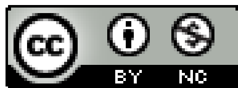
Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture

Volume 5 | Issue 2 Article 20

May 2024

Determining Autistic Aesthetics: How to Find Autistic Artists in Canada

Gerald S. Beaulieu
Confederation Centre of the Arts, geraldsbeaulieu@gmail.com



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ought

Part of the Art Practice Commons

Recommended Citation
Beaulieu, Gerald S. (2024) "Determining Autistic Aesthetics: How to Find Autistic Artists in Canada," *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 20.
DOI: 10.9707/2833-1508.1174

Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ought/vol5/iss2/20

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Determining Autistic Aesthetics: How to Find Autistic Artists in Canada

Gerald Beaulieu

Artist's Statement: *Guardian* (p. 179) was done 25 years ago, long before I knew I was autistic. I was an artist looking for answers. Every time I tried to fly, metaphorically, I would crash and burn. The gifted child never reaching their potential. All I could do was to get up from the ashes and try to defy gravity once again. *Guardian* is currently in the Collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

At the beginning of 2021 I signed up to be a founding editor of the *Canadian Journal of Autism Equity* (CJAE), an online journal published through MacMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. All of the editors and contributors to the journal are autistic. Being a professional artist for over 30 years, I suggested to my fellow editors that we feature the work of a Canadian autistic artist on the cover of the journal. Publishing original cover art would give the journal a good visual identity and give an artist access to a new audience as well as a modest royalty payment. This is all standard operating procedure in the publishing industry.

When I began searching for artists and suitable works, I looked in the usual places, mostly online and through familiar networks. While doing this I was vaguely conscious that I had never encountered another autistic artist from Canada. I was aware of a handful from Britain and the US but that was all. Given the percentage of autistic people in the general population, I did not think that finding the work of Canadian autistic artists would be a difficult task.

My initial efforts quickly turned up a young artist from Winnipeg Manitoba named Ryan Smoluk. He had an inspired portfolio of work spanning a decade of production. His CV was solid, hitting all the right milestones for an emerging professional career as a visual artist, including an art school degree, provincial and national arts grants and a consistent exhibition record. His painting, *Beautiful Nightmare* was selected for the inaugural CJAE cover, a credit that the artist then included on his CV.

The editorial choice to use artistic work by a practicing autistic artist seemed beneficial to both parties as intended. It also seemed like it would be an easy process to replicate for subsequent issues, especially since we publish on an annual basis and had a year to search for our next featured artist. But this was not to be the case. With the use of submission calls and direct solicitations of individual artists, we struggled to find an autistic artist to provide work for the second, third and fourth issues. A truer picture of the autistic footprint on the professional artistic landscape in Canada was beginning to emerge.

What is a Professional Artist?

Using the term "professional artist" can often be tricky because there is no real consensus on a working definition. The most defining characteristic of any profession is that it is a paid occupation. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many artists. A recent study analyzing the distribution of income for artists across varying career levels found that 85 percent of artists earned less than $25,000 annually (Resch, 2021, p. 58). This means that many professional artists work a second job to achieve financial security. In Britain, 68 percent of artists needed additional income from other employment as their art practices did not earn enough to live on (ACE, 2018). Clearly the myth of the starving artist is a reality for most artists.

Without meeting the benchmark of earning a living, other definitions of professional artist needed to be adopted. These often include criteria such as specialized training, peer recognition, artistic production and public presentation. For most artists, seeking an audience or public presentation is the most significant act of professionalism. This act of seeking an audience simply acknowledges that art is meant to be consumed. Books are meant to be read, music is meant to be heard, paintings are meant to be looked at, and plays are meant to be watched. For any art form to work it needs to be interacted with. To do this, artists need and seek an audience. Audience interaction is intrinsic to what an artist does. Artists that never reach an audience and go completely unnoticed have really lousy careers. By the very definition of what they do, artists want to be noticed.

Even though any established definition of professional artist is fuzzy, the act of seeking an audience and wanting to be noticed means that artists

working in their respective professional spheres will be the easiest to find. The various institutions that present the work of professional artists are usually deeply invested in promoting their work and engaging the public. As sources for locating and sampling the work of professional artists, cultural institutions across the world provide easy and varied access to this content. The professional realm also offers an extremely large sample size of content in which to ask comparative questions like those regarding aesthetics.

