

# Myth-Busting Autism Art: Challenging Stereotypes in Creativity and Expression

Heyon Choi

MLK Scholar

September 6, 2024

## Preface

I self-identify as a producer, consumer, curator, and advocate of art. Since beginning my artistic journey, I have been engrossed in the idea of visual products influencing the minds of not only the creator, but also the beholder. Their potential to aid and support social causes by visualizing intangible concepts is limitless and, as a result, has been the focus and foundation of my artistic motivation. Shortly after my realization of my passion for incorporating art as a means of representing the physically impalpable, I came across the disability of autism and the struggles of those with autism within society. I wished to aid in elevating their status and sense of belonging within the community, which led me to a focused mission to advocate for neurodiversity and autism through my art. Over the past nine years, I have been deeply involved with artists on the autism spectrum, many of whom I have befriended. The initial encounters with these artists were thought-provoking and visually mesmerizing, as their artistic capabilities and unique methodologies were inexplicable to me at the time. They were able to create compositions from unconventional starting points, such as forming flawlessly proportional paintings that required no sketches or preparations. As I was a blossoming artist myself, I was captivated by their abilities and have since been invested in understanding the mechanism behind the visual prowess they portray through their art. Their creativity, often spontaneous and unconventional, challenges the boundaries of what is traditionally considered artistic. Demonstrating exceptional talent unique to those on the autism spectrum, the artists rightly deserve better visibility in the contemporary art scene. Yet, their works remain largely marginalized and unappreciated, confined to the category of Outsider Art. This discrepancy reflects broader societal misconceptions about autism which I am committed to challenging. Through my curatorial work, research and artistic collaborations, I aim to highlight the unique talents of these artists and alleviate the stereotypes that limit their recognition. My research is indebted to the friends and acquaintances that have taught me the

importance of creativity and resilience. My journey is driven by a profound respect for the individuals I have grown up with and learned from, and a firm belief that their contributions to art and society deserve to be celebrated, not sidelined.

## **Introduction**

Autism is a neuro-developmental disability that has been misrepresented and misunderstood since its inception in the 1920s. The accrument of the misinterpretation of the disability has, over time, reinforced incorrect and negative social stereotypes. Conscious efforts to tackle this ignorance have been made through continuous revisions of the legislation accompanied by a surge of effort in recent years to adequately support autistic individuals. However, such an increase in awareness has not greatly impacted the career choices of autistic individuals, most notably in the arts sector. The conventional misconceptions of autism have influenced the social perception of autistic artists and their works and have consequentially stunted their development. With art being a critical visual tool for autistic individuals to showcase their unique identity and intangible psychology, raising awareness for these artists who represent the world of autism offers valuable insight into further appreciating and accepting autistic individuals. Autism art has often been categorized under Outsider Art (*art brut*), and has not been considered in the mainstream art ecosystem. This marginalization not only restricts the appreciation of their art but also eliminates opportunities for society to fully comprehend the psychology of autistic individuals. Consequently, to further understand the perspectives of those with autism, appreciating and raising awareness for autism art is critical in dissolving the boundaries between society and autistic individuals.

This paper aims to highlight the value of autism art by challenging existing prejudices on autism, referring to works of Korean and Korean-American autistic artists as a

means to substantiate such contradictions. Specifically, it proposes to tackle two critical, deep-seated beliefs that hinder the inclusion and equitable treatment of autistic artists and individuals alike. The first is the stigma that autistic individuals demonstrate a lack of creativity in their process of thinking, mentioned in the ICD-10 diagnostic guidelines on childhood autism published by the World Health Organization in 1992.<sup>1</sup> The second stereotype is that autistic individuals are entirely detached from their environment and thus society, as mentioned by renowned psychiatrist Hans Asperger in 1944.<sup>2</sup> The investigation on the production of art by autistic individuals can not only aid in eliminating these generalizations but by doing so can elevate the reputation of autism in society. By first defining the term autism and Outsider Art, followed by the introduction of specific autistic artists and their works to contradict the stereotypes on autism creativity and societal detachment, the paper hopes to underline the value of autism art in raising further awareness on the disability and its harmonization with society.

### **Autism**

The ambivalent social attitude toward autism throughout the years is a consequence of the fluctuating definition of the term since its first introduction by Swiss Psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Originally derived from the Greek word ‘autos,’ meaning ‘self,’ due to early research on autism stating that autistic individuals were often observed to be ‘self-absorbed,’ research on autism since Eugen Bleuler has continued to broaden the definition to adequately support the changing narratives in society.<sup>4</sup> The term

---

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders: Clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines* (Switzerland: World Health Organization, 1992), 253.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Asperger, “‘Autistic Psychopathy’ in Childhood,” in *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, ed. Uta Frith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Asperger, “‘Autistic Psychopathy’ in Childhood,” 37-38.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Kuhn, “Eugen Bleuler’s Concepts of Psychopathology,” *History of Psychiatry* 15, no. 3 (2004): 361-

autism has undergone the lens of four critical psychiatrists since the 1920s, namely Grunya Efimovna Sukhareva, Leo Kanner, Hans Asperger, and Lorna Wing. Their extensive contributions in expanding the possible symptoms and diagnoses shed light on how social and medical perceptions have shifted from considering autism as a disability that needs to be treated to one that should be accepted and embraced. The following sub-chapter will briefly outline their research to underline the turbulent transition of autism perception in society.

