Yet, even artists who enter into disadvantaged neighborhoods with the best of intentions are often unaware of the fact that they are stepping into this ‘correctional’ logic” (31). He brings up this idea of “correctional” work because this is exactly how artists are often manipulated into believing they are doing “good work” that is funded by the government or other

agencies (prisons for example) to use art as a utility to conform communities and people to the larger hegemony of society.

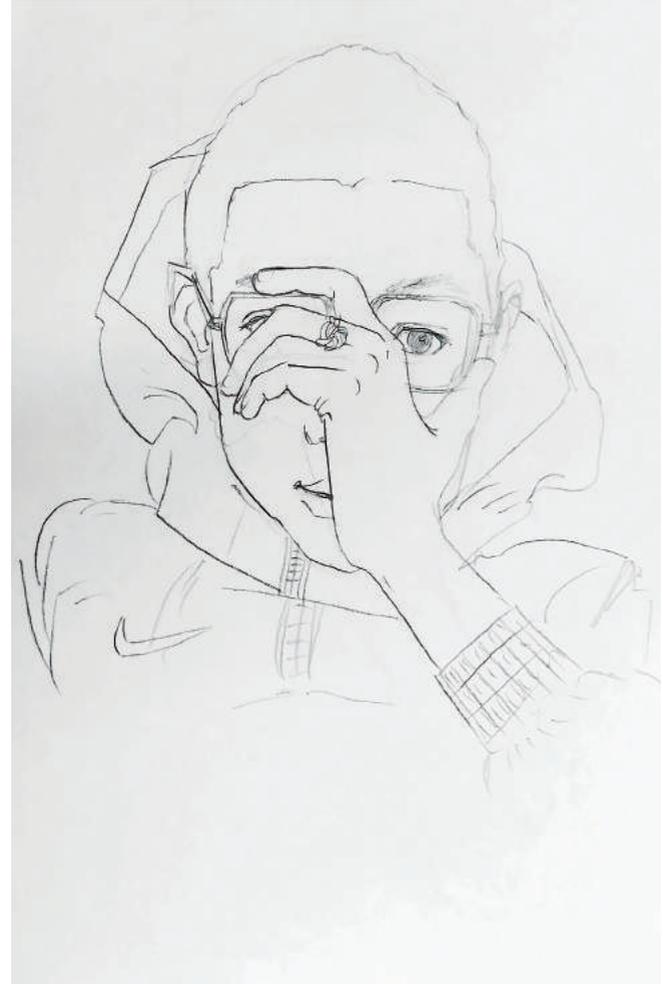
The Netherlands is guilty of this, having withdrawn crucial social services over ten years ago and is now funding artists to do a cheaper version of social work to “improve” local communities (Gielen 30). This is prevalent in the neighborhood in which I’m working in Amsterdam-Zuidoost where the municipality has stimulated creative projects to engage young people as an alternative to the growing gang violence (Rigter). It is of course not a problem that the municipality and government want youth to avoid violence and criminality so that they have better opportunities and can remain safe; it is however often the implemented tactics that are the problem: more surveillance, prevention through correctional behavior and assimilation to a greater society. People who are then sent to work in communities can often carry a “mission” to change the community to their perceived “better” way of living. This creates an emphasis on the lack, challenges and disadvantages of the community and can lead to further stigmatization and little connection to the community (Rios 43).

It is therefore important to see community-focused and participatory art not as a means of helping one group, but as a communal experience where the artist is also vulnerable to change and learning. The disappearance of hierarchy is an important aspect in order to see transformation in not only the community but of the artist as well.

² By “non-expert” I mean that artists walk into the community empty-handed: they do not have the skillsets of social workers or government workers. Instead, they must work alongside the community to welcome all expertises present, whether that be an historical knowledge of the neighborhood or a skill in community gardening for example.



A portrait of me drawn by a student



A portrait of a student drawn by me

A redefinition of “success”

When an artist and community are able to denounce the correctional, hierarchical method of working, the most success and impact is found. Defining “success” is a crucial step in Community Art in a world that often prioritizes quantity over quality. In my own work, I have been wooed into viewing success as the number of participants, which can bring external validation to the project. However, a large number of students at Redefine Arts can lead to chaotic situations where meaningful individual contact becomes impossible. Due to the lack of attention, students get bored with so much unplanned, empty space and look for negative attention by teasing each other, complaining and defusing their energy in destructive ways. On those days, I feel like a teacher trying to keep the peace rather than a mentor attempting to create safety.

Helguera emphasizes that success is intertwined with the duration of an artist’s engagement in a community and their deep understanding of the participants (20). This highlights the importance of investing time and nurturing relationships. In the case of Redefine Arts, after five years of working with the same children in the same neighborhood, I have seen that conversations have become deeper and more impactful than when I first started. Now, it is a common occurrence that we have deeper conversations about our lives and share things that perhaps in other places it feels there are risks involved with sharing.

This aspect of sharing together is also what Jeanne van Heeswijk finds to delineate success in her own practice: “If we manage to learn with each other and link our individual desires to collective desires, and we can shape and carry them together: I find that successful” (Muijnck).³ The relational aspect becomes the determining factor for success, far outweighing participant numbers, artistic outcomes or visible change in the community. At Redefine Arts, even if there is only one child coming in an afternoon, I find it successful if we together can make a step towards each other, through a thoughtful conversation or encouragement.

³ Translated from Dutch: “Als het ons lukt om met elkaar te leren en onze individuele verlangens te koppelen aan collectieve verlangens, en we die met elkaar kunnen vormgeven en dragen: dat vind ik succesvol.”

Subversiveness of Community Art

Community Art's greatest strength lies in the artist's ability to immerse themselves in the community as non-experts. By relinquishing authorship, power dynamics, and success factors of contemporary society's hegemony, Community Art projects operate on the fringes. They create their own rules of interaction and challenge the status quo, rather than aiming to please governments, powerful stakeholders or artists' egos. "The marginal space of resistance is a space of creativity that resists normative assumptions about the way things are. It is not just a space for the oppressed" (Rios 44) but a space for everyone where those who are categorized as "at-risk" or "disadvantaged" carry the creative power and ownership just as much as the artist who actively works in the margin in spite of their possible privilege.

By subverting "the way things are,"⁴ artists and communities can imagine a new way of existing, not bound to the societal rules or oppression of established structures. Stories that have been silenced and ways of being that have been ignored can take center stage in the community. "Then to embrace minority culture and value its communities will inherently challenge the dominant culture and attitudes that deem them deficient, thus achieving a transformative pedagogy" (Rios 46). Community Art inherently critiques the individualistic culture by implying that the important, transformative work happens with each other, in community. As Gielen states, "the notion of community art nowadays carries with it a remarkably subversive potency, which is hidden in the very word 'community'" (32). The very idea of interdependence pushes against the contemporary narrative and illusion of the "self-made man" or the solitary genius.



⁴ The theme of subversiveness is woven throughout these books and is given a practical outworking in the *Nurturing Sketchbook*.

**Drawing Prompt: sketch what it would look like if
Community Art were to take on a living form.**

Bonus points for including different life stages!

The Ground of After-School Art Programs

Besides delving into the different conversations and ideas surrounding Community Art, it was important to also investigate different after-school art programs for my research. Since Redefine Arts as a project began as an after-school art program, and looks like one on the surface, it was important for me to find the commonalities and the differences between this framework and Redefine Arts. In the past two years, I spent time at a number of after-school art programs. The three programs that I investigated were: Art-S-Cool, Noordje and Zuid. Boijmans Van Beuningen. I spoke to their founders or coordinators as well as gave an art lesson in the case of Noordje.



Art-S-Cool

Art-S-Cool is an art program in the neighborhood of Schilderswijk, Den Haag, which gives children an opportunity to be creative and develop their artistic practice while also intentionally building connections to the neighborhood (art-s-cool.nl). Laura van Eeden started this project ten years ago, and in the afternoon of March 15th, 2022, I had a conversation with her and toured the different studios where Art-S-Cool gives art lessons to students. While there is still an organized program for students to take part in, the themes tend to be wide enough for every student to develop their own expression: for example, having a lesson around the theme of identity. They also have a “TalentKlas” where students learn more specific techniques with the goal of developing skills for an art profession.

While speaking with Laura that afternoon, I shared about my difficulties with how long it has taken to establish Redefine Arts in Amsterdam-Zuidoost, and how it is difficult to garner committed students and community engagement. She nodded her head knowingly and said that they too share in this struggle. It was a relief to hear that a well-established program that sees over a thousand kids per year still has inconsistent days where one kid show up in an afternoon. Struggle is a part of the process, and as she said continuously during our time together: “Het is een werk van een lange adem.”⁵

Seeing how they make it a goal to connect the project to the neighborhood, allow student agency in their programming and that they share similar struggles of inconsistent participation all felt like ways that I connected to the project. Laura’s commitment was inspiring and showed that long-term work is not a linear process of growth. One aspect that highlighted how Redefine Arts is different from Art-S-Cool however is the absence of community-building amongst participants. Based on my time at Art-S-Cool, there was an emphasis on working with schools in the neighborhood and parents of kids but less emphasis on collaboration between students or the development of a community within the program. At Redefine Arts, the emphasis is on creating a place of belonging which extends beyond artistic expression. This difference in emphasis was also shared with Noordje and Zuid.



5 “It is a long-term process.”



Painting with soil outside of Redefine Arts

Noordje

Noordje gives after-school art workshops and with writing lessons in the neighborhood of Amsterdam-Noord. These workshops are structured with a planned theme or activity for students to participate in. They also do excursions to museums and invite guest artists to give lessons. As an after-school art program that aims to give students the opportunity to create art, I was curious to learn more about the nuances of their program and interviewed the founder and current director of the organization, Saskia Noordhuis. Although this gave me insight into how they run organizationally, the best insight came when I gave an art lesson to their kids on the 10th of October 2022.

I was invited to give a workshop based off of the program that Noordje had put together about famous artists. I was asked to create a lesson plan around the artist Kehinde Wiley: first, a Noordje volunteer would introduce the artist in the form of a slideshow and then I would give my lesson about portraiture. There ended up being one participant that day who had too much energy to sit and listen to adults giving instructions. I recognized immediately that if I held to a rigid lesson, the student would push against it out of boredom due to previous experiences with the same dynamic at Redefine Arts. While I was used to being more flexible to my students' needs, I noticed that the two Noordje volunteers wanted to stick with the program that

had been planned which in turn made the student challenge boundaries: for example, sitting on the table instead of his chair and challenging instructions.⁶

I think the difference between my ability to quickly adapt my lesson to the student's energy-level showed me that the lesson-planning at Noordje is a structure which makes it feel like a traditional classroom after-school rather than an open art studio. In this way, the framework of Community Art which incorporates radical pedagogy is an essential part of Redefine Arts that has a less prominent part in Noordje: co-creation, flexibility, listening and non-hierarchy find their way in an open art studio which doesn't rely on rigid structures and traditional student-teacher roles to provide learning opportunities for students.

Despite this disparity, Noordje and Redefine Arts share a crucial similarity in their commitment to providing children access to creativity through afternoon art sessions. Additionally, it was inspiring to see Noordje's regular invitation for practicing artists to participate as well as their commitment to the neighborhood in which they work.

⁶ It should be said that perhaps the volunteers felt a sense of duty to see the lesson completed since I was paid to be there. I can imagine that with the pressure of inviting a practicing artist, the volunteers wanted to stick to the schedule to respect the time I had taken to prepare the lesson. This pressure of responsibility is also addressed in the *Sowing Sketchbook*.



Self-portrait inside the belly of a dragon, made by the student at Noordje during my workshop

Zuid. Boijmans Van Beuningen

On the 11th of November 2022, I was invited to visit Zuid. Boijmans Van Beuningen, a neighborhood project run in Rotterdam-Zuid which was set up as a collaboration between the neighborhood and Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. There I met Lies Brilleman who helps run the educational aspect of the program. She explained that they run art workshops for all ages on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons where parents are also invited to come along. The conversation with Lies was inspiring and also confirming of the other two conversations I had had with Saskia and Laura: working in a neighborhood is a messy, non-linear process which takes patience and skill to navigate different expectations from children, and in Boijmans case, the very involved and opinionated parents.

I was astounded by the space in which Zuid. works, the commitment and the integration that they are building in the south of Rotterdam. The space was vibrant, brimming with creativity and my talk with Lies showed me again how important it is to make art accessible to everyone. I do believe however that due to the way the programming is set up at Zuid., it feels more like a transactional class where students receive an activity than what I hope for Redefine Arts. Something that I recognize in this transactional dynamic is unmet expectations of parents who threaten to not bring their child to activities they deem uninteresting rather than feeling a collective responsibility of making the programming benefit everyone. This can also signal that there hasn't been enough time for trust to develop between the museum and the neighborhood.

Similarities and Differences

On the surface, the three after-school art programs and Redefine Arts share similarities in their core aim of providing students with opportunities to explore art. They all to some degree give students access to art through involving guest artists, providing lessons and visiting museums. Each program operates within similar neighborhoods, facing similar struggles of commitment from students and community involvement. However, there are notable differences which set Redefine Arts outside of the structure of these three programs. They follow a more programmed approach with planned lessons, while Redefine Arts leans towards an unprogrammed structure where the students initiate the learning through their interests. The emphasis in the three programs is primarily on providing opportunities for artistic exploration, whereas Redefine Arts places greater importance on building a sense of community with the students. Additionally, the three programs tend to adhere to more traditional teacher-student roles, while Redefine Arts seeks to foster a more non-hierarchical and interactive environment through the use of mentorship.



Drawing Prompt: map out some practices that are similar to yours. What do you share, and where do you differ?

