

Outside In

Bringing work by marginalised and outsider artists to a wider public

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'Thank you so very, very much for having the courage and determination to organise and curate Outside In. It was a privilege and an honour to be part of this and has given me hope to try and forge further inroads into the artistic world.' Outside In artist, 2007

'Outside In' is a biennial open exhibition of art work by marginalised artists. It is held at, and managed by, Pallant House Gallery in Chichester, an art gallery with a collection of primarily Modern British art.¹ Outside In offers a series of six awards, including the opportunity to have a one-person show or residency at the gallery. It was set up in 2006 to offer opportunities to artists who are marginalised due to health, disability or because their work doesn't fit a prescribed art norm. Outside In held its first open art exhibition in 2007, with over 100 artists taking part, submitting over 200 pieces of work.

Outside In is managed by the Head of Learning at the Gallery and a steering group. The steering group consists of marginalised artists, private donors, Creative Response (a local arts organisation for people with mental health issues) and HMP Ford (a category D open prison in West Sussex). The challenge Outside In faces is ultimately to change attitudes about who is and is not an artist and what is and is not artwork.

Inclusion evolved

In the cultural sector, the inclusion agenda has moved away from working with targeted special interest groups towards a more general approach to working with the community. As part of 'Celebrating Diversity' 2008, Arts Council England stated that



*'The debate now also needs to encompass a richer and more broad-ranging definition of diversity. By "diversity", we mean that we will respond to issues around race, ethnicity, faith, disability, sexuality, class and economic disadvantage – any social or institutional barriers that prevent people from participating in and enjoying the arts.'*²

Our view is that the cultural barriers for a disabled person, which could include physical or intellectual access, might be similar to those of a single mother, a migrant worker or someone with health needs. Pallant House Gallery tries to work in an inclusive way in the development and delivery of its Community Programme, and Outside In continues this approach.

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This journey towards an inclusive programme began with the founding of the 'Partners in Art' scheme in 2002, a unique scheme that places artists in partnership where one partner needs additional support either due to disability, health, mental health or social exclusion. The scheme was developed initially for adults with learning difficulties as part of 'Building Bridges', an audience development programme for the building of the new wing at Pallant House Gallery.³ The scheme enables people to access the Gallery as any other gallery visitor by focussing on their interests in art and the Gallery and not on their disability. Partners in Art has at its heart a sharing of creativity. Its strength lies in enabling an individual to access the art world on an equal footing with a partner who shares their interest. The Community Programme at Pallant House Gallery aims to support people's creativity rather than focusing on their disability or needs.

Whereas Partners in Art seeks to deliver opportunity and access, and to deliver new audiences to galleries, it does this on an individual basis: each partnership finds its own way to address the barriers they come up against. Outside In was set up to challenge the larger cultural barriers which artists have to face. It has built on Partners in Art's focus on

individual creativity and applied it to a much broader demographic.

