

*Improvised Mark-Making:
The Mobile Painting Device,
Repurposed Everyday Tools, and
Traditional Dance*



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Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

The Mobile Painting Device (MPD) will be attached to wheelchairs and large-scale paintings will be created. Other adaptive pieces of equipment will be repurposed into makeshift mark-making devices. Improvisation, spontaneity, and innovation will be key aspects of this activity. The use of crutches and canes will very much be stressed throughout this activity, as well as anything else that is readily available in just about any elder care setting. This activity can take place over two sessions, although a minimum of three sessions is strongly recommended. Music, dance, and movement can be used to augment the creative experience. Music, dance, and movement will also help ease participants into the painting process, and will provide context and direction to the overall project. This is an opportunity to introduce the traditional arts into a contemporary setting. Thus, working with dancers is very much recommended. (To see a video of this project conduct an internet search of “Yes, I am Free: The Inspiration of Dance and Paint.”)

TIME:

Four and a half hours to six and a half hours over three sessions; preparation time is one to two hours. (Session 1 is thirty minutes, Session 2 is two to three hours, and Session 3 is a repeat of the activities explored in Session 2. Two painting sessions are recommended.)

MATERIALS:

- 2 sheets of 4' x 8' x ½" – ¾" thick plywood (good one side)
- Attach 1" x 3" frame to back of wood for installation
- Prime all wood with flat white latex paint, using black latex paint to finish the edges
- OR, instead of plywood, use 12' x 12' canvas or larger (canvas drop cloth from large home improvement stores works great)
- Prime canvas with flat white latex paint
- Washing tubs (4)
- Bag of cloth rags (1)
- Paint rollers and trays (2 of each)
- Crutches, canes, walkers, etc.
- Wheelchairs (manual or electric, depending on the physical capacity of participants)
- Mobile Painting Device (if available; a swiveling fifth wheel covered with imitation wool that is attached to a wheelchair by a metal arm onto which paint is dispensed through a funnel and rolled onto the canvas; contact Jeff Nachtigall, inventor of the Mobile Painting Device, for further information)
- Flat latex house paint (1 gallon each of red, blue, yellow, and white [Glidden Brand])
- Empty 1-quart yogurt containers (10-20)
- Paint stir sticks (10)
- Plastic sheets to cover tables

- Vinyl tarps (1 or 2) to cover floor (the larger the better, 16' x 16' minimum)
- Latex gloves
- Large rolls of duct tape (3)
- Large folding table for paint mixing
- Stretcher (used to stretch the canvas after the painting is finished. Note: This is for display purposes, and a skilled professional should be contracted to do this work, if you do not have the capacity to do so internally.)
- Lots of good music! (Have a good audio system to play music during the activity.)
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

This activity addresses loneliness and boredom as a collaborative, community-based project that increases social interaction between all participants. It is designed to be inclusive, engaging, and empowering, as it blurs the lines between residents, staff, volunteers, and family members. The sense of helplessness is addressed through the use of equipment, such as wheelchairs and canes, which people with mobility issues already utilize. Everyone can participate in the creative process and celebrate in the final product, as it hangs on the wall as a living monument to the entire creative community.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDIES:

“At an individual level, participants indicated that they had gained a sense of achievement through their creations and discovered creative skills and abilities they never knew they had. However, it was the social benefits that participants highlighted most often—suggesting that the program had offered increased opportunities for neighbors getting together, and a sense of belonging to something positive in a community which was perceived as being bereft of social activities and community spirit.”

--Murray, M., and A. Crummett. “I Don't Think They Knew We Could Do These Sorts of Things’: Social Representations of Community and Participation in Community Arts by Older People.” Journal of Health Psychology 15, no. 5 (2010): 777-785.

