

# From Outsider to Participant: Developmentally Disabled Dialogue in Socially Engaged Art

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**Abstract:** How can the museum incorporate the voice of the developmentally disabled artist? How can the very idea of dialogue be reconsidered through the interactions that the museum curator might develop with artists that have atypical cognitive abilities? I trace these questions through an examination of a video and the circumstances around it, entitled *CREATE: The Artists Are Present* (2011), which showcases a series of interviews with developmentally disabled artists from Creative Growth in Oakland, Creativity Explored in San Francisco and National Institute for Art and Disability (NIAD) in Richmond, California. The interviews were conducted by self-identifying physically disabled artists as a reaction against the lack of self-representation of the interviewed artists in the large-scale exhibition, *CREATE* (2011), co-curated by Lawrence Rinder, Director of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archives (BAMPF), California, and Matthew Higgs, Director of White Columns, New York. This paper argues that the very nature of artist/curator dialogue and socially engaged art practices in the museum can be deepened and enriched by much more variegated forms of communication amongst those typically occupying the margins.

**Keywords:** Developmentally disabled dialogue, Artist/curator exchange, Atypical communication, Curatorial strategies, Museums and disability, Socially engaged art

## Introduction

How can the museum incorporate the voice of the developmentally disabled artist? Given that developmentally disabled dialogue is widely considered non-normative, and non-verbal, how can the very idea of dialogue be rethought through the interactions that the museum curator might develop with artists that have atypical cognitive abilities? What does dialogical art as community-engaged art mean if the subjects participating cannot speak using their voices? What other kinds of information are offered by disabled artists, either individually or collaboratively, when

they interact with non-disabled participants and producers? Art historian Grant Kester says that dialogical practices

encourage a heightened awareness of bodily schema—our capacity to orient ourselves in space relative to the world around us—and an increased sensitivity to the process by which our bodies feel, relate, and produce meaning ... the subjectivity of the viewer fluctuates with the subjectivity of the producer, which involves immersive, haptic or participatory forms. (Kester 2011, 114).

I dwell on the nature of these fluctuations involving disabled subjects, questioning what is “radical” or “subversive” (and who decides) and whether or not the reins of the artist and curator are loosened enough in order to achieve transformation regarding the disabled subject’s marginal social position both within the museum and the wider world. If the disabled artist “voice” is moving from the repressive, problematic economy of outsider art and into the realm of dialogical, collaborative art practice within the museum, what are the conditions, limitations, and opportunities opened up by this strategic move for artists, critics, curators, and institutions? More specifically, how can disabled artists have more of a “say” in the production of collaborative exhibit work about them?

In Kester’s book, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (2011), the scholar examines the possibility for the Other to explore his or her own agency and to speak back to the viewer. He speaks of this in the context of contemporary dialogical, collaborative projects that he defines as a process which “occasions a reciprocal testing of both ethical and aesthetic norms, the outcome of which can only be determined through the subsequent forms of social interaction mobilized by a given work” (p. 185). Thus, he differentiates the dialogic work from the material object, where the artist is attributed with all the power and pre-conceived instructions for how the object or event should be perceived with a given context. Kester continues that the goal of this dialogic process (and often, the art object too) is to seek a transformation that enhances our capacity for the “compassionate recognition of difference, both within ourselves and in others” (p. 185). He pushes this point by asking if it is possible for the sufferer or the victim, those typically marginalized, to speak back within the context of dialogic practice? This paper will aim to deepen Kester’s questions by thinking about how political resistance might be a fulcrum for the mental developmentally disabled subject. Surely there is more to their “participation” than simply the artwork they make or what their bodies represent? What do they think and feel about their art? How does their art transfer or relate to a participatory mode, where the material object is less central, and there is a focus on the conversational, dialogic aspects within their specific art practices, and how can this be presented in the art museum?

I trace all of these questions through an examination of a video and the circumstances around it, entitled *CREATE: The Artists Are Present* (2011), which showcases a series of interviews with developmentally disabled artists from Creative Growth in Oakland, Creativity Explored in San Francisco and National Institute for Art and Disability (NIAD) in Richmond, California. The interviews were conducted by self-identifying physically disabled artists Neil Marcus, Leroy Moore, Katherine

Sherwood, and Sunaura Taylor as a reaction against the lack of self-representation of the interviewed artists in the large-scale exhibition, *CREATE* (2011), co-curated by Lawrence Rinder, Director of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archives (BAMPF), California, and Matthew Higgs, Director of White Columns, New York. Using this video as an example, this paper argues that the very nature of artist/curator dialogue in museums is deepened and enriched by much more variegated forms of communication amongst those typically occupying the margins.