Historically, most artists have displayed their work in physical venues: galleries, museums, concert halls, record stores, theaters, and bookstores. While physical venues still have an important role to play, with the advent of the digital age puts much of this content online, giving audiences vast libraries of content. In order to navigate all of this content successfully, we have developed very sophisticated search algorithms. Generally speaking, if an artist is making it, the internet can find it. Today, artists are very aware of the potential of the internet as a platform in promoting their work. Most artists, musicians and writers have their own websites, social media accounts, and Vimeo or YouTube channels. Many also have Wikipedia pages. This all part of the business of finding and maintaining an audience. In many ways it has never been easier to be noticed.

In other ways, it has never been so much work.

What does the internet say when you Google “Autistic artists”? The results are pretty much a history lesson on how autistic artist have been stereotyped and marginalized. There is an initial list of 11 artists, followed by a Wikipedia page titled Autistic art, and then a number of artist profile features that are mostly coming from autism organizations. What is missing entirely is any link to any institution or organization that is part of the contemporary art world. There are no links to museums or art galleries with collections of autistic art, there are no commercial fine art galleries promoting their autistic artists, there are no art auction houses listing the sale of autistic artists. They seem to have no footprint in the world of mainstream contemporary art.

Autistic Savants and Outsider Art

The examples that one can find usually fall into the category of savant or outsider artists. Savant abilities are generally characterized as an

extraordinary ability coupled with some defining disability (Park, 2018). Popular representations include remarkable feats of memory such as Raymond Babbit counting cards in the 1988 film Rain Man. Arguably the most famous living Autistic artist is the British artist Stephen Wiltshire, who is known for his detailed cityscapes, meticulously drawn after a single viewing, sometimes by helicopter. His art works are both a feat of draftsmanship and memory. While there seems to be no common definition of autistic savant artists, at least not beyond definitions of autistic savants as a whole (Chung & Son, 2023), they appear frequently as a kind of autistic artist.

One of the problems of correlating the autistic artist with savantism is that it creates unrealistic expectations. Not only are you expected to make art, but you also need to do it through some extraordinary, unconventional feat. Then the product is the savant feat rather than the actual art. While it is generally understood that about half the people that have savant syndrome are also autistic, the flip side of the coin is that only about 10 percent of the autistic population are savants (Treffert, 2009, p. 1355). For an autistic artist, facing down the expectations of savant syndrome can be a real barrier when you just want to make art without pulling a proverbial rabbit out of the hat.

The phenomena of outsider art also casts a long shadow over autistic artists. Outsider art usually refers to a type of art practice that is self-taught, idiosyncratic, and outside the conventions of the art world. The term was coined by Roger Cardinal in his 1972 book *Outsider Art*. Samples of outsider art often contain works by autistic artists. Cardinal himself went on to write further about the connection between autism and outsider art with its strangeness, idiosyncrasy and extreme experience of otherness (2009). Outsider art itself eventually went from a fringe field of academic study to a mainstream force. The annual Outsider Art Fair, established in 1992, is taking place now in New York as I write this. Here you will find some autistic artists represented by their commercial galleries. But this inclusion can be problematic if it creates a market that reduces autistic artists to novelties, succeeding despite their condition. Any artist with a highly stigmatized difference, like autism, risks having that difference become larger than the art that they produce (Queen, 2019). From here, it is quick decent into inspiration porn. Still, a number of established autistic artists do feature their work at the Outsider Art Fair, but perhaps only those who have comfortably adopted or work within that label.

As models, both the artist-as-savant and the artist-as-outsider fail to accurately represent the reality of the autistic artist. This failure also raises key questions: Why do autistic artists need to be defined by their condition and not their work? Why are so few papers that simply examine autistic art compared to those that look at through the lens of psychological and neurological pathology? Why is the neurological condition of the artist consistently capturing the attention of the research, even in the broader field of cultural studies?

Returning to Canada, I might suggest, briefly, that the history of Indigenous art can reveal some much-needed answers. When I was an art student going to the Ontario College of Art in Toronto in the mid-eighties, my student card gave me free admission to the Art Gallery of Ontario, which was around the corner. There I saw sizable collections, from the canon of Canadian to European art. It was a collection I became familiar with as my studies required me to look and learn. However, if I wanted to take in examples from Canadian Indigenous artists, I was out of luck. To do that I needed to walk several blocks north and pay to go into the Royal Ontario Museum, where I could look at Indigenous art through the lens of Anthropology. The anthropological view situated these works as *artifacts* rather than art. The debate between art and artifact, high and low culture, has taken place for more than a century, with its roots in the academic disciplines of art history and anthropology (Ginzburg, 1980). In a context of a colonialist hierarchy, Indigenous production was often considered artifact and was not on an equal footing with western art production (Dominguez, 1992).

