

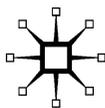
ART EDUCATION BEYOND THE
CLASSROOM

ART EDUCATION BEYOND THE
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PONDERING THE OUTSIDER AND OTHER SITES
OF LEARNING

Edited by
Alice Wexler

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ART EDUCATION BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

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For the extraordinary artists who have graciously given their artwork and
their time to make this book possible

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INTRODUCTION

This compendium has been gestating in my mind since 2004, and its many iterations have reflected the changing Outsider label. Well before 2004 the concept of the “Outsider” had been commercialized, institutionalized, and compromised to such a degree that in order not to perpetuate the myth, its definition and meaning are best left to the purview and discretion of the authors and readers of this text. Nevertheless, I believe that the authors herein use the term with metaphorical integrity. “Outsider” is the term that the authors, as art educators, art therapists, and art critics, use as a reminder of the limits of the dominant culture to which we are tethered. Mainstream culture also efficiently obscures us to the experiences of those who are attached to the world by a mere thread. Outsiders teach us about the arbitrary—sometimes sterile or even laughable—conventions we use to adhere to the world. Possibly no group of people does this more efficiently than autists, a population that is the subject of several chapters in this text.

Autism, like all disabilities, exists only in the context of the “normal,” or an ideal construct of being and behavior. For instance, Sue Rubin describes her philosophical viewpoint about the social convention of concealing emotion.

In a society that has not yet accepted us as being normal, what a great advantage it would be to always appear like everything is rosy. That, all-is-well look is something I see most often: people, normal people, falling to social context, walking around with a permanent smile shielding what they really feel. Yet *we* are termed abnormal or peculiar.

(In Biklen, 2005, p. 83)

As an autist who typically learned to talk late in life, Lucy Blackman observes that non-autists who learn to talk in a timely way do not have the same sensitivity to non-talking, nonhuman species.

What is speech? I laugh to myself when the scientific community privileges our interaction over [that of] the animals. . . . How can we say a sardine doesn't know the meaning of life? They don't necessarily become part of a silver flowing school by chance. To suggest that a cat doesn't know what death is would seem to be downright totally unobservant. But we big brained apes, because so much else is going on in our heads, have to work so hard at this, using different social construction to do so.

(as cited in Biklen, 2005, p. 153)

Autists pose an existential question about alterity with their exceptional gifts, such as inter-species communion, their unworldly sensitivities to their environment, and a sensual knowledge about the natural world that is an artifact of a visual, rather than verbal, language. Is our conceptual construction of the world superior to their concrete and sensual one?

*

I have been an art educator working in the field of disability for about 15 years. During most of that time I believed that I had fallen into the field accidentally or, perhaps, serendipitously. It was in fact neither. I have never felt entirely in the center of the world, inside of things, and many of my dreams are literally about being on the outside of a window looking in. But my actual connection to disability is with a history of mental illness in the maternal side of my family. At least one child in each of my mother's siblings' families has been severely mentally ill. My sister became schizophrenic in her early teens, and she died a self-induced bulimic death. My mother too, although undiagnosed, certainly had a mental disorder. The proximity of the two women to me, needless to say, influenced my life in such depth that I will always be exploring its ramifications.

A recent article in the *New York Times* (2011) about Marsha Linehan's exposé of her hidden borderline disorder, and a discussion of her therapy of *radical acceptance* that followed, invigorated a more objective interest in my family's ailment. Her basis for treatment is appropriate for the paradoxical and existential experience of mental disorder: "[a]cceptance of life as it is, not as it is supposed to be; and the need to change, despite that reality and because of it" (p. 3). The juxtaposition of the seemingly contradictory terms, "acceptance" and "change," and "despite" and "because," is necessary when working through the incongruous emotions and distorted thoughts of the young and old with mental, neurological, and physical disabilities. While the concept of radical acceptance can raise reasonable

questions of indulging people with mental illness to the point of divesting them of responsibility, I would argue that it is also our responsibility to take these risks. It is our overindulgence in caution rather than our reasonableness that keeps us at a safe distance.

I believe that I devoted my life to disability as a kind of metaphor, or replacement for my imposed denial of and distance from schizophrenia. In my course *Disability Studies in Art Education*, I have consciously or unconsciously stayed clear of it. But with this concept of radical acceptance, my thoughts have turned toward schizophrenia, not as the ultimate other in my midst, but as one of the many permutations of humanity.

Included in the *New York Times* article about Dr. Linehan was a note from Elyn Saks. She said, “There’s a tremendous need to implode the myths of mental illness, to put a face on it, to show people that a diagnosis does not have to lead to a painful and oblique life” (p. 1). Saks (2007) is the author of *The Center Does Not Hold: My Journey through Madness*, the only autobiographical narrative about schizophrenia that I am aware of, and therefore an awakening comparable to Temple Grandin’s (1986) groundbreaking book about autism, *Emergence: Labeled Autistic*.