Russian child psychiatrist Grunya Efimovna Sukhareva was the first to have documented the symptoms of autism in 1925, which was recorded in her 1926 article as ‘schizoid psychopathy.’<sup>5</sup> Her findings indicated observations of characteristics such as solitude, social avoidance, and repetitive actions in the children she treated, which contemporary psychiatrists now consider as common tropes of autistic behavior.<sup>6</sup> She also stated the existence of a unique potential in the form of exceptional intelligence and personal talent, which has been widely regarded henceforth as a notable trait in autistic individuals.<sup>7</sup> Despite her recordings not amounting to the coining of the term ‘autism’ itself, having diagnosed the disability as a form of schizophrenia, her contribution underpins the fact that autism research had been done prior to the 1940s, which many consider to be the beginnings of understanding the medical format of autism.

The term ‘early infantile autism’ was first coined by Austrian-American psychiatrist Leo Kanner in the 1940s, superseding Sukhareva’s documentation on ‘schizoid psychopathy’.

---

366.

<sup>5</sup> David Ariel Sher and Jenny L. Gibson, “Pioneering, Prodigious and Perspicacious: Grunya Efimovna Sukhareva’s Life and Contribution to Conceptualising Autism and Schizophrenia,” *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 32 (2023): 477.

<sup>6</sup> Sher and Gibson, “Pioneering, Prodigious and Perspicacious: Grunya Efimovna Sukhareva’s Life and Contribution to Conceptualising Autism and Schizophrenia,” 477-478.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 477-478.

Kanner's 1943 paper "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact" recorded observations of eleven case studies on children who he considered to have autistic traits, comparing symptoms of 'early infantile autism' with childhood schizophrenia as a means to separate the two mental disabilities. He notes how traits such as obsessiveness and echolalia are shown in both mental disabilities, but the element of change, apparent in childhood schizophrenia, is absent in the case of those with 'early infantile autism.'<sup>8</sup> Many of Kanner's observations on autistic behavior concurred with Sukhareva's accounts, but the causality of the disability was one element that Kanner had strongly stated in his research which had not been focused on prior. He delineated that the source of 'early infantile autism' was the affected child's relationship with their parents and is the critical difference between 'early infantile autism' and childhood schizophrenia. He writes in his 1943 paper that in all his case studies, the children came from highly intelligent families and comparatively cold-hearted parents, which he believed to have affected their autistic tendencies.<sup>9</sup> This is further emphasized by Kanner in the 1948 issue of *Time* magazine, where Kanner compares the parents' neglect of their children to children frozen and forgotten in refrigerators, birthing the term 'refrigerator mother'.<sup>10</sup> Despite the extreme integration of the parent-child relationship theory as a cause and catalyst for autistic behaviors, which is now considered to be an outdated framework as mentioned by reporter Charles C. Thomas in the 1960 issue of the *Time*, Kanner's attempt to separate 'early infantile autism' from the mass understanding of childhood schizophrenia demonstrates a progression from Sukhareva that bolstered further research on the disability in

---

<sup>8</sup> Leo Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact," in *Nervous Child* 2 (1943): 248.

<sup>9</sup> Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact," 250,

<sup>10</sup> Leo Kanner in "Frosted Children," *Time*, Springfield (April 26, 1948).

later years.<sup>11</sup>

The 1940s had seen not one but two exceptional psychiatrists in the field of autism research, with the emergence of Austrian psychiatrist Hans Asperger and his 1944 publication of the “Die ‘Autistischen Psychopathen’ in Kindesalter”. Asperger had performed an epidemiological study, much like Kanner’s in the year before, to assess the common behavioral traits of autistic individuals. Asperger’s work, though not influenced by Kanner’s but the early studies of Eugen Bleuler, recorded similar behavioral traits in autistic individuals as that of Kanner’s.<sup>12</sup> His research not only underlined the noticeable high levels of intelligence shown by many children with autism but also clearly stated their ability to devise original ideas.<sup>13</sup> He stresses, in fact, that their ability to produce original concepts was the only way in which they could process information because the standardized mechanical learning proved difficult for them.<sup>14</sup> Despite some of Asperger’s frameworks being perceived as archaic in the eyes of the modern beholder, such as his theory on the influence of genetic factors on autistic behaviors, his efforts in assimilating the positive traits that made autistic individuals unique remain relevant and critical in the pioneering of autism research and support. Even in the 1940s, Kanner and Asperger’s investigation into autism had underscored different priorities in approaching the disability, and consequently illustrates how the trajectory of autism research had undergone much confusion since its implementation but offered potential for future stabilization.

Gradual revisions and renewed contemplation continued to occur after Kanner and

---

<sup>11</sup> Charles C Thomas, “The Child Is Father,” *Time*, Springfield (July 25, 1960).

