

De'VIA: An Expression of Deaf Culture through Art

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Deaf culture can be understood through art by Deaf people that follows the standards set by the De'VIA (Deaf View/ Image Art) manifesto. De'VIA was created at four-day workshop immediately before the Deaf Way arts festival at Gallaudet University in May, 1989. ... This workshop [was] led by Betty G. Miller and Paul Johnston” (Deaf Art).

This leads to the question, what is Deaf Culture? In the book Understanding the Language of the Deaf World there are four cultural values. The first value is of Deaf culture is “face to face communication.” Hynes writes, “only when a Deaf person is in the presence of another Deaf person does freedom of expression exist” (Hynes 110). Visiting each other may have been needed to be done before the age of TTY (teletypewriter) or TDD (telecommunications device for the Deaf), videophones, the Internet, or texting. However, these advances in technology have not completely changed this cultural factor” (Hynes 110).

The second value; “directness” refers to “...being straightforward and unambiguous in the messages sent.” This essentially means no beating around the bush. For example; if you’ve gained weight, the new look it is likely to be noticed and mentioned. This is not a bad thing in Deaf culture, any change in appearance would be noted, in fact, “ ...it would be rude not to acknowledge the change (Hynes 111)” because Deaf are more visually attuned, than hearing individuals.

The “...third value... is the free exchange of information or openness”. Hynes goes on to write: “Deaf culture members often freely discuss topics...[that are often]... considered too intimate for public conversation.” For instance, medical information may go right along with daily activities (Hynes 111-112).

The last value mentioned is “pride in being Deaf” (Hynes 112). They are proud to be “sizable minority whose members consider themselves a viable cultural group, leading satisfying, creative and productive lives without the need for sound. (Hynes 112)” Due to the lack of need for sound they have developed “a separate language and cultural identity” (Hynes 112). This pride goes so far as to change the way the word *Deaf* is written. When writing about the deaf as a “linguistic minority, the ‘d’ is always capitalized because they are a people to be celebrated (Hynes 100, Dennis)! Deaf culture has many important differences from the hearing; such as the common touching each other to get the other’s attention. There are many more points to Deaf culture; such as history, folklore and collective experience.

The next question is what is the difference between an artist, a Deaf artist, and De’VIA (Deaf View/ Image Art)? Both artists and Deaf artists can “use art in any form, media, or subject matter. (Deaf Art)” They can both use “traditional fields of visual fine arts such as painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, printmaking as well as alternative media ...such as fiber arts, ceramics, neon, and collage” (Deaf Art). It becomes Deaf art when the artists is Deaf, late-deafened, CODA (Children Of Deaf Adults), or hard of hearing (Gray). The art must be visual in nature. In addition, there are “formal elements” to the art that can be looked for; “such as Deaf artists’ possible tendency to use contrasting colors and values, intense colors, and contrasting textures. It may also most often include a centralized focus, with exaggeration or emphasis on facial features, especially eyes, mouths, ears, and hands” (Deaf Art). De’VIA builds on both the two earlier definitions with the addition of the “Deaf artist’s and perceptions based on their Deaf experiences (Deaf Art).” The visual art is made “with the intention of expressing innate cultural or physical Deaf experience. These experiences may include Deaf metaphors, Deaf perspectives,

and Deaf insight in relationship with the environment (both the natural world and Deaf cultural environment), spiritual and everyday life” (Deaf Art).

Let’s explore the complex social issues being expressed in the De’VIA art. Deafness, ASL (American Sign Language), silence, communication, education, assistive devices, oralism and audism can all play a role in the art itself. Deafness is defined as “partially or wholly lacking or deprived of the sense of hearing: unable to hear” (Dictionary).

