

Episode 15: Tom di Maria

Woman's Voice: From DisArt it's DIStopia.

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Jill: Hello, this is Jill Vyn.

Chris: Hey Chris Smit.

Jill: And we are here with DIStopia Podcast. It's been awhile but,

Chris: It's been a long time, a long time.

Jill: Yeah, but...

Chris: A long time.

Jill: That doesn't mean that we haven't been working.

Chris: That's right, that's right. We've been busy putting together a huge exhibition and we are really excited to talk to you about that exhibition and season of events we're calling Process and Presence and in anticipation of doing that we wanted to bring this interview which, like you said, is about a year old. Right?

Jill: Yeah. Yeah, it's with Tom di Maria the executive director of Creative Growth out in Oakland, California and we actually first met him in person in Paris.

Chris: In Paris...ah, Paris. You know, we need to tell you a little bit about the setup for this because we had traveled to Paris to go the Outsider Art Fair in Paris to meet Tom but also to look for new artists and to think about, again, finding some artists for this Process and Presence exhibition and when we got there we realized that it was not...duh duh duh...wheelchair accessible. Right?

Jill: Right. Not only were their steps and multiple steps but even if you could get in the building, the elevator was too small.

Chris: Yeah. Think about a shopping cart and that's about the size of what that was. And there was a lot of, you know, a lot of friendly people and creative folks trying to help us figure it out and we finally did get into the building but could not go very far into the building so we did this interview in a closet.

Jill: Yeah, literally it was the closet filled with all their programs and coats and probably cleaning supplies and things like that and we were sitting in pretty awkward positions but you know what, that's the great thing is that Tom didn't care.

Chris: He couldn't care less.

Jill: He just rolled with it.

Chris: Yeah, he didn't care.

Jill: So we are super excited to be launching this podcast. We've actually been holding onto this one because we knew that we would be seeing him again in person.

Chris: That's right.

Jill: So, on November 6th he is coming to Grand Rapids, Michigan to be part of a ART21 screening which is then followed by a conversation with him.

Chris: And so we're talking about a wide variety of topics but the central issue really, is to think about this category of Outsider Art and how Disability Arts conflicts with it, coincides with it, conflates with it so some really good things here that we got to talk to Tom about and hopefully you'll enjoy what you hear.

Jill: Great.

Chris: All right.

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Jill: We're here today with Tom di Maria in Paris, France at the Outsider Art Fair so we had the opportunity to meet with you for the first time yesterday, Tom, and we had a great conversation about Creative Growth and the work that you've been doing over the last 17 years plus the origins of the organization as a whole and so we were hoping that we could hear that story again for all the people listening.

Tom: Sure, I think in the traditions of sitting in a French cafe and talking we did a pretty good job of being intellectual, academic, and romantic.

Chris: It felt very romantic, yeah. It was good.

Tom: Good. So the headlines of Creative Growth if you look at the San Francisco Bay Area in 1972 because we're in Oakland, California. And if you look at what was happening then it's the hippie summer of love, it's the Black Panthers, it's Ed Roberts, it's free speech, it's Disability rights, it's center for independent living. All these things are happening and there's a move

toward deinstitutionalizing people with disabilities, particularly developmental disabilities which is what we tend to focus on. So, when California sort of suddenly deinstitutionalized people with developmental disabilities it wasn't quite clear what path they would take forward. And our founders, who are artists, just really believed in the power of art and that that could be a communicative expressive tool forward. So they put paint in their own home and invited newly deinstitutionalized population of people to come to their home and to make art. This was radical at the time. You know, progressive publication at the time talks about, that discusses, it's called "Life with a Retarded Adult". It's a guide for parents to discuss if you can bring your child, adult child with a developmental disability out to a restaurant or if you should always eat at home. So, and that's progressive. So, in that context a revolutionary action took place which is, no, not only are we going to be cultural participants, we're going to become cultural leaders. That's almost 45 years ago so what started in the home becomes 162 artists in our center in Oakland now.

Jill: Can you tell us about what the center is like? I mean, describe it for us because we have not been there yet.