Saks was fortunate to have had her first full blown episode of schizophrenia in 1977 as a graduate student at Oxford University in the United Kingdom. Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom had banned any form of restraint or use of force for many years. After four months of hospitalization, she was referred to the well-known Dr. Anthony Storr, and for the first time she was heard rather than judged. In an environment with such empathy, she released her “darkest” thoughts, and thus began therapy.

I told Dr. Storr everything, and edited nothing in the telling. His eyes didn’t widen in surprise or horror; he didn’t tsk-tsk, he didn’t shake his head in dismay. He simply leaned forward, kept eye contact with me, and listened intently, without flinching, to every word.

(p. 86)

Storr’s remedy was to resume the work she loved and made her happy (studying philosophy at Oxford, but with the addition of daily intensive talk therapy). On the contrary, the medical field in the United States theorizes that psychoanalysis is fruitless for the severely schizophrenic. Saks’s doctor was to be a Kleinian psychoanalyst, of which talk therapy was the

[D]ensest, most intellectually rigorous, challenging and unsettling sort . . . Kleinian interpretation calls for using the same kind of language that the patient’s fantasies are couched in. To do this, Kleinian analysts

employ the same words and images that the analyst uses—and as a consequence, Kleinian analysts can sometimes sound just as crazy as their patients do. These simple but startling exchanges between doctor and patient operate something like arrows shot directly at whatever it is that's upsetting the person being analyzed. If the arrow hits, it punctures the target; what results is something like a valve opening and long-pent-up steam being released.

(pp. 89–91)

The narratives of people with disabilities are indeed becoming welcome in the field and are one of the flash points of disability studies, as Saks's book highlights. Their stories recounted in the visual arts, theater, music, poetry, and prose are disrupting mainstream assumptions. They describe how a diverse spectrum of bodies and minds exist in the world. They are replacing old metaphors with new ones learned from their bodily experiences. Given new interest in post-postmodernist inquiry of embodied knowing, these viewpoints, which are strictly about, of, and from the body, are of growing interest. Disability and difference of all kinds influence and change the way one communicates and processes information. "Only this body, this voice, can communicate in this time and place" (Swan, 2002, p. 294). Ultimately, what we find out is how people labeled with a disability perceive the "experts'" representations of their bodies and performance, and that they often conflict with their own experience.

The authors of this text describe the subjects of their chapters with not only empathy, but also a mutuality that explores, and eventually disrupts, the barriers between the "sane" and the "not sane," the "abled body" and the "disabled body." What the authors hope to arrive at is not a division, but rather a continuum suitable for the human condition, and how that continuum plays out in our respective fields of study.

In the first chapter, "The Messages of Linda Persson," art historian Roger Cardinal confesses his all too common presumptions about autistic art—the inapproachable distance, the idiosyncratic vernacular, the indifference to communication—with which he approached the work of Persson. After his first introduction, however, Cardinal found her communicating directly to him, with deliberate and meaningful images that are interpretable. At the end of his poetic story, Cardinal raises the question of the autistic "self," particularly as it is presented in the work of autistic artists such as Stephen Wiltshire, Jessy Park, and Nadia C. Cardinal suggests that his communion with Persson's work is testimony of a creative self within, "untouched by a supposed abnormality of brain activity."

In “Working with the Young Outsider Artist: Appropriation, Elaboration, and Building Self-Narrative” David Henley departs from a career-long emphasis on clinically based art therapy research. Rather than searching for a “cure,” or the normalization of the client’s identity, and therefore artwork, Henley shifts from diagnostic labeling to empathy, wonder, and biography. A young autistic artist is also the subject of this chapter, who Henley engages with as the complicated product of environmental and social phenomena. At the time of the writing, R. J. was a 12-year-old African American male living in a “cottage” in the south side of Chicago, next to a freeway and neighboring a construction plant. R. J.’s artworks were understandably perseverations of the construction vehicles and heavy equipment that populated his neighborhood. However, this narrative, says Henley, “is not intended to be yet another tiresome, heart-warming story. It serves as a point of departure to examine and debate ideas and interventions.”

In Chapter 3, artist and educator Tim Rollins describes the genesis of K. O. S. in “How Do You Get to Prospect Avenue?” Under Rollins, a group of teens in the South Bronx, destined to drugs, poverty, and prison, became internationally renowned artists. “Self-satisfaction and congratulation are not enough,” writes Rollins. His social commitment as an artist, educator, and citizen led him to seek a place outside the classroom where he found it more hospitable to influence public education in dire economic and moral distress. The constant interruptions endemic in public schools—bells, intercom messages, late arrivals, and early dismissals—sent a message. But beyond these inconveniences was the more dangerous culture of denial.