The Mixed Soil: Committed Mentorship in Art

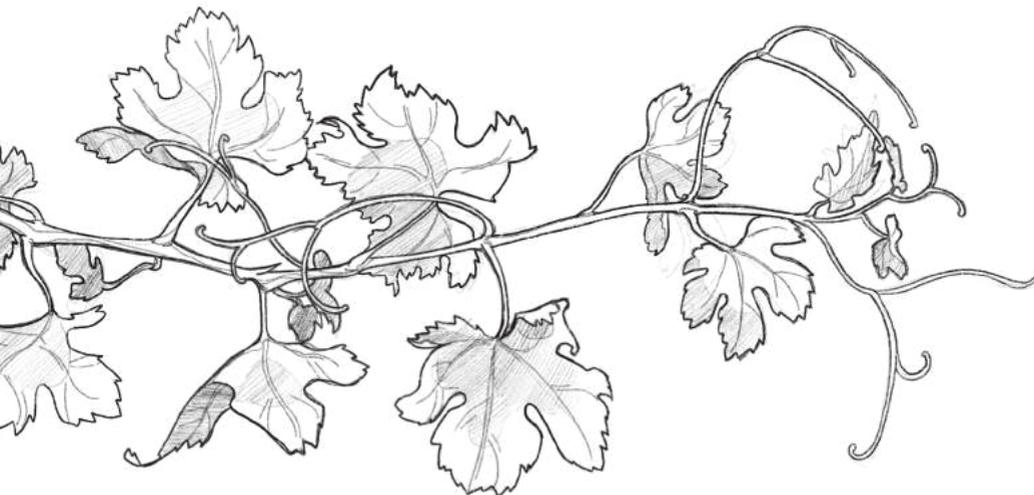
My research into the frameworks of Community Art and after-school art programs have significantly enriched my practice. By merging these two approaches, a new framework emerges, blending the ethos of Community Art with the focus on opportunity and long-term aspirations found in after-school art programs. This mixture, which I have termed “Committed Mentorship in Art,” encompasses subversive art-making, community engagement, radical pedagogy, mentorship and artistic growth. The first explorations into this framework is reflected in the practice of “Drawing Together,” which investigates methods of creating art that prioritize connection, collaboration, and community. The ethics of the **Sowing Sketchbook** and the practical application of the **Nurturing Sketchbook** align with the principles of Committed Mentorship in Art, providing both theoretical and practical foundations for its implementation.

Student painting by the garden of the Redefine Arts studio

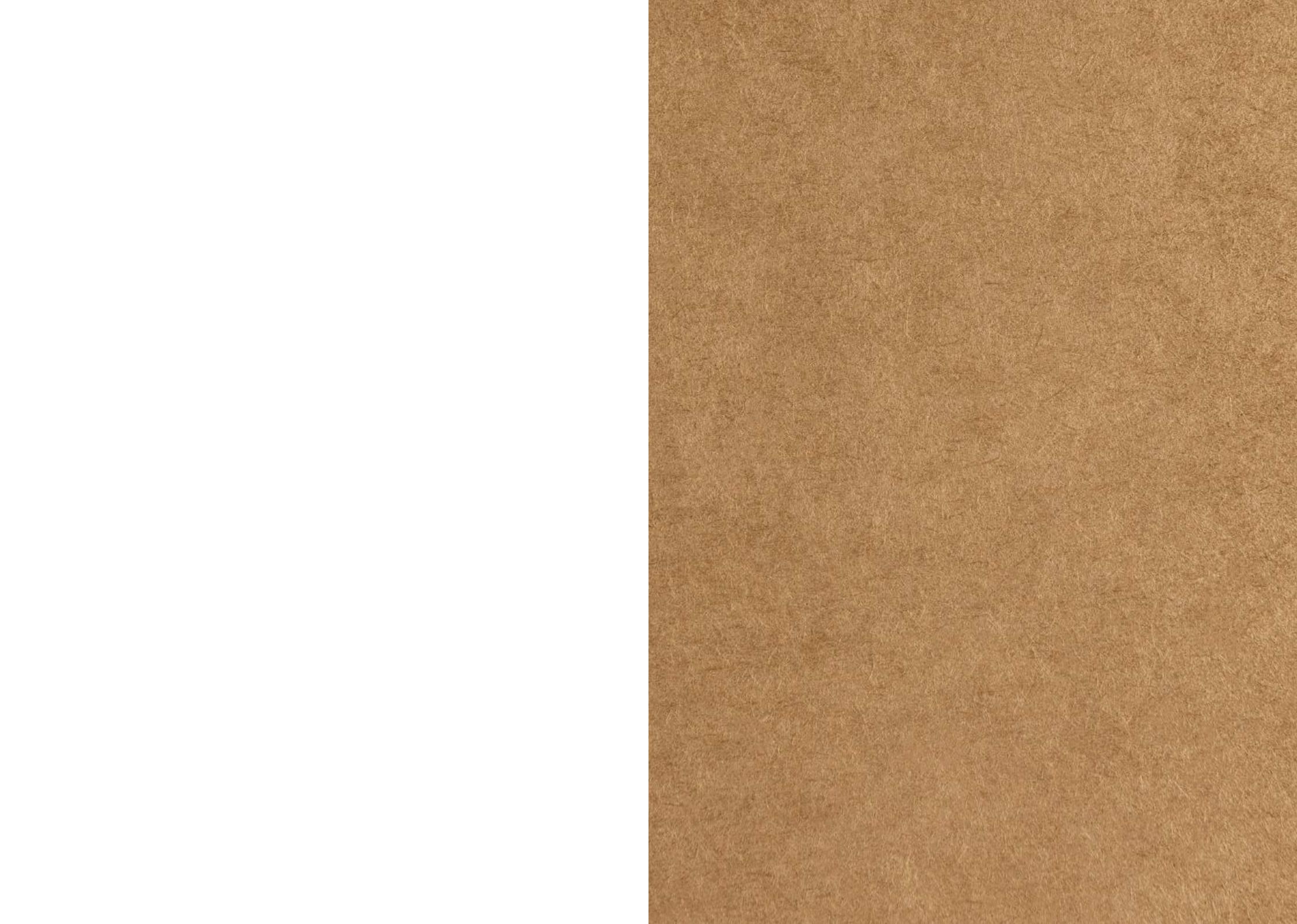


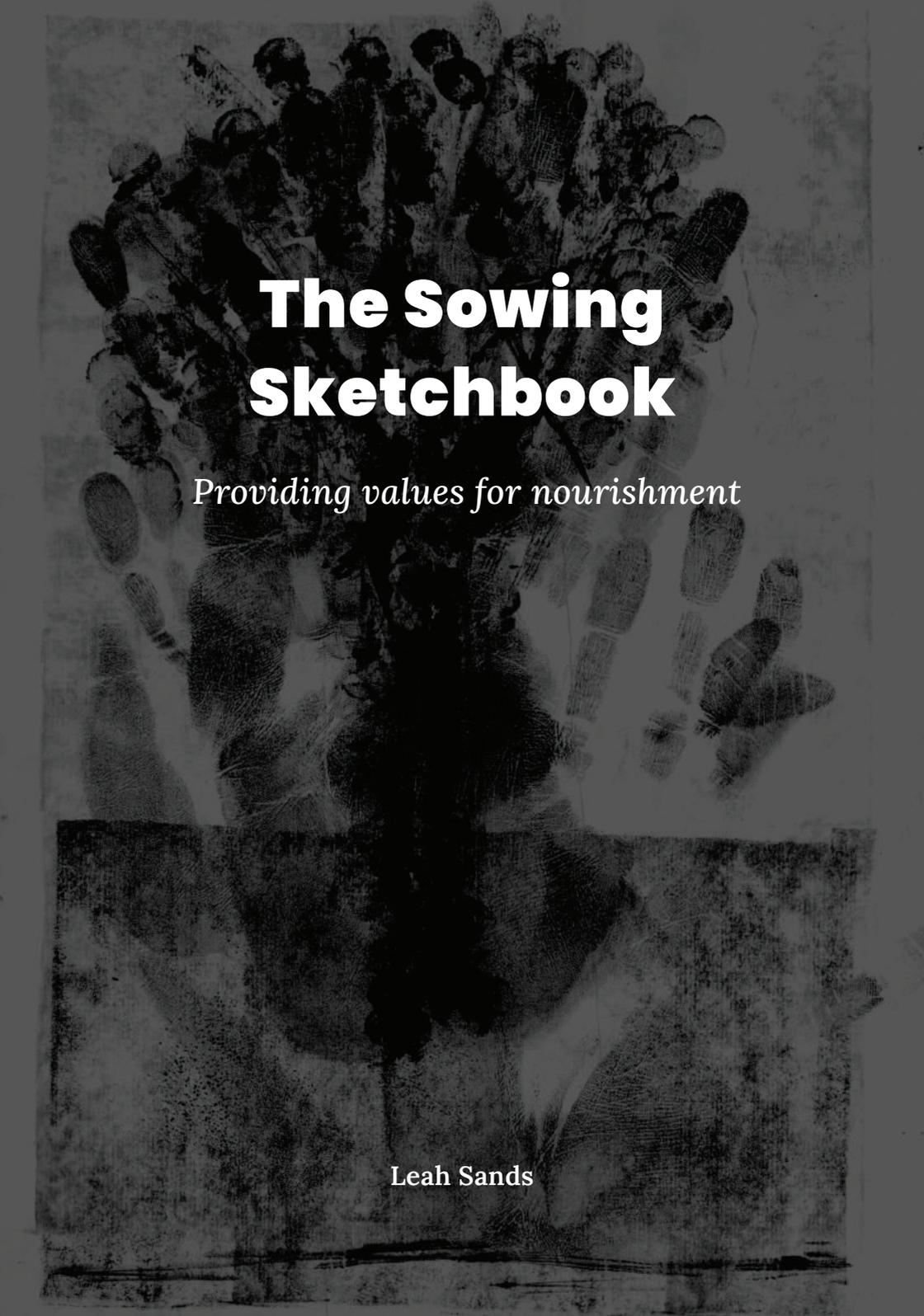
Epilogue

Throughout this sketchbook, we have explored the frameworks of Community Art and after-school art programs, delving into discussions on community involvement, subversive art-making, non-linearity and redefining “success.” Engaging with three distinct after-school art programs, I have discovered both shared principles and distinguishing differences that set Redefine Arts apart from the traditional category of after-school art programs. By mixing these frameworks, I have been able to draw upon the strengths of each while also creating something new, providing a more nurturing environment for Redefine Arts to flourish. It is my hope that as you have engaged with this sketchbook, you too have been able to nourish your artistic practice by discovering fresh insights.



Drawing Prompt: draw out your thoughts as you finish this sketchbook. Try using dirt as your medium.





The Sowing Sketchbook

Providing values for nourishment

Leah Sands



Prologue

Welcome to the **Sowing Sketchbook** which holds the vital seeds of my garden of growing community together. Throughout this sketchbook, I will introduce a number of values that were important for me during my research and while working at Redefine Arts. I have categorized these ethics and values into three different themes: Vulnerability/Acceptance, Collaboration/Conversation and Agency/Subversion.

It is good to mention that each theme works intrinsically with the other. They are separated for the sake of readability, not because they are detached from each other in practice. Together they sow necessary conditions of safety, collectivity and reciprocity in order to draw together while drawing together. Additionally, the act of drawing together can produce these “themes” as shown in the **Nurturing Sketchbook**. It is a cyclical process, and I have deliberately categorized these ethics in such a way to show the connection and recursivity to the other sketchbook.

As we sow these valuable seeds, let us take on a posture of love towards those we work with and ourselves.

“All of the work we do, no matter how brilliant or revolutionary in thought or action, loses power and meaning if we lack integrity of being.”

bell hooks (Teaching Community 164)

Practicing Out of Love

6

Love encompasses all of the ethics and values held in this sketchbook. As bell hooks says, “to truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients – care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication” (5). It is therefore difficult to separate “love” from “commitment,” for example, because one is found inside of the other. Love is entangled in our values completely – all of our motives and actions without love ultimately do not bring us closer to others: compassion without love is pity. Vulnerability without love is exploitation. Listening without love is hearing. Sharing without love is a transaction. Caring without love is obligation, and a community without love is simply a congregation of people.

Love is an essential element when working with others in a community context. As Jodi Rios points out in *Reconsidering the Margin*, communities can sense when they are being used as mere subjects for an artist’s creation, resulting in distance and resentment among participants (41). I

7

have made the mistake of initiating community-based projects with good intentions to bring positive change without fully considering the impact on those involved. For example, when painting murals in China, I remember that interactions were limited to teaching fellow foreigners how to create a mural, while the only engagement with the neighborhood was seeking permission to use their walls. I now wonder if those murals still exist or if they were swiftly painted over due to the lack of connection with the local residents.

In order to work with others, we must be honest with ourselves about our motivations and desires to engage with others in social art-making. This requires reflection, honesty and a willingness to change which often can be a confrontational and grueling process of unlearning and decentering ourselves. It begins and ends with love, since “love will always challenge and change us” (hooks, Teaching Community 137).

The Seeds of Vulnerability and Acceptance

I'm introducing the theme of Vulnerability and Acceptance first because it has stood as a recurring theme throughout my research trajectory: both as a posture towards and a result of my research. From the perspective of a woman, I know that the word "vulnerability" can be a tenuous word in which it feels like safety has no place. The vulnerability that I wish to explore is found in love, so with that in mind, I will define it as such: the courageous opening up of oneself which leads to an honest representation to others and oneself. As Brené Brown says, connection, which is a product of vulnerability, is a result of authenticity, and authenticity can only emerge when you let go of who you want to be and *embrace* who you are (Brown). That embracing of self asks for an acceptance of imperfections and difficult situations. It allows others inside the messy process which leads to authenticity, connection and growth. The act of sharing and being open – letting someone inside – is a catalyst to establishing trust.

