

# VISUAL ACTIVITY BOOKS

Doctoral thesis in the field of Art

in the discipline of fine arts and conservation of works of art



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## Preface

My private bookshelf, which, besides the "shelf of shame" – books I've purchased but have been delaying reading for various reasons – includes those in the field of design and aesthetics, art albums, and cherished reportages. I have a special fondness for this part of the bookshelf, occupied by biographies, essays, and personal reportages – recorded stories that are personal and intimate. Among the books, I seek answers to my pressing questions, guidance, and new perspectives previously unknown to me. However, I realized that this collection lacked that one book which I could gift to others to learn about their uncertainties or observations. This thought is certainly not the sole reason for the creation of Visual Skills Notebooks, but it undoubtedly outlined the form and shape of what was then a project in my mind.

Employing me in an educational institution may pose challenges. I always express my dissatisfaction – often directly. One day I might commission the repainting of a room in a color that doesn't look as if it's old even though it's new (everyone surely imagines that color), and another day I ask the math teacher not to arrange the test papers in my class in order of "from the best..." but rather by a variable random assignment. To this day, I'm not sure if she saw it as a display of mathematical intelligence or just mischief. In none of the institutions where I've had the privilege to work did I adapt tasks and exercises to the curriculum, approaching it with a technique of a long cut<sup>1</sup>. In my opinion, the communication domain that is art should be characterized by the freedom in the undertaken actions. By leaving it open to the young recipient, we offer them not only knowledge and skill enhancement but, above all, unbridled joy of creation, admiration, and intellectual adventure. I assume that after experiencing such an adventure, students will carry with them a hunger for engagement with art. It doesn't necessarily have to manifest in aspiring to be an artist; it is enough that children become future adults who are active and conscious participants.

During the process of preparation and analysis, paradoxically, the most time-consuming aspect was recognizing a different cognitive activity and then understanding that neurodivergent individuals approached the use of objects and the execution of tasks I designed for them in a completely different way. From their accounts, it appears that they often

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<sup>1</sup> This is one of the techniques in advanced downhill skiing, characterized by making large turns during curves.

experience fear related to acceptance by teachers of different results or outcomes, in my perception, is a side effect of earlier school and extracurricular experiences. Visual Skills Notebooks are the result of exploration, an attempt to record information, transferring the non-material personal space of Neurodivergent individuals and their emotional state into physical, tangible equivalents. This publication represents for me taking responsibility for all tasks, conducted workshops, conversations, and entrusted thoughts.

The tripartite structure of the doctoral thesis arises from three possible relationships created by the publication Visual Skills Notebooks:

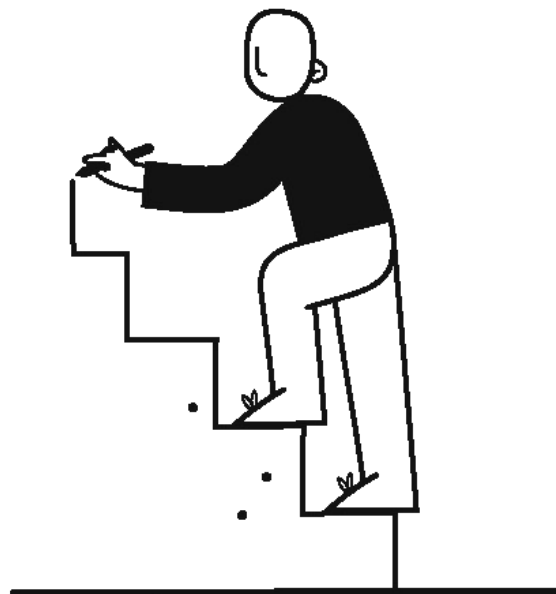
1. DESIGNER (ME) – CHILD
2. DESIGNER – RECIPIENT (YOU)
3. DESIGNER – OBJECT

In the first part, "DESIGNER – CHILD" I summarize my journey to the essence of the undertaking. I discuss the key issues from the border of social psychology that I referred to throughout the creation process of the Notebooks. Symbolically, I return to the sciences and values advocated by Janusz Korczak to restore subjectivity and agency to children. Finally, I describe my model of working with children, which I also refer to in all chapters.

The second part, "DESIGNER – RECIPIENT" provides an insight into the most important considerations in the field of design theory and perception of vision that were utilized in the creation process of the publication. In this chapter, I try to guide the recipient on how to look at and perceive the publication.

The third part, "DESIGNER – OBJECT" is the technical chapter where I summarize the collected materials and present the method of their analysis and placement in the publication. This is a description of the doctoral thesis I designed, along with usage instructions and the symbolism of applying formal solutions. In this chapter, I define the significance of the title Visual Skills Notebooks, explaining what visual proficiency can be in the context of the designer's interaction with recipients.

CHAPTER 1.  
DESIGNER – CHILD







## About the context of thesis development

During a visit to one of the Modern Art Museums in London, I noticed that from the beginning of exploring the exhibition, I was engaging with descriptions tailored for children. Indeed! The part of my intuition responsible for assessing the difficulty level didn't signal any discomfort in navigating through complex descriptions of the ideological foundations of the artworks I later examined. On the contrary, throughout my stay, I thoroughly enjoyed reading the versions affiliated with "*for kids*".

I was enchanted by their genuine simplicity. In contrast, their "adult" counterparts seemed overintellectualized, cumbersome, requiring too much of my focused attention. Perhaps reading descriptions in the "for kids" version was driven by my need to simplify communication due to fatigue after a day at work. However, experiencing the exhibited works was undoubtedly more attractive than devoting attention to their descriptions. Moreover, I believe that rarely do visitors have the luxury of making a gallery visit their sole activity of the day. Therefore, fatigue and overstimulation often negatively impact engagements with art, turning recipients into inattentive participants in the world of art.

This experience proved to be so significant that it stuck in my memory and resurfaced in a different context. A few years later, I found myself in the role of a teacher, facilitating art workshops, and a significant part of my day involved interaction with children and adolescents. As I planned the content of activities that I wanted to communicate efficiently and effectively, I longed for a return to the simplicity of verbal communication observed in London. I recognized its value and associated it with effectiveness. How immense was my joy when the remembered experience contributed to a real change, which, moreover, turned out to be a key to mutual communication between the child and the teacher.

Abandoning the use of complicated language forms, as well as simplifying the message to the most basic and accessible for children, were factors that made me attentive to the phenomena around me and what was happening in my surroundings. It was as if the earlier model of communication was unintuitive and required effort that diverted attention toward needs other than those that turned out to be genuinely important.

The shift that occurred proved to be a considerable facilitation, not only for me but gradually, during the workshops, children managed to achieve better results and experience increasing satisfaction, which they communicated clearly. Experiencing being with people, co-experiencing and co-feeling, began to bring me greater joy.

A chain of interrelated phenomena emerged: a sense of community, joy, engagement, assistance in daily struggles, bonds, and sincerity. At that time, I observed these phenomena with fascination, curious about what else spending time together could bring. From today's perspective, I perceive these values as crucial and fundamental for the development of subsequent events that occurred during the joint workshops.

The topics of exercises proposed by me, the guiding themes of collective activities, became mere pretexts for shared existence, being, based on sincere communication without barriers. The most valuable aspects for me were the conversations *that occurred* during the workshops – sometimes dramatic confessions, retrospections of unpleasant experiences, stories about fears, and other times simplifications and distortions, wordplay, formal or artistic games. *Visual activity books*, from today's perspective, serve as a collection of these simplifications, distortions, paraphrases, fears... which I want to popularize, commemorate, and give meaning to. *The Visual...* are primarily a record of experiences from being with another person, my personal notes from meetings. They originated from the need to find a medium to tell stories that are very important and challenging but without unnecessary pathos and excessive seriousness where it is not necessary.

## FROM THERE TO HERE

My internist once said that we only start paying attention to the functioning of an organ when disorders in its proper operation arise. From a preventive perspective, this may not be ideal, but from the standpoint of feeling the peace necessary to engage in daily affairs and tasks, succumbing to habit makes our functioning easier. We have trained ourselves to operate within the norm, as something that provides stability and guarantees peace. Perhaps that's why it's challenging to step out of the norm and confront differences.

In a short time, I realized that the school environment operates similarly, with the only difference being that the world of norms does not facilitate anything in this case. Creating a norm adapted to the capabilities of the majority of minds, psychological and physical development, imposes rigid frameworks in which few can find themselves - the applied scale forces the distinction between "too weak" relative to the norm, "too strong," and precisely "those within the norm." What is at stake in this game? Unfortunately, until now, it is not known.

According to what my postgraduate studies in pedagogical qualifications prepared me for, the class should be something like a set of similar units with approximate developmental characteristics. Nothing could be more misleading. The group is heterogeneous, and the probability that the next children we will work with will be the same is governed at most by the value, which is the elementary event<sup>2</sup>.

Among the groups I led throughout all these years of my pedagogical practice, I found fantastic young people with various temperaments, preferences, and unique personality traits. Some of them dealt with their difficulties, while for others, their unique disposition actually helped in performing exercises. There is no rule for this, or at least I have not found one. Despite being aware of the presence of individuals in the room assigned various developmental diagnoses, I never secured myself against... well, against what? I never knew what unexpected event would happen during future classes or what consequences it would bring.