## Is Participatory Art Really Participatory?

I'd like to begin by addressing the form of participatory art work espoused by critic Claire Bishop in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012). I contend that her definition of participatory art is not really participatory at all, for it fails to include disabled participants in the role of agent, maker, leader, or even active speaker. She dedicates a chapter to discussing how many contemporary artists choose to “delegate performance” by “outsourcing authenticity.” This might include subjects who “authentically” identify with certain gendered, classed, or raced contexts. In other words, these artists will hire “non-professionals” or “specialists” from other fields to be present in their performance-based work in a gallery or public space at a particular time, where the hired performer will follow the instructions of the artist. Bishop concentrates on artists who “tend to hire people to perform their own socio-economic category, be this on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, age, disability, or (more rarely) a profession” (p. 219). She uses the example of Santiago Sierra to demonstrate her point. Sierra is a Spanish artist who has used low-paid workers to stand in an art gallery to highlight their economic plight and make the audience uncomfortable. According to Bishop, these people sourced by Sierra were usually “willing to undertake banal or humiliating tasks for the minimum wage,” thus Sierra has been accused of perpetuating the cycle of abuse and poverty of such bodies within the space of the commercial art industry (Bishop 2012, 222). Of course, works by Sierra and others who work in this way have also been heavily criticized for the lack of agency bestowed upon, or embraced, by the actual participants.

For Bishop, nurturing this uncomfortable quality is part of the success of Sierra's work, because his intention encourages the viewer to think about exploitation itself. She says,

to judge these performances on a scale with supposed ‘exploitation’ at the bottom and full ‘agency’ at the top is to miss the point entirely. The difference, rather, is between ‘art fair art’ and the better examples of this work that reify *precisely in order to discuss reification*, or which exploit *precisely to thematise exploitation itself*.” (Bishop 2012, 239).

This argument is certainly a valid one, however Bishop leaves little room for us to imagine how *the artist* is equally *implicated* in the theme of exploitation and reification alongside their outsourced participants. In certain sections of the chapter, she describes ambiguous situations produced by a number of artists that do not

clearly articulate the relationship between artist and participant. For example, she describes how Sierra's use of recruitment agencies to find the participant bodies for his performances as "cold and alienated" given his arm's length approach (Bishop 2012, 223). It is the recruitment agency that ends up dealing with all the financial transactions in the hire of these bodies. In another instance, Bishop discusses Polish artist Artur Zmijewski's role as "ambiguous" as "it is never clear to what degree his [sometimes deaf, sometimes blind] participants are acting of their own volition, or being gently manipulated to fulfill the requirements of his pre-planned narrative" (Bishop 2012, 227).

Bishop's notes suggest that the artist's role is ambiguous, but this ambiguity is ultimately trumped by the more important artist's task of "constructing a narrative, grounded in reality" or pointing out themes of social conflict and exploitation (Bishop 2012, 227). I maintain that this is a reckless argument, as work by artists such as Sierra and Zmijewski are simply perpetuating centuries of discrimination, reification, and repression towards minority groups, particularly disabled subjects in the case of Zmijewski. How can the agendas of contemporary artists—even well-intentioned, do-gooder artists, ever have efficacy (in Kester's sense of offering compassionate understanding of difference) if the roles they inhabit are ambiguous and at arm's length? What sort of message does this provide to the public that is already acutely aware of how identity still counts, as a disabled subject will attest? How can artistic vision trump the specific forms of inter-subjective ethics at work in a given context, especially if those bodies are ambiguously participatory? Even more key, why does Bishop ignore the possibility that the artists themselves might identify as disabled, rather than automatically embody the "normative" artist status? It is likely that artists who identify as disabled may have very different notions of exploitation and social conflict. Perhaps she hasn't met any disabled artists yet or is it that disabled artists are not even on the map, in contemporary art practices? I suggest that the answer to this last double-barreled, rhetorical question is affirmative.

