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Department of History

Spaces, places, people and processes: the factors affecting the reception of 'outsider art' within the UK mainstream art world

by

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<u>ABSTRACT</u>

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

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SPACES, PLACES, PEOPLE AND PROCESSES: THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE RECEPTION OF 'OUTSIDER ART' WITHIN THE UK MAINSTREAM ART WORLD

Kate Davey

Despite its evidenced growing presence in the UK art world in more recent years, there is disagreement amongst academics and arts sector professionals about the extent of outsider art's assimilation into and acceptance within the cultural mainstream. This thesis explores present-day attitudes towards 'outsider art' and its reception within the UK cultural mainstream as told through 35 semi-structured interviews with art world professionals (curators, gallery and museum directors), outsider art world professionals, and (outsider) artists. The key research questions are threefold; What are the attitudes and experiences of three key cohorts in the outsider-mainstream art worlds? Do their responses show a disparity in the treatment and reception of outsider and mainstream art within the UK cultural mainstream? What do their attitudes and experiences tell us are the fundamental factors that underpin the lack of acceptance and institutional validation of outsider art and its creators within the UK cultural mainstream?

Thematic analysis of the interview responses, supported by secondary literature from the fields of art history and sociology, has shown a discursively evidenced disparity in the treatment and reception of outsider art and mainstream art in the UK cultural sector. The findings showed that this disparity in reception was due predominantly to four key factors: (1) confusion, debate and ongoing disagreement around the meaning and use of the term 'outsider art' in the present day (the early 2020s), (2) the relegation of outsider art to peripheral physical spaces (in galleries and museums) and less tangible spaces like health and social justice agendas and funding streams, (3) the impact homogenous gatekeepers have on the visibility and dissemination of more diverse art, and (4) the barriers that inherently exist due to the exclusive institutional structures that underpin the UK art world.

The research findings are important in their outlining of the perceptions of key individuals currently working in the outsider-mainstream art world and in their evidencing of the continued marginalisation of outsider art within the UK cultural mainstream. But more specifically, they are important in their identification of the factors that enable this marginalisation to persist. The hope is that the identification and acknowledgement of these specific factors will influence meaningful change within the cultural sector.

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I, Kate Davey

declare that the thesis entitled

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and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

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Signed:

Date: 27th August 2024

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For my daughter Wren, thank you for showing me what I am capable of

Introduction

In 1945, artist Jean Dubuffet coined the term *Art Brut,* which translates roughly into English as 'Raw Art.'[1] With this new term, Dubuffet referred to artwork that was untainted and untouched by traditional artistic and social conventions. At first, it included work created by those housed in psychiatric institutions, but it expanded to incorporate the work of self-taught artists and others who had little knowledge or awareness of cultural happenings, and in 1948 Dubuffet founded the *Compagnie de l'Art Brut* to support the study of this section of creativity and to inform the conception of his now renowned *Collection de l'Art Brut.*[2] Influenced by Dubuffet's *Art Brut,* British art historian Roger Cardinal was the first to coin the English term 'outsider art' in 1972 in his book of the same name.[3] Dubuffet's categorisation was strict and ultimately based on his own dissatisfaction with the existing art world and the values it held dear. His new classification "amounted to a full-frontal assault on the false standards of the established art world," as stated by art historian David Maclagan.[4] Cardinal's definition, in contrast to Dubuffet's, is a much more liberal translation. Rather than offering a label for a movement with strict formal and stylistic guidelines, Cardinal's term has become somewhat of an umbrella or catch-all term to describe artwork created in a multitude of styles, forms and media by artists who are in some way distanced from mainstream culture, often for health or social reasons.

Since Cardinal's coining of the term some fifty years ago, the category and all that it encompasses has evolved, partly due to advancements in technology and increasing global connection, and partly due to the new perspectives on and attitudes towards the treatment of mental health and disability. Reflecting this, Maclagan asserts that:

> What began as a radical antithesis to accepted forms of art cannot go on forever being 'outside' the culture from which it once claimed to be independent: despite initial scepticism or hostility, Outsider Art is gradually being assimilated. Exhibitions and publications devoted to it multiply, galleries and museums acquire it, and it has also undoubtedly influenced many contemporary artists: so the gap that once separated it from the art world has narrowed. [5]

It is true to say, as per Maclagan's statement above, that in more recent years, outsider art has received increasing recognition from the mainstream art world. This is no better illustrated than

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[1] Dubuffet, Jean, *Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre,* Paris, 1946
[2] Dubuffet, Jean, *L'Art Brut préféré aux arts culturels,* Paris: Gallimard, 1949
[3] Cardinal, Roger, *Outsider Art,* Studio Vista, 1972
[4] Maclagan, David, *Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace,* Reaktion Books, 2009, p 8
[5] Maclagan, *Op. Cit.,* p 7-8

in the nomination of Project Art Works, a collective of neurodiverse artists and activists, for the 2021 Turner Prize, and the focus on non-traditional and self-taught art in the Royal Academy's 2021 summer show. Additionally, in the past decade, there have been several key exhibitions centred on outsider or non-traditional art hosted at major institutions in the UK. These include *Souzou: Outsider Art from Japan* at the Wellcome Collection in 2013, *Alternative Guide to the Universe* at Hayward Gallery in 2013, *British Folk Art* at Tate Britain in 2014, and the inclusion of several works from the Collection de l'Art Brut in *Jean Dubuffet: Brutal Beauty* at the Barbican in 2021.

However, as Marc Steene notes in *Outside In: Exploring the margins of art,* despite this progress "there is still so much to do. Too many doors remain closed and it is too easy to be seen to be doing the right thing rather than actually delivering lasting change,"[6] and in *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity,* Gary Alan Fine suggests that "despite valiant attempts to claim that these works should be seen as 'art' or as 'contemporary' art, and not as falling into a specialized, trivialized, ghettoized category, the attempts have not yet been entirely successful."[7] This thesis supports Steene and Fine's claims that this work is still ghettoised and marginalised from the mainstream, but with a specific focus on an exploration of the factors that lead to the continuation of its institutional marginalisation. It argues that despite the increasing visibility of outsider art, there are specific, discursively evidenced factors that continue to affect the proper institutional reception and inclusion of outsider art within the UK cultural mainstream. These factors have been identified through the conduction and analysis of thirty-five semi-structured interviews with three key cohorts participating in the outsider-mainstream art worlds: *Curators*, *Outsider Arts Professionals*, and (outsider) *Artists* who see themselves as facing a barrier to the art world.

The key questions that this research aims to answer are threefold: What are the attitudes and experiences of three key cohorts in the outsider-mainstream art worlds (*Curators, Outsider Arts Professionals*, *Artists*)? Do their responses show a disparity in the treatment of outsider and mainstream art? What do their attitudes and experiences tell us are the fundamental factors that underpin the lack of acceptance and institutional validation of outsider art and its creators within the UK cultural mainstream?

Critical analysis of the interview responses, supported by secondary literature from the fields of art history and sociology, has shown that yes, there is an ongoing disparity in the treatment of

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[6] Steene, Marc, *Outside In: Exploring the mvargins of art,* Lund Humphries, 2023, p 119
[7] Fine, Gary Alan, *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity,* University of Chicago Press, 2004, p 6

outsider and mainstream art, and that there are four key factors that prolong this disparity and continue to affect the reception of outsider art within the UK mainstream. These are (1) the impact of present day (early 2020s) attitudes towards the term 'outsider art' (2) the spaces and places that outsider art is permitted to occupy, and its evidenced relegation to peripheral spaces, (3) the impact of cultural gatekeepers and individuals on the visibility and reception of outsider art, and (4) the art world machine and how institutional structures work to exclude outsider art from the UK cultural mainstream.

These hypotheses are based on the findings from 35 semi-structured interviews conducted with three cohorts. The three interview cohorts are: *Curators* - curators or directors employed by mainstream museums and galleries across the UK; *Outsider Arts Professionals* – professionals working specifically in the outsider art field in the UK (as curators, in supported studios, or as academics and writers); and *Outsider Artists* – artists registered with the UK charity Outside In, which supports artists facing significant barriers to the mainstream art world for reasons including health, disability, social circumstance or isolation. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary research method as the responses were more able to offer a deeper insight into the attitudes and experiences of a range of key actors associated with the outsider-mainstream sectors.

The interviews and questions were planned and framed following Colin Robson and Kieran McCartan's approach to conducting interviews[8], and as such, all interviews were between 30 and 60 minutes in length and semi-structured in nature. Interview transcriptions were interrogated using thematic analysis approaches outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke[9], and William Foster Owen.[10] The interviews sought to uncover the attitudes and experiences of respondents, so questions were direct, short, not leading, and unbiased. Drawing on first hand interview data from groups working on the front line meant conclusions could more readily be drawn around very current and present attitudes towards outsider art. It felt particularly important to include the voices of artists who might today be encompassed under the 'outsider' umbrella as they have for so long taken a back seat in the research and theories about outsider art and its validation within the mainstream. Analysis of the interview responses has been supported throughout by relevant secondary literature from the fields of art history and

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[8] Robson, Colin and Kieran McCartan, *Real World Research,* John Wiley & Son Ltd, 2016, p285
[9] Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology,' in *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* Vol. 3., 2006, pp 77-101
[10] Owen, William Foster, 'Interpretative themes in relational communication,' in *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* Vol. 70, No. 3, pp 274-287, 1984, p 275

sociology. The research methods used and ethical considerations will be expanded on in Chapter 1.

The thesis has been split into thematic chapters based on the findings from the interviews. Each chapter explores a theme identified in the interview responses that was evidenced as having an impact on outsider art's reception and validation within the UK cultural mainstream. Chapter 2 will explore the attitudes to the term outsider art as told by the respondents in their interviews and how ongoing confusion and contention around the term have affected its exhibition and reception within the cultural mainstream. This chapter also explores how outsider art's confounding of the traditional canon and a lack of any canonical re-evaluation for the category has continued to affect its reception within the mainstream. Chapter 3 explores the evidenced relegation of exhibitions of outsider art to peripheral spaces; community and education spaces, hallways and attics, as well as its relegation in less tangible spaces, like its validation through the arts and health agenda rather than on a more aesthetic level, and the impact reductive programming can have on its reception. Chapter 4 looks at the impact individuals (gatekeepers) have on the acceptance (or non-acceptance) of outsider art within cultural spaces and explores the role of curators, critics and collectors as well as the discovery narrative, which for decades has put outsider artists in a secondary position to those who 'discovered' their work. And finally, Chapter 5 explores in more detail the limiting structures that already exist within the mainstream UK art world that have an impact on the reception of outsider art.

This research project arose from my own experience of working for over 10 years in a professional capacity in the 'outsider' sector. Since 2012, I have been employed by a number of organisations that have worked to promote art created by 'outsider' or 'non-traditional' artists, including but not limited to Make Your Mark; the arts and health programme at Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance, and Outside In. I have also worked in a freelance capacity to support artists to apply for funding and write critical and contextual essays about their work, and I am a frequent contributor to *Raw Vision Magazine*, the only international magazine to focus solely on outsider art. My contributions to *Raw Vision Magazine* include an article co-authored with Cardinal introducing the artist Manuel Bonifacio.[11] As a result of these experiences, I have first-hand understanding of the outsider-mainstream sector and anecdotal knowledge of the attitudes that have affected and continue to affect the reception of outsider art within the mainstream. As I navigated my way through the outsider-mainstream dichotomy in a professional capacity, it became more important for me to underline my anecdotal experiences with a solid foundation of research. In 2019 the opportunity

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[11] Cardinal, Roger and Kate Davey, 'An Outsider In Full Flight,' in *Raw Vision Magazine,* Vol. 83, 2014, pp 46-50

to make this a reality through undertaking a sponsored PhD became available thanks to a partnership between the University of Chichester and Outside In. At the time I was employed by Outside In as a Programme Manager, which positioned me at the heart of discourse around the inclusion of outsider art in the UK cultural mainstream and gave me access to a body of artists and arts professionals who could contribute greatly to this area of research. The partnership between the University and Outside In also explains why Outside In Director Marc Steene, a key figure in the current outsider discourse, has not been interviewed for this project. Steene was a secondary supervisor for the project, providing important industry feedback on the research and its subsequent findings. Due to my own familiarity with Outside In's values and beliefs, and as the research was co-sponsored by the organisation, I felt it may have been difficult to escape a conflict of interest by including Steene in the interviews. This was a subjective decision, but a positive is that it has allowed new voices from the outsider-mainstream sectors to be heard. From my own professional position, my hope is that the research findings will contribute to a greater understanding of the attitudes that affect outsider art's current position within the cultural mainstream and that it will provide a foundation for organisations and artists to make meaningful change in the treatment and therefore reception of outsider art within the UK cultural mainstream.

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Outsider art has predominantly been written about (academically) in two ways; firstly, in terms of the label itself and what this encompasses, and secondly, in terms of its emergence and discovery - most notably in relation to those who already hold positions of power within existing fields like the art world or medicine. From the moment the term outsider art was coined by Cardinal in 1972, term contestation has overshadowed much of the discourse relating to the subject in English speaking fields. This could be in part due to Cardinal's initial ambivalence for the term, which, according to John Maizels, was in fact chosen by the book's publishers; "His [Cardinal's] first title, *Art of the Artless,* was rejected, as was *Art Brut,* but Cardinal eventually allowed the publisher's name of *Outsider Art* to be used, even though he only gave it a mark of 7 out of 10 at the time."[12] Since its first coining, there have been numerous terms of classification used in relation to the category; self-taught, folk, visionary, vernacular, untrained, to name but a few. Some academics have explored the differences between these alternative labels, with Charles Russell offering a proposed differentiation between outsider and self-taught art, noting that the term 'outsider' is "generally applied to artists on the psychological and social

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[12] Maizels, John, 'Outsider Art: The Title That Shapes a Genre,' in *Non-Conformers: A New History of Self-Taught Artists,* Lisa Slominski, Yale University Press, 2021, pp85-88, p 86

margins of culture, often those deemed mentally ill or isolated at odds with the cultural norms," whereas self-taught, as a concept, "describes almost all the artists, since very few have received any formal artistic training."[13] He also claims that there is a geographical difference between the two terms. 'Outsider' could be seen to have emerged from Europe; "largely reflecting the early twentieth-century European considerations of psychological, sociological and aesthetic bases of art and creativity in the high modernist era," and self-taught is more US-centric; "arising from parallel but localized discussions in America from the 1930s into the 1970s concerning the cultural significance of artist creations by untrained artists."[14] This Atlantic divide is touched upon by Katherine Jentleson in Lisa Slominski's *Non-Conformers*, who notes that the reception of self-taught or 'folk' art in the US is very different to the UK. For many Americans, folk art "served as an index of national character: proof that artistic originality had existed in the United States for centuries, despite the longstanding presumption that American artists had been, and continued to be, over reliant on their European peers."[15]

Maizels reflects Jentleson and Russell's ideas in the distinction between outsider and folk art, noting that "Art Brut, and Outsider Art in general, glorifies the extreme expressions of those outside society's influences… Folk art, on the other hand, still echoes its homestead past."[16] Maizels offers a compelling theory about the labels that exist within the outsider umbrella:

> One might think of Art Brut as the white hot centre – the purest form of creativity. The next in a series of concentric circles would be Outsider Art, including Art Brut and extending beyond it. This circle would in turn overlap with that of folk art, which would then merge into self-taught art, ultimately diffusing into the realms of so-called professional art. All these concentric circles of creativity have similarities, but they also have essential differences and particular characteristics. [17]

The idea of concentric circles and the emergence of other defining terms is reflected in Dubuffet's categorisation of his own collection as it expanded and developed. His own criteria for *Art Brut* was so precise that in 1982 he created a whole new category which he titled *Neuve Invention* (which he translated as 'Raw Vision' or 'New Invention.') This term covered the