A drawing that I made of one of my students in the park



Reciprocity of care

Vulnerability begins from my side, as the one who first seeks connection. Here I align with bell hooks as she states, “In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share” (Teaching to Transgress). However, my vulnerability does not oblige my students to open up. Since everyone has different experiences with practicing vulnerability, it is important to see the act of vulnerability not as transactional but as a brave gift. My vulnerability is the beginning of the creation of a safe space, and over time, when my students see that I work out of integrity and love, they too begin to open and build safety and establish trust. We are growing together, mutually vulnerable and open to share with one another because enough time has passed to prove that we seek each other’s best interests.¹ This mutual vulnerability and transformational openness is fodder for sharing and community. As Paulo Freire states, our “efforts must be imbued with profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, [we] must be partners of the students in [our] relations with them” (Freire 48).

As we share together and develop trust, a deeper level of care is needed to continue to foster budding relationships. This is a holistic care which recognizes that everyone in Redefine Arts is a complex person who responds differently in situations depending on their past experiences and background. As it is explained in the **Orienting Sketchbook**, I too carry different roles or different “persons” inside of myself – I do not want my students to see me only as an authoritative, teacherly figure but also as a mentor, an artist and as a human being. A holistic care does not assume, generalize or ignore aspects of our lives, and while the art studio in Amsterdam-Zuidoost can be a place to leave problems at the door, those problems are also welcomed to the table.

“...most professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit.”

bell hooks (Teaching to Transgress)

¹ For stories about how I have experienced vulnerability with my students by drawing together, refer to the **Nurturing Sketchbook**.

Caring for the context

Caring for my students' backgrounds means that the program works for them rather than the other way around – I often cannot help or change the context from which they are coming but acknowledging and knowing the context means I can take it into consideration while planning the program. As Helguera states, “Understanding the social processes we are engaging in doesn't oblige us to operate in any particular capacity; it only makes us more aware of the context and thus allows us to better influence and orchestrate desired outcomes” (xv).

12 One way that I show holistic care is by building in moments or rituals where conversation can happen at Redefine Arts. I always start with offering tea and snacks to the children who come into the studio. This landing moment of eating and drinking something creates space to ask questions about how their day or week is going to understand what they are coming in with. It signals to the students that the art studio isn't just about making art but that



they are allowed to be whole people, complicated and multifaceted. Jeanne van Heeswijk reflects precisely on this in her own participatory practice: “For me it is important that you can make coffee [in the space] and that the person who you also work with can immediately create and test the space. If you work in group processes, you need to have the possibility to eat something every once in a while or in one way or another to rest” (Muijnck).²

Showing students that I care about their whole selves and not just their artistic process creates a value system which is often different from the typical societal emphasis on performance. Decoupling their achievements from their intrinsic value means that students are less focused on performing “well” and more focused on the process of becoming. Recognizing and caring for these different aspects means there is also a need to be flexible while working with others.

2 Translated from Dutch: “Voor mij is het belangrijk dat je er koffie kunt zetten en dat je datgene waar je aan werkt ook meteen in de ruimte kunt vormgeven en testen. Als je aan een groepsproces werkt, moet je ook de mogelijkheid hebben om af en toe iets te eten of om op de een of andere manier even rust te nemen”

Flexibility as care

Flexibility is an essential aspect of our afternoons at Redefine Arts. It entails letting go of control and holding my plans secondary to the students' artistic and personal process. If it becomes clear that those plans are not benefiting them, they need to be reassessed.³

Flexibility creates space for a student to leave early because they are tired or have a lot of homework to do. I always emphasize that they are the most important factor in their creative process and that they have to be kind to themselves by taking care of themselves. This gives me the opportunity to show concern and care for their well-being and sparks a much more important conversation about selfcare. Similarly, this care is reciprocated when I'm honest with my students about my own struggles, as it affects my presence in the studio. There have been moments when sharing difficult news with my students has opened up the opportunity for them to show care and ask me questions they wouldn't normally feel comfortable asking an authority figure.

I believe that being open to change and adapting to the atmosphere in the room conveys the message that we're all more than just our artistic output and ideas. It's also a way of embracing vulnerability, acknowledging that we're all complex individuals with unique stories and emotions.

³ In my afternoon with Noordje in the *Grounding Sketchbook* and throughout the *Nurturing Sketchbook*, I refer to the importance of flexibility in my practice.



A half-finished practice pose with different styles of hair and mouths

Healthy boundaries for safety

Co-existing with flexibility however is the need for having healthy boundaries. Not having rules or boundaries may initially seem like an all-inclusive utopia, but it lacks clear responsibilities and expectations, hindering vulnerability. As Meenadchi writes, “Boundaries are not a denial of someone’s needs. They are an investment in the belief that other resources exist to meet those needs and that we do not need to be everything for everyone” (74). Boundaries create safety, right expectations and a shared responsibility for healthy relationships. For the health of Redefine Arts, certain boundaries have been critically considered which prioritize students’ well-being and learning conditions. Two boundaries implemented during drawing sessions are age groups and expected behavior during our atelier times.

The first boundary limits participation at Redefine Arts to specific age groups: ages nine to twelve and thirteen plus, since allowing all ages quickly leads to chaos and lack of focus. It has been the most difficult of boundaries to enforce when there are excited seven- and eight-year-olds that want to join, yet I see it as one that affects the students the greatest.

Another boundary is behavior, established through a list of expected behaviors created collectively by the students themselves about one year ago: being positive and nice to each other, listening to one another and finally waiting turns for help. Students also decided that they would receive three warnings if they couldn’t adhere to expectations, and on the third warning, they may be asked to go home. New students are invited to review the list and decide if they agree to these terms before participating, allowing for shared responsibility in creating healthy dynamics.⁴ This creates a collective culture with clear expectations and desired behaviors that are openly communicated and communally agreed upon.



⁴ Responsibility is addressed under the theme of Agency and Subversion.



A messy table at the studio using flowers as an experimental drawing tool

Embracing the mess

Vulnerability in the Community Art involves embracing imperfection and navigating changes and uncertainties. During these past years, I've had to learn one way or another to take these in stride. One week there are sixteen kids in the studio making art and the next week there are none – often without any sort of explanation. I've sat alone at forgotten meetings; I've been told that our building is getting demolished; I've seen so many volunteers come and go. As the **Grounding Sketchbook** explains, it requires commitment and patience as mess and conflicts are bound to arise when working with groups of people.

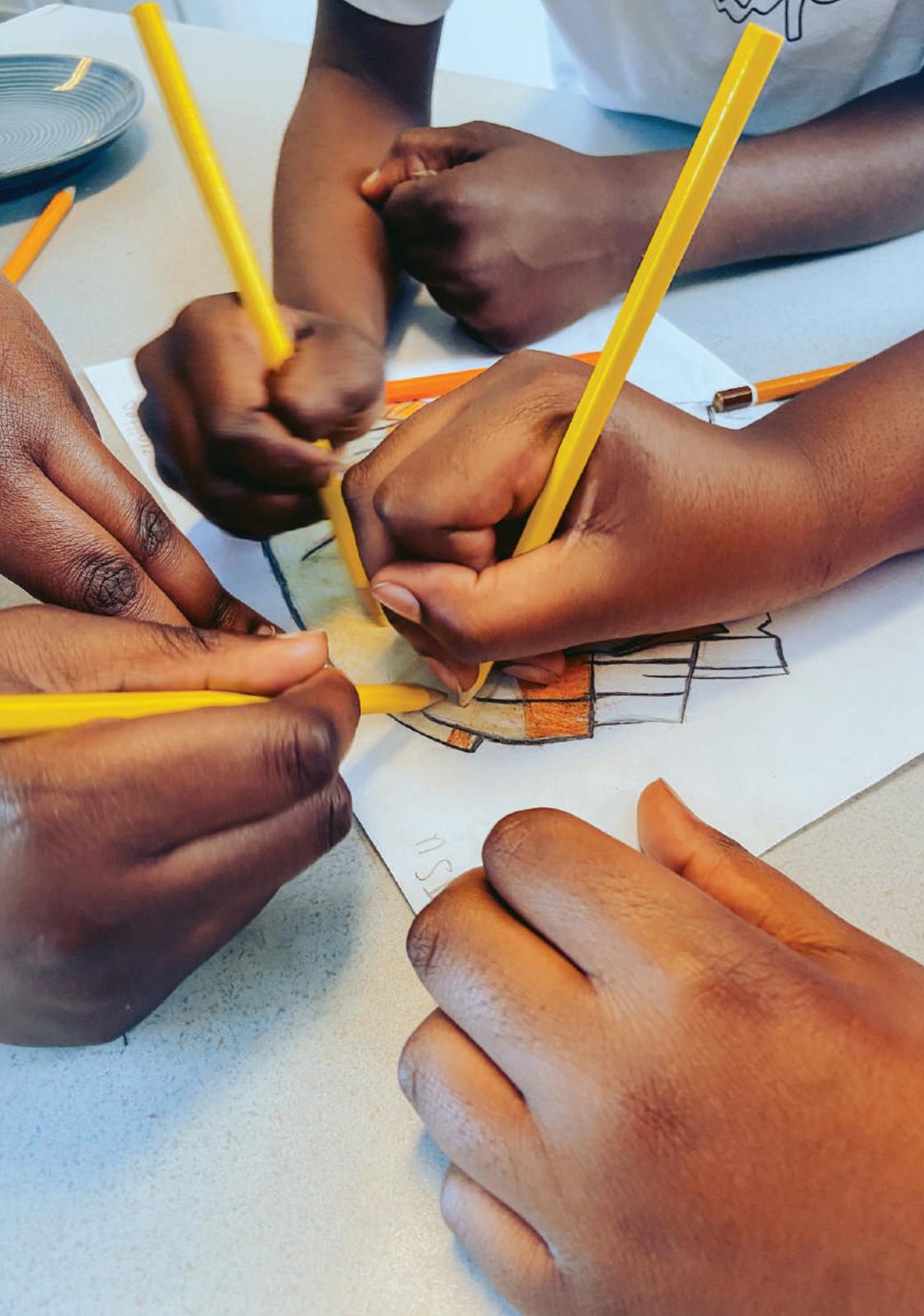
Regarding conflict, I have learned a lot from Meenadchi's analysis into conflict: that it does not occur at a level of differing needs but in the way our needs are not met (27). It is important to highlight where the difference lies: in interest, opinion, approach et cetera in order to move forward together. As bell hooks writes, "as long as we fear facing our differences and avoid conflict we cannot arrive at a true place of solidarity" (Teaching Community 62). This avoidance of conflict works against authenticity and trust as we will always have something "swept under the rug" to keep a superficial peace. One way that I deal with conflict in Redefine Arts is by allowing students first to share what they believe their needs to be and from there, finding a solution together. Here I facilitate the conversation but allow the students to collectively make the decision together.

Drawing Prompt: take five minutes to continuously draw quickly and imperfectly.

Make this page as messy as possible.

The Seeds of Collaboration and Conversation

We have looked at different ways of sowing vulnerability and acceptance into an art practice involving others. Now, I would like to turn to the seeds for sowing Collaboration and Conversation. Within this section, we will delve into the values of commitment, respect and active listening, which serve to foster dialogue among students and make collaboration possible. Much like vulnerability and acceptance, which are nurtured through collective drawing exercises, collaboration and conversation form an interconnected cycle that brings the act of drawing to life.



Establishing trust through commitment

Vulnerability, building safety and trust do not happen overnight or in a matter of weeks. It takes lots of time, continual openness and loving commitment to the people you are working with. As bell hooks says, “the building of trust through a process of concrete action ... combined with commitment to community, is needed if we are to find unity within diversity” (Teaching Community 112). The investment of time and continual integrous action establish the foundation of community; this is why it has taken years for Redefine Arts to reach a deeper level of conversations with students through our time in the studio. The integrity of character and committing ourselves to a group of people cannot develop however without mutual respect.

24



Respect

By respect, I do not mean simply showing regard for someone but seeing another person as your equal. We cannot begin to consider working with others if we still think that we are in some way better, smarter, more capable or morally higher than those with which we work. Helguera points out that “artists and teachers both must demonstrate respect and a sincere interest in their interlocutors, but at the same time they need to construct relationships in which the exchanges are mutual and both parties offer help and contribute new insights, while still challenging their interlocutors’ assumptions and demanding their investment in exchange” (49).

In my project, it is of utmost importance that the children I work with also respect each other. If the respect only goes between “me” and “them” and not amongst each other, a safe space cannot be created. It is the work of all of us to establish a safe space built on respect, openness, commitment and care. It is only when this is established in the entire group that real transformation can occur, and every person feels loved and supported. As bell hooks so perfectly puts it, “As teachers we can make the classroom a place where we help students come out of shame. We can allow them to experience their vulnerability among a community of learners who will dare to hold them up should they falter or fail when triggered by past scenarios of shame—a community that will constantly give recognition and respect” (Teaching Community 103).

25

Active listening

An act of respecting another means deeply listening to each other. The type of listening I mean is to hold an active posture in order to be swept into the world of another person with empathetic ears – not just listening to what participants are saying, but understanding the context and emotions in which they are saying it. This is a somatic empathy, an embodied listening that is attuned to and resonates with someone else's experience (Meenachi 61). In my project, when students excitedly share new ideas, I give them my undivided attention, asking clarifying questions to show my investment in understanding. This level of listening is crucial for supporting their creative process. If I only pretend that I have understood everything, it often leads to hurting the students feelings and demotivates them – their conclusion is usually that the story isn't interesting enough. Listening extends beyond creative projects to problems which might happen at school – a friend who is being teased, a child that they find annoying and don't know how to behave et cetera. Here, understanding the context is essential to demonstrate genuine care and concern.



"Grey Feather" who is a character one of my students is designing for their manga – she is based off of me

Drawing Prompt: ask someone to tell a story and as they're speaking, draw everything that you hear. You're free to ask supplementary questions!



