

Art Without Borders

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The history of visual art in the twentieth century is characterized by an unprecedented expansion of the boundaries of what we consider to be “art”. Many inventions and discoveries have shaken the traditional concept of art which expected that pictures correspond to the conventions of representation and perspective. With cubism, abstraction, dadaism, and surrealism, art from outside the European tradition -- so-called Primitive art -- came to be considered of equal value. Primitivism became an animating force for the renewal and enlargement of the sense of art. As a result, the apparently untutored and meaningless drawings, paintings, and sculptural objects by mentally ill people were discovered to be expressions of artistic creativity. Many recognized artists found inspiration for their work in this art which previously was dismissed as insignificant. Today, we should be able to have an unbiased view of artistic work by the psychologically handicapped. Nevertheless, old prejudices remain and attempts are still being made to define borders between “normal” and “psychopathological” art, between professional art and art by outsiders.

The Schlumpers form a group of artistically active people who work together under the compassionate direction of the artist, Rolf Laute. The group is colorfully diverse in their mixture of ages and sexes as well as in the manner and degree of their mental handicaps. Laute has brought together the few artistically gifted residents of the *Evangelische Stiftung Alsterdorf* [Alsterdorf Evangelical Foundation]. He has discovered an artistic potential in individuals who were considered to be totally disabled and has encouraged the development of their creative and expressive abilities. In doing so, he in no way diminishes their individual freedom and individuality or influences their work in a particular direction, but rather has simply made available to them technical assistance in the form of painting materials and easels. In the process, he has successfully used art therapy in a manner which is entirely consistent with contemporary ideas that encourage the normalization and integration of mentally handicapped people.

The results of this work, however, extend far beyond the usual methods of occupational therapy or art pedagogy which encourage handicapped people to paint. Works have been created of an artistic standard which is seldom attained by normal artists, let alone persons who are psychologically or mentally handicapped. The special nature of the Schlumpers’ mental handicaps should not exclude them from being considered as part of the general world of art; on the contrary, the book at hand, with its reproductions, should demonstrate convincingly that the conventional isolation of this art is unjust.

Christian Mürner wrote in his introduction to the catalogue, *Ebenbilder. Mensch werden ist eine Kunst* [Resemblances. Becoming Human Is an Art]: “To take seriously paintings by people with a mental handicap or psychological illness requires us to focus our atten-

tion on their special means of expression. In this way, their handicap is neither placed in the foreground, nor is awareness of it suppressed.”¹

The acceptance of their work has artistic as well as sociological aspects which influence each other. The mentally ill and handicapped, who were earlier isolated in asylums, are now experiencing a growing acceptance in society. Through their dispersal into residential groups located in different parts of the city and their life now as a part of society, that sense of strangeness which we feel when confronted by conspicuous behavior is being reduced. Just as these people are being taken more seriously as people, their work is being seen from a different, more positive perspective. In return, the works attest to spiritual and mental abilities that either could not be expressed previously or were unrecognized before because of prejudice. There is a rather negative and dubious notion put forward by Peter Gorsen that we are today particularly receptive to divergent forms of art because we live in a pathological society. Gorsen says, “To simplify this in artistic/sociological terms: a sick and sick-making society provokes the art recipient’s interest in psychopathological forms of expression.”² On the contrary, I consider openness to unusual forms of art a positive sign that socially peripheral groups are being integrated into a society where there is a growing degree of tolerance. Considering that 50 years ago the mentally ill and handicapped were still shut away from society, you can appreciate the degree of change which has taken place. As an example of this change, school children are now permitted to paint together with the Schlumper artists. The children’s touching reports indicate that an initial unease has completely disappeared. Through the artistic mastery of the Schlumpers, the children have discovered the human core of these unique personalities.

