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## **Axiological dimension of the art of disabled persons**

The juxtaposition of the notions “disability” and “art” in the title of this paper seems to introduce some dissonance as... how can one match these two incompatible, mutually exclusive axiological paradigms? How human disability i.e. imperfection can be matched with omnipotent “art” ever changing its image, the essence of which is perfection, beauty and harmony? Can art, and to what degree, be interesting and can it give happiness to an imperfect, disabled person? Help this person to understand himself and the world? Help him to find himself and his place, especially today, in the world which is full of contrasts and not very friendly? Can art, and to what degree, help him to find his own way of life, to struggle for perfection in spite of his disability and the adversities of life? Can art, and to what degree, give joy of life to the disabled? I would like to answer these and other questions in a balanced and reflective manner.

Looking for answers to questions formulated in this way, I decided to use research material collected by means of observation. Already at the beginning I made an attempt at defining the standards of disability and the needs of the disabled resulting from it. I made an attempt at listing material and immaterial phenomena which can be treated as a piece of art or an art phenomenon. However, the greatest hardship I encountered in the course of analysis and processing of the collected empirical material was how to define such notions as “disability” and “art”.

### **“Disability” as axiological category**

In order to present the problem mentioned above, I would like to explain first the two aforementioned notions. In the most general terms – *“disability – lowered in relation to standards condition of organism's ability, causing clear limitations and difficulties in fulfilling social roles by a human being”*<sup>1</sup>. Thus, defining the aim of this paper, I would like

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Encyklopedyczny słownik rehabilitacji, red. T.Gałkowski, J.Kiwerski, Warszawa 1986, s. 168.

to explain that as the subject for the paradigm “art” I accepted adult persons (above 25 years of age) with deeper intellectual disability (often accompanied by physical disability), the condition of whom clearly indicated a permanent character of the disability. The disability diagnosed in them is not an illness which can be traditionally cured, but it is a specific state of human development (a kind of injury). A condition relatively stable, which is, however, subject to numerous predicators, both positive and negative. The type of disability in question is diagnosed in people at various stages of ontogenesis (from birth to natural death). In our case the etiology of disability was related to the prenatal, perinatal and postnatal periods, where the development was accompanied with: illnesses, poisoning as well as post-vaccination complications and injuries. In short – these persons suffered from adversities. Each person was different so each person had different needs. I tried to make myself familiar with each person and involving a person in a complex rehabilitation process, I tried to grant this person, according to his or her needs, a far reaching support and help. The diagnosis of the condition and needs of the disabled allows to make the range and form of help they require more suited to individual needs. I would like to remind here that the persons in question (above 25 years of age), who due to their age and the state of their development do not qualify for the obligatory education, were under the care of their families and/or various types of care and rehabilitation or medical and rehabilitation institutions (most often Occupational Therapy Workshops), where taking part in activities they maintain their physical and intellectual abilities at a level which can be obtained in their condition. These persons are able to undertake activities of various kinds [e.g. kinetic, vocal, puppet theatre, theatre or paratheatre, choreographic, handcraft activities], which give them satisfaction and the sense of autonomy, thus, the feeling of being useful, which causes them to feel happy, needed and satisfied. Going out with their handcraft products or artistic repertoire, which goes beyond the average life of the environment they live in, they are noticed, admired and awarded in many ways. Their sense of autonomy and the artistic success which they believe they achieve are essential predicators of broadly understood rehabilitation and social integration. And although we, as society, understand that the autonomy of the disabled which they aim at in spite of adverse circumstances, compared to the level of autonomy of fully able people is not fully possible, it is a result of a long-lasting rehabilitation, mediation, negotiation and transgression process. Such people, sometimes in spite of great efforts, do not give up any chance to prove that: “A disabled person – is someone who wants, who can and is able to be active, creative and happy, useful, if only people who wish him well believe in him, in his ability and possibility and create for him appropriate conditions”.