I will not directly refer to any of the definitions of developmental diagnoses. I am not interested in artificially creating a boundary from now on. The status of diagnostic categories is dynamic –

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<sup>2</sup> In mathematical probability theory, the term "elementary event" refers to the set of all possible outcomes of a random experiment.

something that a few years ago was considered a disease entity might later gain the label of a spectrum, disorder, syndrome, or departure from developmental norms<sup>3</sup>. No nomenclature seemed friendly enough to me, such as autistic individuals, those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)<sup>4</sup>, highly sensitive individuals, etc., for me to use in this publication. There is another reason I decided to avoid language indicating diagnoses. Essentially, it is my personal observation that no one in the adult world wonders on a daily basis whether a person passing by on the street is diagnosed and what ails them. After the school period, diagnoses seep into everyday life and become a more personal, hidden matter. Upon leaving the school building, a certain label automatically detaches – a yellow self-adhesive note with an unpleasant message, maliciously attached to the back by a classmate from the back row. This raises the question of what the boundary of a diagnosis is and what it means for the diagnosed individual.

However, for the purpose of outlining certain directions and frameworks – which exist in the diagnostic space and I do not intend to deny – I proposed in the subsequent part the use of names devoid of a pejorative connotation: *Neurodivergent* and *Neurotypical*.

The concept of Neurodiversity is based on recognizing the natural diversity of the brain and its unique neurobiological constructs as an enriching aspect of the population<sup>5</sup>. This term, coined in the 1990s<sup>6</sup>, filled a linguistic gap and responded to the growing trend of inclusivity. It promotes social acceptance of differences, considering them a unique contribution to society<sup>7</sup>, and, most importantly, it avoids dividing individuals into "normal" members of the community and those considered "abnormal." The non-excluding approach guarantees acceptance and emphasizes selective intelligence as the utilization of each person's potential.

So, who are Neurotypicals? This neologism has been adopted by the Neurodiverse community and the scientific community, referring to individuals without any developmental or neurobiological disorders, not residing within any developmental spectrum<sup>8</sup>. In other words,

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3 For example, Asperger's Syndrome is no longer recognized as an independent entity since it has been merged with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). According to the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-11), as well as the classification of psychiatric disorders by the American Psychiatric Association in DSM-5, it now falls under the same category.

4 Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), also known as *Zespół nadpobudliwości psychoruchowej z deficytem uwagi* in Polish.

5 Source: <https://mlodeglowy.pl/kompendium/jestem-nauczycielem/neuroroznorodnosc-copy/> [accessed: June 10, 2023].

6 The term Neurodiversity was first coined by the Australian psychologist Judy Singer.

7 Ibid.

8 J. E. Robison, *Jestem inny. Moje wskazówki dla aspiech, ich rodzin i terapeutów*, s. 11, Kraków 2019.

the term neurotypicality describes individuals with strictly typical neurology, without any negative connotations.

In the departure from defining these concepts, one may wonder – how should we talk about neurodiversity? Renouncing generic descriptions of disorders and turning towards individuals naturally inclines us to spend time with them and engage in their lives. Mindfulness towards each other, showing empathy, and, above all, stepping away from normative perceptions of the surrounding reality or classifications based on established patterns – these are the real keys to understanding what Neurodiverse individuals are dealing with. They will best demonstrate this themselves, as echoed in the testimonies recorded by them:

*"When reality does not resist on a daily basis, the arrangement of roles and interpersonal games becomes noticeable only in situations of heightened theatricality, especially when the stage becomes a prison, and we experience fear. In the world of roles, an autistic person moves rigidly like a wind-up toy. Once set in motion, they go without changing course until they fall off the table. You can try to install an additional key, but you will never, I repeat never, make them flexible."*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> E. Kačka, *Mysł spektralna*, w: C. Törnvall, *Autystki. O kobietach w spektrum*, s. 217, Warszawa 2022.

## Negotiating one's place in the world

If we perceive the school reality through the lens of, for example, a student with an average grade of 4.5, good behavior, and no adjustments or recommendations from psychological-pedagogical counseling, not only will we receive an incorrect picture, but we will also fail to navigate the reality that differs from the one described at the beginning of this sentence. In such a case, we may fall into the trap of believing that our description of the world is the only possible one, cutting off our awareness and vigilance to the people around us who need that awareness.

Working with Neurodivergent children or youth fundamentally differs as an experience – the goals, effects, problems, and challenges encountered in the process will be different. What is a simple task for some may be a significant challenge for Neurodivergent individuals – there are thousands of examples that can relate to various aspects of our lives. However, a 45-minute focus during a school lesson, following the script, and fitting into the key responses, best illustrates this situation.

Sensitivity and awareness of individuals who assess task results play a role in whether one of the parties feels discomfort due to feedback on their progress or failures. The same message can be conveyed in various ways – adapting it to the recipient and their predisposition to experience and absorb information. A neurotypical person waits for feedback; they want to hear that they have successfully completed the tasks, achieving a satisfactory result. A Neurodivergent individual wants the same, although in reality, these two task results may be different. The reaction to failure and the way it is expressed in representatives of these two groups may also be completely different. While there is no specific key or scientific research classifying and assigning reaction methods to a particular group of people, Neurodivergent individuals are generally more susceptible to experiencing their failures and setbacks. Consequently, they also have specific ways of regulating emotions<sup>10</sup>, and the emotional messages they convey may not be understandable or obvious to everyone.

Each of us is accustomed to describing emotions according to a key and specific conventions acquired from our closest cultural circle – the one in which we grew up and

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<sup>10</sup> Emotion regulation issues are observed in about 18% of typically developing children, 42% of children with intellectual disabilities, and 74% of individuals on the autism spectrum (without an additional diagnosis of intellectual disability). Source: S. Merchut. Strategie regulowania emocji, in: <https://autyzm.life/2021/07/12/strategie-regulowania-emocji/> [accessed: June 7, 2023].

developed. In the case of European culture and Western cultures, emotions are understood individually, as something experienced internally, personally. The foundation for such a schema of understanding emotions can be considered the creation of Plutchik's emotion wheel, which fundamentally defines the relationships between different emotions experienced by people<sup>11</sup>.

In the 1980s, American psychologist Robert Plutchik proposed a theory of emotions<sup>12</sup> in which he identified the existence of eight basic emotions, which he called innate and from which all others are supposed to originate – so-called evolutionary emotions. The main suggestion of this theory is the possibility of experiencing a mixture of several primary emotions simultaneously, which, when combined, create more complex combinations<sup>13</sup>. Plutchik envisioned them in a wheel diagram, divided into 8 segments, each marked with a different color and, depending on the intensity of the emotion, also the intensity of the assigned color. The opposite arms of the diagram describe emotions that cannot be experienced simultaneously (Plutchik's diagram is illustrated in *Figure 1*).



Fig. 1. Plutchik's Emotion Wheel.

11 R. Plutchik, *Natura emocji*, w: *American Scientist*, cz. 89, nr. 4, s. 344-350, 2001.

12 The Plutchik's theory of emotions – [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teoria\\_emocji\\_Plutchika](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teoria_emocji_Plutchika) [accessed: June 6, 2023].

13 Y. Zheng, B. Ju, *Emocje i zdrowie psychiczne: badanie porównawcze tradycyjnych chińskich teorii medycznych umysłu i koła emocji Roberta Plutchika*, in: *Międzynarodowa Konferencja Studiów nad Edukacją i Naukami Społecznymi (ICSES)*, s. 201–203, 2021.

Submitting to the hegemony of such a way of thinking about emotions and their experience raises many questions in the context of mutual understanding within other cultural circles, where the European-Western<sup>14</sup> assumption of the essentialism of emotions may not find the same application. This means that emotions do not necessarily have the same properties for every person in the world, and there is no universal way of interpreting them. Therefore, at the intersection of cultures, cognitive dissonance often arises, leading to misunderstanding and informational gaps.

In daily life, we do not usually consider whether a particular emotion is valued, experienced, and regulated in the same way in every culture. Perhaps techniques for recognizing arousal and regulation from other cultural circles would be foreign, unnatural, or entirely incomprehensible to us. However, in our everyday experience, we lack a comparative scale to assess this.

Even within the same cultural circle, cognitive dissonance can occur, resulting in mutual misunderstandings. The belief that each person processes situations in the same way and gives them the same importance is erroneous and worth discarding. Although feelings and their intensity vary greatly for each person, they are described with universal names for emotions. This convention is defined as neuronal patterns of reactions<sup>15</sup>.

As a result of mastering neuronal patterns of reactions, we have learned to adapt appropriate behaviors to certain emotions within the influx of sensations, such as excess, lack, discomfort, etc. The ability to express these emotions and show them outwardly is a form of coping with experience and emotional control, i.e., self-regulation<sup>16</sup>.