Respect for the art works is the proper point of departure for questions concerning their artistic significance. Even people considered unsuitable for a handicapped workshop can be artistically creative and able to express in pictures their experiences and feelings. Unencumbered by academic dictates, an original and at the same time persuasive creative language can develop out of physical gestures and an aesthetic feeling. This innate pictorial language stands in the tradition of irrational and magical art, of conjuring art as Pablo Picasso understood it. Since art, to be considered as such, must speak to the whole person, it has retained this elemental aspect -- in spite of contemporary intellectual currents to the contrary. This quality of art makes it clear that the rare and remarkable phenomenon of visual creativity can also surface among mentally handicapped and psychologically ill people. The gift to create art that is expressive using visual means is apparently not connected to logical intelligence. Marcel Réja, who was one of the first to consider pictorial and linguistic works by the mentally ill not from the medical but from the cultural standpoint, wrote very clearly: “Our intelligence is for us stranger and more foreign than our feelings. We accept many things rationally without truly understanding them. Nothing really gets through to us which is not actually felt or lived. Comprehension alone always remains something apart. Intelligence is therefore only the entrance hall to our personality as a whole.”³

Moreover, it has come to be recognized that the borders between normalcy, mental illness, and mental handicaps are not fixed. Unusual special talents, as well as partial mental deficiencies, may emerge without affecting other areas of the personality. In our society, with its one-sided value system, rational abilities are given precedence when considering what is normal. The normalcy of an unscrupulous, emotionally deficient intellectual is never questioned, whereas a disturbance in the logical faculties -- despite the retention of emotional and expressive abilities -- is considered a mental handicap.

The predominant impairment of the members of the Schlumper group is an inborn retardation, though of differing degrees of seriousness. This clearly separates the Schlumper group from patients with schizophrenic psychoses, the group whose work has received the most attention in the literature on the subject; this went so far at one point as to say that only schizophrenics, with their loss of a sense of reality and their flood of inner pictures, could be considered to have the possibility of visual creativity. Leo Navratil also believed in this dogma initially. He wrote, "For a long time in the literature, the viewpoint was presented that perhaps only schizophrenia, and no other mental disturbance, could dispose one to artistic achievement. I considered this thesis to be true, until it was refuted by my own personal experience."⁴

The delusive and compulsive drives of the psychologically ill are missing in the mentally handicapped. Their pictures arise from a joy in movement and the sensual pleasure offered by forms and colors. I have been able to observe in the Schlumper workshop and gallery the enthusiasm and passion with which these individuals pursue this activity which has so much meaning for them, and how their sense of themselves as individuals has grown through their artistic work. With versatile artists such as Uwe Bender and Karl-Ulrich Iden, the joy they take in showing off and in role-playing is important. In art, they have found a medium to express themselves; and in their art work, they can see a confirmation of gifts which were previously hidden.

That art works are created in spite of the fact that intellectual control is for the most part missing, indicates that aesthetic feeling and the urge to make art are rooted in deeper levels of the personality. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, art, "the great stimulus to life", originates out of an artistic condition of the creative individual. One might imagine this artistic or -- as Nietzsche often conceived of it -- physiological condition to be a kind of inner excitement with a concomitant elevated awareness and sensitivity. This stimulating and itself stimulated physical state may be clearly recognized in the pictures of Vincent van Gogh, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Markus Lüpertz in his "dithyrambic" period. Apparently, the mentally handicapped can also experience such an artistic condition which enables them to be visually or linguistically creative. The creative force appears to receive its impulse from the unconscious and the emotions, and is able to express itself in spite of a deficit in the reasoning capacity, so that works of art reveal the heart more than the intellect.

While one generally assesses the works of “normal” artists according to the artistic character of the works themselves, those of the psychically ill have been judged up to now as manifestations of the artist’s handicap allowing conclusions to be drawn about the personality of the artist and his or her impairment. Since a work of art in any case transcends the artist, one cannot do it justice by viewing it as the expression of a particular “state of mind”. Hans Prinzhorn wrote in 1922 in his study, *Kunst und Geisteskrankheit* [Art and Mental Illness], “...an art work comes neither from health nor sickness, but from its creator’s formative skill, which is rooted in the whole personality, regardless of sickness or health.”⁵

For many, it is at first difficult to acknowledge that the work of mentally handicapped people is legitimate art. From my knowledge of modern and contemporary art, I see many connections and parallels in various artistic areas. Therefore, the question of art or non-art no longer arises for me; only questions relating to qualitative differences in artistic achievement. The work of psychically ill and mentally handicapped people may exhibit spontaneity and strength of expression, as well as solutions concerning form and color, which are not inferior to those of recognized artists. Naturally, this art is initially strange and difficult to understand, not because it is the work of mentally handicapped people, but because all true art in its essential form is at first strange. In this work, there is revealed, in a surprising and at first unfamiliar language, an interpretation of the world, not as ideology, but as a visual experience.