“American Sign Language was proven to be a language based on linguistic principles by William Stokoe in 1960 (Hynes 60). ASL has “grammar to regulate its flow” (Hynes 60). Communication amongst the Deaf is always visual in nature. Education of the Deaf can be shown in two ways, mainstreaming and residential. Mainstreaming refers to sending the Deaf child to the local hearing school with an interpreter, if possible. This often leads to isolation because they communicate differently, or have an adult trailing them everywhere; they also miss out on common hallway conversations (no interpreter no matter how good can sign for a room full of people talking all at once). In some cases there may be no interpreter available (Gray). The other common way to educate Deaf children is residential schools. This is where the Deaf child attends a school that “...has a comprehensive academic, health, and socialization program including dormitory living equipped for students who are Deaf. ...All staff and personnel are expected to communicate with students fluently in all areas (Hynes).

Audism is an important topic in Deaf culture. In Tom Humphries 1975 unpublished dissertation, The Making of a Word: Audism, it is defined as a notion, that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behaves in the manner of one who hears (Humphries). Although this word and definition are widely accepted in Deaf culture for over thirty years it is still unrecognized in a common dictionary. In addition audism extends beyond the conflict between

hearing and Deaf communities; it can happen between Deaf people in the form of Deaf on Deaf Audism (Gray). It can commonly be seen in cases of job discrimination. Even though Deaf people might have a valid degree they can still be rejected for their inability to behave as a hearing person; for simple things like answering a phone (Audism Unveiled). In addition audism also plays a role in the breakdown of family life. Did you know “...ninety percent of Deaf children are born to hearing parents” (Hynes 100)? Did you know that sixty nine percent of Deaf children come from homes where members do not use sign language regularly (Audism Unveiled)? It is often difficult for the hearing parents to properly take on the role as a parent of a Deaf child. Consequently they develop a communication barrier. In some cases there is an unwillingness to elaborate or interpret dinner table discussions or to explain what is going on in a two and half hour movie (Audism Unveiled). Audism is also responsible for many ‘cures’ of deafness. There have been surgeries on healthy Deaf people. They would be held down while the doctor pierced through the nasal cavity to the Eustachian tube then they would pump in painful burning chemicals. Sometimes the surgery would sever the nerves in the face causing paralysis (Benjamin Bahan). Other times it has gone to the extent of eugenics. In some cases the hearing family of the Deaf person would even decide to have their adult Deaf family member sterilized rather than have more deaf people born in the world (Benjamin Bahan). Audism is very ugly and many horrific things are done in that mind set.

Oralism became blatant in 1880 in Milan, Italy during the second International Congress on Education of the Deaf. When a group of educators of the Deaf, of which there were 164 hearing attendants and two Deaf; which represented 51 schools with a total enrollment of over 6,000 students, got together for the sole purpose of eradicating the natural language of the Deaf, by removing it from the educational environment. These participants voted overwhelmingly to

outlaw the use of sign language as a method for educating deaf children confirming “oral education was superior to manual education” (Gannon). Sadly only six attendees opposed this decision in favor of using sign in conjunction with speech based on the student’s need. Those who objected were American and British; the American ones were, Edward Miner Gallaudet, Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, Isaac Peet, Charles Stoadard, James Denison (who was Deaf). The congress was successful in its quest to ban the use of sign in educational settings (Gannon 63-65, Wikipedia).

Oralism is shown today when hearing people view the hearing lifestyle as the best and only way to communicate. Hearing parents will go to great lengths to save their child from the handicap or disability known as Deafness. They might spend great amounts of money on hearing aids or cochlear implants which are surgically implanted in the head. Then they may continue with speech therapists or perhaps computer aided speech. They may even go so far as to forbid use of sign language and insist on lip reading only in the educational environment. Oralism is a heavy burden to place on an innocent Deaf child.

### The Art

Abellardo Parra Jimenez from Columbia created “Deaf Way II World” featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book, it is a thirty two inch by twenty four inch wood carving. In Jimenez’s artist statement he said, “My art is inspired mainly by religious reflection, but also from the study of past and present history” (31). In his statement he explained how his technique developed. His father who was a professional carpenter greatly influenced him as well as Rafael Garcia Herreros, a priest who founded the church in his home town “El Minute De Dios (The Minute of God)” (31).

