

Concept Paper

**Homebody: Art Therapy and the Art of Possessions**

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doi:10.21926/obm.icm.2403056**Received:** June 07, 2024**Accepted:** September 05, 2024**Published:** September 25, 2024**Abstract**

This concept paper is proposing the inclusion of the home studio as an art making location for art therapy trainees who assemble personal belongings, within the context of their domestic lives. A collection of belongings can become an installation which brings together associations to identities in juxtaposition. The material culture of art therapy trainees, the objects which they live by, is a new contribution to art therapy pedagogy, as it designates the art of personal collections as a life archive (or accumulation) that is close at hand and already available. This collection of household artefacts teaches students how to honour the object collections of their clients, who are experts with lived experience of how to arrange legacies of gathering, consumption, inheritance, and gifted items. What follows is a proposal describing how home arrangements can signify personal associations to meaning and to an ethos of respecting what becomes us in terms of what we already own. The home studio is a key concept in this exploration of material culture as it relates to art therapy. This is a recognition of how a curation of possessions (where we place our belongings) is noteworthy as an act of agency and reflective practice within art therapy training and within the lives of those who participate in art therapy services. Recognising the significance of one's lived-with objects, as navigation



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points of identity, values the culture of their curator who identifies the meaning of what they own as material assets.

### Keywords

Art therapy; material culture; home; found objects; art therapy pedagogy

## 1. Material Culture: Belongings as Art Collection

The term material culture refers to what people own in terms of functional and symbolic objects. It acknowledges the materials we live with in terms of furniture, utensils, ornaments, books, art, trinkets, curios, tools, clothing, and so on [1]. These are the artefacts which perform an autobiographical archaeology “The most basic information about ourselves as human beings [...] has been traditionally conveyed to us by the use of artefacts” ([2], p. 93). They represent identity as a totality of belongings that are in daily contact with lived experience. These objects materialise memory and associations to life activities that are not so much extraordinary, but necessary for the maintenance of domestic living and household functioning. The home as studio contains the paraphernalia that is associated to our existence and their display can become a focus point for reflecting upon life as an index of what we live with [3].

Bachelard’s contemplation of the poetics of space has correspondence to material culture in relation to his use of the word *topoanalysis*, which refers to “the study of the sites in our intimate lives” ([4], p. 8). He refers to the homeplace as being a theatre with different stage settings corresponding to the use of rooms and their contents. These affordances of materials receive the imprints of life interactions, which Ingold [5] has referred to as an entanglement between humans and the objects they live with. The rhythms of movements, with objects at home, are pathways of engagement within domestic life that act as conduits of identity in action. The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre [6] references rhythms to describe interactions between a place, time and phenomena and how they link together energetically and through context. The rhythms of domestic life are interactive and exist within multiple sites in the homeplace. Materialities of home offer opportunities for engagement and expression—domestic wayfaring exists amongst materials that scaffold us in terms of supporting functional, leisure and essential life supports. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, philosopher Michel de Certeau [7] describes how people can create with their life materials—the altering and re-purposing of life possessions designating a strategy that subverts commercial consumerism. By appropriating materials at hand, an individual is not so much a consumer, but an activist who practices everyday life through inhabiting living spaces in personalised ways. Readymade art can occupy a *mise en scène* (a display of objects) as a portrayal of becoming an artist in residence within one’s home [8].

Adams [9] has described readymade art as transitional objects with self-soothing properties in reference to Winnicott’s appreciation of how intermediary objects accompany experiences in the making [10]. Readymade art, best known through the creations made by artist Marcel Duchamp, alters the function of manufactured objects so they become more than their intended use. Duchamp was a key figure in the Dada art movement, which promoted resistance through transforming material reality, and resisting authority [9]. As an aesthetic theory, Dada gave free rein to the

psychological ambivalence expressed by opposites [in order to] gain access to the unconscious by spontaneous free association [...] or happenstance” ([9], p. 191). Using bricolage Duchamp highlighted the significance of both selection and combination as acts of symbolic agency and storytelling. Winnicott [10] believed that objects could encourage a movement between a person’s inner and outer worlds as they represented two types of reality—the psychological interior and exterior. The intermediate area between objects in the home can be considered a transactional space, whereby objects can represent behavioural patterns which compose a *psychobiography* of object handling [7]. Art therapist Julie Brooker [11] describes the use of found objects in art therapy as the ability to engage with chance encounters with domestic belongings. She encourages art therapy clients to bring objects from home into their art therapy sessions, so as to recontextualise their function into a psychological collage or a network of finds that also depicts routes of foraging [11]. Whereas there has been a resurgence in the use of found objects within art therapy [12], the emphasis on material culture is a neglected contribution to the profession.