[13] Russell, Charles, *Groundwaters: a century of art by self-taught and outsider artists*, Prestel Verlag, 2011, p 9
[14] Ibid.
[15] Jentleson, Katherine, 'Modern Primitives: MOMA exhibits the self-taught (1932-1944)', *Non-Conformers: A New History of Self-Taught Artists* By Lisa Slominski, Yale University Press, 2021 pp 21-4, p 21
[16] Maizels, John, *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond,* Phaidon Press Ltd, 1996, p 114
[17] Op. Cit., p 227

work of artists he admired, but "although self-taught, were closer in their connections to conventional society than were the genuine *Artistes Brut.*"[18]

Perhaps because he is writing in the United States, Fine refers to the artists working in this field as 'self-taught' rather than outsider; he has little time for terms like outsider and folk art. He notes that a "poorly chosen term can marginalise artists. This is a problem especially with the labels 'folk art' and 'outsider art.' Labelling a poor, black, uneducated, or elderly person as 'folk' or outsider strikes some – including some artists – as unseemly."[19] It is for this reason that Fine sees both self-taught and outsider art as identity genres; similar perhaps to women's art, because it is "defined through the characteristics of the creators."[20] This is in contrast to the two other forms of categorisation we experience in the art world: those designated by genre, e.g. portraiture, landscape, and those designated by style; for example Impressionism, Minimalism.[21] The idea that outsider art could be seen as an identity genre can provide new ways of thinking about its segregation and sequential integrations and is echoed in Cardinal's assertion that to talk about the category of outsider art is to "talk about a large number of independent artistic worlds that ought not to be envisaged as forming a block, much less a school" – there is no such thing as outsider art, only outsider artists.[22] This theory is reflected too by Steene who notes that "the challenge in discussing outsider art is that the only common denominator is often the artist's life situation, frequently a disability or mental health issue, and their individualised approach to making their work."[23] One curator interviewed as part of Fine's research project notes that categorisation can be important when it comes to the process of a marginal group being accepted into the mainstream:

> In order for a marginal group to gain access to the forum, it's necessary to name oneself in a way that continues to distinguish oneself. In the 1970s any woman who created art created women's art. Now finally in the 1990s, women are suddenly creating just art…But in order to get that kind of recognition and become historically situated within the naturalized centre, it was necessary for a long time to raise the advocacy, using a kind of adjective which qualifies the notion of art and art-making in an unfortunate way.[24]

This point is raised by John Roberto, Diego Ortego and Brian Davis in their preliminary statement 'Toward the Automatic Retrieval and Annotation of Outsider Art Images', in which

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Fine, Gary Alan, Op. Cit., p 25
[20] Op. Cit., p 4
[21] Ibid.
[22] Cardinal, 1972, Op. Cit., p 46
[23] Steene, Op. Cit., p 10
[24] Fine, Gary Alan, Op. Cit., p 259

they assert that "a painter in the mainstream is inspired by the work of those who had gone before him/her but the artist is not conscious that he/she is 'imitating' another work of art."[25] This, they add, is where the categorisation of outsider art differs from the linear, progressive categories that exist in the mainstream art world: "the art of these 'anti-intellectual, anti-professional, anti-academic' people resists analysis with traditional criteria, while the use of non-artistic criteria such as personality features, prevents the consideration of the result of the creative process (you are looking at the person not the work of art)."[26] This assertion is confirmed in their statement, when they refer to the outsider art collector John Saldano, who states that "the only way for me to honestly define outsider art is by artists," and to writer Priscilla Frank who claims that "while other genres like Abstract Expressionism or Cubism denote a specific set of aesthetic guidelines of artistic traditions, the label outsider art reflects more the life story and mental or emotional aptitude of the artist."[27]

It is important to note that the scope of the term outsider art has changed exponentially in the past twenty years, certainly in the UK. Before, we might have reason to agree with Dubuffet and Cardinal's assertions that this category describes artists who are removed in some way from the mainstream art world. And if we take Dubuffet at his strict word, the artist must also be completely disinterested in any kind of success within the mainstream art world; something that has not been evidenced in the interviews with *Artists* that form this thesis. In a 2007 article, Carole Tansella talks about how the structure of the society we now live in is not conducive to the discovery of traditional outsider art. Tansella notes that the culture we are part of today promotes contact between individuals, and the rapid transmission of ideas, images and information which ultimately contribute to an uninhabitable landscape for Dubuffet's *Art Brut*.[28]

Despite this recognition amongst historians that traditional outsider art can never exist in the same way again, there is a continued ambition to urgently define the term and to decide who or what can be encompassed within it. This thesis does not propose to participate in and continue this urgent debate around categorisation. Instead, it explores the reasons why outsider art has remained 'outside' of the mainstream by analysing the perceptions of the field as offered by its key participants. In fact, I will suggest that the term itself plays a central role in the continued marginalisation of the category, and therefore it has been important for the purpose of this thesis

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[25] Roberto, John, Diego Ortego and Brian Davis, 'Toward the Automatic Retrieval and Annotation of Outsider Art images: A Preliminary Statement,' presented at *Language Resources and Evaluation Conference,* Marseille, 2020, p 16-17
[26] Op Cit., p 17
[27] Ibid.
[28] Tansella, Carole, 'The Long and Winding Journey of Outsider Art: An Historical Perspective,' in *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences,* Vol. 16, Issue 2, 2007, pp133-138, p 135

to here at its very start offer some kind of definition. The historical definition offered by Cardinal has been used as a reference point, but with heavy acknowledgement that the term and all that it encompasses has had to expand over the years considering technological and societal advancements. It is used with absolute recognition that the term is not perfect and, in many instances, can be stigmatising and othering. The decision to use the term in this thesis has also been influenced by the *Artist* interview responses, where several of the respondents noted that they found an affinity with the label, and therefore by not disparaging it in this thesis, it is an attempt to not continue to gatekeep the term. Therefore, the working definition of the term outsider art and the artists it encompasses for this thesis is threefold: artists who are experiencing some form of barrier to accessing the art world as an artist, whether this is due to health (mental or physical), disability, or socioeconomic circumstance; artists who have travelled a non-traditional route to become an artist (specifically by not participating in higher education, or not completing a higher education course); and artists who self-identify as 'outsider' for the above reasons and for any additional reasons (for example, their art work does not adhere to mainstream norms).

It was also important for the purpose of this thesis to decide upon a selection criterion for artists interviewed as part of the research. This thesis does not aim to re-define the term outsider art, or to offer another, alternative term. It also does not seek to label artists as outsider or not, and its purpose is not to add to the existing literature where the label outsider has been applied to artists who may not have associated themselves with such a term. This has all informed the process used for selecting the artists for interview. The artists invited for interview were all artists registered with UK charity Outside In, which means that they self-identify in some way as facing a significant barrier to the art world for reasons including health, disability, social circumstance or isolation. Each of the artists interviewed had their own experience of feeling excluded from the mainstream art world, and their association with a charity like Outside In highlights their desire to be called an artist and to have their artwork seen and validated publicly. The artists selected may or may not label themselves explicitly as 'outsider artists,' but this was not a pre-requisite of being involved in the research.

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Second to the ongoing and inconclusive discourse around labelling, outsider art is also talked about academically in relation to its long history of being 'discovered' by those in influential societal positions, such as psychiatrists and already celebrated artists. Perhaps two of the most renowned collections of outsider art in the world are the Prinzhorn Collection, amassed by psychiatrist and art historian Hans Prinzhorn and incorporating art created by patients at the

Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic during the first half of the twentieth century, and the *Collection de l'Art Brut,* amassed by Dubuffet himself and now housed in Lausanne, Switzerland. Both collections were compiled by individuals who on their own merit held some form of accepted societal standing. In addition to this, Anna Suvorova notes that far from being viewed through a cultural lense, outsider art has historically been legitimated through medical channels, with the "discourse of outsider art… formed by psychiatrists, philosophers, and avant-garde artists."[29] Sociologist Victoria Alexander states that because outsider artists create with little to no awareness of the market, "outsider work needs to be 'discovered'."[30] Alexander adds that the discovery narrative is 'crucial' to the field of outsider art as it confirms authenticity, with its discoverers first recognising the "aesthetic significance of works (sometimes saving them from destruction) and process[ing] the social and cultural capital to introduce them to the established art world."[31] Curator and writer Slominski is decidedly anti-discovery narrative, using the example of Sidney Hirsh and Alfred and Elizabeth Starr's 'discovery' of William Edmondson – how could they have discovered Edmondson, when he was already displaying his work proudly in his yard?[32] However, despite this stand, Slominski does not "discount the important role of advocates, champions, and collectors; all of whom play a distinct role in the legacy of any artist."[33] This discovery narrative is returned to by a number of academics. Colin Rhodes notes that "it was only shortly before the First World War that artists belonging to a new generation, whose interests leaned towards formal distortion and Expressionism, began to develop an interest in the artistic production of psychiatric patients."[34] This discovery was, Rhodes writes, part of a search for an "alternative to what they perceived as the dried-up academicism of the western tradition."[35] This theme is touched upon in sociologist Dean McCannell's text *The Tourist,* where the author asserts that "self-discovery through a complex and sometimes arduous search for an Absolute Other is a basic theme of our civilization."[36] McCannell's theory refers to the desire of the western middle-class to find meaning in their own life by discovering the lives of those who are 'other':

> It is the middle class that systematically scavenges the earth for new experiences to be woven
> into a collective, touristic version of other peoples and other places. This effort of the

[29] Suvorova, Anna, 'Dynamic Similarity: Outsider Art and Avant-Garde', in *Modernization and Multiple Modernities,* 162-74. KnE Social Sciences, 2018

[30] Alexander, Victoria D. and Anne E. Bowler, 'Contestation in aesthetic fields: Legitimation and legitimacy struggles in outsider art,' in *Poetics,* 84, 2021, p 6

[31] Ibid.

[32] Slominski, Lisa, *Non-Conformers: A New History of Self-Taught Artists,* Yale University Press, 2021, p 9

[33] Ibid.

[34] Rhodes, Colin, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives,* Thames & Hudson, 2000, p 8

[35] Ibid.

[36] McCannell, Dean, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class,* Schocken Books Inc., 1976, p 5

international middle class to coordinate the differentiations of the world into a single ideology is intimately linked to its capacity to subordinate other people to its values, industry and future designs. [37]

The history of mainstream artists becoming disillusioned with the art world and looking for something new, different and 'other' is not revolutionary. As Cardinal notes, "true art history is in fact a succession of revolts and heresies."[38] What tends to happen though is that these new and revolutionary forms of art are after time eventually encompassed by the art world and accepted as progress. For example, we now do not question the canonical inclusion of avant-garde artists, Surrealists, Cubists or Abstract Expressionists. This, however, has not been the experience of outsider art.

The emergence of outsider art from the monolithic psychiatric institutions of Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries itself tells a story of marginalisation. Maizels talks about Dr Paul Gaston Meunier, Dr Auguste Marie and Dr Charles Ladame, who, alongside Walter Morganthaler and Prinzhorn, were key personnel in the discovery and distribution of outsider art at the turn of the twentieth century: "patients were never referred to by their own names, but by initials or numbers. Although just about recognized as art, their work was still considered a lower form of expression than that by 'real' artists."[39] Similarly, in Cardinal's flagship text, he writes about Dubuffet's exchange with a teacher about whether there have always been alternative forms that have been neglected and lost without trace but that match the quality of celebrated mainstream art. The teacher responded, expressing his conviction "that if such works has been assessed by contemporary experts and deemed unworthy of preservation, it was to be concluded that they could not have been of comparable value to the works of their time that had survived."[40] Cardinal writes, "the teacher bowed before the prevailing wind emitted by the Establishment, and could consent to find objective beauty only in the place marked out by a superior order."[41]

Then there is the influence of Dubuffet, with his disdain for all that was mainstream culture. Dubuffet travelled through Europe, visiting psychiatric hospitals and other institutions, collecting work by people who were in some way removed from society; whether physically or socially. To have such an influential character as Dubuffet on board no doubt contributed to the increasing recognition of outsider art, but it also illustrates again how outsider art has played a

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[37] McCannell, Op. Cit., p 13
[38] Cardinal, Op. Cit., 1972, p 9
[39] Maizels, Op. Cit., 1996 p 13
[40] Cardinal, Op. Cit., 1972, p 8
[41] Ibid.

peripheral, secondary role to established key figures throughout its history. In a 2017 article, Antonia Dapena-Tretter talks about Dubuffet's appropriation of his new-found category and how he used it to further his own artistic career. Through his mission as a collector of *Art Brut,* Dubuffet constructed an 'outsider' persona for himself, despite already being quite comfortable within the mainstream art world. Dubuffet, Dapena-Tretter asserts, offered very little to the artists whose work he collected, and in his role as collector and authoritative voice, he held a lot of power. In *Rules of Art,* Pierre Bourdieu talks about the collector being the creator of the creator; "Dubuffet's role as collector was itself a creative endeavour, but one in which he managed to maintain a constant position of dominance."[42] It is also interesting that by creating such strict criteria for his new category of art, Dubuffet was mirroring what he himself disliked so much about the cultural mainstream. As Rhodes writes, "in this way a position that had originally been born out of a desire to escape the straightjacket of the art market now threatened, ironically, to develop into an 'alternative' orthodoxy."[43]

The paradox for many outsider artists is that they are dependent on art world insiders to act on their behalf. As Julia Ardery notes, Bourdieu presents art as "an enduring definitional question, one in which battles over value and prestige are joined often with less determination or effect by authors than by their authorizers."[44] Maclagan notes that because outsider art is a "category imposed from the outside," there is a role for collectors in building collections, and in building knowledge in this area; "there is a double creativity at work: on the one hand, the work of isolated and eccentric creators, and on the other the 'eye' with which their art is recognized and rescued from obscurity by collectors."[45]

Outsider art's fate has been in the hands of others for many decades. This is no more apparent than in Russell's introduction of the Alfred Barr-Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) tale. Barr was the first director of MoMA and was in fact a great supporter of outsider and untrained art. This support is best evidenced in his organisation of an exhibition in 1938 entitled *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America.* However, despite Barr's belief in and support of this emerging field of art, his views were not widely shared; "there was little interest in either the art of the common man or non-academic work displaying 'independence of school or tradition'."[46] Barr was criticised heavily for his Morris Hirschfield solo exhibition in

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[42] Dapena-Tretter, Antonia, 'Jean Dubuffet & Art Brut: The Creation of an Avant-Garde Identity,' in *Platform,* Vol. 11, 2017, pp12-33, p19

[43] Rhodes, Op. Cit., p 14

[44] Ardery, Julia. S, 'Loser Wins: Outsider Art and the salvaging of disinterestedness,' in *Poetics,* 1997, Vol. 24, pp 329-346, p 330

[45] Maclagan, Op. Cit., 2009, p 64

[46] Russell, Op. Cit., p 17

1943, and was subsequently removed from the position of director by the museum's board of trustees.[47] Barr continued to play a role within the collections department of MoMA, but the museum has shown little to no support for non-academic art since.