Bishop suggests that in order for artists like Sierra and Zmijewski to evade criticism directed to the lack of agency wielded by their exploited participants or to avoid accusations of superficiality for the "reductive branding or packaging of social identities in a work of art," (and indeed she uses the example of "the blind"), they ought to juxtapose their work with "the dominant modes of mediatic representation against which these works so frequently intend to do battle" (Bishop 2012, 239). Bishop's argument assumes there are less reductive images available, rather than realizing that Zmijewski and Sierra's works, I believe, are simply adding to the already sizeable pile of ghettoizing, stereotypical imagery that continues to emerge, time and again, in contemporary art, in which the artist is somehow cut off, aloof, or separated from the subjects he outsources. The art world has long remained a "normate" world, replicating society in a micro-cosmic fashion. The gallery is an arbiter that reproduces the hierarchy between those who are included and those who are excluded, on multiple levels. The reality is that very few art institutions are run by disabled gallery directors, employ disabled people who are curators, educators, or gallery assistants, let alone artists who may identify with an impairment. If those governing the art world don't include disabled people, then it comes as no surprise that they should continue to maintain the invisibility of disabled subjects as

fictionalized exemplars of Otherness, which is very carefully handled with a clinical efficiency in order to keep “them” at a distance from having authority or authorship. This “normalizing” work of institutions is reinforced by the gallery’s employment of the artist, who is selected to represent what the gallery considers to be the social realities of our time. What Bishop needs to recognize is that the gallery is not some neutral or independent space from which critique can be leveled at the world “out there.” The system is always-already flawed. The cycle of prejudice is hard to break when one is operating within a seemingly “natural” system that has failed to be challenged.

As Petra Kupperts (2012) stated in her review of the *CREATE* exhibition (which I will discuss in more detail shortly), the “nothing about us without us” slogan is the cornerstone of disability politics, despite the fact that this slogan itself reinforces a binary between “us” and “them.” If Bishop is arguing for the “presentation of conventionally under-exposed constituencies” (p. 239) then surely the “nothing about us without us” slogan should fall into recognition within her line of thinking. While Kupperts argues that such dismissal of the Other’s voice was “out of step” in the context of 21st-century social justice movements I’d like to add that it is also problematic within the field of curatorial practice. Further, it is complicated by the issues raised in the contemporary field of dialogic art. In her review, Kupperts (2012) encouraged the exhibit curators to “allow others to come to voice for the enrichment of us all”. How can this desire be re-contextualized within dialogic art practices? How can these voices participate in contemporary dialogical practices, ultimately replacing the current attention on how dialogical practices might be “good” or “bad” or if the work contains shocking qualities? Disabled artists’ participation might shift the focus from Nicolas Bourriaud’s (1998) convivial or ameliorative functions in socially engaged art and its ability to effectively portray social justice, social conflict, and agency to instead ask a more fundamental question: What does it simply mean for the disabled participant to *participate*? Kupperts is correct when she states that if an art gallery or museum were to honor and open the cultural gates towards a more inclusive artist voice that might challenge the very nature of dialogue in and of itself, perhaps this will also mean expanding communication, and challenging the current limited forms taken by dialogical art practices. Curators then might work with other curators and artists who focus primarily on gendered, raced, classed, and queer subject matter to undermine sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic discourses. I advocate for a more serious examination of what the art world defines as “participatory,” and I believe that disabled artists can complicate and challenge this field by virtue of their non-standard bodies, including their non-normative *voices* and other non-verbal cues which empowers and gives them more agency.

The scholarship of Amelia Jones (2012) and Jennifer Gonzalez (2008) offers a defense of identity and its deep-rooted relevance in our contemporary life. While Jones’ and Gonzalez’s projects do not specifically interrogate collaborative or dialogical art practices, their thinking regarding the validity of identity discourse—literally, the importance of such conversations—is powerful if we apply it to how such dialogues might be crafted and shaped more productively and generatively within participatory art. Jones argues that we are not “post” identity, citing the

relevance of color and race in the presidency campaigns by Obama in the USA. She argues that our lives are constantly shaped, pushed, and pulled by our insecure, yet contingent identities (Jones 2012, xxvi.). Gonzalez invokes Hal Foster's (1996) essay "The Artist as Ethnographer," which warns against romantic or naïve artistic fantasies of the Other (which is of course the basis of the status ascribed to Outsider artists), and essentialist celebrations of difference. But she pushes Foster further, in order to think about "not only who identifies *with* the Other but also who counts as Other, who is allowed to make representations of this Other, and who has the authority to enforce these representations" (Gonzalez 2008, 13). Indeed, Gonzalez argues that Foster reduces many "complex art practices to the limits of ethnography, subtly evacuating the political dimension of the work" (p. 13). Gonzalez confronts the same discomfort that I describe, in terms of the art world's desire to keep the disabled subject and the Other at bay. She contends that it is the critic's responsibility to "delve into unfamiliar, or perhaps uncomfortable, cultural terrain to grasp the semiotic complexity of the work" (Gonzalez 2008, 14). This criticism can, of course, also extend into the inhibited *CREATE* curators, Rinder and Higgs, who, rather than confront their own biases, prefer to work within a more conventional curatorial framework that continues to reinforce their legitimacy and power. Perhaps it is time to venture into more unknown territories.