You can clearly see the signs for: I love you, at the top; Washington at the top right corner and University at the top left corner. The signs on the bottom of the carving from right to left are Deaf, way, and two. The central focus is that of the earth being upheld by two strong sturdy hands which may symbolize the Deaf culture. You'll also notice "the three curved tips... [above the globe and the track running the span of the sphere that echo Zhou Fang's winning graphic design.] In Mike Kaika's interview with Zhou Fang, he says the three tips symbolize the signs for the letters and words "D", "W" and "2". [In his graphic design the tips were colored;] ...the colors chosen are the ones found on a majority of national flags of the world" (Kaika). Why is there a track circling the Earth? Perhaps the track represents global gathering of the Deaf.

The next artist, Mary Weinberger from the United Kingdom was featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book for her piece titled "The Silence" which is a twelve inch by sixteen inch color photo collage. In her artist statement she says, "Most people take their hearing for granted. However hearing loss affects one in seven people in the United Kingdom. The images that make up the series "Hearing Aids" are reflections of a journey that ends in silence" (69). There is a stark relationship between the egg (*which often represents life as in the case of Easter*) and the trapped child. In a discussion with my American Sign Language Professor Larry Gray, who has always been Deaf, remarked that this image clearly shows from the very start the egg through to childhood the child is jailed in silence.

Mitko Androv, from the United Kingdom, took a black and white photograph entitled "Deaf Woman". It is twelve inches by eighteen inches and was published in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. In his artist's statement he reports, "My

favorite subjects are nature, culture and the relationships between deaf people and society. Through art I want to show how Deaf people express themselves in theatre, film or dance” (8) You’ll notice the eyes, face, and fingers are the most prominent parts in the photograph. This may be due to the way Deaf people communicate. The eye, face, and fingers all play a role in the meaning of a sign.

The artist Chuck Baird from United States of America created a piece, titled “Blooming Outward” The piece is a twenty four inch by thirty six inch oil on canvas painting. It was featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. In his artist’s statement he says, “I am no longer interested in whether I am a deaf artist or an artist who happens to be Deaf. I have accepted being either cultured Deaf or hard of hearing; that’s fine with me. But what makes me an artist that really matters. The process is the power of creativity and all the gifts inside and from the surrounding environment; it is so much more fun that way. The brush becomes so free, and speaks or moves for itself” (12). What you see here is the beauty of the poetic sign for blossom against the beauty of the actual flower.

Iris Aranda, another United States of American artist here was featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. The piece is titled “ABC”. It is a thirty seven by thirteen oil painting. She says, “Art is passion and life to me. I am a professional artist, working oils, acrylics, watercolors, pastels, ink, wood and metal sculpture, and ceramics. All my figures, whether plants, animals, fruits or human forms, or sign language, reverberate in the depths of my starry surreal skies”, in her artist’s statement (9).

You can see in the background of this piece there are many red faces several of which are merged side views which together make a new whole face. Also we see two left ears. What could this mean? In my interviews with Larry he thought the hearing are represented by the faces that kiss and the eye to eye faces represent the Deaf indicating the mode in which each communicates. You may also notice small lines ending in light blue dots going from the ear to the mouth; this is the movement of the sign Deaf.

The next layer is a fence of hands each hand showing a letter of the alphabet. Could this represent a communication barrier with hearing or could it be the beginnings of instruction on how to be able to communicate? Again you can see thin lines over the hand signing 'J' and the hand signing 'Z' to show the movement involved with making these signs.

The American artist, Jeff B. Carroll's piece was featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. The piece is titled "Deaf Me". This piece is fourteen inches by twelve inches by four inches deep. It is plaster in a walnut frame. The sign you see is for Deaf. In his artist statement he says, "My focus is representational sculpture for both public and private settings; I work in plaster cast with wood supports. My main concern is creating aesthetically pleasing works rather than following an 'ism.' I let the piece develop its own voice and remain true to art making the expressive human hand evident in all my work. I draw inspiration from Deaf Culture and its people" (17).

In an interview with Professor Larry Gray when we discussed this piece he confirmed it is likely a "daily announcements of identity or an example of communication method" (Gray). Perhaps the walnut frame represents how audism keeps the deaf population separate that

everyone ignores the signer, considering it inconvenient to communicate with? Or perhaps the hearing society at large puts the deaf community away like an object in a room.