The question of whether outsider art really can be – and whether it should be – integrated into the mainstream has been a question for many academics. Russell notes that "many in the field who follow in the footsteps of Dubuffet insist that the significance of self-taught creation arises from its total independence from the academy, hence it should be valued as a superior and distinct form of artistic expression."[48] Likewise, Steene recognises that many of the artists showcased in his book define themselves as 'outsider'; "kept at arm's length from the art world, they have proudly reclaimed the term. Also of interest is that many of the existing collectors and dealers of 'outsider art' seem reluctant to let go of the label or the need to show this art differently."[49] And then there are those who do not think it should be called art at all. Although a little over two decades old now, in *Outsider Art,* John-Louis Ferrier claims that the "battle is far from won."[50] He writes of Dr Thuillier, a neuro-psychiatrist working in Paris towards the end of the twentieth century who "rejected the idea that works by psychiatric patients show any artistic merit. In his opinion, they are mere scribbles: confused, random drawings by people incapable of producing a clear picture of the objective world."[51] Cardinal, however, is strong in his claim that outsider art should no longer be accepted as inferior, and this is something he made central to his life's work:

> Indeed, what is the most needed is to insist on the healthiness and seriousness of art that diverges from normality in the ways I have described. No longer is it acceptable that people should go along to Bedlam on a Sunday for a good laugh. No longer should it be acceptable that art brut be dismissed as inferior or irrelevant stuff.[52]

The way outsider art has been written about historically provides a foundation for this research, illustrating how its history has shaped its reception today (in the ongoing unresolved discourse around the label itself, and in its place as a subsidiary form of art, secondary to the avant-garde artists it inspired and the psychiatrists who collected it). It underlines the four key themes identified as part of this research as impacting on outsider art's reception within the mainstream art world: continued disagreement around definitions of the term; the relegation of outsider art

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[47] Russell, Op. Cit., p 17
[48] Russell, Op. Cit., p 19
[49] Steene, Op. Cit., p 10
[50] Ferrier, Jean-Louis, *Outsider Art,* Finest SA / Pierre Terrail Editions, 1997, p 18
[51] Ibid.
[52] Cardinal, Op. Cit., 1972, p 53

to peripheral spaces and power-less places; the impact of individuals on the institutional acceptance of outsider art; and the art world as a system and how it works to exclude outsider art. What is missing from existing literature, and what this thesis offers, is a present day view of outsider art's relationship with the mainstream art world as identified by those working first-hand in the field (including artists who see themselves in some way as 'outsiders', who have previously had little involvement in any research on the subject), as well as identification and exploration of the factors that have affected and continue to affect its reception within cultural institutions in the UK.

The findings from the research show that there is in fact a discursively evidenced disparity between the treatment of outsider art and the treatment of mainstream art within the UK art world. It was suggested by respondents that this evidenced disparity can be seen in outsider art's continued confounding of the art historical canon, its lack of cultural scaffolding and its relegation to peripheral spaces, funding streams and agendas. The 'elitist' mainstream art world, as described by the *Artist* respondents, has been a space where outsider art has enjoyed very little success and many artists who exist under the outsider umbrella continue to be challenged by rules and norms that are embedded within the art world due to their health or financial circumstances.

The respondents discussed the term outsider art itself as a barrier and an opportunity. For the *Outsider Arts Professionals* and *Curators,* there was a hesitancy to use the term due to concerns around marginalisation and stigmatisation. But more than this, on the part of the *Curators,* this hesitancy was due to a lack of understanding of what the term itself means. On the contrary, many of the *Artist* respondents felt that a term like outsider art offered them some sense of belonging in a world where they regularly felt like they did not belong. These contrary views – those of the people making the work and those of the people sharing the work – reflect the paternalistic roots of the category of outsider art and raise questions about who can decide where and how a label is applied and who it can be applied to. This failure to agree on a term and a definition for that term has overshadowed discourse in this area and has meant that galleries and museums have been unable to tackle the subject of outsider art in any meaningful or progressive way.

Outsider art's relegation to peripheral spaces, funding streams and agendas and the impact this has on its reception was a major finding of the research. Exhibitions of outsider art taking place in hallways, attics, learning spaces – anywhere but the main curatorial spaces of a gallery or museum – underlines what kind of value is attributed to it by institutions. Further than this physical relegation was an identified relegation of the category to peripheral funding streams

and agendas that result in its evaluation based on health and social outcomes rather than on an aesthetic level.

The third major finding was the impact that individuals have – and have had – on the trajectory of outsider art and its ongoing reception within the cultural mainstream. This included the impact that gatekeepers like curators, critics and collectors have on the visibility of outsider art through important tools of cultural validation like critical reviews and exhibition selection panels and how their cautiousness and reticence to tackle the subject of outsider art has influenced its acceptance - or non-acceptance - as a category of art.

The final and most unanimously identified theme was how the existing structures of the art world present a challenge for artists who might fall under the outsider umbrella. This theme ultimately underpins all of the identified themes in its illustration of a cultural system that is difficult to infiltrate for those who are at any given time outside of it. There was acknowledgement that the art world is challenging for *any* artist to navigate, but more nuanced barriers were identified for outsider artists. These included the tendency to over-academicize language in the art world and the level of unpaid administration involved in being a practising artist; from applying for funding, to submitting annual tax returns to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Artists who had not been to art school saw themselves at a disadvantage as they lacked the skills and tools acquired through formal art education, and it was identified that having health issues was not conducive to having a successful career as an artist. A theme of financial uncertainty ran through the findings; uncertainty for large arts organisations at a time of huge cultural funding cuts in the UK, and uncertainty for the artists themselves at a time when creativity is undervalued more widely and opportunities are expensive to apply for and compensation is small – or non-existent. These financial uncertainties put immense strain on cultural organisations, who as a result are less able to take risks, and on the artists too, who are often existing on low incomes or benefits.

By identifying these factors and how they have been – and are - able to persevere, there is hope that a more knowledgeable and mindful approach to exhibiting and celebrating outsider art can be achieved.

1. Understanding the reception of 'outsider art' today through qualitative interviewing

This thesis primarily seeks to establish the factors that affect the validation and inclusion of outsider art within the UK cultural mainstream today – that is the early 2020s, a period defined by Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. Through the analysis of 35 semi-structured interviews with three key cohorts participating in the outsider-mainstream art worlds, the research has identified four fundamental themes that affect the ongoing validation – and therefore inclusion of – outsider art within the UK cultural mainstream. The three interview cohorts were: *Curators* - curators and directors employed by mainstream museums and galleries across the UK; *Outsider Arts Professionals* - professionals working specifically in the outsider art field; and *Artists* - artists who are registered with the UK charity Outside In, which supports artists facing significant barriers to the mainstream art world for reasons including health, disability, social circumstance or isolation. Throughout the research, the terms used when discussing each cohort; *Curator(s), Outsider Arts Professional(s)* and *Artist(s),* will be italicised to avoid confusion. The *Curators* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* will be named individually throughout the research, having completed consent forms agreeing to this. The *Artist* respondents will be kept anonymous. A coded system has been applied and used to refer to each *Artist* respondent throughout the thesis. The University of Chichester participatory research ethics planning, review and confirmation was completed in December 2020, prior to any fieldwork interviews taking place.

1.1 Selecting a method and ethical considerations

Robson and McCartan's *Real World Research* offers a comprehensive overview of the quantitative and qualitative methods available to researchers conducting projects in the real world. This was an important starting point as a researcher from an art historical background approaching the collection and analysis of primary data. Interviews were selected as the primary research method due to their ability to collect nuanced data on attitudes and experiences from individuals currently working and/or living within the outsider or mainstream sectors. Robson and McCartan's views on social constructivism were of interest when designing the research project, as the authors talk about how "social properties are constructed through interactions between people, rather than having a separate existence," and that meaning "does not exist in its

own right; it is constructed by human beings as they interact and engage in interpretation."[53] The importance of acknowledging how a person constructs their own reality as a result of their interactions with and experience of society was central to this project. The use of interviews as a primary research tool invited participants to share their experience (or constructed reality) of the outsider-mainstream art world, and there is acknowledgement from Robson and McCartan that finding hard truths in these instances can be particularly difficult. The interviews were undertaken with an understanding of this, alongside a belief that they were the most appropriate method for gaining the data needed to most fully respond to the research questions.

Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson's *The Oral History Reader* is a culmination of texts focusing on the use of oral histories, with examples of real-life projects where oral histories have been a primary research method – that is, qualitative interview-based data collection. A number of the texts focus on the importance of oral histories in giving voice to marginalised or traditionally underrepresented groups. The authors note that "through oral histories, working-class men and women, indigenous peoples or members of cultural minorities, amongst others, have inscribed their experiences on the historical record, and offered their own interpretations of history."[54] This nod towards oral histories' use in giving voice to underrepresented groups is evidenced in Perks' and Thomson's text selections; 'Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history,' 'Black history, oral history and genealogy,' 'Life history interviews with people with learning disabilities.' Perks and Thomson also note that "in certain projects a primary aim has been the empowerment of individuals or social groups through the process of remembering and reinterpreting the past, with an emphasis on the value of process as much as historical product."[55] This relates to this project in its attempt to give voice to artists who for various reasons see themselves as being marginalised from the cultural mainstream and who have for the most part been excluded from previous research on this subject.

The theories of interviewing outlined in *The Oral History Reader* shaped my own approach, in particular Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson's chapter 'Ways of Listening,' which addressed a fundamental factor in collecting oral testimonies; "be sensitive to customary modes of speech and communication and allow people to speak on their own terms."[56] And Jan Walmsley's assertion that "disabled people have been marginalised in biographical research, in particular in oral history" confirmed my ambition to include the important voices of people who are so often

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[53] Robson and McCartin, Op Cit., p 24
[54] Perks, Robert and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader,* Routledge, 1998, p X
[55] Ibid.
[56] Slim, Hugo and Paul Thomson et al., 'Way of Listening' in *The Oral History Reader,* Perks, Robert and Alistair Thomson, Routledge, 1998, p 115

excluded from research that directly references themselves and their experiences. [57] This project is unique in its inclusion of 'elite' respondents – the *Curators* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* who are responsible for making cultural decisions – and the artists themselves, with the use of semi-structured interviews ensuring a sense of cohesion and fairness in data collection and analysis, and the ability to offer a coherent response to the research questions that combines the attitudes and experiences of three different cohorts.

Robson and McCartan's writing on ethical considerations is particularly important for this research project, with its inclusion of interviews with *Artists* (who are a group that could be described as vulnerable, notwithstanding any paternalistic subtexts). The authors assert that ethical consideration is an ongoing process,[58] and it was on this basis that the following processes were applied and approved for the collection of data via interviews. The interviews all took place online via Zoom, which meant that the participants were able to be comfortable in their own, familiar space. Additionally, as the researcher, I have worked with vulnerable artists for over ten years, and during this time have completed training in mental health awareness, mental health first aid, disability awareness and safeguarding, and have an up-to-date DBS check. If participants were to experience distress or anxiety as a direct result of participating in the interviews, they were to be signposted to relevant places where they could seek help and support. Informed consent was sought from all participants prior to taking part, and all participants received an information sheet outlining what the interviews would consist of, as well as information pertaining to their right to withdraw from the process and consent form they would need to read, sign and return. There was an easy-read version of the consent form made available for those who required it. All information held on participants was subject to the conditions of the University's Data Protection Policy and data has been stored and used in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines. All information obtained during the study from *Artist* participants will remain confidential and all *Artist* participant's data will be kept on a password protected computer. During the interview transcription process, each *Artist* was assigned a code that has been used throughout. The codes mean that the participants cannot be identified. Any information that could identify the participant will also be coded or redacted; this includes their current place of work, previous places of work, and any exhibition titles that might lead to their identification. Participants were asked if they would like to receive

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[57] Walmsley, Jan, 'Life history interviews with people with learning disabilities' in *The Oral History Reader,* Perks, Robert and Alistair Thomson, Routledge, 1998, p 126
[58] Robson and McCartan, Op. Cit., p 24

and review copies of their interview transcripts, and they will receive copies of all papers, summaries and other published or presented material.

Both the *Outsider Arts Professional* and *Curator* cohorts agreed to be named in the research. They also received information sheets and sign consent forms confirming their agreement to participate in the research.

1.2   The interviews

The use of semi-structured face-to-face (albeit online) interviews meant that, as per Robson and McCartan, the 'line of enquiry' and investigative questions could be adjusted throughout the process in a way that would not be possible through the use of surveys or questionnaires. [59] The predominant method of selection was purposive sampling, which Robson and McCartan explain is based on "researcher's judgement as to typicality of interest. A sample is built up which enables the researcher to satisfy their specific needs in a project."[60] The selection process was purposive in the way that the cohorts were defined prior to a call out to invite potential participants to take part in the research. The *Curator* group was more challenging than the other two groups to recruit to, perhaps because the interviews took place during a period of such global uncertainty (Covid-19 pandemic), but all those who responded to the call out were able to participate in the research, therefore nobody who wanted to participate was excluded. This also explains the larger group size of the *Artist* cohort, because, again, no person interested in participating was excluded. Respondents in the *Curator* and *Outsider Arts Professional* cohorts covered a broad range of organisations spanning the whole of the UK, including London, Glasgow, Chichester, Margate and Manchester. The *Curator* respondents at the time of interview worked for a range of public arts institutions from regional venues to national collections, and they held positions like curator, senior curator or director. The nature of the roles held by the *Curator* respondents meant that the majority were highly educated, with extensive experience working in the arts sector in the UK. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* had direct experience of the current 'outsider' debate, working in supported studios, as academics, or as curators and gallerists. It is also noteworthy to add that the respondents were interviewed during the Covid-19 pandemic and its related lockdowns. This had an impact on the available sample for interview and meant digital interviews were a necessity. Many cultural professionals were furloughed during the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant that they were legally unable to participate in any work related to their employed position. This was an influencing factor in who

[59] Op. Cit., p 286
[60] Op. Cit., p 281

was available to be interviewed for the research, as potential *Curator* or *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents who were furloughed by their employer at the time would have been unable to take part.

For all three cohorts, care was taken to ensure that respondents came from a range of diverse backgrounds, with a range of life and professional experience, although this research has not been able to establish full life biographies of any of the respondents unless they have outlined it specifically in their interview response. For the *Curators* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* the respondents were selected based on their role at the time of participating in the research. Because of this, they will be representative of their role as Curator, Director or Outsider Arts Professional. It is possible that there would be a difference in opinion if there were to be a more rigorous breakdown of gender, ethnicity, sexuality or socio-economic background amongst respondents. This was considered, but as the purpose of the research was to offer a general overview of the attitudes that exist about the reception of outsider art amongst professionals working in the outsider-mainstream space and artists themselves, it was decided that the respondent samples would be defined primarily by role. Further research might drill down into comparative attitudes on this subject based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality or socio-economic background.

Artist Interviews

This thesis does not aim to re-define the term outsider art, or to offer another, alternative term. It also does not seek to label artists as outsider or not, and the researcher does not want to add to the existing literature where the label 'outsider' has been applied to artists who may or may not have associated themselves with such a term. These foundations informed the process for selecting *Artists* for interview. In total, 19 artists were interviewed for this research. The *Artists* invited for interview were all registered with Outside In, a UK based national arts charity supporting artists who are facing significant barriers to the art world for reasons including health, disability, social circumstance or isolation. Each of the *Artists* interviewed had their own experience of feeling excluded from the mainstream art world, and their association with a charity like Outside In highlights their desire to be called an artist and to have their artwork seen and validated publicly. The *Artists* selected may or may not have seen themselves explicitly as 'outsider artists,' but this was not a prerequisite of being involved in the research. The artists were recruited through a call out advertised on Outside In's website and social media channels. On declaring their interest in being involved in the research, all artist participants were sent an invitation letter outlining the purpose of the research and the purpose of their involvement in it.

They were also sent a consent form to sign and return, and this was available in an easy read format for artists who needed it.