As the word *Bildneri* in the title of his book, *Bildneri der Geisteskranken*, [Artistry of the Mentally Ill] shows, Hans Prinzhorn was cautious in questions of evaluating as art the work done by the mentally ill and the classification of this work according to characteristic formal features or stylistic traits. But in the end he came to the conclusion, “Untrained mentally ill persons, especially schizophrenics, frequently compose pictures which have many of the qualities of serious art and in their details often show surprising similarities to the pictures of children and primitives, as well as to those of many different cultural periods.”⁶ His original thesis was that in the work of so-called primitives, children, the psychically ill and mentally handicapped as well as in that by normal adults, there is manifested a common expressive need. In his research, he wanted to approach the sources of creativity and looked to peripheral social groups for a better understanding of artistic creation in general. His interests were not limited solely to the visual works of the psychically ill, but also extended to include the creative activities of all untutored people, as his lesser known book *Bildneri der Gefangenen* [Artistry of Prisoners] demonstrates.⁷ In the work of the mentally ill, he found astonishing parallels to the pictures of children and those of so-called primitives. Prinzhorn was especially impressed by the similarities between the art of the mentally ill and that of the then-modern Expressionists. This similarity appeared to him to be more than a superficial feature; in it, he saw the expression of an inner kinship based on a shared experience of the world.

There have been many suggestions and attempts to incorporate the work of the mentally ill and handicapped, as well as that of other peripheral groups, into our understanding of what art is, and to differentiate their work from other art. With all exclusive definitions, however, one encounters difficulties. The most important argument used is that the art of psychically ill and mentally handicapped people is grounded in their condition and therefore not related to history or culture. In my view, it has in no way been demonstrated that this art lacks historical context. Franz Meyer asked provocatively, “What does that mean: outside of time? Does it mean that the afflicted stand outside the general fate which history represents and that history is played out only in the conscious areas of human life?”⁸ The Schlumpers live in our time and happily not outside our society. They are subjected, as we all are, to technical progress and the visual media. I am convinced that they manifest in their works the spirit of the times as much as any other art does. Leo Navratil also challenged the mistake of assuming *art brut* artists and their work to be “free from all cultural influences,” and explained, “They are not independent of the surrounding culture and absorb what is offered them in the everyday life of their situation; they read newspapers, magazines, and watch television, take trips, and see advertising in the streets; they are steadily confronted by the visual world conveyed by the culture, obtain information from it, and in this way find material for their own work.”⁹

The Schlumpers also do not live completely outside the tradition of art. I was able to join them when they undertook a trip together to the Hamburg *Kunsthalle*. They lingered in front of some of the pictures and viewed them not like the usual visitors, but in the manner of artists critically judging the work of their colleagues, with remarks such as, “Not too bad”.

Uwe Bender worked together with the students in the *Fachhochschule für Gestaltung*. He does not master realistic representation, but by painting over the nude sketches of the students, he made art works out of their exercises. Psychiatrists have tried to formulate criteria that would describe the particular characteristics of art made by the mentally ill, such as regression, distortion, compression, neologisms, and the use of stereotypes. Helmut Rennert believes it possible to organize these criteria according to their pathognomonic value. However, the anti-naturalistic and abstract formal language of modern art and the production of collages and assemblages have shown by now that all these formal characteristics can apply as well to art made by professionals. Georg Baselitz, drawing on his awareness of works in the Prinzhorn collection, consciously used the stylistic elements of these patients in his pandemonic drawings and pictures, as a provocation and critique of the Nazi crusade against “degenerate” art. The description of such formal aspects remains very superficial and cannot penetrate very deeply into the statement these pictures make. There are pictures constructed only of numbers by the psychiatric patient, Joseph Grebing (in the Prinzhorn collection), as well as by Hanne Darboven and Klara Zwick. The aesthetic elements these

