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INTIMACY OF EXPERIENCE OF BEING AN INNOVATIVE DEAF ARTIST – THE CASE OF AMERICAN DEAF ART¹

Abstract: The uniqueness of Deaf culture results partly from the nature of deafness itself, from the visual perception of the world by deaf people, and partly from group life of deaf people. It is also related to ubiquitous hidden discrimination of deaf and hard of hearing people in societies, not only in Poland.

The article aims to show the history of a specific and innovative "trend" in art, i.e., deaf art, and Deaf artists born in the United States in the 1970s, which speaks loudly about Deaf culture itself and is a manifesto of the identity and pride of being a Deaf artist. The works of American deaf artists discussed in this article (including Chuck Baird, Nancy Rourke, Christine Sun Kim, Ann Silver, Dr. Betty Miller, Susan Dupor, Patti Durr, Arnauld Balard and David Call) go beyond the categories of fine arts. They seem to belong to the category of interdisciplinary matters with a strong social aspect.

At the same time, deaf art is a form of rebellion against the existing situation, raising the importance of the experience and intimacy of being a Deaf person, and the importance of not depreciating the word "deaf". Saying "I'm deaf" is an expression of taking pride in one's own identity. This type of process of reversing the meaning of a given term in the environment of people with disabilities may refer to the crip theory and involves reversing the meaning of an offensive, discriminatory term towards an affirmative and meaningful identification. This process is associated with the need to reject or transform normative, usually ableist, categories used to recognize and "order" reality and identity.

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Through de-coincidence, deaf artists cross the boundaries of previous ways of expression, discovering new forms that were previously unavailable. Deaf art therefore becomes a constant process of discovering and creating new possibilities.

It is worth mentioning, that the artworks of Polish deaf artists in the spirit of American deaf art and paintings of Nancy Rourke were shown at the pioneering *Glusza/Deafland* exhibition at the Silesian Museum, telling the story of the language and culture of the deaf community in Poland. The author was the curator of the above-mentioned exhibition.

Keywords: deaf art, Deaf culture, sign language, being Deaf, Deaf experience, Deaf artist

1. Introduction to the issue of the deaf community

The uniqueness of Deaf culture results partly from the nature of deafness itself, from the visual perception of the world by deaf people, and partly from group life of deaf people. It is also related to the ubiquitous hidden discrimination of deaf and hard of hearing people in societies, not only in Poland².

The community of deaf and hard of hearing people around the world constantly struggles with barriers and lack of understanding. It means a lack of knowledge and awareness about this specific social group or a lack of respect and empathy for deaf and hard of hearing people as full members of society.

The problems listed above are accompanied by very clear labeling and flaunting the word disability. Using terms such as invalid or disabled towards the Deaf is a label given from the perspective of the hearing society. It does not take into account the identity of those people who do not feel that hearing people should be the category constituting a point of reference for them in the process of establishing this identity. Labeling is a form of linguistic violence³.

These problems can very often be perceived by deaf people as manifestations of audism, or a belief in someone's superiority, based on their hearing ability or behavior characteristics of a hearing person. Audism manifests itself in the form of constant evaluation of the intelligence of deaf people and their

² More: M. Czajkowska-Kisil, *Glusi, ich język i kultura*, in: *Lingwistyka przestrzeni i ruchu. Komunikacja migowa a metody korpusowe*, ed. P. Rutkowski, S. Łozińska, Faculty of Polish Studies, University of Warsaw Warszawa 2014, pp. 17-35; D. Podgórska-Jachnik D., *Glusi wśród słyszących – glusi wśród głuchych. Problemy integracji społecznej osób z uszkodzonym słuchem w aspekcie tożsamościowym*, in: *Tożsamość społeczno-kulturowa głuchych*, ed. E. Twardowska, Polish Association of the Deaf Lodz Department, Łódź 2007, pp. 219-223; D. Podgórska-Jachnik, *Glusi. Emancypacje*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej w Łodzi, Łódź 2013.

³ More: M. Zajkowska M., *Przejawy audyzmu wobec osób głuchych. Krytyczna analiza dyskursu*, MA thesis Faculty of Polish Studies, University of Warsaw, Warszawa 2013, p. 56, available: <https://open.icm.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/0905858b-81b0-4205-ac67-138289fc0201/content>; M. Zajkowska, *Swoi, gdy polscy. Inni, gdy glusi. Praktyki kolonizacyjne wobec głuchych w Polsce*, "Przegląd Humanistyczny" 2014, vol. 5(446), pp. 97-105.

successes based on their ability to use the language of the hearing culture. An audist knows the world of the deaf better or worse and, despite it, treats the deaf in an unfair way. It is manifested when someone assumes that the happiness of deaf people depends on acquiring proficiency in using the language of the hearing culture. However, we can speak of unconscious audism, a lack of empathy towards deaf clients or customers⁴.

In the context of the diversity of the deaf and hard of hearing community, it is worth mentioning the importance of borderline identity, which refers to people living and being between two (or more) cultures. Borderline identity is simultaneously being between two, three worlds, being on their border.

Being between worlds requires creating one's own customs, rules based on multiculturalism. The value system is a kind of fusion of values from all the surrounding worlds. There is an overlap of cultures, which causes a dual identity system.

It may be territorial or cultural proximity, similarity of life experiences, language, or community of beliefs and behaviors, which become a very important element of the survival of a social group against the pressure of the dominant and minority culture. Being in between is also a positive phenomenon, because it allows for a variety of perspectives on the same event. Borderline identity seems to be more of an individual identity with an element of social bond, an attempt to develop one's own space and rules taken from the surrounding worlds, but in which one is not able to fully reside⁵.

Being "in between" is not easy for a deaf or hard of hearing person.

