



# The Creative Growth Book

**From the Outside to the Inside:  
Artists with Disabilities Today**



# The Hidden Paths of Judith Scott

Lucienne Peiry

The words of the famous neurologist Oliver Sacks, in *An Anthropologist on Mars*, deeply impressed me a few years ago, and I reread them on the plane that brought me from Geneva to San Francisco. The New York doctor says in his book that, “Defects, disorders, or diseases may play a paradoxical role in fostering the emergence of powers, developments, evolutions, and/or life forms that could otherwise remain latent, or would even have been unimaginable in their absence.” He goes on to declare that, “Behavioral disturbances or diseases can also be held as creative—since while destroying routes or specific procedures, sometimes they simultaneously force the nervous system to an unexpected growth and evolution by forcing it to engage in other tracks and paths.”<sup>1</sup>

Oliver Sacks’s suggestions in this book, as in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, provided a new approach to psychological, neurological, or mental disturbance. But above all, such affirmations from a scientist of international experience and reputation have led, in my opinion, to a totally new view of the relationship between artistic expression, creative process, and psychic disturbance.

These ideas resonated for me. I was also convinced that disorder could be conducive to the de-

velopment of a creative fecundity: the works of the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, had fostered a secret conviction for many years. The musical inventions and crazy graphics of Adolf Wölfl; the eccentric beasts of Heinrich Anton Müller, also of Vojislav Jakic; the delusions of magnified love in couples by Aloise—all showed me clearly how their authors, beyond their disorders, found deep within themselves untapped resources and exceptional artistic abilities which they managed to take advantage of. I had felt for some time that the same was true for two artists at Creative Growth in Oakland. My interest in and esteem for them were already very much alive, even though I had never met them. The first show I mounted as Director of the Collection de l’Art Brut, in 2001, was specifically dedicated to the work of Judith Scott, and I had also hung several drawings by Donald Mitchell in the following year’s exhibition, on the theme of *The Crowd*.<sup>2</sup>

I was fascinated by the production of both artists, and was looking forward to meeting them as Tom di Maria drove me to Oakland to introduce me to the unique creative workshop he has directed for a number of years. A clear sky and a brisk ocean

<sup>2</sup> Judith Scott, *Collection de l’Art Brut*, Lausanne, 2001–2002. *La Foule*, Collection de l’Art Brut, Lausanne, 2002. Lucienne Peiry, “Donald Mitchell’s Fantasized Crowds,” in *Donald Mitchell: Right Here, Right Now*, Oakland, Creative Growth, 2004, pp. 12–17.

<sup>1</sup> Oliver Sacks, *Un Anthropologue sur Mars* [1996], Paris, Seuil, 1997, pp. 14–15.







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wind welcomed me to San Francisco. Beyond the Bay Bridge that connects the city to Oakland, Tom di Maria dropped me off at Creative Growth. As I crossed the threshold of the building, I immediately sensed an unusual intensity of life inside. There was a simmering energy, a buzzing hive of activity apparent as soon as we entered the creative space. Dozens of men and women gathered in this large workshop, all busily engaged in working on their paintings, designs, or sculptures with evident concentration and determination. Di Maria initially introduced me to Donald Mitchell, whose work I knew well. Of impressive physical stature, the man who stood before me seemed to give himself over entirely to his work, almost to abandon himself, with no affectation. Our face-to-face was all the more disconcerting as I immediately felt and perceived obvious formal similarities between his

characters and himself—being suddenly confronted with his body, his head shaved, his way of standing in front of me, motionless. We spent some time close to each other, experiencing this encounter, he before me and I before him, without any need to talk. I was very moved, and even more so when I then saw him return to his desk to continue drawing in silence, his strange assemblies of human figures that I could thereafter consider to be self-portraits.

On that same morning at Creative Growth, my encounter with Judith Scott would come to change me and leave upon me a very deep impression. Tom di Maria acted again as my guide.

Busy working with her threads, strings, ropes, and cords, to package and cover fastened objects, Judith Scott suddenly stopped working as she saw me approach her. She swiftly took hold of the journals and

magazines that the Director offered her and, rather than looking at them or flipping through, she took a long draft of their odor, slid her lips across the glossy pages, and then licked the pages, probably to feel their structure and taste. Without any inhibition, Judith Scott called upon the senses she had particularly developed—smell and taste—the most neglected in the West. After exchanging some mischievous glances with Tom di Maria, she returned to work, and I was surprised to notice the artist resume her unusual weaving with slow, repetitive gestures, not paying visual attention to her work. Judith Scott never looked at the bicycle wheel she was wrapping, and seemed to prefer to sense it physically, bringing it close to her body each time she wrapped it round, feeling it regularly, her sculpture expanding in keeping with a sensitive perceptivity that took me aback.

I knew of Judith Scott's creative process from what I had studied, first in carefully observing her work, then by avidly reading John MacGregor's monograph, whose ideas and analyses gave me access to her textile universe. Yet finding myself suddenly with this woman, spending time at her side, watching her shuffle and move, but above all observing her at work—in this grappling match she engaged with her objects and textile fibers, and her unusual gestures, almost animal like—unearthed something deep inside me. To use the words of Oliver Sacks, I was witnessing the “other tracks and paths” which Judith Scott used while the regular “processes and procedures” were disrupted and even destroyed. The number of malfunctions and shortcomings that Judith Scott manifested as a result of Down syndrome, such as deafness and dumbness, was high. However, I was seeing clear evidence that the nervous system can, under stress, be forced to take shortcuts—underground paths—that lead to the “unexpected growth and development” mentioned by the neurologist. Creativity bloomed in a totally original and innovative expression, a silent sensory experience, as she diverted her eyes from her work. I understood then, in her presence, that she was focused on the invisible, wrapping objects to heal, repair, and mend, as a Mali or Benin shaman might find a therapeutic and propitiatory virtue in the fetish she creates.

At that moment I decided to produce a documentary film about Judith Scott. I chose Philippe Lespinasse to direct, to give a wider public the opportunity to discover her in her place of life and art-making, a chance to have a long look at the work—to allow a more acute perception of such stirring sculptures. Shot in extremis, just a few weeks before the death of the artist in 2005, the film is called *The Cocoons of Judith Scott*,<sup>3</sup> and bears witness to her work. Thereafter, all the exhibitions I designed were, without exception, accompanied by one or more such documentaries, often made for the occasion. Thanks to the freedom and intelligence of Philippe Lespinasse, Judith Scott and many other creators of *art brut* have been recognized, discovered, and studied, in rich and fertile films which allow us to experience the striking force of these extraordinary beings.

As such, I warmly thank Tom di Maria, who has always accepted, supported, and promoted my initiatives to showcase the artists of his studio, especially during the exhibition specifically devoted to Creative Growth art at the Collection de l'Art Brut Lausanne, in 2006.<sup>4</sup> Oakland—this place of artistic and human confluence—owes him much.

—Translated from the French  
by Ethan Mitchell and Tom di Maria

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<sup>3</sup> *Les Cocons magiques de Judith Scott*, by Philippe Lespinasse, Lausanne / Bordeaux, Collection de l'Art Brut / Lokomotiv Films, 2006, 36 minutes, French/English, cf. [www.artbrut.ch](http://www.artbrut.ch)

<sup>4</sup> Exhibition at the Collection de l'Art Brut, à Lausanne, en 2006, *Creative Growth Art Center* featuring: Judith Scott, Dwight Mackintosh, Donald Mitchell, Lorna Hylton, Daniel Miller.