

A Project Access New York White Paper



Culture of Autism, Neurodiversity, and Art Education



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Art Beyond Sight



By Pamala Rogers Ed.D. NCPsy A LP

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This article examines ways in which children and adults on the autism spectrum benefit from participating in art programs. It will discuss how art activities can facilitate communication, socialization, and sensory stimulation for students with autism. The article also speaks about the success of Pure Vision Arts which is New York City's only studio for people with autism and other developmental disabilities. It will also explore the concept of neurodiversity and the notion of a culture of autism which points to a savant garde throughout the history of arts and science and includes luminaries such as Andy Warhol, Michelangelo and Albert Einstein.

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Autism is a lifelong, pervasive, developmental disability that is the result of a complex constellation of neurobiological factors not yet fully understood by the medical profession. It is often referred to as a spectrum disorder because the symptoms and characteristics of autism can range from mild to severe and manifest themselves in a wide variety of behaviors. The spectrum of autism includes those who are non-verbal with very low IQ's to those who are extremely verbal with very high IQ's, and have advanced musical, mathematical or artistic abilities. In general people with autism have difficulty with communication, social interaction, and sensory processing. They also often engage in some form of repetitive behaviors or unique fixations. More specifically, they experience the world in a dramatically different and heightened way than neurotypical or so called normal people.

Autism is the fastest growing developmental disability. As the number of children born with autism continues to rise, there will be hundreds of thousands of students on the autism spectrum with unique learning styles being mainstreamed into the public educational system and into society at large. According to the Center for Disease Control, 1 in 88 children born in the United States today is being diagnosed on the autism spectrum.

Art Education for Children with Autism

As the increasing population of children with autism mature there will be a huge need for age appropriate and specialized community based programs and services to support them. Much of the current attention and funding given to autism is focused on research, finding a cure, or early intervention for children. There is a definite lack of funding for programs for adolescents and adults. This

is unfortunate because people with autism are prone to depression, anxiety, and isolation and are in dire need of social and expressive outlets. Due to lack of national, state, and city funding very few specialized art programs exist for children or adults with autism.

As the Director for Expressive Art Programs for the Shield Institute in New York City for many years, I have taught art to literally thousands of children and adults with on the spectrum. From a first-hand perspective I have witnessed how effective and beneficial art programs can be for people on the spectrum.

Many children who have difficulty focusing for more than a few minutes are able to fully engage in art activities for much longer periods of time. Students on the spectrum are sensory and visual learners - traits which can help them succeed and even excel in art activities.

Teaching art to people with autism can be extremely demanding and perplexing even for the most experienced art educator. It is often difficult to establish rapport with children who seem distant or have challenging behaviors. However, when a teacher and student gain a comfort level with each other, the arts can be an excellent way to facilitate sensory stimulation, communication, self-expression and social interaction. Art programs are an effective way to address the deficits in communication and social interaction in a child-centered and enjoyable way.

Students with autism often have the ability for intense concentration allowing them to process the world and translate their perceptions into distinctive art. This ability to focus on sensory activities can be an advantage for the art teacher. Many children who have difficulty focusing for more than a few minutes are able to fully engage in art activities for much longer periods of time. Students on the spectrum are sensory and visual learners - traits which can help them succeed and even excel in art activities.

Art programs help to facilitate language development and communication in very specific ways. Because art is essentially a non-verbal activity it can reach children who have language impairments, are non-verbal, or speak English as a second language. Children who are withdrawn or have so called behavioral difficulties respond well to art activities. Creating art can provide a way to express and sublimate thoughts and feelings that are not dependant on spoken language. Often children who are non-verbal, or have limited language capacity, can often communicate clearly through art with less frustration and anxiety.