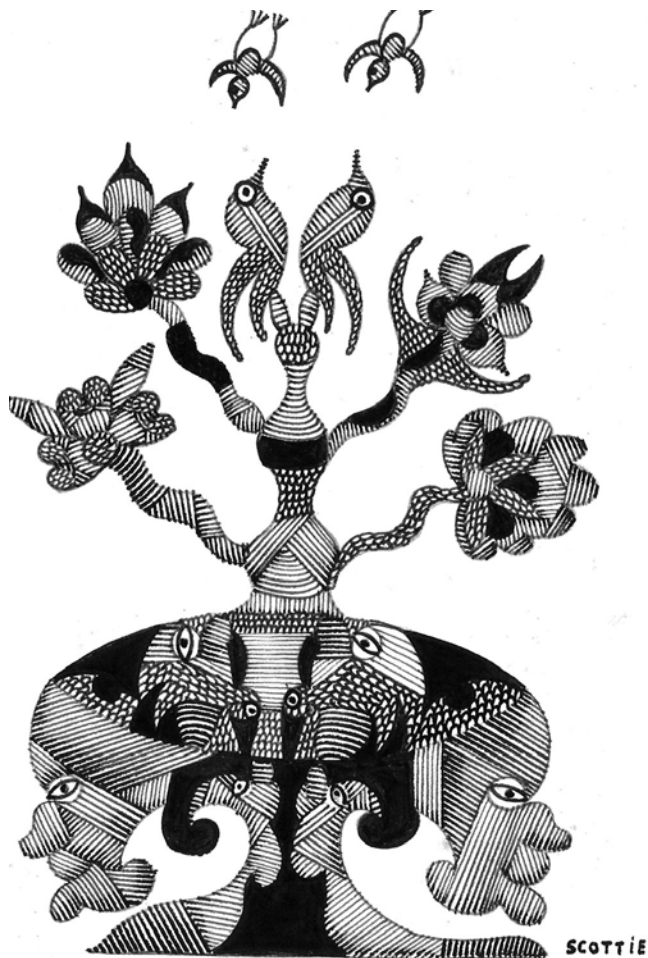
Terminology

There have been many discussions about terminology and criteria within the steering group in its attempt to define the audience it seeks to reach. Outside In is working in an often grey and nebulous area, without definite rights and wrongs. As hurdles are jumped, the

ground shifts again. There is an abundance of different terminology and descriptions used in this area by professionals, individuals, and society at large, with little sense of consensus. There are even divisions within the Disability Art world. For example the key criteria for an artist to be considered a 'Disability Arts' artist is that their art practice be informed by their disability. An example would be an artist such as Aidan Shingler⁴, whose work is informed by his experience of schizophrenia and his treatment by the medical world. This movement has a strong political history driven by the prejudice and lack of opportunity for disabled artists, but to participate in it requires an ability to express complex ideas and opinions about one's own experience of being disabled. An art movement based on and constrained by content excludes a large number of artists with disabilities who are inspired to make work for other creative reasons. These artists may not want to, or may be unable to, create art work knowingly derived from their experience of being disabled.

After much thought, the steering group arrived at the term 'marginalised' as the best description for the artists it wished to engage with. In the context of Outside In we consider a 'marginalised' artist to mean someone who exists beyond the lines that seem to specify who is included in the cultural life of our society. It is

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through challenging these lines and exclusions that Outside In is trying to effect change.

Outsider Art

The term Outsider Art was first coined by Richard Cardinal in 1972 as an equivalent for 'Art Brut', the art movement established by French artist Jean Dubuffet who established one of the first collections of Outsider Art, the Collection de l'Art Brut, now housed in Lausanne, Switzerland. The early Outsider Artists were primarily psychiatric patients, self taught visionaries whose work had no relation to the artistic cultural norms of their time, and was collected by psychiatrists such as Hans Prinzhorn. The artists had developed strong idiosyncratic personal styles to portray their inner worlds and thought processes. The impulse to create was not driven by the need

to share or to communicate, but rather to make tangible unspoken worlds with their own inherent logics.

Purist Outsider Art critics and collectors have questioned and rejected artists who knowingly achieve fame and recognition, believing that this destroys their innocence and purity. Albert Loudon, who exhibited at the Serpentine in 1985, would be an example of someone whose 'outsider' credentials have been called into question by his mainstream visibility. This attitude has placed Outsider Artists in a seemingly impossible position. They are expected to work unknown, without sharing or gaining a sense of the value of their work, preferably to die in obscurity and then to be discovered by an enlightened critic or psychiatrist who sets the terms for their acceptance.

However, many well-known Outsider Artists such as Scottie Wilson and self-taught naïve artists such as Alfred Wallis, were collected by artists and collectors throughout their lives. They made a large impact on artists like Pablo Picasso and Ben Nicholson who in their quest to find a new pictorial language explored other art traditions including outsider and

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non-western art traditions and forms. Max Ernst and other surrealist artists also found inspiration in the work of Outsider Artists.

Self-taught, primitive, naïve, mentally ill, outsider, visionary, psychotic, folk art, art brut, compulsive, mad, accidental, singular.... A myriad of names have been used for the perceived originality and intensity of work from 'the margins'.⁵ When artists and artwork do not follow the prescribed norm or career path, it can seem almost comical the knots that art historians, critics, curators tie themselves in when trying to describe it. The tabloid paper, The Sun, in 1968 described artists in an exhibition of outsider art as follows: 'English "naïve" painters – to qualify for that description they must be self-taught, totally unselfconscious and their work must have a direct and fresh appeal'. It is surprising how little the debate seems to have moved on since then. Recent descriptions to be found on Wikipedia suggest the confusion and lack of clarity in the attempt at definitions for this group of artists:

'Outsider Art: While Dubuffet's⁶ term is quite specific, the English term "Outsider Art" is often applied more broadly, to include certain self-taught or Naïve art makers who were never institutionalized. Typically, those labelled as Outsider Artists have little or no contact with the institutions of the mainstream art world; in many cases, their work is discovered only after their deaths. Much Outsider Art illustrates extreme mental states, unconventional ideas, or elaborate fantasy worlds.'

