Ian Patel

Marginal Art: Public Property or Social Justice?

Artworks marked by indifference to or isolation from mainstream artistic preoccupations and traditions have long been recognised and critically appreciated. In 1945 French artist Jean Dubuffet coined the term *art brut* (“raw art”) to describe art by inmates of what were then insane asylums. In addition to *art brut*, which in English tends to be referred to as “outsider art”, one may also come across references to naive, intuitive, or censured art, each of which is perceived to be untrammelled by artistic conventions and institutional training.

Today’s mainstream art world also maintains an interest in what it sees as its liminal practitioners, its outsider and disenfranchised constituencies. Both in the UK and America, for example, there have been a number of productions by recovering drug and alcohol addicts. In 2012 a national charity for homeless people, Crisis, commissioned a number of high-profile artists to produce work on the theme of homelessness. The exhibition was held during March and April in Somerset House, London, with pieces eventually auctioned at Christie’s.

There are many ethical questions surrounding the public display of art produced by what might be termed “vulnerable adult” constituencies. Such exhibitions tend to go unquestioned as a positive force for both participating artists and the viewing public. Mainstream appreciation for non-traditional works of art seems to satisfy the liberal demand for inclusivity. Participating artists are assumed to benefit from artistic recognition.

But are there deeper social and ethical questions to the public consumption of marginal art? Do we need to think more critically about this public interest as something that goes beyond simply a liberal belief in inclusivity? The success of marginal art exhibitions is the result of additional factors: a public belief in the redemptive power of art and a public fascination with the lives of marginalised groups. Such exhibitions may rely on public interest in self-taught works of art, but they also rely on public interest in the extreme experiences supposedly implicit in such art. Viewers are unlikely to see themselves as voyeuristic. Rather, there is an unspoken consensus that such exhibitions serve an educational purpose. By viewing the work of an ex-addict, the argument goes, the artist herself benefits, but so too does the viewer, who imaginatively enters the moral and creative world of the artist, learning something in the process.

The long-established interest in the creative work of prisoners is a particularly interesting example of this phenomenon. The work of the prison arts charity, the Koestler Trust, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, reveals the full scope of marginal art as a progressive social and political force. In order to participate in a Koestler Trust scheme or exhibition, the artist must be a "current inmate in a UK prison, young offender institution, secure training centre, secure children's home, immigration removal centre, or high or medium security psychiatric hospital or unit (including the Channel Islands and Isle of Man)".

At first glance, a Koestler Trust exhibition could be misinterpreted as some kind of artistic *nostalgie de la boue*, that is, a voyeuristic thirst for productions rooted in human degradation, infamy, and shame. As the trust itself explains, however, it views itself as more socially ameliorative than artistically decadent. It describes its main objectives as "help[ing] offenders, secure patients and detainees lead more positive lives by motivating them to participate and achieve in the arts" and "increase[ing] public awareness and understanding of arts by offenders, secure patients & detainees".

These assumptions recall the concept of "restorative justice" used by legal theorists. Put simply, restorative justice is the process by which a person, rather than being punished further for his actions, is made to enter into a process of mutual understanding with others, often in the name of reconciliation.

Koestler Trust exhibitions are nevertheless elite occasions, judged by well-established artists and arts practitioners. They garner invariably positive mainstream media attention. High-profile artist Sarah Lucus is curating this year's 50th anniversary exhibition at London's Southbank Centre. This courtship of the arts establishment most obviously secures mainstream recognition for its artists, but it also serves as a powerful advocacy tool.

Aargh!, Anon, HM Prison Whatton. Image courtesy of koestlertrust.org.uk

Marginal art exhibitions can be seen in this light as ambitious political campaigns that aim to be socially transformative. They want to make general audiences truly understand the moral and creative imaginations of those who have been forgotten, discarded, or disgraced. At its most ambitious, there is a belief that in the production of their art participating artists experience a form of social redemption, profound educational development, and a symbolic restoration to the wider community from which they have been removed.

It is a disservice to the social vision of such art programmes to believe that public exhibitions are their end-goal. It may be a powerful form of recognition to have one's art viewed by a highly educated and sympathetic audience, but genuine recognition demands something much more thoroughgoing. Marginal art exhibitions (as sometimes are) need to be

integrated within a larger political programme designed to socially benefit participants and advocate on their behalf.

Certain charities more obviously political than the Koestler Trust combine art programmes with social service provision, research and advocacy. The London-based charity Only Connect not only produces plays written and performed by ex-offenders but also provides mentoring, housing, and education programmes.

Exhibitions of marginal artwork are fundamentally different from mainstream art exhibitions; they demand a duty of care. In the most compelling examples this duty of care extends beyond liberal inclusivity to question more fundamentally the conditions that lead people to become criminal offenders or drug addicts or homeless in the first place.

The article was written in response to ART vs REHAB, a critical catalyst for those working creatively in addiction, homelessness, criminal justice and mental health. For more information, please visit artvsrehab.com.