pictures have in common should not obscure the fact that numbers may be used as formal material out of quite different impulses and artistic intentions. In spite of the phenomenological similarities, the pictures have a completely different meaning which, however, we are able to understand if we pass beyond the aesthetic surface. Although, or for that matter, because Inge Wulff never learned to read or write, she created, along with Willi Eggers, pictures made out of writing which on the surface have a similarity to the works of Cy Twombly; but it is clear that the ideas of the pictures and the statements they make are quite different. Inge Wulff writes an illegible and puzzling script for which she found a highly aesthetic form and a lively rhythm which expressed her desire to participate in the larger culture of writing through her private script. Just as Ludmila Vachtova claims, concerning the writing scores by Cy Twombly, that he applies “seemingly awkward, stuttering strokes as a aesthetic device which transforms the act of writing into a signature of innocence while conjuring up images of vandalism,”¹⁰ one can also speak in the case of the writing pictures by Inge Wulff of a naïve and spirited body *scriptura*.

Rennert lists the insertion of elements of writing and the combination of heterogeneous materials as kinds of compressions. These elements come into play in the work of many artists who differ greatly. They have a formal, rather than a pathognomonic value. One often has the impression that those who set out to find particular signs of illness and to establish criteria of psychodiagnostic significance simply are not aware of the multiplicity of expressive forms that characterize modern art. The so-called “negative catalogue of the evolution of a form” (Peter Gorsen)¹¹, used to characterize works by the mentally ill, can become a positive evaluation when brought into conjunction with established works of art. The evaluation of a work of art is not free from considerations of its context and from the prior knowledge of other art works.

Bader and Navratil in their book *Zwischen Wahn und Wirklichkeit* [Between Madness and Reality]¹² use the term “psychopathological art” to characterize the work of artists who are psychically ill. Drawings by Ernst Josephson in a style which later appeared in the works of Picasso, and which are in no way inferior, were classified by both psychiatrists as psychopathological. This seems to me to discriminate against the work as well as its creator. I reject, as does Michel Thévos, any division of art into normal and psychopathological categories. Art cannot be healthy or sick. The term “psychopathological” is also inaccurate to the extent that it cannot be verified in the case of any individual work of art, because the term does not refer to the work itself, but proceeds from the assumption that the mental condition of an artist can be deduced from the appearance of his work. The term was invented to indicate a deviation from the norm. However, where art is concerned, there is no norm. On the contrary, it achieves renewed legitimacy through the regular demolition of conventions. Creative work can never be normal, because there is no normal condition for the creation of that which is new and unexpected. The term “psychopathological art” also awakens discomfoting memories of the way the terms “sick art” or so-called “degenerate art” have been used in the past. As a protest against this classification, Anselm Kiefer wrote onto several of his works the words, “Sick Art”. In referring

to his work in this way, he points out that for some observers they may appear to be the work of a deranged person and would surely have been labeled “degenerate art” by the Nazis. In his study of Strindberg and van Gogh, Karl Jaspers wrote in 1922, “The way the bourgeoisie use ‘sick’ as a term of disparagement or insinuate it in connection with attitudes which are actually philistine, blinds us to a reality which until now we could only view casuistically, and which we really cannot understand; even the formulation gives us difficulties, probably because we are so ensnared by limited categories of evaluation and a terminological system which chains us down even as we feel it dissolving into something more all-encompassing, freer, and more flexible.”¹³

We should not let our judgement be influenced by an awareness of the psychological condition behind the work of art, but rather approach the work in an open and serious way. The works of Louis Soutter, Penck, and Inge Wulff stand for me -- though with a certain gradation -- in one line, and form a language of shapes and signs which is quite generally comprehensible, both logically and emotionally. Louis Soutter, who was psychotic, the apparently normal Penck, and the mentally retarded Inge Wulff all have an equal access to art, which in its formal construction, symbolic content, and expressive strength transcends individual limitations.