Tom: So, we moved from our founders home to a small storefront. And in 1982 Creative Growth bought a big industrial building in Oakland and it use to be a car repair factory. Big. And so if you'd walked into Creative Growth on one side you'd see a gallery that looks like a contemporary modern gallery and on the other side you'd see this massive open-spaced room with about 100 people everyday working making art and it can be breathtaking in the fact that it can be completely silent even though there are all these people. There never seems to be a writer's block. Everyone seems to be making all the time and engaged in all sorts of visual arts. It's an open plan so you'd see the big room surrounded by windows and you'd see painting, drawing, rug making, tapestry, fashion, visual arts, ceramic studio, woodshop, everyone working that way and it's process-based and as a result of that process so much product and so many products get created so it's part of the organization's plan is also then to use those art objects as a way to exhibit and to serve kind of as advocacy tools for how the public can come and understand the lives and contributions of people with disabilities, see the work that they make and also for me, the most interesting part is that we see, what I believe, is a kind of culture of disability appearing in some of the work. Where we see people without language or with similar disabilities from around the world sort of solving visual problems in the same way or using visual imagery as an alternative form of communication that really tells us about who they are.

Chris: Let's keep going on that thought for a second in terms of.. Is Creative Growth, in your mind, an advocacy group first or is it an art group first? How do you balance that?

Tom: Creative Growth has always seen itself as an art center first. So, all the staff are artists. There's no other...we're not art therapists. I saw there's something extremely therapeutic happens but we're not trained as art therapists as a specific practice. We don't come out of rehab training or social work or vocational care or anything like this, we're all artists so we approach people with as artists would approach another person and I think that dispels so many of the stereotypes and the prejudices immediately because we don't have anything in our head

other than this is a human being that I'm going to work with. And if you believe in someone, they step up to the plate. And we work with all adults. So we've worked with people who have often gone through their life being defined by the deficiencies. He's deficient in this, he can't do this, he can't read, he can't speak, he's nonverbal and you come to Creative Growth and it's all about achievement and it's a huge life lesson for everyone that if your goal is achievement you achieve.

Jill: So how do people find out about you?

Tom: We have a network of social workers, boarded care homes, roommates, the gallery which is a portal to the public and people come to us to be artists without any previous experience in art. So if you had someone you know, a friend, or a relative let's say who is on the autistic spectrum and you say, I think my sister might be interested in this program we give her a tour and she'd meet the other artists and whether there was a verbalization or not we would try to get some kind of indication if this is a community that person wants to participate in. If so, a trial starts and we encourage a person to try something 2-dimensionally, 3-dimensionally, maybe clay, maybe painting, maybe drawing and then we wait. And you can stay the rest of your life whether you make something or not but people always make something and it happens usually quickly and we encourage in the language is visceral and immediate and the door opens that's been shut for entire lives and it's an amazing thing to see.

Jill: So, when you think about the art that people create. Is everybody an artist? In this case?

Tom: I think everyone's an artist. Everyone has the potential to be an artist and we take art idea out of so many people and we see the spontaneous creation that we see in children and then how it kind of disappears because we're told it doesn't look realistic or right or not as good as the other person and we're very good socially at taking the sort of aesthetic beauty that we all have within us away. So we deal with a population that often haven't encountered art and so we're getting people as adults a fresh chance to be within a creative community that they've often, that's a privilege. And I like to think about the people who have often had a life experience that's been so without privilege coming into this privileged ... everything you need is provided artistically. You have peer support, you have a loving community, you have materials, it's all free for you, you can stay forever, and that's the privilege in our people's lives usually and they respond to that.

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Chris: Now, let's talk just for a minute about one of your more famous artists Judith Scott and a lot of our listeners will know her work and you were just in Venice. She's with the Biennele in Venice. I'm really curious about translation. In other words, how do you tell her story in a locale like Venice which is, it's a pretty high culture environment. So how does that story get told? Did it get told? Are you happy with how it got told?

Tom: Well, it's interesting because right now we have two Creative Growth artists in the Venice Biennale, Dan Miller and Judith Scott and the first time that artists with developmental disabilities are included. So another glass ceiling is broken. So, if you go to Venice you'll see 20 sculptures by Judith Scott. Her story is compelling. She was born a twin with down syndrome and deaf and her sister was typical but they were separated at an early age and Judith was institutionalized where they didn't realize she was deaf so she didn't develop language. So she comes to Creative Growth thanks to her sister much later in life, in her 40s, and she tries to tell us her story without language and it takes her years and she comes up with this visual process of sculpture making, of gathering objects and protecting them and wrapping them because in her life she had nothing that was hers or private in the institution, of having the 2 sisters reunited in the womb so you'll see it's wrapped of wing-like sculptures that speak to freedom. So, if you go to Venice and you see these 20 sculptures. She's telling you her story, we're not telling it to you and if you look at the text, or you look at the context you see a contemporary sculptor and if you read the note you'll get some of the history I just told you but it's really up to you as an informed viewer with hopefully visual literacy to understand what she's doing, to see this language equivalent and to see how she has spent, you know, 20 years of her life telling us who she is.