The philosophical influences which have informed much socially engaged art scholarship in the past decade may provide disabled artists with an opportunity to think about how their participation can create a productive rupture in standard museum practices. Like Bishop and Kester, I have been inspired by French philosopher Jacques Rancière's (2010) model of aesthetic rupture or "dissensus": "a conflict between sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies'" (p. 139). In other words, there is a difference between how the senses are normally perceived and received so that our understanding of bodies shifts. Similarly, a sensory rupture is produced when the eye gazes upon forms that are contrasting to its own. This approach works well for addressing the politics of disabled bodies and their atypical forms in art, and in space more generally. Politics—or disabled politics, in the current discussion—invents "new ways of making sense of the sensible" so that there are new configurations between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, "new distributions of space and time—in short, new bodily capacities" (Rancière 2010, 139). Disabled politics in aesthetics creates a "dissensual" commonsense, offering alternative ways of being embodied and of seeing bodies. This rupture is the kind of "good" rupture that Bishop seeks in participatory art, but it endows disabled artists with agency through a wider variety of bodily forms and capacities. As Shannon Jackson notes, Rancière argues for "the necessity of questioning the categorical divisions and binary oppositions that govern an aesthetic 'distribution of the sensible.' A radically equalizing vision dismantles analytic polarities that divide activity from passivity, stasis from duration, use from contemplation, image from reality, artist from audience, object from surround, individual from community" (Jackson 2011, 53). Within this radically equalizing vision, I argue that there is opportunity for disabled artists to participate in socially engaged art practices that indeed dismantle and rupture any previous binaries or polarities.

### ***CREATE: The Artists Are Present***

*CREATE: The Artists Are Present* (2011) is a 26-minute video directed and produced by artist Katherine Sherwood, showcasing a series of interviews with mental developmentally disabled artists Jeremy Burleson, Daniel Green, Willie Harris, Dan Miller, Bertha Otoyá, and Aurie Ramirez who work with Creative Growth in Oakland, Creativity Explored in San Francisco and NIAD, California. The interviews were conducted by independent self-identifying physically disabled artists Neil Marcus, Leroy Moore, Katherine Sherwood, and Sunaura Taylor as a reaction against the lack of self-representation of the artists in the large-scale exhibition, *CREATE*, co-curated by Lawrence Rinder and Matthew Higgs, in 2011. All of these organizations - namely Creative Growth, Creativity Explored, NIAD and the Berkeley Art Museum - generously supported the creation of the video interviews.

The *CREATE* exhibition was a survey of work by the cited three Bay Area non-profit art centers that work specifically with developmentally disabled artists. According to Koppers, “all three [centers] emerged from the 1970s pioneering work of artist Florence Ludins-Katz and psychologist Elias Katz, who created these centers as part of a socially-and expression-focused treatment plan for adults with disabilities” (Koppers 2012). The artists in the exhibition included Mary Belknap, Jeremy Burleson, Attilio Crescenti, Daniel Green, Willie Harris, Carl Hendrickson, Michael Bernard Loggins, Dwight Mackintosh, John Patrick McKenzie, James Miles, Dan Miller, James Montgomery, Marlon Mullen, Bertha Otoyá, Aurie Ramirez, Evelyn Reyes, Lance Rivers, Judith Scott, William Scott, and William Tyler, many of whom have established national and even international reputations. The exhibit was displayed first by its host institution, the Berkeley Art Museum, before it traveled throughout 2012–2013 under the auspices of Independent Curators International (ICI). The exhibition included works on paper or canvas such as paintings, drawings and prints, and multiple sculptures.

Like Koppers’, my critique of the *CREATE* exhibition is not directed towards the art itself, as the show was startlingly affective during my experience viewing it. The essence of the problem was that regrettably, the curators didn’t recognize the potential or the possibility of engaging in a dialogical relationship with the artists in the exhibition and relied instead on the staff of the institutions to speak for the artists (this I discovered, after I interviewed Rinder). The curators decided to allow the art to speak for itself, hand in hand with the catalogue essays and the didactic/label text posted in the exhibit space itself. The physically disabled community in Berkeley was outraged about the curators’ apparent unease and flippant disregard for the developmentally disabled artists’ voices, and some of these community members decided to take matters into their own hands by engaging in a first-time, dialogic relationship with the artists in the show. Of course, given that Berkeley is the center of a 40-year, still-strong disability rights movement, such critical history was another source of great aggravation for the disability community, as they felt that the Art Museum should have been better equipped to handle the *CREATE* presentation with more sensitivity and consultation within their community.