“The purpose of this study was to describe the phenomenon of social dancing in the care of persons with dementia in a nursing home setting. Social dancing is an activity that has taken place once a month regularly during the last 10 years at a nursing home in Stockholm. The period of data collection for this study was the year 1995. At the time of the investigation, the subjects were in special units for persons with dementia. The analysis is based on the data contained in five 45-minute video tapes. ... The results suggested that dance music was a good stimulus for making social contacts. The earlier-trained social patterns, old social habits, and general rules seemed to awaken to life in the persons with dementia. It was important that the caregivers showed individual creativity, spontaneity, and supportive nursing care. Social dancing at the nursing home was found in this

study to be very positive and successful for patients with dementia.”

[Abstract]

--Palo-Bengtsson, L. and S.L. Ekman. "Social Dancing in the Care of Persons with Dementia in a Nursing Home Setting: A Phenomenological Study." Scholarly Inquiry for Nursing Practice II, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 101-18; discussion 119-23.

Cover photo: Dakotah/Hidatsa elder, traditionalist, dancer, and storyteller Mary Louise Defender Wilson helps direct the creation of a Medicine Wheel through dance and the use of the Mobile Painting Device, Ellendale, ND. (Image by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

Activity Plan

PREPARATION (1 TO 2 HOURS):

1. This activity can take place indoors or outdoors, weather permitting.
2. Spread a large vinyl tarp (16' x 16' minimum, 20' x 20' is recommended) on the floor.
3. Secure tarp to the floor with duct tape.
4. Lay out canvas (12' x 12' or larger) on top of tarp.
5. Secure canvas to tarp with duct tape. (Be sure to pull the canvas taught and stretch the canvas as you tape it to the tarp.)



Michifiddler James “Cubby” LaRocque performs while an elder care resident utilizes the Mobile Painting Device. Note how the tarp was stretched first with vertical strips of duct tape and then secured with duct tape running along the edges. Note, too, how the canvas was stretched and secured similarly on top of the tarp. (Image by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

6. Prime canvas with a single coat of white latex paint. (Use a roller on an extension pole, so that you don't have to bend down.)

7. Let dry overnight.

8. Pour each gallon of paint into smaller, quart-size containers. (Yogurt containers work well.)

9. Mix desired colors (Red + Yellow = Orange; Red + Blue = Purple; Yellow + Blue = Green).



(Image courtesy of Jeff Nachtigall.)



(Image courtesy of Jeff Nachtigall.)

10. Set washtubs filled with soapy water and cloth rags to the side. (These will be used to wash the tires of the wheelchairs once participants have driven on the canvas and through the paint. They will be used to wash the hands and feet of participants, as well. Cold water works best for washing wheelchair tires. Cool to room-temperature water is recommended for washing participants' hands and feet.)



Volunteers wash the feet of elders in Wahpeton, ND. (Image by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

11. Gather a host of familiar props, such as crutches, canes, walkers, wheelchairs, brooms, sticks, or anything else that can be used to make a mark.

12. Wrap cotton rags on the ends of the chosen props and affix with duct tape.



Using a cane with cloth duct-taped to the end to make marks in the creation of a large contemporary painting, Enderlin, ND. (Image by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

13. Purchase or download a “color wheel” to assist in selecting and mixing colors.

SESSION 1 (30 MINUTES):

1. In this short session, the person directing the activity should conduct a brief discussion and sharing of dance experiences with the participants. The goal of this session is to get the elders thinking about and moving to the sound of music in preparation for the main activity of painting with movement, music, and dance.
2. Begin by explaining to the participants that they will have a movement and music session. Read “The Man in the Long Coat (Version 1),” from page 7 of the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Then play a fiddle tune, a waltz, or something slow. (Many fiddle tunes can be found online. If possible, play a Michif or Metis fiddle tune, as the story just read comes from that group of people.) Ask the participants to close their eyes and move their hands and feet to the sound of the music. For those with canes, ask them to move their canes on the floor to the flow of the music. (Have a good sound system, so that the music can be heard by all.) Ask them to imagine a time when they danced or to just imagine themselves dancing right now.
3. After the tune is done, ask the participants if they danced when they were younger and at what kind of events did they dance. The person directing the activity should encourage the participants to share their experiences by sharing some of his or her own. To help spark conversation, read “A Big Occasion,” from page 206 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. Ask other kinds of questions, like what kind of dances did you dance? What kind of music did you dance to? Polkas, waltzes, schottisches, the Butterfly Dance, the Chicken Dance? Play another

tune, again having the participants close their eyes and move to the music.

