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Art in the Life of Disabled People, i.e. a Slightly Different Discovery of Beauty

When several years ago a film entitled *Mój Nikifor* entered the cinemas, the whole country drew attention to the issue of art of disabled people. The artists and their works started to emerge from studios previously unknown to anybody where, under the vigilant eye of instructors/ therapists, they had been fulfilling their passions related with graphic arts and at the same time participating in a therapeutic process. Many cities organised exhibitions presenting works created by people with various degrees and types of disabilities.

The mass media interest in the activity of disabled people has slightly subsided. There is no publicity and limelight. The artists have been left alone. They are unusual people, for whom art has become the sense of life. It is obvious that every type of disability significantly limits the possibility of obtaining artistic education. However, it does not mean that these people are deprived of the chance of making use of their potential skills. If the potential has been discovered at the right moment and if it has been properly managed, every disabled person has chances for being successful in art.

History shows us a huge number of artists who struggled with various types of disabilities and whose works are nowadays considered the canon of world cultural heritage. Francesco Goya and Vincent van Gogh are the most typical examples of artists who were mentally ill and for whom art was a special type of *catharsis*. They depicted their experiences by peculiar means of artistic expression (characteristic for their creativity). In a cycle of etchings entitled *The Caprices*, Goya reveals what is dozing in his subconscious: desires, dreams, but also obsessions and anxieties. The artist made use a scrupulous of the texture and the black and brown hues with strong colourful accents in wall paintings of his own house known as the House of the Deaf Man in order to emphasise the expressiveness and mysteriousness of the

paintings. His works, such as *Saturn Devouring His Children* or *The Giant*, continue to fascinate.

Paintings of Vincent van Gogh, despite the artist's use of bright, clear and saturated colours, reveal his painful life experiences. We encounter typical artistic procedures which intensify expression, including intuitive use of colour contrasts and their intensification by the characteristic manner of applying paint to the canvass.

The group of great artists also features artists with physical disabilities. Among them is Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, a great drawer and a graphic artist, one of the fathers of the modern poster, the artist who documented the life in Paris at the end of the 19th century.

Frieda Kahlo was a Mexican painter who fought with epilepsy from early childhood and struggled with walking difficulties caused by the Heine-Medin disease, but who continued to paint until the very last moment of her life, lying in bed.

The examples listed above prove that solely the artist's talent decides whether a given work will be included in the category called art. The artist's talent can be scrupulously shaped in a workshop or at an art school or nourished and developed in a studio or at home. Many artists, such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin or Henri Rousseau, have never mastered their skills under professional supervision and yet their works constitute an important element in the history of painting.

Nobody has to be convinced about the importance of art in the life of disabled people. Yet only the statements of artists themselves can bring the issue closer to us.

A couple of years ago, the Foundation of Disabled People's Art conducted a questionnaire entitled *Why am I creating?* The most interesting answers were included in a book with the same title (Kraków 2001).

With respect to the question asked in the questionnaire: *What stimulated your interest in art and induced you to create?* (Kraków 2001), most people answered that they felt the need to tell something about themselves and about their lives. For a number of people, undertaking artistic activity by participation in workshops is the only possibility of contacting the external

world. Paradoxically, their creativity is not characterised by excessive self-pity. On the contrary: there is joy and strength to continue. The words written by Józia Łaciak are probably most moving: *Why do I do it? Why do I paint? Through my paintings I want to give joy to other people. I want people to become more cheerful and kind to one another by looking at what I am doing. I would like to instil others with strength to become better* (Kraków 2001).

Therefore, there is numerous evidence supporting the fact that it is worthwhile to invest in places where disabled people can fulfil their creative passions. It is possible that at this very moment, a van Gogh-type artistic personality is being shaped.

My interest in the artistic works of disabled people emerged quite a long time ago. I started to establish contacts with various therapeutic centres where art workshops are operating. Every person whom I met represents a different history, always interesting and fascinating.

As an example, I would like to present some of the artists.

Wojciech Kunarzewski (Down syndrome).

The author's artistic adventure commenced in his childhood. He became interested in art on his own. Initially, he created at home and later participated in classes organised by *Pałac pod Baranami* and the "Jordanówka" Club at Bronowice Nowe in Kraków. This is where he found his new home and under the supervision of artists/ pedagogues (Maria Grabowska, Robert Małoszowski) was able to pursue his creative passion. This fact is very significant because such professional assistance creates greater possibilities of selecting proper sources of inspiration, subjects and techniques.

The main subject of his works is architecture combined with landscape. His works feature houses, trees and streets. They are multi-element compositions with a clearly distorted perspective. The characteristic attention to details (which are greatly simplified) is captivating (illustration No. 1). Figures and portraits have features characteristic for creativity of children in the schematic period (illustration No. 2).

The author definitely and willingly uses colour and it is possible to note that it is a well thought-out process. Among his works, there are paintings "seething" with colour: dynamic, constructed on strong contrasts, where the colour is treated with particular finesse and self-

confidence. Yet we can also find works where colour is only a tint. This testifies to immense colour sensitivity. This is a feature that can be envied by any person dealing with painting.

This creativity has, as in many similar cases, an intuitive character, even though we can find a specific language of forms and means of artistic expression used in a conscious manner in order to express specific types of content.

Consistent improvement of the workshop, mastering of the artistic language and continuity of actions prove the authentic need to express feelings by means of art and to transform all experiences into a positive vision – beauty.

References:

1. Popek S., *Barwy a psychika*, UMCS, Lublin 1999
2. *Dlaczego tworzę*, Foundation of Disabled People's Art, print: APOSTROF, Kraków 2001