

Artful Autodidacticism: Art making for Well-being and Self-care

By Adam Zucker

Published 12 Dec. 2018, on [Artfully Learning](#)

Original URL:

<https://theartsandeducation.wordpress.com/2018/12/12/artful-autodidacticism/>

The self-taught artist has typically been contextualized within the canon of Western art as a reclusive individual who has had little to no contact with the academic or accredited art world. Another epithet for these individuals is an “outsider artist.” In truth, there is no such thing as ‘outsider art.’ That label is an oxymoron, which negates the highly personal and symbolic artistic process. Every artist is self-taught, which is evident from the moment they engage in a self-directed exploration of materials and symbolic imagery.

Our ability to create works of art has been steadfast since prehistoric times. Art is a fundamental form of expression, which is why it is utilized as a favorable means for conveying deep meaningful narratives and as a therapeutic practice (i.e. art therapy and music therapy). There are many historical and modern examples of individuals who have harnessed art for self-expression and self preservation when other forms of communication have failed (see: [Art as Therapy](#)). Some of whom will be discussed in the text that follows.

Martin Ramirez is one of the most well known autodidacts in the art world. His work is currently exhibited in museums throughout the world and is highly sought after by collectors. From the aforementioned description it would seem like Ramirez lived the high-life as an art star, however, he spent the majority of his life inside of a California state mental institution. Furthermore, Ramirez had little to no connections to the art world during his lifetime. He wasn't a part of a coterie of artists, nor did he attend any formal art school. Despite all of that, Ramirez clearly had a brilliant aesthetic and conceptual vision, which he recorded on brown paper bags, scraps of examining-table paper, and book pages glued together with a paste made of oatmeal and saliva ([Smith, 2007](#)). The artwork Ramirez made indicated his vivid imagination and his cultural background. For example, his juxtaposition of avant-garde (ex. 20th century architecture and design motifs) and archetypal iconography (ex. the Madonna, cowboys, animals, and trains), blurred the lines between Mexican folk art and modernist visions of society. Above all else, Ramirez maintained an autonomous artistic approach for contextualizing his unique perspectives.

Fortunately, Ramirez's vision and passion for creating works of art was recognized by Tarmo Pasto, a visiting professor of psychology and art at California State University. Pasto met Ramirez at the DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, California. This was in the mid 1930's, when Ramirez was a prolific artist. Pasto, moved by what he saw, became a champion of Martin Ramirez's artwork. At the time, Ramirez was making intricate works using unconventional materials, which he found throughout the asylum. Pasto provided Ramirez with quality art supplies and carefully documented his oeuvre. The support that Pasto provided to Ramirez allows us to enjoy Martin Ramirez's artwork in some of the world's biggest museums and galleries today.

During the time period that Ramirez was making his self-directed artwork within a psychiatric hospital, an Austrian born artist and educator named Edith Kramer was in New York, developing the framework for what would be known as art therapy.

When Kramer was thirteen years old, she began studying fine art with a former Bauhaus student and faculty member named Friedl Dicker. At the age of eighteen, she followed Dicker to Prague where she served as her teaching assistant, teaching art to the children of political refugees. It was through this experience that Kramer realized art's ability to nurture trauma and mental anguish.

In the late 1930s, after immigrating to New York City, Kramer took a position as a faculty member for the Wiltwyck School for Boys, which was a boarding school and psychiatric care facility that served a population of boys with behavioral and emotional needs. Kramer realized that art making had a major impact on the boys' ability to communicate their issues in a far more profound way than they had ever experienced. In prior instances, these boys would express frustration over not being able to communicate their problems, however, through engagement with art materials, they were given a positive and significant outlet to describe how and what they felt. She became the school's de-facto 'art therapist.'

Kramer's lifelong work as an art therapist, blurred the lines between the humanities and behavioral psychology. By utilizing art as a means to better understand and treat mental health issues, she made significant contributions within the mental health community.

