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CHAPTER NINE

Protested Space: Artworks made in a therapeutic art studio under threat from cuts

Helen Omand

Art has a rich history as an agent of protest. This chapter will consider how artworks, made in a therapeutic art studio, were radical acts of protest for the group. These artworks were made in response to the partial closure of the service due to austerity-driven funding cuts and a sense of wider political and social injustice. In the chapter I examine the tension I felt as an art therapist between an initial wish to protect and shield the group from knowing the truth about the financial pressures (the studio as a 'protected space') and a desire to work with the potential for empowerment that knowing the worst, and becoming part of a joined-up community response to the closures, might provide. The studio became a 'protested space' in which art was an active agent. Viewed like this the art illuminates the hierarchical tensions within the therapy space during this time of crisis, where the more radical community-based ethos of the studio seemed under threat of erosion by powerful social, economic and political forces, and felt difficult to maintain. The art can be seen as giving form to this ethos.

Some of the artworks discussed here were put up on the studio wall by members during this time as a deliberate protest against the closures. Others were left out on easels or shelves from week to week, or shared and hidden away, or even exhibited in public. From my discussions with the artists, I started to consider that these artworks, with their often-overt political subject matter, had agency as a voice of dissent. It seemed to me that the images had a life in the studio space and contributed to the experience of this particular period, when the impact of social, political and economic forces threatened the studio's survival.

Seven images from studio artists are presented here alongside their words about their images. This chapter seeks to think about the role these images may have had for the wider studio group at this time, particularly as acts of protest. I refer in this chapter to the 'community' of the whole organisation, but of course there are many differences, intersections of identities and power relationships within this. I am conscious of not being able to speak for the whole therapy team, or an imagined homogenous community, a 'we'. Instead this chapter is a personal and subjective attempt to make meaning from images, words and memories of this particular time in the studio's history.

Organisational context

The Human Arts Studio* is for adults experiencing a range of enduring mental health difficulties, for example psychosis of one kind or another, or profound struggles with relationships. Most people have been in the mental health system for some time. The studio was founded on the radical principles of therapeutic communities, the anti-psychiatry movement, R.D. Laing and the Philadelphia Association. Service users are called 'members' to reflect this ethos. Certain principles remain decades on: the community forum, where all have a say in the running of the studio; the involvement of studio members in decision making; the emphasis on people rather than diagnoses that may pathologise; and the

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attempt to lessen the hierarchy of therapist/client. Therapists make art and exhibit work alongside members in regular exhibitions. The shared struggle with creative processes may contribute to a flattening of the hierarchy, with therapists on more equal ground with members. For example, some members may be more accomplished artists in particular mediums, and there is much sharing of knowledge in the group. I have attended workshops that members have given for the studio community. Additionally, with making art and with having long contact hours, more aspects of the therapist as a complex individual are seen.

The equality of 'we are all artists together' exists on some levels, yet at the same time can be somewhat idealised, as, of course, there are all sorts of hierarchies and differences in the group. The current organisational structure is hierarchical: a management level and their administrative team; the art therapists, students and volunteers; and members. Monthly team meetings include all levels of the organisation, including member representatives. To avoid confusion for the purposes of this chapter, I will call the art therapists 'therapists', the management and administration 'management' and the wider membership 'members', or in the context of their artwork, 'artists'.

The studio opened most days of the week 10am–5pm, the space overseen by two co-therapists on each day. Each day hosts a consistent group of members who come and go as they wish during the day. Some stay a whole day, others manage less. The space is a working art studio, crowded, rich and stimulating, crammed with easels, ceramics equipment, folders, piles of canvases and work left drying. There is a kitchen and CD player. In my experience, long-term members care deeply about this environment and contribute to it, bringing in shared food, art donations or music to play.

