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Childhood as a Source of Creative Creation for Art Brut Authors

Dzieciństwo jako źródło twórczej kreacji autorów art brut

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

art brut, childhood,
subjectivity, sense of
identity, disability

Childhood is a crucial period for the development of subjectivity and a sense of identity, unfolding in relation to both individuation and relationships with others. The aim of this article is to present the work of art brut authors – Judith Scott and Hawkins Bolden – in the context of childhood shaped by the experience of disability, accompanied by isolation and limited opportunities to fulfill developmental tasks. The study was based on a qualitative case study, employing the analysis of documents: the films *Judith Scott at The Museum of Everything* and *Make. Outsider Art. Documentary*. The interpretation of the artists' works was grounded in Stanisław Popek's model of the layered structure of an artistic product. The analysis sought to answer two research questions: How is the artist's creativity constructed by the experience of childhood? How is the creative process connected with formulating responses to the fundamental questions: "What can I do?", "Who am I?". Three common features were identified in the work of both artists: the repetitiveness and rituality of the creative act, the use of unusual materials, and the exploratory character of the creative process. In light of the analysis, the artists' work emerges as an act of reconstructing identity and regaining control over one's life. These analyses provide a starting point for reflection on the nature of disability and, above all, on the value of pedagogical practice based on balancing the recognition of children's shared developmental needs with respect for their uniqueness and striving for agency, even in the context of disability.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

art brut,
dzieciństwo,
podmiotowość,
poczucie
tożsamości,
niepełnosprawność

Dzieciństwo stanowi kluczowy okres kształtowania podmiotowości i poczucia tożsamości, przebiegający w odniesieniu do indywiduacji oraz relacji z innymi. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie twórczości autorów art brut – Judith Scott i Hawkinsa Boldena – w perspektywie dzieciństwa z doświadczeniem niepełnosprawności, łączącym się z izolacją i ograniczeniem możliwości realizacji zadań rozwojowych. Badania oparto na jakościowym studium przypadku, wykorzystując analizę dokumentów zastanych: filmów *Judith Scott at The Museum of Everything* oraz *Make. Outsider Art. Documentary*. Podstawą interpretacji twórczości badanych był model warstwowej struktury wytworu plastycznego Stanisława Popka. Analiza zmierzała do odpowiedzi na pytania: Jak twórczość artysty jest konstruowana przez doświadczenie dzieciństwa? Jak proces twórczy łączy się z formułowaniem odpowiedzi na pytania: „co mogę?”, „kim jestem?”? Wyodrębniono trzy wspólne elementy charakteryzujące twórczość badanych: powtarzalność i rytualność aktu kreacji, użycie nietypowych materiałów oraz eksploracyjny charakter procesu twórczego. W świetle przeprowadzonych analiz twórczość badanych jawi się jako akt rekonstrukcji tożsamości i przejmowania kontroli nad własnym życiem. Analizy te stanowią przyczynek do refleksji nad istotą niepełnosprawnością, ale i znaczeniem praktyki pedagogicznej opartej na równowadze między uznaniem wspólnych potrzeb dzieci a poszanowaniem ich wyjątkowości i dążenia do bycia podmiotem sprawczym, także w sytuacji niepełnosprawności.

Introduction

This study aims to describe and analyze the work of two art brut creators – Judith Scott and Hawkins Bolden – through the lens of their childhood experiences. Both artists' biographies were profoundly shaped by disability, social isolation, and the inability to assume roles and tasks that could have allowed them to experience themselves as agents. Their spatial works were created in a distinctive, individual, and almost ritualized manner, resulting not only in untitled artistic objects but also in acts of self-reconstruction.

Grounded in the interpretative paradigm, the study employed a qualitative case study approach (Stake, 2009), particularly suited for examining the functioning of persons with disabilities and understanding disability as a personal, social, and cultural phenomenon (Gajdzica, 2016).