According to Canadian scientist and Ph.D. in philosophy and psychology Stuart Shanker, self-regulation is also the ability to recognize the state of arousal and regulate its level to optimally manage one's energy<sup>17</sup>. Shanker developed the self-regulation method, whose fundamental

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14 Such a range of the cultural circle area is applied by psychologist Marta Niedźwiecka, among others, in the podcast episode: *Emocje mają paszporty i narodowości*, in: *O Zmierzchu*, S05E22. <https://niedzwiecka.net/podkasty/emocje-maja-paszporty-i-narodowosci/> [accessed: November 5, 2023].

15 M. Niedźwiecka, podcast: *Emocje mają paszporty i narodowości*, in: *O Zmierzchu*, S05E22. <https://niedzwiecka.net/podkasty/emocje-maja-paszporty-i-narodowosci/> [accessed: November 5, 2023].

16 Self-regulation is one of the psychological competencies. Its broader definition was addressed by Dr. Stuart Shanker in the publication: *Self-reg. Jak pomóc dziecku (i sobie), nie dać się stresowi i żyć pełnią możliwości*, Warszawa 2016.

17 M. Jankowska, *Zarządzanie emocjami. Krok w stronę zdrowia psychicznego*, s. 31, Warszawa 2020.



premise is that "difficult behavior of a child is a result of stress overload, i.e., a disrupted balance between the state of arousal and the amount of stimuli experienced.<sup>18</sup>"

Stuart Shanker also distinguishes five generic stress areas:

- Biological (unmet basic needs – lack of sleep, hunger, noise, difficulties in sensory integration);
- Emotional (excess of strong emotions that hinder rational thinking);
- Social (observation or dealing with conflicts and aggressive behaviors);
- Cognitive (information overload);
- Prosocial (excess of perceived emotions from others due to empathy and concern).<sup>19</sup>

The process of self-regulation, as the management of emotions and thus the proclamation of a message related to internal experience to the world, may be accompanied by chaos or ineptitude. The lack of developed skills in expressing emotions is common, especially in childhood and adolescence, which is conditioned by the process of maturation and gradual finding oneself in one's emotional life.

Getting to know and understanding one's own emotional nature does not happen overnight; it is a process full of twists and turns, trials and errors, and eventually successes. During this process, it is very easy to fall into the trap of alleged feelings, which are not identical to emotions and do not name them. Unlike emotions, which are expressed through feelings associated with emotional states, alleged feelings arise from interpretations, thoughts<sup>20</sup>.

Alleged feelings are considered inappropriate reading and expressing one's emotions, often used as a substitute in communication. However, following Marshall Rosenberg, a psychologist who first used this term, skillful recognition of feelings contributes to better self-understanding<sup>21</sup>. Rosenberg emphasizes the uselessness of false feelings in interpersonal communication and then describes them as verbal aggression directed at the interlocutor. Kept to oneself, processed, and reflected upon, they can, however, provide important information about oneself.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> S. Shanker, *Self-reg. Jak pomóc...*, s. 17.

<sup>20</sup> M. Jankowska, *Zarządzanie...*, s. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Experiencing emotions and the process of their self-regulation can be even more challenging for Neurodivergent individuals, where the acquisition of cognitive skills develops in a different way and within individualized time frames<sup>22</sup>. During my meetings with children and adolescents, I often observed difficulties in expressing emotions or alternating expressions of emotions and alleged feelings. Emotional communication often dominated over a cool assessment of the situation and defined the further course of activities. I sensed that I had no choice but to work with what I had – to adapt to the situation rather than fight against it. In order to ask the right questions and understand needs, I tried to listen carefully to every message directed towards me or other participants in the activities. Through this, I understood that alleged feelings had become the currency, a means of communication for Neurodivergent – their tool for negotiating their place in the world.

Following the alleged feelings initially proved difficult for me, while Neurodivergent individuals seemed to do it extremely naturally. Colored by unlimited imagination, descriptions of emotional states flowed sincerely from their mouths; after all, it was permission to experience "on their own terms." I began to write down selected sentences to reflect on them longer. I found value in them; alleged feelings turned out to be a bridge in mutual communication. Thanks to them, the chapters of the Notebooks... gained their unique titles.

But most importantly, Neurodivergent individuals gave me courage, without which this story would not have unfolded. Thanks to them, I learned that someone experiencing neurodiversity does not see it as something negative or exceptional. Either you are Neurodivergent or you are not, and it turned out that you can talk about it in an unrestrained way, as evidenced by the dialogue from which everything started:

- *Well, you can't see it* - Mateusz blurted out, as if reproachful.
- *What can't you see in this work?*
- *You see, I have ADHD, and so does Niko, but you can't see it. Right?*
- *No, you can't.* - I replied, not entirely understanding where Mateusz was heading.
- *And what can't you see in yourself?*
- *Hm... that I have two teeth less?*
- *Well, you can't see that either!* - he shouted satisfied.
- *But I'll tell you, you came up with it...* - Mati interrupted me halfway through the sentence.
- *Yessssss! I came up with it like a sling, at you, ma'am!*

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<sup>22</sup> S. Merchut, *Strategie regulowania...*

Child is an expert in their own affairs<sup>23</sup>

Speaking of a modern perspective on working with a child - where the ethics of collaboration and treating children on an equal footing with adults are a priority - the work of Janusz Korczak immediately comes to mind. Although most of his thoughts were written and structured almost a hundred years ago, they still remain an accurate and relevant social diagnosis from which conclusions can and should be drawn. Although the observation of the continuous relevance of the writer's ideas is generally uplifting (as it testifies to their timelessness), from the perspective of social attitudes, it undoubtedly has a negative undertone. It means that little has changed in this matter.

Korczak's pedagogical postulates and attitude - demanding respect for children and recognizing them as fully-fledged individuals - originate, among others<sup>24</sup>, from the observed marginalization of the position of children in the "adult world." In the previous subsection, I mentioned the courage to speak openly about neurodiversity that I acquired thanks to them - the Neurodivergent themselves. However, it was not always obvious to me, and I did not always show an open attitude - I often lacked mindfulness and sensitivity to differences.

The beginning of my pedagogical practice turned out to be disappointing. I was sure of my knowledge and convinced of my infallibility. I also lacked the naivety to believe that my colleagues would take care of introducing me to the institution - because who knows their charges better than they do? Unfortunately, instead of help in the adaptation process, I was met with great disappointment. The people I counted on turned out to be a negative pattern that I did not want to replicate in my work. Initial, small signals intensified over time, arousing concern and helplessness in me. When contemptuous and sarcastic questions-comments like: *how do you feel like making an effort...?* - finally appeared, I stopped deceiving myself and heard everything. Numerous contemptuous comments about children and their diagnoses exchanged between education professionals; belittling or ignoring children's opinions, verbal aggression, pressure, and coercion, and finally comments targeting the Neurodivergent aimed at negatively emphasizing their differences - these and other multidimensional manifestations of aggression sparked internal rebellion and intensified a strong sense of disagreement.

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<sup>23</sup>Subtitle is a borrowing and paraphrase of Janusz Korczak's thought - "*Child is an expert, an authority in their childish world. They discover, create the child's reality, prompting the adult to reflect, often revealing new meanings to them (...).*" In: *Prawo dziecka do szacunku*, s. 6, Warszawa 2012.

<sup>24</sup> In part, because I don't know of another person who would consciously make the decision to end their own life along with their charges, to be with them until the end of their moments.

In that place, I didn't find friends among the staff, but I did find excellent companions for creative work among the children. These future adults became equal partners and authorities in their own matters for me, and every encounter with them filled me with genuine joy. Basing my approach on Korczak's idea (which has been paraphrased into the title of this subsection), I made the necessary shift towards the children, hoping that they would tell me the most and the best about themselves.

Following Korczak's concept of participation, which revolves around observing the child attentively and giving them due mindfulness, as well as actively involving the child in the creative process, not just as a source of inspiration:

*"(...) Inside me lives a pompous authority who recognizes 'such a little brat' on the spot, thoroughly penetrates. Inside me lives a demoralized bungler, whom the school trained in slacking off the duties of true understanding. These two little fingers raised by little Władzia, it's a protest of a living being who won't dismiss himself with anything, who won't agree to a note, a label – it says, 'you don't know me.' What do I know about Władzia? That she's spinning? The teacher threw out casually, 'slacker' – it tasted good to me – I internalized. – Maybe Władzia is not a slacker. Perhaps she should renounce the perfunctory diagnosis, admit the mistake – and in return, receive a few autocratic comments.<sup>25</sup>"*

In the quoted fragment, Janusz Korczak creates a self-portrait. An antagonist who recognizes in himself the "pompous authority." This authority reflects on why he truly doesn't want to see Władzia, only applies a mental shortcut taken from others, and thus looks at the girl. In his characteristic way, Korczak reverses the meaning and takes us through a list of cardinal mistakes made by adults in their contact with children: emphasizing automation, highlighting the brevity of actions, and the lack of effort made to acquire sufficient knowledge to not condescend to their charges.

The mentioned "autocratic comments" – that is, statements made by children about themselves – should become the key to building the relationship between adults and children. However, recognizing and interpreting the signals that come our way requires the mentioned mindfulness.