Today, thankfully, at least in Canada, decolonization has been the museological practice for the twenty-first century. Indigenous art is largely perceived and presented as equal to western practices (Phillips, 2022). The result of this ideological shift is that now nearly a third of the Art Gallery of Ontario presents the work of Indigenous artists. Art that was once overlooked and marginalized now shares space as contemporaries with any other form of artistic production. But a similar shift has not happened for Autistic artists. They are still underrepresented and marginalized. Stuck in outmoded paradigms, their artistic voices are still seen through the lens of a pathologizing, even colonizing approach, oddities of experience rather than authentic and equal contributors to seeing and conveying our sense of the world.

Other Barriers to Autistic Success

Some of the practical reasons for this dearth is that some autistic artists do not know they are autistic or, due to persistent stigma, choose not to disclose. Even in the United Kingdom where autism diagnoses are accessed for free through the National Health Service, estimates suggest that between 59-70 percent the autistic population are undiagnosed. This proportion of undiagnosed adults increases with age (O'Nions et al., 2023). Therefore, the art world would certainly have practicing artists who are unaware of being autistic. I was 30 years into my career before being diagnosed at the age of 57.

Public disclosure is also a very complicated topic for autistic people. While many have a desire to challenge stigma and to raise awareness, disclosure is still an act of vulnerability. The potential benefits of disclosure are still too often outweighed by the risks (Farsinejad et al., 2022). While identity has become a valuable currency in most of the art world, even if that identity might be invisible, acceptance has not extended to artists with disabilities. Putting yourself out there as an autistic artist is something you still need to think about if you want to be taken seriously in the art world (Berry, 2017).

In 2018, to better understand the art practices of disabled artists in Canada, The Research, Measurement and Data Analytics Section of the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) engaged the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) to study the sector in order to make best practice recommendations to cultural stakeholders across the country. Three years later, its 108-page report was released with much to ponder. While it did tackle a diverse range of topics, including barriers to professionalization, cultural representation, self-determination, and accessibility to opportunity, specifics about autistic artists were notably absent. This was confirmed within the stated limitations of the study, which acknowledged that there was little or no information on artists who identify as neuroatypical (Véro et al., 2020). These limitations further reported that while the study did cover a wide range of artists and their practices, neurodivergent artists could have been better represented.

The CCA is a crown corporation of the federal government, the largest funder of artists and arts organizations in Canada. Census data from 2016 show that Canada is a country with over 158,000 artists, or .87 % of the labor force.

Statistically, 1 in 116 Canadian workers is an artist (Hill, 2019). Within their mandate of research and policy development, the CCA looked for autistic artists and had the same experience I did trying to find Canadian artists for the CJAE: they were either invisible or they were not there to be found.

Autistic Art in the United Kingdom

The Arts Council England (ACE) has a similar mandate as the CCA, supporting and funding the cultural sector in England. It was formed in 1994 when the Arts Council of Great Britain was broken upon into three separate institutions representing England, Scotland and Wales. Fifteen years later, in 2009, England passed the Autism Act. This law guaranteed the protection of the rights of autistic people. It is England's only law that directly supports people with a specific disability. It also provides for free autism diagnoses through the National Health Service (NHS). It is not surprising, then, that 15 years after the establishment of the Autism Act, ACE is discussing autism at the management level. In 2022, two ACE members, Natalie Bradbury (Relationship Manager, Diversity) and Peter Heslip (Director, Visual Arts and Brighton), both autistic, published an open conversation about Autism. In this dialog, they openly discussed familiar themes such as public disclosure, stereotype threat, masking, the social model of disability, and the double empathy problem. These are all familiar concepts talked about in autistic circles that are now trying to find a place in conversations in the art world.

A year earlier, Peter Heslip talked publicly about his decision to disclose his diagnosis and the needs of Autistic artists. He confirmed the fact that Autistic artists were missing from cultural institutions and looking at them through a deficit lens was taking a toll:

> There is quite a bit of programming which looks very dated. Disabled artists have, for instance, been asking for some time why they are still being labeled 'outsiders'? This is not a self-chosen movement. It is an academic concept invented over 50 years ago. They are asking why their work is still being shown in the foyer, hung as an education project, only presented within group shows with novelty framing devices that foreground difference and perpetuate otherness? What it really comes down to is simple: consistently giving autistic artists the time, space, and opportunity. It means investing the same

> amount of care and attention in presenting the work of neurodivergent people as you would do with anybody else. Until this happens those lived experiences are yet to be validated (as cited by Hambrook, 2021).