The Seeds of Agency and Subversion

The last theme that I would like to explore in this sketchbook deals with agency and the subversive nature of working in a community. As mentioned in the *Grounding Sketchbook*, I see Community Art itself as subversive since it goes against the “way things are” to imagine a new way of being together. This means that we work with others in a way where we spurn traditional roles: where those in places of privilege take on humility in order to give agency to those who have had opportunities withheld from them. The seeds of humility, shared responsibility and honest authorship must be placed into the soil for this to grow.

Authentic help through humility

If we are honest and integrous with those that we work with, it doesn't mean that we solely share our inner world, thoughts, emotions and life circumstances. It also means that we are willing to be helped. I find this to be one of the hardest practices of working with others since it goes against the expectations of society. As hooks quotes Freire in her book *Teaching to Transgress*: "Authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality which they seek to transform. Only through such praxis—in which those who help and those who are being helped help each other simultaneously—can the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped."

This subversion of roles between the helper and the helped actively dismantles systems of power because it is no longer the rich helping the poor or the privileged helping the under-privileged but a reciprocal commitment to help each other. Jodi Rios says that in her experience with inviting her art students into community-based projects, the community members see that they also have a role in challenging the students as well as receiving their input (51). This is the easiest way to let others know that they are not just some project, and they aren't dancing puppets in your grand artistic vision – they are active participants who have valuable, if not the most valuable, input for bringing about change.⁵

⁵ I give a wonderful example of how a student genuinely helped me in the *Nurturing Sketchbook*.



The residual sketches of my students helping me with a character design and me helping them with expressions



Redefine Arts students walking through the Rijksmuseum with folding chairs

Shared responsibility

Part of subverting roles involves letting go of control and therefore letting go of feeling responsible for everything and everyone. At Redefine Arts, loosening control and handing over some of the responsibility allows my students to experience art-making and art-discovering on their terms in a way that is sustainable to their growing artistic practice. Every artist has different interests, methods and tempos which every student must discover through their own willpower and curiosity. I love bell hooks's quote regarding the collective responsibility of learning which fits so well with this concept: "There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community" (Teaching to Transgress). She goes on to say that any talented teacher, lecturer or professor cannot singlehandedly generate enough excitement for an entire classroom: it is a collective effort in which the responsibility is also shared.⁶

⁶ One way that I've investigated sharing responsibility can be found in the *Nurturing Sketchbook* when we visited the Rijksmuseum as Redefine Arts.

Honest authorship

Sharing responsibilities and creating together inherently implies that there is also shared authorship of the project or artwork. “Sharing” authorship is not the norm however, and even if there is a collective feeling in the project, society tries to frame a communal effort as the genius of one artist. It is an ongoing and active commitment to include all makers as the authors of the project rather than slapping the artist’s name in the title. Jeanne van Heeswijk, for example, includes the names of all of her participants in the project rather than “a project of artist Jeanne van Heeswijk” “in order to counteract the persistence of individuality and embrace the collective, things must be structurally tinkered with”⁷ (Muijnck). The structural change of seeing a community collective as credible makers begins with how they are represented, how the artist takes or shares authorship and guarantees that the voice by which the project is shared is a collective one.

Sole authorship doesn’t carry a lot of importance at Redefine Arts because the focus is on developing together and experimenting rather than rising above the rest to be noticed. I was once asked if it was ever a problem that two students would want to take the same artwork home, but I have never had that problem, as most students leave all of their work at the studio and are more than happy to hang their piece on the wall to be looked at rather than hidden away in their private lives. I don’t believe this is just coincidence or luck that we have never had problems with this – I think it is due to the careful emphasis on community and developing together.

⁷ Translated from Dutch: “Zo zet ik me er al heel mijn leven voor in dat ik bij projecten alle namen vermeld wil hebben en het niet ‘een project van kunstenaar Jeanne van Heeswijk’ is. Om die hardnekkigheid van de individualiteit tegen te gaan en het collectieve te omarmen moet er structureel aan dingen gesleuteld worden.”



Drawing Prompt: draw anything here and pass it onto someone else to draw something. Continue this until the whole page is filled.

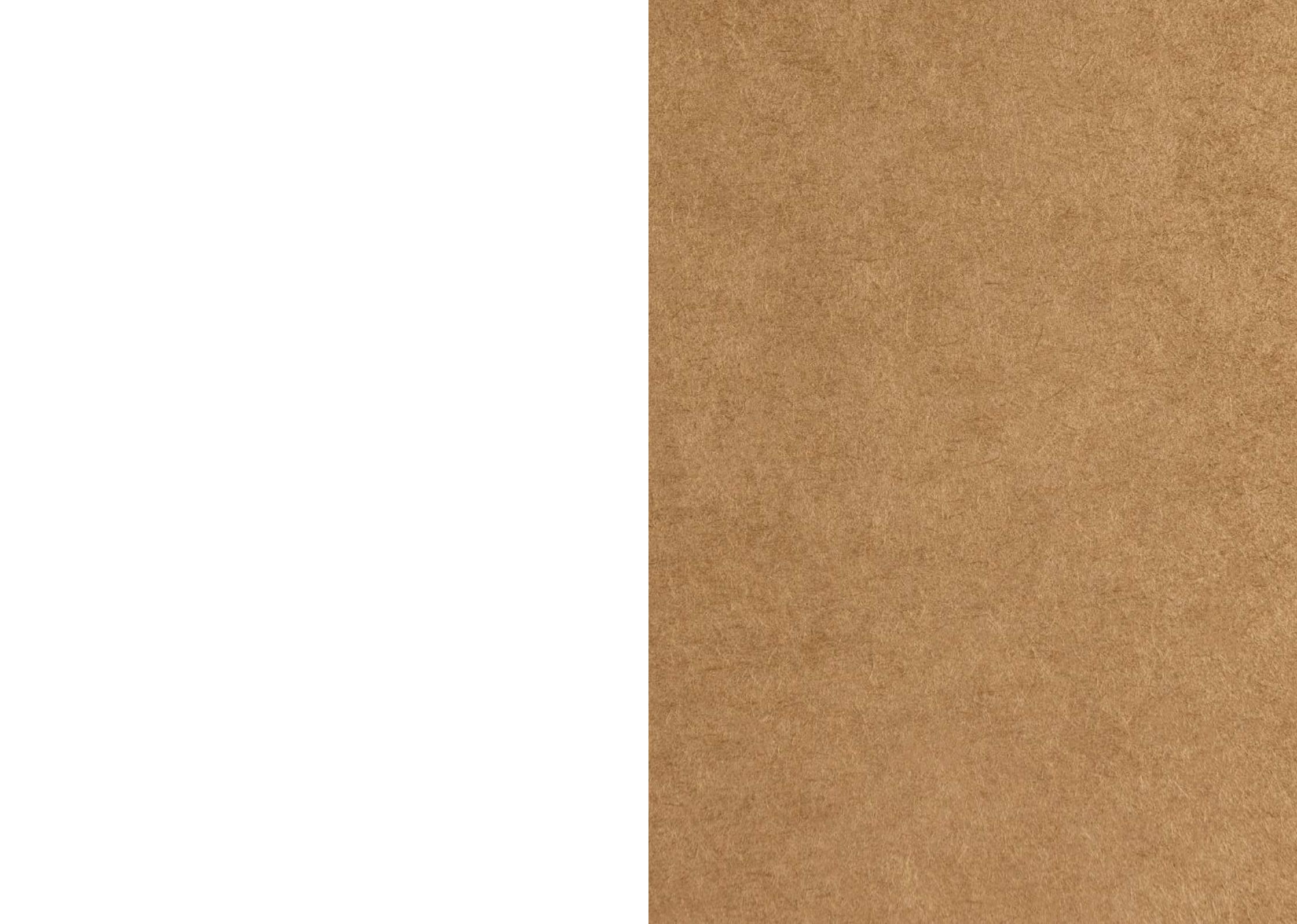
Epilogue

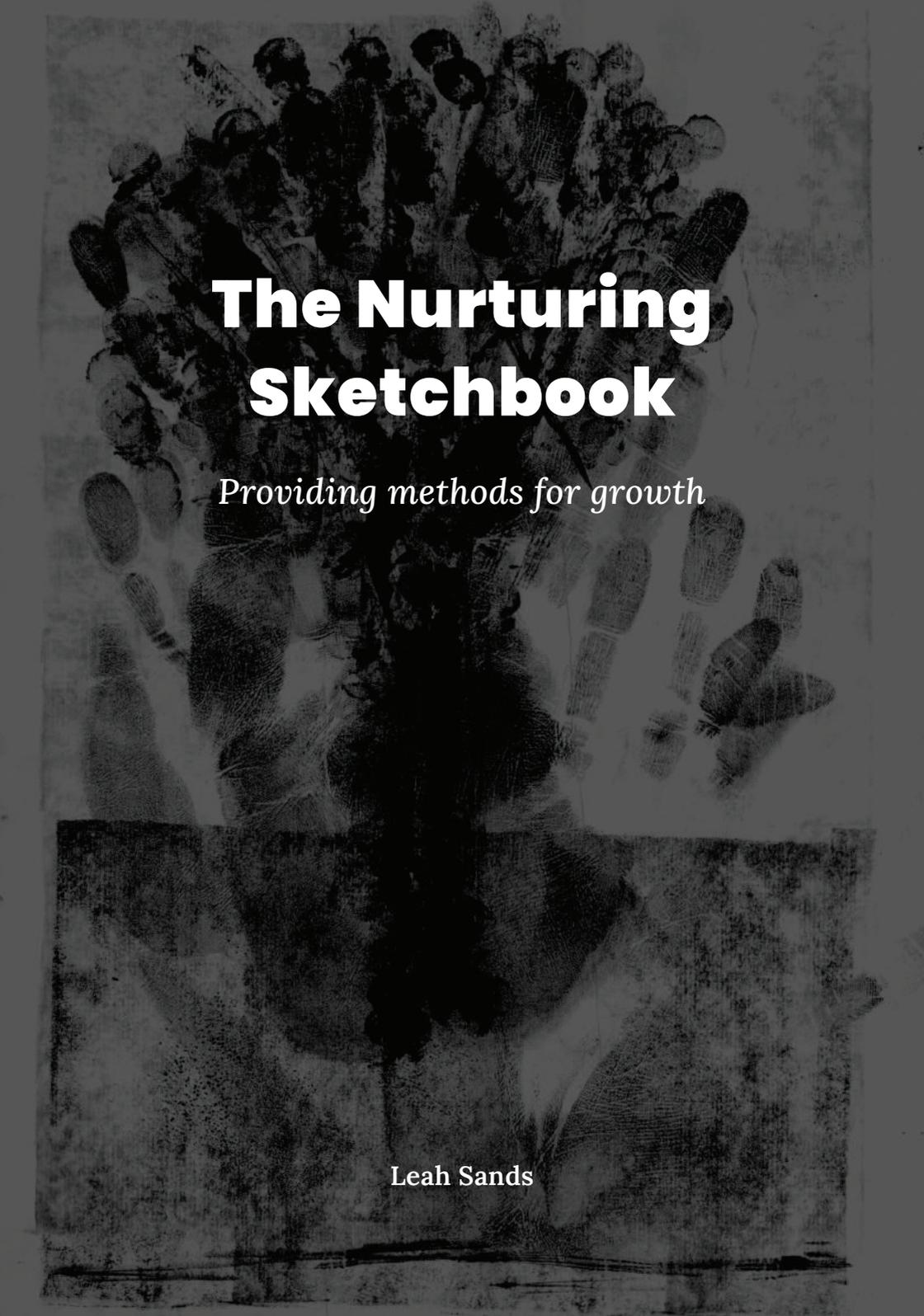
Just as sowing seeds is an integral part of the gardening process, our community practices require us to plant the seeds of our values. The act of kneeling and placing our hands in the soil symbolizes the posture we must take while working with others. Throughout this sketchbook, we have discovered that love permeates all the values we have examined, nested in themes of Vulnerability and Acceptance, Collaboration and Conversation, and finally, Agency and Subversion. The values found within these themes help create a place of belonging through drawing together while being simultaneously created from drawing together in a cyclical process.

As we cover these seeds with anticipation and excitement, remember that the process takes an enduring love, patience, commitment, vulnerability and trust to germinate and grow the garden.



Drawing Prompt: draw out your thoughts as you finish this sketchbook. Include someone else in this!