In the same way, the notion of “outsider art” fails to designate any special category of art which might be contrasted to “official” art. Famous painters such as Vincent van Gogh or Ernst Ludwig Kirchner considered themselves outsiders, because they were rejected or misunderstood by society. Since all segregating labels -- whether outsider, naive, or mentally disturbed -- are prejudicial and suggest the wrong associations, Frank Maresca and Roger Ricco have devised the more neutral term “self-taught” for these artists. They observe “that the art of untrained individuals cannot be separated by quality, impact, or formal beauty from mainstream art.”¹⁴

Given all these pointless attempts to establish different artistic categories, it follows that the formal richness and the recognizable capacity for development and transformation in the art of psychically ill and mentally handicapped people require a correction of the academic presumptions which have labeled such art “unhistorical” and “condition-determined”.

The work reproduced in this book gives a small impression of the variety of graphic techniques and styles and the formal inventiveness of the Schlumper artists. Between play and seriousness, they find original pictorial solutions and communicate them in a persuasive visual language. The individuals possess an unmistakable personal style, and their work reveals with increasing experience stages of development: two criteria which are relevant in determining artistic worth.

The reproduced examples confirm that the Schlumper pictures do not follow fashionable trends and that the communal work has not produced a group style. Completely different personalities speak to us in their individual voices. This is a clear sign of the authenticity of this art and the unspoiled nature of its producers. The direct, if sometimes awkward, realization of inner impulses and emotions gives the works a genuine character, a quality of undisguised truth. Theodor Spoerri¹⁵ called this state the identity that is shared by the act of painting and that which is painted. The pictures do not have the appearance of something which has been made artificially, but rather the effect of something which has grown naturally. They are created without dissimulation out of the feelings of a complete person. The works are not autistically shut away in a world closed to us, but have, if we open ourselves to them, a communicative function common to all artistic expression. Some of the Schlumper pictures may resemble better known art: tachistic painting such as that by E.W. Nay, the stick figures by Penck, or the figures of Gaston Chaissac; but it is impossible to view this similarity as an act of imitation or interpretation, because the Schlumpers do not know of these antecedents. These similarities or resemblances are not signs of any kind of dependence, but speak for the existence of principles of form which apply everywhere.

In order to appreciate the variety of expressive means used by the Schlumper artists, we must look at the individual works. Some of them are characterized by the physical act of painting, some are representational, and others mix gesture and representation. In the first group, pictures develop out of the impulse of the gesture. They document the process aspect of their creation. Movement as the basis of all creation was described by Paul Klee in his essay, *Schöpferische Konfession* [Creative Confession]: “Also an art work is above all a Genesis; it is never experienced as a product. A certain fire to become springs to life, is directed through the hand, pours onto the page and flows around on the page, and leaps like a spark, closing the circle, from whence it came: back into the eye and beyond.”¹⁶

In the second group, the individual Schlumper artists differ in their invention of original figures. Uwe Bender in his pictures arrives at a great variety of figures: from figures consisting only of heads and legs to mixed creatures which are part human and part bird, part tree and part man, and going on to include representational portraits. With his enormous production which includes all formats, he feels himself to be not only a professional painter, but also the Picasso of the group. Using wax crayons, he draws with bright, but coordinated colors. His picture, *Affenbaum* [Ape Tree] (Illustration, p. ...), is used by the Schlumpers as their logo. In the *Sternenfrau* [Star Woman] (Illustration, p. ...), he gives her an ornamental background of stars covering the whole page. How strong the figurative transformation of a visual perception really is in his work, can be seen in the picture, *Frau mit Hahnenmaske* [Woman with Rooster Mask] (Illustration, p. ...), which was created from a nude model. The mask, which dominates the picture, transforms the nude into a bird-like creature with four extremities. With the portrait of Slavica Markowska, he achieved a very expressive representation of a person. The inability to draw realistically

has given him a certain freedom in relation to a natural model, so that his visual language, both compositionally and in terms of color, is devoted completely to the reality of the picture, rather than that of the model. *Die Teetrinker* [The Tea Drinkers] are arranged *en face* around a table seen from above, the framed pitchers appear as a picture within the picture, and the edge of the table with the depicted breasts provides a carefully constructed exterior border. Objects and people are laid into the picture's surface. Here as well, there emerges an original and self-confident sense of formal invention which comes out of an inability to convey perspective.