## **2. Material Culture as Art Therapy**

During COVID 19 art therapy trainees at the Belfast School of Art developed home studios as part of a teaching collaboration with ceramics lecturer Chris McHugh, who introduced the subject area of material culture as a way to support each learner’s material heritage. This learning and teaching partnership developed into a feature of online training, and then established itself as a signature pedagogy of the course itself.

Reimagining the significance of our belongings, contributes to diversity education in the way that possessions represent their owners in distinctive ways [...]. These items may be a combination of functional objects, bric-a-brac, heirlooms, trinkets, souvenirs, handmade artworks and the ephemera of possessions in general—no object is excluded, and all material contributions are welcome in the production of home [13].

Art therapy may have an affiliation with bought materials, however the additional use of found objects has significance as foraged discoveries, which bring parts into a whole. Material culture recognises objects as personal collections that are bespoke and which characterise a life story. “Objects-as-personal-possession regularly inform narratives about a person’s life experiences and personal history, linking what they have to some notion of who they are, and in essence, helping to form their identity ([14], p. 152). Hurdley [3] uses the term authorship to describe a life story through objects that represents chapters and scenes within a person’s life.

As an example of repurposed artistry, using materials at hand honours the vernacular culture of home. For art psychotherapy trainees this methodology [is] also applicable to their practicum work with clients in a variety of clinical and community contexts. Rather than art psychotherapy trainees deciding which materials are brought to the table, their clients can be invited to bring what they need from home. As artists in their own residence art psychotherapy service users are familiar with what matters in terms of their meaningful possessions [13].

Possessions develop a portraiture of a person in their aggregate of associations to life experiences. Deleuze and Guattari [15] describe our use of life materials in terms of motion and becoming. Materials are coordinates for identity as a kind of *eventscape*, meaning they can be

understood through a series of life events where their use or handling is demonstrated. The affordances of materials, what they offer us, are a means by which we conduct our lives [5]. Domestic artefacts tell stories, and as such should be included within art therapy. Hurdley [3] asserts that we perform our lives through the stuff all around us, which can also be considered a form of life-sized visual journalling. Figure 1 and Figure 2 are examples of assembling personal possessions in the home environment by art therapy trainees in response to the theme of centrepiece. A centrepiece is a curated home display, a composition that exists as a focal point for observing objects in relationship to one another. It is simultaneously a menagerie, mixed media artwork and bricolage composed of available material contributions.



**Figure 1** Centrepiece. Photo Credit, Juliet Ashe.



**Figure 2** Ode to Autumn. Photo Credit, Megan McLaughlin.

The hearth of home is a symbolic reference to home making, and the creation of an intimate environment as autobiography. In relation to art therapy, the home place is an artistic endeavour, or life project, that is responded to in the everyday. As art therapy is typically executed outside of home, the materials of art making are often selected by the art therapist, rather than the art therapy participant. The challenge is to create an art therapy space that extends hospitality and comfort. To invite the home studio into the art therapy studio, is an act of humility and co-production. Co-production within art therapy recognises the expertise of lived experience [16, 17]. It asks the question who controls art therapy, and who determines what materials are available for use? The material culture of art therapy participants contributes to the production of the art therapy studio. It is a contribution of their life history as a maker using what they have around them. Using affordable and obtainable materials encourages a continuation of art making after the completion of art therapy [18], as the art materials are not specifically associated with an art therapy location. “Discarded objects can be given a second chance or a new life that can parallel a client’s creative process” ([18], p.33). Using materials at hand can overcome anxieties of how to use bought art media, which may associate to the discipline of fine art.

Co-design respects the material preferences of art therapy participants and could be considered an attribute of anti-oppressive practice, which honours the realities of lived experiences by

addressing intersectionality [19]. The intersections of a person's material culture represents the passageways of identity, which are impacted by real world experiencing. Materials may associate to life experiences across the ages and reference class, gender, race, disability, ethnicity and sexuality. Often, art therapy exists as a place apart, sealed off from the world by the boundaries of a room prepared for use by an art therapist. As such the art therapy space may not provide an environment that acknowledges home culture and materials that speak to the art therapy service user. The home studio can develop place attachment in terms of relationality and by occupying household space in a way that becomes an act of placemaking. "It is the material quality of space and the particular usages of space that instil a feeling of attachment and home in people" ([20], p. 26) (Figure 2).

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton note that our spatiotemporal environment is culturalised by the activities that we execute within our surroundings over time ([2], p. 21). In this context, the philosophical practices of Deleuze and Guattari apply well to art therapy, as a navigation across territories of life in the making [15]. Rather than focusing upon self-actualisation as a one-dimensional goal, Deleuze and Guattari [15] extend subjectivity in all directions through a rhizomatic processing of identity across differing locations. This is a form of human geography in the home landscape, which features relationships between people and their things as an extended terrain of identity occupations. The ecology of the homeplace consists of our assembly of subjectivity as being multiple and moving across different kinds of spaces, which evoke emotional, nostalgic and metaphoric resonances. "Art therapy is not a reductive exercise, its artworks are not fixed in representation, but rather exist as a series of ecological thresholds that hold the potential for the next transformation of experience" ([21], p. 348). By promoting the art of home, art therapy trainees can support an ethos of inclusion, whereby art therapy becomes best suited to honouring lived experience. The recognition of each person's distinct collection of home is also a representation of diversity and complexity, and a way to explore an art therapy client's narrative more deeply [22].