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<sup>25</sup> J. Korczak, *Jak kochać dziecko*, s. 372, Warszawa 2020.

The difficulty in interpreting these messages seems unavoidable because we use different languages and their forms, regardless of the overall growth of our knowledge. To build a community and mutual trust, Korczak does not suggest shortcuts but a patient path full of learning from each other. Personally, I find great value in such an approach. In reality, deadlines and shortcuts often overshadow efforts par excellence. We always rush towards something we don't yet have, look for the endpoint of our chosen goal, and make plans for what will happen when we achieve that goal.

Perhaps it is rough and severe, but probably in the face of current societal habits and expectations, Korczak would not pass the exam. He does not create a manual for action. He does not provide ready-made solutions. Instead, he engages in a battle, a critique of the status quo. He not only deals with others but, more importantly, presents himself as an example, does not shy away from condemnation, and holds himself accountable for his own path. What can we do, according to Korczak? Be "attentive and vigilant<sup>26</sup>" both towards children – their diversity and the histories they've lived – and towards ourselves, our own attitudes, and motivations.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., s. 111.

## On how we painted the little room "Kamerlik"

If my text, contrary to my intention, suggests a very serious character of the workshops and activities I conduct, placing me in the position of a queen managing order in a swarm of little bees, it's high time to correct this mistakenly created impression. Instead of scientific arguments, I will use an anecdote that fantastically captures the character of my creative meetings with children.

Although this story is related to painting, it has nothing to do with artistic activities. Or maybe it's just the opposite – perhaps it's our biggest, shared act of participation. But from the beginning... Besides the art room – where I settled for a longer time, even calling it "mine" – there was another small room. We called it the "kamerlik," which in Silesian dialect means a *storage room, a small space*<sup>27</sup>. The kamerlik housed almost everything that didn't fit in the art room.

One day, we lost Olaf. That day he played with us as usual, and then suddenly, imperceptibly disappeared from our sight. After immediately launching a search, we found him in the described *kamerlik*. He was sitting there alone, quietly, in the dim light. He wasn't afraid of the place he found himself in; rather, he sought tranquility there. He honestly told me that "it was too loud, and he wanted to be in silence," which, in my understanding, triggered Olaf's self-regulation mechanism. He added that *it would be nice if he could sit there again someday*. That's how the idea of collectively painting the walls of the room in a neutral shade of gray was born, supporting the process of calming down and then organizing all the treasures accumulated in the kamerlik.

From then on, the second name of this room was: "the room for calming down," and the *kamerlik* opened its doors to anyone who needed to embrace a peaceful place.

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<sup>27</sup> Source: <https://www.antryj.pl/slownik/slownik-slasko-polski-i-k/> [accessed: October 9, 2023].

CHAPTER 2.  
DESIGNER – RECIPIENT (YOU)







Reading the book "Histories of the Eye" prompted me to broader considerations about the eye as *a human organ and, consequently, the process of vision. Professor Swoboda describes the eye as an extreme, boundary organ, a place where the image of the world penetrates into a person—a strange meeting point, a part of the human body yet non-human, as it concentrates and reflects what is external*<sup>29</sup>.

No precise, even the most detailed physical descriptions of the process of seeing or the structure of the eye capture the psychological phenomenon resulting from this activity. Captured images reaching the eye are then subjected to the process of analysis and evaluation in the brain. They influence the experience and understanding of emotions, some are stored in long-term memory. In the case of re-encountering a similar image, the brain utilizes the established pattern, allowing us to compare, create associations and references, comprehend, and understand.

A similar phenomenon is elaborated on by the theorist and perception psychologist Rudolf Arnheim, who, in his reflections, first determined the significance of the shape of an object not only seen at the moment of observing the object but also as *an image conditioned by the totality of visual experiences that a given object or type of objects provided us throughout our lives*<sup>30</sup>. In simple terms, this means that recognizing an object occurs on both the level of visibility and, equally importantly, on the level of using the catalog of associations and accumulated experiences created in our minds.

Based on the idea of object patterns, Arnheim develops the concept of the influence of the past on perceptions:

*Every visual experience is embedded in a spatiotemporal context. The appearance of objects is influenced not only by what we see next to them at a given moment but also by what we saw before. However, in acknowledging these influences, we will not maintain that everything surrounding the object automatically modifies its color and shape, or in extreme terms, that the appearance of the object is simply a product of all the influences to which it necessarily submits or has submitted*<sup>31</sup>.

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28 The title is borrowed from the words of Dr. Joanna Podgórska, in: *Tak działa mózg. Jak mądrze dbać o jego funkcjonowanie?*, Warszawa 2023.

29 T. Swoboda, *Historie oka*, s. 8. Gdańsk 2010.

30 R. Arnheim, *Sztuka i percepcja wzrokowa. Psychologia twórczego oka*, p. 59, Łódź 2022.

31 Ibid., p. 60-61.

In summary, Arnheim argues that perception involves engaging the sense of sight and the records of memory. It combines the competence of physical observation with the eye and links this event to previous individual experiences stored in our minds.

The concept of the influence of the past and the clarification of the meaning of perception lead Arnheim to the theory of perceptual concepts, understood as an intuitive mechanism that enables capturing the essence of a thing based on just a few noticed characteristic features<sup>32</sup>. He claims that perception works from the general to the specific – thus, we only notice individual details at a later stage:

*A few characteristic features are enough not only to determine what or who the perceived object is but also for this object to appear as a complete, integrated pattern. This applies not only to our image of the object as a whole but also to every detail that attracts our attention. The human face, like the entire figure, is seen and understood as a system containing all the important elements – eyes, nose, mouth – to which additional details can be added. And if we decide to focus on someone's eye – that eye will also be perceived as a complete pattern: a circular iris with a dark pupil in the middle, surrounded by a boat-shaped, drooping eyelid frame<sup>33</sup>.*

These *perceptual concepts*, as argued by Arnheim, result from the creation of concepts, which, in turn, are the result of using the visual nervous system and senses. He considers vision as a raw process, merely as the registration of experiences, which are then processed into an appropriate system of general forms<sup>34</sup>. Therefore, one can infer that each person, looking or more broadly, perceiving reality through the senses, undergoes a creative process. The result of sensory perception is the creation of patterns and references. They have an individual character and are different for everyone. However, considering their basic scope, such as optical illusions, perspective vision, color or texture perception, and smells, perceptual concepts are similar enough to be considered universal or comparative.

The universalism of perceptual concepts and associative patterns is utilized in the field of graphic design, particularly in the process of user experience (UX) design<sup>35</sup> and user interface (UI) design<sup>36</sup>. These closely related fields use psychological mechanisms and

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32 Ibid., p. 56.

33 Ibid., p. 56.

34 Ibid., p. 58.

35 User Experience Design (UX) refers to the sum of reactions and feelings experienced by a user of a product.

36 User Interface (UI) refers to building the language of communication with the audience of a project.

patterns to determine the experiences accompanying the use of a designed service or product. Designing experiences is allowed with the intention of both positive and negative feelings<sup>37</sup>. The term "*user experience design*" was first used by Professor of Cognitive Psychology and Computer Science, Don Norman, who, considering the duties he performed, named his position at Apple Computers "experience design architect"<sup>38</sup> Norman expands the theory of experience-oriented design in his publication "*The Design of Everyday Things*"<sup>39</sup> where he points out the competencies that a UX designer should possess: an interest in elements of psychology, art, usability, industrial design, technology, as well as empathy and the ability to understand the needs of the project's target audience<sup>40</sup>. This implies that a person assigned the role of a user experience designer should demonstrate interdisciplinary interests and skills, encompassing both artistic-humanistic and technical fields.

It is worth contemplating the reciprocity between the user experience design (UX) field and Rudolf Arnheim's theory of perceptual concepts. UX, in its assumption, is based on psychological models, so it can be stated that perceptual concepts are also used in this process. As Arnheim's assertion suggests, these concepts are formed as a result of experiences and perceptions. UX, in a way, accomplishes the reverse task – it creates a field of experiences (such as a project) through the resources of knowledge about universal perceptual concepts, which are consciously and intentionally utilized.

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<sup>37</sup> M. Zyznarski, *User Experience – projektowanie pozytywnego doświadczenia*, in: <https://www.comarch.pl/erp/blog/user-experience-projektowanie-pozytywnego-doswiadczenia/> [accessed: November 9, 2023].

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> D. Norman, *Dizajn na co dzień*, Kraków 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 22-28.

Do you see what I see?

As a designer and illustrator, I often use the language of associations and metaphors in the process of conceptualization and creation. I leverage my reservoir of perceptual concepts to create visual content, images, ensuring that the resulting visuals resonate with the audience through narrative play, humor, or double entendre. I find myself in a complex situation – using visual shortcuts and incorporating information obtained through conversations, and then interpolating the borrowed language into the field of creativity. Because my task largely involves mediating information, I feel responsible for the process of communication and understanding of intentions.

