

210 Politics of Disability

Identity Politics of Disability: The Other and the Secret Self

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Moreover, I myself have reached an age at which my failing flesh reminds me at every moment that the ultimate questions about mortality, normality, and identity are ones which, though we cannot finally answer them, whatever our area of expertise, it is incumbent on us, for the sake of our common humanity, to keep on asking (Leslie Fiedler, 1978, p. xvi).

Introduction

Ambivalence with severe physical and mental abnormality runs deep in pedagogy, but it is only a reflection of an historical ambivalence in western culture. By analyzing institutionalized behaviors towards, and assumptions about, disability in art and education, I hope to speak to the theme of the journal, which is "(Un)becoming." For at least a century individuals with severe physical disabilities have been derided as freaks, while for two decades of youth counterculture, the same term denoted a rite of passage. Individuals who exhibit their disability professionally want to be called performers or entertainers, while the Mothers of Inventions' first album beckons their fans to "Join the United Mutations." Artists have portrayed the Other in ways that might not

be faithful to their reality, while art made by the Other has made its way into the mainstream. Trained artists have made their profession look less becoming by co-opting the raw naiveté of their Outsider counterparts. This paradoxical penetration of boundaries deserves to be heard under the ambiguous rubric of (Un)becoming.

The dichotomy of such terms as normal/abnormal sets the stage for the domination of the majority of the so-called "Normals." Leslie Fiedler (1978) calls the institutionalization of normalcy the "tyranny of the Normal" and the oppressed as the "Ultimate Other." The historic division between "normal" and "Other" has deep roots in the collective unconscious, so it is to archetypes, myths, and legends that Fiedler turns. The fear that we might appear freakish to someone else lies in our adolescent unconscious only to be activated at the site of physical and mental deviation. Thus it is with wonder and awe that we gape at the exception from the norm, or the Other. But far from reassuring us that we are normal, the "Other" is "really a revelation of what in our deepest psyches we recognize as the Secret Self" (Fiedler, 1996. 152).

The acceptable and self-conscious term "Other" became popular at a time when such terms as "Freak" were rejected, as well as a clear and non-transferable divide between "us" and "them." The political correctness of "Other" appears to make deviation a matter of degree rather than of kind. Fiedler challenges political correctness as a thin veneer behind which remains long held fears, myths, and fantasies about disability. So it is with some irony that he invents the term "Absolute Other." In his politically incorrect *Freaks*, Fiedler mines the collective unconscious peopled with the malformed, the overly large and the very small, the many limbed and those with missing limbs, as they are conceived in literature and art. The reader becomes aware of the simultaneous repulsion and attraction with the congenitally deformed and disabled who make their entrance into his or her consciousness. It is not through social interaction that the Absolute

Other is known, Fiedler writes, but in literature: fairy tales, myths, fiction, and in art. Fiedler sites such artworks as Goya's *Giant* and Velasquez's *Las Meninas*. Along with kings and courtesans, Velasquez and Goya also depict dwarfs and other physically deformed fellow-humans that were kept for their amusement. He sites fictional characters of authors such as Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's deformed and dejected Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter*, Victor Hugo's *Hunchback* in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and more recently, the antihero in the revival of Merrick's *Elephant Man*. What do archetypal roles in these works of art and literature reveal about our historical obsession and oppression with the Ultimate Other? According to Fiedler, as long as these archetypes are embodied in literature and visual art, they live outside the "real world," and remain in the collective imagination. Are the disabled to be either pitied or revered as something other than human, as these images and characters suggest? Or are they merely to be perceived as one of the many varieties of humanity? To what extent, then, do we, as "normals," know the life of the Other?