Events leading up to the closures

<text>The studio is unusual in offering long-term support and community to its members in a climate in which cheaper, short-term therapy, CBT, and tick box recovery plans are dominant. As government mental health funding reduced year on year, local authority payments that had historically funded individual members to attend the studio increasingly dried up, despite willingness of mental health teams on the ground to refer. This affected the studio's income and threatened the sustainability of surviving on local authority payments. Meanwhile, punitive government disability benefit reassessment schemes increased member anxiety. The impact of austerity policies was felt in ever-increasing cuts. Studio management regularly mooted closing days, which would result in established groups shutting and jobs being lost. There were splits over the differing priorities of management and therapists as to whether closures were needed. Management, pragmatically, wanted to diversify our approach to increase economic sustainability, whereas therapists focused on the detrimental effects of the reduction in the service.

Around this time, management and therapists held several team meetings without member representatives; we discussed studio finances and the real threat of day closures, and I remember worrying, like others, that these discussions might be overwhelming for members. With hindsight, the exclusion of members from these meetings seemed to reassert hierarchy. I felt caught up in the dilemma of how far we should share financial problems with members, and how far we should contain the anxiety amongst staff until we

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were more certain about the outcome. However, we did not want to patronise members and there was the possibility that some would want to voice opposition and take action. Therapists tried to hold the uncertainty at this time. In a strange parallel, during this period the physical environment also started to be gradually eroded; the building that housed the studio was emptied for renovation by developers. We remained clinging on like a last bastion as facilities and lifts were stripped out. There was a feeling of huddling against the storm.

The following monthly meeting was attended by member representatives and staff. Management announced its decision to members and therapists at the same time to cut the service by over a third, and in a matter of weeks. The impact was palpable, leaving us momentarily lost for words. A community that had weathered the storms of decades went into a sort of shock. Long established day groups were to be closed, losing several therapist positions.

Emergency meetings were held by members and therapists to ascertain possible action plans. Disbelief was followed by anger and a call to action from members. This was a period of upset and distress, but also, I felt, one of solidarity between members and therapists. Members got together to campaign and write letters, and therapists formed proposals for alternative financial options. The endless meetings and negotiation of co-operative working took its toll on all, as did the split between management and the therapists and members.

Our collective efforts were in vain and reality hit – we had not stopped the closures. Therapists faced the prospect of ending their groups and, if they wanted to stay on in the organisation, being re-interviewed for the remaining jobs. Some members found it too painful to come in at all and detached from the studio. Members who chose to stay were amalgamated into existing groups. As a community we started the uncomfortable process of moving forward.

Artist images and text

The following images were chosen after discussion with each member. The accompanying words are extracts from recorded conversations which I co-edited with each member. Members chose to use their real names to credit authorship of both artwork and words, which is in the studio's ethos of promoting the development of artistic identity. Artwork is regularly exhibited under people's names. Each artist therefore had to feel sure that they were happy for their work and statement to be in the public domain. The artworks are presented here in chronological order of their making.

'Sgt Maybot's lonely hearts clubbed banned' by Jake Summer (Figure 9.1)

<fig>Figure 9.1 <cap>'Sgt Maybot's lonely hearts clubbed banned' by Jake Summer. Oil on canvas.

The large canvas painting of Trump and May had an ongoing presence in the studio in the year prior to the cuts. Summer says:

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It reflects that period when Theresa May was Prime Minister, after Donald Trump was declared President. It was inspired by May 'holding hands' with Trump. There is the sense of a couple presiding over a scene of desolation. There is an absence of love and happiness. A group of far-right figures, emulating a zombie takeover, are surrounding a girl in a burka, like bloodhounds. The husk-like structure gives a sense of something arising from the ashes, from all this apocalypse. I think the terrible image of Grenfell tower was somewhere in there as an influence.

There is a characterisation of a harsh uncaring couple – certainly Trump makes no indication that he actually cares for the world. He denies all very real problems like climate change. May was very willing to side with Trump, little good that it did her. It was a very tragic relationship, which is reflected in the painting, but let's not waste our tears on the architect of the 'hostile environment' and someone who was all too complicit in brutal austerity.

There's billions of pounds spent on nuclear weapons, while getting access to NHS mental health support is nearly impossible. Punitive welfare reforms have left people actually dying from hunger. The poor are dying under the Tory government. Warnings are given; if you cut this far, it will kill people. But who cares when you're poor? I live in a constant state of anxiety, magnified by the rhetoric of austerity. Art can be a form of protest because we are often disempowered: art is a means of reflecting our disenfranchisement. Sometimes when you see an artwork or you hear a good song – it doesn't have to be something political necessarily – but speaking about what's upsetting you in the world, it means a lot that somebody did that. On Donald Trump's official visit last year his helicopter flight route happened to be right over the studio. I brought my painting out onto the top balcony with a sign I made saying 'No, Donald, no'.

