

# Art Asylum

Exploring Otherness Through Play  
and Art-making

Ellen G. Levine



One night a few years ago in an AHS Masters core group, I decided to use the three-hour class time for an arts-based reflection on the course material that students had just completed in the psychopathology subject course. "Core group" is the name we use for the group that studies together throughout the whole three weeks of the summer school program, and for the sessions devoted to reflection on the material arising from the four subject courses. These periods between the subject courses can also be used for group building and for an examination of the dynamics of the group in order to provide the students with a clear learning frame.

In the psychopathology course, we began by looking at the impulse toward classification and diagnosis of "mental disorders," particularly as found in the diagnostic manual used in North America, the DSM V. The course then examined psychopathology from an arts-based, phenomenological and relational perspective, one which puts emphasis upon encountering "otherness," that which is strange to us, and finding a way to be with and shape it. To think of psychopathology from an arts-based perspective means to consider how the arts have always been able to hold suffering within human life and how they can also uncover the resources with which people meet such experiences.

Our focus here was on how we work with psychopathology as expressive arts therapists. We explored the subject through the arts, as well as through a reflective discourse, using painting, writing and theatre as our media. The results that emerged from this research then became material for further enhancing and enriching our understanding of the subject.

While we had used the arts in the work of the course, I wanted to also use them in the core group time in order to continue to reflect more deeply on the material. That night, therefore, I posed the following questions to the students: what is the otherness in you and how do you encounter that otherness in another? How could we make an art studio together that would give us the freedom to be other than ourselves for a few hours? I then came up with the idea of creating an “art asylum,” a space where the students could feel free to explore whatever they wanted, to play in a completely unstructured way, perhaps in strange ways. Using the word “asylum,” the old term for a mental institution, was an attempt to play with the idea of the art studio as a place of retreat and safety where anything non-ordinary was possible—we could “go insane” for a little while, held in the safe container of the arts.

The students took on this challenge. They ranged freely around the room, engaging with each other in playful and strange ways. Years later, whenever I meet these former students, we reminisce about this evening and the special quality that was created in the classroom that night.

That night, students danced, sang, painted and engaged in improvisational encounters without instruction. The atmosphere was one of completely free and unfettered play. The picture on this article’s title page captures one of the many playful moments we experienced in the studio. Through “going insane” within a safe space, the students not only explored some of the characteristics of their own psychopathology but also experienced how “otherness” can be a creative re-

source as well as an intolerable burden. I believe that this is one of the ways that the “freedom to learn” (*Lernfreiheit*) fostered by the creative atmosphere of EGS provides an understanding that could not be achieved through more conventional means of education.



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