He stated the need for a sustained inclusive approach that would give more meaningful representation to Autistic artists.

Some validation occurred that same year when the neurodiverse artists' collective Project Art Works was a finalist for the prestigious Turner prize. This nomination propelled a number of artists into the spotlight and further fueled art world discussion about proper inclusion. While attitudes are changing, Project Art Works CEO and artist director Kate Adams acknowledges that progress is still slow:

> It was only about six years ago that a head of exhibition somewhere within an organization said to us, "I don't think it's right [to have] people with learning disabilities in an exhibition downstairs with an artist of caliber upstairs. They shouldn't be in the same building" (as cited by Cosslett, 2021).

Even with the nomination there was suspicion over the quality of the work and its right to belong. Quality has often been historically weaponized to exclude and marginalize artists. It is a common tactic of institutional gatekeeping. The art world is still not ready to accept autistic artists as contemporaries, that what we do is just art that is valid in its own right.

Notions of quality are not the only hurdles Autistic artists need to overcome for better access into the art world. The art world is an extremely social arena and it is no surprise that networking is an important avenue for career success. This point was clearly driven home when Shape Arts, a disability lead arts organization in England partnered with The White Pube, an art critic collective, to publish an online guide, 'How to get an Exhibition'. Rule number one was that the art world is social. As Autistic artist Sonia Boue states in her blog: "The art world is Social – with a capital S – is a statement which tells you everything you need to know about an environment which is excluding, at times toxic and frankly (to borrow the author's tone) disabling for autistic artists. (Boue, 2018)

Anna Berry comments further:

> . . . if getting networked in is something that is just not within your ability, reading this brings a certain amount of despair. There seems to be no alternative strategy for the likes of us. There is just a glaring asymmetry in accessibility between those who are able to just "get talking to people' versus those who struggle to do that. And that is even assuming you are in a position to attend openings in the first place, which many autistic, non-autistic, and disabled artists are not.

The need to network effectively, to see and be seen, is a serious barrier to professional access for autistic artists. In 2021, Flow Observatorium, a national artist hub for neurodivergent people in the UK (funded by the ACE) published its Kongress Report on the barriers to engagement in the arts for neurodivergent people. They recognize a suite of barriers that neurodivergent creatives faces in trying to pursue a career in the arts. The report states:

> Neurodivergent creatives should not have to justify their active inclusion in the arts but rather, the arts needs to justify the active exclusion of Neurodivergent creatives which is not neutral but discriminatory.

To overcome these barriers, they encouraged arts organizations to develop and implement a Neurodivergent Arts Strategy. In the same year, Neuk Collective, an organization of neurodivergent artists, funded by Creative Scotland's Create: Inclusion project, published Removing Barriers: Report, which chronicled the experiences of neurodivergent artists in Scotland. It recognized many of the same barriers and came too many of the same conclusions::

> The creative industries are notoriously difficult to break into and making a living within them can be a struggle for any artist. However neurodivergent artists face significant additional barriers to entering and working within the creative industries, often making an already-difficult situation impossible and keeping neurodivergent people out of the arts. (p. 18)

Identifying and knowing these barriers is a first step in a process on eliminating them and increasing the Professional participation of Autistic artists. This is at least one step ahead of where we are in Canada, where we remain invisible, still a gap in the research.

Conclusion

In looking critically at the current state of autistic artists in the context of the professional art world and market, we can see that there are far too many barriers for autistic artists to have equitable access, especially in my home country of Canada. Without equitable access, their careers will not thrive, and the public will not view their work. Art is meant to be seen, and if we cannot see it then we cannot evaluate it in any kind of context other than to conclude we can't find it. Attempts to evaluate or discuss the aesthetics of an art form that we can neither see nor find is a moot point or at best inconclusive. We simply don't have access to the necessary data. While there is recognition of the problem in some areas and progress is being made as illustrated by a few studies from England, autistic people are decades behind other equity-seeking groups. This dilemma is further compounded by the fact that autistic people are so sparsely and evenly distributed throughout the population. This makes community building and advocacy even harder.

When the barriers do come down, eventually, and autistic artists reach some kind of parity in the professional art world, we will begin to encounter autistic art on a regular basis. Autistic art being included in art exhibits will not be uncommon. Their art will move outside of the shadows of disability and outsider and into the halls of the mainstream. Once we can see autistic artists as simply artists making art, then we can ask the comparative question; is there an Autistic aesthetic. Until then it remains an unanswered question.