The Nurturing Sketchbook

Providing methods for growth

Leah Sands



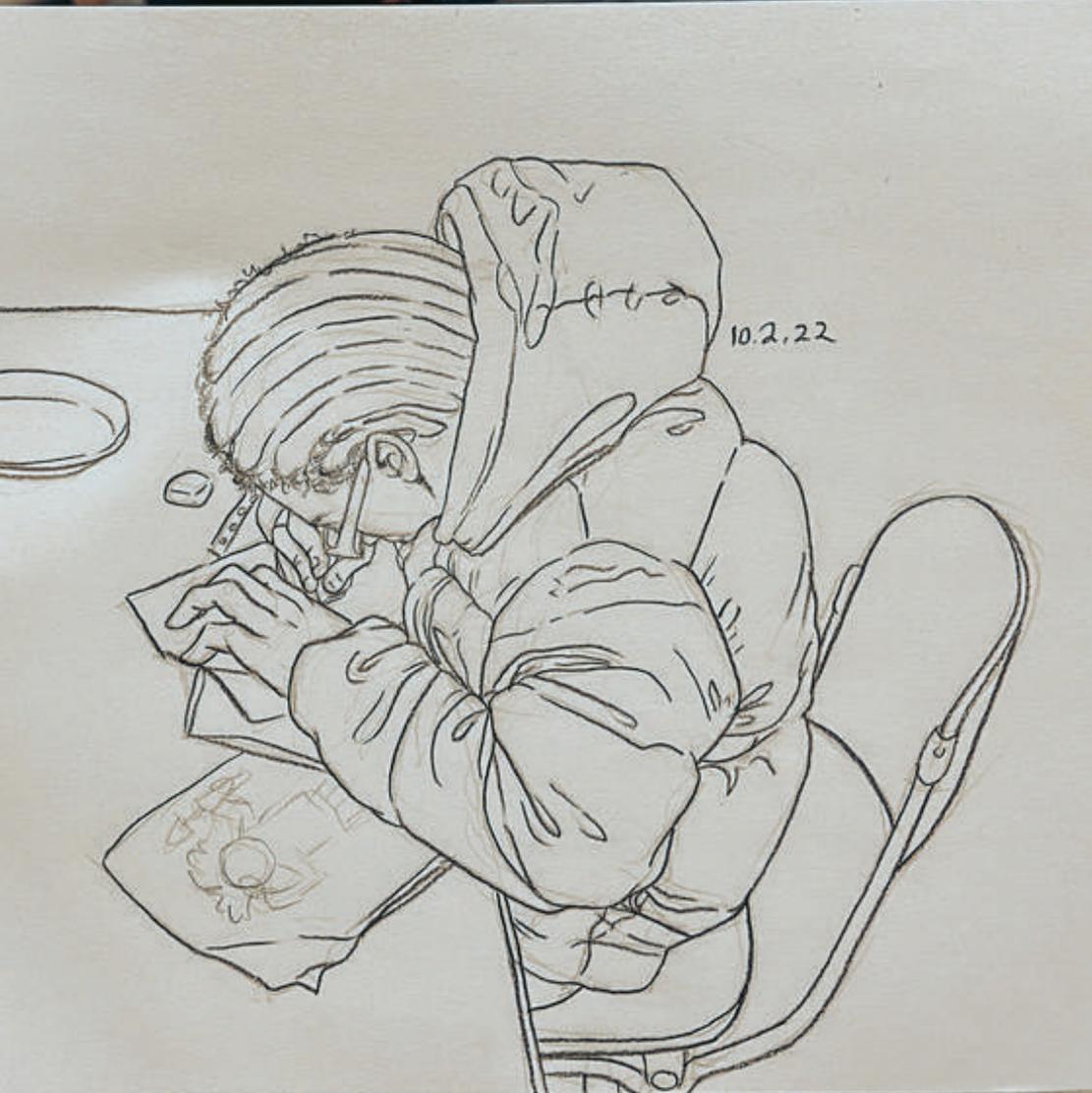
Prologue

Welcome to the **Nurturing Sketchbook** which explores how drawing together can foster a sense of belonging. Like a garden, we cannot force the plants to grow. We can however provide the *means* for growth. This entails investigating the practice of gardening to see what encourages the most growth. Through developing drawing together as a method for investigating how to create community, I delved into the various ways and spaces in which we come together to draw, and how this interaction influences our relationship to both our art and each other at Redefine Arts. As mentioned in the **Orienting Sketchbook**, I will look into how, where and why we draw together in order to answer the overarching research question: *how can drawing together create a place of belonging?*

Reflection is an essential aspect of any endeavor requiring concrete action. For this reason, I will also take the opportunity to review my research into drawing together and look towards the future, seeking ways in which art can continue to foster and strengthen a place of belonging.

How We Draw Together

One of the first things that I investigated was the various ways of how we draw together at Redefine Arts. Through a lot of experimentation, I have singled out different ways by first determining which exercises students gravitated to, and then by trying each of the ways multiple times with different constellations of student involvement: small and big groups, new and old students, younger and older students. The four ways that seem to create a greater sense of community and cohesion amongst everyone involved are: challenges, collaborations, instructional lessons and drawing together reflectively.



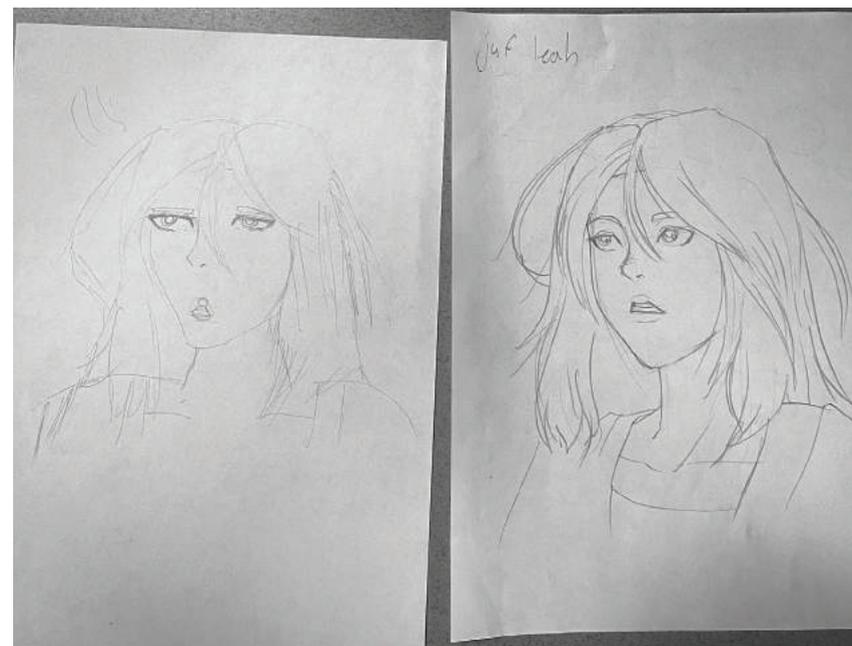
A drawing I made of a student while they were drawing

Mentoring through challenges and anti-perfectionism

“Challenge” exercises involve setting limitations, such as time constraints, on activities initiated by either myself or the students. As a mentor, I often notice students getting caught up in their perfectionism, so these exercises provide a way to reduce the pressure of creating something “good.” By participating in these exercises, students realize their ability to set conditions and take charge of the atelier time by creating challenges themselves.

- ∞ This dynamic energy also leads to students challenging me, which flips the traditional roles of student and teacher. It shows students that I’m willing to draw imperfectly and follow their instructions.

An example of this happened when an eleven-year-old student asked me to draw his favorite anime character in ten minutes. He was in charge of the stopwatch, and I began to draw... I eventually finished the drawing in eleven minutes, which he allowed because he wanted to see it completed more than he wanted me to stop after ten minutes. The look of satisfaction and appreciation showed on his face as he held up the results of his genius art direction. After he finished looking at the drawing and put it in his “mapje,”¹ I asked if he would



Both my student and I created the same drawing within a time-limit

¹ The “folder” that each child has at Redefine Arts to store their collection of artworks made by themselves or gifted by someone else. Every once in a while, we look through the folders to appreciate our progress.

Facilitating collaborative and supportive drawing

like to try the same challenge. Initially hesitant, he feared the comparison of his effort to mine. With gentle encouragement, emphasizing the fun in the time limit and the focus on *seeing* rather than producing, he agreed. As the time elapsed, he proudly admired his own drawing, surprised with what he could accomplish in such little time.

By engaging in challenges in a playful way, students at Redefine Arts become active learners by creating an engaged learning experience – there is always lots of positive laughter and enjoyment. When they see me embracing challenges and openly making mistakes, it gives them the bravery to try as well. Limitations create an exciting game of beating the clock, pushing their creative boundaries in a short amount of time. The time constraint encourages them to work quickly and let go of the need for perfection, freeing them from the frustration of laboring over a drawing for hours to only end up being dissatisfied with the result. Some other constraints that we play with are: not looking at our paper, drawing with a single line, and using our fingers dipped in paint to draw a portrait.²

² Other challenges in which I help mentor students with perfectionism can be found in the “why” section of this sketchbook and in the [Harvesting Sketchbook](#).

Collaboration is a central aspect of the work in Redefine Arts. Most of the collaboration that exists in the project is student-initiated such as helping each other complete an artwork by offering advice or helping finish coloring. While the collaboration that happens naturally between students signals that the project is a safe place to these students, sometimes it helps to encourage collaboration through exercises.

These planned collaborative exercises are facilitated moments to help students learn to work together in a playful way. One exercise I developed to encourage working together is called “drawing musical chairs.” Students gather around a table with a roll of paper in the center. They begin drawing whatever comes to mind while music plays in the background. When the music stops, they move one seat to the right and continue the drawing of the person who previously occupied that seat. This process continues for several rounds until the paper is completely filled. We then appreciate the eclectic and intricate drawing that emerges.

I have facilitated this exercise twice, and the experiences were vastly different from each other. The first time involved a group of friends who were familiar with the Redefine Arts studio and the safe and supportive environment. Initially disappointed to leave their own drawings behind, the game evolved into a highly creative process with layers of drawings and transformations of each other’s work. Laughter and genuine intrigue filled

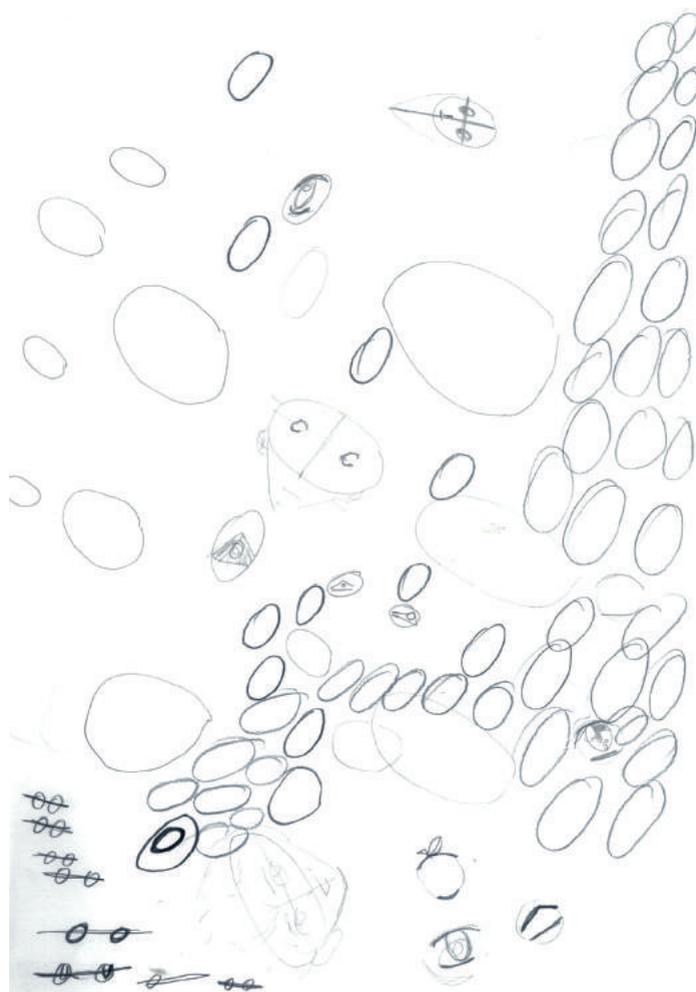
the room as students discovered what others had done to their drawings. I and a volunteer were also involved in the drawing rounds since there were only four students at the studio that day. By respecting what came before us, we collectively were able to create an interesting artwork which still hangs in the studio to this day as a reminder of what we can make together.

The other time of doing this activity went in the exact opposite direction. On that afternoon, there were eight students, with about five of them being new to the studio. There was a clear energy difference with the younger, newer children compared to the older, regular students. Despite hoping for an opportunity for the younger ones to engage and for the older ones to collaborate with new students, the activity didn't unfold as expected. Each round resulted in chaos, with students scribbling over others' drawings and writing provocative words like "poop" or "sex." This mess of scribbles and words left some students frustrated and others laughing which made the frustrated students become angry at the lack of care.

It became clear that the group lacked a sense of social cohesion, making it premature to expect them to work together effectively. It reinforced the notion that collaboration cannot be forced but should emerge from a foundation of mutual trust. As a facilitator and mentor, it is my role to gauge the relational dynamics among students to know when a facilitated collaborative exercise would be beneficial for collective making.



A segment of the large drawing made during the first "drawing musical chairs" exercise



A student's practice of making circles

Teaching lessons for agency

Occasionally we still have more classic lessons at Redefine Arts where I carry the role of an instructor or teacher. Most of the time, these lessons serve as a way for students to develop a new skill or for new students to be introduced to the idea of working in an open studio. Walking into a new space can be intimidating, and most new students are hesitant and reserved. In order to ease them into the space, it was important to develop an introductory lesson to act as an entry point for them to have a space to land in the studio.

One of the simplest introductions to the studio has been to teach students the different kinds of pencils we have: ranging from 8B, soft and dark used for shading, to 2H, hard and light used for sketching. I line up the pencils and ask them to experiment making lines with each of them to see if they can feel and see the difference, making the first lesson about experimentation and discovery. By playing with the different pencils, their shyness starts to fade: there's no risk of "failure," and the knowledge they gain allows them to begin drawing immediately.

In November 2022, I introduced an additional exercise I learned in university. This exercise utilizes the anatomy of our arm, particularly the elbow and wrist, to assist in drawing lines and circles. Regardless of skill level, warming up these joints and movements is essential for creating confident shapes. The exercise involves drawing circles and lines of various sizes and directions using sketching pencils. Students are encouraged to complete this exercise quickly and fluidly, trusting that their arm intuitively knows

the movements. Interestingly, even students who have been coming for years are eager to participate. It has become somewhat of a ritual, reminiscent of their first time at Redefine Arts, which they fondly reflect back on. The combination of knowing the pencils and a practice exercise gives them much more agency to pick up a blank paper and start drawing the next time they come to the studio.

The other types of lessons given at Redefine Arts are skill tutorials. If a student expresses an interest in a specific skill, like shading, and others share that desired skill, I propose organizing a tutorial. We then dedicate time in the following weeks for lessons on the chosen topic. Students who prefer not to participate in the tutorial are free to work on their own projects or join later if they change their minds. These tutorials are designed to be flexible, allowing room for practice and ensuring that students who aren't participating still receive attention and support during the afternoon. This inclusive approach empowers students to explore and develop their own creative expression, letting their curiosity lead their artistic development.