Pure Vision Arts

Pure Vision Arts (PVA) is New York's first art studio and exhibition space for adult artists with autism and other developmental disabilities. PVA was initiated in 2002 by The Shield Institute to expand creative opportunities for people in the New York metropolitan area. There was a need for an art space where people with autism could come together to work and be supported as serious artists. The mission of PVA is to develop the capacity for creative expression while increasing a sense of personal identity and pride through the creation of art. PVA's philosophy begins with the belief that the arts are not a luxury, but a

necessity in a civilized society, and that all people regardless of their level of disability should have equal opportunity to express themselves through art. Art can provide profound pleasure for self-discovery and energize and transform the human spirit. Each person can experience and create something that is uniquely different which reflects their individual personality.

PVA provides studio space, art materials, instruction, and exhibition opportunities for an expanding number of beginning and emerging artists who are garnering mainstream media attention and gaining a growing audience. All of the artists attending PVA are self-taught. Some have developed their unique style independently in either group residences, institutions, or at home with little or no support. Others have had family members, or a special friend, who encouraged and nurtured their artistic interests. Although art had been an integral part of their private or family lives, there was no place in New York City, the nation's cultural capital, where their talent was taken seriously and their work could be exhibited and sold.

PVA sought to fill this cultural void by establishing a stimulating and lively sunlit loft studio in the Chelsea art district of Manhattan. Close proximity to nearby galleries and museums allows PVA to provide art appreciation outings and other community activities to artists who attend the studio. On a typical day you will find as many as 25 artists busy painting, drawing, sculpting, and working with textiles. The studio is wheelchair accessible for people who have physical disabilities and is certified to comply with ADA standards (American's with Disabilities Act).

At PVA artists work at their own pace and developmental level in a warm and supportive atmosphere. Art activities are person-centered with an emphasis on ability rather than disability and focusing on the process not the product. PVA is a place where creativity, joy, and music abound and people express themselves freely. Artists are encouraged to translate their interests, or what some might call obsessions and fixations, into profoundly personal art that chronicles their inner life. Everyone is encouraged to develop his/her own pure vision from within and not through formal instruction or copying material from other sources.

PVA views making art as a viable vocation and serves as a representative or agent for the artists. Some artists work on commissioned pieces; others create work for an upcoming exhibition, while others are working on developing their style and creating a body of work. The more serious artists sell their work to generate income. It is the person's choice to exhibit or sell their art and formal consents must be obtained for the art to be sold. If individuals cannot consent for themselves, a legal guardian is contacted for permission. Artists receive a 50% commission on the sale of their work. The other 50% goes to PVA to help pay for the cost of art materials, framing, studio space, and exhibition expenses.

The art made at PVA depicts a wide variety of fascinating imagery and content. Some of the art is particularly idiosyncratic while other works are highly

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sophisticated and meticulously created labors of love. Since its opening in 2002, thousands of people have benefited from the opportunity to create art in the studio or attend an exhibition. At PVA people have found a community where they can flourish, be themselves, and become serious artists unbounded by convention. Artistic virtuosity is not uncommon in people with autism and PVA's exhibitions and publication showcase the depth and complexity of exemplary works being created. Articles about PVA have been included in major publications such as Art News, Arts and Antiques and Envision Folk Art Magazine, Folk Art Messenger, and Raw Vision.

PVA also hosts exhibitions at its gallery and at other venues to sell the artists' work, help raise funds, and increase the visibility of the studio and its mission. For instance, Pure Vision Arts organized a major event in at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Arts and Sciences in New York City entitled *Pure Visionaries/Artists on the Spectrum*. The event featured an internationally curated

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exhibition of art by twenty established and emerging artists on the spectrum. To coincide with the exhibition, a ground breaking symposium was held featuring a keynote speech by Dr. Temple Grandin, a noted animal scientist and author with autism who spoke directly about the culture of autism. Additional speakers included artist Jessica Park and her late mother and writer Clara Park. Multimedia artist Johnny Seitz performed an autobiographical piece about his autism titled *Dialogue in Our World: God Does Not Make Garbage*.