### **3. The Art of Homecoming**

Material cultural is the ephemera of the objects we live with that we call our own and exhibit in our own personalised cultural arena [8]. For art therapy trainees it is an opportunity to realise the potential of home care for self-care and for developing artistic ingenuity with found art materials that can produce a tableau or object portraiture. "Everyone can be a curator in their own home and appreciate what they already have as being enough" [13]. A display of belongings is an art installation and therapeutic landscape [23], which can be a form of home making in between art therapy sessions, acknowledging the art therapy service user as an artist in their home studio. "Transactions between people and their things [...] constitutes a central aspect of the human condition" ([2], p.ix). The use of objects are intrinsic to human development in the way they are used in the making of a life and as a form of storytelling. As both essential and relatable fixtures of daily life, household artefacts declare a trajectory of use that are not apart from their everyday functions.

By creating their own displays with personal effects, art therapy trainees can bring together episodes of their life experience through a vernacular use of their worldly goods, which most truly represents their subjectivity across their lifetime. Their home studio practice can be a means of welcoming the material cultures of art therapy service users, bringing to the fore their archive of personal objects as memoir. The re-ordering of one's environment can simultaneously order one's

own thoughts, and for this reason rearranging can be restorative, “the value of moving furniture [and possessions] is that [...] it impresses a feeling of newness and change within the domestic environment as the need arises ([24], p. 53). Art therapy’s commitment to domestic life can ensure an ethics of care towards art therapy participants who are experts in their own material choices. It’s important not to make decisions about art materials people should work with, but rather encourage people’s pride in choices that are unique to themselves.

#### **4. The Home Studio in Art Therapy**

The aim of this article was to showcase the use of the home studio as a place based ethics of care for both art therapy trainees and the people they serve. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton refer to a household as an ecology that shapes aesthetic experience through transactions of handling [2]. The therapeutic message conveyed is that what we possess has creative potential for reflection, repurposing and agency. Our resources, in terms of what belongs to us, are always close by. The capacity to assemble, rearrange, and re-order personal artefacts bestows a narrative with a message that we can initiate change. Starting at home, the movement of objects can represent changemaking with what is already available to us. There is an appreciation of the home studio as a place of experimentation and artistry in relation to site specific displays as art installations. “Objects can be a way of relating; acting as a bridge from one point in life to another, and helping people to become more engaged with their environment” ([14], p. 158). Developing comfortzones at home nurtures the potential to do so in other living spaces that can also be impacted through rearrangement. The commonplace cannot be taken for granted and life studios, either at home or civic society, can be focal points for curation. The domestic interiors and exteriors of our lives can be opportunities to generate artistry and impact. Possessions are an archive of identity and there is a relational materiality in how the assemblages of things, architecture and surrounding environments hold people together. Our attachments to objects extends our identity into things we can control [14]. The verification function of material objects evidences “significant life events...linked to specific times, places, and situations...which serve an important autobiographical function” ([14], p.153).

Participants in art therapy can photograph displays in their home studios for inclusion within art therapy. These photographs document a curation of household materials and how they can compose a three dimensional journal of domestic arrangements. This is an archive of object relations, which chronicles a material companionship with domestic life [25] Reordering and repositioning one’s objects can give a different feel to a living area; there is a sense of revitalisation in what is already familiar [26]. Environments should be enabling and support bodily integrity in terms of promoting security, protection and rejuvenation—in other words the homebody is our lived-in habitat [27].

Unlike other aspects of decoration, reordering one’s house holds slightly different connotations than refurbishment...life circumstances have an impact on experiences of place...Therefore, while reordering might be discussed in terms of tidying up, moving [household objects]...is an attempt to revigorate a perception of staleness or impose a missing dynamism ([26], pp. 52-53).

The acknowledgement of material culture within art therapy training and services is fundamentally an honouring of people’s personal lives. Belongings compose domestic life and they are essential to making homes function as support structures. Material culture is a narrative of

subjectivity by which “the things that surround us are inseparable from who we are” ([2], p. 16). Art can be a positioning of ourselves within a new setting, or re-staging of life content, that bestows an intention to concentrate on what is before us.

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Pamela Whitaker: Conceptualisation, writing – original draft, formal analysis, writing – review and editing.

### **Competing Interests**

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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