4. Tell the group that some dances, such as those from India, are very complex. Read “Kathak: A Storytelling Dance,” from page 39 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. The person directing the session should then demonstrate the hand gestures for “offering,” “lotus flower,” and “two deer facing each other,” as pictured on page 39. Have the elders make the same hand gestures as best they can.
5. At the conclusion of the activity, tell those in attendance that in the next session they will create a large painting using music, movement, and dance. Encourage them to attend to see how this will be done and to participate while having fun. Explain that things like crutches, canes, and even wheelchairs will be used to create the painting and that anybody can participate.
6. If the person leading the session wants to end with a funny movement activity, lead the group in the clapping game “My Boyfriend Tony,” which can be found on page 260 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*.

SESSION 2 (2 TO 3 HOURS):

1. Invite participants to gather around the canvas. Music, movement, and dance can be incorporated into the improvised mark-making experience and will act as an accessible creative entry point. This will help contextualize the session and provide direction for reluctant participants. Encourage participants to move their adaptive devices or dance to the music to create marks on the canvas.
2. Clearly explain the process and the intent of the activity. Improvisation will play a key role. There are no mistakes. Simply explore the types of marks that can be made using non-traditional tools, such as crutches, canes, brooms, wheelchairs, and so on!



Note the marks made from electric wheelchair tracks, shoes, feet, and the concentric rubber ends of canes and walkers. (Images by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

3. Have the group choose colors for the project. One color should be applied at a time. Keep in mind that certain colors do not mix well when wet, so limit your palette for each session to colors that will work or mix well together. Once the paint is thoroughly dry, a new palette of colors can be applied. This usually will happen the next day. This can continue on for multiple sessions, applying a rainbow of colors over an extended period of time, or over the course of a single afternoon with a single selected palette. Use a “color wheel” as a guide when selecting the palette for each session.

4. Set out the paint and the mark-making tools and begin. Encourage each participant to make a mark, any mark. If you have the Mobile Painting Device, the person directing the activity will attach it to the wheelchairs of the selected participants.



Artist Jeff Nachtigall attaching the Mobile Painting Device to an electric wheelchair; Jamestown, ND. (Image by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)



Paint poured into the funnel allows gravity to pull the paint downwards through a tube and onto a thick, shaggy cloth wrapped around a wheel that swivels as the wheelchair moves. The paint is in this way applied to the canvas. (Image by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

5. Use music and dance to help with the painting process. Move the paint around to the sound of the music or in step with the dance. Have dancers participate, and allow them to dance with those who are making marks on the canvas.

6. The music or dance facilitator will lead this portion of the project, working in conjunction with the artists in the room. The dance facilitator will help “move” the paint around the canvas. This will successfully merge different creative mediums, including traditional dance and music.



Elder care facility director Jerry Trupka waltzes with a resident as the Mobile Painting Device applies paint in the pattern of the dance on the canvas. James “Cubby” LaRocque performs traditional Michif tunes, Wahpeton, ND. (Image by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)



With paint poured on the canvas at their feet, residents, staff, and volunteers move to the fiddle music of James “Cubby” LaRocque, thereby creating designs for the painting, Wahpeton, ND. One resident relayed how she looked into the paint and imagined her children running through mud puddles. (Image by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)



With traditional East Indian music playing in the background, Bharatanatyam dancer Margreat Sam helps direct the flow of paint by dancing with the residents. One resident uses the Mobile Painting Device, while another uses a cloth attached to a handle. (Image by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)



As traditional Irish music plays, Maureen McDonald Hins performs a traditional dance with a resident as they leave paint patterns with the Mobile Painting Device and their shoes, Enderlin, ND.