<sup>12</sup> Asperger, “‘Autistic Psychopathy’ in Childhood” 87.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

Asperger's critical papers, but a drastic shift in perspective can be observed during the 1980s with the British psychiatrist Lorna Wing addressing and contending Kanner's research. In her 1985 publication "Autistic Children: A Guide for Parents and Professionals", Wing disagreed with Kanner's analyses, deeming the parental influences on 'early infantile autism' to be an irrelevant factor in affecting the output of autism and therefore denouncing Kanner's theory to be based purely on subjective injection.<sup>15</sup> Alongside her demarcation of Kanner's original model, she had made strides in changing the framework itself by devising the diagnosis research known as the 'triad of impairments', which remains relevant in the modern day. The 'triad of impairments', or the 'Wing's triad', were three types of impairments noticeable in autistic individuals that could be used for early diagnoses.<sup>16</sup> In her 1979 paper, she notes these impairments to be difficulties in social interaction, stunted language development and visible repetitive behaviors.<sup>17</sup> Through her clarified classification of autistic traits, Wing proposed a novel model that focused on accepting and understanding the disability that contended Kanner and Asperger's methodologies in treating it. Wing's contribution to the field of autism research represents the shifting perceptions of autism during the 1980s, one which continues to be relevant in supporting autism thereafter. The rigid need to categorize disabilities in society during the early 1940s and up to the 1960s can clearly be seen to have dissipated to a degree during the 1980s, thus exemplifying how autism perception had fluctuated drastically since its first inception during the 1920s.

The erratic historical transition of the medical definition of autism demonstrates the

---

<sup>15</sup> Lorna Wing, *Autistic Children: A Guide For Parents & Professionals* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Routledge 1985): 15.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Gillberg, "Lorna Wing OBE, MD, FRCPsych Formerly psychiatrist and physical, Social Psychiatry Unit, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, co-founder of the UK National Autistic Society," *BJPsych Bulletin* 39, no. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 2015): 52.

<sup>17</sup> Lorna Wing, "Severe Impairments of Social Interaction and Associated Abnormalities in Children: Epidemiology and Classification," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 9, no. 1 (1979): 11.



necessity for continuous clarification and renewal of the nature of the disability, as well as consistent efforts to challenge existing preconceptions that surround it. Better understanding and acceptance of the autism can offer opportunities to foster an environment in which future generations can more appropriately integrate those with disabilities in contemporary society. In recent years, autistic individuals have made valiant strides in actively enforcing their presence in society through the display of their unique abilities, most notably in the field of art. Their art, however, was swiftly relegated from the contemporary scene and grouped under the movement known as *art brut*, more commonly referred to as Outsider Art. The following sub-chapter will delve into the origins and key players in this movement, as to devise a foundation of reason that autism art offers beyond the shackles of this limitation.

### **Outsider Art**

Outsider Art, also known as *art brut*, is the categorization of art that exists on the outskirts of social normalcy and gains power and purpose from its independence, as noted by Professor Roger Cardinal.<sup>18</sup> Cardinal outlines how art by many who are diagnosed or conditioned by mental dysfunctions, as well as social ostracization adhere to this category of art.<sup>19</sup> Cardinal does, however, explicitly state that Outsider Art is not a completely equal terminology to what he notes as ‘autistic art,’ but that common behavioral tendencies of autistic individuals resonate with the definition of it.<sup>20</sup> Originally termed *art brut* in the 1940s by the French artist and critic Jean Dubuffet, meaning ‘raw or rough art,’ which was later coined by Cardinal in an English translation as ‘Outsider Art,’ the movement was largely

---

<sup>18</sup> Roger Cardinal, “Outsider Art and the Autistic Creator,” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 364, no. 1522 (Royal Society, 2009): 1459.

<sup>19</sup> Cardinal, “Outsider Art and the Autistic Creator,” 1459.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1461-1462.

purposed to represent strength in individuality.<sup>21</sup> *Art brut* was its own category because it represented works of art that entirely differed from existing forms of art, making them incomparable and unique to the psychology of the artist.<sup>22</sup> Its detachment from mainstream art gives it purpose because those who worked under what was considered *art brut* had no inclination of the art society surrounding them and thus were not affected or influenced by trends and narratives that dominated the public sphere. However, as mentioned by Claire Barber-Stetson, much research on Outsider Art had largely focused on the theoretical frameworks of the reasoning behind its emergence rather than the visual literary and brilliance of the works themselves, resulting in its evaluation to be structured around the context of the aesthetic qualities it offers.<sup>23</sup> Such sentiment was shared by Cardinal in 2009, as he wrote how Outsider Art should center around the intensive visual prowess of the unique imagery as opposed to the historical and biographical nature of its source.<sup>24</sup>

The visual nature of Outsider Art, therefore, seems as imperative as understanding the narratives behind it. Referring to German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn and his accounts of the art produced by the mentally disabled in 1922 titled “Bildneri der Geisteskranken”, translated as “Artistry of the Mentally Ill,” Cardinal illustrates the core visual elements of Outsider Art to be outlandish and strange, which he aligns to the traits noticeable in those with autism.<sup>25</sup> It is this unconventional, novel visual imagery that separates Outsider Art with the likes of contemporary and conventional art. The importance of Cardinal’s intervention in

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1459.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Cardinal, “Toward an Outsider Aesthetic,” *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, ed. Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf Jr. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1994): 23.