References

Arts Council of England. (2018) *Livelihoods of visual artists report*. https:/ www.artscouncil.org.uk/livelihoods-visual-artists-report

Arts Council of England, (2022). Meet the team: a conversation about Autism. https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/meet-team-conversation-about-autism

Berry, A. (2017, December 21). Disability is the poor relation of identity politics, *Disability Arts Online*. https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/disability-poor-relation-identity-politics/

Boue, S. (2018, July 5). The art world is social, *The Other Side*. https://soniaboue.wordpress.com/2018/07/05/the-art-world-is-social/#comments

Cardinal, R. (2009). Outsider Art and the autistic creator. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 364(1522), 1459-1466.

Chung, S., & Son, J. W. (2023). How well do we understand autistic savant artists: A review of various hypotheses and research findings to date. J*ournal of the Korean Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 34(2), 93.

Cosslett, R., L. (2021, December 23.) "I was blown away by the work I saw": the Turner prize and the rise of neurodiverse art. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/dec/23/turner-prize-rise-of-neurodiverse-art-project-herbert-coventry

Dominguez, V. R. (1992) Invoking culture: The messy side of "cultural politics"'. *SAQ (The South Atlantic Quarterly)* 91: 1.

Farsinejad, A., Russell, A., & Butler, C. (2022). Autism disclosure–The decisions autistic adults make. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 93, 101936.

Flow Observatorium, (2021). *The barriers to engaging in the arts for neurodivergent creatives, Kongress report*. https://55cb82d2-280f-4058-b905-01929c2af2cf.filesusr.com/ugd/1d1361_fcaa7a5f0f8544e6a6d2690caff99acc.pdf

Ginzburg, C. (1980). Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and scientific method. *History Workshop Journal* (9) 1, pp. 5–36. https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/9.1.5

Hambrook, C. (2021, November 23). Breaking down barriers: Peter Heslip talks about autism, leadership and the visual arts. *Disability Arts Online*. https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/breaking-down-barriers-peter-heslip-talks-about-autism-leadership-and-the-visual-arts/

Hill, K. (2019). A *statistical profile of artists in Canada in* 2016. Hill Strategies Research Inc. https://hillstrategies.com/resource/statistical-profile-of-artists-in-canada-in-2016/

Neuk Collective. (2021). *Removing Barriers: Report on research into the experiences of neurodivergent artists in Scotland*. https://neukcollective.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/full-report-survey-on-removing-barriers-for-nd-artists.pdf

O'Nions, E., Petersen, I., Buckman, J. E., Charlton, R., Cooper, C., Corbett, A., ... & Stott, J. (2023). Autism in England: assessing underdiagnosis in a population-based cohort study of prospectively collected primary care data. *The Lancet Regional Health–Europe*, 29.

Park, H. O. (2023). Autism spectrum disorder and savant syndrome: A systematic literature review. *Journal of the Korean Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 34(2), 76..

Phillips, R. B., (2022). The issue is moot: Decolonizing art/artifact. *Journal of Material Culture*, 27(1), 48-70.

Queen, J. (2019, May 21). Outsider art: Madness, marginalization, and exploitation. *The Neuroethics Blog*. http://www.theneuroethicsblog.com/2019/05/outsider-art-madness-marginalization.html

Resch, M. (2021). *How To Become A Successful Artist*. Phaidon, 2021.

Treffert, D.A. (2009). The savant syndrome: an extraordinary condition. A synopsis: past, present, future. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 364, 1351 - 1357.

Véro, L., Boukala, M., Rouleau, J., Louw, A., McAskill, A., . . . & O., Grimard, C. (2020). *Deaf and disability arts practices in Canada. Research report. Université du Québec à Montréal* (UQAM). Canada Council for the Arts. https://canadacouncil.ca/research/research-library/2021/02/deaf-and-disability-arts

Gerald Beaulieu is an autistic sculptor and installation artist who lives and works in Epekwitk/Prince Edward Island, Canada. During his 35-year career, he has had over 80 solo and group exhibitions across Canada, the U.S. and Europe and has received numerous national and provincial arts awards. His work is in several public collections and his permanent and temporary outdoor works have been installed in a number of cities in Canada. His latest work was recently installed this fall at the Glenaladale Sculpture Forest. During the day he works as the preparator for the Confederation Centre Art Gallery. He currently serves on the editorial board of the *Canadian Journal of Autism Equity*.