Chris: One of the things that DisArt is really interested in is access to the arts. So here, we've had a bit of a rough time getting in and what not and, you know, the building is old etcetera, etcetera. How important is accessibility to your vision of Creative Growth?

Tom: Well, accessibility is everything, and you know, and the horror story of today in terms of accessibility both it's particularly poignant in the context of Outsider Art or, you know, where we're showing artists with disabilities but it's also particular to France in a city that's in Paris that's loaded with barriers where you can't take the metro, you can't go down the street, you can't go in a restaurant, you can't use the bathroom and I think it both reminds us of how important the ADA is and how important Ed Roberts is and how while we have these huge fights still to have at home how, you know, the challenges for people with disabilities in Paris are amazing. And the courage it takes to get through the day, I don't have to tell you. So, the accessibility is everything. How would we even have a program like Creative Growth in Paris? We'd have to modify an entire building before we could even put paint on the table. So, we take for granted some of that. You know the Creative Growth building, when we got it, it hadn't been modified so my second year at Creative Growth we raised 2 million dollars to renovate the building make it accessible and that allowed for greater access to the building, you know, a better quality of life for our people, the capacity to add a second floor to elevators to administrative offices so people with disabilities could be staff people and be artists and have full access. That not only allows us to have more people be a part of Creative Growth but it allows Creative Growth to be led by people with disabilities and to have it just be a human beautiful environment for everyone where there's, it's a barrier free, and not just physically barrier free, it's emotionally and mentally barrier free as well.

Jill: That's really wonderful to hear you talk about that because one of the things that DisArt is doing is really focusing on the participation gap that we're calling. With the ADA people can get into buildings but once they're in there, are they participating? Are they engaging? And it sounds like Creative Growth has done both in a way that's really wonderful to hear.

Tom: I think artists really understand the human experience and I think being an artist-led organization I think it's very key to the equalization that we see with our population and I think that, you know, that's really key. I think access to arts is a human rights issue because that's a creative human issue and very few people understand that and I think, you know, artists. I like to say artists lead the culture and we don't know, really, who the artists of our era are until that era is over. I think something's happening with the Creative Growth artists and artists with disabilities now that's a particular moment in time. The artists are speaking to us emotionally and viscerally and directly in a way that, you know, we live in a society where everything is mitigated through a screen. Nothing is direct. Communication is fractured and we're responding to this Outsider Art, this self-taught artist because it reminds us of what human communication is. So that comes from a accessible, supportive community of people that really believe in those values.

Jill: So what is your community outside of the walls of Creative Growth? How do you situate yourself within the city?

Tom: Well, I think for a small organization we're a complicated organization because, you know, we travel around the world. We have our artists in art fairs here in Paris, and in Tokyo, and New York. In the most contemporary art fairs and museum collections and the art really speaks to. It's an advocacy tool, in some ways. It's aesthetically beautiful. If the art doesn't interest you there's nothing to say about it, the context under which it was made or the circumstances of the maker. But if it interests you, boy you're going to learn some important things about what it's like to be a human being. But it has to be in that order because we're a nonprofit, we're not a charity. So, I think if you lead by example and you lead with quality, you get results.

Chris: Yeah

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Chris: You know, so it sounds like DisArt and Creative Growth share a lot of ideology, at least, and when you're at a fair like this how far does that ideology reach? In other words, are you finding community with that ideology upstairs with the other dealers? Is there discussion about Disability Art in this context? Do people use that term? What's your impression of that?