<sup>23</sup> Claire Barber-Stetson, “A Vibrant Autistic Aesthetic and the Limits of Art Brut,” *Journal of Literacy & Cultural Disability Studies* 11, no. 2 (2017): 115.

<sup>24</sup> Cardinal, “Outsider Art and the Autistic Creator,” 1460.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 1459.

raising awareness for Outsider Art is his attitude toward treating the works as artworks rather than research material for scientific purposes.<sup>26</sup> Much of Cardinal’s art historical analyses of autistic artists in the Outsider Art movement have demonstrated visualizing their obsessiveness in image format. The autistic symptoms themselves become the subject and methodology of the produced art, and such representation can be aptly observed in the works of American artist Gregory Blackstock.



Figure 1. Gregory Blackstock, “THE GREAT WORLD PARROTS COMPLETE-COLOR” from *THE INCOMPLETE HISTORICAL WORLD, PART II*, archival pigment print, 30 x 29 inches, 2021 (Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 1462.

Gregory Blackstock is an autistic artist who lies on the spectrum of savant syndrome, those of whom are often considered to have levels of exceptional talent in a singular, particular field of study. His works are often drawn classifications of animal species and common objects, handling a diverse breath of subject matters. Fig .1 is a 2021 work by Blackstock titled “THE GREAT WORLD PARROTS COMPLETE-COLOR” from a collaborative series in *THE INCOMPLETE HISTORICAL WORLD, PART II*, which is composed of drawings of exotic hook-billed tropical birds. The work is aligned in a grid-like composition that repeats the format of an image of a bird followed by a subscripted title of the species' name. A trend in scale can also be observed, with the birds placed in the top half of the work being of larger size than those in the bottom half. The hue and intensity of the colors also darken as the composition transitions from top to bottom. The remaining constants can be viewed as the posture of the birds and the calligraphy of the writing, which are standardized throughout the drawing. The overwhelming use of green is dispersed through various tones throughout the composition, and color usage is restricted to specific areas of geometrically drawn linear structures rather than a sense of shading or merging of colors. The birds are composed in an orderly, yet compressed fashion, as if to signify the need to adhere to the boundaries of the canvas. Blackstock’s obsessive nature is beautified through a diverse collection of birds, extending beyond merely its informative quality and portraying Blackstock’s psychology as one that explores the aesthetics of order and completion. The visual qualities outlined are all indicative of autistic traits being manifested within the art. A sense of repetitiveness, alongside the clear-cut classification of color and scale, all resonate with the common traits of those with autism, and as a result, this work embodies the visual manifestation of Blackstock’s autism.



Figure 2. Gregory Blackstock, cover of *Blackstock's Collections*, 2006 (Princeton Architectural Press, New York).

Commentary on Blackstock's oeuvre, such as Cardinal's analysis of the series of crows drawn on the cover of Blackstock's publication titled "Blackstock's Collections," adhere to a similar sentiment in appreciating the work for its unique qualities. Cardinal mentions, referring to Fig. 2, how the work shows a glimpse of "something of the man's prodigious appetite for detail and delight in precision and completeness."<sup>27</sup> He underlines

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1464.

how the autistic nature of the repetition and precision that is visualized results in a production of Blackstock's personal perception of the subject matter and what he deems individual to each species rather than a direct reproduction of the real world. This notion embodies the unique qualities of Outsider Art, as those artists of this category reference not the social implications of how these are conveyed in reality but are dedicated to displaying the façade of the subject matter they hold in their minds. Owner of Greg Kucera Gallery, Greg Kucera, is also recorded in a short documentary on Blackstock, saying that the unpredictability and breadth of the subject matter Blackstock envisions through his work is a critical feature that makes his work unique and immersive.<sup>28</sup> The individualized perspective of Blackstock's works underscored by Cardinal and the unpredictability of the subject matter and imagery stated by Kucera indicates that Outsider Art has the ability to fascinate and draw in those from contemporary society through its incomparable, distinctive nature. As can be seen from Blackstock's works and the analyses that surround them, the behavioral symptoms of autism that translate into visual compositions are themselves creative and eccentric in the eyes of those who do not have autism, which not only highlights the value of Outsider Art, but also calls for a reevaluation of past social stereotypes that have restricted these artists to flourish.

### **Reevaluating Creativity**

A generalization believed by many, including official medical documents in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, is that those with autism lack a sense of creativity, as can be extracted from the ICD-10 diagnostic guidelines on childhood autism published in 1992 by the World Health Organization. The guidelines record that autistic individuals struggle to exact creative

---

<sup>28</sup> Drew Christie and Kalakala Animation, "How Autism has Shaped Artist Gregory Blackstock's Work," *PBS* (July 13, 2021), 10.38 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y19BccIQBT8>.

thinking.<sup>29</sup> Though much has developed on the perception of autism since then, medical documentation and categorization of autism have induced and solidified public stigma on the matter. The psychological approaches to measuring creativity, most notably the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT), Karmiloff-Smith's drawing task, and the Creativity Assessment Packet, are often the core indicators for levels of creativity, which autistic individuals perform poorly in comparison to its neurotypical counterparts.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century had implanted a stigma that autistic individuals are not capable of creative thinking. Though scientific research on the matter, such as those carried out by Jaime Craig and Simon Baron-Cohen in 1999, clearly illustrates the low variability in creativity usage in autistic individuals. Their paper argues that the concept of creativity should not and cannot be contained by the medical limitations of its definition but rather should be reconsidered as a social phenomenon in which autistic individuals portray their individualized versions of creativity. A methodology that can substantiate this claim is analyzing creativity vis-à-vis autistic art to justify a redefinition of the term that is inclusive of those with autism within contemporary society.