In my understanding of graphic design, the practice of user experience (UX) design is a broader field than limiting oneself to digital, commercial products. I am most drawn to projects that, even to a minimal extent, serve the audience – those that have a social impact or consider the presence of the audience and their needs. The natural consequence of my thinking about UX is my diploma project, which speaks not only about me but also addresses the space of other people; in a symbolic way, it becomes a bridge between me and the Neurodivergent. In this configuration, there is still room for one more party – the recipients of the designed and created object, namely, the *Visual Activity Books*.

Determining the needs of the target group for this project was a daunting task, relying solely on personal observation and situation recognition. The driving force was a change in perspective, awareness, sensitivity, and empathy. However, I never heard about these needs directly; I used conventional patterns, fragments of overheard statements, and brief observations from conversations. The target group never learned that they were chosen as the target. In reality, anyone who has ever been curious about what it's like to be in the shoes of others belongs to this group. In other words, probably all of us.

The practice in which the target group consists solely of designers and their own experiences is called self-design or designing based on one's own experiences and requirements<sup>41</sup>. It involves not bringing people outside the team into the design process and also verifying the effectiveness of the applied solutions within the group. This tactic is successfully used, among others, in the design department of Apple<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> M. Zyznarski, *User Experience – projektowanie pozytywnego doświadczenia*, in: <https://www.comarch.pl/erp/blog/user-experience-projektowanie-pozytywnego-doswiadczenia/> [accessed: November 9, 2023].

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

I will return once again to the premise of user experience design to emphasize the conscious, intentional creation of a project in a specific way to influence the audience in line with the adopted strategy and the intentions of the design team. I do not consider manipulative techniques, as UX involves actions in line with ethics. When making design decisions, it is crucial to be aware of the potential impact on the audience and the goal one aims to achieve. With a similar intention, I designed the *Visual Activity Books*, with the difference that building experiences is a different process. Of course, the goal is to facilitate understanding of certain phenomena or behaviors, but the methods that lead to this typically disrupt, hinder, or work on the principle of associations with other experiences. The process I employ is, in a way, a contradiction of the principle "*Don't make me think*<sup>43</sup>" which aims to minimize the effort associated with finding elements of a project while emphasizing the intuitive elements.

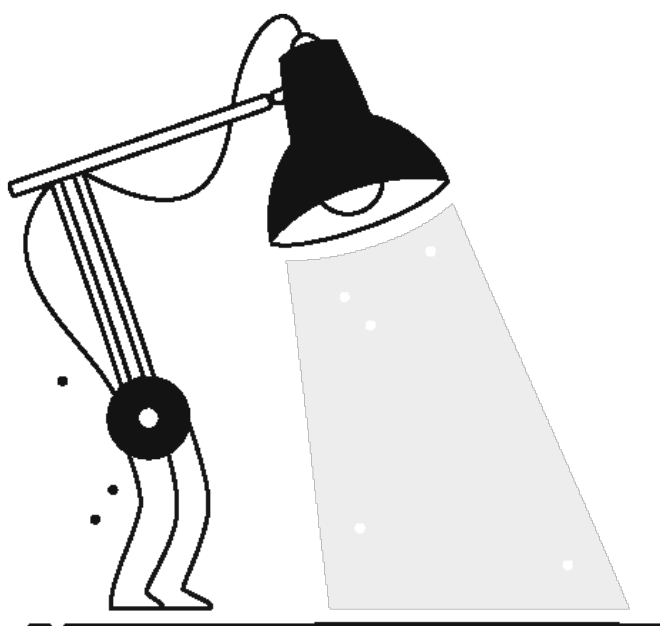
As a result of the decisions I made in the publication design process, I want to trigger a reverse process – stimulate independent exploration of meanings. I assume multiple interpretations of the solutions proposed by me and look forward to them with curiosity.

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<sup>43</sup> This is a reference to Steve Krug's book with the same title, in which the author discusses UX design principles emphasizing the maximum simplification of processes related to the user's role and effort.



CHAPTER 3.  
DESIGNER – OBJECT







"I wrote like a machine"<sup>44</sup>.

If I were to start talking about my search for the right form for the expanding project, it would be ignorance and abuse to omit the figure of Maryna Falska<sup>45</sup> - a collaborator mentioned multiple times in Chapter I by Janusz Korczak. It was she who introduced the practice of taking notes into her pedagogical work, capturing the memories of her charges from Nasz Dom<sup>46</sup>. "*Wspomnienia z maleńkości dzieci Naszego Domu*" (Memories from the Childhood of the Children of Our Home) in Pruszków, published for the first time in 1914, is a collection of stories and notes written by eight children with whom "Mrs. Maryna<sup>47</sup>" collaborated. What sets "*Wspomnienia z maleńkości...*" apart from Korczak's numerous publications on education and pedagogy is that Falska was interested in the history of specific children she interacted with daily, and she built relationships with them.

There is something exceptional in "*Wspomnienia z maleńkości...*" that draws my thoughts to Falska's publication in the context of the project I am conducting - it is the permission for childlike narration, the freedom of expression evident in the unaltered language. The author herself emphasizes that all the statements she recorded were made voluntarily, even without initiating the topic:

*I didn't ask any questions. If I asked - I noted it in parentheses - I didn't react at all, neither with a smile nor with any show of interest. - I wrote like an automaton*<sup>48</sup>.

Through the seemingly simple act of taking notes, Falska managed to achieve something very valuable - she provided space for stories that children wanted to express, to gift someone with their own history. The children's expressions in their own, unrestrained, unedited language create a sense of their presence in the narrative about themselves:

*And now I will tell you how our dad took us to the doctor. Dad took us to the doctor; we entered the room and waited at a desk with books and pens. There was a dog there holding cigarettes in its teeth. We sat on the ottoman, and then Mrs. Mary and the doctor entered. The*

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<sup>44</sup> The subtitle is borrowed from the words of Maryna Falska.

M. Falska, *Wspomnienia z maleńkości dzieci Naszego Domu w Pruszkowie*, p. 53, Pruszków 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Actually, Maryna Rogowska-Falska used the shortened form of her last name because that's how the wards of Nasz Dom in Pruszków addressed her.

<sup>46</sup> "Nasz Dom" is the name of a care and educational institution founded in 1919 in Pruszków. The founders of the institution were Maryna Falska and Janusz Korczak. In 1928, "Nasz Dom" relocated to a newly constructed headquarters in Bielany.

<sup>47</sup> "Pani Maryna" appears repeatedly in the publication "*Wspomnienia z maleńkości dzieci Naszego Domu w Pruszkowie*" as a term used by Maryna Falska's charges to refer to her.

<sup>48</sup> M. Falska, *Wspomnienia...*, p. 53.

*doctor undressed, sat on a chair, and told us to undress halfway. We undressed, approached the doctor, Dr. D. examined us, and told us to sit on a chair that spins around and can be made low or high. Dr. D. made it low, told me to sit, lifted me up with that chair, spun me around, kissed me, and asked: "Do you like spinning?" And I replied: "Yes."*

*And he kept asking me what I did, whether I was good, mischievous, whether I fought with someone, whether I broke someone's head, whether I gave someone a bump. And I would answer: I fought, gave a bump, cut Janek's head. And he also asked Janek and Józek. And that's it...<sup>49</sup>.*

The convention of conversation adopted by Falska, in which a child utters a stream of words simultaneously handwritten by her, probably aimed to achieve the purest form of communication, and thus recording. It is difficult to decisively support or oppose such a method of interaction, minimizing gestures, as we do not have a complete view of the situation. We do not know if the mentioned conversations were the only circumstances in which the discussed topics were addressed, we did not personally know the protagonists of the chapters, and we have no knowledge of whether these minimized stimuli positively influenced them. However, judging holistically through the prism of Maryna Falska's pedagogical activities, it can be assumed that the practices she applied did not contribute negatively to the state and well-being of her charges.

In seeking an appropriate form for the information I gathered – tentatively called "*skill exercises*<sup>50</sup>" – I decided, unlike Falska, not to remove the context and traces of my presence in the events I document. This is due, among other things, to my way of integrating and engaging in the process of shared activities with children, which I strive to practice. For example, if we happened to be sitting on the carpet in the common room, and in order to sit on the carpet, everyone had to take off their shoes, we all did. I also never had a problem admitting to the children or young people when I made a mistake or lacked knowledge about a question they asked. The latter I cleverly concealed by suggesting a joint search for the answer on the Internet, which gave me the opportunity to temporarily deviate from the principle that in the school club during collective play, the use of phones is not allowed. Placing myself on an equal footing with others guaranteed me a participant's role in events (workshops, various artistic activities, games, and plays) of which I was the initiator and organizer.

49 M. Falska, *Opowiada Staś*, in: *Wspomnienia...*, p. 32.

50 It was the initial form of the title of my doctoral dissertation, ultimately replaced by the name "Visual Activity Books."

I didn't decide to transcribe fragments of conversations with Neurodivergents based on Maryna Falska's pedagogical activities – I wasn't familiar with her pedagogical practices, and I knew little about her. However, the discovery of her work was not without significance for the continuation of the project and its further development – on the contrary, it bolstered my sense of confidence and the relevance of the chosen theme.