Each artist interview took place on Zoom where it was recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were all roughly between 30 and 60 minutes long. Of the 19 artists, six saw themselves as trained (through completing an art degree), six had completed a degree in a non-arts subject, and seven were self-taught, or had received no degree. A rough list of questions was devised for the artists, which could be deviated from if further information was required, or an interesting aside was mentioned. The questions included: *how long have you been practising as an artist? What has been your experience of navigating the art world? Have you ever had work in an exhibition? If yes, what was your experience of being part of an exhibition? Would you consider yourself to be someone who faces barriers to the mainstream art world? If so, could you describe these? What does the term outsider art mean to you? Do you think there is a difference in how outsider or non-traditional art is perceived/valued/exhibited in the UK? If yes, how and why?*

Curator Interviews

The *Curator* respondents were sought through a combination of targeted contact and an open call. The open call was posted via Twitter to the researcher's almost 1,500 followers consisting predominantly of art world professionals and artists. Additionally, three of the *Curators* were approached directly, based on existing connections or knowledge of their previous work aligning with the themes of the research. The requirement was that each *Curator* respondent was employed by a public art gallery, museum, collection or organisation at the time of interview, and their role had to in some way incorporate curation and decision making about exhibitions at their respective institutions. All *Curators* have signed consent forms to be named publicly in the thesis. The respondents in this category were:

Beth Hughes, Curator of Arts Council England's Collection. The Collection is owned by Arts Council England, but is housed at and has been managed by Southbank Centre since 1986. The collection does not have a permanent gallery space; it is predominantly a loan collection, but there is a space at Yorkshire Sculpture Park called Longside Gallery at which the collection programmes one exhibition per year. Hughes completed an undergraduate degree at the University of York, before engaging in a number of volunteering positions in the arts. Hughes' first paid role in the arts was for the National Media Museum's learning department. Her first curatorial role was at Abbott Hall Art Gallery in the Lake District, and she had been with the Arts Council Collection for five and a half years at the time of interview.

Tony Lewis, Curator, Glasgow Museums. Lewis is curator at Glasgow Museums, part of Glasgow Life; a charitable organisation whose mission is to inspire the city's citizens and visitors to lead richer and more active lives through culture, sport and learning. Glasgow Museums is the largest museum service in the UK outside of London and operates 10 venues across the city of Glasgow.

Simon Martin, Director of Pallant House Gallery. Martin is responsible for directing the organisation's mission and making sure they are delivering on and achieving their vision. At the time of interviewing, Martin had worked at the Gallery for 18 years, the majority of his working career. Prior to working at the Gallery, he was a student and completed internships at the Peggy Guggenheim in Venice, Sotheby's, Bonham's and the Mead Gallery. At Pallant House Gallery, he started out as Assistant Curator, before becoming Head of Curatorial Services, Artistic Director and then Director. Pallant House Gallery is based in Chichester, West Sussex, and explores new perspectives on British art from 1900 to now through a programme of exhibitions and creative opportunities. Outside In was initially founded as a project at Pallant House Gallery in 2006 before becoming an independent charity in 2017.

Daisy McMullan, Curator at Watermans. McMullan is a curator with Creative People and Places Hounslow. McMullan facilitates a group of local people to curate and produce a programme of activity. Creative People and Places Hounslow is a consortium of seven organisations, including community arts organisations, led by Watermans. It aims to boost arts capacity and audience through the development of new arts spaces and activities, a programme of large outdoor events and support for small and emerging creative businesses.

Martin Myrone, Convenor British Art Network (previous Curator at Tate Britain). At the time of the interview, Myrone had been the convenor of the British Art Network, based at the Paul Mellon Centre, for five months. The British Art Network is a membership association which exists to connect people working in the field of British art curatorially, supporting their research and curatorial work through bursary schemes. Prior to this, Myrone held various curatorial positions at Tate Britain from 1998 to 2020. In that role, Myrone was involved in several curatorial projects that explored primarily folk art, but also touched on outsider art.

Fiona Parry, Senior Curator, Turner Contemporary. Parry is Senior Curator at Turner Contemporary in Margate, Kent. The gallery was founded to celebrate JMW Turner's connection to Margate and opened in 2011. Their mission is to show world class exhibitions and to drive the social and economic regeneration of Margate and East Kent to transform lives in

one of the most deprived areas of the UK.

Phoebe Roberts, Curator, ArtAngel. The ArtAngel Collection is part of Tate and consists of 30 works, predominantly film and video works. The collection also commissions contemporary artists to realise projects outside of traditional museum or theatre settings which then tour across the country. Roberts has worked for ArtAngel since 2015, previously working at ARTIST ROOMS; another Tate touring programme.

Questions for the *Curators* consisted of the following: *What is your job role? What has your journey been to get to this point in your career? What is the process for deciding on which exhibitions will take place at your organisation? How do you decide which artists to exhibit? What do you think makes a good exhibition? How would you define the term outsider art? Have you curated an exhibition that has included outsider art before? If yes, how did you curate it? In your experience, do you think there is a difference between how outsider art is treated or valued in the art world compared to more mainstream art? Do you have any final comments or thoughts?* If there was time or the question responses allowed, the respondents were also asked*: What exhibitions have you curated that you think went well? Have you curated any exhibitions that have not gone as planned?*

<u>*Outsider Arts Professional* interviews</u>

The *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents were identified through the researcher's previous work in the outsider-mainstream sector. Having worked for over twelve years in this area, connections have been built with a number of professionals and as such, the researcher was able to approach potential interview candidates whose experience would contribute greatly to the research aims. Biographies of the *Outsider Arts Professionals* are outlined below. The *Outsider Arts Professional*s all signed consent forms asserting they are happy to be named in full in the thesis. The requirement for the *Outsider Arts Professionals* was that they had experience working in a curating, writing, academic, or organisational role specifically in the realm of outsider art, or non-traditional art. This included professionals working within supported studio settings, as well as independent freelance curators and gallerists. The respondents in this category were:

Sheryll Catto, Co-Director, ActionSpace. Catto is the co-Director of ActionSpace, a leading development agency and supported studio for neurodivergent artists based in London. Established in the 1960s, ActionSpace's mission is to advocate for diversity within the

contemporary visual arts sector by supporting neurodivergent artists to develop their artistic practice, sell and exhibit work, and realise other creative projects.

Elisabeth Gibson, Director, Project Ability. Gibson is director of Project Ability, a Glasgow based visual arts organisation established in 1984. Their aim is to create opportunities for people with disabilities and people with lived experience of mental ill-health to express themselves and achieve their artistic potential.

Jennifer Gilbert, Director, Jennifer Lauren Gallery. Gilbert is the founder and director of the Jennifer Lauren Gallery. The aim of the gallery is to champion and exhibit international self-taught, disabled and overlooked artists who create work outside the mainstream art world and art history. The gallery organises pop up exhibitions and events, like artist talks and artist-led workshops, as well as taking part in art fairs internationally.

John Maizels, Founder and Editor, Raw Vision Magazine. Maizels is the founder and editor of Raw Vision Magazine, first published in 1989 with the purpose of bringing the phenomena of Outsider Art to a wider public. The magazine remains the only international journal of the art of 'unknown geniuses.' Maizels has also authored several books on outsider art, including *The Outsider Art Sourcebook*[61], *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond*[62], and *Raw Erotica*[63].

James Peto, Project Director for New Collections Gallery, Wellcome Collection. Peto is Project Director for New Collections Gallery at Wellcome Collection in London. Peto has worked for Wellcome Collection since 2005, and prior to his new position, he worked in temporary exhibitions. His new role focuses on bringing new perspectives to the Wellcome's Collections. Peto was selected for the *Outsider Arts Professionals* cohort as opposed to the *Curators* cohort due to the aims and ambitions of the Wellcome Collection more widely, and because of his own experience curating exhibitions relating to arts and health and outsider art more specifically.

Colin Rhodes, Professor and Xiaoxiang scholar, Hunan Normal University. Rhodes is a professor in the Fine Arts Academy at Hunan Normal University and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Dundee. Previously, Rhodes worked in various positions at the University of Sydney for 15 years and has been the Pro Vice Chancellor and Dean at Kingston

[61] Maizels, John, *Outsider Art Sourcebook, Second Edition,* Raw Vision, 2009
[62] Maizels, John, *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond,* Phaidon Press, 2000
[63] Maizels, John, *Raw Erotica: Sex, Lust and Desire in Outsider Art,* Raw Vision, 2011

University. Rhodes is the author of a number of books including *Primitivism and Modern Art*[64] and *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives.*[65]

Lisa Slominski, Independent Curator. Slominski is a curator and writer who advocates for neurodiverse artists. Slominski specialises in the emerging field and history of 'self-taught' and artists coming from unexpected circumstances. This includes outsider art's terminological debates as well as the art market. Her first art history book entitled *Nonconformers*[66] on self-taught was published in 2022. In 2020 she co-founded the inclusive international curatorial platform Art et al.

Amanda Sutton, Director, Venture Arts. Sutton is director of Venture Arts, a visual arts charity based in Manchester. Their mission is to shape a new cultural landscape where people with learning disabilities reach their potential as artists, curators, critics, audiences, participants and advocates.

Jo Verrent, Director, Unlimited. Verrent is the Director of Unlimited, the world's largest commissions programme for disabled artists. The organisations not only works to fund disabled artists to make new work, but aims to promote its discussion and integration within the cultural fabric of the UK. Verrent is also an artist, advocate and activist and is on the Advisory Panel for Arts Council England.

Questions for the Outsider Arts Professionals consisted of the following: *What is your current role and your previous experience working with outsider or non-traditional artists? How would you define the term outsider art? Is there another term you would use? In your experience, what is the relationship between outsider art and mainstream art in the UK? In your experience, is there a difference in how outsider art and mainstream art are seen, perceived or valued in the UK? If yes, why do you think this is the case? In your experience, are there things to be considered specifically when curating an exhibition of outsider art? In your experience or opinion, are there barriers for artists from non-traditional backgrounds? If yes, what have you experienced these barriers to be? What do you think the art world is doing well / what could it be doing differently to make itself more accessible to non-traditional artists?*

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[64] Rhodes, Colin, *Primitivism and Modern Art,* Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1994
[65] Rhodes, Colin, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives,* Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2000
[66] Slominski, Lisa, *Nonconformers: A New History of Self-Taught Artists,* Yale University Press, 2022

1.3 Methods of analysis

Following thorough reading of and immersion in all interview transcripts, a thematic analysis approach was used as the primary tool for interrogating the responses. As a tool for analysis, it had the potential to uncover and highlight common themes from across all three sets of interviews, and as such would support the formation of a cohesive structure to the findings. Although it is important to note that each participant was interviewed as an individual, and that the nature of the semi-structured interviews meant that some participants were questioned further on certain points, the findings from across the three sets did feature commonalities.

Braun and Clarke note that thematic analysis "provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data."[67] The common features of this method of analysis include: giving labels to areas of text, adding comments, identifying patterns and themes, using these themes to focus further data collection, and then linking these themes to constructs or theories to support the research.[68] Thematic analysis can be "used as a realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants, or as a constructionist method, which examines the way in which events, realities, meanings, and experiences are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society."[69] This was important as the project is reflective of both critical realism (in its exploration of the reality of interview participants) and social constructionism (in its aim to uncover what are inherently subjective attitudes and experiences to a socially constructed world; the art world).

Robson and McCartan note the usefulness of seeking both 'similarity relations'; based on things that are similar and different, and 'contiguity relations'; based on finding connections when analysing interview transcripts.[70] They also recommend a strong familiarity with literature surrounding the area of interest. This familiarity ensures that the researcher has an awareness of the themes and constructs that may arise from the data. They suggest a number of things to look out for when identifying patterns and themes. These include "repetitions; indigenous categories; metaphors and analogies; similarities or differences; linguistic connectors; missing data; and theory-related material."[71] This is mirrored in Owen's article on 'Interpretative themes in relational communication', where the author notes that a theme can be identified when these criteria are present: "(1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness. Recurrence was

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[67] Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke, Op. Cit., p 78
[68] Robson and McCartan, Op. Cit., p 463
[69] Op. Cit., p 467
[70] Op. Cit., p 463
[71] Op. Cit., p 474-475

observed when at least two parts of a report had the same thread of meaning, even though different wording indicated such a meaning."[72] Owen noted that criterion two (repetition), was similar to 'recurrence' but referred to an unambiguous repetition of wording.[73] In a 2018 article, Brandi Lawless and Yea-Wen Chen expand on Owen's points further by encouraging a more critical reading of interview data that asks "why and how communication codes are recurrent, repeating, and forceful in ways that reproduce and reinforce social inequalities."[74]

Braun and Clarke assert that the researcher must make some judgement to determine how important each theme is, and they advocate for flexibility when using thematic analysis. A useful question to ask, they note, is "what counts as a pattern/theme, or what 'size' does a theme need to be? This is a question of prevalence, in terms both of space within each data item and of prevalence across the entire data set."[75] This question was applied to the analysis of the interview responses, where micro-themes discovered on initial read-throughs were identified (see below), and then in tandem, critical analysis of the transcripts became more general *and* more specific. It became more general in the grouping of recurring micro-themes into wider, overarching themes that crossed responses from all three cohorts, and more specific in the drilling down into phrases, sentences and even words used by respondents that evidenced each overarching theme. This combined general-specific approach enabled the eventual identification of the four overarching key themes that answer the research questions and at the same time, the identification of specific quotes that evidence each of these themes.

The theories outlined by Robson and McCartan, Owen and Braun and Clarke shaped the analysis of the interview responses, which was approached with a strong existing knowledge of the literature surrounding the field of outsider art, and focused on repetitions, similarities and differences between the transcripts. Throughout the analysis process, focus was brought back to the research questions and how the information gathered would help respond to these as accurately as possible. As outlined by Braun and Clarke, a combination of judgement and frequency and strength of occurrence was used to identify the key responses in relation to the research questions. During the analysis, there was also acknowledgement of what was not said by respondents and the weight of this, and to how things were communicated by each group.

In the first instance, each interview transcript was read for a general sense of what was being said by each respondent. As a result of this initial reading, areas of repetition and common

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[72] Owen, William Foster, Op. Cit., p 275
[73] Ibid.
[74] Lawless, Brandi and Yea-Wen Chen, 'Developing a Method of Critical Thematic Analysis for Qualitative Communication Inquiry,' in *Howard Journal of Communication,* Vol. 1, No. 0, 2018, pp 1-15, p 4
[75] Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke, Op Cit., p 82

narrative were identified amongst each respondent cohort. For the *Curator* respondents, these areas included: *outsider art confounds the traditional canon, outsider art is not as academically critiqued as mainstream art, degradable/difficult materials are used by outsider artists, marketing exhibitions of outsider art to audiences is challenging, there are challenges with 'pastoral care' of artists who need it, outsider art lacks art historical value, there is a focus on biography in outsider art, reductive programming is a challenge, acknowledgement that more diverse curators make more diverse exhibitions, outsider art's credibility exists through its mainstream connections, there is a lack of connection to mainstream art, there is a lack of financial resources and a lack of staffing, there has to be a focus on paying audiences, there is a lack of opportunities in the art world generally and an oversubscription of artists, the term outsider art is problematic, there is confusion around the term outsider art, definitions of outsider art depend on the context, there is increasing interest in outsider art, there are preconceptions about what is art and what is not art.*

For the *Outsider Arts Professionals,* these initial readings uncovered the following areas of interest: *outsider art as a term is problematic but useful, outsider art is an historical term, the emergence of outsider art as a category is still having an impact on its reception, there are problematic approaches to exhibiting outsider art, there is no relationship between outsider art and the mainstream art world, the art world exists as an exclusive system, the art world is difficult for everyone to navigate, there is a curatorial nervousness about approaching outsider art, curators need to actively engage with artists in less traditional spaces, the digital sphere has created more opportunities for outsider art, outsider art should be included in the mainstream, outsider art should be kept separate from the mainstream, there is a relegation of outsider art to learning and community programmes, there is a need for more supported studios and support systems for artists, the UK outsider art world is behind other countries/continents (specifically Europe and the United States), there is a need for a permanent exhibition space for outsider art, there is a lack of exhibition space and opportunity in the art world more widely, there is a lack of critical examination of outsider art, critical reviews of outsider art exhibitions are negative, there are funding barriers for organisations, outsider artists need to be empowered in the art world workforce more widely.*

And finally, the *Artist* cohort: *artists are not paid for what they do, there is difficulty navigating the benefits system when it comes to earning income as an artist, artists face financial barriers when applying for opportunities, being an artist/creativity is not seen as financially viable, money is seen as success in the art world, galleries and museums are financially risk adverse, rejection is challenging, the art world is restrictive, there is no feedback on rejected applications, being self-taught/untrained is a barrier, the art world is elitist, the art world is*

superficial, the art world is not transparent, lack of outsider role models, there is no access to gatekeepers for artists, curators are not visible or accessible, artists are the last people considered in decision-making, criticism of the system will have consequences, navigating the art world is challenging, attending art school was a negative experience, the art world academicizes language, a lack of connections to the wider art world is a barrier, critical discussion of art work is important for artists, exhibiting work is important for artists, connecting with other artists is important, health problems are a barrier to the art world, working cultures in the art world lead to burn out, the arts have been beneficial for health, there needs to be a dedicated space for outsider art, it is important to have a term like outsider art, the term outsider art provides a sense of belonging, the outsider-insider dichotomy is too binary, outsider art can be used in a tokenistic or patronising way, outsider art is not seen by others in a positive light, there is organisational nervousness when it comes to exhibiting outsider art, outsider art is shown in peripheral spaces, having no success in selling work is demoralising, creativity is not valued in the Western world, parental stigma existed around creativity, gatekeepers need to be more diverse, museums and galleries need to be held accountable, museums and galleries need to be representative of their local communities.

