

Disability and Creativity

Revolt against the categories and stereotypes that kill the spirit

Sylvie Kashdan

2022, Spring

a review of

There Plant Eyes: A Personal and Cultural History of Blindness by M. Leona Godin. Knopf Double-day Publishing Group 2021

More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art by Georgina Kleege. Oxford University Press 2018

“I want freedom, the right to self expression, everybody’s right to beautiful, radiant things.”

—Emma Goldman

We all deserve what Emma Goldman desired, to be free, to have possibilities for self-expression and the joy of sharing the world with others who respect and love us. We all have dreams, goals, interests, and some sort of sense of humor and desires to relate to others. Social creativity is a gift we all have in one way or another. It must be shared to thrive. But all too often in today’s society people with disabilities are narrowly evaluated in terms of what and how much they can contribute to production and consumption.

They are told that their best hope of acceptance is to strive toward conformity in the workaday world of the present oppression and repression.

It is certainly true that many people with physical and mental impairments experienced prejudice and persecution in pre-modern societies, before the development of manufacturing processes and the factory system in the 1700s. They were often attacked as the embodiment of evil, as witches, or even the Devil. Nevertheless, many people with a variety of impairments were integrated into those societies and contributed, to one extent or another, to family and village economies.

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, those unable to conform to the needs of the machines and employers have been labeled deviant or inadequate and excluded from standardized jobs, even though they might not have been considered inadequate under earlier ways of organizing work.

Today, people with a wide variety of physical and mental differences are often stereotyped and stigmatized as lacking intelligence and deserving only pity, or as superhuman marvels, geniuses in some area, but not human beings other people can relate to as unique individuals.

One of the most familiar examples is Helen Keller, the deaf-blind woman who became famous for overcoming her handicap with the help of her so-called miracle worker teacher, Anne Sullivan. Keller participated in the Chautauqua lecture circuit and the vaudeville circuit; she joined the American Socialist Party and advocated for the cause; she opposed World War I; she supported the Industrial Workers of The World (IWW) and advocated for civil liberties, the rights of women, workers, and people of color.

She was considered remarkable for developing the capacity to communicate with others (something taken for granted among so-called normal people). But her stances on social and political issues were not generally considered important or taken seriously as expressions of her own ideas outside disability rights circles. As she wrote in 1908:

“It seems to me difficult to imagine anything more fatuous and stupid than their comments on anything I say touching public affairs. So long as I confine my activities to social service and the blind, they compliment me extravagantly, calling me the ‘archpriestess of the sightless,’ wonder woman,’ and ‘modern miracle,’ but when it comes to a discussion of a burning social or political issue, especially if I happen to be, as I so often am, on the unpopular side, the tone changes completely. They are grieved because they imagine I am in the hands of unscrupulous persons who take advantage of my afflictions to make me a mouthpiece for their own ideas.”

Keller also found that very few people considered her ideas about beauty, art, or creativity to be authentic or important because she couldn’t see or hear. She noted, “Critics delight to tell us what we cannot do. They assume that blindness and deafness sever us completely from the things which the seeing and the hearing enjoy, and hence they assert we have no moral right to talk about beauty, the skies, mountains, the song of birds, and colors. They declare that the very sensations we have from the sense of touch are ‘vicarious,’ as though our friends felt the sun for us. They deny *a priori* what they have not seen and I have felt.”

Her other senses and her capacity to feel emotions and empathize with others didn’t count for much either.

In recent decades, people in the disability rights movement have worked hard to familiarize the general public with the idea that those with disabilities can be ordinary participants in the society, as workaday producers and consumers like everyone else. A number of books, theater works, films, and TV shows describing the lives of people with various disabilities have become popular. They help to develop sympathy for those fighting for a world that is significantly more accessible for all. Quite a few have dealt with blindness, among the most feared physical afflictions in the United States and most other parts of the world.

For example, in her 2021 book *There Plant Eyes*, M. Leona Godin, presents a well-researched cultural history of blindness by referencing the writings about and by various emblematic blind people from Homer to Stevie Wonder and beyond. Very many of the stories are about people who are blind serving the rich and powerful, educating kings and saviors, who may or may not go on to be inspirational leaders themselves.