Recognizing the ways in which making art can benefit an individual's mental well-being, Dr. Bolek Greczynki and artist Janos Marton created The Living Museum at [Creedmoor Psychiatric Center](#), in Queens, New York in 1983. The

Living Museum presents patients in and outside of the hospital with a creative outlet to channel and synthesize their thoughts and feelings. Fountain House, a non-profit organization New York City, also provides a nurturing creative environment for individuals dealing with mental illness. In addition to operating a residency program where artists get much needed studio access, the [Fountain House Gallery](#) provides a high-caliber platform for artists living and working with mental illness to showcase their work.

Art as therapy is a significant form of mental health rehabilitation because it empowers individuals to communicate repletely. Individuals build self-confidence through independent art making activities, which helps them cope with their psychosocial conditions, perceive themselves apart from mental illness or trauma, and value themselves as active and influential members of society (see: [Lloyd, Wong, Petchkovsky, 2007](#)). Additionally, analyzing artwork made as a result of art therapeutic sessions enables the art therapist to better understand the crux of social, emotional, and neurobiological factors affecting their patients (see: [Bednash, 2016](#)).

United Kingdom based artist, [Lizz Brady](#), founded an organization called [Broken Grey Wires](#) in order to harness the language of art as a means for cathartic responses and explorations into mental health related issues. While Brady collaborates and consults with established professionals and institutions in the art field to raise awareness around mental health, Broken Grey Wires mainly builds an expansive community for all individuals to [“feel comfortable and participate in the project, for art to become a facilitator for recovery, and to encourage people to make something special for themselves.”](#) At its core, Broken Grey Wires is utilizing art to break the stigma of mental illness. Too often, the word ‘outsider artist’ (which as I mentioned previously is a misnomer) is used in reference to individuals who suffer from mental health difficulties.

Brady, who experiences severe depression and anxiety, as well as borderline personality disorder embraced art as a form of catharsis. In 2012, she graduated college with a degree in Fine Art, however, while she found some solace in her peers and professors, the severe struggle with her mental health issues culminated with her being an inpatient in a psychiatric ward. For Brady, this was a seminal turning point, and she has henceforth devoted her artistic practice to addressing her own mental health issues, while also developing and maintaining a creative community alongside others who struggle with mental health related issues.

While Brady received artistic training via instructional scaffolding at a university level, she was an autodidact in relation to establishing her own studio practice. Initially, she felt isolated by the severe difficulties of living and working with mental illness. However, the drive to create art and address her issues through creative forces persevered and led to a unique enlightenment with regards to her work and personal life. She stated:

“I was living as an artist, and yet I couldn’t really find anything out there which explored mental health and creativity. I decided to form Broken Grey Wires, which initially would be one exhibition, showing work alongside other artists who inspired me. I wrote to David Shrigley, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Bobby Baker, Jeremy Deller...and to my genuine surprise, they were all interested in the concept I shared with them” (Rix, 2017).

This is how Broken Grey Wires came into fruition and it has since provided a therapeutic means for artists like Brady to assiduously communicate complex social, emotional, and psychological subjects.

Brady’s artwork explores and assesses her experiences with anxiety, alienation, feelings of doubt, rejection, and the audacity of hope. Through a multidisciplinary practice that includes video, sound, installation, and drawing; Brady reflects the temporary malfunction of the mind, and expresses the emotional push-pull relationship, which affects mental health. Brady strives to create a symbolic link between physical ‘stuff’ and thinking ‘stuff’; through the creative process, to form as she describes, “‘The Moment’ where juxtaposed ideas permeates to fill the empty spaces, in the solid world or within our imagination.” The overarching statements that Brady expresses in her cerebral and stirring narratives address mental health as a realistic and debilitating issue. One that actually deters creativity rather than inspires it. This is a reality that Brady has had to overcome in order to make her highly personal work.

Although some cultural critics, Hollywood producers, and news media outlets like to bestow creative people with the title of the ‘tortured artist, as creative genius,’ this is a dangerous ideology, which does more harm than good. Labeling grief and mental torment as a catalyst for making ‘good art,’ romanticizes mental illness as being intrinsic to creativity and adds to the stigmatization and stereotypes of certain creative individuals and groups.