<head2>'Austeri-tea' by Rachel Rowan Olive (Figure 9.2)

<fig>Figure 9.2 <cap>'Austeri-tea' by Rachel Rowan Olive. Digital print.

Rowan Olive says:

It's about the pattern of what's happened since my breakdown, all the way through my time in the system, over and over again. I was at a day hospital when they had just lost their funding and were changing their model because of that – making everything really short and time-limited and pushing people out as quickly as possible. Crisis house stays are really short-term and I was being told to ask for help, but then there just wasn't anything there. It was a painful, damaging process.

The way that you're constantly told this is not really what's happening, goes back to the idea of being given piss and being told it's tea – you're told so much of the time that your perceptions are wrong. It gets pushed back onto you. 'If we can't meet your needs, it's because your needs are wrong.' It creates so many probably abusive dynamics that ... that's what drives people mad. When all the stuff happened with the threat of studio days closing, it was like, okay, here we fucking go again.

'Brexit poster' by Jake Summer. Ink on paper (Figure 9.3)

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<fig>Figure 9.3 <cap> ‘Brexit poster’ by Jake Summer. Ink on paper.

The ‘Brexit poster’ is inspired by the cold war era government information programme, Protect and Survive, about nuclear attack. It shows what could potentially happen in the worst-case scenario of a no-deal Brexit.

Underneath the house there’s a bunker in which the perfect stiff-upper-lip family – loyalist, rule Britannia, never question the government, Brexit all the way – they’re ready ... well, they think they’re ready, in their bunker. They’ve stockpiled water, food, medicine, toiletries, and all the essential items that one would need to see through the disaster. The image is really informed by ... kind of an impending sense of doom, Armageddon, that the Brexit no-deal scenario poses.

<head2>‘Grayson Perry’ by Toria Lamb (Figure 9.4)

Figure 9.4 <cap> ‘Grayson Perry’ by Toria Lamb. Paint on mirror.

Artist Toria Lamb made this work as the closures were announced.

It was a lot of fear. Everybody was frightened that they might lose this space altogether – that the studio might close. The fear is that you might lose the service that you really need. I feel secure here. It’s a place where the vulnerable come when their, you know, their life is falling apart and they’re trying to put it back together. So, I did a picture of Grayson Perry – I just felt that somebody needed to be sticking up for us.

I asked, why Grayson Perry?

I just really like Grayson Perry. He does a lot of stuff, art stuff. He looks at society and he seems to take a sort of ... a look, and he seems to care about political things and care about people. I don’t know whether he does or not, but he seems to. I thought he’d be a good role model. A floating head. He’s saying some horrible words directed towards management – I was frightened to say them myself. They’re cutting words and I carved them in. It’s faint, I suppose because anger is frightening to me.

Maybe my anger was misdirected. You don’t know who’s responsible. Maybe it’s wider political, you know, austerity. The words could go anywhere ... to anybody in a position of power, who are taking advantage. It was a really difficult time. The inequality goes against the community spirit of the studio. I wanted someone like Grayson Perry to step in.

<head2>‘Wounded Bear’ by Andrew Mead (Figure 9.5)

Figure 9.5 <cap> ‘Wounded Bear’ by Andrew Mead. Collage on paper.

Figure 9.5, ‘Wounded Bear’ by Andrew Mead, began a series of work that was posted up on the walls of the main studio space as protest when the cuts to the service were announced.

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The piece formed a backdrop to studio life during these months, which included whole group forums, team meetings and supervisions all happening in the space. Mead says:

It was using the walls to exhibit our work – but angry work related to the closures. There was a political element to it, a protest. And it kind of grew, once I'd put the Wounded bear up.