Tom: Well, that's an interesting question because, you know, dealers in a fair, in an Outsider Art Fair are very different because they don't really represent the artists, they represent the objects so they are often like antique dealers and they buy and sell objects and it's a commercial enterprise. Creative Growth is different and 16 years ago we were the first artist led organization

to bring their own artists work to the Outsider Art Fair as opposed to having galleries buy and sell it in their secondary market or from the artist and mark it up and sell it and that was a radical idea because some of the galleries felt like, "wait, that's our job." And we're like, "No, it's our job and we're going to do it that way". And, breaking those barriers has been really amazing and we see our work resonating with collectors and students and young people more than we do with other galleries because they're essentially the businesses. But the people who come to a fair that want to explore and see the work, meet the people, hear about what we do, know our history. That's where the learning takes place.

Jill: And how many of your artists have an opportunity to travel with you? Is that a possibility?

Tom: It is a possibility. Some. A lot of artists don't like to leave the studio. They like the process. They like making it and are anxious about travel. But William Scott has traveled with his work. A one man show in New York. And, William, you know, when art sells half of the money goes to the artist. The other half goes to the nonprofit. So, he makes enough, so when William goes to New York he brings his mother, his sister and his cousin and they go to plays and he makes more money than I do. So it's a fantastic thing. And, Dan Miller, for example in the Venice Bienale, his sister would really love to go see him but he doesn't really travel well and he has a lot of issues with anxiety and seizure disorder and, you know, she's coming to see it. And it's a family decision and in some cases they come and in some cases they don't.

Jill: So, a couple years ago there was an artist Jeremy Burlison who we included in the Art of the Lived Experiment exhibition in Grand Rapids. And, at the time, the ask to have his work included was a really significant deal and I think Chris was very involved in sharing how we're going to take care of the artist, how are his works going to be represented and I have a lot of respect for that protection that you have for your artists and I am wondering if you could talk about that because that was similar to when we initially approached you for our next exhibition.

Tom: So, when we get calls about, "We really want to support your artists and we'll put some of their art in the cafe windows and can we get really big photographs of them in their wheelchairs or with their medication." We say, "no thank you" and, of course, a lot of people find, "well, what?". And that doesn't help us and we don't accept that. We have very high standards and our very high standards are to be in museum collections, to have our artists be cultural leaders. In movements for social change you have to push to the farthest limits sometimes before you can come back to the center. So, by us being extreme in terms of the way our artists are presented and positioned and what we say no to is disturbing to some people but ultimately the right thing to do and then it allows us to come back and tell the story or talk about how disability is an important part of our artist's lives and as opposed to leading with that and that's, I hope, the way that we're thesis antithesis moving forward in terms of bouncing those ideas back and forth.

Chris: So, in the 17 years you've seen progress, then? You've seen changes?

Tom: So, when I started at Creative Growth. An organization that Creative Growth would never bring their own work to an art fair that was for other people to profit from or to present in a patronizing way. "I have discovered this artist", you know, because I'm the intellectual commercial person and, of course, these people can't do that for themselves. So that's changed. The way that...museums wouldn't see the work as contemporary so our artists, 3 artists in the Museum of Modern Art in New York that have been purchased for their permanent collections. That's a contemporary; that's every artists' dream pretty much. Every American artists sees that as a pinnacle and having artists in the Venice Biennale those are glass ceiling after glass ceiling after glass ceiling that have been broken and so you chip away one at a time and then you partner with the important curators, the visionary artists who understand and see it who don't play follow the leader and see things that they didn't learn about in art school as being visionary and brilliant and things they want to support. And, you know, the snowball starts to roll down the mountain and it gets bigger on its way down.

Chris: Great, great. What else?

Jill: I'm actually, you mentioned the glass ceiling a couple times and I'm curious about what's next. You're a very creative person and visionary so...

Tom: Yeah, well, what's next is we should be an organization completely run by our artists and they should decide if we even exist. So, I think about an artist like Dan Miller and Dan should have every should every consideration and choice as any other contemporary very successful artist. He should be able to work independently in a live-work artist space or in his own studio or home or choose to be in a safe supportive community where he feels comfortable. The choice should be his, it shouldn't be his only option and so moving towards that. So, by empowering our artists to make curatorial decisions, we've installed a gallery. In our gallery and in our building artists learn to present their own work and talk about it and see how they present. And we have artists becoming staff and becoming teaching assistants and working with our teenagers with disabilities in our weekend program. So, the choice is not mine. The choice is theirs. So empowering people to find the path forward, I think is the future.

Jill: That's awesome. I'm very in you as a leader and you said something yesterday where you had to be arm-twisted into this position and now 17 years later you're still here. So, I'm curious why and what is your artistic craft, are you an artist?