To return to Koppers’ (2012) review of the exhibition, she maintains that when a project that is centered on the marginalized, then that particular marginalized

subjectivity should be “voiced” as a way of honoring their artistic discourses, and for accepting a myriad range of embodiments or expressions. This might mean that the voice is atypical, embellished with stuttering or non-normative utterances that can be more challenging to hear for a normative ear. It may be non-verbal, and instead include body language, hand, foot, or eye gestures, or communicatory neologisms that don’t have established definitions, signifiers, or codes yet among normative speakers. Kupper’s arguments were written in the context of a more traditional exhibition, in that the *CREATE* curators Higgs and Rinder selected a range of artists and their material objects for display. While traditional curatorial work can entail an arm’s length approach by the curator, where interaction is limited to email or Skype conversations, or often fierce negotiation for consigned works of art from gallery dealers, most curators would agree that the best approach is to establish a more intimate working relationship with an artist about their work. In many cases, curators and artists become friends after working so closely together for an extended period of time. I believe that Higgs and Rinder neglected their professional curatorial duty by dismissing the artists’ voices completely as they produced this exhibit. Indeed, in an interview I conducted in 2011 with Rinder while I was a Masters student attending California College of the Arts, I asked him why he had not had any conversations with the mentally disabled artists from Creativity Explored, Creative Growth and NIAD. He replied that “they couldn’t speak”.

Sherwood, amongst Koppers and others, decided to vocalize her displeasure at what she thought was a glaring omission in Rinder’s and Higgs’ curatorial strategy, in addition to some confusions about their understanding of “disability” itself. An email exchange between Sherwood and Rinder was posted by Rinder on the Berkeley Art Museum blog *beta blook* on July 21, 2011. Entitled “Katherine Sherwood and Larry Rinder Debate *Create*,” Sherwood began by questioning Rinder in the following way:

Throughout the [*CREATE* catalogue] essay you conflate mental illness with developmental disabilities and thus flatten the whole enterprise. You explain that in the past the two terms were confused. You provide us with a legal definition of developmental disabilities but don’t further expand it to include the wide span of conditions it encompasses such as autism, Down’s syndrome, deafness, etc. None of the *Create* artists would warrant being in a mental institution or claim mental illness as their disability. Larry, why set up the false comparison between them and the psychiatrically disabled? (Sherwood and Rinder 2011).

Sherwood is pointing out the tendency to confuse artists with mental illness, such as those characteristically labeled within the Outsider or Art Brut movement, and those with developmental disabilities. Sherwood continues to say, “To my knowledge, the Art Brut fold doesn’t include any developmentally disabled artists” (Sherwood and Rinder 2011). Sherwood’s questioning implies that Rinder was exploiting the classic conflation of developmentally disabled artists with individuals affected by mental illness to publicize *CREATE* exhibition within a certain sanctioned market for those interested in the Outsider Art economy. She then sets up a series of important questions:

What does art by the disabled look like? Aren’t you implying that to be a disabled artist you must have a developmental disability? Where then do disabled

artists such as Joseph Grigely, John Dugdale and Corban Walker belong? These are presumptions that the disabled artists community has been working against for decades. The dualistic label of ‘insider and outsider’ artists has been exhaustively questioned and only serves to reinforce negative stereotypes about these artists. (Sherwood and Rinder 2011).

Sherwood goes on to point out the alarming omission of any rigorous discussion of the artists themselves in the curator’s essay, as well as their invisibility on the website, poster, and invitation to the opening. She states that the essay only mentions mainstream artists as a comparison for the *CREATE* artists in an attempt to legitimize them. In other words, the disabled artists needed to be juxtaposed with “normal,” mainstream artists as a means of validating their work, and this implied that they could not be presented autonomously or independently within the essay. In Rinder’s response, he maintained that certain curatorial conventions took priority, implying that this was more important over any real investigation into the artists or allowing them to have a say as to how their work was hung or presented (Sherwood and Rinder 2011).