Werner Voigt uses in his pictures a recurring, peculiar human-like figure, an invented element in which, like Horst Antes, he is able to invest all his experiences and feelings. In addition to his own history of suffering, he draws and paints biblical stories which reflect his deep religious faith: *Jesus rettet Petrus* [Jesus Saves Peter], *Die Speisung der Fünftausend* [The Feeding of the Five Thousand]. One of the few works by Schlumper artists that use pre-existing art as a model is the set of 24 panels by Voigt based on the famous Hamburg Petrikirche altar by Meister Bertram now found in the Hamburg *Kunsthalle*. With a deep feeling for the events depicted by Meister Bertram and the Bible passages they illustrate -- the text of which Voigt has written into his pictures -- he has transformed these pictures in his flat, figurative style with a color concept which carries through the individual panels in such a way that a typical Werner Voigt work has been created.

Karl-Ulrich Iden works as a multifaceted artist who builds large environments out of various materials, found objects, and paintings. He has also painted a large-format "Schlumper Chronology" on cotton on which he has written, "Art Peep-show". The association of a peep-show with art is surprising: not the picture itself as an art work, but as a window to the art, which presents itself naked in the picture for all to see. Apparently, it is the artist's view that with this picture, in addition to the story of the Schlumpers, he has presented art as a magic show.

Klara Zwick always carries a notebook with her in which she draws in every spare minute and from which some pages are shown in this book. She fills the pages with figures or numbers. The geometric form of the circle is united with numbers in her clock pictures. She painted the large picture on cotton, *Engel kommen runter* [Angels Coming Down], with the colors black and white in many shades of gray. Angels, which look like figures in the work of Dubuffet, people the large canvas. The manner of painting in broad brush strokes reminds one of Penck. The dynamic rhythms and changes of direction which the brush strokes exhibit bring the picture to life, so that it bears witness to the vitality of the painter and conveys this expressivity to the observer.

Inge Wulff, with a temperament of overflowing sincerity and friendliness, appeared transformed and detached from her surroundings when painting. With sensual pleasure, she enjoyed color and the playful act of painting. She painted with her entire body and soul,

suffering outbursts of emotion in the form of laughter and tears. In spite of this intense behavior, she possessed an astonishing mastery of form in small as well as large formats and a feeling for an effective use of color in her compositions. She found forms and balanced compositions directly in the painting process. Her artistic decisions, which seem so well-considered, were primarily directed from the unconscious. The multitude of forms, which may seem puzzling to us, had for her a significance which she wrote into the pictures herself with her beautiful but incomprehensible script.

In her work, one may see an artistic development from small to large-scale works. In the early drawings from 1985, small geometric forms are distributed across the surface together with a lively script which she invented herself. The combination seems additive, but actually reveals a significant talent for color and decoration. There followed a representational phase reminiscent of the Cobra artists. In her large canvases, Inge Wulff composed with brightly colored surfaces. Initially, one has the impression that her pictures are abstract, but as one becomes accustomed to her pictorial language, one realizes that she depicts specific events and experiences. The colorful chalk drawing from 1988 represents a trip from Schlump to the Hamburg Gnadenkirche. Surrounded by a kind of path, the church tower rises with its yellow bell in the lower left corner. In the composition which is divided diagonally, the church and the road are represented in the lower half, while the upper half depicts her optical impressions along the street. In pictures where dark colors predominate, she makes window-like openings which are filled with little forms. With her intense line, she always places direction and rhythm in opposition to each other. In the doll drawer, she made an object which is a kind of reliquary formed by the painting-over of a doll which Werner Voigt had sewn together and which she placed in a drawer she found. Inge Wulff invented pictorial signs for people and animals, for landscapes, and for heaven and earth, which means that her pictures are pictures of the world. Her works are not only aesthetically beautiful objects, but representational works which convey to us meaningful content in a personal, cryptic pictorial language.

The extreme diversity in the pictorial worlds and formal languages exhibited by the Schlumper artists forces us into a more discriminating kind of observation which does not permit sweeping judgements and general classifications. Their works cannot be construed as “alternatives to normality” (Peter Gorsen¹⁷). With works of art, we are concerned with singular creations for which the sole criteria for an estimation of their artistic worth are not the source and circumstances of their creation, but their strength of form and expression.