Falska's method of consolidating the identity of children occurred through storytelling and somewhat in the literary layer due to maintaining the structure of free expression. The direction that interested me, where I feel the greatest freedom of expression, is the creation of visual experiences, the consolidation of information, and the communication of messages using visual means. To influence the perception and thinking of the audience, I will naturally choose the field of graphic storytelling and, at times, symbolism and conciseness.

Perhaps I aimed to create a very personal record of my everyday life, but the most important aspect for me became the preservation and transmission of this testimony through a universal form, as visual content is not constrained by language barriers.

## Attribution errors

It should be assumed that, as beings capable of independently collecting and processing data obtained from the outside, we have different ways of processing this information, cataloging it, and assigning meanings to it. These activities – collecting, processing, and cataloging information – largely rely on intuitive thinking<sup>51</sup> and assumptions. We often engage in simplifying and explaining reality through rationalization of events because our brains assess events based solely on limited information and our cognitive resources. This ambiguity, as well as the general difficulties associated with the predisposition to intuitive thinking, can hinder problem-solving or understanding events around us.

Intuitive thinking alone is absolutely insufficient for solving complex issues and problems because we live in a dynamic environment and are constantly negotiating our needs with others, requiring us to use a much broader range of knowledge. If we choose to rely solely on intuitive thinking, utilizing our accumulated associational information, there is a risk that we will operate with immature conclusions, and cognitive distortions – exaggerated or irrational thinking patterns<sup>52</sup>.

In psychology, there are many parallel aspects related to cognitive errors that directly relate to rationalizing the causes of one's or others' behavior. One of these aspects is the so-called *fundamental attribution error*<sup>53</sup>, which involves a tendency to explain behavior based on internal, stable categories (such as disposition, character traits) while simultaneously ignoring situational, external influences.<sup>54</sup>

Let's try to reverse the situation then. If intuitive thinking relies on the process of automation, and the act itself is described as rapid, it almost reduces the possibility of prolonged, multi-level information processing and seeking new solutions to zero. Remaining in this process does not develop us in terms of accumulating information. So what happens when we cannot associate a new event with something we already know?

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51 Type of associative thinking, characterized by, among other things, lightning-fast speed and automaticity of mental operations. Processed information is derived from accumulated experiences, through spontaneously occurring associations, as well as through conscious and regular learning. Intuitive reasoning is considered passive in the sense of involuntary thinking, and one of its main risks is the non-representativeness of the gathered information, which translates into the conclusions drawn.

52 Ph.D. in Medical Sciences G. Mączka, *Zniekształcenia poznawcze – psychoterapia poznawczo-behawioralna*, in: <https://www.centrumdobrejterapii.pl/materialy/zniekształcenia-poznawcze-psychoterapia-poznawczo-behawioralna/> [accessed: August 14, 2023].

53 Correcting the attributional error is credited to the Canadian social psychologist Lee David Ross.

54 A. Reber, *Słownik psychologii*, p. 88, Warszawa 2008.

The process of searching and opening up to acquiring information from the outside, as well as integrating the experiences gained, are skills that can be described as "enduring prolonged discomfort of not knowing." In 1954, researcher Hans Jürgen Eysenck<sup>55</sup> referred to this skill as tolerance for ambiguity<sup>56</sup>, and in 1962, researcher Gordon Bruner<sup>57</sup> defined tolerance for ambiguity as *the tendency to perceive and interpret ambiguous situations as desirable*<sup>58</sup>. This means a hunger for moments when the existing way of thinking is no longer sufficient and requires updating.

The concept of tolerance for ambiguity was further developed in the context of *something that an individual avoids or seeks. The level of tolerance for ambiguity is more a way of assessing the situation than a coping mechanism(...)*<sup>59</sup>. Therefore, the same activities—associating, imagining, making mistakes—may motivate one person while strongly hindering another.

In the process of forming what eventually became the "Visual Proficiency Notebooks," I encountered a plethora of conflicting information, mutually exclusive contexts. What I could read about the individuals I collaborated with in the "special needs" section of the electronic journal was different from what I observed during our collaborative work. Raw factual descriptions provided minimal knowledge about the neurodivergent individuals with whom I had already built a certain kind of relationship and had somewhat gotten to know. The thought of why descriptions from psychological-pedagogical counseling centers are negatively biased, focusing largely on what neurodivergent individuals cannot do or achieve, troubled me. There were usually far fewer recommendations based on focusing on their strengths.

I thought that I, myself, am capable of characterizing each of these individuals in a completely different way. Following this thought, I decided to take action – I started describing the behaviors of neurodivergent individuals, noting their temperament, gestures, body posture, facial expressions, and recording their colorful stories and comments. The driving force behind these inquiries was curiosity and cognitive flexibility – understood by me as openness to new perspectives.

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55 Hans Jürgen Eysenck was a German-born English psychologist, researcher, and personality theorist.

56 D. Czajeczny, *Skala Tolerancji Wieloznaczności Edwarda F. McQuarriego i Davida Glena Micka: polska adaptacja*, in: *Testy Psychologiczne w Praktyce i Badaniach*, p. 2, Poznań 2016.

57 Gordon Bruner is the Professor at Southern Illinois University primarily a researcher in the field of marketing.

58 D. Czajeczny, *Skala Tolerancji...*, p. 2.

59 Ibid., p. 3.

The actions I took somehow corresponded to the concept of tolerance for ambiguity, including attempts to gather information from an external source other than initially provided and subsequent comparative verification. The process of acquiring this information was never closed or exhausted. There will always be other external factors that will affect the motor skills, behavior, overcoming of challenges, withdrawal, or various other emotional states of neurodivergent individuals in different ways.

## ANTI ARCHIVE

The spatial conditions in which we worked and the composition of the group were diverse. There was no constant rule that would ensure stability and predictability in the course of activities – there were too many variables to make stable assumptions and establish rigid, uniform goals for everyone. The sooner I understood and accepted this, the easier it was for us to work together. Among the participants, there were both Neurotypical and Neurodivergent individuals – the teams were always diverse, and in my opinion, there is no reason to separate representatives of both groups. On the contrary, children cleverly perceive differences among themselves and learn from each other, observing various problem-solving approaches. It is an exercise in mindfulness for them.

The spaces in which we worked, in terms of the arrangement of elements and equipment, were similar to each other and did not attract much attention. As is often the case in school rooms, they consisted of mismatched elements, a collection of freely donated furniture that was still suitable for use. Fortunately, this did not hinder the conduct of activities; my only requirement was a carpet – smaller or larger – as long as it could be symbolically used as a shared space for play. In the face of the carpet, everyone becomes equal – one cannot dominate with knowledge, age, or experience when you take off your shoes and sit on the carpet with a group of children. However, the common play space was not a guarantee of complete agreement among participants, the absence of conflicts, and unforeseen difficulties. The rule was simple: if nothing has happened yet, either we don't know about something, or something is about to happen. Not everyone has equal predispositions to function in specific social conditions – some were bothered by excessive noise, others needed more space, and unpredictability adversely affected yet another group. These are probably not individual opinions – many similar testimonies I have read in publications written by Neurodivergent individuals:

*"The construction of school is based on the basic assumption that all children are the same. This works for the majority who are not bothered by noise in the classroom, group work, and eat everything in the cafeteria. But there is a minority that cannot cope with this, and the same responsibility is not taken for them"*<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> C. Törnvall, *Autystki. O kobietach w spektrum*, p. 182, Warszawa 2022.

The author criticizes the systematic nature of institutions that standardize norms for the majority of children without considering exceptions and differences. Continuing to read about the challenges of functioning:

*"Society expects that children will be able to find themselves in an institution like school. Even though many environmental factors make it difficult for everyone. It's loud, cramped, and unpredictable; students with neuropsychiatric diagnoses are subjected to bullying. No wonder they don't want to go there. Who would enjoy being in such an environment?"<sup>61</sup>*

The model of conducting classes did not always follow the planned scenario. In reality, it almost never did, and I only noticed satisfying results when I stopped focusing on achieving set goals. For example, we won't get through the stage of hammering several nails into a piece of wood if we don't develop a way to perform this task in the presence of someone sensitive to sounds. I felt that we formed a certain model, all together participating in this process. In hindsight, I conclude that the participants created the process, set the direction of the activities; I was a vigilant observer.

The more time we spent together, the more open I became to proposing activities that went beyond the framework of artistic activities per se but brought a lot in the context of working with stimuli and sensory experiences. I also stopped feeling the burden of building – I had a program, a constructed model, and decided that we would play with it instead of implementing it point by point.

Perhaps the most important advice I received was the sentence: *"such is the difference that in education, theses are put forward, and in art, questions are asked"*<sup>62</sup> – the key turned out to be a momentary displacement of the educational role of what we are doing during the classes and focusing on these questions. Their significance does not necessarily manifest in the form of effects and subsequent stages. And so, for us, subsequent stages included: creating a journal of thoughts, discovering and drawing one's biggest "fear," recording a 10-meter roll of paper with numbers calculated by machines, embodying the role of inhabitants of newly discovered planets and telling about oneself, acquiring the skill of naming the structures and consistency of food, building a symbolic wall from red Lego bricks so that one of the participants could present (tell) us about his sensory defense.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>62</sup> Maria Wojtyzsko is an educator and theatrical scriptwriter.