Subsequent readings of the transcripts and further analysis brought together some of the above initial micro-themes from each group. For example, for the *Curator* responses, micro-themes including *the term outsider art is problematic, there is confusion around the term outsider art, outsider art confounds the traditional canon* and *definitions of outsider art depend on the context*, were grouped under the growing theme of 'attitudes towards the term outsider art.' For the *Outsider Arts Professionals,* micro-themes such as *outsider art should be included in the mainstream, there is a need for a permanent exhibition space for outsider art* and *there is a relegation of outsider art to learning and community programmes* combined under the growing theme 'the spaces outsider art occupies.' And finally, for the *Artist* respondents, micro-themes such as *creativity is not valued in the Western world, outsider art is not seen by others in a positive light* and *parental stigma existed around creativity* combined to produce the growing theme 'how art is defined by society.' This exercise was also undertaken across cohort transcriptions to discover common themes that surfaced for all respondents. For example; *there is a lack of opportunities in the art world generally and an oversubscription of artists* (*Curators*), *there is curatorial nervousness about approaching outsider art* (*Outsider Arts Professionals*), and *Curators are not visible or accessible* (*Artists*), were grouped together under 'The role of the curator.'

I am aware that my research was conducted from my professional position as a member of the *Outsider Arts Professional* group. In using comparative and discursive analysis, I was able to remain distanced from all three groups and I have allowed the analysis to shape the findings of

the research. The open, semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled me to listen and elicit comment and experience. These were conversations, and I was, however, a part of them by necessity.

The interview transcripts will be available to future researchers and any readers who would find it useful to experience the collaborative interaction between interviewer and interviewee. This is in response to Steve Mann's critique of qualitative interviewing and subsequent analysis, where they talk about interviews being a "collaborative and constructed event," and the role of the interviewer being more important than it initially seems. [76] Additionally, all interview transcripts were sent to interview respondents before analysis for validation purposes, which Mann identifies as good practice. [77] For a more objective approach to the analysis of interview transcriptions, future research might invite an additional researcher to read and theme the transcripts in the initial stages of analysis.

Findings from the interview responses have been supported throughout by existing literature from the fields of art history and sociology. The thesis draws on the major texts relating to the field of outsider art by authors including Roger Cardinal[78], Gary Alan Fine[79], David Maclagan[80], John Maizels[81], Colin Rhodes[82], Lisa Slominski[83] and Marc Steene[84]. As this research combines art historical discourse around the category of outsider art with present-day theories on the art world and its limitations for such a category, this thesis also draws on relevant sociological literature. Using theories from the field of sociology to explore and examine the art world is in fact relatively new. Victoria Alexander suggests that the arts have "occupied a marginalized position in both modern society and the discipline of sociology."[85] It is important, however, as Alexander notes in a later 2020 book, because sociology looks at the "systems, structures and culture: that is, the connections among individuals, the stabilized patterns emerging from social interaction, and meaning that is shared across individuals," making it a key tool in the

[76] Mann, Steve, 'A Critical Review of Qualitative Interviews in Applied Linguistics,' in *Applied Linguistics,* Vol. 32, No.1, 2010, pp6-24, p13

[77] Op. Cit., p 15

[78] Cardinal, Roger, *Outsider Art,* Studio Vista, 1972

[79] Fine, Gary Alan, *Everyday Genius: Self-taught art and the culture of authenticity,* The University of Chicago Press, 2004

[80] Maclagan, David, *Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace,* Reaktion Books, 2009

[81] Maizels, John, *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond,* Phaidon Press Ltd, 1996

[82] Rhodes, Colin, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives,* Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2000

[83] Slominski, Lisa, *Nonconformers: A New History of Self-Taught Artists,* Yale University Press, 2021

[84] Steene, Marc, *Outside In: Exploring the Margins of Art,* Lund Humphries, 2023

[85] Alexander, Victoria D., 'Art at the crossroads: The arts in society and the sociology of art,' in *Poetics,* Vol. 43, 2014, pp1-19, p 2

exploration of a social world that is rooted in systems, structures and culture. [86] Although written from a predominantly art historical perspective, relevant sociologists and their theories have been carefully selected to support this research. These include Howard Becker[87], Claire Bishop[88], Pierre Bourdieu[89], and Nathalie Heinich[90]. Their theories include social concepts that can be applied to the art world and its peripheries such as individualism, inequity in social worlds and connections between historical and contextual factors that have contributed to the development of the art world over the past century and can contribute greatly to the discourse outlined in this research around the reception and validation of outsider art within the mainstream.

Alongside art historical and sociological literature, this thesis also references several reports and conference papers that provide contextual background to the current state of the UK arts sector, particularly in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion. Their findings have provided a contextual back drop to the reading of the interview responses and the subsequent development of thematic categories in this research. These reports include 'Equality and diversity within the arts and cultural sector in England: Evidence and literature review' by Coliseum Research and Consultancy[91], which explores the barriers to attendance at arts activities; 'Making a Shift: disabled people and the arts and cultural workforce in England', by ewgroup[92], which focuses on the experience of disabled people in taking up paid positions within the arts workforce; and 'Curating for Change: Disabled People Leading in Museums', by Esther Fox and Jane Sparkes[93], which looks at the impact of more disabled curators on the museum sector.

[86] Alexander, Victoria D., *Sociology of the Arts: Exploring Fine and Popular Forms,* Wiley, 2020
[87] Becker, Howard, *Art Worlds,* University of California Press, 2008
[88] Bishop, Claire, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship,* Verso, 2012
[89] Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979
[90] Heinich, Nathalie, 'Mapping intermediaries in contemporary art according to pragmatic sociology,' in *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* Vol. 15, No. 6, 2012, pp 695-702
[91] Consilium Research and Consultancy, 'Equality and diversity within the arts and cultural sector in England: Evidence and literature review final report,' *Arts Council England,* 2013
[92] Ewgroup, 'Making a Shift: disabled people and the arts and cultural workforce in England (understanding trends, barriers and opportunities,' *Arts Council England,* 2017
[93] Fox, Esther and Jane Sparkes, 'Curating for Change: Disabled People Leading in Museums,' *Accentuate Report,* 2021

1.4   Positionality

Informed by Andrew Gary Darwin Holmes' 2020 writing on researcher positionality[94], I have reflexively approached and considered my own position in relation to the research throughout the process: from conception and design to analysis and interpretation. In their text, Holmes cites the importance of understanding how a researcher's own professional and personal background might influence the research process, asserting that reflexivity is key, and encouraging researchers to critically assess and disclose their position to both maintain the integrity of the research and to provide further insight and information for the reader to understand the shape of the research and the process that informed it.

This research was undertaken with full recognition of my position as a member of one of the participant groups; that of the outsider arts professionals. Having worked in this field for over a decade, I was acutely aware of my relationship to the respondents and the ways that this might shape my approach to conducting interviews and interpreting and analysing the responses. This recognition has brought with it a sense of responsibility to ensure that the research remains as neutral as possible, and that my own experience has not unduly influenced any of the narratives being shared.

Given the focus of the research, for me it felt imperative to remove myself and my experience in many ways as much as possible from the process; or at the very least, approach data collection from a place of openness and curiosity, not coloured by my own experiences. The findings of the research reveal the deep-rooted power dynamics that exist in the outsider and mainstream sectors, and because of this, I was particularly mindful of ensuring that the voices of those working within these realms; and particularly the artists themselves, took precedence, rather than being shaped or mediated through my own narrative. Stepping back in this way has enabled me to adopt a 'balcony view' of the experiences of these three key cohorts, resisting any urge to impose assumptions or to mould the data into any preconceived notions shaped by my own professional lens. By consciously creating this separation between my professional self and the research, I believe the findings are better able to offer a more objective and reflective account of the realities faced by the three key cohorts. By insisting on this separation I hope that I am challenging some of the inherent power dynamics that are ever present in this area, removing

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[94] Holmes, Andrew Gary Darwin, 'Researcher Positionality - A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - A New Researcher Guide,' in *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2020, pp. 1-10.

the idea of 'us' and 'them', and instead providing space for the sharing of narratives, perspectives and experiences in a way that has contributed to an incredibly meaningful piece of research that has the capacity to affect real change for outsider artists in their relationship with the cultural mainstream.

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, at the heart of this research was a commitment to amplifying the voices of artists; voices that have, for too long, been underrepresented in discussions about the experience of outsider art in relation to the cultural mainstream. I was determined to approach my interviews with the artists without assuming knowledge of their experiences, even though my career so far has been spent working alongside artists who may (or may not) have had similar journeys. On reflection, too, because of the insider-outsider dichotomy that underlines the area in which my research is situated, I wanted to promote the artists themselves to an 'insider' position, at least in their participation in the research. My hope was for them to feel empowered and to know that they are important; that their stories are integral to the research and its subsequent findings. And it is true, it could not have happened without them and their openness and honesty in sharing their perspectives.

As I distance myself and my experiences from influencing the findings of the research, I acknowledge that my position within the field has brought many advantages to the project. My longstanding involvement in the outsider sector – and arts sector more widely – has given me access to key individuals who were able to contribute as interviewees from all three participant groups. My direct experience of working with outsider artists, I hope, helped foster a sense of safety, trust and understanding during the interview process, allowing participants to share their perspectives and experiences openly and without fear of judgement.

The foundations of this research are perhaps illustrative of the broadest influence my own position has had. The project's inception was rooted in my long-standing curiosity about the experience of outsider art within cultural mainstream and a desire to underpin anecdotal evidence with rigorous, relevant and useable research. Without my own professional experience, this line of inquiry would not have emerged in the same way. My knowledge of the field has also been instrumental in the design of the research: I was able to define with clarity the key cohorts and identify and recruit relevant participants so as to reflect the breadth of voices operating within this space. Additionally, my understanding of the history and discourse surrounding outsider art provided a framework for identifying important recurring themes during analysis, and enabled me to situate the findings within (and build upon) existing literature.

While I took deliberate steps to distance myself from the research; to challenge existing power dynamics and to give untouched voice to key cohorts operating in these spaces, my position

within the field is inextricable. What I hope I have achieved is balance; one that allows for an objective representation of the current experience of outsider art (and the artists who create it) within the cultural mainstream, whilst at the same time acknowledging the value that my experience can bring to research of this kind. One final reflection is that I hope my position within these sectors means that this research will not be in vain. My hope from the beginning was for it to be relevant, useful and useable, with the ability to make real change. I aim to use my position to promote the findings and to better advocate for a more positive and progressive reception and treatment of outsider art within the UK cultural mainstream.

2. The Term Today

This chapter explores the attitudes to the term 'outsider art' as told by the *Curators*, *Outsider Arts Professionals* and *Artists* in their interviews. All interview respondents were asked for their view on the use of the term outsider and there was a diversity in opinion amongst the three sets of respondents. The *Curators*, who saw the term as inherently problematic, showed some confusion in their definition of the term, whereas the *Outsider Arts Professionals* unsurprisingly showed less confusion, but focused more on the complexities and intricacies of the term and its uses. Interestingly, the *Artist* respondents were much more positive about the term than the other two cohorts of interviewees, with several of the respondents noting the importance of having a differentiating term or label to use for those who do not feel like they fit comfortably into the mainstream. Additionally, the *Curators* identified that outsider art's confounding of the traditional canon was a reason for its continued exclusion and there was a sense of gatekeeping from the *Curators*, and even the *Outsider Arts Professionals*, around the meaning and the use of the term which ultimately mirrored the paternalistic history of outsider art and its supporters and promoters. This paternalistic history is outlined by Jesse Prinz, who, when talking about the incentivized exploitation of outsider artists says "art-world insiders try to make peace with this predicament by adopting a paternalistic stance toward the outsiders whose work they buy and sell."[95] This is reiterated by Elizabeth Rita Risser who when writing about the paternalistic nature of the medical profession at the time Prinzhorn was amassing his collection, noted that "a paternalist will override the autonomy of another but strictly for the good of the other. At the time it was presumed that a medical professional would decide on behalf of the patient what is in his or her best interests regardless of the patient's wishes."[96]

Both the *Outsider Arts Professionals* and the *Artists* noted a difference in the treatment of outsider art between the UK and other countries like the United States, and all three interview groups recognised that general audiences are probably less concerned about whether an artist is classed as outsider or not, suggesting that any problems with such a term and the work it encompasses come predominantly from within the art world itself.

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[95] Prinz, Jesse, 'Against Outsider Art,' in *Journal of Social Philosophy,* Vol. 48, No. 3, 2017, pp250-272, p 266

[96] Risser, Elizabeth Rita, 'Insiders Curating Outsider Art,' in *Museum Anthropology,* Vol. 40, No. 1, 2017, pp 78-87, p 83

2.1 Confusion and contestation

In the *Curators'* cohort, Simon Martin, director of Pallant House Gallery, said that he was *"conscious outsider art is a problematic term, and I would generally use it with inverted commas,"* and Phoebe Roberts of Art Angel said, *"My observations about it – I find it really problematic."* Two of the *Curator* respondents noted their discomfort when using the term, with Martin Myrone of the British Art Network (and formerly a curator at Tate) responding that *"in terms of your direct question, I probably wouldn't want to answer it."* Senior Curator at Turner Contemporary Fiona Parry added that *"I'm not necessarily that comfortable using the term myself if I'm honest."* This obvious discomfort amongst the *Curators* when it came to using the term was the result of a combination of confusion and a lack of knowledge about the term. This is illustrated when Parry adds *"If I'm honest, I don't think I would use it because I'm not sure I feel confident that I know exactly what it means,"* and Beth Hughes, curator of Arts Council England's Collection exclaimed *"Crikey, what is contemporary outsider art? How do I understand that?"* Illustrating this confusion, when asked whether Arts Council England's collection contained any works by artists who might be considered 'outsider,' Hughes responded saying *"we definitely have artwork, purchased artworks by people who aren't represented by galleries. So people who don't have agents. But thinking off the top of my head those ones that I know recently that we've purchased, I know most of them have come through the art school system. So they are outsider artists by not having any kind of gallery representation – so yeah, we do, I think actively collect art work, which might fit under a definition of outsider art."* Such uncertainty from the *Curators* around what constitutes an outsider artist could be explained in two ways: firstly, it highlights the fundamental lack of inclusion of outsider art as part of an historical trajectory within higher education teachings of art history. Secondly, it illustrates the semantic challenges for a term that has struggled to achieve any sense of cohesive definition; what does it mean to be working 'outside' of the cultural mainstream? Could the term describe an artist who has shunned the traditional modes of validation in the art world (art school, exhibitions and gallery representation) on their own terms, or does it specifically describe an artist who has been shunned from the main channels of cultural validation through no choice of their own? And ultimately, who gets to decide who can be described by the term.