In Rinder’s response to Sherwood’s email, he agreed that he should have completed more research in learning about the differences between developmentally disabled artists (that can also include physical as well as mental developmental disability) and that of people with mental illness. His responses to her criticism regarding the absence of the artist voice were for the most part to either reject or ignore them or to justify this omission on the basis of curatorial conventions. While it is true, as Rinder maintains, that in the production of an exhibition, the work of art comes first for the curator, Joseph Grigely (2011) reminds us in his essay “Beautiful Progress to Nowhere,” that inevitably, the identity or the background of the artist always comes up when curators are writing about artworks. He says whether one likes it or not, artists are “constantly subject to the gravitational pull of rationalizing about [difference]” (p. 9) although some artists have been more or less successful at avoiding this, or at least forgetting their subject positions. This is even more pronounced in the case of artists within the Outsider genre, because people like to marvel at the heroic, rare talents of the artist who is afflicted by an incurable pathology. In her paper, “Fake Identity, Real Work: Authenticity, Autofiction, and Outsider Art,” M. Kjellman-Chapin (2008) develops a term she calls “visual auto-fiction” which consists of peculiar features that she says are “endemic to Outsider Art: [these features are] the maker’s identity and social marginality”. The major reason for this “visual auto-fiction” component is that it retains economic value and can be “co-opted as a savvy marketing device” and thus art dealers, for example, can capitalize on the marketability of outsider art by utilizing this device when these mainstream artists don’t even appear in the exhibit itself (Kjellman-Chapin 2008).

Sherwood asked Rinder to consider publicly screening the video she proceeded to make in collaboration with Marcus, Moore, and Taylor, at one of the panel conversations staged at the Berkeley Art Museum, in conjunction with the show (a panel that did not include any of the artists). Sherwood produced this video in an attempt to ensure that the artists were now present, as the very title of the video suggests. Rinder

conceded and the video was shown to the public after the panel discussion that also included renowned social practice artist Harrell Fletcher. *CREATE: The Artists are Present* received positive feedback from guests at the BAMPF screening, and the video is now publicly available on Vimeo (<http://vimeo.com/54344468>).

In the video itself, Marcus, Moore, Sherwood, and Taylor go on a journey through the three centers, interacting one on one with six of the participating *CREATE* artists (it is unclear who decided to interview whom) while they sit at their work-stations. In some cases, the artists make art as the interviewer engages with them, while in other instances, the artist responds directly to their questions, or makes physical contact, such as when Jeremy Burleson holds Taylor's hand during their conversation. Sometimes the video provides sub-titles to translate what several of the artists are saying, like the image in Figure 1, where Neil Marcus responds to a drawing by Dan Miller (see also Figures 2 and 3 for more screen shots with other interviewers).

What comes across most clearly from this video is the richness of how each of the artists communicates with his or her fellow interviewer, and in turn, how the interviewer's non-normative communication style rubs up productively against theirs. It was enlightening to watch two individuals engage with one another in very different, atypical communication styles. The sub-titles added another complex level of translation to the viewer experience. Overall, after watching the entire video, I was also left with the realization that each artist has a very individual relationship with his or her art, and each has a very different way of expressing that relationship, either verbally, through sound, vision, or haptic sensibilities. Each mode was no better or worse than the other, but it was simply another way to participate in the dialogical aspects of the art-making experience. The politics and the methodology employed in making this video was also very important for two reasons: first is that while Sherwood, as the video's producer and director, made the video with certain well-defined goals and



FIGURE 1 Screen shot from *CREATE: The Artists Are Present*: Neil Marcus interviews Dan Miller and responds "Wow!".



FIGURE 2 Screen shot from *CREATE: The Artists Are Present*: Sunaura Taylor interviews Bertha Otoya.

strategies, once the interviews began to roll, I imagine it was entirely impossible for Sherwood to forecast what the end results would be. In other words, Sherwood was open about how the shape and form of the interviews would unfold, and what the final outcome would be, good or bad. It was likely essential that Sherwood remain spontaneous regarding the flow of conversation, and that she allowed herself to learn from the artists along the way. This quality of the video therefore already embodies a key characteristic of dialogical or participatory art practice as defined by Kester, given Sherwood's spontaneity. Most critically however, in this video, the disabled artists—both the interviewers and the interviewees—had dialogical agency versus serving as spectacle.



FIGURE 3 Screen shot from *CREATE: The Artists Are Present*: Leroy Moore interviews Daniel Green, asking him, “How long have you been painting?”.