In the face of the only constant, which was variability, I had to somehow acquire and accumulate the data and information needed to continue the project. I think my collection of notes can be described as an "anti-archive." It was a file of chaotic notes made on every possible calendar page, stacks of sticky notes, on photos, and short recordings in a digital notebook, which were never organized.

The starting point for collecting data for me was a model of cooperation that assumed partnership and respect for different perspectives—meaning that both adults and children could share valuable insights. Secondly, getting rid of all prejudices, mental shortcuts, and stereotypes. Listening to all communications and recording them "for later"—you never know when (or if at all) they will form a whole—even if they seem chaotic at the time of recording. Assuming equality in the relationship guarantees a two-way flow of experiences, without dividing into more and less experienced.

Another step is asking myself questions, doubting my thoughts and beliefs: Can our meetings be based on methodologically free, intuitively applied actions that form in the process itself? Can the information obtained by me result from factors such as impressions, sensations, imagination? What if children give up what is considered the achieved effect of the classes, and something else is important to them? What if the subject matter of the tasks is problematic or difficult for the participants?

Moments in which key information for the project was created, in a nutshell, are the intersection of several spaces: participation in workshops, attention deficits understood as crises, and related conversations.

*The Visual Activity Book* that emerged from the process of asking questions, observation, and acts of mindfulness are largely stories about expectations from the world and the impossibility of fulfilling them. The only thing left for me at this stage is to recognize that children's agency is not a product of an adult but an action flowing from a child, and then tell this story further.

## Visual Activity Books

In the previous subsections, I tried to explain the practice of acquiring knowledge and building concepts around the developing project. In this subsection, it's time to explain the technical aspects related to the publication, which ultimately bears the name "*Visual Activity Books*" and the design decisions I made during its creation. It is, to some extent, a shortened user manual, although the publication was designed to be understood without additional explanations.

Among the gathered research material, there were many concepts and phenomena of a chaotic and non-material nature. I faced the challenge: how to frame something that doesn't want or can't fit into those frames? The weight of the undertaking intertwined with a sense of responsibility for the form of communication and every decision I would make. How to ethically convey stories that are a narrative of someone's life, not just a filler in a text column? I am aware that I am moving in territory whose maps are constantly being sketched, so everyday records have taken on the character of hermetic information. I mediate this everyday life to try to show its unique uniqueness.

The heroines and heroes of individual chapters differ from each other. In addition to the conditions that distinguish them and with which they sometimes struggle, they also differ in the stage of development they are at. Each of them is at a different place on the axis of acceptance and self-discovery, as well as developing their own protective mechanisms. Despite this, they have something in common—qualities that make them unique and the fact that they are incredibly honest in their relationships. "*Visual Activity Books*" tell the story of seven Neurodivergent young individuals: Olaf, Olesia, Mateusz, Niko, Felix, Mirusia—although, to protect their identity, names and characteristics enabling their identification have been changed by me.

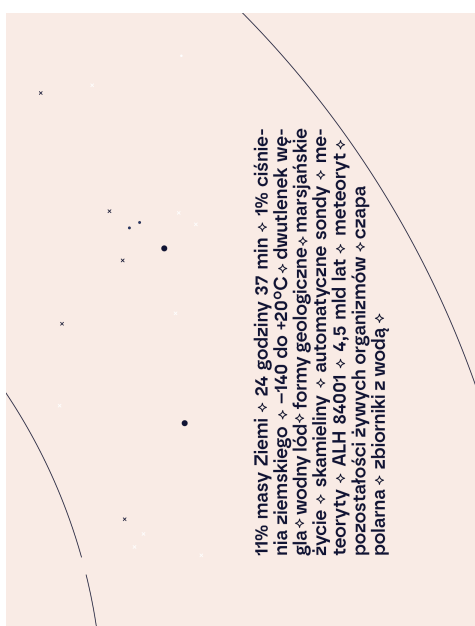
Each chapter is dedicated to one person; however, importantly, a chapter can describe several events from more than one common meeting. This way, sometimes, you can observe the cyclicity of different behaviors or phenomena. An exception is the eighth chapter, "*Is the lady mad at me for this planet?*" which serves as a bracket for the story of Olaf from the first chapter—„*Every Notion*“.

None of the stories is fictionalized—the descriptions of situations are a record of events observed from my perspective. I decided to keep the textual layer of *the Books* "raw"—without

interfering with the style of expression. This approach aimed to best reflect past events, become a testimony to children's experiences and perceptions.

Chapters gained their distinctive titles thanks to borrowings from the words of the characters. To a large extent, these sentences became a starting point for me to begin the narrative: a manifesto delivered by the Neurodivergent, often repeated, characteristic expressions, or they were remembered by me as a funny breakthrough in relationships. From the records in individual chapters, it can be inferred that the attention of children is sometimes focused on details incomprehensible from the perspective of an adult, and the transitions between stories are distant from each other. At that point, I took on the role of a narrator.

The meetings were characterized by different dynamics and course, so the chapters differ formally. Experimentations, brief descriptions of situations, dialogues, or illustrations responding to the unlimited imagination of children alternately appear on the pages. A special type of pages includes fragments of scientific articles. Their subject matter has been tailored to the characteristics of the individuals discussed in each chapter. Therefore, the text structure has been deliberately graphically disrupted. For example, these include: cut letters with dots, placing the text exclusively in the margins of the pages, or duplicating the text by placing the same sentences one after the other. The aim of such formal manipulations is an attempt to mechanically evoke an experience similar to the real one, emphasize a specific aspect, or identify with it.



Metaphorical approach to monotropism, i.e., the tendency to focus attention strictly in the so-called attention tunnel<sup>63</sup>. In the publication, this page is preceded by a shorter sheet that covers the column of the article, so that initially, you can only familiarize yourself with the selected fragment. In a similar way, a monotropic mind can function, which is focused only on a small number of interests and data at any given moment<sup>64</sup>.

*Fig. 2. Monotropism.*

<sup>63</sup> [pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monotropizm](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monotropizm) [accessed: March 6, 2023].

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

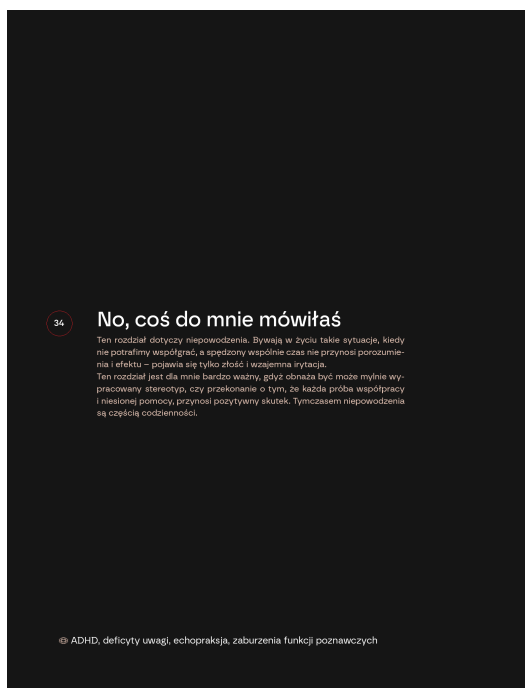


Fig. 3. Page numbering.

The selectively marked page numbering throughout the publication symbolically reflects attention deficits and cognitive function disorders. Characteristic symptoms of attention deficits include, among others, losing things and forgetting their location<sup>65</sup>. The removal of page numbering complicates the use of the book, to which we are accustomed - wanting to return to the sought content, one must find another way to perform this task. Mechanically, I attempted to convey the impression of losing a particular thing while being aware of its existence and searching.

Komunikacja dzieci z autyzmem – przegląd badań<sup>1</sup> (fragment)  
 ● Ewelina Młynarczyk-Karabin, Akademia Pedagogiki Specjalnej w Warszawie

Do najbardziej typowych cech komunikacji u dzieci zdrowych, a także autystycznych należy mowa echolaliczna. Nie jest ona werną kopią przekazu, lecz dominuje w niej świadome dostosowanie przekazu do danej sytuacji. Najbardziej typowe cechy. Według Międzynarodowej Klasyfikacji Chorób, Urazów i Przyczyn Zgonów echolalia jest to automatyczne powtarzanie dźwięków, wyrazów lub całych zdań zaraz po ich usłyszeniu(...), zaraz po ich usłyszeniu.