I avoid giving lessons to teach any “proper” way of drawing. Especially because students come to Redefine Arts with a variety of skill levels, it can be harmful to make students believe there is only one right way of doing things. This is also to recognize there are various ways of teaching a technique in drawing which can all lead to the same results. If one way of instruction isn't helpful for a student, I try to teach it in a different way that better helps them learn.³

³ This flexibility relates back to the framework of Committed Mentorship in Art found in the *Grounding Sketchbook*.



A lesson in body proportions to aid a student with character design

Creating reflectively for acceptance

The fourth approach of drawing together involves everyone in the studio, including myself, working as independent artists in the same space. This activity works best with a small number of more self-directed students sitting near each other. Although this sounds like a counter-intuitive method, lacking the “togetherness,” the empty space fosters a contemplative atmosphere where students’ busy hands allow their minds to wander. As we each create our own artwork, the reflective space often leads to deep conversations in between the drawing.

A key aspect of this is my own participation in the afternoons by bringing my own ideas and work to the studio. I started doing this more intentionally in the spring of 2023 which has led to many wonderful and vulnerable conversations in the studio. Drawing together where silence acts as a facilitator has sparked conversations about anxiety, responding to bullying, dealing with conflicts, relating to individuals from different backgrounds and exploring the difference between good and bad trouble. When these discussions arise, students indirectly seek acceptance and advice, subtly asking if they can be themselves without judgment.

I handle these conversations with care, as do the students, and we have learned to ask clarifying questions to understand the desired response—advice, reassurance, or encouragement. For example, if the topic is stealing, I refrain from imposing my own morals on my students. Instead, I try to understand why the student brought up the story. By withholding judgment, trust is eventually established, enabling students to ask challenging questions within this safe space as we all draw together.

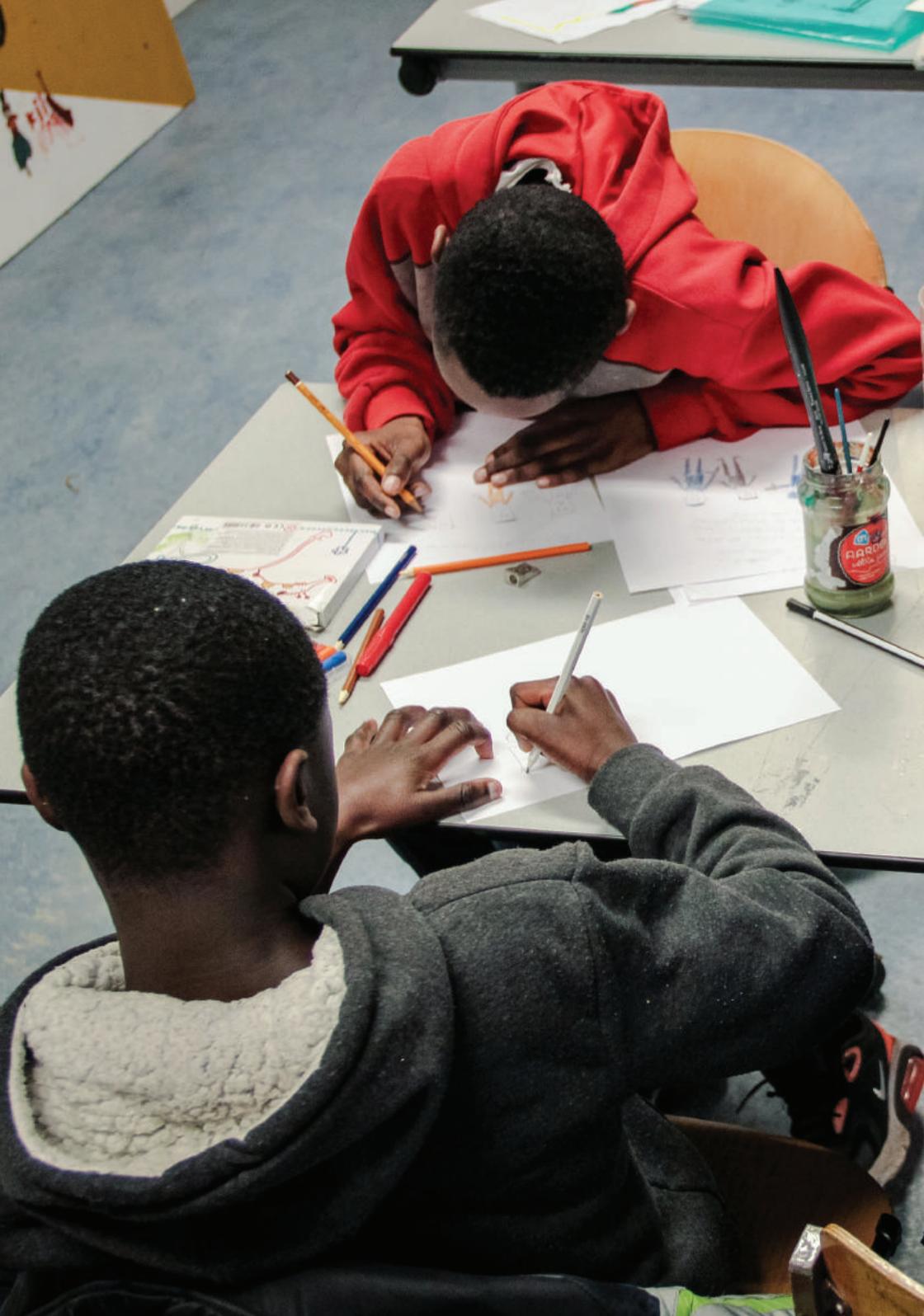
Reflecting on these stories brings to mind a quote by Paulo Freire, where he speaks of education that “bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation” (57). The safety of the studio encourages the courage to ask, fostering vulnerability and authenticity—essential elements for building a community.⁴

⁴ To learn more about fostering community through vulnerability and authenticity, read the [Sowing Sketchbook](#).



Drawing Prompt: fill this page with variously-sized lines and circles.

Experiment with different mediums!



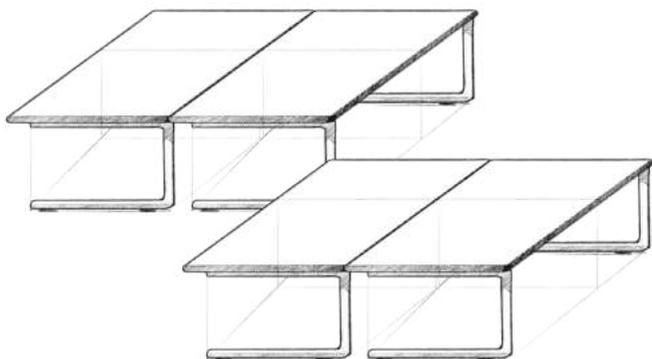
Where We Draw Together

The table as a conversation-starter

The table is an integral part of an afternoon at Redefine Arts and depending on the different ways that we draw together, the way tables are situated impact the relationship-building of an afternoon. The first thing that I do when I walk into the Redefine Arts studio is moving tables around: we have four tables that can be arranged in various ways to suit different group interactions. The flexibility of this set up means that depending on what we want to do together, our space can be curated to it.

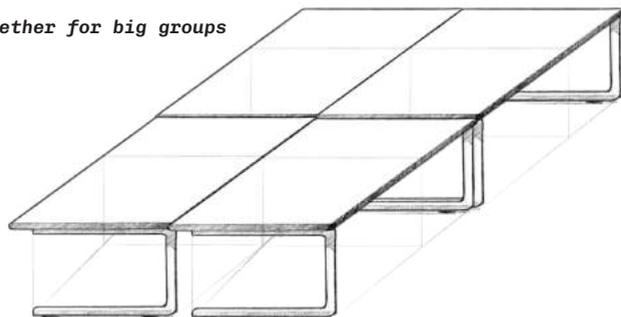
The table arrangement greatly impacts the freedom students feel to sit together, collaborate and have meaningful conversations. I have experimented with setting up one big table with a small amount of self-directed students: it is a seemingly small change to the space but results in interesting insights. Students who are more familiar with each other tend to sit very close to each other on the big table while students who haven't been in the studio long tend to sit on opposite ends of the table. This decision for them is often intuitive: the moment that they walk into the space they do not hesitate to find a seat. However, when tables are arranged in smaller constellations, even students who initially sit at opposite ends of the table engage more, observing and interacting with each other since the physical distance is lessened.

Two Redefine Arts students drawing together at a table

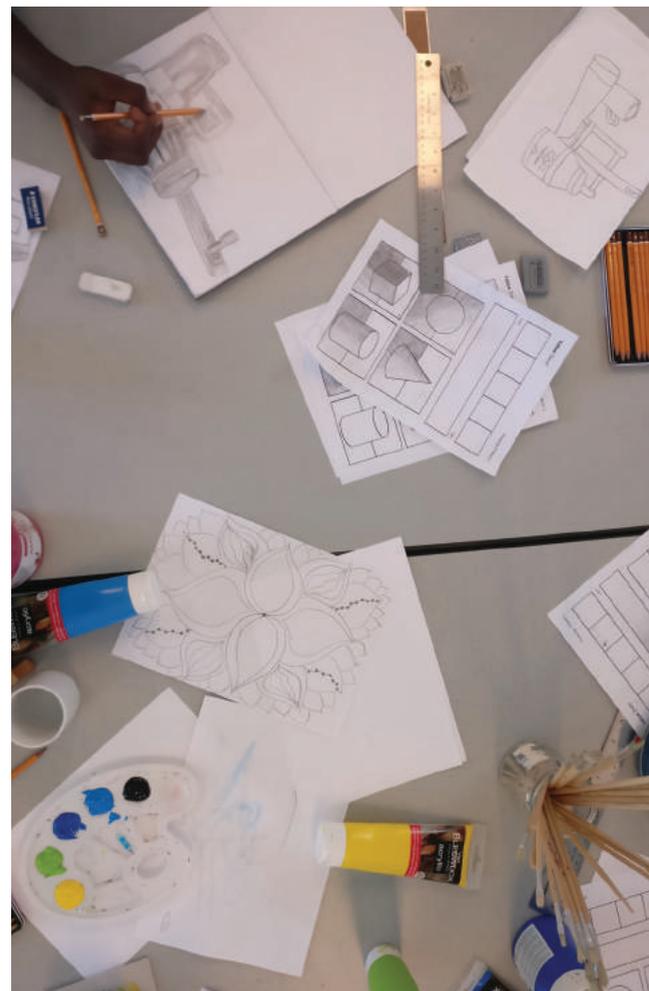


Above: two sets of two tables together for small groups

Below: four tables together for big groups



Based on these dynamics, I typically set up the tables in a more intimate manner to encourage collaboration, listening and cross-pollination of artistic processes. I consciously avoid having a designated chair and instead move around the table, sitting next to students for specific instruction or in the middle for group conversations, signaling my interest in everyone's work. This approach influences students' perception that they can seek advice or assistance from me, and occasionally, students themselves proactively change seats to be closer to someone they want to collaborate with or talk to. These moments of reaching out or offering support are integral to the growth of community in the studio.



Students engaged in various forms of drawing at one table in the studio



Outside as a Space for Play

In nice weather, Redefine Arts loves being outside for experimentation and a change of scenery. The sunny weather in the Netherlands brings a brighter mood, with jovial conversations and students happily exploring experimental drawing or painting in the grass, embracing the wind blowing at their paper and the dappled sunshine on their paper. Students also weave in and out of creating, sometimes kicking a football around, sometimes swinging in the tire swing found outside of our studio.

Outside, students tend to prioritize playful exploration over challenges or lessons, and my role often tends to be that of an artist or a mentor. Perfectionism and intense concentration fade away as unexpected elements, like a ladybug leaving a mark on their artwork, become included in their process. This relaxed and playful atmosphere fosters lighthearted interactions between students and myself, which is crucial for Redefine Arts' growth. Balancing seriousness and playfulness leads to deeper relationships with each other, willingness to collaborate, pushes against perfectionism, encourages experimentation and reminds us that creating should be enjoyable, especially in good company.

Students drawing their surroundings outside the studio

In public as a practice in agency

One of the best and most challenging ways for me to practice letting the students take control of their own learning is by going into a public space with them. Here, outside of the safe context of the studio or the lawn just outside, there is far more societal pressure for me to be the responsible adult “in charge” of my students. To see if we could create our studio atmosphere in a public space, I took two students from Redefine Arts to the Rijksmuseum in October of 2022.

Throughout the visit, we managed to keep the same dynamic of the studio in the museum even though it took a lot of effort from my side to not feel the obligation of a chaperone. I cherished the conversations that different artworks sparked with the students and enjoyed sharing their funny escapades, like unfolding and sitting on chairs in the elevator. It was interesting to see what caught their attention, such as a two-hundred-year-old frog

from Suriname that intrigued a child because of their Surinamese grandmother. It was wonderful to see that by letting them take the lead, each student navigated the museum based on their personalities, with one freely exploring and focusing on things they found interesting, while the other was more organized, using audio guides and floor plans.

By allowing students to have decision-making power, they felt in control of their learning process as young artists. They took initiative, set their own pace, and made decisions that allowed us to experience the Rijksmuseum in a unique way. However, I also faced the challenge of transitioning between different roles outside our studio context, balancing my roles as a mentor, teacher, facilitator, and artist. Being in an unfamiliar space provided an opportunity to observe our group dynamics and recognize how my behavior can be influenced by a sense of responsibility.





Students exploring the Rijksmuseum



A student's drawing at the Rijksmuseum's atelier

Drawing Prompt: make two drawings in two different locations.