My second point is that Sherwood further politicized the video by titling it *The Artists are Present*. Beyond the basic political premise that the disabled artists are now “present” in the gallery, as opposed to being invisible, as rendered by Higgs and Rinder, Sherwood’s choice of title also has an association with the well-documented, highly publicized 2010 solo performance by seminal performance artist, Marina Abramovic, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York: the almost identically-titled *The Artist is Present*. This work invited audience members to sit on a chair across from the seated artist and a small table, and stare into her eyes for as long as they could muster, while conveying very little expression. Many of those who participated claimed the experience was powerful and even transformative, as the intensity of looking into Abramovic’s eyes for an unusually protracted period drove many of them to tears of ecstasy, anguish and joy. This was Abramovic’s longest performance, testing the limits of her body, and the sustained focus of her gaze.

The performance was also a rare opportunity to engage with the artist directly as a “presence,” and while it certainly does not strictly belong to the category of dialogical art, I’d like to once more push the limits of what we might understand to be *dialogue or participation*, by suggesting that bodies can be dialogical through other modes, in addition to their voice, as Abramovic’s performance demonstrates. To complicate matters, does Abramovic’s project have more legitimacy and currency in the world of contemporary art than art by a disabled person, because of Abramovic’s legendary status in the art world? Does Sherwood have the same legitimizing intention as Rinder’s, when he compares the *CREATE* artists with the work of mainstream artists in his essay? Or perhaps Sherwood is pointing out the Abramovic performance, in juxtaposition with *CREATE: The Artists Are Present*, may have more in common than we might initially realize, given both of their attempts to re-frame dialogue and offer new modes of participation?

The notion of legitimacy and who is “inside” or “outside” the art world also brings me to a relevant discussion on the “outsider art” genre, which might extend Sherwood’s own criticisms of this category. In his classic text, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives*, Colin Rhodes (2000) says that the definition of artist outsiders suggests that they are “fundamentally different to their audience, often thought of as being dysfunctional in respect of the parameters for normality set by the dominant culture. What this means specifically is, of course, [is that they are] subject to changes dictated by history and geographical location” (p. 7). The artist outsider group is heterogeneous by virtue of the great assortment of people who might be assigned to this vast category, and so there is much slippage in this definition, as those deemed dysfunctional in society are often labeled due to social classifications like pathology, mental illness, criminality, or even gender or sexuality. The list goes on. What Rhodes makes clear is that in the early days of Art Brut, the artists were mostly comprised of mentally ill patients and “self-taught visionaries,” people working “outside” the art academy (Rhodes 2000, 8). But I think it is fair to say that in the contemporary moment, agents who work with developmentally disabled artists have conveniently utilized the profitable “outsider art” label to promote their work within a recognizable, commercial and so-called “legitimate” and not least, contentious, category. In other words, developmentally disabled artists have been

lumped into the “outsider art” category, wrongly or rightly, just as artists belonging to other minority positions have also been swept into the Otherness borderlands. While the word “outsider” may have historically had quite a different genealogy when we think of “outsider art” (where developmentally disabled artists had nothing to do with such a phrase), it becomes tricky to disassociate the etymological and social implications of the popular understanding of “outsider.” If we think about the deep-rooted oppression that the disability community has been working against in their activism and in their reclaimed agency, the very nature of the fight has been about rupturing binary divisions, as I’ve already discussed. In other words, “outsider” can only ever conjure up the notion of “insider” and why is it that some members of the art world are implied and so privileged “insiders,” simply because they had an art education, and they don’t claim a disabled identity? Towards the very end of Rhodes’ book, I believe that he is still struggling with the “outsider art” category, as he patronizingly concludes that outsider artists are actually “insiders,” because while their trajectory asserts their difference, their ostensible insider status reveals a “true multiculturalism” (Rhodes 2000, 217). But does “multiculturalism” actually have a leg to stand on in the deeply elitist art world, where categories like “normal” conveniently persist?