In contrast, for the *Outsider Arts Professionals*, there was still opinion that the term is problematic, but for these respondents, the most troublesome part was identifying who has the authority to define the term and who is able to make decisions about who it encompasses. Amanda Sutton of Venture Arts noted that *"to me, it's that learning disabled artists don't get to choose to be outsider artists,"* and that the *"term has become more of a definition of the person*

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than the art itself." Additionally, the positioning of artists underneath such an umbrella, Colin Rhodes (art historian and outsider art academic) noted, disadvantages them when it comes to their integration into the contemporary mainstream: *"if we want these artists to be seen as contemporary artists, then we have to start calling them contemporary artists. Not outsider artists – doesn't matter whether it's art brut, or outsider art, or marginal or vernacular or grassroots, or, choose any of those words and immediately, you are taking yourself out of the game."* The labelling of art as 'outsider', Rhodes elaborates, comes with an additional caveat of assumption – *"that's one of the other myths of outsider art, I guess, in terms of its contemporary usage is this notion of somehow artists not being interested in careers, not being interested in making a buck and all that sort of stuff, and not interested in what people think of their work and all the rest of it."* The *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents have in many ways moved away from the traditional descriptors of outsider art; the Dubuffet and Cardinal descriptors, and towards the idea that the term emphasises the 'otherness' of the artists and the work encompassed by it. This is reflected in Kristin Nelson's writing on Deaf and disability arts when they observe that "what may have seemed radical in the early twentieth century we can now understand as problematic, and perhaps for this reason, some Deaf and disability artists and academics still fear association with the term 'outsider art.'."[97] This is perhaps a more commonly held belief amongst arts professionals working closely with contemporary artists who might generally fit the 'outsider' rhetoric but for whom it is more difficult - or controversial - to apply the historic labels of Cardinal and Dubuffet.

For several of the *Curators* (Parry, Hughes and Daisy McMullan of Watermans), the term primarily describes artists who are self-taught, or who have not taken the formal or traditional route to become an artist, through an arts degree or attending art school. Parry noted that *"I think it's probably widely considered to mean people who might have been self-taught who haven't had an education in you know, a university education or college education. And that are maybe making work not within the professional art world."* Hughes said that *"I guess my first thought was definitely somebody who didn't go through the mainstream arts education line I guess,"* and McMullan noted that *"I would see it as artists who probably have come from outside the formal route into having a practice. So someone who's not gone through a kind of mainstream arts education."* Interestingly, these identifications of outsider artists as those who have not received formal training are more aligned with the US-centric term 'self-taught'; a term that is celebrated in the States and is often interchangeable with the term folk art. The use

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[97] Nelson, Kristin, 'Deaf and Disability Arts: Insiders, Outsiders and the Potential of Progressive Studios', in *Mobilizing Metaphor: Art, Culture, and Disability Activism in Canada,* ed. By Christine Kelly and Michael Orsini, UBC Press, 2016, pp98-117, p101

of terms like 'folk' or 'self-taught' are perhaps more comfortable for the *Curators*, as they can enable a non-traditional artist to be identified without the need to label them quite literally as an 'outsider,' and any associated stigma that might come with this. Parry, McMullan and Roberts' understanding of the term outsider art as focused on non-art school educated artists also means that they can quite safely avoid defining anybody as 'outside' of anything and are able to avoid talking about artists who have experienced mental health issues, those with physical or learning disabilities, or those who have experienced difficult or traumatic life circumstances, such as being in prison or experiencing homelessness.

This also raises an interesting comparison between the favoured terms for non-traditional art in the United States and those favoured in the UK – and Europe – more widely. The use of terms like 'folk art' and 'self-taught' in the US enables work under this umbrella to be seen as part of the cultural and societal history of the country. It is in a sense the art that expresses the grass roots culture of the country, and it is embraced as such. The more Europe-centric term 'outsider' is the opposite. It provides a demarcation between what is historically, societally, and culturally acceptable, and what is – quite literally – outside of this. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* identified that there are lessons to be learned in the way other countries validate the work of non-traditional artists. In the US, folk art is not traditionally or historically anti-cultural, and because of this, it is on the whole more accepted as a valid (and valued) cultural category. Jennifer Gilbert, Director of the Jennifer Lauren Gallery, cites this as the reason why *"places like America are just so much further ahead."* Gilbert's assertion was also identified by other respondents, evidenced in the number of contemporary art galleries showcasing outsider and non-traditional art in America, and the number of art world insiders championing the work, like curator Matthew Higgs and critics like Jerry Saltz and Holland Cotter. *"We don't have the same – we don't have high profile artists [advocating],"* Gilbert adds. Jane Kallir talks about this unique US interpretation of the term in her introduction to *Accidental Genius*. Touching on the grass-roots nature of US 'folk' art, Kallir notes that "self-taught artists of the 1930s, like the contemporaneous Regionalists, represented the strength of the heartland against the corrupt big city. They represented native ingenuity, freedom and individualism."[98] And on the term warfare that encompasses the outsider genre, Kallir claims that "in Europe a sharp rift developed between proponents of 'naïve' art and avatars of Art Brut, [but] Americans were far less inclined to engage in such theoretical hair-splitting. To them, folk art, 'naïve' art, and 'outsider'

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[98] Kallir, Jane. 'Art Brut and "Outsider" Art: A Changing Landscape'. In *Accidental Genius by Margaret Andera and Lisa Stone*, 23–29. DelMonico Books, 2012, p 24

art were all different expressions of pretty much the same thing."[99] It seems that in the US there is less urgency to strictly define the category (or even to have one decisive name for it) and this more liberal approach has encouraged a reduction in cautiousness amongst decision-makers, in turn leading to increased opportunities for the work to be exhibited, celebrated and critiqued within arts institutions.

This cultural difference was identified too, by the *Artist* respondents in their interviews. C noted that *"we're so far behind. It's niche worldwide as it is, but here, it's really, really hard. Considering how close we are in a way to the movement when it started, you know, quite early on,"* C added that *"you look at how big it is in America now, France, and other parts of Europe, Germany; it's quite well regarded."* N agrees with this: *"I mean in France it's a lot better and people are more knowledgeable but here it seems to be right this is the trendy person, get their stuff. Abroad, my experience is much better. The people are a lot more knowledgeable. They don't care who you are or if you're famous or whatever. They just take it on face value. And sort of place it within the history of creative things."* N finished by saying *"so in this country I just despair at the art world."* Q nodded to this too, noting that *"The UK doesn't have, for whatever reason, all those reasons, something that's really quite the same level [as Europe]."* C suggested that this lack of outsider art activity in the UK could be due to a lack of people working specifically in this area: *"There's so few, there's so few people dealing in it though, so few taking much interest in it. Yeah, we're really far behind. Like the Gallery of Everything, which is the kind of one outsider art gallery we've got – it's not accessible! That's just crazy!"*

Like the *Curators*, the *Outsider Arts Professionals* were cautious about using the term, but for different reasons. Gilbert noted that *"I don't use that term when I talk about the artists that I work with, unless they explicitly state they want it to be used",* and Jo Verrent of Unlimited said *"we think it's really important that people have autonomy over how they describe themselves."* There was a consensus amongst the *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents that the label was used more often by art world agents rather than the artists themselves. One of Verrent's key concerns regarding the use of the term was where the money goes: *"I think my concern with the term is always around the money – who's getting paid? Where's the money going? Because with the birth of the outsider art movement, the money certainly wasn't going to the artists."* There was certainly some evidenced caution around using the term amongst the *Outsider Arts Professionals*, as identified in this quote from James Peto from the Wellcome Collection in reference to *Souzou: Outsider Art from Japan*; an exhibition that took place at the Wellcome

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[99] Ibid.

Collection in 2013: *"I think to be honest, we slightly hedged our bets when we put the Souzou exhibition on and I think, we sort of did use it, but tried not to overuse it."*

This reluctance to widely use the term from both the *Curators* and the *Outsider Arts Professionals* relates to a concern in the *Artists'* otherwise noticeably more positive views on the term that there is existing stigma attached to the term, particular from cultural gatekeepers. C talked about a time when they were applying for funding, and were told *"whatever you do, don't put that you're an outsider artist because it's so badly seen – you know, put self-taught."* Similarly, M noted that *"I would say it's probably slightly looked down on,"* and that *"I don't think – they maybe see it as less, lesser. I don't think the art world sees it like that [as a purer form of art]."* There was a sense amongst the respondent *Artists* that to be self-taught, or to use non-mainstream materials, was to be seen as amateurish and results in the work not being respected in the same way by galleries or gatekeepers. This is highlighted by D who thinks it *"is probably seen as different. Like we're somehow less academic than other artists or there's, you know, the other artists are maybe seen as being more skilled sort of thing,"* and by N who relates this attitude to the wider societal class system in the UK: *"People think, they think it's all – especially if they see someone's made something out of shells or something. They think it's a little bit amateurish, we've got a very odd attitude that insofar is probably to do with our whole class system."* N then goes further, suggesting this attitude embodies the hierarchical nature of the UK's mainstream art world: *"People don't seem to take it very seriously. When people just make stuff out of wire or bones, whale bones and this kind of thing. They seem to think it's some sort of crafty dabbling, which seems to be the attitude – snobbish attitude."*

This aesthetic categorisation of outsider art was primarily mentioned by the *Artists,* with both the *Curator* and *Outsider Arts Professional* groups avoiding any aesthetic assessment, applying instead a biographical lens to categorisation. The exception to this was Martin, who mentioned that outsider art has *"got an aesthetic challenge that it has different notions of quality,"* and that the aesthetic of outsider art is *"a lot more nuanced. It's not middle aged ladies going to see an exhibition of Impressionist landscapes or flowers, the aesthetics can be quite brutal, or raw."* Martin also compares the public's aesthetic assessment of outsider art to what has been said in the past about modern art – *"my four year old could do that. It's a similar kind of challenge for outsider art, but it is almost greater."* This approach to the aesthetic qualities of outsider art (that there are different notions of quality for outsider art in comparison to mainstream art, that the term refers to work that more aptly fits the label of 'craft' than 'art', and that it is amateurish in appearance), highlights other ways that contestation surrounds the term and all that it encompasses, proving a challenge to the cultural legitimisation of the category. Alexander talks about this ambiguity around aesthetic criteria with regards to outsider art: "ambiguous criteria

are likely to increase legitimacy struggles, because they make it easier for different groups in the field to make competing claims on the basis of the same evidence."[100]

Contestation and confusion around the term are evidenced in several ways through the interview responses. Firstly, through confusion around *who* the term encompasses (what kind of background does an artist need to have to qualify? Is it purely educational background that is relevant, or is it personal circumstances too?), and secondly, through confusion around *what* the term encompasses (what are the aesthetic criteria for defining something as outsider art, if any). This confusion and ambiguity has an impact on outsider art's visibility and therefore reception, as cultural decision makers may not feel equipped to tackle a category that is formally lacking in uncontested boundaries.

2.2   The Impact of Ambiguity

The impact of this ongoing contestation and ambiguity on outsider art's visibility and reception within the mainstream can be seen in the interview responses. One concern amongst six of the *Artist* respondents was whether they felt able to class themselves as an outsider artist; a nod to the ambiguity that has historically surrounded the term. B illustrates this by noting *"I know it's a heavily debated term, like some people like it, some people don't. It can mean slightly different things to different people. I know for myself I'm never really sure if I would pass myself as an outsider, because I kind of started off as an insider artist, and then hopped the barrier. I'm never sure whether that really counts."* This uncertainty around who or what is encompassed under the term was also identified by H, who said that *"I suppose I'd say I find myself sort of a little bit, I feel like I'm in a bit of no man's land, because obviously, I identify with the outsider art. But because I've done a degree, and therefore don't fall into this self-taught area, it's tricky,"* adding that *"because I'm mildly on, you know, my diagnosis is mild. And my dyslexia is mild. So I'm sort of like, I'm neither here nor there. So I just feel like I flounder."* This concern was again mirrored by O, who noted that *"it's hard because I've got, I do have the training and stuff. But I'm going against that with my sort of thing. And the fact that I can be all singing and dancing. I've met people who are outsider artists who are not very good at vocalising – it's a hard spectrum to know where I fit on,"* and by Q who said that *"I think aesthetically, it comes with its own aesthetic. So that as an outsider artist, I'm not an outsider artist."* Such concern and cautiousness belies the power most (mainstream) artists have had over the decades in identifying with a particular term, label or movement, highlighting the lack of control outsider artists have over a category that defines their own art.

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[100] Alexander, Victoria D. and Anne E. Bowler, Op. Cit.

This ambiguity was also problematic for the *Curators*, with Myrone noting that it makes *"classification an interminable process… and that contestation never ends, because what's at stake is the act of classification itself. Any answer you give is only going to be provisional."* The lack of clarity is perhaps particularly challenging for curators, whose role is to offer a visually exciting contextual framework for a group of works, artists, or themes. Martin notes with reference to programming exhibitions of outsider art that *"it's a greater challenge because not only does it not fit into clear groups and narratives, it's got an aesthetic challenge that it's kind of notionally – different notions of quality."* The line that separates what is outsider art and what is not is an issue for curators, because as Martin notes, *"it's hard because it's human nature – how people try to place everything in a context. So I realised that as institutions, we both kind of have to do that, and also question it."* In his interview, Myrone spoke about his curation of *British Folk Art* at the Tate in 2014, which was – by Myrone's own admission – an aesthetic review of folk art, rather than anything more chronological or contextual. There was a sense from Myrone that to engage with the category in a more critical way would have meant grappling with the term and all that it encompasses, which has already been identified as a task the *Curators* feel reluctant to take on. This resulted in the exhibition, in Myrone's words, being neither *"popular enough, nor critical enough."* This illustrates the challenge curators face in approaching the curation of works that have such uncontested boundaries. As humans we use uncontested boundaries and categorisation as a tool to help us interpret and make sense of the world around us. Without categories, we would regularly become overwhelmed with the processing of new information. But these categories can be arbitrary, as observed by Jorge Luise Borge in a 1942 essay; "it is clear that there is no classification of the Universe not being arbitrary and full of conjectures."[101] Borge humorously illustrates this arbitrariness by using an example of a taxonomy taken from an ancient Chinese encyclopaedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge.* In the encyclopaedia, a new way of categorising animals is suggested. The new categories include things like 'belonging to the emperor,' 'embalmed,' 'fabulous,' 'drawn with a very fine camelhair brush,' 'that from a long way off looks like flies.'[102] But, despite Borge's illustration of the arbitrariness of categories and as evidenced in Myrone's reflection on *British Folk Art,* some kind of categorisation or boundary can be helpful in approaching a more critical curation of a subject that is perhaps not so well known.

