

## *Stitched to the Beat of a Heart, to Comfort the Terrors of the Dark*

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To me Art Therapy signifies the bridge between inner meanings and the outer world of "translations" that try to represent all these unconscious feelings, thoughts, memories, etc. The symbols that we use at a conscious level are very personal/private representations from each person's unique unconscious—and yet simultaneously can aim for mutual comprehension by others so that they might somehow understand what we are trying to convey.

It is in this light that I perceive the "AIDS Quilt" as a spontaneously-created, grass-roots level expression of art used not only as creative product to communicate the remembrance of a life now ended, but also (and simultaneously) as a form of "natural" therapy for all concerned with the Quilt panels' making, viewing, and reflective discussing. The art-making as therapy; the icons, symbols, colors and media within each individual panel as unique, yet frequently (and unknowingly) archetypal; the strong need to have others comprehend the meaning and value of each individual's life; the permanent trace of that person's life that will last long after the tragedy of the death event—all of these communicate to me the healing (and therapeutic) value of this incredible exhibition stitched from people's hearts and minds.

I volunteered to be an "emotional support" worker at the recent local showing of the Quilt. From my experiences I found myself emotionally mandated (from my own unconscious) to write it all down.

There is no single reason for the Quilt; no solitary way to understand it. Death is not that simple; grief cannot be that easily scheduled.

The Quilt started out of grieving individuals' wish to honor their own casualties; it has spread to cover all of humanity as women, babies, and others besides Gay men have died of AIDS and have had their lives marked for remembrance with panels describing their lives and their love. The original territorial possession of the Quilt by the Gay community has given way to more universal mourning.

Some say grief is private and shouldn't be shared

with, or even witnessed by, strangers. Some say once a person has finished grieving you should shut that door and get on with life (while some call that denial of the depth of it and an attempt to put a lid on feelings much too early). Others say that the pain never disappears, that you only learn finally how to live with its presence. Most agree that no one knows when the right time is for another person to finally "let go."

Very simply, those who didn't need or want to be there didn't come—but nearly 15,000 did, and the sheer magnitude of the exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery made the abstract experience of AIDS and its death sentence far more personal and individualized than statistics ever could.

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As he finished viewing the room full of brightly decorated soft fabrics representing our British Columbia deaths, the 60-ish gentleman said to me: "I haven't spoken to my son since the day he told me he was homosexual. I told him that in my mind, I no longer had a son, and that if he got sick with AIDS, that I didn't want to know about it. My wife forced me to come down here, so I did. I warned her that it wouldn't change my mind any . . . but I want to tell you that I'm going home to phone my son right now and try to talk to him if he'll let me . . . before it's too late."

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The whole of it all, the sum of all those hundreds of uniquely memorializing details that define and contain a life of a treasured friend, lover, brother, sister, or child make up a mosaic of raw feelings in people that beg to be verbalized, yet still lose something in their essential intensity as they arise to conscious description. People came, each for their own reasons, with their own expectations of death no longer at arm's length. Others wandered in from other exhibits in the building, not knowing until they found themselves in the midst of it all exactly what they were seeing—and they too usually stayed

on and paused and received whatever messages were their own.

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"This was my brother; he died in Ottawa; his lover made this Quilt and we haven't seen it until today. He asked to be cremated, so there's no gravestone; this is all we've got as a memorial that survives him." She had stood, in tears, before the panel photographing it and being photographed beside it. "I wanted to have a last photo of him, and he died before I could get to Ottawa; this is the next best thing, because he's gone now and we hadn't visited in years."

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Some of the visitors kept their tears clutched tightly to their chest, stories mute, secrets kept. Others would seek out emotional support workers standing nearby and their stories spilled out, flooding details of special moments—how they were connected to this Quilt panel or that, not satisfied with their private grief but finding that it demanded to be witnessed, recorded in the reality of now and in the minds of others so that the memories were kept living.

The anecdotes and explanations validated not only the grief, but also the proof that *this* person mattered, that this life was not in vain or lost to anonymity, and therefore could be seen to have had purpose. It was a salve to those who grieved to see how others were touched enough to pause and read and know and share the pervasive sadness and the insane waste of life.

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"We didn't know our son was Gay until two weeks before he was hospitalized, and then he died that same month. We rushed to be at his bedside down in the States and met his lover, who said he had written us a letter in case we didn't make it in time. I have that letter with me; it's been in my purse, by my heart ever since; would you like to read it? I would like to share it with you."