Ann Silver, also from the USA, was featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. Her piece is titled “Deaf Pride”. This piece is sixteen inches by twenty inches. In her artist statement she says, “No matter how you look at it – protest art, political satire, visting or graphic wit – I do not shy away from ethical questions or controversy. Having fused scholarship, creativity and sociopolitical philosophy, I truly believe that my being Deaf-with-a-capital –D give me a greater visual acuity which in turn affects my work, artistic and otherwise. Deaf Art is my soul, my heart, my conscience” (61).

This piece relates to some of Andy Warhal’s work. He used everyday items to make a statement. Its commercial aspects make the advertisement more telling of what she is trying to express. Much like an advertisement, this mixed media piece indicates if you’re not using American Sign Language you’re not really signing. It also encourages its audience to believe in Deaf history and to be proud of it. It says don’t give into societal demands of changing communications.

The piece I’m showing you here was featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. The piece is “Untitled” and photographed by Orkis Sassouni. This photograph is sixteen inches by twenty inches. She explains her process in her artist’s statement, “At deaf events I wanted to capture the moment when signers express their energy, spirit and soul in front of the camera. This task became challenging in the evening hours because I didn’t want to use flashbulbs-others might think I’m working for the newspapers. I wanted to show the natural way deaf people communicate with each other” (57).

Notice these hedges narrow in the stairway that leads to the light. The sand filled stairs are covered in foot prints that indicate there have been many conversations that lasted long enough for the shifting of feet or perhaps the treading of numerous individuals all following the same path. Have you ever noticed how uncomfortable it is to walk on sand, even more so when one attempts to run? In my interview with Larry he also mentioned those footprint covered stairs could also illustrate the speed bumps in the daily life of a Deaf person (Gray).

The photographed sculpture I'm showing you here was featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. The piece is named "Project One" and created by Christopher Sacre and environmental artist originally from the United Kingdom. This photograph is twenty four inches by thirty four inches.

In his artist statement he says, "My sculptures give me freedom and great pleasure, exploring the landscapes with silence and self belief. In the past few years I have become fond of outdoor sculpture. Nature has given me inspiration to develop my ideas. Deaf people need to communicate. Our visual means of communicating requires breathing space. It almost seems that nature too needs this kind of space and nurturing. We need to protect Deaf culture and the environment from society's often destructive progress" (56)

This photo of the landscape with disturbing protective spokes erupting forth from the vast tranquil green earth could be mother earth trying to communicate just as deaf people are trying to communicate. Both are using visual means. The spokes could also represent a barrier for both the Deaf culture and nature, by stopping the approach of society and giving the required protection and nurturing, they both need (Gray).

The acrylic painting on wood I'm showing you here was featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. The piece is named "Three Stages of My Life" and created by Ixchel Solis Garcia an artist from Mexico. The piece measures forty eight inches by forty one inches.

In her artist's statement she says, "During the past months I have been working on a series of paintings and drawings which people are not used seeing very often. In these art works I have concentrated on describing my own experience as a deaf woman and also my love for Mexican Sign Language" (24).

You'll notice the youngest child to the far right has an assistive device by the head. The child's face looks angered in shock and unsettled. The middle girl's face seems sad and angered perhaps even ashamed. Her hands have been bound in silence and her mouth sewn shut, again a hearing aid though less obvious. Her forced means of communication with the hearing are by a piece of chalk and a board thereby halting her ability to express herself. The board is reminiscent of the story "The Scarlet Letter", and also the lepers in the Bible who had to ring a bell announcing their ailment, or misdeed. The adult Female lacks a face and only half the body is shown however, the hand is in motion. Does this mean she has left the oralist forms of communication and is in the process of choosing sign only? At the bottom left corner an adult hand is reaching up from the floor. Could this be Mexican sign we're seeing (Gray)?