The event was designed to educate people about autism from a first hand perspective from accomplished artists on the spectrum. *Pure Visionaries/Artists on the Spectrum* was attended by over three hundred people and was a celebration of neurodiversity and the cultural achievements of people with autism. The event was designed to inspire and give hope to educators, clinicians, and families affected by autism.

The term neuro-diversity was created by people who believe their autism is an intrinsic part of who they are and they belong to community that has common characteristics. This had led to the concept that autism is a distinct culture, a unique way of being, and not a disorder that needs to be cured but an atypical variation of

Ultimately PVA is about community building and creating social change by promoting and legitimizing the cultural contributions of artists with autism as part of a larger contemporary folk art context. Many of the artists have led amazing lives and the sheer power and uniqueness of their expression add greatly to our humanity and helps society advance by breaking down negative stereotypes and misperceptions about autism.

The Savant-garde

Autism is not a pathological but a neurological condition. The term neuro-diversity was created by people who believe their autism is an intrinsic part of who they are and they belong to community that has common characteristics. This had led to the concept that autism is a distinct culture, a unique way of being, and not a disorder that needs to be cured but an atypical variation of human neurology. In reference to being cured of her

autism, noted animal scientist Dr. Temple Grandin states: “Some people might think if I could snap my fingers I’d choose to be normal. But I wouldn’t want to give up my ability to see in beautiful precise pictures. I believe in them.” (Grandin, 1995)

Current research indicates that some famous and highly influential people throughout the history of the arts and sciences may have been, in fact, high functioning autistics. This list includes notable people such as Albert Einstein, Andy Warhol, and Michelangelo to name a few.

Current research indicates that some famous and highly influential people throughout the history of the arts and sciences may have been, in fact, high functioning autistics. This list includes notable people such as Albert Einstein, Andy Warhol, and Michelangelo to name a few. Einstein, for instance, had many of the diagnostic criteria associated with having Asperger Syndrome, the name for high autism. He had problems with language development and did not speak until he was three years old and was thought to be mentally retarded. Temple Grandin cites in her book *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism*: “Einstein did not exhibit any great genius as a young child. Like many autistic type children, he was very good at jigsaw puzzles and spent hours building houses out of playing cards.” Einstein did poorly in school and was a loner who was more attached to ideas than to people.

He was very eccentric and clearly had savant like abilities regarding mathematical calculations and theorems. His appearance was also very unconventional for the times in which he lived.

Another example of an eccentric with many traits associated with autism is artist Andy Warhol, the main figure in the contemporary Pop Art movement. He was socially awkward, very shy and had a unique speech pattern with minimal use of language. He preferred to hide behind a camera or tape recorder obsessively documenting everything. Warhol invented the notion of serial and mechanical repetition of ordinary imagery using the process of silk screening. (Paradiz, 2002)

Warhol’s artistic process with its emphasis on the perseveration of common products and mass production is very autistic by nature.

Michelangelo is another artist that two medical experts in London have speculated might have had Asperger Syndrome. They drew this conclusion based on his behavior, single minded work routine, few friends, his obsessive desire to create, and his ability for hyper focus and productivity. (Lane, 2004)

The notion of three such important figures in the arts and sciences being autistic is a very intriguing possibility. It helps us to see autism from a broader cultural perspective and points to a savant-garde throughout history. It is important to note that we all exist somewhere on a great neurological continuum and genius like autism is considered a phenomena of unusual brain circuitry. Many children being diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome are currently being identified at a much younger age and being placed in programs for the gifted and talented to nurture their innate abilities in math, music or art.

There is a great deal of speculation and controversy regarding the increase in the number of people diagnosed with autism worldwide and what this means

on a grander scale in terms of human evolution. Maybe we should be focusing on our similarities rather than our differences. As our society continues to embrace models of inclusion rather than exclusion it will be interesting to see how, through their individual and collective vision, people with autism will continue to have an impact on the arts and sciences. Their contributions could be responsible for helping to create a paradigm shift in the way we understand the mind, art, creativity, and neuroscience. ♦

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