Creativity, as connoted by Stolte et al., is a broad terminology that embraces both convergent and divergent thinking processes that lead to the birthing of inventive and original ideas.<sup>31</sup> Stolte et al., underline how convergent thinking is the process of exacting an answer that is targeted to a specific idea, whereas divergent thinking is the ability to successfully

---

<sup>29</sup> World Health Organization, *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders: Clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines* (Switzerland: World Health Organization, 1992), 253.

<sup>30</sup> Rebecca McKenzie, "A Different Way to Think about Creativity: The Case of Autism and Outsider Art," (Plymouth Institute of Education, 2011): 4-6.

<sup>31</sup> Marije Stolte et al., "Characterizing Creative Thinking and Creative Achievements in Relation to Symptoms of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13 (2022): 2.



branch out from an existing source and creatively adjust to the according variables. Quantitative research, as outlined by Stolte et al., has discovered that both components, though more for divergent than convergent thinking, were comparatively less apparent in those with autism than in other neuro groups, leading to the assumption and stigma that autistic individuals were less creative than their regular peers.<sup>32</sup>

One such quantitative research done in 1999 by Jaime Craig and Simon Baron-Cohen, titled “Creativity and Imagination in Autism and Asperger Syndrome,” utilizes the TTCT to conclude that those with autism and Asperger’s syndrome demonstrate abilities to produce creative thoughts but were in minimal numbers, and their change was mostly influenced by the reality surrounding them, rather than that of what is considered as ‘imaginative.’<sup>33</sup> General implications of the research pointed toward the fact that it was not impossible for them to devise creativity, but the connection between reality and their psychology remained a far greater causality for their actions. The flaws of the research, however, are also noted by Craig and Baron-Cohen, in that the questioning of what the deficit of imagination is, as well as the causes of it respective of the autistic traits, need further evaluation as their research proves only to be a specified sampling of how scientific data is interpreted to display lack of creativity in those with autism.<sup>34</sup> The presented issue regarding the ambiguous results of the lack of creativity in autistic individuals, therefore, can be identified as the incorrect and inappropriate methodology in measuring imagination and creativity.

---

<sup>32</sup> Stolte et al., “Characterizing Creative Thinking and Creative Achievements in Relation to Symptoms of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Autism Spectrum Disorder,” 3.

<sup>33</sup> Jaime Craig and Simon Baron-Cohen, “Creativity and Imagination in Autism and Asperger Syndrome,” *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 29, no. 4 (1999): 325.

<sup>34</sup> Craig and Baron-Cohen, “Creativity and Imagination in Autism and Asperger Syndrome,” 325.



To combat the inaccuracies in creativity measurement put forth by the quantitative research done in the early 21st century, recent scholars have turned to qualitative research to value individual perspectives over numerical data. One such researcher, Rebecca McKenzie, highlights how art is a measure of qualitative creativity, which has the potential to offer a divergence from existing quantitative research. She deliberates on how the obsessive interest in singular and specific subject matters displayed by those diagnosed with autism can only score poorly on quantitative tests on creativity because the contents do not invigorate the source of creativity for them. In contrast to these quantitative tests, the world of art has shown acceptance of creativity through various pathways, such as heightened interest in singular subject matters and repetition being traits common to many old masters and modern artists alike. McKenzie references artist Paul Cézanne's obsessive interest in representing nature and Andy Warhol's consistent and continuous use of repetition as evidence for her argument, as these qualities are highly regarded in the art world, despite their lacking results in quantitative testing.

Researcher Ilona Roth's paper titled "Autism, Creativity and Aesthetics" also concurs with McKenzie's argument in that while she acknowledges that society assumes visual production by autistic artists to be mostly mental processing of exterior imagery rather than creativity, she clarifies how autistic artists also import the element of choice as to accentuate the areas of their personal interests.<sup>35</sup> She takes to artist Stephen Wiltshire as her prime example for this framework, as his complicated architectural reproductions have often been credited solely to his autistic ability to memorize everything in perfection, despite clear control in certain shades and structures in the composition more than others, indicating the

---

<sup>35</sup> Ilona Roth, "Autism, Creativity and Aesthetics," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 17, no. 4 (2020): 499.

artist's personal intervention, and consequently a representation of creativity.<sup>36</sup> Roth accurately points out how creativity is not a standardized, rigid concept. By adjusting and reevaluating creativity to fit the perceptions of the individual who believes their actions to be creative, their talents and efforts can not only shine but be accepted in society.