In order that they could present (somewhat “by the way”) themselves, showing their, often underestimated abilities and predispositions, they need a recipient, well-wishing addressee, active and supporting participant of the dialogue, noticing their efforts at struggle for the normality. The personal courage and determination of these people, their will to be recognized among people and to present to them what they can do often opens for such people the way to worthy, human life among the closest people who love them and are loved. We can give here the example of artistic festivals organized for many years as Polish or international events, integrating not only local societies but also authorities. How important it is for those rich in feelings, disabled artists, to be among people, to meet “together” to look at one another, exchange glances and accept congratulations, to sing “together” the hymn of the festival. Each such meeting of the festival artists with spectators i.e. “the curious ones” (i.e. inhabitants of the village, town or city) creates an opportunity to show them what they can do. To present true art which “builds bridges”, strengthens mutual relationships and contacts and bringing people together eliminates the distance between the fully able and the disabled.

**“Art” as a part of the dialogue in the process of integration and normalization of the life of the disabled**

Defining the notion of “art” goes beyond – as it seems – the ability of the human mind, what can be proved by its definitions which are still imperfect. However, undertaking an attempt to find the element of dialogue “in art” and “by art” accepting the following definition of “art” as axiological category: *“art means artistic creation including objects of painting, architecture, sculpture, music, literature, which fulfil the requirements of aesthetics, characterized with beauty, harmony; [...] it is also the ability, skilfulness in creating something; talent, artistry, mastery”*<sup>2</sup>. Definitions of “art” – as history tells us – changed with time; since the Antiquity to the present times. Functions of art., its contents and forms changed as well. At different levels of civilization's development definitions accepted different criteria for divisions of arts, taking as a basis the type of effort put into the creation of a masterpiece. Leaving out historical attitudes towards the essence of art, I would like to stop at the 19<sup>th</sup> century when to the achievements of the Antiquity and the Middle Ages there joined new arts: film, photography and utility arts. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, in spite of computerization and other modern forms of life's technicization, clearly deprived art of beauty and harmony features as basic characteristics of art. Mottos: “everyone can be an artist” or “art in the street” seem to treat art as “a kind of consumption good”. This type of art made

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<sup>2</sup> Słownik wyrazów obcych, red. J.Tokarski, Warszawa 1980, s. 735.

common due to the use of TV, computer, the Internet, posters, books and other media, upsets many connoisseurs of “true art”. The contemporary man, who cannot keep pace with the course of social changes, feeling fear and apprehension, excited by cacophony, dynamics of noises of speeding cars, stupefied by avalanches of multicoloured, pulsating light, colours of aggressive advertisements and posters insulting beauty, devaluating the recognised values, stops more and more often asking himself with determination: “who am I and who am I to be in this multifarious mixture of something I do not understand, what seems to be contrary to my nature?” He sometimes seems to be tired with the effects of ever-present noise, rattle of metal, dynamic accords of too aggressive techno music, striking the mind and injuring very strained or tired enough nervous system. „True art” – as it seems – requires intimacy from its recipient, as well as intellectual activity, inner calmness, imagination and normal, human sensitivity. It cannot be aggressive and captivating with sharpness of dissonance sounds or the palette of benumbing colours. „Art” if it is to maintain its status, must be exclusive, cannot be brought down to the level of goods for consumption, freely available, for masses, sold by ignorant people with high level of confidence. Exclusivity of art – as one of its experts and connoisseurs – is a higher level of spiritual culture of man, which is totally independent on this person's education, social or professional position, consisting in constant inner development and enrichment, and, what follows, going to higher levels of human spirituality and sensitivity.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that in this context “disability” of a person, limiting his social contacts and access to broadly understood mass culture, never hinders this person from feeling the pleasure and joy of creating, experiencing aesthetic feelings and deep emotions. people suffering from intellectual disability often cannot speak, they can also have difficulties with understanding many of the messages they receive, but this is not an obstacle preventing them from looking for and discovering the beauty of their world, a simple world, fully understandable and, as a result, safe. Being in the realm of art they seem to really study its nature, experience by means of visual, auditory and sensory sensations what is important, subtle, beautiful and permanent. Their feelings, stored carefully in the recesses of their, maybe less able, minds are for them a spiritual food, which causes sometimes not too dexterous parts of the body (e.g. deformed or expressionless face, hands without fingers, or capriciously, beyond human standards, disfigured profile) follow the strict requirements of the “willing spirit”. The melody, accent, rhythm, they have in sufficient amounts in themselves and around them, are for them a kind of