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[101] Perneger, Thomas V., 'Borges on Classification,' in *International Journal for Quality in Health Care',* 2006, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp 264 – 265, p 264.
[102] Borges JL. 'John Wilkins' analytical language,' In Weinberger E et al.,ed. and trans. The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922–86. London: Penguin Books, 2001: 229–232. The text quoted is from another translation available at http://www.ldc.upenn.edu/myl/wilkins.html Accessed 24 June 2020

The grey area of categorisation also raised problems for the *Curators* when defining which of their exhibiting artists would be classified as outsider and which would not be. Two of the respondents referred to this issue in their interviews, with Myrone noting that there are *"anomalous figures, the Blakes and Alfred Wallis' are kind of interesting in the unpacking they do about the limits of what appear to be a coherent line of thinking around the classes and the categories,"* and similarly, in Roberts' suggestion that *"on the one hand you have these kind of white male geniuses, and on the other hand, you have somebody who's looking after four kids and painting in the night and they're crazy. So it's just -the same probably, but one is incredible and the other is labelled a lunatic."* Roberts also noted the disjuncture between how outsider art has been described, exhibited, and interpreted by specialist 'outsider art' organisations, most notably the Museum of Everything, and how this has had a real impact on how outsider art has been valued as a genre. She notes that *"there's a kind of distancing that is like, oh, this isn't what you would normally see in the museum. And, why is this abnormal? I find it actually to be quite offensive, it's not given the same status as like Salvador Dali, who equally is as mad as the next guy. I don't really like that. I don't like those labels because that is something that prejudices you before you – I'd be happy to read about it, maybe afterwards."*

In contrast to the vagaries associated with labelling someone as an 'outsider', the *Artist* respondents identified an overly binary outsider-insider dichotomy. B highlights this concern by noting *"I suppose the term suggests there's an outside and an inside and it's a binary thing. People are rubbish at living in binaries, it doesn't really work."* Likewise, K was concerned that labels can lead to pigeonholing: *"I think every label is contentious. It's so difficult, I mean, I sit between art and craft, and I'm really bored of that sort of narrative. What's art? What's craft? I mean, obviously it's good to explore on an academic level, but in terms of my everyday reality, I like the fact that I have some craft skills, but that doesn't define me."* To overcome the problem of pigeonholing, K noted that they used the term when it worked for them: *"I just sort of try and keep all definitions very loose. So in terms of outsider art, I guess I would, you know, identify with it, when it suits me."* On the subject of such a binary outsider-insider dichotomy, L confessed that they did not feel like they belonged anywhere, even as an outsider: *"my biggest barrier is the fact that I've always felt like I'm on the outside of outsiders. I've always felt like I'm not – to use a different example, I'm not gay enough to kind of go and be in pride, I'm not straight enough to go to church, I'm not this enough to be in that group,"* and *"I've never really felt like I belonged anywhere."*

Two *Artist* respondents noted that the term is linguistically exclusionary by its very nature, with L addressing this subject by saying *"it's immediately creating its own obstacle, because it's exclusionary, even in its wording,"* but they add that *"I don't know what the alternative would be, but I do wholeheartedly believe a lot of the language is antagonistic."* H agrees, noting that

"it's obviously quite negative in terms of it's away from the mainstream." This was identified too, in the *Artist* respondents' suggestion that the term can be used to patronise or dismiss an artist's work. B noted that *"I've talked to people that say oh, you know, I'm the token outsider artist. And so people go oh yeah, we're a great venue, we've got this poor disabled person here, isn't that nice?"* On this subject, E questioned the intentions of those who have been interested in this type of work: *"Do people buy them because they feel pity or empathy or because you're an asylum seeker and you only get like thirty-nine pounds a week, or do people actually like what you do as an artist? I guess I will never find out until I step out of that label."* Going further than this, E questioned too, whether their work has been previously capitalised on because of their outsider status: *"Some wanted to sell my work because it's Refugee Week, so they're using my work to get more traffic or more people to the site, but I can't sell so how are you even actually just using my work to capitalise on it?"* L noted a hidden narrative that can accompany outsider works, saying that *"there is almost this patronising tone. It's not just, this person created this piece of work – for whatever reason, and it's amazing, cool, let's celebrate them and lift them up and put it somewhere everyone can enjoy it, and maybe somebody will buy it. It's a – they create this, even though they've got this – there's always that added bit of narrative."*

Another respondent from the *Artists'* group, P, had experienced outsider art being contextualised in a sensationalist way, noting that *"I sometimes think there's a bit like almost like the people that buy the art they'd like it to be a bit sensational. And I think sometimes that matters more than the work itself, that it's done by somebody in prison that's murdered, or people with severe psychosis that never get out. So there's almost a glamour attached to that."* P recognised that this is an approach that can be quite common in the mainstream art world too, although perhaps not as pronounced as it is with outsider art: *"I suppose that's there with the art thing anyway, like the idea of having the starving artist, and in poetry as well – Sylvia Plath, then it sort of becomes about the person and their life rather than the art almost."* This sensationalist contextualisation has even encouraged O to politicise their work in a way that draws more attention to it: *"I mean political art has its place, it's not something I would make personally. But sometimes I feel like I have to be... almost have to be challenging."*

Both the *Curators* and the *Outsider Arts Professionals* suggested that approaching the term with a more historical perspective could provide a solution. Myrone, in the *Curators'* cohort, proposed that *"you could deal with the categories having a kind of purely historical existence, that folk art is what's been called folk art in the past, and you could do the same, in order to avoid the question, perhaps, I would come up with something along the same lines to think about outsider art – it is what has been labelled as outsider art in the past."* This was echoed in

the *Outsider Arts Professional* interviews with the notion that the term refers to a particular moment in history. Similarly to how we would not continue to add new work under other historical labels such as Surrealism, Impressionism, Cubism, Sheryll Catto, Co-Director of ActionSpace and Rhodes both proposed that we should not continue to add new works to the existing category of outsider art. Catto suggested that *"that's probably where we're going wrong as we're trying to create this other category. Now there is a category, but it's historical. But in the modern world, where artists are making work now – they're picking up the zeitgeist."* Rhodes acknowledged the issue by suggesting that when you use the term outsider art you are *"pointing to a very specific historical construction,"* and Maizels asserted that *"it's an historical term. If you're looking at who the new artists are – a lot of them don't look anything like what used to be called outsider art."* Situated instead as an historical genre means, too, according to Rhodes, that we are able to escape the inherently anti-cultural way the category's emergence set a precedent for how it is seen, valued and interpreted: *"It was supposed to annoy people. On one level, people are wanting acceptance for art coming from particular places, because they think it's important. But at the same time, this is a field whose very basis – in Europe – is built on being against all that stuff and not wanting to be accepted."* He adds that *"In some respects, I'd say don't expect the Tate to show that, because if it's positioning itself as an outsider art show, then it kind of needs to be outside. That's the construction."* This is a curious take from Rhodes and Maizels, as looking at the category through this kind of historical lens raises the question of what happens to contemporary outsider artists, particularly those *Artist* respondents who had found some sense of belonging and resonance with the term.

2.3   Affinity and belonging

Interestingly, the *Artist* respondents were on the contrary much more positive about the term, with nine of the *Artists* claiming they felt an affinity and resonance to it. It helped them make sense of the position they found themselves in in the art world, and it was comforting for them to know that there were other artists out there in the same or similar positions to themselves. B noted *"I think it is important to have a term, like an identity for people that are artists, and are left outside of the mainstream. Because there's so many people and the mainstream arts world in many ways requires so much privilege,"* adding that it's important *"having a word to kind of cover everyone else whose work is just as valid but isn't being let in the door."* Similarly, two of the *Artist* respondents noticed that having such a label can boost the visibility and value of the work, with K suggesting that *"sometimes that label might help give the work some value, because it gives it a label that makes it more understandable,"* and Q noted that *"I have learned that labels are really useful. It may not fit precisely, but if I say I'm an outsider, naïve artist, I know that people can place me."* Q adds that *"I think not having a label is worse. I think*

assuming the need has been met, that's worse." T noted on this point that a label can help artists start conversations or discussions about their work: *"Having a label sometimes helps people… can help as a vehicle to discuss your work and help other people identify here you are in terms of you know, part of the mainstream art world."*

This was echoed by the *Outsider Arts Professionals*, who despite having reservations about the term did acknowledge that it can be useful in many ways. Sutton spoke about an artist who said the term outsider art made him feel at once both *"isolated and liberated,"* Sheryll Catto said that *"we found it useful, because it got people's attention on this area of work,"* and John Maizels, editor of *Raw Vision Magazine*, added *"I think it's the best we've got."* Sutton said *"On the one hand it's good… it's a way for artists to make money and to sell work, it's quite good to use it to your advantage,"* and Lisa Slominski, independent curator and author noted *"it does help to define a group of underrepresented artists."* This reflects the ideas of the interview respondent in Fine's 2004 research who claimed that "in order for a marginal group to gain access to the forum, it is necessary to name oneself in a way that continues to distinguish oneself."[103]

The positive uses of the term for the *Outsider Arts Professionals* predominantly focused on the recognition and advantages it could bring, but for the *Artists*, it was much more personal. Six of the *Artist* respondents felt that the term provided them and their creative work with a sense of belonging, with C noting that *"this is where I feel like I fit. This feels right to me,"* expanding on this to say, *"I mean, I've always felt quite outside anyway, since I was a kid. I've always had that kind of internal feeling quite outside of things. So for me, it was quite an easy – it kind of fits for me."* D feels a similar way about the term, suggesting that *"I feel OK with it because I like to sort of feel like I belong to something. So I don't mind being called an outsider artist, I think I would probably feel quite happy to describe myself as that. Just so I feel like I sort of belong somewhere."* H said that the term is positive in that it *"gives people who aren't in the mainstream somewhere to feel like they belong,"* and Q feels *"very much at home in the community, very much at home in the peer group – I much prefer it to the mainstream art world."* This feeling of positive labelling shows parallels to Barga's 1996 study of students with learning disabilities, where the author found that "students experienced labelling as positive when it helped them to make sense of the academic difficulties they were encountering and enabled them to get the help that they needed." The students in the study experienced negative

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[103] Fine, Op. Cit., 2004, p 259

connotations with labelling when "it set [them] apart from their peers and meant that they received different provision from other students." [104]

This strong sense of association with the term amongst several of the respondent *Artists* draws parallels with the reclamation of stigmatising labels that has happened over the past decade or so in the UK and more globally. T spoke to the subject of reclamation, suggesting that they *"always feel like taking the outsider artists and reclaiming it for ourselves and being like, okay, the mainstream art world has defined us as outsider artists, but how do we redefine ourselves within that context?"* Adding that, *"I think that's happened so much recently [reclamation of labels], hasn't it with kind of labels and things like that, that I think it's only a matter of time before it happens for outsider art."* There was a sense, too, amongst the *Outsider Arts Professionals* that a reclamation of the term was on the horizon, echoing developments in the disability arts and queer arts movements. Signs of reclaiming the term highlights how the term itself can be mobilised as a powerful tool for recognition and acceptance. This resonates with Rhode's sentiments about Cardinal's real meaning of the term when he initially coined it, which Rhodes asserts was based on Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* (published in 1956 by Victor Gollancz); *"in that sense, it's kind of really interesting as a notion, because it's not about disempowerment, it's not about being thrust into an outside when you're kind of lost and all the rest of it. It's actually about an empowered sense of engaging in spite of everything, of being authentic, and all of those kind of things."*

In 2007, Shyon Baumann wrote about the process of legitimation within the art world, noting that "cultural production and reception are acts that are inherently collective, and the legitimation of culture is always achieved collectively."[105] Baumann asserts that this is like social movements, which work together as a collective to achieve societal and attitudinal change. Baumann uses the examples of the civil rights movement and the gay rights movement, where the important goal is to "legitimate – make accepted – an idea that was initially not widely accepted."[106] The broader issue in Baumann's assertion for outsider artists is that the artists themselves, historically, have generally not been involved in any kind of collective action, instead the term and its meanings have been decided and then used by those with higher placement in the cultural hierarchy. Baumann also notes that a broader change in societies' attitudes towards the people who are a part of a social movement or a group is often needed

[104] Roddick, Barbara. 'An Examination of the Relationship Between Labelling and Stigmatisation with Special Reference to Dyslexia'. *Disability & Society* 15, no. 4, 2000, pp 653–67, p 661

[105] Baumann, Shyon. 'A General Theory of Artistic Legitimation: How Art Worlds Are like Social Movements'. *Poetics* 35, no. 1, 2007, pp 47–65, p 50

[106] Op. Cit., p 51

before real legitimation can take place. They cite Peterson's (1972) example of the changing interpretation and acceptance of jazz music over the years, noting that "jazz, a cultural production that was strongly African American in its practitioners and audiences, was more readily elevated to artistic status after the reduction in discriminatory attitudes about blacks among the public and elites." [107]

This collective activity and its impact on legitimation can be identified too in Francesca Polletta's work on 'Free Spaces.' Polletta describes these free spaces as "small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization."[108] Although perhaps not quite a political movement, the term outsider art provides a linguistic 'free space', perhaps, for many of the *Artist* respondents who find an affinity with the term and the artists who identify with it. Polletta quotes Evans and Boyte's writing on free spaces: "put simply, free spaces are settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision."[109]

It would be interesting to look at the possibilities for artists in re-gaining some power in relation to the term outsider art through the lens of Kenneth Culton and Ben Holtzman's writings about free spaces, and in particular, the DIY punk scene, where they note that the premise of the DIY scene was "a means through which to build an alternative to corporatized ('mainstream') culture as well as to individuals and other scenes who were seen as furthering the values of this hegemonic culture."[110] Members of the scene themselves established the criteria for what the scene should stand for, ultimately "professing a commitment to eliminating hierarchy."[111]

In a sense, outsider art as a term or – ambitiously – a movement, could (and can) offer an important space for non-traditional artists to begin to feel confident in their identity as an artist and to start on their own collective activity outside of the sometimes-stifling institutions of the mainstream art world.

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[107] Op. Cit., p53

[108] Polletta, Francesca. '"Free Spaces" in Collective Action'. *Theory and Society* 28, no. 1 (1999): 1–38, p 1

[109] Op. Cit., p 3

[110] Culton, Kenneth R., and Ben Holtzman. 'The Growth and Disruption of a "Free Space": Examining a Suburban Do It Yourself (DIY) Punk Scene'. *Space and Culture* 13, no. 3, 2010, pp 270–84, p 272

[111] Ibid.