Why We Draw Together

Although the “why” has been inferred throughout this text, I think it is important to name the rewards of drawing together – offering some insight to the question: *why would you draw together?* I am hesitant here to use words like: outcome, results or product to describe each of the “why’s” because it gives an impression of a step by step formula to fabricate a desired product. Besides the easy accessibility and low threshold of drawing which makes it a cheap and immediate medium to use with students, the method of drawing together can foster: vulnerability and acceptance, conversation and collaboration, subverting roles and agency, and creativity and storytelling.⁵

⁵ These categories relate to the ethical themes in the [Sowing Sketchbook](#).

Above: student's drawing, Below: my instructional drawing

Vulnerability and acceptance

The act of drawing in front of others and asking questions are both vulnerable acts. When we draw together, we open ourselves up to others seeing us still in process, showing both sketches we're proud of and those we'd rather keep hidden. This raw process entails the risk of being laughed at or teased – our vulnerability not being met with care and love. However, it also opens us up to the opposite experience of being celebrated and accepted for who we are.

At Redefine Arts, the struggle for acceptance mostly stems from students battling their own inner critical voice. One student, in particular, is quite hard on himself and his work. On the 29th of July 2022, we had a really long conversation about what it means to “be good” at drawing. I wrote in my journal,

“He was in an uninspired dip and felt that he couldn't draw. So I gave him a pep talk about not listening to the critical voice that told him he wasn't good. I told him that if he kept practicing he'd get better. I think and I hope he walked away encouraged.”

Students need to hear that they're doing well in order to trust their ability to create. Many students have come a long way in these regards: from first hiding in the corner, shouting “don't look at it,” ripping up their drawing halfway through the afternoon or throwing a pencil across the room in frustration. The act of initially and repeatedly trying is also a perpetual act of



A drawing of a student with commentary of “...oof I tried”

vulnerability where the student takes risks against their inner critical voice to dare to get better. These small acts do not go unnoticed at Redefine Arts and slowly, with a lot of encouragement, students start moving closer to each other to draw, put a finished drawing in their mapje or even ask to hang up their drawing on the pinboard.

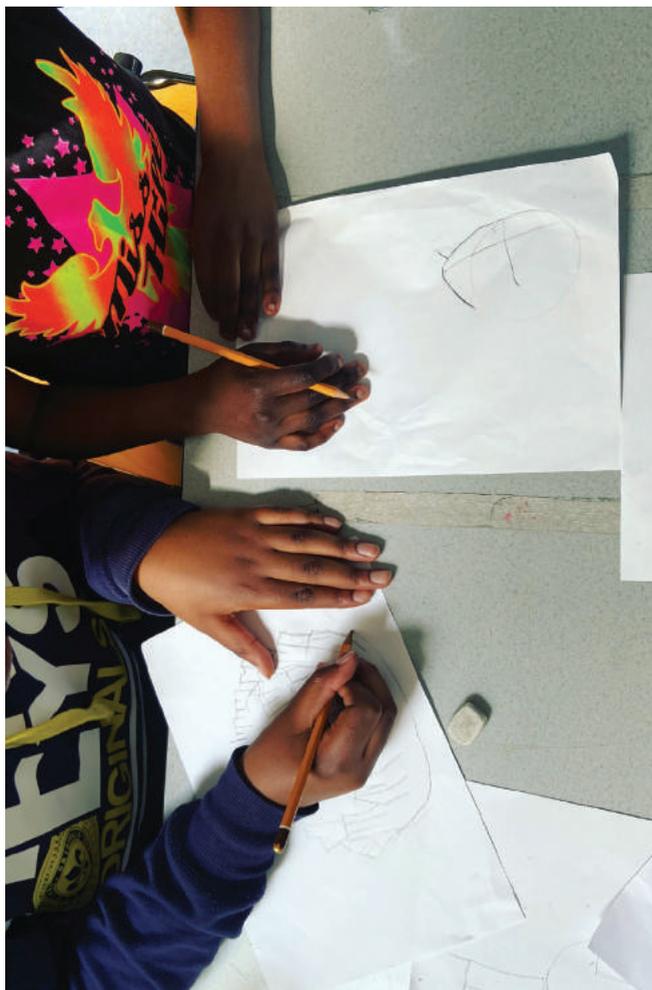
Since students constantly engage in this vulnerable creative process, they find it easier to open up about other things in the studio. In spring 2022, while working on a collective project about their neighborhood, a student raised the topic of anxiety. They had asked whether it was normal to have trembling hands. The question under the question was, “is it normal to have anxiety or am I weird?” The other student present and I both shared times that we felt anxious or that we knew other people who struggled with anxiety, and I could see this student visibly relax. “You’re allowed to be,” was the answer we collectively gave them back. Even though we never addressed any personal anxiety, they had taken a brave step out by daring to bring up the topic and were shown that these kinds of questions receive a loving response when asked in a safe environment.

Conversation and collaboration

Conversation and collaboration seem to grow hand in hand when students realize their drawings won’t be laughed at or they won’t face personal teasing. Since drawing together serves as practice for respecting, helping, and listening to each other, collaboration requires alignment in the students’ expectations, trust, and agreed-upon behavior in the studio. It is a recursive process, almost an upwards spiral between the students’ personal growth and the act of drawing together. Once the recursive process starts and students begin collaborating, conversations become deeper.

I recall a moment on July 22, 2022, when a new student (“A”) joined the studio with a long-term student (“S”) present. I emphasized the importance of kindness and love at Redefine Arts to the new student. S observed with





Two students helping each other with their drawings

suspicion, unsure if A would abide by our agreement. Throughout the afternoon, I encouraged the new student as he explored materials and worked on his first drawing. Sitting at the same table, he peeked at S's drawing and whispered with genuine appreciation, "Wow, you're really, really good." S looked at her drawing, then at him with guarded suspicion, and continued drawing.

Not wanting to interfere, I allowed the dynamic to unfold, guiding both of them in their drawings and offering tips. At one point, A asked for help with making the eyes look the same. S looked up sharply, so I asked her if she wanted to share some tips, boosting her confidence by saying, "because you know how to do this." She gladly gave him a mini lesson on drawing eyes, and they both delighted in the results. A admired his drawing, and S felt proud of her successful instruction. A repeated his appreciation for S's drawing skills and thanked her. At this point, S was won over and told A, "Thank you, you're so good at giving compliments!"

After the session, I noted in my journal, "Everyone learned that it's far better to encourage and give compliments than to laugh at each other's work." That afternoon, a clear positive spiral between words and actions occurred. Though they didn't engage in deep conversation, something profound happened through this positive spiral. Drawing together accelerated a vulnerable process of care between the two students. The following week, they continued drawing next to each other, offering help when needed and praising each other's progress.

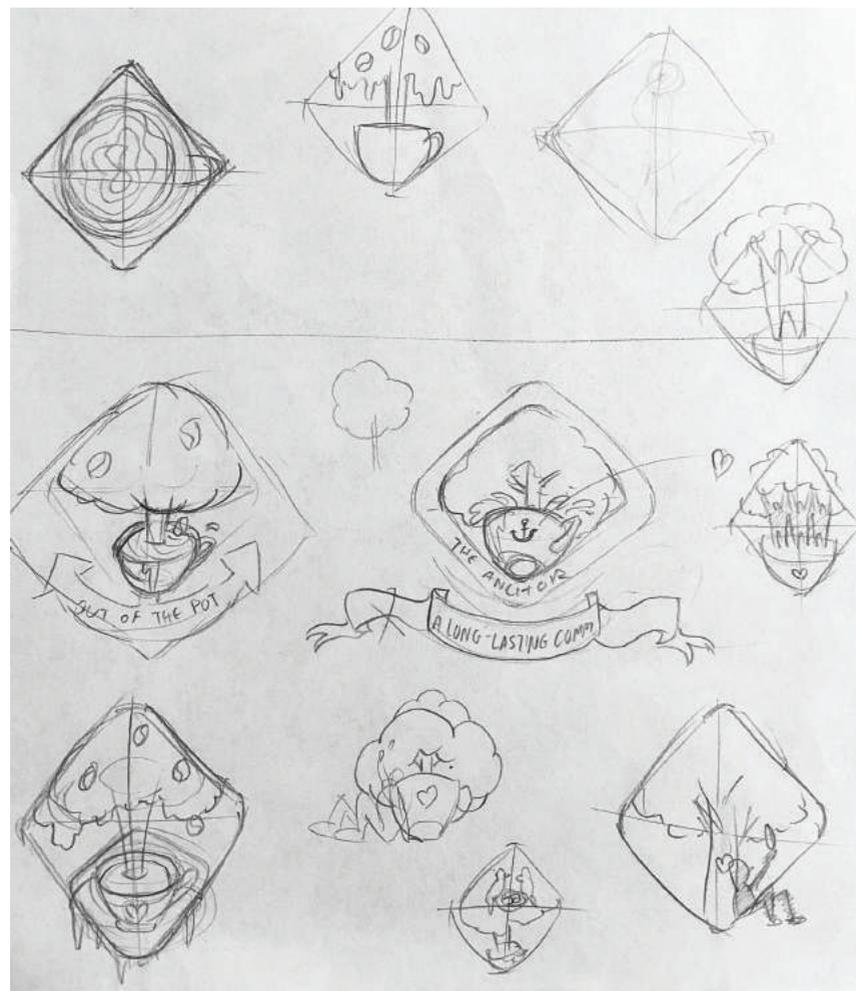
Subverting roles and agency

Drawing together in various ways has shown me how it can subvert traditional student-teacher roles, empowering students to have agency over their artistic process and supporting others in theirs. Particularly in cases of drawing together but separately, where my role is that of a fellow artist, I witness students collaborating with both their peers and myself. On March 1st, 2023, I had a significant moment with a long-term student (“D”) who often works on his manga story:

“I was drawing some logo ideas at the top of the page when D came in. We started drawing together for his story but when he was busy with something, I sketched again on my paper. He then asked what I was doing so I explained I was making a logo. He asked if he could help and we started putting ideas down.

It was a nice co-creation and D was very pleased when I said he contributed to making a really nice logo (which is the truth, it was lots of fun to work with him on it). He mentioned he wanted to maybe be a graphic designer because he enjoyed the process.

We then worked on his story and made some nice steps. At the end of the day we both had something tangible with our own projects.”



Co-created preliminary logo designs

Creativity and storytelling

In this instance, D not only helped me with logo sketches that I genuinely liked, but my response to his assistance encouraged him, showing him that he could contribute to an adult's professional work. It is rare for a fourteen-year-old student to have the opportunity to provide advice and suggestions to an adult, as children are often seen as learners without enough life experience to offer insightful advice. This requires a posture of humility and openness to receive such instruction.⁶

The non-hierarchical nature of drawing together requires a level of humility from the adult for it to be rewarding. If I had approached the situation with guarded pride, thinking something like, "What does he know? He hasn't been creating logos for over ten years. It's cute that he thinks he can help me," both of us would have experienced the moment differently. Unfortunately, I often hear adults condescendingly speak to children in this manner, reinforcing hierarchical norms where children are expected to listen and obey adults, not recognizing their own voice as a valuable contribution.

Drawing together also fosters creativity and deepens our understanding of each other through storytelling. Whether drawing close to someone on separate works or collaboratively on the same piece, there is a cross-pollination of ideas. As social beings, humans are constantly learning from our environment and being influenced by those around us. When we work together creatively, our individual creativity is further inspired by others. In the case of D helping me with logo designs, he had given me inspiration to try out different perspectives for the logo because he himself was busy with drawing a scene of his story from a bird's eye perspective. By engaging in each other's processes, we brought our unique experiences and expertise to push the creative concept further.



⁶ Within the *Sowing Sketchbook*, humility is an important value to grow community.



The memory drawings from my workshop group

Drawing together also prompts stories, both personal and imagined, to flourish. The act of drawing enables us to share a part of ourselves that may be challenging to express through words alone. A powerful example of this occurred during a workshop in my master's program. I had asked participants to draw a childhood memory that brought them happiness, whether through abstract representations or objective drawings. I then invited everyone to share about their drawings. As I listened to the others in my group and learned about their childhood fascinations, I was also aware of the humming sound of others sharing with hardly any moments of silence. Vulnerable moments of pride, fear, excitement and joy were freely exchanged. In my own group, participants shared how their childhood experiences influenced their current interests, or they rediscovered passions forgotten in the busyness of adulthood. With just a prompt, paper, pens, and a group around a table, we all learned something about ourselves and each other.

Drawing Prompt: sketch a memory when you created something with someone.

Reflections about Drawing Together

These past two years have been a labor and struggle for me. In the beginning, I had no idea that delving into researching Redefine Arts and my personal motivations and actions would ask for so much vulnerability. My hyper perfectionism hindered me from critically looking at Redefine Arts as a project because I felt the need to present a flawless image. Therefore, my biggest regret is not letting go of perfectionism earlier. Adopting a more relaxed approach and being open to experimentation would have made the process more enjoyable and less stressful.

However, working against my fear of failure and perfectionism in this research led to insights that I can share with my students and to you. The struggle against perfectionism and striving towards community is a daily process that asks continual effort. Transformational pedagogy impacts all participants, so it is no wonder that I too have been deeply transformed throughout this research. Drawing together has allowed me to explore the intersection of art and life, and I am grateful to have reached a point where I can confidently say why drawing together is so valuable in creating belonging. My practice now has a scaffold that I can refine, experiment with and develop alongside my valuable co-creators – my students.

"We are open" sign hanging on the Redefine Arts door



Epilogue: Next Steps

In retrospect, I recognize the need for clearer separation of each stage of the “spiral” in the methodology. Although the non-linear format complemented the nature of Redefine Arts, this separation of steps would have assisted me in organizing my research into clear themes at a much earlier stage. For example, establishing a structured timeline for reading resources, designing experiments and reflecting on student responses would have been helpful. Now, all of these spiral stages mixed together which made the writing of the sketchbooks more challenging. I believe this complexity arose from the inherent nature of community-based practice, which resists rigid schedules, as well as from my ongoing search to shape Redefine Arts into its own community-based art framework. It is easy to look back on the process and see where changes could have been made, but I wonder if anything could have expedited the necessary process to reach my present position.