The artists collaborating with Broken Grey Wires are working to address and dispel this harmful myth by presenting an honest and safe space for depicting mental illness. In addition to taking action against mental health stigma, their work centers around creating connections with others and exhibiting empathy for those who have boldly shared their experiences.

The communal fusion evident in the aforementioned descriptions, breaks another common myth about artists, which is 'the artist as a enigmatic hermit.' In truth, the majority of artists don't live in a vacuum. They thrive when they have the support of each other and the community around them. Examples of Martin Ramirez's relationship with Tarmo Pasto, The Living Museum, Fountain House Gallery, and Broken Grey Wires, indicates that while the autodidact flourishes in self-directed projects, they may also benefit from instructional scaffolding, and empathetic coaching from other individuals and organizations.

When we enter into the act of artistic creation, we employ a colorful blend of cognition and emotion. Artistic knowledge is influenced by experiential living and a yearning to communicate expressively within the era that the specific artist works. Aptitudes for using art materials and techniques develop over time in each individual who dedicates themselves to a continual involvement in the creative arts. Artistic learning is intrinsically self-directed, as in examples of autodidact artists, who independently select the themes they will engage in, the materials and mediums they will use, and create work in their own pace and time. This knowledge can also be supplemented with formal education within primary, secondary, and higher educational institutions, as well as through non-formal learning environments such as vocational apprenticeships.

A trained art educator understands the phases of artistic development (see: [Louis, 2005](#)) and sets up scenarios that prompt and support their students' ability to become more self sufficient communicators and innovators. Art educators (and all other educators for that matter) should refrain from didactic and derivative instruction, because the crux of symbolic expression comes from a uniquely personal journey. Instead, the educator should be a facilitator of self-directed student-centered learning. This not only helps learning become a more engaging activity in the classroom, it also supports an enduring drive to learn because students realize how they can connect education to other aspects in their lives.

Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB) is a contemporary pedagogical methodology where students are expected to direct their own learning processes in a similar

manner to the ways artists work. TAB learning exposes students to multifaceted artistic practices where they come up with their own directives. In a TAB classroom, students either come into class with an idea that they want to address, or develop their ideas during a free play with materials, which are organized in stations. When they've affirmed their idea, the students will guide themselves through a series of aesthetic explorations in order to make insightful connections and create new meanings that stretch their imagination and expand their pragmatic skills. TAB learning is essentially autodidacticism, with the educator providing instructional scaffolding and coaching when needed.

TAB shouldn't be the sole focus in the curriculum (and of course, it's OK not to utilize it altogether). There needs to be a strong social element within these classroom environments, where students are learning to not only rely on themselves for insight, but to work cooperatively and embrace the ideas and discoveries of their peers. Having students build independence and interpersonal skills, while working through difficult problems, is what supports the types of inventiveness that shapes strong progressive communities.

Everyone has the ability to live a creative life where they can find the strength, courage, and motivation to achieve mindfulness and practice self-care. If we embrace our inner artist and foster that artful seed with steadfast experiential artistic behavior, we will reap the many cathartic and insightful benefits that art can have on our social, emotional, and mental health.

References, Notes, Suggested Reading:

Andrews, Barbara Henriksen. "Art and Ideas: Reaching Nontraditional Art Students." *Art Education*. 1 Sep. 2001.

Bednash, Ceccily J., "Art Therapy and Neuroscience: A Model for Wellness" (2016). LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations. 297.
<http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/297>

de Botton, Alain and Armstrong, John. 2013. *Art as Therapy*. London: Phaidon.

Lloyd Chris, Wong Su Ren, and Petchkovsky Leon (2007). "Art and recovery in mental health: a qualitative investigation." *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70(5), 207-214.

Smith, Roberta. "Outside In." *New York Times*. 26 Jan. 2007.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/26/arts/design/26rami.html?ref=museumofamericanfolkart&mtrref=en.wikipedia.org&gwh=D47B2E036B2930C836D2C199549A18CB&gwt=pay>

Rix, Yasmine. *Lizz Brady: Interview by Yasmine Rix*. YAC | *Young Artists in Conversation*. Dec. 2017. <https://youngartistsinconversation.co.uk/Lizz-Brady>