

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

‘Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace’ by David Maclagan. London, Reaktion Books 2009

Reviewed by Chris Wood, Northern Programme, Sheffield

For me, as an art therapist, the book is gripping to read. It is also a pleasing object to hold, being hard-backed, the size of a hand-span and full of coloured paintings. Words from the introduction show how Maclagan quickly lends the reader his own articulate curiosity and commitment to the subject.

‘Imagine a situation where you come across, in a junk stall or second-hand shop, a drawing or painting that strikes you as being odd enough to consider calling it ‘Outsider’: are there intrinsic qualities or criteria to justify this? You might say that it has to have a striking level of originality, that it doesn’t seem derivative or self-conscious, that it has a peculiar intensity, perhaps even an obsessional or solipsistic feel to it, that it hits a nerve in you somewhere that other art doesn’t, and so on. But these are all second-order judgements: perhaps there are qualities that are more directly connected with the work itself; such as its awkward facture, its use of second-hand materials, its utter insouciance about correct ways of drawing, the sense of it being densely crammed with competing motifs, or stuck in a compulsive formal repetition. Perhaps the work in question doesn’t exist on its own, it might be in a folder along with other work by the same artist: so then you could begin to get a sense of a body of work with its own idiom or stylistic consistency, and this might reinforce your sense of it being somehow out of the ordinary’ (Maclagan, 99, 15-16).

Outsider Art is presented as a subject ‘thick with questions’ and a distinct ‘sequel’ to Dubuffet’s manifesto for *Art Brut*. The book holds many stories about the lives of the outsider artists and about ways in which their work has influenced mainstream artists. The work of James Ensor, André Masson, Edward Burra and Jim Nutt are offered as examples from mainstream art where it is possible to see the influence unhidden. The

book is not intended as a comprehensive overview of Outsider Art, but it is a thoughtful analysis of the way it has informed general propositions about creativity and intentionality.

There is an absorbing narrative throughout about the difficulties of arriving at one definition for Outsider Art. What might constitute a definition is evolving and Maclagan shows that even Dubuffet, was acknowledging this during his lifetime, in relation to *Art Brut*. We are pointed to the remarkably illustrated journal *Raw Vision*, pressures facing the journal and tensions provoked by the market place are used as a case study of parallel pressures acting upon outsider artists.

Maclagan shows how those making *Art Brut* at the beginning of the twentieth century were hidden from the mainstream in ways that are no longer possible for contemporary outsiders. Nevertheless, a biographical profile of an outsider might fit within a post-renaissance view of the isolated artist genius and similar cultural antecedents are seen in the strangeness, isolation and raw creativity that remain a feature of much outsider work. To discuss the impact upon *Art Brut*, during this period, of works made by people with a history of psychosis, Maclagan has used the phrase 'classic psychotic art'. He has avoided MacGregor's phrase 'the golden age of psychotic art' and his analysis (MacGregor, 1989), which explicitly dismisses the works of the majority. Maclagan's book traces the ways that the qualities found in the artwork of some mental patients met the most stringent criteria for *Art Brut*, and it makes a good case for casting Dubuffet in the role of respectful champion of both the artworks and the artists in the psychiatric system.

Maclagan invites us to imagine how the art in the psychiatric system might be made, whether during or after hallucinations. In doing this, he teases out considerations about the agency of these artists. He considers spiritually 'guided' work within the same frame and suggests that assumptions made about 'psychiatric' art are similar to those made about outsider art. This result in examples of irony and humour in both often being missed. He points to the second part of the twentieth century and the changes in the life circumstances of both users of psychiatric services and outsider

artists. He considers the impact of this upon the artwork, questioning whether old categories and definitions remain valid.

The chapter of the book about 'psychotic art today' is particularly thought provoking for me because I have long thought about the potential of city centre studios for the work of art therapists, including in the last issue of ATOL (Wood, 2010). Maclagan's knowledge about the *Gugging House of Artists* in Austria and *the Living Museum* in New York is a challenge to such provision. It needs, at the very least, to be thoughtful and have user involvement, if it is to avoid the production of new forms of institutionalisation. Or worse, 'thinly disguised voyeurism or latent cruelty in the ways in which such art is rescued, kidnapped or simply stolen from the context in which it was originally created' (129).

The discussion about doodling as 'graphic truancy from the task in hand' (109) looks underneath the issue of conscious agency and makes thoughtful parallels with the way outsider artists might work. It also considers widespread use of doodling and through it the popular understanding of non-figurative work, which Maclagan wryly suggests does not often extend to abstract art. The penultimate chapter considers the problematic introduction of Outsider Art into the wider art world and the dangers for it of conceited pathologising in the guise of appreciation. Yet repeatedly Maclagan shows how works on the margins provoke many thoughts about the nature of art making. His book is extraordinarily knowledgeable, as well as containing many examples of the artwork; his use of language makes us think about images, and he repeatedly offers references to visual history. Using the internet to look up and find pictures by even just a few of the artists he refers us to, certainly means that it takes a bit longer to read the book, but it is a book that encourages us to look. It is concerned with what propels the extraordinary forces seen in Outsider Art. Maclagan's vision is sensitive and his analysis well researched and vibrant.

'I have argued that what is really at stake is an underlying, and not always fully conscious, set of conceptions about the nature of authentic artistic creativity. Allied to this are numerous concepts, such as madness, originality, automatism, privacy and even "authenticity" itself, that need closer examination' (Maclagan, 2009, 170).

Biography: Chris Wood (PhD) works as the team leader for the Art Therapy Northern Programme. This is in Sheffield and it provides a base for training and research. She is happy to continue to combine work in higher education with therapeutic practice in the NHS. Her interests include the uses of contemporary art and popular culture, the relationship between mental health and politics, and the many ways in which people with long-term mental health problems manage to live well. She works with staff and students of the programme, clients, arts therapists, and other colleagues to contribute to the evidence base and to promote art therapy.

References:

MacGregor, J. (1989) *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*. New Jersey: Princeton University.

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http://eprints-gojo.gold.ac.uk/82/2/Wood_Convivencia1.pdf