The research was guided by two principal questions:

How do childhood experiences shape the development of artistic creativity?

How does the creative process contribute to negotiating fundamental questions of subjectivity and identity, specifically: “What can I do?” and “Who am I?”

Data were collected through documentary analysis (Kubinowski, 2010), drawing on two films that depict the artists' creative processes: *Judith Scott at The Museum of Everything* (Museum of Everything, 2011) and *Make. Outsider Art. Documentary* (Hearn, & Ogden, 2011). The analysis followed Popek's model of the layered structure of an artwork (1999), which distinguishes three dimensions:

- I. Representational – examines what the work depicts or illustrates, the cognitive content it conveys, and the degree of concreteness versus abstraction in its visual elements.
- II. Formal – considers the artistic means through which the content is expressed, including the visual “language” or symbolic system employed.
- III. Axiological – assesses the creative value of the work, including its originality, generativity, potential applications, and social recognition.

In line with Eco's concept of the “open work” (1994), the interpretations presented here are offered as one of multiple possible readings of the artists' creations.

The Essence of Art Brut

The term “Art Brut” was first described in 1945 by the avant-garde artist Jean Dubuffet to designate works produced in isolation, free from formal education and artistic conventions, arising from the creator's innate impulse and almost as a necessity to create, rather than for social recognition. In the catalog of the first exhibition of works from his collection, Dubuffet wrote:

By this, we mean works created by individuals untainted by artistic culture, works in which imitation – unlike what is often seen among intellectuals – plays little or no role; their creators draw entirely from their own resources, rather than from the conventions of classical art or the art that happens to be in fashion. Here, we encounter art in its rawest form; we observe how it is completely transformed at every stage of creation by the talent of the artist (Dapena-Tretter, 2017, pp. 16–17).

Consequently, Dubuffet did not offer a precise definition based on strict criteria. As Joanna Daszkiewicz (2018) notes, the term functioned rather as a label for his own collection – a concept which, due to the “attempts to establish a common denominator by various ‘users’”, should be understood as a “traveling concept” (Bal, 2012).¹

¹ In an effort to preserve the distinctive integrity of his collection, Dubuffet carefully regulated the use of the term he had coined, resisting attempts to equate it with notions such as folk art, naïve art, children's art, or psychopathic art, as well as its appropriation by other collectors. Over time, this led to the emergence of related designations, including raw art, raw vision, intuitive art, self-taught art, *création franche*, and *hors-les-normes art*. In English-language scholarship, Roger Cardinal (2005) proposed outsider art as

The creators of works included in Dubuffet's collection, as observed by the distinguished Polish anthropologist Aleksander Jackowski after meeting him, were "people from the social margins, vagrants, street prophets, inmates of correctional facilities, and patients of psychiatric hospitals... Dubuffet believed that, in order to be truly oneself and free from cultural influences, one must oppose social norms and conventions" (1994, p. 60).

To emphasize the independence of *art brut* from tradition, official art, and the prevailing cultural system, he employed the terms "product" instead of "work of art" and "author" rather than "artist" (see Daszkiewicz & Doda-Wyszyńska, 2015).

Art brut emerged as a negation of what is conventional, accepted, unambiguous, and traditionally established. Contemporary *art brut* encompasses a plurality of works that lack shared formal or generic characteristics, which would allow them to be unequivocally assigned to a single category. Each creator is thus an individual entity requiring distinct description, as every product is rooted in a unique experience, often linked to social marginalization, illness, disability, and/or poverty. Using Jackowski's terminology (1994), *art brut* can be described as an "anti-style."

What undoubtedly unites the creators of *art brut*, however, is their autotelic, self-propelling motivation to create, as well as spontaneity and authenticity (Bouillet, 2011), alongside the exceptional integration of their work with the author's own biography. Their creations have no reference to what has already appeared in art and will have no continuation, because each work, reflecting the internal world of its author, constitutes a "closed unit" (Chlewiński, 2018).