'Naïve art is characterised by a childlike simplicity. (See also outsider art, to which it bears many similarities.) It is a gross oversimplification to

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assume that Naïve art is created by people with little or no formal art training.⁷

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The issue here is about value and power, both intellectual and financial. On one hand the art world, or certain members of it, need to see the ancestry and trajectory of art's development; they need to see the relationships between artists, movements and art works. It is after all the traditional role of the art historian to tell stories, tracing the relationships from Poussin to Cezanne, from Cezanne to Picasso, to the rest of modern art history. Postmodernism may have challenged the idea of linear development or progression in art but the core beliefs and labels





remain unchanged. An artist who lies outside this accepted route and tradition is almost immediately unclassifiable, hence the continuing struggle to label these artists and also the continuing fascination and interest in them. There is a thriving Outsider Art market, particularly in the USA, but it is important to look at who controls and makes the decisions, and who writes for the magazines and catalogues – often academics, psychiatrists or arts professionals, hardly ever the artists themselves.

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‘disabling.’ Outside In includes the term ‘outsider’ in its description. We are using this term in two ways – to describe someone’s position of exclusion but also to describe a category with which many of the artists involved may have an affinity.

A big question for Outside In during its early days was not only ‘who is a marginalised artist?’ but ‘how do we assess their eligibility?’ It seemed potentially very off-putting to have to complete a questionnaire regarding your disability and seek a reference to confirm it. We do not want to alienate the artists we seek to reach, but we did want it to be clear that Outside In 2007 was not just an ordinary open art exhibition. After consulting with arts professionals, we devised an application form that provided a statement explaining what was meant by the terms ‘outsider and marginalised artist’. In 2007 it meant being somebody who is ‘marginalised due to health, disability or because their work doesn’t fit a prescribed art norm.’ Artists were asked to complete a brief statement that described how they felt they met this description in order to be eligible.

Supporting Creativity

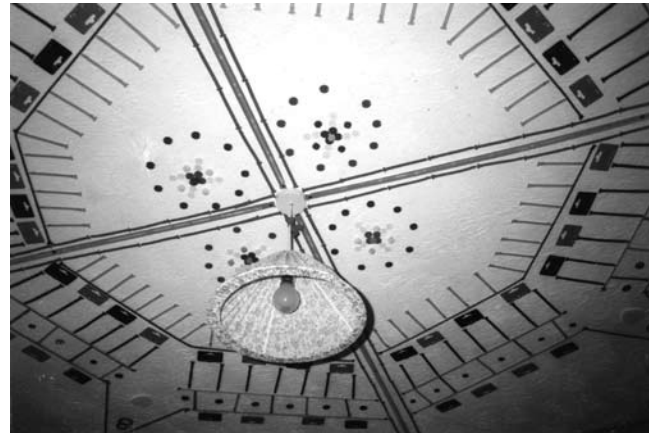
Many of the artists involved in Outside In have arrived at their ways of working out of a lack of opportunity, materials, encouragement or space. They are quite often lacking in confidence and they may create in isolation from any external art world stimulus. They will use whatever is at hand – cardboard boxes, walls etc. Due to the need to create and the lack of materials, the processes arrived at are often unique and it is this uniqueness which may be what is most

valued and prized within the art world. Ben Wilson uses chewing gum found on pavements to paint detailed paintings⁸, Madge Gill worked on rolls of wallpaper, and Alfred Wallis used old ship paints and irregular scraps of cardboard from the local grocer.⁹

This is a curious paradox for anyone working in the field: how to support someone without negatively affecting them as artists, or imposing inappropriate external standards. One cannot presume that giving people canvas and oil paints will make them into 'proper artists'.

As well as the process, it is also the uniqueness of vision and content that needs to be respected and valued. The work of these artists is often arrived at outside of accepted art world thinking and concepts. Artists draw inspiration from whatever communicates or resonates with them. Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood famously discovered Alfred Wallis, seeing in him another artist whose work they admired.