Godin’s book explores what blindness signifies in modern cultures, how we conceptualize abilities and disabilities—what it means to be blind in the social context of a society which values vision while neglecting to fully recognize the contributions of the other senses. She explores the reality that all too often sight is equated with knowledge and understanding, while blindness is

associated with ignorance and stupidity. So, it seems unremarkable that “...the rhetorical use of the word “blind” is bandied about so frequently—blind faith, blind love, blind rage, blind drunk, etc.—that one does not often pause to consider the effect the slur may have on actual blind people.”

The book also describes Godin’s experiences as a person with vision impairment, the social and environmental barriers to her full participation in certain areas, and the work arounds and remedies she has found. She appropriately cautions, however, that there is no universal consciousness or politics that emerges from being classified in this disability category.

In her 2018 book *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art*, Georgina Kleege presents another element of experience. Growing up with a visual impairment in a family with two parents who were successful modern artists, she regularly visited galleries and the homes of other artists, where she looked closely at and touched many of their works. Kleege also frequently heard and began participating in long discussions about visual as well as other forms of art that made her aware of several aspect she would have missed if not called to her attention. This helped her to become familiar and comfortable with discourse on art culture and creativity. Kleege covers some of the same history and philosophy dealt with by Godin, but with more emphasis on exploring the possibilities for discussion and creativity for people with different capacities for knowing the world. She writes: “the history of speculation on visual art, and human vision in general, is haunted by ideas about blindness...when theorists imagine a spectrum of human visual experience they place the blind man at one end, standing for the complete absence of vision. The other endpoint is occupied not by a person with merely average vision, but by the artist, someone understood to possess extra special vision. The artist is depicted as a sort of superman of seeing, able to see more or better than ordinary people, and to show, not just what he sees but also how best to look at it.”

But Kleege asserts that this elitist and exclusionary way of understanding artistic expression is contradicted by the fact that we are all living in a world where visual aspects of the environment are constantly being referenced verbally and in writing, so that “the average totally, congenitally blind person knows infinitely more about what it means to be sighted than the average sighted person knows about what it means to be blind.”

As a person with a visual impairment who has a deep appreciation for art and creativity, Kleege is particularly interested in exploring possibilities for empowering more blind people to enjoy, study and create art alongside and in collaboration with sighted people with similar interests. The final chapters of her book have many examples of how such collaborative interconnections can be developed, in and out of museums, art galleries, the theater, movies, and on the street. In the last chapter, Kleege particularly explores “the complex three-way communication that takes place between the artist, the art work, and the beholder.”

From an anarchist perspective this view of art can be a weapon to challenge the exploitative and alienating dimensions of modern society, including work and consumption, and the political relations of power and authority they reinforce. This includes redefining human needs, and the recognition that standards of inclusion in modern society cheat us all out of the ability to share and support each other.

Some anarchist and anti-authoritarian activists with disabilities have begun to challenge the focus on wage labor and consumerism in order to break out of the traditional limits of disability demands and call for more social and personal fulfillment for everyone.

For example, in several articles the independent scholar-activist in the field of Disability Studies, and anarchist, Steven Graby argues that wage labor cannot be liberating for people with dis-

abilities any more than for non-disabled people because even under the best of circumstances it denies the self-determination of workers who are effectively forced to sell their time to employers. This relationship is necessarily authoritarian and disciplinary in structure. And, consumerism is also alienating and manipulated to sustain the market, not to satisfy people's needs.

Graby explicitly rejects the work ethic and refuses to equate human value with labor-power.

This leads him to emphasize the importance of everyone learning how to integrate people with different strengths and weaknesses into mutual aid projects that embody sincere social relationships of care, as a rejection of the marketplace.

The focus needs to change to emphasize the positive value of social interdependence for everyone—regardless of perceived abilities or disabilities.

This means concentrating more on prioritizing inclusion of people with disabilities in mutual aid projects as a foundation of our relationship to each other and the natural world. It also means placing greater importance on cultivating the elements of gift economies that already exist. In addition to being important in times of scarcity and plenty, sharing needs to be recognized as a major source of life's pleasures.

Sylvie Kashdan is an anarchist who, among other things, is blind. Her main interests are anarchist social history and current possibilities. At the 2009 Seattle Anarchist Book Fair, she participated, along with two other anarchists with different impairments, in a panel titled "Aging, Disability and Allyship in the Community: Don't leave us behind at the end of the march!"

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Fifth Estate #411, Spring, 2022. Accessed January 30, 2024 at
<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/411-spring-2022/disability-and-creativity/>

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