On the one hand, there is the world of the hearing, in which one has to cope with life situations, because it surrounds them every day, and on the other hand, the somewhat hermetic, closed world of the Deaf community. People who are between the two worlds are usually perfectly rehabilitated from childhood in speech and writing, and they are braced or implanted in most cases. The cause of hearing loss is most often due to a childhood illness, mechanical damage, or other unexplained circumstances, less often a genetic defect. The deaf go to mainstream schools and universities, and usually move around among hearing peers. Frequent visits to a speech therapist and the work of their parents allow them to achieve excellent effects in speech and writing rehabilitation. They often establish contact with the world of the deaf in their youth. A person living in between usually cannot find their place in either of these worlds.

⁴ P. Tomaszewski, R. Wieczorek, P. Krzysztofiak, J. Kowalska, *Percepcja audyzmu w polskiej społeczności głuchych*, "SOCIETAS/COMMUNITAS" 2018, vol. 2-2 (26-2), pp. 109-139.

⁵ A. Sadowski, *Tożsamość pogranicza jako kategoria socjologii pogranicza*, "Roczniki Nauk Społecznych" 2019, vol. 11 (47), no. 4, pp. 73-91.

The world of the hearing requires adaptation to its living conditions, i.e., free verbal communication both in conversation and on the phone, good knowledge of the Polish language, interpersonal contacts, use of all technical aids facilitating communication (hearing aids, implants, an FM system, etc.).

It is difficult to find your way in the world of the hearing. It is not always possible to understand everything that people say. Any discussion in a group of more than 3-4 people is limited due to the difficulty of capturing the reading of all the speakers at the same time. It is not always possible to make a phone call for a regular official matter. It is often difficult to explain to a hearing person what it is like to have hearing loss. Often, due to misunderstandings and lack of understanding, problems arise in relationships between hearing and deaf people. Communication walls are then created and, as a result, there is a lack of acceptance for the partner's dysfunction. Very often, there is a feeling of embarrassment and shame in situations when you have to ask for sentences or incomprehensible words to be repeated. Often, in contact with hearing people, a sense of low self-worth appears, just because you cannot hear certain things. You are often forced to prove to your hearing environment that you are worth something, that your hearing dysfunction does not prevent you from achieving your goals and dreams, and is, in fact, a strong enough motivation to fulfill them.

The world of the Deaf, in turn, requires adapting to its unwritten norms and rules of conduct, i.e., knowledge of sign language (this aspect is decisive in the acceptance of a hard of hearing or hearing impaired person by the deaf community), the mentality of this community and its culture, unconditional acceptance and tolerance of people who use sign language, equal treatment without showing a sense of superiority due to better speech or knowledge of sign language.

All the above-mentioned problems, i.e., auditorism, borderline identity, being "in between", barriers and lack of understanding encountered in society – i.e., the world of hearing people, at some point led to rebellion against the system of existing norms.

2. Rebellion against the system of existing norms – the beginnings of the deaf art movement in the United States

The system of social norms taken as a whole, alongside other non-normative factors (technical infrastructure), co-determines the social order that regulates the lives of society members. Any deviations from the norm or a strong discrepancy between norms and the possibilities of members' actions are called *anomie*, according to Richard Merton's concept. An individual who finds themselves in such an anomic crisis society must take actions to adapt to the situation. They can accept the goal that is in force in a given structure (+),

reject it (-) or change it to another (+,-). The same happens with institutionalized means of achieving goals. According to Merton's concept, the following behaviors may be undertaken: a) innovative – when goals are accepted and institutional means rejected; b) ritualistic – when goals are rejected but people remain faithful to means (rituals); c) withdrawing – when goals and means are rejected; and d) rebellion – when goals and means are rejected, and new ones are proposed in their place. Among the adaptation types mentioned above, only rebellion is considered by the author to be of a group, organized character. Sometimes the only way out of an oppressive situation is to rebel.

A rebellion against existing norms, audism and the dominance of hearing culture led to the emergence of a little-known art movement in the United States – deaf art – which had its roots in the 1970s, inspired by the first exhibitions of the deaf artist and art theorist Dr. Betty Miller, daughter of the famous deaf illustrator Ralph Miller. The inspiration for the emergence of this movement was also the recognition of American Sign Language (ASL) as a language, as a result of William Stokoe's activities within the civil rights movement in the 1960s. This resulted in an interest in sign language, sign language courses and the creation of textbooks for them. The forerunner of drawn textbooks for learning sign language was Ralph R. Miller (1905-1984), father of Dr. Betty Miller. Miller's illustrative works became a contribution to the creation of cartoons drawn in ASL⁶.

His daughter, Dr. Betty G. Miller (1934-2012), became the first artist in the United States to openly express in her paintings the awareness and problems of being deaf in American society. Betty G. Miller was a well-known professional deaf artist who taught art at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., for 18 years. She left Gallaudet in 1977 to co-found Spectrum, Focus on Deaf Artists.

Dr. Miller has exhibited extensively throughout the United States: in Washington, D.C., Maryland, Texas, California and Massachusetts. She was best known for her visual representations of her deaf experiences, some of which were published in Jack Gannon's *Deaf Heritage* (1980). Her first solo art exhibition of deaf life, *The Silent World*, was held at Gallaudet College in 1972, where she was a professor of art. This exhibition unofficially began the Deaf art movement. She continued to exhibit solo and during group exhibitions throughout the 1980s and 1990s. "Many of my artworks represent the Deaf experience expressed in the most appropriate form of communication: visual art. I represent the suppression and beauty of Deaf culture and American sign language as I see it, both past and present. The oppression of Deaf people is in

⁶ D. Sonnenstrahl, *Deaf Artists in America: Colonial to Contemporary*, Dawn Sign Press, San Diego, CA 2002.

fact cultural, educational and political. Another aspect of my work represents the beauty of Deaf culture. I hope that this work and the understanding that can come from this visual expression will help bridge the gap between the Deaf world and the hearing world”⁷— so Betty G. Miller claimed.