In an effort to understand the ways in which autistic artists truly operate, I myself have documented case studies of autistic artists that I have personally come across and conversed with. Their artworks were assessed qualitatively by trained neurotypical artists as well as a general audience. All of them exhibited intense, unwavering focus on a singular theme as well as demonstrating resilient adherence to a particular style of artistic expression. Despite their narrow focus, all of them showed no limitations in their ability to produce distinct artworks within their chosen subject matter, and such displayed detailed and individual oeuvres. None of the artists scored highly on creative tests and recorded poor results on the IQ test (e.g., below 70), thereby indicating a quantitative low measurement of creativity within the boundaries of conventional psychology. However, they collectively exhibited a wide range of creative qualities within a targeted frame, as assessed prior. The most noticeable salient qualities include innovative storytelling, symbolic representation of highly abstract concepts, and seemingly limitless artistic productions within a focused theme.

---

<sup>36</sup> Roth, "Autism, Creativity and Aesthetics," 499.

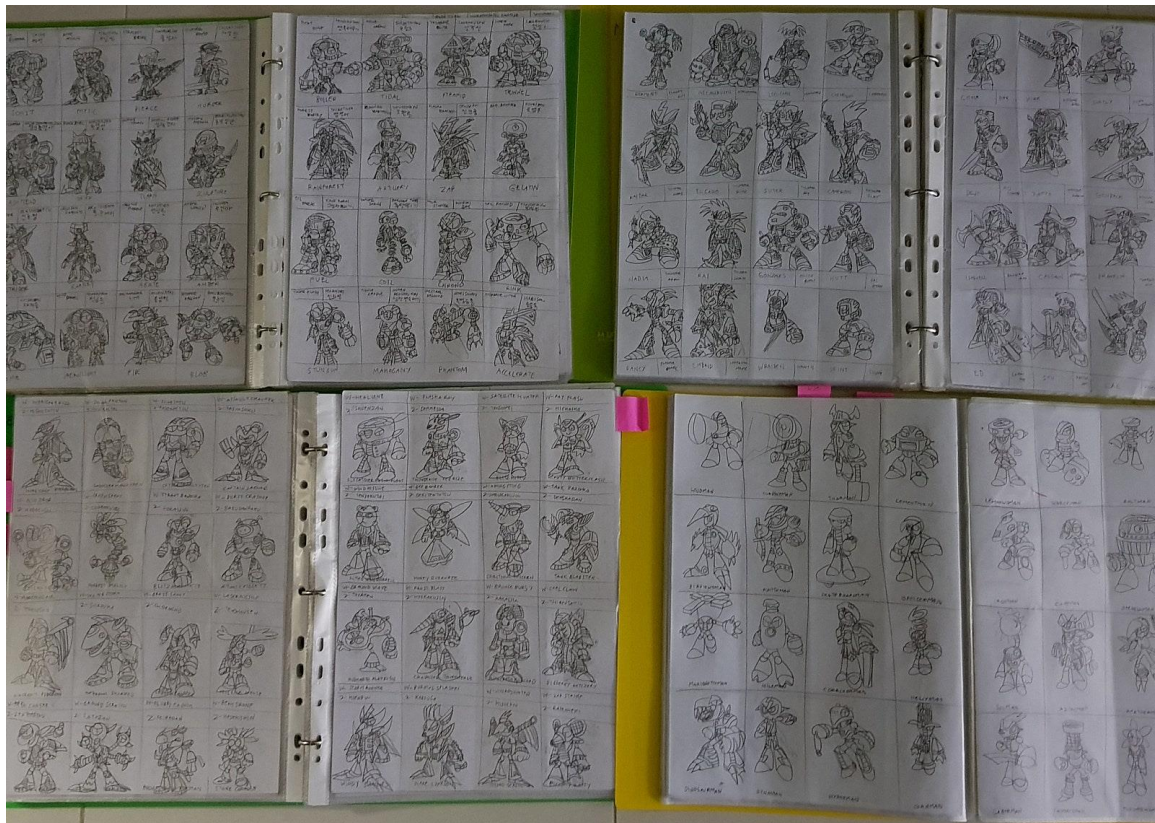


Figure 3. Sungje Hwang, *Robot Sketches*, pencil on paper, 2022

The first of the two artists that will be introduced is South Korean artist Sungje Hwang, more commonly known as the robot artist. His work consists of a series of robotic designs in a grid-like fashion documented in clear files, as can be seen in Fig. 3, resembling a visual encyclopedia of his mind. These robots are purely from his imagination, and while all of them are anthropomorphic, each demonstrates a distinct characteristic and defining attributes. Hwang remembers each robot he has produced and continuously designs new ones through seemingly limitless imagination and ideation. His sketches are repetitive in composition but intricate and separate in their detailing and clarifies how, within the larger framework of robotic imagery, Hwang has continuously activated a cognitive process of divergent thinking which others, who may have scored highly on the TTCT, would find difficult not only to replicate, but to envision in the first place. Though limited to robotics, Hwang displays the levels of unlimited potential for creativity that autistic artists can exact

through the visualization of art.