They are also not intended for a specific audience; rather, they serve to organize, helping to interpret and come to terms with what is difficult, alien, and sometimes elusive even for the creator. "Thus, we are dealing here with the inseparability of life from the work, with a tenacious clinging of one to the other. This is why, alongside the aesthetic aspect, the existential and ethical dimension becomes so strongly activated" (Daszkiewicz & Doda-Wyszyńska, 2015, p. 131).

Although these works are often created using whatever materials are available to the author at the moment and do not exhibit a wealth of artistic technique, they are full of archetypal signs and individual codes intertwined into a unique whole (Jackowski, 1994). In this context, *art brut* emerges not only as a distinct record of the creator's experiences and life history but also reflects their subjectivity, sense of identity (Lubińska-Kościółek, 2017), and pursuit of emancipation (Pawlik, 2017).

an equivalent of art brut; however, this term does not fully capture Dubuffet's original conception of the concept.

Childhood as a Foundation for Subjectivity and a Sense of Identity

Contemporary scholarly reflection on the child and childhood, focusing on the individuality of the child, understanding diverse ways of experiencing, the multiplicity of contexts in which subjective childhood worlds are created, and the child's social participation, emphasizes recognition of the child's rights and autonomy as a person competent for dialogue and partnership with adults, collaboration and co-creation of living spaces, as well as for self-development and self-determination (see Jarosz, 2018). A child's perspective on perceiving and understanding the world, their experiences in relation to others, revealed through expressions, choices, activities, and ways of interpreting and attributing meaning to their experiences, allows insight into the child as a person, forming the foundation for establishing authentic relationships between the child and adults (Miś & Ornacka, 2015).

The child, as a relational subject acting and experiencing through action, not only undergoes external influences but also exerts an impact on their environment (Archer, 2013). Perceiving and experiencing oneself as a subject is the source of an active attitude toward the world, engagement associated with effecting change, being a creator of events, and assuming responsibility for one's own actions (see Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006; Górniewicz, 2001). According to J. Juszczyk-Rygałło (2016), the subject's conviction regarding "what I can do" constitutes a foundation for identity related to the question "who am I?"

From a developmental perspective, identity is primarily grounded in social interactions and the challenges encountered by the individual in the process of personal development. A sense of identity, understood as a subjective conviction regarding one's existence, encompasses a sense of distinctness from the environment, continuity of the self, internal coherence, and possession of inner content (Sokolik, 1993, pp. 10–11).

According to E. Franz and K.M. White (1985), the fundamental dimensions shaping a sense of identity are intertwined in human life histories: the thread of individuation, associated with constructing individual identity, and the thread of relationships with others, which strengthens social identity. Individuation is thus linked to attaining a sense of distinctness, agency, and independence, while social bonds provide a means for establishing one's place in the world, which is also shaped by cultural context (see Brzezińska, 2006).

The child's ongoing reinterpretation of the self within close, influential relationships with others enables the acquisition of cognitive and emotional schemas that shape both their sense of "I" and their social identity. From the very beginning of life, being inherently prepared to live among others, the child requires a caregiver who is available both physically and emotionally (Schaffer, 2005). The attachment

experience developed in this relationship—described as a “record of the attachment figure’s responses to the infant’s affect” (Plopa, 2019, p. 491) – serves as a foundational template for the individual’s future interactions with the world.

In later years, the substantive content of a child’s sense of identity undergoes dynamic transformation through the discovery of physical and psychological distinctness from others and the accumulation of personal experiences derived from exploring the world. Growing independence in performing basic self-care tasks, moving about, and investigating the environment allows the child to become familiar with their body and its capabilities, and to discern similarities and differences relative to others. Several other factors related to the child’s ongoing psychological development play a significant role in this process, including the gradual development of self-evaluative feelings (e.g., pride), the formation of first friendships, opportunities to assume social roles, and, in later childhood, the emergence of self-awareness from the perspective of agentic action (Brzezińska et al., 2016).