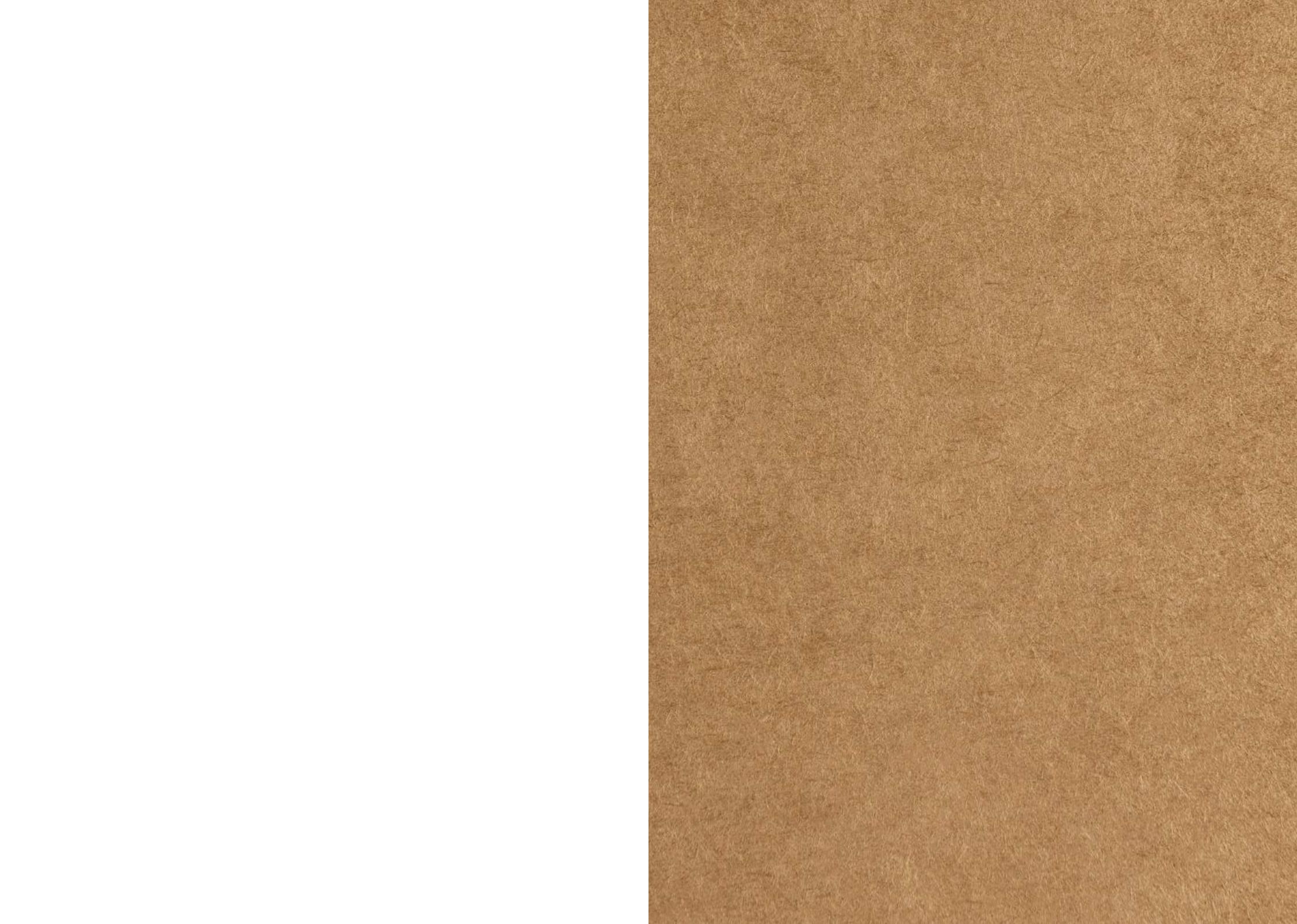
The beauty of this process lies in its continuity. Although these books signify the end of a study trajectory, as Redefine Arts, we will continue to draw together and develop our creative practices. As we draw together, we will share stories around our table, challenge roles and create a safe environment that welcomes everyone. This work is characterized by its quietness, and it is precisely in this quietness that its radicalism is found. We are committed to a long-term process of change, and looking back, we will see the profound impact of our quiet efforts. The harvest day will be a beautiful one, but like any harvest, it will be followed by further sowing, tending, and growth.

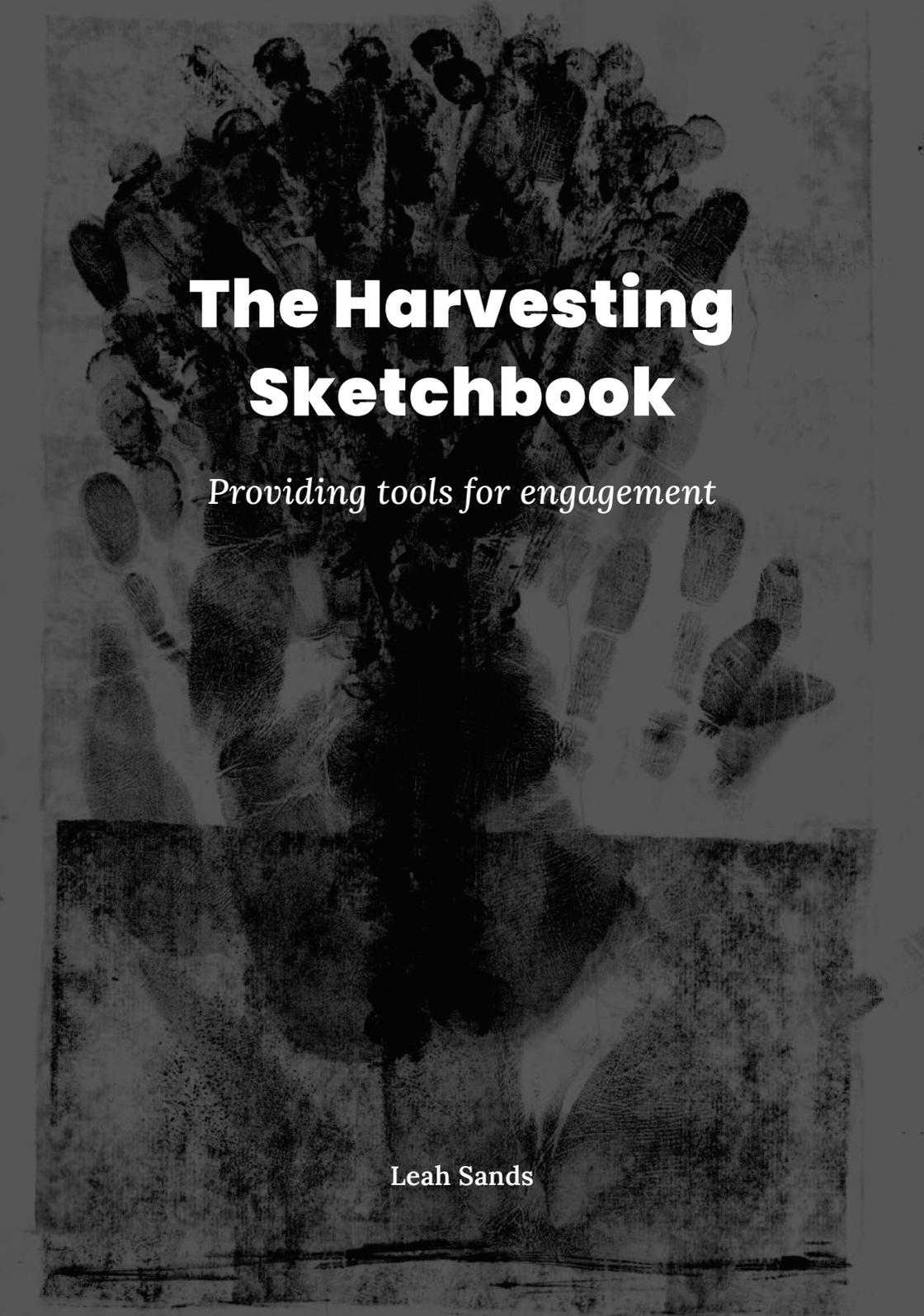
As for myself, I want to share the concept of drawing together as a method for community with others. For this reason, you’ll find two drawing exercises in the *Harvesting Sketchbook* in order to utilize drawing the same way we do at Redefine Arts. I aim to develop more exercises that use drawing to bring people closer to each other and themselves. This may take the form of workshops, speaking engagements, or even another book. Growing in community has been far too important in my life to not share with others. I’m curious to see where all of this leads in the future.



Drawing Prompt: draw out your thoughts as you finish this sketchbook.

Use a concept that you found interesting in your drawing.





The Harvesting Sketchbook

Providing tools for engagement

Leah Sands



Drawing Activities

Tools and goals intertwined

As a wonderful way to synthesize my experiments in drawing together, I would like to offer some exercises that you can practice through drawing in this sketchbook. If you have read the *Nurturing Sketchbook*, you will know that these exercises do not ensure that the “together” part of the drawing will go smoothly. Drawing together in a way that leads to conversations, collaboration and community is a much longer process that involves a constant working out of our personal ethics and tending to the context we work in. Drawing together can however act as a catalyst to create a positive spiral towards safety and belonging in a group. I would like to offer two simple exercises addressing some aspects that I’ve studied. Each exercise uses an aspect of drawing together both as a tool and as a goal (i.e. collaboratively drawing together to learn how to collaborate). There are many more exercises that I have in my pocket, but I hope these two act as a start for the curious reader.

Co-Creation Exercise to Collaborate

As an exercise to open students up to collaborating with others, I have created the exercise of “drawing musical chairs.” The goal of this is for students to let go of authorship in order to create a large collaborative work together. This exercise is about students and yourself having a conversation through your drawings and building them up progressively throughout the activity.



The results of “drawing musical chairs” with students at Redefine Arts

Prep

It starts with a long table, with paper rolled out across it. Every chair around the table must have equal access to the paper, with drawing material (up to you which ones!) scattered around for participants to use. It's best if the chairs are placed close to each other so drawings have to eventually meld into each other: if the space to draw is too large, participants will be tempted to just draw something by themselves in a blank space.

Exercise

The concept of the exercise is musical chairs. Every participant starts at one seat and begins to draw when the music begins. Once the music stops (you decide who controls the music, as long as no one else knows when the music will stop), everyone needs to move one seat to their left. They have some time to study the drawing that's in front of them, but once the music starts again, they need to resume drawing, building upon the drawing that's in front of them. This continues for as many rounds as you would like or until there's no more space on the paper to draw. At the end, make sure to give everyone a chance to look at the collective and wonderfully complicated piece and reflect about their experience.





Tips

It's up to you if you'd like to explain the exercise to the participants. Sometimes it's nice to surprise them with the notion that they have to change seats after the first round when the music stops: it can be playful, but it can also be stressful, so know your group.

Try taking upon yourself to draw differently every time you move spots: make something large, something small, something connecting drawings or something that transforms the original drawing. This will inspire other participants to think outside the box of how they could interact with the drawings around them since they might start out timidly drawing in a blank space every round.

Feel free to use a completely different medium! Drawing together is my method, but you might want to try something else out! This is true of both of these exercises.



Anti-Perfectionism Exercise to Enjoy Failure

This exercise is one of my favorite exercises to do with my students. I've done it in many different contexts outside of Redefine Arts and within, and every time there is a lot of laughter with participants leaving the exercise with positive feelings. It is an exercise with so many limitations, it makes it impossible to draw well. It is a practice in letting go of perfectionism in order to really *observe* and get lines onto paper with one of the most intimidating subjects: live portraits.

Prep

I always have students work in two's, so having a set up where people can sit across from each other is optimal. These pairs can change during the different rounds, but they will always need to have a partner. If there is an uneven number of students, then a group of three can be formed although it is not ideal – in this case, I either jump in to make groups even or not participate so the number stays even. Besides heaps of paper, every participant needs a drawing tool: preferably marker or something that cannot be erased.



Exercise

The goal of this exercise is drawing extremely fast portraits of the person across the table. When I announce this to participants, there is always a nervous laugh that ripples across the group. I then tell them that this is a practice in anti-perfectionism so there are restrictions to ensure that they actually look at the person they are going to draw rather than trying to draw a pretty picture. They are not allowed to look at their paper, and for the first round, they are given two minutes to draw an entire portrait.

A protest of “but it won’t look good” is often heard and that’s exactly the point. We’re all going to draw someone’s likeness very, very poorly, but we will make very interesting lines and therefore drawings. After the two minutes are up, we have a brief moment of looking at our drawings, looking at each other’s drawings (if the participant wants to share), and then we move onto the second round. If they are successful at not looking, then they can look at their paper during the next round. Instead of two minutes, they are only given one minute to make an entire portrait. I always give half way, three-quarters of the way and ten and five second warnings so they know how much time they still have to draw. It ends the same way with sharing every round. Rounds can vary between one minute, two minutes, five minutes and I always do a final one of ten minutes when I feel like they are warmed up. At the very end, participants have a stack of drawings that they made even if at the beginning they said, “I cannot draw someone.”

Tips

With the longer times, especially five minutes, students tend to fall back into perfectionist modes and don't look at their partner instead focusing on their paper. This can be frustrating for their partner because the partner is also busy drawing them - if they are constantly looking at their paper, the partner cannot draw their face. Warn everyone that if their eyes are more focused on their paper than the person across from them, the next round will again be without looking at the paper for everyone, to make it collective.



Space for Creating

This sketchbook intentionally leaves the rest of the pages blank, providing you with the opportunity to practice the exercises. Occasionally, you will come across drawings from Redefine Arts students. You can choose to interact with these drawings, find inspiration from them or look at them and carry on. How you use this space is entirely up to you!



Drawing Together

Leah Sands

The Harvesting Sketchbook

Space for Creating



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