I thought 'wounded bear' was a good phrase. It occurred to me that the studio was a wounded bear and that we're not going to give in lightly. If you back a wounded bear into a corner, it comes out fighting. It goes vicious. The idea of wounds, cuts, is of something that has been, damaged I guess. The bear is bleeding. Perhaps from his mouth, or maybe he's spitting blood or spitting nails. He's probably bleeding internally as well. I think I saw myself as part of the studio and therefore part of the image of the wounded bear. It all mashed into one. I felt we were so messed with that we wanted to fight.

The response from other members was surprisingly positive, the work seemed to channel other people's anger and distress. I was quite nervous about putting it up. I was aware that when we had meetings the Wounded Bear would be behind where the management sat and could be seen by us but not them. I felt it empowered the group and was, sort of, sticking two fingers out behind or something. Solidarity – like looking to a masthead.

Alongside Mead's work, an anonymous contributor had pinned up another sheet of paper with more expletives scrawled on it. Mead also posted up enlarged photocopies of work from his sketchbook. The pieces were based around text, a series of slogans or communications. One of these read 'TOTAL CONTEMPT FOR VULNERABLE LIVES', on collaged paper. Mead says:

It felt quite empowering that I'd done something private that I could expose to the world. I wasn't holding back, various bits of work were tumbling out. And I wasn't showing that it was okay. I think they were quite personal. I mean my emotional background is about being bullied. When you're bullied, there's no communication. If you accede to the bully then you're not answering back or standing up for yourself or something, so maybe that was triggered, that kind of feeling.

'Showing contempt for vulnerable lives' was definitely about the members. The way the cuts were announced didn't acknowledge the impact it might have on individuals. There was a lot of anger targeted towards the management after this, rightly or wrongly, possibly scapegoating. But there were perhaps ways it could have been handled differently. The communication was poor. It felt brutal – 'We're cutting the studio. Thank you for coming. Goodbye'.

I ask Mead if the therapists could have handled it differently.

I'm reminded that, I think we felt that a lot was being foisted on us members to deal with it as opposed to staff taking responsibility of standing up to management decisions. As though members were in the best position to object, like we had more power. Because you (the therapists) were all fairly vulnerable because of the nature of your employment contracts there was the feeling that we were being expected to do more than reasonable because

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we're the clients. I think it was hard. There was that feeling of not being protected. Maybe it was good that we had to write letters and take it on. Maybe that was empowering. But exposing. Less comfortable.

<head2>'Reusable protest placard' by Rachel Rowan Olive (Figure 9.6)

<fig>Figure 9.6 <cap> 'Reusable protest placard' by Rachel Rowan Olive. Digital print.

There's so much to protest, just have a reusable one. It just saves time these days. I made postcards of this image, and I feel tempted to just keep one in my bag at all times to bring out if someone pisses me off (laughs). Usually the people who find my art funniest are people who've been in similar situations. People in most of the spaces that I am in are subject to multiple marginalisation and oppressions, and so they get the humour. It's a nice side effect if it challenges the way clinicians and professionals see you, but that's not really what it's for, it's for me and my friends.

<head2>'Mystic Menen, the Empress of Ethiopia, Her Imperial Majesty' by RSJ (Figure 9.7)

<fig>Figure 9.7 <cap> 'Mystic Menen, the Empress of Ethiopia, Her Imperial Majesty' by RSJ. Acrylic on canvas.

The final image is by artist RSJ and was made some months later in the aftermath of the changes. It stuck in my mind particularly as RSJ had been completely absent from the studio since the closures. He arrived back unexpectedly and met, for the first time, the newly amalgamated group he had been allocated to. He immediately painted an image, 'Mystic Menen, the Empress of Ethiopia, Her Imperial Majesty'. RSJ says about his image:

That was the first piece of the year, and it was delayed because of my absence from the studio. It's from a photograph where I thought she looked very mystical, she had a power. It gives her a spiritual feeling like she is being lifted up ... an honourable woman. That circle looks like some kind of platform almost, like a mystical platform. She's floating. And then, it also looks like the sun in another way. So, hope for brightness, protection.

The studio causes you to look within yourself for the answers to whatever you're going through. Because I made it on my first day back, this piece is like it was from two different worlds. Actually – when you look at it, you don't see the war I had been going through. Simplistic – there's a simplicity about it; the hopeful protective elements rather than the complicated, destructive elements. It's important to do art that reflects humanity, especially in inhumane times, so people can remember what humanity is.