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The names were read each hour; those who had died sometimes identified by full name, sometimes by first name or coded initials only. It crept into my ears as I wandered through the exhibit; sometimes I felt punched in the chest as I heard a name I recognized, but hadn't expected to be dead. Most people were overwhelmed long before halfway round the exhibit. Eyes and hearts saturated, viewers appeared stunned and muted.

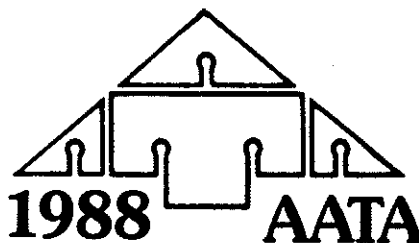
To me it's not just an AIDS Quilt—but it's also a universal grief Quilt. A Quilt to comfort against the terrors of the dark, hugging warmth tightly around.

I watched as it tucked people into their memories and thoughts; the pervasive sadness at a deeply subconscious archetypal level beyond individual stories became also empowering, the isolation joining through its crushing grief into community of shared experience. It originally belonged to people losing lovers, but in its "spread of hope" it has moved beyond that into the very fragility of life and our own mortality.

One answer I find myself giving about the power of the Quilt is that it quickly becomes clear that you don't have to be Gay to understand, and that once you've encountered the Quilt and its message of love-and-loss, that differences may not make such a difference anymore. It is not just a sadness, but also a stubborn defiance.

Five panels were added during the exhibit; two Vancouver people died of AIDS during the five days while it was displayed. It was not what made "them" so different from "us" that hits us all so hard, but what makes us all so much the same in our vulnerable human fragility, the much-too-early deaths so unjustly imposed. Certainly, tears do not have any sexual politics.

NOTE: Sections of this Viewpoints article were previously published in an article on the Editorial page of the *Vancouver SUN*, July 22, 1989.



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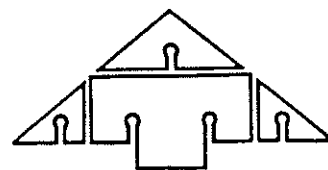
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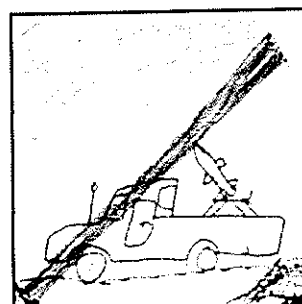
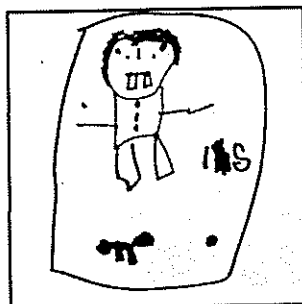
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## Editorial

Gary C. Barlow, EdD, ATR ..... 90

### Letter to the Editor

Rawley Silver, EdD, ATR ..... 91

## Articles

### *Characteristics of Artwork in Children with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Northern Ireland*

Terry J. Tibbetts, PhD, ATR ..... 92

### *Change: The Reality of the Mental Health Providers' World in the 1990's*

Shirley Riley, ATR, MFCC ..... 99

### *Art Therapy Education at the Crossroads*

Harriet Wadeson, PhD, ATR ..... 103

### *Beyond Psychic Numbing: Child Art Therapy and the Nuclear Taboo*

Ellen Speert, MEd, ATR ..... 106

## Viewpoints

### *Stitched to the Beat of a Heart, to Comfort the Terrors of the Dark*

Judy Weiser, MEd, ATR, RSW ..... 113

## Reviews

### *Advances in Art Therapy*

by: Harriet Wadeson, PhD, ATR, Jean Durkin, MA and  
Dorine Perach, MA

Reviewer: Winnie J. Ferguson, PhD, ATR ..... 115

### *Gods in Everyman: A New Psychology of Men's Lives and Loves*

by: Jean Shinoda Bolen, PhD

Reviewer: Joseph Mancini, Jr., PhD, MSW ..... 117

### *Adolescent Art Therapy*

by: Debra Greenspoon Linesch, MA, ATR

Reviewer: Susan Evans Spaniol, MA, ATR ..... 119

## About Our Cover

"Pumpkin Patch" is a cut-paper, marker and paint collage done by an 11-year-old boy with severe attention deficit disorders and perceptual problems. This artwork was done during an art therapy summer camp for children at the Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio.

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

ART THERAPY is the official journal of the American Art Therapy Association. The purpose of the journal is to advance the understanding of how art functions in the education, enrichment, development, and treatment of people. The journal provides a scholarly forum for divergent points of view on art therapy and strives to present a broad spectrum of ideas in therapy, practice, and research. An emphasis will be placed on the visual arts but articles in related disciplines that have relevance to art therapists will also be published.

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