Earlier manifestations of deaf art did not differ much from the works of hearing people, probably due to the lack of awareness of being deaf and the different social situation of deaf people in the world. Betty Miller also became a precursor of the famous deaf art movement.

The most important day in the history of deaf art was May 25, 1989, when, during a four-day workshop at the Deaf Art Festival at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., USA, Betty Miller and Paul Johnston (the workshop leaders) formulated the Deaf View/Image Art (De'VIA) manifesto, which was later presented more widely during The Deaf Way conference (July 9-14, 1989) at the aforementioned Gallaudet University.

“De'VIA represents Deaf artists and perceptions based on their Deaf experiences. It uses formal art elements 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”⁸.

⁷ <https://deaf-art.org/profiles/betty-g-miller/> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

⁸ De'VIA manifesto content:

De'VIA can be identified by formal elements such as Deaf artists' possible tendency to use contrasting colors and values, intense colors, contrasting textures. It may also most often include a centralized focus, with exaggeration or emphasis on facial features, especially eyes, mouths, ears, and hands. Currently, Deaf artists tend to work in human scale with these exaggerations, and not exaggerate the space around these elements.

There is a difference between Deaf artists and De'VIA. Deaf artists are those who use art in any form, media, or subject matter, and who are held to the same artistic standards as other artists. De'VIA is created when the artist intends to express their Deaf experience through visual art. De'VIA may also be created by deafened or hearing artists, if the intention is to create work that is born of their Deaf experience (a possible example would be a hearing child of Deaf parents). It is clearly possible for Deaf artists not to work in the area of De'VIA.

While applied and decorative arts may also use the qualities of De'VIA (high contrast, centralized focus, exaggeration of specific features), this manifesto is specifically written to cover the traditional fields of visual fine arts (painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, printmaking) as well as alternative media when used as fine arts such as fiber arts, ceramics, neon, and collage.

Created in May, 1989, at The Deaf Way.

The signatories were: Dr. Betty G. Miller, painter; Dr. Paul Johnston, sculptor; Dr. Deborah M. Sonnenstrahl, art historian; Chuck Baird, painter; Guy Wonder, sculptor; Alex Wilhite, painter; Sandi Inches Vasnick, fiber artist; Nancy Creighton, fiber artist; and Lai-Yok Ho, video artist.

<https://deviaccr.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/devia-manifesto-full-size-72-dpi.jpg> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

The famous painting by Susan Dupor, *The Family Dog* (acrylic on canvas, 1991), became a symbol⁹ depicting a very common situation of a deaf person in a hearing family, where the deaf person is treated like a *family dog* who does not understand anything, but nods and wags its tail. The phrase family dog has become the main metaphor for the ubiquitous audism and cultural and social discrimination of the deaf. Susan herself is an American deaf artist, a graduate of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). She then moved to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she received a bachelor's degree in fine arts. She worked in an animation studio and received a master's degree in deaf education and art education from the University of Rochester. She currently teaches art at the Wisconsin School for the Deaf.

"As a Deaf artist, I am constantly exploring my identity as a Deaf woman. I have been painting this subject for ten years and my perspective has changed over the years. There were times when I expressed my emotions and others when I wanted to celebrate the uniqueness of Deaf culture and explore the irony of being Deaf in a hearing world," is Susan Dupor's creative motto¹⁰.

And further: "Growing up in the 1970s without captions, I spent many hours guessing the plots and dialogues on television. I would focus on drawing, going through page after page, inventing my own plots. I still enjoy telling stories through art. My paintings can keep viewers guessing the plot"¹¹.

In 2016, the manifesto and activities of deaf artists at the De'Via Reunion Conference were revised in response to rapidly changing critical and artistic perspectives and changes in artistic expression. Deaf art begins to encompass areas such as: art education, art criticism, historical documentation, studio practice and art residencies, museum and gallery exhibition¹².

⁹ <http://kpgd.miedzyuszami.pl/m/94-Deaf-Art-sztuka-osob-nieslyszacych> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

¹⁰ <https://deaf-art.org/profiles/susan-dupor/> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://deafculturecentre.ca/deaf-arts-series/deaf-arts-handbook-vol-one.pdf> (accessed: 26/06/2025), content of the manifesto:

De'VIA Statement of Philosophy (2016)

The De'VIA Elders present at the De'VIA Reunion Conference 2016 realize that since the creation of the term De'VIA (Deaf View Image Art) in 1989, the term De'VIA has come to mean the artistic expression of the Deaf Experience.

The original goal of De'VIA was to understand more about what makes visual fine art by Deaf people based on the Deaf Experience different from visual fine art made by Deaf people not motivated by this experience and to provide a framework for this understanding in the field of visual fine art.

Now we accept and embrace that the philosophy of De'VIA can apply to other artistic disciplines.

We encourage other artistic disciplines to develop criteria for understanding what makes work De'VIA (work based on the Deaf Experience) versus artistic work made by Deaf people.

After many years of American deaf artists' activities, now it is necessary to mention the most important difference between the meaning of deaf art and De'VIA. During a seminar held as part of the "Boundless" project by the Faculty of Arts and Educational Science at the University of Silesia in Cieszyn (03.06.2025), a recording of Nancy Rourke's lecture "De'VIA and Rourkeism" was presented. Rourke mentions the most important fact: De'VIA shows and tells us the story of the Deaf community: audism, problems, discrimination, danger of sign language extinction or Deaf culture disappearing. Its artworks are strongly connected with Deaf culture, *deafhood*¹³ and sign language oppression. De'VIA was the main causative factor in deaf art development. Rourke says that deaf art is understood in a wider sense as art made by deaf people, deaf artists¹⁴. The subject and image do not

We recognize that the Deaf Experience is unique and the purpose of De'VIA includes but is not limited to:

- artistic expression
- communication
- narrative expression
- social & political commentary
- persuasive expression
- ceremonial purposes
- intellectualism
- functional and access design

We encourage ongoing development in these areas:

- art education
- art criticism & theory
- historical documentation
- studio practice & art residencies
- art marketing & engagement
- cultivation of collections and collectors
- museum & gallery exhibition

Signed by the De'VIA Elders present: Paul Johnston, Guy Wonder III, Alex Wilhite, Sandi Inches, Nancy Creighton, Ann Silver, Tony McGregor.