Discussion

I will not interpret the meaning of this work in relation to the personal history of each artist. In keeping with the studio ethos, each artist is 'expert' on why they made these images, which are full of rich autobiographical significance. Instead, I'm going to consider the meaning that this artwork had for the community, and to think about it as an agent of

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protest. In doing so I will highlight the tension it raises between the therapist's perceived role as 'protector' and as fellow 'protester'.

Group art therapy theory shows artworks will have unconscious meanings for the group as well as for the individual (Skaife and Huet, 1998). I suggest the artworks here reflect the preoccupations of the studio community as a whole at this particular time, when all levels of the organisation were subject to destabilising economic, social and political forces. Some images show powerful figures who represent ideas about fairness or cruelty, care or neglect, and who are held up to be saviours, protectors, perpetrators or villains; Grayson Perry, Empress Menen, Trump, May. The art seems to mirror the split feelings in the world outside the studio, where divisions between rich and poor feel acute, individuals are atomised and 'Brexit' is imminent. The images convey themes of power used for good or bad by authority figures, perhaps also reflecting feelings about power and hierarchy within the organisation. The images prompted me to think about the community's wish for scapegoats or for individuals who might stand up to injustice or protect us from the horrors of the world.

Part of the difficulty I felt with how far to 'protect' members from the anxiety of the truth about financial problems may stem from tensions in how therapeutic work in studios has been conceptualised. For example, to what extent are therapists seen as symbolic parental caregivers, and how far is the group, or community, seen as empowering itself? In recent decades studios in inpatient settings have been thought of as holding environments by art therapists, using objects relations theory. The space, which is provided by the therapist, has been regarded as having a maternal holding or containing function (Brown, 2008, Killick, 2000, Deco, 1998). I have previously found this theoretical frame useful, perhaps like other art therapists, in response to the fragmentary feeling of working with psychosis where a concrete, and symbolic, holding space feels so necessary. Within this framework the sudden shutting down of the therapeutic space could be experienced as a catastrophic withdrawal of holding, with the therapist potentially in the role of neglectful or failing caregiver. This emphasises a more dyadic hierarchical relationship than that of a group. There may be a danger here, in the context of a community group, that members could be disempowered by being perceived as the 'vulnerable' ones within this hierarchy. In fact, we are all vulnerable without the support of others in our communities. The wish to hold on to the responsibility for the financial information about the studio may be our defense, as therapists, in the face of unstoppable economic forces and our own distress. Later, when members were protesting about the cuts, artist Andrew Mead observed that the therapy team's lack of contractual rights meant we appeared vulnerable. It may have felt difficult for members to express anger with the therapists who were so obviously affected too, by loss of jobs. There may have been anger at the therapists' lack of agency, which meant that things felt 'foisted' onto members instead, and that ultimately this powerlessness meant therapists had to go along with the cuts to keep their jobs. These feelings and what they represented may not have been explored enough.

Having considered some of the hierarchical tensions that seemed to be present in the artwork for us as a community, I will now suggest a more active role for art as an act of protest. From political posters to acerbic humour and dystopian scenes, the artworks and statements in this chapter are also a critical voice, drawing attention to harsh policies that

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have cost lives and marginalised sections of society. A body of art therapy literature draws on social critical theory to acknowledge the systemic power injustices that pervade our social systems and impact individuals, and this literature sees art as a force for empowerment (e.g. Huss, 2015, Hogan, 2016, Talwar, 2019). Similarly, the art here is socially engaged and actively political. Jake Summer's images, for example, highlight injustices, and RSJ's image purposefully expresses his views. Artists are subverting, commenting on, giving shape to, and communicating their experiences of the world.