Researchers indicate that situations of disability can pose a threat to both answering the questions “Who am I?” and “What can I do?” Social stigmatization and exclusion (“you are different,” “you are not capable”), overprotective parenting limiting opportunities for self-exploration, and the inability to assume social roles can lead to internal identification with the label “*disabled*” and the experience of oneself as incapable of constructing one’s own life or being its author (Głodkowska, 2014; Głodkowska & Gosk, 2018).

Childhood with the Experience of Disability in Art Brut as Exemplified by the Works of Hawkins Bolden and Judith Scott

Hawkins Bolden (1914–2005) was born and raised in Memphis. He came from a poor, religious, large African American family. He shared a particularly close bond with his twin brother, Monroe. Both dreamed of playing professional baseball, and like many other children in Memphis, they devoted considerable time to training. At the age of seven, as a result of being struck on the head by a ball, Hawkins suffered an injury that soon triggered epileptic seizures and ultimately led, within a few months, to permanent loss of vision. This experience left a profound mark on his memory. “I couldn’t stop looking at the sun,” he later recounted, “I looked, and darkness covered my eyes. I never saw anything again. I feel things. I know the sun” (Arnett, 2001, p. 148). At this point, his formal education also came to an end. In the early 1920s, the social and economic status of his family virtually condemned him to social isolation. Until the end of his life, he lived with his older sister (Arnett & Arnett, 2001).

Bolden's works were created from anything he could find on the streets of Memphis and in its littered alleys. Wagons, chairs, old night lamps, Christmas tree ropes, scraps of carpet and artificial trees, even pots and license plates, became his artistic building materials, the raw matter from which his peculiar sculptures emerged. Most of his works are representational in nature. Bodies and faces predominate, some of which are self-portraits.

Whenever he felt the need to create, he would take objects from his dark "studio," located directly under the house. Bent over on all fours, he reached for the necessary materials. He then cut, drilled holes, and attached elements to form extraordinary constructions. Bolden worked almost continuously, claiming that he had been given a gift from God (Willson, 2004).

Bolden's distinctive artistic code, for which his works are recognizable, included eye-like holes drilled into metal and scraps of frayed material, along with weavings reminiscent of African totems. He is particularly known for the collection of "scarecrows" he created in his own yard – a type of assemblage that began to appear in the 1960s. Initially, the scarecrows served a purely practical function, protecting the vegetables he cultivated for his family, but over time they became an obsession. "The birds think something will get them. They are scared. They stay away," Bolden explained when asked about the numerous sculptures in front of his house (Arnett, 2001, p. 160).

This demonstrates that he did not perceive his works as belonging to the world of artistic production, nor did he identify himself as an artist. Nevertheless, his creations – resembling masks and totems intended to ward off evil and imbued with references to his disability, religiosity, and background – have been recognized as artistic objects admired for their precision and extraordinary symbolism (Arnett, n.d.)².

Judith Scott was born in 1943 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Her parents were not only unprepared for the birth of twins but were also unaware for several months that one of their daughters had been born with Down syndrome. While her twin sister Joyce began to speak, Judith was initially capable of producing only isolated sounds. Later, it became apparent that she had lost her hearing as a result of scarlet fever. By the age of five, she experienced rejection due to her disability and was mistakenly diagnosed as profoundly intellectually disabled. Deprived of information regarding available support and educational opportunities, her parents – under pressure from doctors and psychologists – decided to place her in a state institution for persons with disabilities located in Columbus, nearly 170 kilometers from their home. In the context of war-time America, this distance effectively condemned Judith to total separation from

2 The artist's works and information about exhibitions can also be found on the websites of renowned galleries, such as New York's SHRINE (<https://www.shrine.nyc/hawkins-bolden>) and London's The Gallery of Everything" (<https://www.gallevery.com/artists/hawkins-bolden#>).

her family environment. Analysis of the few surviving documents concerning Judith's time in institutional care indicates that the supervision she received was not only superficial but often marked by instances of abuse.