Figure 4. Yi-Jeong Rim, *Abstract Artwork*, acrylic on canvas, 2023

Figural representation is not the limitation of autism art. As mentioned by Roth, artistic genius is not a behavioral trait destined for every autistic child, and creativity can be observed differently for autistic individuals on different parts of the spectrum. South Korean artist Yi-Jeong Rim is an autistic artist who displays an entirely different understanding of color and composition from Hwang's. His works, visually, are reminiscent of Neo-Plasticism in that the geometric shapes and linear patterns are repeated endlessly within his composition and incorporate a diverse and eccentric combination of bright hues. Rim's use of color and simplified geometry is representative of the emotions and values he experiences, which he visualizes on canvas to communicate and resonate with his audience. His abstract translation of ephemeral and intangible concepts such as emotion and personal values highlights his intention to emphasize with his audience and connect to the world around him through his thoughts. His thoughts, however, are difficult to process into words, and as such, in his own way, Rim creatively intertwines abstraction with his emotions to create works of art that demonstrate the embodiment of his being as an autistic individual.

The expansion and revision of the concepts pertaining to creativity is a clear necessity when autistic individuals and their art signal varying results between the quantitative and qualitative testing of imagination. Through autistic artists and their individual works of art, one can effectively contend against the existing stereotype that autistic individuals lack a sense of creativity because it is their repetitive, routine, and obsessive natures that translate to a new form of creativity in the world of art. As beholders who do not have autism, such notions of creativity may be perceived as foreign and nonsensical, but autistic artists clearly demonstrate that they manipulate and mold the senses and information they have been given to create ‘original’ ideas, as mentioned by Asperger, and this source foundation verifies their ability to be creative, albeit differently to the average person.

### **Detached from Society**

The reevaluation of creativity has insofar highlighted that autistic artists and their work have the power to revitalize and upturn past stereotypes of the disability. However, the overhaul of the terminology brings forth another critical aspect to consider within the autistic art ecosystem, which is whether they truly belong in the Outsider Art genre, and if the movement benefits the progress and unique intricacies of autism art. Cardinal’s definition of Outsider Art, alongside commonly acknowledged traits in autistic individuals, extensively states that those with autism unconsciously depart and separate from the public sphere, not as a means of negative retraction, but because their world has dominion over their interest and ability to empathize with others.<sup>37</sup> With past medical documentation from Asperger and Kanner into more relevant material researched by Wing, and recently through the discovery

---

<sup>37</sup> Cardinal, “Outsider Art and the Autistic Creator,” 1459.

of Outsider Art, continuous stereotyping of the lack of social intimacy is underlined as a fundamental basis shared by those with autism. Though, to a degree, these behavioral traits may be true, not all who have autism automatically resign from social bonding and their inclusive desires. As can be seen from Rim, who attempts to communicate with society through his art, and through Blackstock, who offers his perspective on the world to his audience and opens himself up to the public sphere, many autistic artists and their works represent a desire to connect with society, despite their disability's restrictions. The reinterpretation of creativity through autism art has equally brought about the necessity to counter the existing stereotype of how autistic individuals naturally detach from society. Consequently, the readings on the limitations of Outsider Art in supporting the potential of autistic artists can not only extinguish the stereotypes of their supposed social detachment but also better highlight the value of autism art in further understanding autism.

The sentiment for change in categorizing autism art is shared by Barber-Stetson, as she references the likes of autistic artists Jessica Park and Seth Chwast to have not matched the criteria of Outsider Art and comments that if they were to be “released from art brut, their work could be linked to other aesthetic movements.”<sup>38</sup> In deliberating on how Park attempts to connect with her environment, Barber-Stetson cites Emmanuelle Delmas-Glass's analysis of Park's work, noting that the subtlety of the colors used indicates her intended connection to her physical environment.<sup>39</sup> Barber-Stetson clarifies that this awareness of surrounding elements in itself counters the fundamentals of Outsider Art and underscores how autistic artists do attempt to connect with the real world.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Barber-Stetson, “A Vibrant Autistic Aesthetic and the Limits of Art Brut,” 117.

<sup>39</sup> Emmanuelle Delmas-Glass in Barber-Stetson, “A Vibrant Autistic Aesthetic and the Limits of Art Brut,” 120.

<sup>40</sup> Barber-Stetson, “A Vibrant Autistic Aesthetic and the Limits of Art Brut,” 120.

In the case of Chwast, Barber-Stetson outlines how in Chwast's Artist Statement, he had written a series of common words that relate the various colors used in his works.<sup>41</sup> Barber-Stetson stresses how these mundane objects that Chwast refers to are his way of inviting the neurotypical into his narrative and his artistic world, demonstrating his intention to connect with and accommodate his audience.<sup>42</sup> This purposeful Artist Statement is proof that Chwast does not fit into the definition of Outsider Art as his individuality is not merely for himself, but a trait he wishes to share and converse with the world.

Moreover, Barber-Stetson states that both Park and Chwast were taught artmaking from a young age and thus contends the notion that those within the Outsider Art genre are untaught and untrained, which is where their source of uniqueness is birthed.<sup>43</sup> Park acknowledges this support in her interview with Gillian J. Furniss, where she is noted to have said that children with autism must be taught artmaking; they will not learn artmaking simply by observing others."<sup>44</sup> Art education in itself signifies that autistic artists have accepted and implemented the concepts and imagery of the world outside their own minds, meaning that their works have foundational connections to contemporary society. The visual and contextual history of Park and Chwast highlights that society and their connection to it is of importance, and as a result, their identities as artists do not fit the criteria of Outsider Art, nor do they accurately display behavioral traits diagnosed in the medical field of autism research.