Fiedler removes the Ultimate Others from the context of literature and art, and presents them center stage in his "sideshow" for our contemplation. "It took me into dark areas of my psyche which I had hitherto entered only in my most troubled dreams...in which we come to terms with the ultimate mysteries of Love and Death, the Self and Other" (1978, xiv). Confrontation with the dark side of the self was not the purpose of freak shows as the Victorians conceived them, however. Rather, they were cathartic spectacles. Human oddities were supposed to reassure the onlooker that they are the freaks, not us (Fiedler, 1978). Now, as our trust in these distinctions wanes, the freak show has come to mean something quite different, something coarse and embarrassing. Possibly the 60's and 70's subculture of freaks and punks helped to usher in a self-reflexive era, reminding normals of their tenuous separation from these oddities

Somewhere between the sideshow and the arts lie the lived experiences of the Other. Fiedler suggests that although more humanistic than the sideshow, the arts still fail to tell the truth about the Other, or how the Other perceives herself. Rather, the arts show us how the Other is perceived by "Normals." Fiedler suggests that this less than perfect human body, its decline, and ultimate death, is behind the disownment of the Other. Is it the psyche's secret deformities and the fear of death that keeps disability from entering spontaneous conversation? If little value is found in the cultural and social discourse about disability, what possibility is there for reconstruction and renewal? Is the institutionalization of the Other a socially sanctioned way of keeping death and disability at a distance?

While the institutionalization of the old and infirm, the wheelchair bound and the psychotic, is an imperfect practice, the art that has emerged from these same institutions has redeemed the inevitable isolation and loss. In the past century, making art has been used in institutions as a way of offering psychic freedom, if not bodily freedom, by providing a partial antidote to the social problems generated in an impoverished environment. The lack of efficacy one has in an institution can do more harm in the building of a positive self-image than the physical disability itself (Lowenfeld, 1987). These limitations, however, become the driving force for making art. The urgency to conquer isolation and reclaim selfhood often results in equally powerful art. Reaching out to the world through visual symbols transforms physically and psychically painful experience into metaphor and neutralizes feelings of isolation and loss. With experience, unintentional behavior becomes intentional, and mastery over the laws of materials parallels how effectively one communicates through them. The following pages briefly describe the current history of art that has emerged from such institutions.

The Marginal Arts

Who is there who will ensure the production of the barbarous images, the impudent graffiti, the intrepid doodles, the shaggy embroideries, in this age of the computer, the television, and the cordless phone? (Roger Cardinal, 2000, p.72)

Only since the early 20th century has art made inside mental institutions and other facilities become of interest to the art world, and given the appropriate name of "Outsider Art," coined by the British art historian, Roger Cardinal in 1972. For Cardinal, the "otherness" of Outsider art was characterized by its lack of regional, ethical, religious, or occupational tradition. "It wasn't fine art because it wasn't learned in an academic setting, and it wasn't commercial because it wasn't made to sell" (Krug, 1992, p. 107). Outsider Art extends beyond institutions and into prisons and rural back roads. The term is now used with some irony since Outsider Art has become a style co-opted by trained "insider" artists. That the orthodox art world embraced this art form is indicative of the historically ironic relationship the normal world has with disability. Cardinal (2000) dates the end of the nineteenth-century in Europe as the genesis of the marginal arts, which at the same time gave birth to the lone genius of the avant-garde and set the stage for a host of marginalities. Even while crossbreeding with the primitive and untrained, the linear progress of high modernism constructed an insular, insider world. Museum and gallery art might then be considered the insider counterpart of what is deemed to be outside. The acknowledgment of these Outsiders who make art inside institutions disrupted this trajectory. Enter the paradox of the passive patient, as described by McBryde Johnson (2003). Having lost ownership of life, the patient now takes up a brush and symbolically

takes control once again. Within this new locked-up life, art is made as a form of resistance — the declaration of one's humanity in the face of powerlessness. "As a glimpse of something other than what normal perception makes available, art offers a special sort of hope" (Cardinal, 2000, p. 54). In these institutions that imprison the body, impulse outweighs real and symbolic constraint. Ironically, what is distinctive about the work of these artists is its unrestrained and uncontainable quality (Cardinal, 2003). In acts of self-construction and self-affirmation, they invent worlds that beckon us, and we submit to them unconditionally. "They have a disturbing authority and intensity, these Outsiders. We get sucked into their world ... they invent an alternative world that is inhabited absolutely" (Cardinal, 2003).