To bring all this in step now with my initial rebuttal of Bishop’s discussion about the relative validity of artists working with themes of exploitation and social conflict in emergent socially engaged art practices, it is the “outsiders” that artists like Sierra hire in order to bring them “inside.” This is illustrated particularly well by another example in the case of a live performance presented by Italian artist Gino De Dominicis in the Italian pavilion during the 1972 Venice Biennale. Entitled *The Second Solution of Immortality (The Universe is Motionless)*, the artist decided to put a man with Down’s syndrome named Paolo Rosa on public display. Rosa simply sat in a chair and gazed at a beach ball and a rock placed on the ground before him (Bishop 2012, 116). I first discovered this astounding work in the Venice Biennale archives back in 2011, before coming across it once again in Bishop’s book. It presents a strong contrast with how the bodies of the *CREATE* artists are displayed in *CREATE: The Artists Are Present*. It is interesting that Bishop describes the scene as conveying two types of vision: the gaze of the performer with Down’s syndrome and the gaze of the audience members who look at him. In this image, a woman can be seen putting on her glasses in order to look at the man more closely under her inquisitive lens. As Bishop (2012) says, “the image seems to emphasise the disjunction between two different experiences of looking and thinking” (p. 117). I can’t help but focus on Bishop’s word, “disjunction.” What would happen if the Other spoke back in dialogical practice? Since De Domenicis has been quoted as saying that the person with Down’s syndrome represents a different state of being, then surely Paolo’s active participation in this installation is worth including and hearing? How can Paolo have more of a “say” in his involvement with this project, or does the presence of his body and his body language say it all?

I want to make clear that while I identify as physically disabled owing to my rare form of dwarfism, brachyolmia, I have had little contact and experience with developmentally disabled people and artists, and I am still learning about the possibilities and complexities of their embodiments in the world. But I do write from a position in

which I strongly believe that developmentally disabled artists can participate in dialogical art practice through their atypical voices, their body language, haptic movements and other non-verbal cues that empower them to articulate how they might have an affective relationship to a work of art. For example, curators might explore more deeply with disabled artists how they might inhabit and be with a work in their own unique ways, rather than simply seeing disabled artists as an instrument who can follow the directions of a normative artist like De Dominicis or like Sierra within contemporary manifestations of socially engaged art practices. While such atypical forms of communication may not be immediately perceptible, graspable, or comprehensible (and indeed, both Sherwood and Taylor told me that their artist interviews were challenging at times), the point is to be present with the artists in general, and open to what may come. We need to expand our definitions and frameworks of communication in an art museum, and curators need to embrace the challenge.

Ultimately, Rinder and Higgs were not only confronted by Koppers and Sherwood, through their writings and conversations, they also had to deal with a letter of complaint from Neil Marcus that was photocopied and passed around to visitors engaging with *CREATE*, along with an overt disability presence at several of the panels (by myself, Taylor, Marcus, and Sherwood). Marcus, whose non-normative voice and mode of speaking is often challenging to understand (he can take minutes to communicate a word or a speech) decided to ask Rinder a number of questions, and it was quite obvious how uncomfortable Rinder was during these dramatic moments, as the tension enveloped the air between speaker, listener, and audience. Later on, in 2012, I decided to challenge Rinder during another panel discussion, this time at the *Open Engagement: Art & Social Practice* conference hosted by Portland State University. My question was phrased around “if you had to do it again, knowing there were gaps and errors, what would you do differently?” to which Rinder replied “nothing.”

In the face of Rinder’s inflexibility, *CREATE* and Sherwood’s corresponding film bring up complicated conversations about classifications of disability, and inherent prejudices, stereotypes, and misrecognitions that continue to be sustained by the art world, particularly by museums and curators. It was clear through this project that incorporating the disabled voice directly and explicitly was anathema to, and resisted by the curators, despite the premise that the work by the artists from the three centers was being celebrated. However, I offer *CREATE: The Artists Are Present* as a counter-moment when artists were participating in a dialogue that I believe is just as critical as the material objects of the work itself; certainly advocates of socially engaged art practice will attest to this statement.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have considered what a disabled imagining of dialogical art practices might sound like, feel like, and look like. Developmentally disabled people are able to engage in modes of dialogical or socially engaged art practices in ways that express their way of knowing and understanding the world. These practices are particularly effective insofar as they emphasize the always-already inter-subjective and

inter-corporeal nature of all embodiment. While mainstream society perceives developmentally disabled people's knowledge as arrested or stymied by their congenital conditions, *CREATE: The Artists Are Present* offers a powerful example of how our assumptions might be ruptured or challenged. Not only does participatory art encourage spontaneity by the artist—where the artist no longer maintains full control of the process or the outcome of a work—but this process also encapsulates a dictum for the curator working in this realm. In their move from working with objects and a material practice to one that involves collaborating directly with people, curators might want to let go of their well-trodden practices in favor of an approach that is experimental, open, and questioning, where they learn as much as the participant. In this move from curators who work at arm's length to curators who explore variations in voice, and other modes of communication embodied by the full spectrum of their participants, developmentally disabled artists will come to be defined more by their renewed presence than their absence, their activity rather than their passivity. As a result, a compassionate recognition of their varied difference might be achieved, after all, where they get to have more of a say.

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