The attendees at the De'VIA Reunion 2016 conference acknowledge and appreciate the De'VIA elders for their work with our hearts, eyes and raised waving hands. We cherish and will honor the fact that the foundation of the De'VIA philosophy came from an understanding of its application to traditional visual art.

Signed by those in attendance: Jim Van Manen, et al.

¹³ The meaning of deafhood was created by Paddy Ladd and is the metaphor of deaf experience and emerging in the Deaf culture. Deafhood also means the emancipation and the creation of Deaf identity. See more: P. Ladd, *Understanding Deaf culture: In search of deafhood*, Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto, Sydney 2003; P. Tomaszewski, P. K. Krzysztofiak, *Deafhood - rekoncepcja pojęcia głuchoty*, "Przegląd Socjologiczny" 2025, vol. 74(2), pp. 97-120, available at: <https://journals.ltn.lodz.pl/Przegląd-Socjologiczny/article/view/2725/2431> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/live/1R79jujnhkc> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

matter at all, because it is decisive that the artwork was made by a deaf artist. De'VIA means higher awareness of the pride of being Deaf and involved in Deaf culture, the importance of using sign language and the significance of visual space (Deaf Space). The American deaf artists described in the following part of this article are the ones who create their art the De'VIA way.

3. American Deaf artists

The most famous American artist of the De'VIA movement is Nancy Rourke (1957), who openly demonstrates her affiliation with Deaf Culture through her artistic and educational activities.

In her works, Nancy Rourke includes many symbols, e.g., blue tape symbolizing American sign language (ASL), the yellow color (hope and light), a light gray bluish color (deafness), a hand (pride in being deaf, language and communication), an ear (audism, oppression arising from oralism, eugenics).

Rourke's painting style, very characteristic of her artistic personality, is unofficially called *rourkeism*. Her works show ubiquitous discrimination against deaf people. Nancy Rourke graduated from the National Technical Institute of the Deaf and the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, majoring in graphic arts and painting. Her artistic inspirations include neo-expressionists, fauvists and the art of Jean Michel Basquiat. In 2010, she received an artistic scholarship from the American Puffin Foundation for her artistic activity in the field of Deaf history, Deaf culture, discrimination and the social situation of Deaf people in the world (creating a series of paintings on this topic). In 2019, she received the Laurent Clerc Award from Gallaudet University in Washington as a deaf artist showing all aspects of Deaf culture and history. Three of the artist's paintings (*Deaf Mona Lisa*, *Second Wave of Milan*, *Doris Fedrid and Rose Steinberg Feld*)¹⁵, purchased by the Silesian Museum in Katowice, became the main point of reference for other art objects in the fourth part of the exhibition *Głusza/Deafland* at the Silesian Museum (2022-2023), especially *Deaf Mona Lisa*.

When describing the assumptions of deaf art, one should not ignore another manifesto, which was created independently without the awareness of the existence of deaf art. The manifesto of surdism was articulated in 2009 by the French deafblind artist Arnaud Balard¹⁶. In 2009, Balard coined the

¹⁵ More artworks created by Rourke are presented on her website: <https://www.nancyrourke.com/oilpaintingsyears.htm> (accessed: 26/06/2025),

¹⁶ <https://surdistsunited.com/devia-history/surdism-manifesto/> (accessed: 26/06/2025), content of the manifesto: We, Deaf, turn down any discrimination created by the exclusive and oppressive socio-medical vision – called AUDISM – from which springs imprisonment, depreciation and denial of our identity.

term *surdism*, when he created the *Surdism Manifesto*. The word *surdism* comes from the French word for Deaf (Sourd), whereas its suffix (-ism) indicates an artistic and/or literary movement. While writing the *Surdism Manifesto*, Balard was unaware of Deaf View/Image Art (De'VIA), which had originated in the United States in 1989. Unlike De'VIA, Balard's manifesto extended beyond the visual expression of the Deaf experience to include theatrical, film and literary works.

Indeed, if audists consider being deaf as an infirmity, a suffering to be looked after and cured, a sensory lack to repair, and think it is necessary to act very precociously on this impairment, we, Deaf, do not perceive it this way, and wish to express it vigorously but proudly.

This manifesto is a vibrating appeal to express once again that we are Deaf, yes, but not disabled people. We don't want to be seen through this single frame of reparation, which mentally and intellectually alienates us by summarizing us with a mere stereotype of hearing impaired individual.

To be able to stand up for ourselves as "other" but certainly not "less", we must oppose this reductive trend of thought. Together, we must mobilize to restore, to its right social, political and public place, being Deaf.

Being Deaf is a relationship, it implies an exchange between two people, and it reveals an unshared communication. It is only that, at the beginning.

No one is deaf alone, one is in relation to the other.

And it is the vision from the other that the most urgently needs to be fixed.

Manifesto of Surdism:

Surdism is an artistic, philosophical and cultural movement which aims to carry militant values against the still lingering obscurantism which make us prisoners, we Deaf, of judgments, and above all of a destiny, on which we don't really have the right to sign.

Surdism is thus a revendication and a signing out in public space, and to get its aim, it must be clearly written, read, signed and shared in order to exist.

This is why this manifesto conveys with visibility this act of emancipation which refutes audism and its dominant and censoring point of view.

It is a Deaf intellectual and artistic movement through which we signify:

- We, surdists, offer to express ourselves by literature, theater, cinema, painting, sculpture or any other form of expression, by exploring anything which concerns, in one way or another, being Deaf, Deafhood, Deaf people and their position in social space.