The case studies of Rim, Park, and Chwast denounce the idea that autistic individuals are discordant and detached from society. Though the spectrum is far and wide for autism,

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>44</sup> Gillian J. Furniss, "Celebrating the Artmaking of Children with Autism," *Art Education* 61, no. 5 (2008): 9.

which could result in those with autism being uninterested in common society, the critical perspective these autistic artists demonstrate is that through art, they can tell the world that they are trying to communicate, albeit in their own manner. Outsider Art may have been the neuro-typical categorization of autistic art because art that seemingly did not concern itself with societal trends and narrative seemed unbecoming of any other movements and genres. Autistic artists do not all retract and depart from society, but rather, many communicate, through art, the ways in which they feel appropriate as methods of connecting with the world around them. Through this perspective, Outsider Art is a limitation that confines the potential growth of autistic artists and encourages a necessity to evaluate their artworks in relation to other modern and contemporary art movements. In doing so, a more effective conglomeration of autistic individuals and society can be achieved, where full inclusion of their being can be accepted as unique and individual traits within society, rather than merely being 'different.'

### **Conclusion**

Our society has come a long way in our efforts for equity, diversity, and inclusion. Yet, our misperceptions of autistic individuals and their artistic skills have led to the mistreatment and a failure to recognize and celebrate their irreplaceable and irreplicable talent. This paper has highlighted the value of autistic art as a catalyst for the revision of past stereotypes on creativity and social detachment, as well as the Outsider Art movement. Autistic art offers critical insight into the misconceptions of the psychology surrounding autistic individuals as it presents physical and visible forms of imagery that society can relate to. Approaching autistic art hereafter should not only allow for further understandings of the disability itself, but by analyzing it through the lens of normalcy, promote a much fairer, equitable and sustainable social inclusion for those with autism in the years to come.



## Bibliography

- Asperger, Hans. "'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood." In *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, edited by Uta Frith, 37-87. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Barber-Stetson, Claire. "A Vibrant Autistic Aesthetic and the Limits of Art Brut." *Journal of Literacy & Cultural Disability Studies* 11, no. 2 (2017): 115-125.
- Cardinal, Roger. "Outsider Art and the Autistic Creator." *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 364, no. 1522 (2009): 1459-1462.
- Cardinal, Roger. "Toward an Outsider Aesthetic." In *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, edited by Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf Jr., 23-32. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1994.
- Christie, Drew, and Kalakala Animation. "How Autism Has Shaped Artist Gregory Blackstock's Work." PBS, July 13, 2021. 10.38 min.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y19BccIQBT8>.
- Craig, Jaime, and Simon Baron-Cohen. "Creativity and Imagination in Autism and Asperger Syndrome." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 29, no. 4 (1999): 325.
- Delmas-Glass, Emmanuelle in Barber-Stetson, Claire. "A Vibrant Autistic Aesthetic and the Limits of Art Brut." *Journal of Literacy & Cultural Disability Studies* 11, no. 2 (2017): 120.
- Furniss, Gillian J. "Celebrating the Artmaking of Children with Autism." *Art Education* 61, no. 5 (2008): 9.
- Gillberg, Christopher. "Lorna Wing OBE, MD, FRCPsych Formerly Psychiatrist and Physical, Social Psychiatry Unit, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, Co-Founder of the UK National Autistic Society." *BJPsych Bulletin* 39, no. 1 (2015): 52.
- Kanner, Leo. "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact." *Nervous Child* 2 (1943): 217-250.
- Kanner, Leo. "Frosted Children." *Time*, Springfield, April 26, 1948.
- Kuhn, Roland. "Eugen Bleuler's Concepts of Psychopathology." *History of Psychiatry* 15, no. 3 (2004): 361-366.
- McKenzie, Rebecca. "A Different Way to Think About Creativity: The Case of Autism and Outsider Art." PhD diss., Plymouth Institute of Education, 2011.
- Roth, Ilona. "Autism, Creativity and Aesthetics." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 17, no. 4 (2020): 499-500.
- Sher, David Ariel, and Jenny L. Gibson. "Pioneering, Prodigious and Perspicacious: Grunya Efimovna Sukhareva's Life and Contribution to Conceptualising Autism and Schizophrenia." *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 32 (2023): 477-478.

Stolte, Marije, et al. "Characterizing Creative Thinking and Creative Achievements in Relation to Symptoms of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13 (2022): 1-5.

Thomas, Charles C. "The Child Is Father." *Time*, Springfield, July 25, 1960.

Wing, Lorna. *Autistic Children: A Guide for Parents & Professionals*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 1985.

Wing, Lorna. "Severe Impairments of Social Interaction and Associated Abnormalities in Children: Epidemiology and Classification." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 9, no. 1 (1979): 11-29.

World Health Organization. *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders: Clinical Descriptions and Diagnostic Guidelines*. Switzerland: World Health Organization, 1992.