



# Large paintings and art installations by joining hands. Art-workshops for intellectually disabled children to overcome ableism.

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## Reference

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## Abstract

Many social welfare activities for intellectually disabled children might be based on an apparently natural and humanistic emotion, compassion. But compassion can be an obstacle for true understanding of disabled people, as it can be linked with a prejudice which disability studies regards problematic, ableism. In this paper, reporting the art-workshops for intellectually disabled children I carried out with art students, I would like to investigate the possibility to overcome ableism in the context of art and culture.

## Keywords

art-workshop, ableism, empathy.

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## Introduction

My academic career is slightly unique and dare to say odd. In my MA degree I studied design history. But perhaps experience of having children changed my academic interests and attitude. After becoming a parent, I began to hope that my academic research could be helpful for our children and all their generation. I didn't deny the academic value and meaning of design history for next generation, but I hoped to work for our children more directly. When I thought such issues I encountered with disabled people coincidentally.

The encounter with disabled people excited me academically. The encounter with deaf people and their own language, sign language, shook my conventional recognition that the phonetic language was the most superior medium for human thoughts. Smiling faces of severe intellectually disabled children taught me the miraculous possibility of diversity of human existence. The encounter with disabled people gave me great hint for my hope that I work for children thorough my academic research activities. That is to connect my former and new academic interests, more definitely to connect art theory including design history, social welfare activities for disabled people and disability studies. For almost two decades, I have devoted myself to two kinds of activities to realize my hope, art-workshops for intellectually disabled children and research of disability studies.

## 1 Viewpoint towards disabled people

Most of the both physically and intellectually disabled people all over the world are isolated and marginalized, at least on the social superficial level. An assertion I hope you to share with me is that the differentiation between the disabled people and the average people which causes such social isolation and marginalization doesn't have any meanings. We can find several reasons for this assertion. First, the entire disabled people are not really a minority group in the society. But more important reason is the very simple fact that all of us can be disabled. We can be physically disabled by accident or disease. We can also be both physically and intellectually disabled naturally by aging. Natural aging takes many abilities from us, from ability for moving body,



seeing and hearing clearly, to ability for recognizing the outer world accurately. These disabling can affect all of us, except for the died before aging. So we don't have any legitimate reasoning for differentiating disabled people.

But some of us must feel a kind of antipathy to my assertion because of their very humanistic emotion, compassion. They must think we have to take pity on disabled people because disabled people suffer many disadvantageous situations caused by their own differences from average people. But this apparently reasonable emotion could be based on an also apparently reasonable concept, normalcy. We tend to think there must be normal human being, normal human body and normal human intellect, but how can you define them? We should know the concept normalcy is a relatively new and only a product of capitalism (Davis, 1995: 23). And also we should pay attention that when we accept the concept normalcy we must take it from medical viewpoint. From medical viewpoint there could be faultless human being, human body and human intellect. But many scholars of disability studies regard the medical viewpoint very problematic, because it must be an unfair and biased way of understanding human beings, and it must blur the most important aspect around disabled people, social conditioning. Disability studies regards the origins of disadvantages that disabled people suffer not as medical conditions of individuals but as social conditionings of society, and this understanding is called social model of disability (Shakespeare, 1997: 197-8, Linton, 1998: 9). From the viewpoint of social model of disability the apparently humanistic emotion, compassion can be a hindrance for investigation of truth. We can rely on another emotion, empathy, instead.

There must be another concept around disability which requires careful attention in its usage, ableism. Ableism is a mindset evaluating others by the measure of ability. The most problematic point of ableism is that it could justify discriminatory treatment of society towards disabled people (Hehir, 2005: 13, Wolbring, 2008: 252). Under-evaluating others on account of their low ability might lead to denying their existence, and also to the worst invention throughout history of human beings, eugenics. With the viewpoint of ableism, there could be possibility to deny the diversity of human beings. Anyway, with medical viewpoint, ableism is one of the most important critical issues for disability studies.