Years later, her twin sister located Judith and assumed legal guardianship. Joyce enrolled Judith in the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, where, unexpectedly, after two years, Judith began creating works reminiscent of "cocoons" (Scott, 2016).

Judith Scott began creating art at the age of forty-four. After multiple attempts with graphic and pictorial work, she discovered her own form, entirely independent of existing artistic references, combined with a unique creative process. Her first work, produced in 1988, consisted of a bundle of wooden sticks wrapped in fabric and bound with strands of yarn. She achieved her characteristic style by the mid-1990s. She began her creative process by collecting or "stealing" objects, usually ordinary items related to everyday life, such as keys, an umbrella, or a magazine. These objects became the core of her peculiar installations. Day after day, she enveloped them in intricate layers of multicolored threads, fibers, and cords until the object was completely hidden within the sculpture. She worked meticulously on each piece for several weeks, carefully modulating every detail.

The "cocoons" (Collection de l'Art Brut, n.d.), which initially retained recognizable, often zoomorphic or anthropomorphic shapes, over time became increasingly abstract and gradually began to open up (Morris & Higgs, 2014).

The extraordinary act of creation in which Judith Scott simultaneously concealed and shaped objects, when interpreted in light of her life experiences, reveals, according to the distinguished art brut scholar Lucienne Peiry (2013), a process of reclaiming identity that ultimately leads to an abstract expression of inner rupture. This process was initiated by her physical and emotional reunion with her sister. The cocoon plays a crucial role in embodying the presence of her twin, from whom she had been separated. One of the first works her sister saw was a delicately connected form composed of two twin elements, which she interpreted as a representation of their two bodies intertwined as one (Scott, 2016).

The textile sculptures, constructed from thousands of threads, appear not to protect the object itself but rather some secret of the creator. Wrapping the objects serves to restore order and confers power to the item hidden within. In this way, the sculptures resemble fetishes and seem to possess a special connection both to life and to death (Peiry, 2013).

The Creative Process as Expression and Reconstruction of Experience

Almost every form of isolation – whether resulting from illness, disability, marginalization, exclusion, or direct confinement – that profoundly marks human existence, may become a source of expression. This expression is not necessarily addressed to an audience but rather constitutes a form of self-communication. Beyond the more or less evident attempt to interpret a work integrated into the sphere of symbolic culture, there exists a deeply personal act of creation (Bouillet, 2011), particularly in the case of this group of creators. The very process of creating, of collecting non-random objects, selecting them, and deciding on their mode of presentation – as well as the undeniable fact that they act outside the necessity of finding an audience for their works, let alone granting them the status of artistic objects – demonstrates its significance from the perspective of the subject undertaking the action. It is an attempt to respond to the questions “What can I do?” and “Who am I?”. There is, in fact, no conscious artistic intention designed to result in a completed artwork. Each author acts as a being defined by their own history, in which childhood experiences of disability play a crucial role.

An analysis of the works of J. Scott and H. Bolden allows for the identification of common elements characterizing their creative processes.

The first of these is the repetition and rituality evident in the act of creation.

In Scott's case, this is manifested in the intense, meticulous wrapping of objects – a practice that serves not only as her creative technique but perhaps also as a way of redefining the object from her own perspective (Możdżyński, 2008) and/or as a ritualized passage into a new stage of life (Peiry, 2013).

Bolden's creative activity, in turn, is characterized by the recurring motif of “scarecrows,” constructed each time in a similar manner. Having experienced familial closeness and being rooted in its traditions, Bolden drew upon motifs characteristic of his culture (masks, totems), thereby affirming the foundations of his cultural identity (Brzezińska, 2006).

The very process of creating may therefore be interpreted as an attempt to restore the sense of security lost in childhood. Hiding objects, carefully interweaving colorful threads, or protecting the home with self-made guardians all contribute to a sense of control over one's world, a sense of agency in relation to reality, and thus the recognition of oneself as a subject who assumes responsibility for shaping one's life (Głodkowska, 2014).