In the early twentieth-century, Prinzhorn in Heidelberg and Leo Navatil at the Gugging Institution in Austria, saw that making art could use madness as a point of departure from which a new identity might emerge. Unlike art therapy, the artists were not being prepared to re-enter society in a conventional role, but to offer society something of themselves as they are and on their own terms. A hybrid form of art therapy and art training was forming, driven neither by psychology nor the canon of western art technique. Rather, Outsiders are characterized by the need to communicate emotions that are uncontainable within the orthodoxy of the art world. Isolation and illness motivates the maker to express the ironic condition of living outside social conventions, and the strangeness of their spontaneous visual gestures and utterances are reminders of the arbitrariness of artistic conventions. Many of these works show evidence of a striving to construct and explain their own world through figures, symbols and text. Many artists decontextualize discarded materials and objects and reconstruct them with an obsessive and compulsive use of language (Rhodes, 2000).

Thus, the inhabitants of institutions that were designated as having nothing to say to us are now telling us something. There is contact through this visual world that stuns us into comprehension. They have reached across the divide and we can see ourselves in their images, "...there is a distinct sense that a compelling private vision gains authority over the frustration and failures of ordinary life, transmuting social deficit into artistic resplendence" (Cardinal, 2000, p. 66).

Dubuffet seized on the art of those "innumerable species and subspecies" (Cardinal, 2000, p. 52) that do not bow to the art world because they don't know it exists. The institutionalized and disabled continue to hold a large space within the umbrella that Dubuffet called Art Brut. The art of this genre included, but was not limited to, folk art, child art, prison art, tattoo art, fairground art, and graffiti art (Cardinal, 2000), "art in the purest state of spontaneity, immaculately conceived, innocent of orthodox prescriptions, impervious to influence and audience alike" (Cardinal, 2000, p. 53). The artistic styles of those in confinement are nothing if not extraordinary assertions of freedom.

In Cardinal's 1972 book entitled *Outsider Art*, he calls the Art Brut artists Outsiders, and it is this term that has remained most current and convenient, despite the authenticity rhetoric and redefinition of terms by curators, collectors, and gallery owners. The following pages describe two examples of such Outsider artists who spent most of their lives in institutions.

Two Artists Emerge

Art enshrines memories we sometimes never knew we had. It is said that everything fades. Yet the patterning of human expressions always represents a call to contact, a faint yet audible appeal to our curiosity and our generosity. Even the least communicative trace made by an alienated individual can touch us, pointing to our own solitude, our

mortality, and what is left of our freedom. We must look deeply into images while we still have time. (Roger Cardinal, 2000, p. 74)

Judith Scott



Judith Scott, a 55-year-old woman with Down syndrome, was warehoused in an institution for 35 years until her “normal” twin, Joyce, rescued her (MacGregor, 1999). Her deafness was not recognized for the first 30 years and so she remained alienated and mis-diagnosed. Joyce soon brought her to the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland California, one of the oldest art programs for disabled men and women. She was unresponsive to most of the materials offered her until she wandered into the textile studio. After the long silence of neglect, Judith suddenly and spontaneously made soft fiber sculpture with scraps of yarn woven around discarded and found objects. From the first

construction, her work was entirely independently conceived. Its origination might have at first appeared as an accident, but it was soon followed by similar structures. They were unlike anything found or seen in her environment, all with the same bound reed form. It appeared that Judith found an image and a form of construction that had great significance for her (MacGregor, 1999). From our perspective, as insiders, Judith is making art. But there is no evidence that Judith has a concept of art, although what she makes seems to have great meaning for her. Each work takes months to complete, and she works with intensity and dedication.

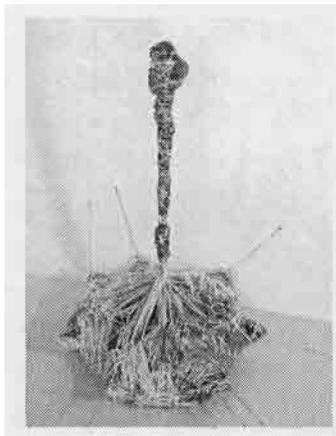
This question of how we "Normals" make meaning of the art of the cognitively disabled can only be conjectured (MacGregor, 1999; Cardinal, 2003). Is it the disability itself that gives rise to such intensity and peculiar meaning? And what language does the viewer use to understand it? To the viewer's eyes these works produced from compulsion and obsession sometimes look like the work of professional artists. But are they alike? Or is it that the viewer's ideas about art need to change in order to embrace and apprehend these works on the level they deserve? MacGregor (1999) writes that the burden of assumption that is brought to bear on the artwork is troubling, even for professional artists. So much more troubling, then, are the unanswerable questions about Outsider Artists such as Judith Scott. Only to the extent that the observer can free himself or herself of assumptions, is entry possible into a "psychological and creative experience that departs radically from the norm. Merely to discover what we expect to find, is to have failed" (1999, p. 8).