## **2. Art-workshops based on compassion**

Generally speaking, art-workshops are thought to be very good educational opportunities for intellectually disabled children. But we have to pay attention that art-workshops for intellectually disabled children directed by leaders whose motivation for social welfare activities is based on compassion may not escape from conventional prejudice of ableism. The leaders who take pity on disabled children tend to think that children are poor existences because they cannot enjoy the same pleasure as their non-disabled friends can enjoy due to their disability. Hoping that disabled children can enjoy the equivalent pleasure, the benevolent leaders might bring the disabled children the usual and professional equipment and tools, set the usual goals for art-workshops. But the pleasure brought from the conventional settings and goals might depend on the judgment on how the children attain skillful results, in the case of paintings or drawings, whether they depict the objects well or not. We have to say that the pleasure of conventional art-workshops is not limited to interests caused by skill, but we can say the entire framework of the workshops is dominated by ableistic viewpoint. To exclude ableism from art-workshops for intellectually disabled children, we have to seek different methodology from conventional artistic thinking.

## **3. Suggestions from contemporary art**

To exclude any ableistic viewpoints from art-workshops for intellectually disabled children, we can derive some suggestions from methodology of contemporary art. Forgive me that I use the term contemporary art to mean the art expressions after WW seeking new methodology continuously.

Some authors of contemporary art don't set the goal at the result of the artwork itself, but at the process or concept of art making. Throughout the history, in a sense, artworks have always been judged by a sense of value accompanied with ableistic viewpoint, for the results of artworks have been seen as manifestations of artist's ability. But by attaching importance on



the process or concept, contemporary artists can put up the dimension of their artwork beyond ableistic viewpoint level.

Other authors of contemporary art use the daily objects as media for their artistic expressions. But we should pay attention to the fact that they always use them with deconstruction or de-contextualization of objects. As deconstructed or de-contextualized objects cannot be understood within commonsense judgment, they can be objects beyond commonsense ableism.

The authors of contemporary art always seek new method and value system of art. They should not regard the beauty as what brings superficial visual pleasure, but as a field at where they accept diverse value, and where the diverse value causes deconstruction in chain reaction. The deconstruction of value system is the most prolific advice to overcome ableism.

#### 4 Large paintings by joining hands

The art-workshops for intellectually disabled children to overcome ableism I have carried out in corporation with art students are divided into two categories methodologically; large paintings and art installations. I have to confess I didn't have any intention to overcome ableism at the beginning. But I felt some incompatibility to the framework of our workshop that art students gave disabled children leads with compassion, for there could be a shadow of a kind of pecking order. Honestly speaking, I had convinced that our workshops had significance to overcome ableism only in recent years. The most important key phrase for our workshops was "by joining hands".

Figures 1 and 2. On the left: Making process of The Large Painting by Joining Hands (18th. Dec. 2010). On the right: Making process of The Large Painting by Joining Hands (Staircases, 2nd. Jul. 2011).



##### 4-1 Significance of largeness

I would like to show you two of our recent large paintings by joining hands. The first one was produced by 13 people on 18th. Dec. 2010 in a studio of the school I am working. (Figure 1) Our team included 5 intellectually disabled children, 2 were mental retarded, 3 were autistic. I prepared a large canvas, 5m x 3.6m, for the workshop. My original intention was quite simple, that to paint something in a large canvas had to be a pleasant art work. But in the process of painting and after the workshop, we were going to know the largeness of the canvas had significant meaning.

Before the workshop I instructed participants, children and students, not to draw or paint any representational forms to avoid any ableistic judgment from our creation. This instruction was not easy to understand both for children and students, so I had to begin with myself. When I had painted apparently formless lines, children and students began to imitate me with brilliantly colored brushes. We enjoyed painting and drawing without any restriction except not to paint or draw any representational forms, very freely and easily.

But in the midst of the workshop we came to realize a very severe fact. The canvas was too large to finish the workshop if we continued to draw and paint with usual brush stroke with pigments. To complete an art work was not our main goal, but at least we hoped to conquer this formidable canvas, so this was a kind of emergency.

Some students who should know the American Abstract Expressionism began to drip pigments directly from their pallet to the canvas. But after realizing this Pollockean method was not



sufficient for this canvas, students tried to squeeze pigments from tubes, put them on the canvas and spread them out with hands and feet. Immediately children followed this rough, but innovative and exciting method side by side. With this methodological revolution we did the canvas nearly in two hours.