The second common element rooted in childhood experience is the use of found materials.

Bolden primarily utilizes old, worn objects and discarded materials, granting them not only new functions but also summoning them into existence through creative activity. Scott, by contrast, begins with a deliberate selection of an object that is then “stolen” and enclosed within her sculpture, which she wraps with colorful threads, fibers, and strips of fabric.

In both cases, the choice of material is significant, as their sculptures can be read as “the language of things” (Barański, 2008) rather than conventional artworks. Bolden seems to restore meaning to what was once rejected and deemed useless, much as he reclaims meaning for his own existence through an activity that, though directly oriented toward the object, simultaneously becomes an act of self-subjectification (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006; Górniewicz, 2001). Scott, on the other hand, favors what is unique – what was lacking in her life of isolation from others and from the world of objects with which people normally interact on a daily basis (Barański, 2008). By protecting her “treasure,” she reconstructs the lost reality, also in its physical dimension.

A third distinguishing aspect is the exploration characteristic of childhood (Brzezińska et al., 2016), which informs their creative process.

Both Scott and Bolden engage in a kind of exploratory activity that involves movement as well as sensory experiences. They experiment with material, thereby satisfying the need not only to know but to understand the world and to frame it from their own perspective. In creating, they explore matter and their surrounding environment, make choices, and test boundaries. Unlike children exploring the world, however, they do not require words or labels in acts directed toward themselves.

The sculptures of Scott and Bolden are silent narratives of childhood marked by isolation, loneliness, the inability to experience closeness, the lack of opportunity to make choices, and the profound need for self-understanding. They constitute a symbolic space for shelter and healing, but also for the creative expression of the self. In this sense, their activity may be regarded as assuming authorship of one’s own life (Głodkowska & Gosk, 2018). Yet, one cannot disregard the purely artistic perspective, which situates the works of Bolden and Scott within the realm of art as resonant voices of artists – voices that unsettle, engage, and compel reflection.

Summary and Conclusions

Analyzing the works of the authors presented in this text – selected from among many extraordinary individuals representing the world of the “Other,” creating outside the mainstream art scene and without aspiring to the status of “artist” – one cannot help but concur with the interpretations offered within the art cultural sphere by

experts, enthusiasts, or academically trained artists. Aleksander Jackowski, an eminent ethnographer and researcher of phenomena emerging outside the mainstream of art, far from the exhibition halls of major galleries, wrote: “Even if I cannot anticipate what I will encounter in the exhibition, I can be certain of what I will not see” (Jackowski, 1994, p. 61). Indeed, we will see nothing conventional or imitative, as each work encapsulates a unique personal set of experiences.

The analyses conducted indicate that, in the case of the presented art brut creators, the primary formative experience of their childhood was disability. Themes related to loss, the characteristic childlike exploration and intuitiveness of their creative acts, as well as the materials employed, suggest a close intertwining of the artwork with the creator’s biography, particularly experiences from childhood. In the authors’ works and creative processes, one can also discern the memory of these experiences, which may serve a protective function. In Scott’s case, this was expressed through the bond with her twin sister, reflected in ritualized intertwining. In Bolden’s work, there is a clear grounding in the religiosity and culture of the family.

At the same time, their creative process undeniably reflects subjectivity and the striving of individuals in extreme circumstances to define their existence. It functions as a form of autobiography and world reconstruction, a mode of communication, as well as an attempt to introduce order and exercise control over one’s life. In this context, the case analyses provide data for understanding both the universal and the exceptional aspects of individuals with disabilities. They serve not only as a point of departure for reflection on the nature of disability and its personal and socio-cultural origins but also as a stimulus for teachers’ self-reflection regarding pedagogical practice, particularly in the context of working with children with diverse developmental and educational needs.

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