This ceramic sculpture was created by Mary Thornley from the USA. The piece measures eight inches by five inches. She was featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. In her artist's statement she discusses her recent muse, "I think Deaf people have many motifs for their lives. I look for motifs and develop them. Most recently I

have worked in ceramic sculpture making ear molds. I borrow ear molds Deaf people use and copy these forms in a larger size. Or I prepare an ear mold that is an interpretation” (65).

This ceramic sculpture is an enlarged ear mold. The sculpture is painted in crosshatched alizarin crimson, a red. Mary goes on to say; “an ear mold is an inverted ear. An ear mold is about the internal. Ear molds represent deafness—although there is no reason why it should, other than that only deaf people seem to have them. (Thornley, Interpretation of Deaf art). She went on to notice that all the ear molds she had collected were different.

The black and white screen printed flag by USA’s Jeanette Patrice measures sixty six inches by fifty four inches. She was featured in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. In her artist’s statement she explains “is about [her] experience in 1994. I was one of three women falsely arrested for domestic abuse because local police didn’t obtain interpreters for us as required by state law.”

All four corners of this screen printed quilt have a flag like image. The silhouettes at the top have a pleading almost prayerful pose which shows the desperation the artist may have felt at the time of the incarceration. Along the left side is the title to a newspaper article concerning the arrest with jail bars running through them, which pulled her good reputation into question. Along the right edge you see several signs for interpreter also with jail bars running through them, showing her repeated request for help to communicate with law enforcement officers which was required by state law. Last but not least the cinder blocks of her cell wall are most prominent showing the inability to properly communicate with the hearings that were in power at this junction (Gray).

This graphite, metals and collage was created by MJ Seltzer. The piece measures forty inches by fifty two inches and is two and half inches deep (58). She explains her goals in her artist statement, “Language can bring people together or keep them apart – a barrier or a bridge. Through the inclusion of American Sign Language in my work, I try to voice a bridge between gestural and written language symbolism. Sign is used in these portraits of women to express their emotional makeup, their history, their desires. The work is sanded, painted or drawn in graphite, iron oxide or other materials, and collage is incorporated as well” (58)

In this mixed medium piece you can see a hearing aid on the most prominent female, but you’ll also see that all the females are in the process of being erased. The sign for stop may be saying I am more than my hearing aid look at me head on, directly (Gray)!

The acrylic, collage and neon piece “Hearing Aids are Not Like Glasses” is a collaborative effort between Judith Treesburg and Betty Miller, both from the USA. It can be found in the Deaf Way II International Festival of the Arts, 2002 Guide Book. The work measures thirty five inches by forty five inches (67).

In Treesburg’s artist statement she expresses “as coordinator, project director and art worker, I consider it my honor and obligation to integrate technical expertise with the energy and force of personal experience. ... I strive to provide viewers with many ways to enter the space of the artwork. I hope they walk away wondering about their own lives” (66)

Miller’s straight forward artist statement tells how “much of [her] work depicts the Deaf experience expressed in the most appropriate form of communication: visual art. I present both the suppression, and the beauty of Deaf culture and American Sign language as I see it: past and

in the present. I hope this work, and the understanding that may arise from this visual expression, will bridge the gap between the Deaf world and the Hearing world” (66)

The outlined assistive device is being shown off a bit with its neon adornment. Could the neon going into the piece shows the hearing aid is implanted cyborg like or unnatural. Perhaps it is not something that needs to be hidden? In the background you see a hearing test with clouds of red and orange colors and gold stars. Perhaps she’s been given approval and praise for the ranges she can hear in based on the gold stars? The photos of Betty, (one of the artists) are pieced together in a marionette like way. Perhaps she felt forced to smile and approve of the hearing aid or hearing test (Gray).