One of the aims of Outside In is to challenge the accepted concept of 'artist'. There are a couple of examples in the south of England where funding has gone to projects working with moderately learning disabled artists housed in studio complexes with mainstream artists. The artists involved in these projects are encouraged to use quality art materials. They are taught new art processes and how to paint still lifes or portraits, and how to work with other artists and curators. There are many unspoken assumptions at work here. These projects on the whole work with people who are able to learn the boxes one seemingly has to tick in order to become a fully fledged member of the art world. Often they tend



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to emphasise the acquisition of traditional processes and subjects rather than the development of a personal style, vision or voice. They do not consider whether it is in fact the art world that needs to change its ideas about what an artist is.

It should not be underestimated the impact that entering the art world can have on an artist. The value given to certain ways of working and thinking is enshrined on the walls of art galleries. It is hard enough to find your own voice as an artist coming from a trained background. How much more difficult must it be for a marginalised artist?

One marginalised artist who has taken part in Outside In is Gary, a man in his forties who lives with his parents and has been involved in a single creative project since he was a young man. He

decorates his bedroom ceiling, recreating the arrangement on a regular basis using pieces of recycled materials, bottle lids, pieces of plastic and card, which form fantastically complex abstract shapes. He has carefully photographed each installation and collected them in cardboard boxes. This has been done despite the bemused tolerance of his parents and a lack of encouragement and support from anyone else in his life. Gary has found a way of creating that is uniquely his own. He lay in bed and saw in the large empty expanse of the ceiling the opportunity to create. His is truly an outsider art, a unique process created out of need and opportunity.

Our experience shows that unless there is a mediated engagement with the art world and positive role models, both historical and contemporary, the pressure on marginal artists to mimic, and the subsequent loss of confidence, can be overpowering. Our aim is to make Outside In that mediated engagement. Our hope is that once change has been effected, Outside In will no longer need to exist.¹⁰

*With further funding from The Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Outside In will take place for the second time in 2009, expanding to encompass the South of England, and will work with partner arts organisations across the region. A website will be online from spring 2009:
www.outsidein.org.uk*

Access Advisory Group

The Access Advisory Group was set up in 2003 by the Courtauld Gallery and Pallant House Gallery. The group brings together people who are interested in access and inclusion in museums and galleries. It is peer-run, free and informal. We take turns to host membership meetings and have set up a web forum so we can discuss access issues. If you have not joined the forum yet, please do so here: the web address is <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/accessadvisorygroup/>

To add your name to the mailing list please email Ben Whitaker on benjamin.whitaker@ntlworld.com

Notes

1 Pallant House Gallery reopened to the public in July 2006 to much acclaim. It has won the Gulbenkian Prize, and was Museum of the Year 2007, one of many awards.

2 Arts Council England, Celebrating Diversity 2008

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/diversity>

3 Building Bridges was funded by the Arts Council England through its Regional Arts Lottery Programme.

4 Aidan Shingler

<http://www.oneinahundred.co.uk>

5 Galerie Hamer 2008

<http://www.galeriehamer.nl/glossarium.htm>

6 Jean Philippe Arthur Dubuffet (1901-1985) French artist who used the term 'Art Brut' to describe art created by self-taught artists including children and prisoners.

7 Wikipedia 2008

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outsider_art

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Na%C3%AFve_art

8 Elmore, J. (2006) 'Art on Chewing Gum, Ben Wilson' *Raw Vision* no. 55, Summer, pp. 32-36

9 Berlin, S (1992), *Alfred Wallis, primitive*.

Bristol: Redcliffe Press Ltd, p. 55

10 Elmore (2006) op.cit., p. 32

Images in order of appearance

1. Thomas Hughes. *Subarachnoid Haemorrhage*. 2007. (Tattoo)

2. Scottie Wilson. *Untitled*. n.d. (Ink on Paper) Wilson Gift through The Art Fund, Pallant House Gallery. Chichester

3. John Cull, *Where's Freda Kahlo?* n.d. (Acrylic on canvas)

4. Andy Hood, *Self Portrait*. 2007. (Black and white photograph)

5. Joel Howie, *Dancers*. 2007. (Oil on canvas)

6. Gary Williams, *Ceiling Decoration*, n.d. © the artist