However, the initiatives most often described in that literature (ibid) are usually co-designed with local communities and the art therapist specifically to empower members of their group, and so, by nature, they are directive projects that center around an issue or theme to be explored. Unlike these, the art in this chapter erupted unsolicited in an established, non-directive therapeutic space. Like Toria Lamb's spikey criticism, or Andrew Mead's texts, art here had the subversion of unauthorised, unspoken commentary. The politics of power, hierarchy, inequality and resistance were present, invited or not, in the art. I suggest this is because they were part of the latent ever-present material of the group itself. Here, a non-directive group space enabled this artwork to be brought into being. The display and presence of artworks in the therapeutic space communicated across the weeks and ensured all levels of the organisation would see them.

The work's agency or power can be thought about further. As a communication about the cuts, the wall of slogans in the main space was striking. Positioned by the table used for team meetings, they formed the backdrop to organisational meetings during this period and were impossible for management and therapists to miss. The artwork was a pointed reminder of the departure that we had made from the historic studio ethos of community representation at meetings. 'Total disrespect for vulnerable lives' seems to call into question the values and priorities of studio staff, as accounting and monetisation to keep the service afloat took priority. Certainly, in relation to the art world, there are many examples of work that takes the principles of the artists to those that exclude them, for example, the posters of the Guerilla girls outside gallery entrances voice criticism of suspect practices by the powerful individuals in charge.

Protest art has long been used to create networks of like-minded individuals for the purposes of resistance, and to convey particular causes or messages. In the studio, artworks may also have been a way of bringing studio members together, aligning ideas and forming social consciousness. Rachel Rowan Olive's comic strips do this using subversive shared humour, Andrew Mead's slogans acted as 'a masthead' to rally behind, reminiscent of art made by political activists: murals, pamphlets, posters, interventions and subversions of logos, and signage and zines. Certainly, over this time members initiated a series of meetings from which organised actions emerged in the form of research, letters and petitions against the closures.

Andrew Mead describes how 'the work seemed to channel other people's anger and distress'. Looking at these artworks, the nuclear explosions, expletives and wounded bear bring back for me the raw feelings of the time, a painful and furious outcry. They are also images of violent acts and, of course, protest can be violent. Members and therapists half

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joked together about a sit in, or refusing to shut. Perhaps there was an idea from members that the therapist's actions did not go far enough, and perhaps we agreed.

Did we the therapists 'fight' for our principles? For example, could we have done more to keep the groups from closing so suddenly? With the precarious positions of the therapists, perhaps members felt it was left to them to protest and be the culture carriers of the radical history of the studio community. The artworks were used in the space in a way that could be seen as giving form to the radical ethos of the studio's founding, an ethos at risk of being eroded by the new paradigm of the marketised health system that brought the funding cuts, and which perpetuates precarious employment.

Brian Haw, an anti-war protester, occupied a tent outside the Houses of Parliament in London for 10 years to bring attention to the UK and US foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq. He became synonymous with his violent and hand-painted placards that pointed blame at the government as killers of innocents. These had a visual presence for a decade in parliament square; a constant embodiment of the government's moral duty. He had much public support and, as such, he protested 'for' the wider group. The art here perhaps also communicated something for us therapists, too, that we did not feel able to communicate ourselves.

While writing this I often found it difficult to separate out the therapists' feelings from those of the members; a painful problem embedded in the fact that therapists are both 'with' the members and also, in some ways, partly responsible for the cuts as staff, because at some point we had to go along with them, to accept them and keep our jobs. The dynamics of the power-infused 'therapist/client' dyad, which the original studio ethos had wanted to eradicate, were complex to negotiate in a shared struggle. Equally difficult was to think that the management level of the organisation also felt in an insurmountable position – to keep the studio viable under pressure from changing mental health paradigms and powerful political and economic agendas. Art historian Kester, writing about activist art, concludes that as the concept of community itself is under threat from global capitalism, 'concepts of collective solidarity and community identity have never been more important. It's impossible to underestimate the significance of community as an organizing principle for resistance and political identity ...' (2003, p. 8). I wonder, in these pressing times of cuts and hardship, how there can be more collaborative working in therapeutic spaces. The artwork in this chapter helps generate thoughts about the hierarchical positions we take up in therapeutic spaces in relation to each other. Seen as acts of protest, the art here embodies the struggle of holding on to more egalitarian principles in today's climate.

I would like to thank and acknowledge the members who so generously contributed their images and words to this chapter.

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