Tom: No, I was an artist and a filmmaker and photographer and working on my own work and I was a professor of photography at American University and then in the late 80s when my friends started to die of AIDS I became more politically active and so that moved me into more human rights and AIDS activism and Gay Rights activism so that becomes a movement and then...I organized and worked on the first national AIDS film project which was the first documentary around that. So, you know, then you're involved in art as a vehicle for social change and that was a transformative moment for me. But, from that point on, I worked for film festivals and museums and I just felt like art activism or bringing art as a vehicle to people to help see culture

different was an important part and the more I didn't like the personal engagement of being an artist so much. It felt to self-centered or something. Coming to Creative Growth, I finally had a really nice job at the University of California Berkeley in the art museum as the assistant director of the museum and the film program and I was a working class kid who went to art school and I didn't expect ever eat a meal that didn't come out of a can and finally I had a job and somebody says, "Come to our little ma and pop on the corner and apply for a job." And I said, "Are you kidding me?" So, I walked in and the artists and the art was so amazing in that room and the organization was not in the shambles but it needed a lot of work. The building, there wasn't a wheelchair accessible bathroom. There's a 100 people with disabilities working here. The challenges seemed huge but I believed in the artists. I think the community of people just gets richer everyday. It's my family. And, also, I think the impact that the Creative Growth artists have had and are having in our culture is rich and continues to be something so worth of investing in. That's why I'm still there.

Jill: Yeah, it's interesting because people say this work is going to take forever. You know, change, cultural change takes a long time but we've found that people are receptive. If the avenue is appropriate, it's respectful, it's honest, it's authentic, whatever it may be. I'm not sure if we're just in our own little cloud here or if you're finding that people are receptive in a way that maybe other cultural movements haven't.

Tom: It's really hard in this moment in time politically to believe it, but I think that people rise to the occasion and people fail because we let them fail and people fail because we don't offer a path forward and people fail because they lose their sense of vision or there's not leadership. So that's our role socially, collectively as people who care about this work to offer that model and I see in the Creative Growth artists when you say, "You can move forward." They do. It's kind of like, you give somebody a little kick and get out of the way and it's amazing what happens.

Jill: That's awesome. Well, thank you so much for your time.

Tom: The pleasure was mine.

Jill: It's been so good to meet you in person so I look forward to many more times.

Tom: Thank you all.

Chris: Thanks Tom.

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Jill: What a great conversation with Tom.

Chris: Oh, it's so good to remember that weird day. But it was fun.

Jill: Yeah, with us all crammed in a closet space, but I guess that's how you become closer.

Chris: Yeah, that's right. That's right. And Tom has become a really good colleague and this podcast is really a launch of sort of three podcasts that will center around Process and Presence which is the name of a larger season of events that we're doing. It's also the name of an exhibition at (Frederik) Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids. So, Tom will be here next week to spend some time with us and he'll be screening something really cool.

Jill: Yeah, so, Creative Growth has been featured in ART21. For those of you who are not familiar with ART21, the program that airs... I think they're in their 8th...

Chris: Yeah, yeah.

Jill: Season, maybe, and they highlight different, you tell me Chris.

Chris: Yeah, different artists and different movements in contemporary art and it's been on PBS for a long time and so we're really excited for him to come show that episode but also spend some time with us about these issues of Disability Art and Outsider Art which are near and dear to us because some of our artists sort of fall in that category and some don't so you have to figure out how to do that but we really want folks listening to be able to see this work and so I want to invite you to go to our website DisArtNow.org and take a look at our exhibition and we've set up a couple things there for you to be able to experience the exhibition without having to come here.

Jill: Yeah, so we have a virtual tour that you can kind of try and navigate through and we also have audio descriptions for all of the artwork with these underlying soundscapes is what we call them. It was a project done by two local musicians who wanted to give, to use music to help with the description of the objects that are included.

Chris: It is really an interesting process. It was something that we hope you'll enjoy. So, now you've enjoyed listening to Tom diMaria and in our next episode we'll bring the conversation that we had with Brian Catling, who's also in the exhibition, really talented artist from the UK, and then eventually you'll hear what we thought was a really wonderful discussion with Sandie Yi who's also part of our exhibition.

Jill: Until next time this is Chris and Jill with DIStopia Podcast.

Chris: Have a good day, folks.

[Music plays and then fades out]

