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What We Talk About When We Talk About Art Therapy: An Outsider's Guide to Identity Crisis

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Randy Vick's analysis of studio-based programs in the United States and Europe provides valuable insight for those of us practicing in the space between fine art and art therapy. This disparity reflects the competing influences upon community-based studios of the European *art brut* tradition, the American therapeutic ethos, and an active international art market.

In contrast to the institutional structures of both the clinical realm and the commercial art world, a hallmark of the disability studio field (to coin a term) is the grassroots and often ad-hoc nature of its own creation. The staffs of these studio programs, in a manner both ironic and thoroughly apt, are often self-taught, as in the case of individuals who find themselves in professional isolation with limited resources, and creating working models from scratch. Community-based, under-staffed, and under-funded, these practitioners are often unaware of the "big picture" evolving around them: that the operation of studio programs for artists with disabilities is a worldwide movement.

Vick's (2008) study is most revealing in the way it examines the disparate approaches of each studio program as well as uncovering commonality between them. From the perspective of Project Onward (www.projectonward.org), a studio program I co-founded in 2004, I recognize common ground with a number of the conditions documented in Vick's analysis. Project Onward, like many studios, arose out of a specific need, which was to help a small group of talented artists with disabilities overcome obstacles to art making. We did not have an agenda beyond the daily operation of the studio, and we did not consciously model ourselves on existing programs.

Project Onward is designed to support artists with developmental and mental disabilities by providing workspace, art materials, and professional guidance in a communal studio at the Chicago Cultural Center. Our staff of administrators and facilitators have backgrounds in the fine arts, particularly studio art, gallery exhibition, and sales. Artists are admitted into the program on the basis of a portfolio review that demonstrates both skill and a commitment to a personal vision. From all outward appearances, then, we run an "art-first" operation, and it is easy to concur with the forceful assertion Vick encountered at many European studios that we do not, in fact, "do" art therapy.

But Vick's examination revealed a number of contradictions in how we facilitators view our roles in the studio program movement. During Project Onward's formative period, art therapy was a concept perpetually shrouded in air quotes. The aversion among art world practitioners to self-described "art therapy" is less an objection to a specific methodology than a reaction to the general stigma of "softness" associated by many with the field. A view commonly held by many fine art professionals is that art therapy lacks critical or intellectual rigor, and focuses instead on a "feelings-first" agenda with an emphasis on judgment-free practice that serves to lower expectations. Such perceptions, Vick noted, are based partly on "narrow and outdated" perspectives of art therapy as seen by the lay observer (p. 8). But even among the survey respondents with on-staff art therapists, only half in the U.S. sample claimed "art therapy" among their functions at all.

When Vick concluded that these art therapists may "see themselves as moving away from the profession's traditional model" (p. 8), the data begin to suggest that the field itself is caught somewhere between an identity crisis and a case of bad public relations. The self-descriptive terminology employed by many studio programs (including "healing studio," the more general "creative process," and "self-esteem," etc.) can both be overly vague and, in practice, ineffectual. In the case of an individual's artistic activity, such language not only reinforces the idea that "it doesn't matter what it looks like," but also that the activity itself doesn't matter to anyone outside the studio.

The life of a work of art beyond the studio is largely dependent upon the idea of intention, on the part of both the maker and the facilitator. If one's intention is to employ art materials and processes for a therapeutic outcome, then the work need not venture outside the studio: the value of the activity lies in the process itself. Of paramount importance in the mission of both studio art facilitator and art therapist is the empowerment of the individual to make his or her own decisions, artistic and otherwise. The soft language of social service (exemplified by the U.S. sample) runs the risk of reducing terms like "empowerment" and "self-esteem" to the level of an empty promise or wishful thinking—the kind of language that may turn some practitioners away from the traditional model of art therapy.

Editor's note: Rob Lentz, MFA, is Program Director of Project Onward, a studio program for artists with special needs at the Chicago Cultural Center. An artist, administrator, and curator, Lentz has exhibited his own artwork nationally. This commentary reflects an ongoing conversation about art therapy and the commercial art world initiated by Randy Vick's collaboration and assistance with Project Onward as an art therapy consultant. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to the author at rlentz@cityofchicago.org

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Once client artwork ventures outside the studio via public exhibition, many of the contradictions expressed by facilitators come to the surface, yet the public display of works can offer solutions to many of the questions that vex practitioners. Vick's discussion of Wolfensberger's (2000) concept of social role valorization has particular resonance in this context. Social role valorization gives the vague notion of "empowerment" some real teeth, by offering concrete solutions to the problem of marginalization. One of its strongest practical expressions is in the public exhibition of client/artist work and, as Vick notes, many of the European disability studio-based programs have embraced the philosophy. In comparison to the social-service model of their U.S. counterparts, social role valorization and the *art brut* tradition have galvanized the EU model into what comes across as a sleek and self-confident professional practice.

Many of the individual artists affiliated with Project Onward are by definition socially devalued, economically marginalized, and emotionally isolated. The term "outsider" is a contentious one among scholars and critics, but the definition conveys an important distinction for artists in our program. In response to their life state, these artists operate beyond the traditional norms and practice of visual art, devoted to producing artwork that has the capacity to communicate when language fails.

I prefer the term "outsider" because it suggests this *sui generis* nature of self-taught art while also conveying, in the spirit of Wolfensberger's outlook, a sense of the obstacles an artist with a disability must overcome. "Outsider" also implicates the "insider" world as a self-interested power brokerage that seeks to exclude or, worse, exploit the Other. By presenting our artists in the context of Outsider Art, we seek not to banish the idea of otherness but to harness its potential power. Art making is a valued activity that permits individuals on the margins of society to contribute meaningful work to the very culture that excludes them. The effective exhibition program deploys social role valorization in the service of both vocational empowerment and personal self-esteem. The desired outcomes converge when artwork gets out of the studio and into the culture at large.

Ultimately, Vick's analysis argues for the establishment of an expanded field for art therapy, wherein interested practitioners gain additional training in studio, connoisseurship, and curatorial practice, and where professional practices reflect ethical conduct with commercial gallerists and dealers. Connoisseurship, which is the application of esthetic judgment in the evaluation of artwork, is an essential faculty for engaging artists with disabilities in meaningful studio work. Once we have accepted the notion that it *does* in fact matter what it looks like, we are tasked with assigning qualitative judgments to the work. Artwork created by self-taught individuals has the advantage of existing purely on its own terms and can be judged as such—not on a competitive basis with other artists, but only in relationship to the artist's own body of work. Artists who are capable of participating in a professional studio program are entitled to thoughtful criticism and discernment, both from facilitators overseeing the process of creation and from the curator assessing the quality of the finished product.

As a trained artist, I retain the utmost respect for the outsider's visionary power to pierce my ingrained cynicism. On this point, practitioners on all sides of the purported debate can agree. Ultimately, what we talk about when we talk about art therapy is harnessing the power of an individual's creativity—be it for personal growth, for art world legitimacy, or for the pure joy of it.

Reference

Wolfensberger, W. (2000). A brief overview of social role valorization. *Mental Retardation, 38*(2), 105-123.

Vick, R. (2008). Community-based art studios in Europe and the United States: A comparative study. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 25*(1), 4-10.

Call for Papers

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Submissions will be accepted from March 15 through August 15, 2008.

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