Resident in care facility in Ellendale, ND, uses the Mobile Painting Device to apply paint to a large canvas on the floor. She is moving to the sound of Dakotah Sioux traditional music.



Maureen McDonald Hins leads residents in a group Irish dance as they leave their marks with feet, walkers, and rags attached to the ends of canes and dipped in paint.



Dakotah/Hidatsa elder, storyteller, dancer, and traditionalist Mary Louise Defender Wilson leads care facility residents and volunteers in a traditional Dakotah healing dance. Using the Mobile Painting Device and their feet, a Medicine Wheel was created, Ellendale, ND.

(All images above provided courtesy of Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

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7. Continue “painting” and “making marks” until the group is satisfied. This project works best over a number of sessions, slowly layering color after color until the group is satisfied with what has been created. Remember, less is more! Do not feel that every color has to be applied and that numerous days have to be spent painting. Sometimes a couple of sessions and a limited palette reveal the best and most profound results.

8. Clean as you go. Paint has a tendency to find its way onto just about everything, so make sure you have plenty of staff and/or volunteers on hand, armed at the ready with rags and soapy water. If the Mobile Painting Device is being used, a dedicated wheelchair clean-up station will need to be set up. This will consist of a large tub of soapy water, rags for washing, and towels for drying. Thoroughly clean the tires of each wheelchair, as well as the hands and feet of the participants. If possible, this can be done outdoors.

9. Let the canvas dry between layers.



*Children in Wahpeton, ND, who participated with the elders in creating the painting, also volunteer to help wash up afterwards.
(Image by Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)*

SESSION 3 (2 TO 3 HOURS):

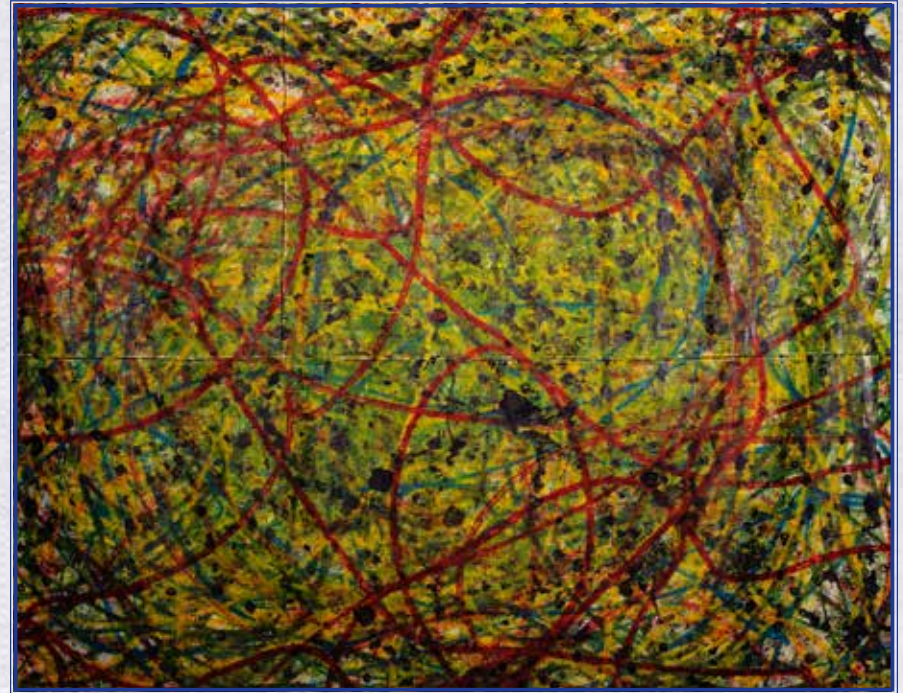
1. Repeat the same process as in Session 2, but this time with different colors of paint.
2. Once the painting is finished, let it dry for 24 hours.
3. The canvas can be mounted on a wooden stretcher and/or framed for display. This will require sourcing out a professional, who can help to execute this task.
4. The final product should be displayed in a professional manner and celebrated as a living monument to the entire community's creativity.