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<sup>3</sup> B.Nowak, Czy współczesnemu człowiekowi potrzebna jest sztuka ? [w:] Edukacja artystyczna wobec przemian społeczno-oświatowych, red. L.Kataryńczuk-Mania, J.Karcz, Zielona Góra 2002, s. 9-14.

accompaniment in life, activating all, even the most disturbed functions of the organism. This very accompaniment provokes it to change behaviors (e.g. change of place, dislocation, taking appropriate poses specifying or expressing the power of dreams, aspirations and needs of a human being). Communication strategies of the disabled, most often non-verbal in character, occurring in the form of different signals (e.g. gestures and mimics, paraphonic or somatophonic), they help in familiarising oneself and those who love and understand them. The presence of well-wishing and understanding people encourages them to start communication, thus to use proxemic signs indicating the interaction space.<sup>4</sup> It encourages them to exchange messages, enriched with positive emotions. That is why in the disabled persons' process of learning about the world there is a place for their personal feelings, intimate sensations and authentic joy, which engages a person totally. Their persistent struggle "to be" makes the impossible to be possible. Feeling the true joy, which is something an engaged and happy person never has too much of, seems to encourage them to undertake new activities over and over again. Looking for the opportunities and the ways of its expressing can be treated as a basis for a creation act, so important for the spiritual development of a human being. It is in such act where the personal thought of a person becomes real, also the plan of reshaping the world as he sees it can be found there. This dreamt of world which already at the stage of its mental creation seems to be better, more beautiful, richer and closer to this person's nature.

### **Summary and conclusions**

Considering the contents of this article one can doubt if people with deeper intellectual disability, with often so limited possibilities of their development can really feel and understand the sense of art. I assure you that one can believe in that. To justify this answer it is enough to see their looks full of joy, sometimes concentrated faces reflecting emotions, "utterances without words", shouts full of overwhelming joy and ovations. Listening to hymns and songs sung, looking at pictures, admirable macrames, glass paintings, expressive creations of stage roles, I admired many times their engagement, unique ability to feel the nature of stage characters, the way of their identification with their roles, authenticity, and also a kind of distance to what they participate in. Taking part in yearly artistic forms festivals for many years, I keep discovering those people anew. They are like they are but they understand the art straight from the heart and "painted by the heart" like nobody else. They see in it sanctity, a

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<sup>4</sup> E.M.Minczakiewicz, Niepełnosprawni wobec szans na normalizację, „Szkoła Specjalna”, 2003, nr 3, s. 158-167.

kind of sacrum. this art. of theirs, maybe too primitive for others, means everything for them; it is a live sparkle of fire which starts the fire, the thrill of emotion and elation, feeling of pride and, most of all, the source of hidden dreams and hopes. Art is for them not only the sense of life but an opportunity to show talents, which without the phenomenon of art would remain unknown to us. It is their unusual although simple, and at the same time great art. which guards what is beautiful, reflective, technically difficult, enchanted in a shape, mysterious gesture, signal with a sounding given by its creator, which has its sense, hard to overestimate. A disabled person remaining in the circle of art and creating this art perfectly feels its intentions and message. Intuitively, he feels the need of creating and maintaining the masterpieces from the past, so important for the presence and future of generations. In art he looks for new artistic inspirations and new, imperishable values.

**References:**

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