Judith cannot speak or hear, and has little concept of language. Outside the intense relationship she has with her work, she seeks few others. She called her first constructions "Baba" and rocked them in her arms. They grew larger, even to life size, and many photographs show her embracing them. MacGregor finds a parallel between the

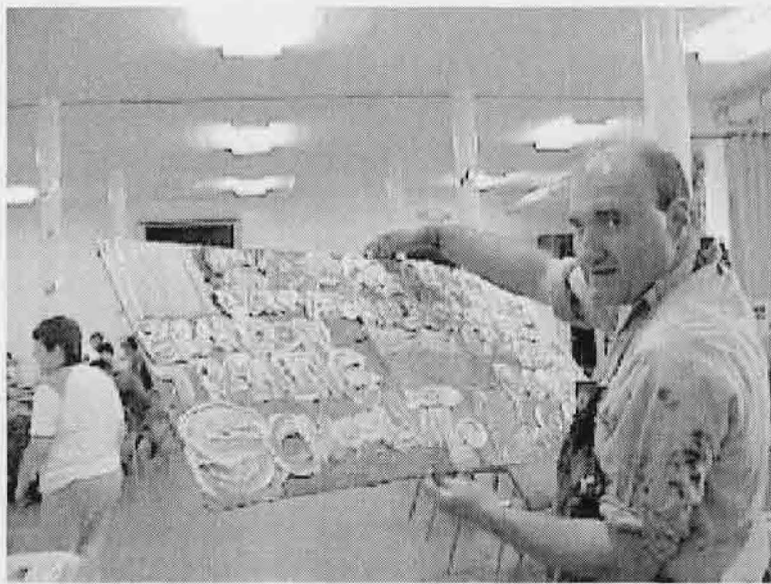
woven, layered fiber works and cocoons, both literally and metaphorically, as a form that protects, but also makes possible new life, or metamorphosis.

Something begins to grow slowly, meticulously, thoughtfully, day by day, month after month. Watching Judith working, witnessing the deliberate repeated gestures of her hands summoning an object into being, observing the slow evolution of a 'thing,' is not less fascinating, or essential than recording the step by step development of a spider's web, or a moth's cocoon. The recent works are large. Some could easily contain Judith's body. All of them 'contain' Judith's mind. (MacGregor, 1999, p. 32)

Judith gives life to these forms (see Umbrella, 2002 below), and at the same time they have given birth to her new life. They grow from objects that she adopts in the studio and wraps until only their shapes are left protruding under the layers of yarn. During this process she develops a lasting relationship with her work. "Occasionally, little loving pats serve as a way of saying hello or goodbye to the piece, or suggests a gentle gesture of approval or affection reminiscent of a mother's touch" (1999, p.35).



Larry Bissonnette



Larry Bissonnette was, by turns, diagnosed as mentally retarded, clinically insane, schizophrenic, and autistic, and locked up for ten years at the now defunct Brandon Training School in Vermont. Like Judith, Larry's sister removed him from the institution, and placed him in a residential program for developmental disabilities. It was through this program that he found his way to the Grass Roots Arts and Community Effort (GRACE) program in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. At GRACE he infuses his paintings with the rage he felt at Brandon. But even at Brandon he deflected rage by making art, prying open the door of the art room and working through the night. He has a rudimentary concept of language, focusing and persisting on words that have immediate relevance and meaning. This limited ability to communicate verbally translates into an intensity in his production of art work equal to Judith's. Unlike Judith, he works two dimensionally, using paint,

crayons and markers, often on large and heavy boards. He makes his own frames from found wood, which puts the right finish to the rough rawness of his work. Most of his images are interiors of Brandon Training School, with such titles as *Eating of Individuality by Institution*, *Pell Mell Mainland of Rolling Fortress of Painting of Monastery of Brandon Training School*, and *Utterly Gray Day at BTS* (Brandon Training School). With his hands he carves embedded messages deeply into the paint. Only since 1991, when he became part of a process called facilitated communication, has he been able to communicate the meaning of these powerful art works. In March and July 1994, Bissonnette wrote:

Theories are the dangerous shingles of mandatory names of people and earthy houses. Omnipotent ecological art lends ordered structure to spelling termed expression or spraying tree of grapes of abstract concepts like love... Peach of startled tensions of ideas like love and happiness is picked best when world of daily checking for ripeness is dramatized greatly with paintings of titled explanations of methods of discrimination. (Sunseri, 1994, p.2)

Every day at the GRACE workshop in Burlington Vermont, Larry Bissonnette will religiously follow the same schedule. Larry knows the routine; he sets up his painting table, puts his board on it, and mixes his paints. The workshop lasts for three hours during which Larry is entirely occupied, murmuring words usually related to the text of his paintings. Every movement is sure and steady. He mixes a color for the base of his painting and works the paint with his hands onto the board. The paint becomes thick and viscous under his hands. Another color is soon applied, and forms start to emerge. The forms become the interior of Brandon; walls surrounding a shallow space. One might

interpret the walls as oppressive, suffocating the inhabitants. He has been working out his anger about Brandon in paintings such as these.

Just before noon, he puts his paints and board away, and takes a break with his caseworker before the afternoon workshop. I did not observe a workshop facilitator, as they are called, interrupt his flow. His concentration was confident and focused, and so the facilitator must have recognized that intervention was not desired or necessary. GRACE and The Creative Growth Art Center are similar in their approach. Both encourage highly individualized forms of expression by judiciously choosing when to intervene with advice or suggestions.

Judith Scott and Larry Bissonnette have much in common. Both have had damaging experiences in institutions. Both have found the release of anger and the birth of a new identity in art making. Both make art with a vengeance, and apparently follow an impulse that is akin to survival. Thus the significant aspect of Judith and Larry's work is that it is self-motivated. Both artists are deliberate and confident in their process. Both artists begin the day with a routine that is as self-directed as any professional artist. This behavior, however, is in stark contrast with the artists' inability to care for themselves or live independently. And it is this ironic condition that makes their life and work compelling. The onlooker cannot help but admire the purity and purpose with which such individuals make art.

The function of art in the lives of these Outsiders is complex and something other than what we know as the traditional function of art, in terms of production and communication. The insider, however, gives the artwork meaning in ways never conceived or intended by the artists. Where the point of contact is between their works and what we, of the art world, recognize as parallel, is unknowable. The outward form can only suggest to us our own pre-conceptions and well-established notions about meaning and art.

Conclusion

Mainstreaming in the public schools makes demands on teachers to become skillful with children with special needs. The art room is often the first regular classroom where this population is placed. New challenges are going unmet as both young art educators and art therapists are placed in settings that do not have clear boundaries. Both art education and art therapy are broadening their conceptual frameworks to include wider populations for which students are not prepared. Art education practices might benefit from the artistic processes of artists like Judith Scott and Larry Bissonnette. But in order to crossover to this approach, a few foundational assumptions about art making might be necessary to consider. First, these artists teach us that art making is a necessary form of communication when speech is inaccessible or inadequate. For them, art making might be viewed as a general behavior (Dissanayake, 1992), rather than as an object or quality, which are more common notions in art education. The second assumption is that all human beings have the capacity to create something of artistic value; an inherited ability to shape into concrete form one's inner reality. Finally, and this is where art educators come in, the right environment needs to be provided so that this human potential can be realized. If natural inclinations are thwarted or mis-directed, art making will lack the conditions, or factors, that produce health.

This article advocates for a new form of scholarship: one that uses the lessons learned from both art therapy and art education. It might be considered a hybrid with aspects of both. In such places as GRACE and the Creative Growth Art Center, individuals with disabilities reshape their relationships with the world by using metaphor to transform emotion into poetic form. A critical space between these two fields allows for new identities to form with the least external intervention from us well-meaning, but clueless, insiders.

Notes

(1) Section 504 prevents discrimination in programs financed by the federal government.

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