- We claim that our movement carries creativity, inclusion, complementarity and mutual enrichment.

- We will artistically mobilize in order to create a frame of mind of Deafhood – which intends to be an enlightened attitude that anyone can share.

As long as the linguistic specificity is acknowledged and accepted for its true worth, and as long as the values of exchange, respect, communication and equality are shared.

We want therefore surdism to create and sharpen a Deafhood in other people; let it be a bridge between you and us, a walkway that each one can cross freely.

- We support and mobilize ourselves through our artistic means, unambiguously, to carve a space for the Deaf community's linguistic and sociocultural specificity.

- We stand up for artistic expression about, of and through Sign Language as a link of social union, and not as a linguistic and cultural division.

- We pay tribute to those who openly and publicly supported and carried our potential, despite of and against obstacles, through Deaf History.

The manifesto of surdism contains many more emphatic words and a clear context of rebellion against prevailing audism and oppression from the culture of the hearing. Deaf artists want to fully express themselves in their art, both intellectually and as being proudly Deaf, not as people with a hearing disability. The word *disability* immediately ranks them, automatically assigns them to a specific pigeonhole with the inscription "person with a hearing impairment" and, at the same time, introduces a stereotypically negative axiology automatically conditioned by the word *disabled*. Deaf artists, according to Balard in the manifesto, must rebel and protest against this automatic negative axiology in order to regain their place, the political and social right to be themselves, i.e. to be deaf in their own individual way. The manifesto emphasizes the importance of artistic and literary expression to ensure justice and political progress. Thus, behind these creative works lies the intention to challenge audism, celebrate deafness and advocate for equality.

Who is the author of the surdism manifesto? Arnaud Balard (1971) is a French deafblind artist, suffering from the Usher syndrome. He studied at the Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail (1992-1993) and then at the École MJM Graphic Design in Toulouse (1993-95). He then attended École nationale supérieure des arts visuels of La Cambre in Rennes, and graduated with honors (1995-98). He studied at the Ecole Supérieure des Arts Visuels de la Cambre in Brussels (2000-2002), where he created several conceptual works depicting the experiences of deaf people. Balard designed the Deaf Sign Union Flag in 2013. The flag has three colors – dark blue for the deaf and humanity, turquoise for people using sign languages and yellow for enlightenment and hope. The dominant shape of the flag is a hand with an outline of another hand representing global unity through signing, including tactile signing. The flag has been flown in countries around the world and is an international sign for people using natural sign languages.

When discussing the issue of De'VIA and deaf art, it is impossible to ignore other artistic personalities who contributed to the creation and development of deaf art in the United States.

Well-known or obscure, they carried up the faith of surdism to us, even though they did not name it explicitly. It is incumbent to us to redefine it, to connect to each other, and to work to make our social place visible and real. Surdism wants to be an international collective movement which carries a positive, constructive, militant and inclusive philosophy. You people who share these values, do join us!

Let's denounce the prejudices, let's stimulate our creativity and call in a new Community force in the spirit of universality, beyond our national borders.

Fellow members, express ourselves through surdism!

Audism denigrates,

Deafhood welcomes, Surdism reveals.

Chuck Baird (1947-2012) was an American deaf artist, curator and actor. He attended the Kansas School for the Deaf, Gallaudet University and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology. He has participated in dozens of exhibitions, created several commissioned murals and was an artist in residence at over thirty schools for the deaf. Baird divided his time between painting and acting, and was associated with the National Theatre for the Deaf and Equity for 23 years. He was involved with the Spectrum: Focus on Deaf Artists' colony in Austin, Texas, in the late 1970s and with the Deaf View/Image Art (De'VIA) movement in 1989 as its founder and chairman.

"I no longer care if I'm a deaf artist or an artist who is deaf. I've accepted being culturally deaf or hard of hearing; that's fine by me. But what makes me an artist really matters. The process is the power of creativity and all the gifts within and from the environment. It's much more enjoyable that way. The brush becomes free and speaks or moves for itself," said Chuck Baird¹⁷.

David Call (1960) is a deaf American artist specializing in printmaking, particularly linocuts. David also discovered drawing as a way to communicate with his hearing parents and was drawing pictures at the age of four. David's artistic inspirations were the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and the prints of Albrecht Dürer. He attended a high school for the deaf in Riverside, California. He graduated from Gallaudet University and California State University, Northridge. He was then hired as a social studies teacher at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont (CSDF). At this point in his life, David focused on his career and family – he has three CODA children (acronym for hearing children of deaf adults). After 18 years of teaching social studies, etc., he began teaching visual art and the principles of deaf art.

For Call, art has been a way of communicating, a way of sharing imagination, passion, a method of telling the truth and a tool for activism. David's work in deaf art is connected to his desire to reveal the truth about oppressive childhood experiences and the way Deaf people experience the world. He hopes that his art will help change the way Deaf people are perceived by the dominant hearing culture. David's works of resistance began appearing as protest posters at rallies, where deaf people demonstrated against the systematic oppression of sign language. Call's mantra is a quote from Cesar A. Cruz: "Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable"¹⁸.

Patti Durr is a mixed media artist, playwright and director who graduated from Le Moyne College and the University of Rochester in New York. She is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of Cultural and Creative

¹⁷ <https://deaf-art.org/profiles/chuck-baird/> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

¹⁸ <https://deaf-art.org/profiles/david-call/> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

Studies at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York. In 2004, Patti received the Rochester Institute of Technology Eisenhart Award for Excellence in Deaf Education.

For Durr, creating visual art, all because of her deaf solitude, is a challenge. The nature of solitude and collaboration requires more courage. In terms of her graphic art, Durr has been inspired by collage and multimedia artists such as Romare Bearden, Betye Saar and Betty G. Miller, who have shown her the way.