Three of four paintings created using repurposed mark-making, the Mobile Painting Device, and traditional dance on exhibit at the Jamestown Fine Arts Center, Jamestown, ND. (Photo courtesy of Sally Jeppson, Jamestown Fine Arts Association.)



Painting produced using creative mark-making, the Mobile Painting Device, and East Indian Bharatanatyam dance, Jamestown, ND. Made in partnership with Heritage Centre and Ave Maria Village (eldercare facilities) in Jamestown, the Jamestown Fine Arts Association, and the North Dakota Council on the Arts. (Photo courtesy of Kenneth Andersen.)



Painting produced using creative mark-making, the Mobile Painting Device, and traditional Irish dance, Enderlin, ND. Made in partnership with Maryhill Manor (an Eldercare facility) in Enderlin, the Enderlin Fine Arts Association, and the North Dakota Council on the Arts. (Photo courtesy of Kenneth Andersen.)



Painting produced using creative mark-making, the Mobile Painting Device, and traditional Michif music and movement, Wahpeton, ND. Made in partnership with Siena Court (an eldercare facility) in Wahpeton, the Three Rivers Arts Council, Wahpeton Parks and Recreation Department, and the North Dakota Council on the Arts. (Photo courtesy of Kenneth Andersen.)



Medicine Wheel painting produced using creative mark-making, the Mobile Painting Device, and traditional Dakotah/Hidatsa dance, Ellendale, ND. Made in partnership with Prince of Peace Care Center and Evergreen Place Assisted Living (eldercare facilities) in Ellendale, the Ellendale Area Arts Council, and the North Dakota Council on the Arts. (Photo courtesy of Kenneth Andersen.)

AUTHOR • JEFF NACHTIGALL:

Jeff is an established artist whose work has been exhibited in North America, Europe, and China. He also is a facilitator, speaker, and social entrepreneur who has led dozens of residencies and workshops, lectured in communities across Canada and the United States, and given keynote addresses at national conferences on the arts and aging.

In 2007, Jeff developed Open Studio Projects (www.openstudioprojects.com), a model that he has successfully replicated throughout Canada and the United States. This inclusive, non-hierarchical, community-centered strategy challenges traditional clinical approaches and pushes the boundaries of the arts in healthcare. This model has evolved and grown into a community-based practice, engaging marginalized groups across North America in art interventions that act as a catalyst for social change. Jeff is also the designer and inventor of the Mobile Painting Device (MPD). The MPD transforms the wheelchair into a giant paintbrush, giving people who live with neurological deficits the opportunity to express themselves on a very large scale.

Twice shortlisted for the Lieutenant Governor's Award in Arts and Learning, Jeff consults with communities and organizations across Canada, Australia, and the United States.

AUTHOR • TROYD GEIST:

Troyd is the state folklorist with the North Dakota Council on the Arts who is charged with encouraging the preservation and continuation of folk and traditional arts, heritage, and culture. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Sociology/Anthropology from North Dakota State University, and has participated in and conducted projects involving the impact of folk art and folk traditions on personal health and well-being. Those efforts include traditional storytellers working with fetal alcohol research and prevention programs, Bell's palsy as viewed and treated in traditional cultures, familial Alzheimer's disease tracking using anthropological methods, and the use of culturally infused narrative and traditional music for guided imagery. He directed the original *Art for Life* pilot project in 2001-2003, which measured the effects of long-term folk arts and artist interaction on combating the negative impact of the "Three Plagues" (loneliness, boredom, and helplessness) that many residents in elder care facilities experience. Subsequently, he developed the *Art for Life Program*. With Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, Troyd co-edited, co-compiled, and co-authored the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*.