Bleszyński i Bobkiewicz (1997) oprócz terminu „echolalia” wprowadzili dodatkowy – „mowa echolaliczna”, która dotyczy, zdaniem badaczy, zaburzeń warstwy suprasegmentalnej przekazu, te zaś powodują, że w wypowiedziach dzieci autystycznych dominuje chęć świadomego dostosowania tych komunikatów do zastanej sytuacji. U dzieci autystycznych mowa echolaliczna jest traktowana jako maoizynowanie i przechowywanie w mózgu elementów słuchowych z otoczenia – traktowana jako maoizynowanie. Lovas (1993) uważa, że można ją traktować jako „wewnętrzny próg mowy”. Według Prizanta (1983) echolalia pojawia się natomiast tylko w sytuacjach, które są nieznanie dziecku, np. pojawienie się nowej osoby, zmiana otoczenia. Jak podaje Siegel (2012), ten sam wniosek pokazały w sytuacjach, które są nieznanie dziecku, badania przeprowadzone w 1995 r. przez Ritę Jordan i Stuarta Powella. Badacze ci zwrócili uwagę na fakt, że echolalia wzmacnia się, gdy dziecko musi sobie poradzić z nadmiarem informacji, poradzić z nadmiarem informacji, które muszą zostać przetworzone przez mózg. Wtedy też najprostszym rozwiązaniem jest powtórzenie przez nie usłyszaną wypowiedź. Siegel zwrócił uwagę na fakt, że to badania Prizanta i Duchana z 1981 r. były przełomowe dla interpretacji mowy dzieci z autyzmem, przełomowe dla interpretacji mowy ponieważ ich wyniki pozwoliły na opracowanie podziału na siedem kategorii echolalii na: tychimastowej oraz 14 – echolalii odroczonej. Liczba stosowanych przez dziecko wariantów echolalii może świadczyć o jego poziomie rozwoju językowego. Prizant i Duchan uznali także, że echolalia może, choć nie musi, charakteryzować się zamiarem komunikacyjnym, może, choć nie musi. Podobne zdania jest Bleszyński (1996), który uważa, że jeżeli echolalia będzie formą komunikacji, to przez odpowiednie strukturalizowanie w terapii przyczyni się do nawiązania lepszego kontaktu z dzieckiem, a tym samym może wpłynąć na jej efekt, lepsze kontakty z dzieckiem. Odmienne stanowisko przedstawia Uta Frith (2005). Badaczka ta twierdzi, że pojawienie się echolalii powoduje, iż dziecko skupia się na mowie w sposób wybiórczy, i niekoniecznie dowodzi tego, że dziecko rozumie znaczenie i cel tej pierwszej. Dziecko wypowiada bowiem usłyszane frazy, jednak pomija interpretację wypowiedzianych słów w celu nadania im znaczenia(...).

<sup>1</sup> Fragment artykułu pochodzący z czasopisma „Człowiek – Niepełnosprawność – Społeczeństwo”, CNIS nr 2(52) 2016, 103–116, ISSN 1734-5537 (dostęp dnia: 13.04.2023).

The punctuating of the letter "g" in the article serves the metaphorical representation of obsessive-compulsive disorder, manifested in Olesia as an excessive focus on words containing that letter. This disorder arose due to a traumatic experience, and a form of self-regulation for Olesia is a game she devised. It involves attempting to find words with similar meanings that do not contain that letter.

Fig. 4. Punctuating letters.

<sup>65</sup> slimebox.pl/autyzm-wysokofunkcjonujący-charakterystyka-objawy-leczenie [accessed: January 12, 2023].



W the same article, I decided to manipulate the textual layer by repeating certain sequences of sentences directly after each other (*Fig. 5*). This is a reference to a thinking disorder called echolalia, which manifests as the unnecessary repetition of words or phrases spoken by others<sup>66</sup>.

*Fig. 5. Echolalia.*

In addition to manipulating the textual layer, there are also elements that, in standard usage, serve to emphasize elements of the publication, so-called enhancements – for example, cutting a fragment of an illustration, shortening the width of the page, using glossy foil, etc. I chose to use them metaphorically, thus impacting the viewer's imagination. The applied formal solutions are, in a way, an invitation to a game between the designer and the viewer, discovering hidden, metaphorical meanings. Sensory perception and the reception of stimuli have a certain universality, as they are non-linguistic elements of experience.



An example of such a technique is the pages with a fragment of the article "*Children with Attention Disorders*" to which a strip of semi-translucent paper has been attached. It disrupts the readability of the text by limiting its visibility, aiming to symbolize partial hearing loss, specifically the consequences related to information processing with partial hearing.

*Fig. 6. Partial Hearing Loss*

<sup>66</sup> A. D. Cameron, S. K. Sidorowicz (red.), *Psychiatria*, p. 34, Wrocław 2005.

A prominent view among designers and design theorists is responsible design in the service of society. Advocating for such an approach was Viktor Papanek, the author of three publications on designing for and around society<sup>67</sup>. He argued: "*Design can and should be a form of participation in a changing society*"<sup>68</sup> setting an example for less experienced designers. Papanek pays proper attention to the ethics that designers should embody, emphasizing the necessary paradigm shift in the approach to the essence and meaningfulness of the designer's profession. *Designing any product divorced from its sociological, psychological, or ecological context is no longer possible and cannot be accepted*<sup>69</sup> – he emphasized.

*Appropriate metaphors are like improved versions of user manuals because they convey knowledge about the functioning of an object without the need for conscious assimilation*<sup>70</sup> – following the idea of designer Robert Fabricant, I tried to leverage impressions and associations from various experiences, unrelated to the essence of design but connected to everyday activities. Analyzing or being mindful of simple phenomena, the essence of things, material properties, aided in the exploration of new design practices.

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<sup>67</sup> About publications: *Design for Human Scale*, *The Green Imperative* oraz *Dizajn dla realnego świata*.

<sup>68</sup> V. Papanek, *Dizajn dla realnego świata*, p. 78, Łódź 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>70</sup> R. Fabricant, *User Friendly. Jak niewidoczne zasady projektowania zmieniają nasze życie, pracę i rozrywkę*, p. 142, Kraków 2022.

## Conclusion

This undertaking is the culmination of many years of work with children and youth, including those who are Neurodivergent. It combines my professional work and educational background in graphic design, illustration, and pedagogical work. As a designer, it is crucial for me not to advocate for the elitism of issues related to art, creativity, and visual arts in general. On the contrary, it aims to make them accessible and introduce their elements into shared tasks and activities.

This project provides a space to talk about failures, setbacks. It allows accepting them, treating them, and interpreting them as "nothing negative." The work on the Visual Proficiency Notebooks did not proceed linearly; it was not easy. It was full of twists, setbacks, and doubts that forced continuous verification of steps and actions taken. However, the initial substantive consultations of the publication with psychologists, special education teachers, its reception, gave me confidence that the work I had done was meaningful and made sense.

At the beginning of this dissertation, I mentioned the tripartition of chapters and the relationships resulting from them: DESIGNER - CHILDREN; DESIGNER - RECIPIENT; DESIGNER - SUBJECT. The fourth relationship: RECIPIENT - SUBJECT is an area that I cannot describe or understand at this moment. It is that moment when the story begins, dear Recipient, when you confront the object created by me. Each of you will write Chapter Four best for yourself.

*The Books...* are not just a record of how I influenced the Neurodivergent individuals collaborating with me. In this perspective, the publication is not just an object but primarily a record of meetings and diverse relationships and becoming – the becoming of myself as a participant. Ultimately, this took all of us on a very interesting journey. Do the *Visual Activity Books* constitute a compendium of knowledge about Neurodiversity? Certainly not. I would call this publication a *tool for thinking*.





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## Abstract

Can one convey the experience of sensory hypersensitivity to others? How should one respond to the suggestion, "*Could you swap the salad for potatoes?*" spoken in the school cafeteria? How can the phenomenon of partial hearing loss be solidified to become an experiential act for observers? What can be discovered when one stops seeking shelter from the differences in the environment? Can joy in creation be found in collectively painting a room? These and many other questions have been my ponderings over the past few years.

The fundamental beginning of my doctoral dissertation was spending time with children and adolescents, including those with neurodiversity. Discovering their unique predispositions, recognizing individuality, and developing educational materials and workshop aids to popularize art among children and young people were the initial ideas. Due to various experiences, the suggestion emerged to adapt the content of activities to the psycho-physical capabilities of neurodivergent individuals. This change led to the formation of specific relationships that defined the further development of the project.

The thesis of this work is that there is a lack of scientific studies that simultaneously describe and experience; exert intentional influence through metaphors or formal, even structural, solutions. In my artistic and design activities, many examples of works with a narrative and user-oriented character can be found. These experiences helped me encapsulate a narrative about the everyday lives of neurodivergent individuals.

The doctoral dissertation is divided into three parts. In Part I, I discuss my relationship with the protagonists of *the Books* starting from the perspective that they will tell me about themselves best and most fully. Next, in Part II, I address selected aspects related to the perception and interpretation of vision and thinking, which may influence the assessment of situations. In the final part (Part III), I summarize the undertaking I embarked on—writing and illustrating fragments of stories and dialogues. In the conclusion, I invite readers to form their opinions and perceptions of the formal and aesthetic solutions I propose.

In relation to the set thesis, I proposed filling the identified gap with the publication "*Visual Activity Books*" which is a kind of game between the audience and the designer. It involves capturing nuances, perceptiveness, and inference. The metaphorical formal solutions leave room for many open interpretations.