Betty Miller also created “Ameslan Prohibited” in 1972. I found the copy in Deaf History a Narrative History of Deaf America by Jack Gannon. Ameslan is a former word for American Sign Language. This image clearly depicts the torture the Deaf people’s feeling when not allowed to use signs. In addition it portrays the spirit of the Deaf when oralist education oppressed sign (Gannon 130-131). In the documentary Audism Unveiled there were many stories of when a child was caught signing in an oralist school the teacher would grab their hand and start beating it, with a ruler, for punishment (Audism Unveiled). In addition Betty Miller produced “Education for the Deaf” in 1971 also found in Deaf History a Narrative History of Deaf America by Jack Gannon. This piece speaks for itself. The child clearly asks why they are being forced to learn become something they aren’t and will never be. They will never fulfill the standards for hearing acceptance and in the process of trying are rejected (Gray).

Robert Walker says in his artist's statement, "I have long been fascinated by the myriad of our society, its differing levels and cultures and as an never ending source for my work.

During my childhood, art was the earliest mode of communication with my hearing family prior to having a 'real' language to use. I continued in this endeavor all through my life, taking art courses in high school and at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, the Arkansas Arts Center and many private instructions and workshops."

"In my work, I tend to focus on the expressions and backgrounds of the subjects I choose to do. Among some of the challenges I have encountered was found in the concept of De'Via during my days at Gallaudet University. Prior to this exposure, I'd had no conception of 'deaf art' and this opened up a whole new venture for me to explore. In this, I do a great deal of focusing on deaf children, either of the past or today. I feel that in this direction, we can explore our beginnings a little more deeply and bring out the child within all of us" (Walker, Life as a De'VIA artist). He also feels "composition is one of the most important elements ... in paintings"

"Deaficide of the Innocent #3" is painted in water color/ gouache on 300 lb hot press D'Arches paper (watercolor paper) in 2004. The painting measures twenty-two inches by thirty inches. This scan was sent directly to me from the artist himself. He wrote, "this is based on deaf children of the 1960's. I wanted to imply the relative innocence of those times - and of the children. In some ways, deaf children are more 'sheltered' than the rest of the population and I wanted to imply that. The innocence is torn away when hearing parents or other outside factors try to implement their beliefs and norms onto us, speech in place of sign language and so forth. The reason for the way the cords traveled around their bodies and their necks is to represent strangling of our hands and throat - the two conflicting factors that symbolizes our ASL and speech. In another way of looking at this can be said to prevent the hands from using signs. Yet

another way to interpret this is to see the children being choked from expressing themselves in a natural manner” (Walker, Life as a De'VIA artist).

Robert Walker also painted “Unity” done in acrylics on canvas in 2006. He wrote this interpretation of his work “The Unity’: ... should be fairly obvious. The colors of the skins and the ethnic backgrounds hold very little ground in the interest of a common goal; and that was towards seeing the ousting of Dr. Jane Fernandes as the president of Gallaudet University. It was felt at large that she lacked empathy with the Deaf community and with Gallaudet's student and faculty bodies; this is the reason for the identical facial expressions on the two girls” (Walker, Life as a De'VIA artist). Both girls together are signing the word oppression. You can also see in the upper left corner the tower clock of Gallaudet’s campus. Behind the ladies is a large banner that the artist says is “... most likely; Resign, Fernandes! or something of that nature relating to the protest” (Walker, Life as a De'VIA artist). The motto of the protest was “Unity for Gallaudet” (Gray)

Aspects of Deaf Culture can be seen throughout all the eighteen pieces we’ve seen. The visual communication ranged from commonalities amongst the Deaf, Deaf pride and the beauty of ASL, to historical facts of hearing oppression and of the natural need to express emotions and thoughts through the Deaf’s native language. De’VIA is a very powerful way of sharing how the Deaf have to deal with everyday life. It gives the viewing audience a taste of how it is to be scrutinized and judged as something that needs to be fixed. Whether you understand and agree with the perceptions of prejudices (Oralism and Audism) or not, these are part of the paradigm of the Deaf community. We need to take action to overcome these obstacles in order to bridge the gaps between our communities. The question is will you walk away wondering about your own

life? Do you feel the gaps between the Deaf and hearing worlds have been bridged? Well I can tell you my perspective has altered. Initially I felt a strong sense of denial; however, the fact is this is reality. The Deaf's perceptions are their reality regardless of how I feel. Their reality is fraught with struggles but also beauty I've seen nowhere else.

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