Durr was a founding member of Lights On! Deaf Theatre, a community theatre company dedicated to performing Deaf experiences, and served as its artistic director for several years. She wrote the play *META*, about a deaf Jewish Holocaust survivor who befriends an African American college student, produced by NTID and Lights ON! in 1993. She also served as the artistic director of the first Rochester Deaf Film Festival (DRFF) in 2005.

Durr also worked as an information architect, content expert/curator and creator of two websites for NTID/RIT¹⁹.

Another question about deaf art is whether the work of selected individuals aims at demythologizing and bringing the deaf community closer to itself, or whether it is a kind of study of individual cases, of being deaf in one's own way through the negation of existing norms and an attempt to find oneself between two worlds.

Maybe the answer to the above question is more complicated and has a little bit of everything. A brilliant example of a contemporary deaf artist is Christine Sun Kim. She told her story in an interview conducted by Eliza Wilk in 2015²⁰. Christine talked about creating a total sound piece while studying sound and music at the Bard College, and her emerging doubts about the lack of 100% accessibility of her work to deaf people, which she voiced out loud. The interviewer asked her directly whether she was making art for herself or for them (the deaf). The question was a turning point for Christine's work, because she began to focus on herself and her art. When deaf people come to her exhibitions, she tries to explain the creative process and her hopes to them in American Sign Language (ASL).

"I realized sound is like money, power, control, social currency," Kim explains. "In the back of my mind, I always felt that sound was your thing – a hearing person's thing – and [I realized that] sound is so powerful that it can either disempower me and my artwork or it could empower me. I chose

¹⁹ <https://deaf-art.org/profiles/patti-durr/> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

²⁰ <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/oct/30/artist-profile-christine-sun-kim/> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

to be empowered”²¹. To empower oneself means to understand and own the sphere of sound, which is theoretically assigned to the hearing culture. Kim has created a world of alternative sound that is not audible in the audio sense, but visible, because sign language has its own sound intensity and vibration tones.

Christine Sun Kim was born in 1980 and raised in Southern California with hearing parents and a deaf sister. She has been profoundly deaf since birth. She attended University High School in Irvine, California, and graduated from Rochester Institute of Technology in 2002 with a degree in interdisciplinary studies. She has MFA in Visual Arts from the School of Visual Arts in New York and MFA in Sound and Music from Bard College. She currently lives and works in Berlin.

In her famous work exhibited at the Rubin Museum during the group exhibition *The World is Sound*, increasingly quiet sounds and finally silence are indicated by the letter p in one of her drawings, *The Sound of Obsessing*. Kim uses the symbol p to represent the sound of a piano and to indicate that the note is played quietly. The more p's, the quieter the notes are played. The smaller the distance between the successive p's, the greater the silence. A lot of p's together intensify the experience of silence.

These examples show that Kim not only triggers an alternative perception of sound but also does not interpret her deafness as a handicap or disability. She makes a shift in identity, from “deaf” to “differently hearing”. Thus, she exposes her culturally defined handicap – deafness – not as a disability. Kim’s work shows that deafness is not a deficit but rather gives one certain abilities²².

Living in a society oriented towards speech and hearing, Kim's "voice" is not heard. As Tom Humphries states, "the self cannot exist unless it is heard. Deaf people have had to create voices, learn to hear their own voices, and now it is a matter of getting others to listen to it"²³.

Although Kim speaks of her deafness having an impact on her art, she emphasizes it as just one layer of her identity:

"My deafness has clearly contributed to and influenced my work, but so have many other factors such as my upbringing, family, communication and interests. Ideally, there would be no adjectives preceding the identity ‘artist.’

²¹ <https://uproxx.com/life/meet-christine-sun-kim-the-sound-artist-whos-changing-the-way-we-listen/> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

²² A. K. Benedikt, *Let's Listen with Our Eyes " The Deconstruction of Deafness in Christine Sun Kim's Sound Art*, in: M.-A. Kohl, ed., *Under Construction: Performing Critical Identity*, Basel: MDPI Books, 2021, https://res.mdpi.com/bookfiles/edition/1060/article/1780/Lets_Listen_with_Our_Eyes_The_Deconstruction_of_Deafness_in_Christine_Sun_Kims_Sound_Art.pdf?v=1573116209 (accessed: 26/06/2025).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

After all, 'deafness' and 'disability' are words that carry a certain stigma. But on the other hand, these terms can be helpful and acknowledge the elephant in the room – giving the audience a chance to get past this superficial layer of my identity. So maybe I shouldn't be averse to such words and just let things be – I believe my work is strong enough to stand on its own"²⁴.

4. Deaf art contra crip theory – reversing the meaning of the word *deaf*

Crip theory, created by Robert McRuer, mentions reversing the meaning of the word *crip* towards disability studies describing the activities of people with disabilities around the world. It is a form of a radical alternative opposing traditional disability research studies. While they have mostly focused on the disabled, McRuer tries to move the gaze from the disabled to the question of how this category is defined²⁵.

In relation to the deaf art movement, it seems very important that McRuer points out Susan Erevelles' way of thinking, i.e. "*In Disability and Difference in Global Contexts*, Erevelles indicates a deep commitment to forms of collective resistance: "at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability, we will see that collective resistance is more fruitful than its individual forms"²⁶.

McRuer supports Erevelles' view that a form of collective resistance is a form of active resistance against social cultural and linguistic colonization. Such active resistance can be related to the De'VIA movement as a form of artistic resistance against discrimination – treating deaf people as incomplete and "crippled" in the sense of using strange gestures. The De'VIA movement has become an effective form of resistance because it is collective and brings together a specific group of people who want to break away from the mainstream understanding of deaf people in medical and disability categories.

In McRuer's analysis, another researcher on the borderline of disability, Darieck Scott, rightly notes that this scarred, wounded figure, who is literally disabled and not fully agentic (although Scott never calls her that directly), still has interesting features: she is defeated – she works within the defeat and is saturated with it in such a way that the defeat determines her identity and the

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

²⁵ L. Gronvik, *The review of the book McRuer R. Crip Theory. Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, "Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research" 2008, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 67-69.