Condescending, well meaning, good intentions were all around: lots of high fives, backslaps, and “good jobs!” as praise for even the slightest accomplishments. Kids who showed up on time and never cursed out the teacher were assigned to classes for the gifted and talented students who did the opposite were placed in special education.

Rollins bears witness—as many young and motivated teachers do who want to make change—to the lack of high expectations, rigor and, most regrettably, to the open contempt from teachers, administrators, and staff who are determined to maintain the status quo. “After my first year of acclimation, something had to give.”

In Chapter 4, art educator Alice Wexler narrates brief case studies of children who have gone under the public radar because of the severity of their physical disabilities. In “Young and Disabled in Harlem: Making Art Like It Matters,” the author writes about an art studio in the Harlem

Hospital Center in the 1990s where five young boys and founder Bill Richards defied the odds. Richards's hands-off approach quickly generated eloquent artworks from the five children, which received attention from New York City curators, art critics, and journalists. Because Richards's approach falls outside the purview of art education and art therapy, the children's artwork is more closely aligned with the idiosyncratic work of Art Brut or Outsider Art. Wexler follows four boys: two entered the hospital with injuries in 1989, one youngster with cerebral palsy, and one with spina bifida. She records their developing artistry and healing throughout the decade.

In Chapter 5, "The Art of Living and Dying: Linda Montano," art critic Linda Weintraub and art educator Alice Wexler reflect on Montano's performance art. Through interviews, the authors illuminate how Montano's lifelong work of endurance, risk taking, control, and spirituality emerged from her preponderance on the life process. They discuss how her roles as Mother Teresa, the chicken woman, resident counselor of the New Museum, and finally full-time caregiver to her Dad conform to a legacy of therapeutic art she inherited from her parents and grandparents. Dad Art is the culmination of what Montano calls "Art/Life counseling," a practice she used for over 30 years. Weintraub writes, "The words 'art' and 'life' do not refer to the 'life' of the people or the 'life' of the era. They are specifically the life of the artist as she forms her identity, matures, and awakens."

In the next chapter, "Truth, Goodness, and Beautiful Art: Set Free in the Penitentiary," Phyllis Kornfeld narrates how after a series of teaching positions she arrived at her calling: making art in prisons. She says, "I remember feeling constrained, overworked, under-joyed, and restless. It wasn't for me." In 1983 she was hired to teach painting and drawing to men and women incarcerated in state prisons, and taught her first class in a medium security men's facility in Lexington, Oklahoma. As a result, she experienced a sense of belonging to the art teaching profession that has not abated. For the past decades she has campaigned against the predictable stereotyping of pain and victimhood: the kissing swans and bleeding hearts that are so popular in "prison art." They are replaced with earnest and personalized images.

"Following the Siren's Song: Scott Harrison and the Carousel of Happiness," by art educator Doug Blandy and art therapist Michael Franklin, is a story of Scott Harrison, a Viet Nam veteran and cofounder of Urgent Action Network Office of Amnesty International USA. Harrison is also a wood-carver and mechanic, and over the past 25 years has carved 58 animals for a carousel initially built in 1910 and dismantled in 1987. The carousel now operates as the nonprofit *Carousel of Happiness* in

Nederland, Colorado, with a mission dedicated to “inclusiveness and giving.” Blandy and Franklin discuss Harrison’s *Carousel of Happiness* within the larger context of art created by veterans from both an art therapeutic and an art education perspective.

In Chapter 8, “Digital Ethnography: Artists Speak from Virtual Ability Island in Second Life,” Mary Stokrocki, Alice Wexler, and L. S. Krecker investigate the coalescence of disability and technology within an island on Second Life called Virtual Ability, and how identity is reconstructed in the commingling of real and virtual worlds. Digital ethnography in Second Life is different from other forms of qualitative research in the role switching that occurs between observers and subjects during the interchange of technical information and the forming of friendships that are built into the Second Life community. The avatar identity levels the playing field, which is one of the benefits of being an individual with a disability in Second Life. In Virtual Ability Island, however, as opposed to most other sites in Second Life, disability is recognized and supported. At the same time, having an avatar permits accessibility and participation not available in real life. The authors interview five artists who live and work on this island.

In the final chapter, “Outside the Outside: In the Realms of the Real (Hogencamp, Johnston, and Darger),” Jan Jagodzinski invites the reader to question the political implications and the legitimacy of the phenomenon “Outsider Art,” which suggests exclusion but quickly captures the interest of the gallery and museum as transgressive and innovative. Jagodzinski wonders whether inclusion by these institutions is benignly democratic and embracing, or “vampiric” in their capitalistic search for the newest spectacle. “. . . in the name of equality and justice, the distribution of power remains unchanged.” Institutions and galleries then make safe and tame the ultimate otherness of madness, “and readied for tasting as exotic, mad, violent . . .” Jagodzinski presents three schizophrenic artists who have entered the gallery walls while paradoxically remaining outside society’s empathy.

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