

Explainer: Raw art

Vic Segedin

JoCAT launches its new *Raw Art* podcast series with an interview with Sarah Rossiter and two of the artists she works with at Pablos Art Studio in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. While editing the interview, I was prompted to look more closely at the world of so-called ‘outsider art’, its origins and its intersections with creative arts therapies, and explain why we chose to call the series *Raw Art*. With more interviews and explorations into this area in our regions planned over the coming months, *JoCAT*’s podcast interviewers will be giving the listener/reader/viewer snapshots of the work of the creative arts therapists and their client artists in some studios.

The term ‘outsider art’ was coined by British art critic Roger Cardinal in his titular book of 1972. It was used to explore, in an English-language context, the already-existing French concept of ‘art brut’ (raw art), so termed by artist Jean Dubuffet in his manifesto of 1947 (Cardinal, 1972; Tate, 2023). Dubuffet became interested in art that was “raw expression of a vision or emotions, untrammelled by convention” (Tate, 2023), and started collecting works that would become the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne.

As Cardinal supposed, “the critical definition of the creative Outsider is that he or she should be possessed of an expressive impulse and should then externalize that impulse in an unmonitored way which defies conventional art-historical contextualization” (1972). This became particularly associated with the art produced by people living in the mental asylums of the early twentieth century, when doctors and psychiatrists began to both study the art for diagnostic purposes and to collect the works. In Australia, The Dax Centre in Melbourne is an example. The Cunningham Dax Collection is named after its founder, Dr Eric Cunningham Dax (1908–2008), and now comprises over 16,000 works, all of which have been created by people who have a lived experience of mental health issues or psychological trauma (The Dax Centre, 2023).

Outsider art would come to encapsulate a plethora of forms of art – ‘folk art’, ‘intuitive’, ‘naïve’, ‘self-taught’ and some other monikers more dubious by today’s standards. The work did not comfortably sit within the established art world – a world that could be defined as work produced by artists trained and working in the art establishment largely born out of the European tradition of art schools and academies, art museums and the commercial-gallery sector.

How can one re-perceive works made by ‘untrained’ artists, by artists from traditions located far from European conventions, by those with mental health challenges, by children; to see these works as valid, and not inferior? To drop one’s Eurocentric art-establishment hegemonic lens?

In 1992 LACMA held an exhibition called *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art*, and the following year the Outsider Art Fair was established and continues to take place annually in New York. At this time, respected journals dedicated to the subject emerged, along with a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of the genre. But the debate continues, of both what nomenclature is appropriate and how one can reconcile the “historical bias concerning racial and sexual difference, neurodivergence and disability, and

geographic isolation, among other conditions, that has prevented certain artists from gaining access to the art world and the canon” (Vogel, 2018, para.1).

In 2018, Lynne Cooke of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, proposed that a term borrowed from data science could best describe the contemporary perception of the conglomeration of art produced outside of the mainstream art world. She explained in the catalogue of the seminal show *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* that the label ‘outlier’

sidesteps questions of ‘inside’ versus ‘outside’ in favor of distances nearer and farther from an aggregate so that being at variance with the norm can be a position of strength: a place negotiated or sought out rather than predetermined and fixed. (2018, n.p.)

Today, art produced outside the mainstream has been largely accepted into the wider art world that often expresses a hunger for the new, the different and the diverse. Artists today, even those who might have come through the traditional art-school/art-market routes, might self-declare their ‘outsider’ status to convey parts of their story or practice that may be different or diverse. As Grayson Perry stated in an interview in 2020, “I’ve always felt a little bit bitter, an outsider of the art world, you know” (BBC, 2020, 1:22).

This brings us to the question: how does this tangle of these ‘outlying’ art forms intersect with creative arts therapies? Given creative arts therapists often work with populations with lived/living experience of mental health issues that are commonly associated with outsider art, it is interesting to consider their shared history. Both have some of their origins in early mental health institutions.

In his seminal text *Art as medicine: Creating a therapy of the imagination* (1992), Shaun McNiff described his early work as an art therapist in a mental health institution. Rather than seeing the images as something to be interpreted and pathologised, he viewed them as soul “messengers”. “Pairing art and medicine stimulates the creation of a discipline through which imagination treats itself and recycles its vitality back to daily living”. He goes on to explain that “(s)ince every aspect of art contributes to its medicine, we do not assume that some expressions heal and others do not. Negative and disturbing images are vital stimulants for healing in that the toxin is the antitoxin” (1992, p.xx).

Rachel Cohen, in her book *Outsider art and art therapy*, explains that

outsider art, art therapy, art education, and any individual’s conception of fine art, can hold varying relationships with each other, based on the continuums that form from these polarities, and thereby stimulate greater dialogue – and acceptance – among these fields. Hence, outsider art is well within the “definition” of contemporary and postmodern art – and needs to be placed within the history of art itself – and because it so often encompasses the population that art therapists engage with via artmaking, a better understanding of this placement will help reconnect art therapy with the larger art world. (2017, p.24)

She goes on to posit that creative art therapists might want to “become more engaged with outsider art as another tool to help empower client-artists, and as a way to reconnect with historic roots of the field” (2017, p.24).

JoCAT's decision to reprise Dubuffet's designation is a considered one. Proposing that in English the term does not carry any negative connotations from a less-nuanced time in history, we felt that the word 'raw' would in fact now suggest authenticity, the quality that can so easily be found in works where the primary intention is to portray lived and/or living experience. We wanted to encapsulate the essence of the work that we perceived in the studios we approached.

There are many such art studios in our regions catering to people who could be called outsider, outlier, or raw artists, from various populations. While most of these institutions, if asked to define their intensions and positioning, would probably identify as open art studios or creative spaces, many of them employ creative arts therapists and the therapeutic value of these practitioners' sessions to their participants is indisputable. Some of these CATs will be interviewed in the coming months for you to hear their stories on *JoCAT*'s podcast series. We hope you enjoy them.



Image: Jean Dubuffet, *Restaurant Rougeot*, 1961, Collection Fondation Dubuffet, Paris. (<https://heromagazine.com/article/187863/how-jean-dubuffet-became-the-father-of-outsider-art>)

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