²⁶ N. Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politics*, Palgrave, New York 2011, p. 12. After: R. McRuer, *Kaleki opór*, "Teksty Drugie" 2020, no. 2, p. 240.

scope of her activity – and at the same time not at all defeated in the sense that she transcends defeat and takes on the power resulting from the fact that defeat does not necessarily destroy and does not necessarily involve assimilation²⁷.

At the same time, being deaf does not mean failure in the traditional sense and does not mean, according to Scott, the necessity of assimilation, because in the process of deafhood deaf people acquire a conscious identity of being deaf and very often do not want to assimilate. One can safely risk saying that in the case of De'VIA, a form of spatial sculpture/social installation was created as one of the tactics of crippled resistance described by McRuer – spatial, because sign language is a visual-spatial language.

In her description of one tactic of “crippled resistance” – the crippled camp/social sculpture, Mc Ruer describes the establishment of the Arnieville camp in the US. “Before the Occupy movement began occupying and before Los Indignados became outraged, activists created the (crippled) Arnieville camp on an intersection island in Berkeley, California, to protest the massive cuts in benefits implemented by the administration of Arnold Schwarzenegger, the state’s Republican governor. Described by Petra Kuppers as “an activist camp and tent city built with the collaboration of the disabled, the poor, and the homeless,” Arnieville was established in the late spring and early summer of 2010”²⁸.

“The metaphor of ‘common’ space and the space literally occupied by activists at Berkeley demonstrates once again that crippled times should be understood not only temporally (time of austerity, time of resistance) but spatially.” Kuppers argues that “unstable time” – even in the fog of literal toxicity in which the phrase was coined – produces new possibilities and a vital temporality that allows bodies to come together in innovative ways²⁹.

This type of understanding of unstable time can be related to the attitudes of De'VIA artists, who, through manifestos and intensified exhibition activity, created their own space and a new way of manifesting their own otherness and identity, which are constantly renewed in the practice of resistance that has been going on for a long time and is manifested in many images showing the world of the deaf community.

McRuer describes that “in reference to the camp described above, the Arnieville group used the name CUIDO: Communities United in Defense of

²⁷ D. Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*, NYU Press, New York 2010, pp. 94, 65. After: R. McRuer, *Kaleki opór*, p. 244.

²⁸ P. Kuppers, *Introduction*, [in:] *Somatic Engagement*, ed. P. Kuppers, ChainLinks, Oakland 2011, p. 15. After: R. McRuer, *Kaleki opór*, p. 246.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

Olmstead, which in Spanish also means “cares” or “cares about me.” The flexibility of the name CUIDO allows for the reading of the “crippled camp” not necessarily as a physical space, but rather as a contagious and enduring practice of resistance and freedom that can be renewed wherever and however it is needed: although in Spanish “cuido” is a first-person singular statement, the group’s name indicates a collective, fragmented, and inventive social practice.”

McRuer points out that “the activist passion and commitment that these images represent is strategic and contagious, and at the same time real, desiring or wanting a disability that is embraced in the interests of the entire activist movement as a way of expanding its identity³⁰.

The policy of financial and economic cuts, discrimination against groups that are theoretically the weakest, unable to defend themselves, in many cases brings the opposite effect to the intended one. Badiou called these sensitive bodies that “are present in the world, but absent in its meanings and in decisions about the future, non-existents of this world.” According to the philosopher, change begins and becomes “real” “when the non-existents of this world begin to function in this world with maximum intensity”³¹. and develop a strategy of resistance that manifests itself in activist forms such as social change and artistic movements³².

And here we can safely relate this type of social change and strategy of active resistance to the De’VIA movement, which is trying to redefine its own identity, activity and form of resistance.

Performer and activist Katarzyna Żeglicka rightly notes that, unlike American activists, people with disabilities in Poland do not call themselves “cripples”. In our country, this word is still a hurtful insult used by the able-bodied part of society. Being called a “cripple” is still laced with systemic violence and Catholic charity, the experience of being humiliated and stripped of dignity, medical traumas, and the subject of scientific considerations”³³.

She further notes that: “I am not ready to say about myself, like him, that I am a ‘cripple’. So I use the English word *crip* to describe my identity. I do not know the equivalent of this word in Polish that would have a positive connotation. The term ‘cripple’ reminds me of traumas and evokes fatal associations. Sometimes I still feel like an exhibit viewed under a microscope and

³⁰ R. McRuer, *Kaleki opór*, p. 252.

³¹ A. Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, transl. G. Elliott, Verso, London 2012, p. 56. After:

R. McRuer, *Kaleki opór*, p. 254.

³² Ibid.

³³ <https://didaskalia.pl/pl/artykul/kto-mi-daje-prawo-do-bycia-crip> (access: 26/06/2025).

then assessed in terms of (dis)ability or artistic professionalism. It is also difficult for me to recognize the connotation of the word 'to cripple' spoken by someone who has not experienced disability"³⁴.

And further: "My crip identity strongly influences the artistic work I do. In my body, even the most mundane topic is immediately political. I want what I propose to radically challenge existing norms"³⁵. Deaf identity strongly affects artists described in this article, also defines their activities, life and willingness to promote their art.

5. Summary

Patricia Durr mentions that at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester, during a deaf art course, students are asked to create their own self-portraits, reflecting their understanding of themselves as deaf personalities – the works do not necessarily have to be literal realistic self-portraits with distinctive features of character³⁶.

The history of deaf art is strongly connected with the roots of the De'VIA movement and deaf artists' artworks in the United States. The important role of strengthening the importance of being deaf falls to Gallaudet University as the main American University where deaf people are studying and working. The environment of Gallaudet is a natural undoubted place for a big collection of artworks and archives of deaf artists from the United States and other countries.

