Community-based participatory arts projects have been shown to promote well-being and mental health recovery. One reason for this is because they provide opportunities for mutuality – connectedness to others and different kinds of sharing and reciprocity. Yet research into mental health arts projects has not focused on shared creative practice between participants/members and practitioners. This article reports on qualitative research in an arts and mental health organization employing an open studio approach in which art therapists made art alongside members. It explores the possibilities for, and tensions associated with, generating mutuality between studio managers and members through this approach. Conducted from a critically engaged, feminist sociological perspective, the study encompassed an analytical focus on power, especially gender relations. Findings are presented along three themes: (de)constructing and obscuring relational asymmetries; mutual acceptance and its limits; and maintaining, working with and challenging ‘boundaries’. Implications for applied arts and mental health practice are highlighted.

KEYWORDS
mental health, creative practice, gender, mutuality, therapeutic community, open studio

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