In this case the largeness of canvas which was beyond the dimension of individual hand strokes derived a dynamic method which required whole collective body actions. In this method, mediocre aesthetics attaching importance to dwarf handy skills were excluded and the fruits of dynamic artistic actions of children and students fused into one borderless picture surface sneering ableism which always judges individually. Through this collective work, we could find an almost flat framework for creation both for intellectually disabled children and art students.

#### 4-2 Strange settings

The second large painting I would like to show you was carried out on 2nd July 2011 by 18 people including same intellectually disabled children as first one. This time I prepared a long canvas in 2m x 10m and we set this extraordinary long canvas on big outdoor staircases in our school vertically. The idea of such an unusual setting was result of discussion among art students and me that it should be enjoyable, but we didn't understand the aesthetic meaning of this setting. In this workshop I didn't give participants any instructions, because I hoped that all participants enjoy without any restrictions. And we were so lucky that the day we enjoyed the workshop was very fine.

It was not easy to draw and paint in such a strange setting in a technical meaning. Vertical and horizontal surfaces tended to be divided and cut off. The vertical surfaces were not smooth space to depict something differed from usual easel settings. But we enjoyed this inconvenient setting for drawing and painting in an emancipated feeling. There must be several reasons for our contradictory pleasure, from outdoor setting to making something together. Perhaps the clearest reason was we were doing something unique nobody else did before.

But we can find more important point in this strange setting. That is this setting can bring us an even and equal platform for creation both for intellectually disabled children and average people. To draw and paint something on big staircases has no aesthetic meanings, and this meaninglessness is meaningless equally both for the disabled and the average. Equally meaningless but equally emancipating, this strange equality can be a hint to overcome ableism, as in such equality the distinction between the disabled and the average loses its meaning.

#### 5 Art installations by joining hands

Figures 3, 4 and 5. On the left: Making process of Art Installation with Toilet Roll (26th. Aug. 2010) On the center and right: Making process of Art Installation with Plastic Tape (23rd. Aug. 2011)



Besides large painting workshops, I carried out several play-like art-workshops with intellectually disabled children which could be called art installations. The procedure of the art installations is not complicated. I bring a lot of daily necessities in form of belt, e.g. toilet roll or plastic tape, into specific site, e.g. a room or a hall with fittings. And I instruct participants including children, art students and volunteers to spread out those belt-formed materials all around the site. When participants cannot find more space or fittings to spread out the materials, the installation is completed, and after taking photos the installations should be removed immediately.

The main purpose of these installations is to change the scenery dramatically and temporarily. In this sense the famous wrapping projects of Christo and Jeanne-Claude gave me hints and courage. But the more profound purpose is to exclude ableistic viewpoint from art-workshop. The main purpose, changing the scenery dramatically and temporarily, is equally simple and



exciting for every participant. Skills required for the installation, spreading, knotting and passing the belt-formed materials, are also equally simple and easy for every participant. In these art installations every participant can enjoy the performance on a perfectly even and flat platform.

Every participant can enjoy visual pleasure, seeing the change of the scenery, but they can enjoy another kind of pleasure in these art installations. It can be defined as the pleasure of deconstruction or de-contextualization. The materials for our installations are daily necessities with normal utilities, but we try to ignore such normal utilities and change the meanings of materials, by doing so we seek different context from commonsense ableistic order. Such deconstruction or de-contextualization is accompanied with mischievous pleasure, and the pleasure brings every participant chance to retrogress to naughty child.

## Conclusion

There must be disabled people as our comrades in our society, and they should not be marginalized as burden to the society. Generally speaking, public support system for disabled people which is based on morals and justice cannot escape from ableistic viewpoint and tends to be rigid, for society should support disabled people because of their vulnerability. Individual goodwill or compassion for disabled people can soften this rigidity of public support system, but we have to pay attention that such benevolent feelings tend to derive some senses of superiority. Needless to say, average people participating welfare activities should not regard themselves as superior to disabled people.

As cultural and artistic viewpoints bring different value sense from ableistic judgment, they can supplement public support system and benevolent welfare activities. Especially, art-workshops based on artistic curiosity and artistic playfulness without adhering value sense over skills can be good triggers to attain really even and flat social framework both for the disabled and the average. If the average children acquire viewpoint without any ableistic discrimination and compassion towards disabled children through such art-workshops, they can find a way to society based on true empathy and comradeship.

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