From the deaf perspective, the main aim of following the crip theory is to reverse the meaning of the word deaf. For many deaf activists, being conscious of their identity – being deaf – means being proud of their deafness and sign language. The ideas and assumptions of deaf art, including one's pride in deafness, found fertile ground in Poland. Especially here, for the reversal of the meaning of the word *deaf* was helpful for the creation of the Institute of Polish Sign Language at the University of Warsaw. Studying Polish sign language is equal to legitimizing the importance of this language as the same language as any other one: treating it as an object of research, collecting and creating dictionaries, analysing its grammar and rules. In case of deaf art made by Polish deaf artists, the founding of the Group of Deaf Artists (shortly GAG) in 2013 helped to promote deaf art and made the deaf artists visible in Poland along with an increasing number of accessible cultural events with sign language interpreters. The case of the Glusza/Deafland exhibition at the Silesian

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ P. Durr, *De'Via: Investigating Deaf Visual Art*, "Deaf Studies Today!" 2006, vol. 2, pp. 167-187.

Museum led to many discussions about the deaf community and people living between the two worlds (hard of hearing people). The significant fact is that it was the first time for a public museum to purchase the artworks of deaf artists (Nancy Rourke, Daniel Kotowski, Justyna Kieruzalska) to show the importance of their art and their deaf identity. It implies the rising importance and visibility of deaf art, as well as the reversal of the meaning of the word *deaf* from negative to positive as a representation of a linguistic and cultural minority. The practice of so-called rebellion is visible in group actions and group exhibitions not necessarily adaptable to most people (hearing people). We should not forget the example of Christine Sun Kim, which shows all of us that the individual practice of subtle rebellion is also effective. Christine Sun Kim's personality has had an impact on the art of Daniel Kotowski, an outstanding contemporary Polish performance and theatre artist. Kotowski highlights³⁷ that the practices of the Group of Deaf Artists in Poland allowed deaf artists to believe in themselves and create their own artistic practice in opposition to mainstream art in Poland. This can be observed in video-art of Tomasz Grabowski³⁸, where the Deaf identity and the most important issues such as audism, or social barriers are examined.

The strength of the art of deaf artists lies in a group of strong individuals, each of whom has their own recognizable style of creativity and through it most often shows their emotions and positive or negative sense of being in a world of silence. According to practices of rebellion, strength lies in group efforts to be more visible and to criticize forms of audism and sign language deprivation in a subtle and metaphorical way.

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³⁷ interview from 2024 – the own materials.

³⁸ More: <https://www.youtube.com/@TEMOABO/videos> (accessed: 26/06/2025).

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INTYMNOŚĆ DOŚWIADCZENIA BYCIA INNOWACYJNYM ARTYSTĄ GŁUCHYM – PRZYPADEK AMERYKAŃSKIEJ SZTUKI GŁUCHYCH (streszczenie)

Specyfika kultury Głuchych wynika po części z samej natury głuchoty, z wizualnego postrzegania świata przez osoby głuche, a po części z życia grupowego osób głuchych. Wiąże się ona również z wszechobecną, ukrytą dyskryminacją osób głuchych i niedosłyszących w społeczeństwach, nie tylko w Polsce.

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie historii specyficznego i nowatorskiego „nurtu” w sztuce, jakim jest deaf art, który narodził się w Stanach Zjednoczonych w latach 70. XX wieku i który głośno mówi o samej kulturze Głuchych, będąc jednocześnie manifestem ich własnej tożsamości i dumy z bycia artystą Głuchym. Omawiane w artykule prace amerykańskich artystów głuchych (m.in. Chucka Bairda, Nancy Rourke, Christine Sun Kim, dr Betty Miller, Susan Dupor, Patti Durr, Arnaulda Balarda i Davida Calla) wykraczają poza kategorie sztuk pięknych, zdając się należeć do dziedziny zagadnień interdyscyplinarnych o społecznym charakterze.

Jednocześnie sztuka osób głuchych jest formą buntu wobec zastanej sytuacji, przez podnoszenie wagi doświadczenia i intymności bycia osobą głuchą oraz wagę, nie przez deprecjonowanie, słowa „Głuchy”. Nazywanie siebie „jestem Głuchy” jest dumą z własnej tożsamości. Tego typu proces odwracania znaczenia danego terminu w środowisku osób z niepełnosprawnościami może odnosić się do teorii crip i polega na odwróceniu znaczenia obraźliwego, dyskryminującego terminu w kierunku afirmatywnej i znaczącej identyfikacji. Proces ten wiąże się z potrzebą

odrzućenia lub przekształcenia normatywnych, zazwyczaj ableistycznych, kategorii służących do rozpoznawania i „porządkowania” rzeczywistości i tożsamości.

Poprzez de-coincidence, niesłyszący artyści przekraczają granice dotychczasowych sposobów ekspresji, odkrywając nowe, wcześniej niedostępne formy. Sztuka głuchych staje się zatem nieustannym procesem odkrywania i tworzenia nowych możliwości.

Warto wspomnieć, że prace polskich artystów głuchych, nawiązujące do amerykańskiego deaf artu oraz obrazy Nancy Rourke, zostały zaprezentowane na pionierskiej wystawie *Głusza/Deafland* w Muzeum Śląskim, opowiadającej o historii języka i kultury społeczności głuchych w Polsce. Autorka była kuratorką wspomnianej wystawy.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka Głuchych, kultura Głuchych, język migowy, bycie Głuchym, doświadczenie Głuchych, artysta Głuchy

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Extensive professional experience working in the scientific, local government, nongovernmental (creating and running organizations and social economy) and private sectors. Author and implementer of many pioneering activities and grants in Poland, aimed for deaf and hard of hearing people.

Participant in many plein-air workshops and art exhibitions in Poland and abroad. Co-founder of the Deaf Artists Group, MEOK Gallery and “Ucieleśnienie” Foundation.

Passionate about painting, writing icons and texts, drawing, comics and collage. She loves learning new handicraft techniques.