2.4 Integration and assimilation

The *Outsider Arts Professional* interviews highlighted an observable divide between the respondents and their opinions on the integration of outsider art within the mainstream. The more academic respondents: Rhodes and Maizels, see the category as something more historical, something to be preserved as well as celebrated, underlined by the view that this is a separate category of art and should remain so. This was evidenced by Rhodes when he spoke about his role as an art historian and how he sees this in relation to his work around outsider art: *"I sort of see that kind of activity as somewhat separate from my work as an art historian… because in spite of everything I still don't see myself as a historian of outsider art. I see myself as an art historian, mostly of 20th century art."* A similar belief is illustrated by Maizels when he says *"I think I agree with Dubuffet that it should be kept separate. When exhibited together it loses its power. I think it's preferable, it should be shown to be different. I mean, a lot of contemporary art is very, very poor, and I think it's sort of polluted it a bit."*

These comments are in direct contrast to the *Artist* respondents, who spoke about the benefits of integrating outsider art into the mainstream, and how existing perspectives and attitudes towards the term have affected how work that sits under this category is seen. D said that *"I think there still needs to be a change in view of outsider art, you know, don't just sort of have separate – separate exhibitions are nice as well, but I think it needs to be more just outsider art in mainstream exhibitions, not just as like separate or maybe like a sideshow sort of thing,"* and G noted that *"people want to be able to be part of society, be part of being involved, be appreciated. But I think the people who are in power, they're always like – so I think the art is outside because they push people outside from the mainstream and only have certain people presented."* T spoke about how if the existing barriers were removed, then *"lots more outsider art would become mainstream, and the term outsider art wouldn't exist."* K questioned whether there would always be work that was viewed as 'other' in the art world. They used an example of an abstract painter they had worked with in London: *"She just thought abstract painting was out of fashion and figurative was in and so she felt like she was the other. But then I went and met other artists who were figurative, and they said, well, I feel like you know, sometimes abstract work is favoured over my work. So everybody sometimes feels like they're excluded by other people."*

The differentiating attitudes between the *Curator* and *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents and the *Artist* respondents in relation to whether outsider art should be integrated into the mainstream art world illustrates this question of who is making the decisions and whether there are in fact some benefits for gatekeepers in keeping it separate. In *Against Outsider Art*, Prinz points out that because the value of outsider art depends on its continued disenfranchisement (as

suggested by Rhodes in the interviews) – and outsider artists are rarely able to enjoy their own success – cultural gatekeepers are "motivated to keep them on the fringes of the art world."[112] The idea of keeping this type of art separate began with Dubuffet but reaches into more modern-day evaluations of the genre. Prinz notes Maclagan's complaints about Dubuffet's paternalism of the *Art Brut* category, but highlights similar paternalistic views held by Maclagan himself who worries that "some outsider artists may not be able to handle public exposure," and that "the art market will ultimately make genuine outsider art impossible." [113]

Prinz dismantles this assumption that outsider artists are not interested in, or would not be able to handle, receiving recognition for their work by discussing Adolf Wolfli's attempts to give his work to hospital staff in exchange for art materials and tobacco, and in Madge Gill's annual submission of her own work to the Whitechapel Gallery. Even Judith Scott, who may not have understood what recognition of her work really meant, was perhaps not oblivious to the impact her work had on her family and friends and the people around her. [114] This recognition of their own status as an artist is mirrored in the *Artists'* interview responses. For most of the respondents, exhibiting and selling their work was an important part of building their identity as an artist. Additionally, the *Artists* found that having an exhibition could encourage important critical reflection around their work. A noted that *"as soon as I hear someone else talking about it [the work], you get a completely different perspective on what you have done,"* adding *"I find that quite a liberating experience, you know, the getting out there and just seeing what the response is, is quite liberating."* For other respondents, having an exhibition felt very much a rite of passage for them in their journey towards seeing themselves as an artist. L said *"that's why I've only just become comfortable with calling myself an artist, because as of yesterday [when their exhibition opened], I can justifiably go, I have had my work or have my work in an exhibition, which isn't something that I've put on, it's been done externally, I've been invited. So there's recognition there."* L added that *"you do need for other people to see worth and value in what you create. Because what you create is so personal. Everything that we, the way we as artists create is an extension of ourselves."* T agreed, noting that having an exhibition at a prestigious space in London had helped them see themselves as an artist: *"I think in terms of identifying as an artist, that's really important as well, because if you think you know, I exhibited at [prestigious gallery space]. Like it just makes you think, wow I can do this. I can be part of the art world."* T also sees exhibiting as part of the 'job' of being an artist: *"I guess part of being an artist is sharing your work… because it means your work is out there, and you get*

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[112] Prinz, Op. Cit., p 250
[113] Op. Cit., p 267
[114] Ibid.

to talk about it. And you get to share it with people, and you get people's perspectives on it." H mentioned that as an artist, the part they find enjoyable is the exhibiting part: *"I've quite enjoyed, I've been able to have it displayed. It's nice to see it up there as part of an exhibition, and yeah, I do enjoy that bit."*

The assumption that outsider artists do not wish to have their work seen by a wider audience feels political in nature and enables cultural institutions to excuse themselves from exhibiting this kind of work by claiming that it is unethical to show work that was not made to be seen more widely. Of course, these ethical questions are very real, but so too is the attempt to keep outsider art out of important curatorial spaces. Baumann notes that having works exhibited in the mainstream cultural sphere is extremely important for its legitimation. They note that "as centers of cultural authority, their decisions about which cultural productions to sponsor are accepted as legitimate by other art world members as well as by the wider public."[115] Baumann identifies too that mainstream cultural institutions also have the authority to label certain productions as art:

> Studies of the insane, African art, and Pop Art convincingly document the role played by private galleries. High status private auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's in New York are another resource in art worlds. Association with these houses is helpful in itself to provide prestige, but they also provide visibility, and by connecting art works with new owners they participate in the preservation of art, such as was the case for American Folk Art. [116]

In 'Loser Wins', Ardery focuses on this idea of purposeful continued separation by evidencing the language used when referencing outsider art exhibitions, noticing several US exhibition titles which focus on the lack of education of the artists exhibiting: *Naives and Visionaries* (Walker Art Center, 1974), *Unschooled Talent* (Owensboro Art Museum, 1978), *Artists by Nature* (New York State Historical Association, 1983), *Handmade and Heartfelt* (Laguna Gloria Art Museum, 1986), *Intuitive Art* (Virginia Polytechnical Institute, 1986), *American Self-Taught* (Ricco/Maresca, 1994).[117] These titles are telling in that they continue to keep outsider art separate through semantics. On exploration of titles used for outsider art exhibitions in the UK since 2005, the findings were equally revealing, with a focus on highlighting how 'other' or 'alternative' the work is. Some examples include *Alternative Guide to the Universe* (Hayward Gallery, 2013), *Inner Worlds Outside* (Whitechapel Gallery, 2006), *Female Outsiders: Madge Gill and Pearl Alcock* (Julian Hartnoll Gallery, 2011), *Face to Face with the Outsiders* (Julian

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[115] Baumann, Op. Cit., p 56

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ardery, Op. Cit., p 340

Hartnoll Gallery, 2013), *Epiphanies! Secrets of Outsider Art* (The Conference Centre, St Pancras Hospital, 2013). Similarly, the titles of popular media reviews on the subject reflect this continued insinuation of otherness: *British Folk Art Review: Welcome to the old, weird Britain*[118]; *Meet the Misfits*[119]; *Why it's mad to show art this way.* [120]

The idea of segregation was also evident in the *Curators*' divorcing of historical outsider art and contemporary non-traditional art. Although there are a number of factors that suggest there can be no more traditional outsider artists – in the sense that Dubuffet and Cardinal describe – which include our increasingly globally connected world and almost universal access to technology, new mental health and healthcare systems that focus on the importance of integration of those who are unwell within their local communities, and an increasing acceptance of those who are 'other', there is still a sense of dissociation between the historical term and what it means for artists working in the present day. The *Curators* focused their responses predominantly on the historical, whereas the *Outsider Arts Professionals* were much more focused on the contemporary artists they were working with today. The *Artists* on the other hand, were focused on the benefits that using such a term can have and has had for them and their creative practice. The multifaceted segregation – of historical outsider art from contemporary non-traditional art, of all non-traditional art and works within the cultural mainstream – makes it difficult for cultural actors to know how to go about facilitating integration in any relevant or meaningful way.

2.5   Canonical exclusion

As observed by the *Curators*, the most overt exclusion of outsider art as a category from the cultural mainstream is illustrated by its omission from the traditional trajectory of art history. The idea that outsider art confounds the traditional ideals of the UK art historical canon was mentioned by four of the *Curator* respondents. Myrone notes that *"names win out over themes, and big names win out over small names. So there's always going to be a Hogarth and a Blake and a Constable and a Turner show, but you know, there's not going to be a major George Smart exhibition at the Tate, or a Mary Linwood show."* Trying to make sense of a category of

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[118] Jones, Jonathan, *British Folk Art Review: Welcome to the old weird Britain,* The Guardian, 9 June 2014, available online: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/09/british-folk-art-review-tate-britain

[119] Searle, Adrian, *Meet the Misfits,* The Guardian, 4 May 2006, available online: https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2006/may/04/1

[120] Dorment, Richard, *Why it's mad to show are this way,* The Telegraph, 9 May 2006, available online: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3652224/Why-its-mad-to-show-art-this-way.html

works that has failed to become a part of the traditional canon is, in the words of Martin *"a greater challenge"* for curators. Likewise, Myrone notes that *"canons of British art have been set up repeatedly, and the canons have shifted very little over time. They are based on expectations and around iconographical and formal sophistication, that outsider art – however broadly defined – fails to achieve."* Parry emphasises how the historical context of the production of a work or its creator and where that sits within the canon holds real power in the art world: *"how much is that art historical context part of what creates value – I'm sure it's actually a lot."*

One *Curator* noted that outsider art defies the canon not only in terms of context and content, but in terms of aesthetics too. The aesthetic of some works attributed to the outsider category Martin says, is *"less conventional – the aesthetic is a lot more nuanced. It's not like middle aged ladies going to see an exhibition of Impressionist landscapes or flowers; the aesthetics can be quite brutal or raw."* He added that *"it's the classic thing, which has been said in the past about modern art, you know, Jackson Pollock and my four-year old could do that. It's a similar kind of challenge for outsider art, but it's almost greater."* Although outsider art inherently shares many qualities with modern British art – most notably in the fact that it was created in Britain during the twentieth century – there is a sense that modern art is accepted and celebrated unanimously by audiences, whereas Martin says, outsider art has *"got an aesthetic challenge that it's kind of notionally – different notions of quality. And you know, I will often look at something and go oh my god it is brilliant, but somebody else might look at it and think it's terrible."*

Paradoxically, despite identifying outsider art's distance from canonical works, the *Curators* noted that outsider artists did have a major influence on established modern artists during the twentieth century, and that oftentimes, artists with outsider status have been accepted into the mainstream canon. Martin notes the similarity between the influence of non-Western art on Cubists like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque and the influence in the 1960s and 1970s of more non-traditional British outsider art, as mainstream artists began *"seeing this alternative form of expression, which in many ways can be perceived as being more authentic, more truthful, because it's not mediated."* Although Myrone does note that those 'outsiders' that have been accepted into the canon have been so because they are on the mainstream side of outsider; for example, William Blake: *"he wasn't as outsider as he was made out to be. And then the way he's recovered in the late 19th and into the 20th century, as a sort of proto modern figure and an innovator because he was accommodated to the mainstream or the established art world sufficiently to be recognised."* Martin notes that the *"other route in has been major artists who had engaged with or in some cases supposedly discovered outsider artists. For example, Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood and Alfred Wallis."* Like other artists, there are collectors too,

and Lewis, talking about Joyce Laing and the Art Extraordinary Collection, said that *"[the collector] brought in established market worthy pieces to give credibility on top of the pieces that she was already accumulating."* This approach perhaps is a relegation in some senses of outsider artists to a secondary position behind the 'masters' of the existing canon and the success and validation of non-traditional art relies on the championing of outsider artists by those who already hold a position within the established art world. Myrone notes that *"the canon is only adjusted insofar as there are figures who are already partially within the canonical field,"* and with reference to Alfred Wallis, *"he's there, but he's been discovered and recognised by figures who are very much part of the mainstream art world, who emulate him or rip him off or whatever."* Myrone also discusses the canon in relation to recent calls for diversification within the art world, claiming that *"I think it's even true with the expansion of the canon to accommodate you know, black and Asian artists, or women artists. I mean it's not like Artemesia Gentileschi is an unknown name in the history of art, right? But the National Gallery does it and therefore, it's kind of expanding the canon."* Even an attempt to alter or expand the canon must complement what is already embedded within it.

For Myrone, the idea that outsider art's prime time to enter the canon has since passed is noteworthy. There have been a number of exhibitions of outsider art that have taken place in major UK arts institutions since Cardinal's coining of the term in 1972; perhaps most notably the Hayward Gallery exhibition of 1979[121], and more recently at Wellcome Collection[122], Whitechapel Gallery[123], and again the Hayward Gallery in 2013[124]. Yet despite these opportunities, outsider art overall has not been embraced by the canon. Speaking about the success that folk art has seen in comparison to outsider art, Myrone notes that *"there was that moment where a distinctive idea of a British popular or folk visual culture was apparent. And then that was overtaken by an Americanisation on the one hand, but then also ways of commercialising and turning folk art into a commercial entity for the market which I think took the American example."* Myrone's discussion of a route into the canon through commercialisation was countered by Martin suggesting that [regarding outsider art] *"there hasn't been a market interest backing it up in terms of prices – people can see and understand a Jackson Pollock going for millions. Therefore, they see it as having value. But if a work of outsider art hasn't been given the financial backing, and they can't quite see the quality in it, because it doesn't look accomplished, then it's harder for people to place."* Although Martin

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[121] *Outsiders* at the Hayward Gallery, 8 February – 8 April 1979
[122] *Souzou: Outsider Art from Japan* at Wellcome Collection, 28 March – 30 June 2013
[123] *Inner Worlds Outside* at Whitechapel, 28 April – 25 June 2006
[124] *Alternative Guide to the Universe* at Hayward Gallery, 11 June – 26 August 2013

did not elaborate on what he intended by his use of the term accomplished, these comments make visible the distinction in quality that some curators make between outsider and more mainstream art, and they come despite increasing commercial success for outsider artists; most markedly with the conception in 1993 of a twice-yearly Outsider Art Fair; one in New York, one in Paris, and the sale of a William Edmondson in 2016 at a record of $785,000. This sale price was three times as high as the Christie's estimate, "establishing outsider art as a stand-alone category for the auction house and marking the creation of a blue-chip auction market for outsider art."[125]

The exclusion of art by outsider artists from the canon is expressed by Gregor Langfeld in his 2018 essay for *the Journal of Art Historiography*. The canon – or canonisation – he notes "expresses a process in which specific aspects of culture are established as crucial, of the utmost importance or exemplary." [126] The canon is a homogenous entity that is built by key actors and institutions in the art world and is expressed in "influential art museums, in textbooks, in market prices for art."[127] As the cultural hierarchy persists, so too does the continued elevation of traditionally canonical works. The exclusion of outsider art from the modernist canon is highlighted by James Elkins in his contribution to the exhibition catalogue that accompanied the 2006 *Inner Worlds Outside* exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, London. He notes that "it [outsider art] is invisible to a plurality of art historians who study modernism and postmodernism. By that I meant they don't study it, they don't teach it, and they don't include it in their anthologies."[128] Elkins identifies a striking example of its exclusion when he talks about the book *Art Since 1900*[129] published in 2004, in which "outsider art plays no part in the essential stories of modernism and anti-modernism."[130]

Myrone's assertion that the time for outsider art's canonical re-evaluation has come and gone is countered by the example of movements like German Expressionism, for which the sudden canonisation was influenced directly by political and ideological shifts following the Second World War. The canonisation of outsider art, however, depends on a deeper acceptance of otherness by those with more cultural influence and power. In a conference paper presented in 2017, Anna Suvorova observes that the way outsider art emerged in the mid-twentieth century

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[125] Alexander, Victoria D. and Anne E. Bowler, Op. Cit., p 1
[126] Langfeld, Gregor, 'The canon in art history: concepts and approaches,' in *Journal of Art Historiography,* No. 19, December 2018
[127] Ibid.
[128] Elkins, James, 'Naifs, Faux-naifs, Would-be faux-naifs: There is No Such Thing As Outsider Art', in *Inner Worlds Outside,* ed. By Jon Thompson, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2006, pp71-79
[129] Foster, H, R Karuss, Y.-A and B. H. D Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimoderniam, Postmodernism,* Thames & Hudson, 2004
[130] Ibid.

has had an impact on its continued separation from the mainstream canon. She notes that "instead of traditional authorities of delimitation in art – art critics, museums, art historians, and collectors – the discourse of outsider art was formed by psychiatrists, philosophers, and avant-garde artists."[131] Additionally, these new authorities of delimitation were not subjects traditionally authoritative for the art field in the 18th and 19th centuries.[132] This marginality is not something the category of outsider art has truly been able to overcome, and as such, it has become the victim of its own early idiosyncrasy. In his review of the existing traditional canon in the Western world, Langfeld suggests a reconstruction of the whole process of canonisation, which for centuries has been based on "decisions by specific figures in the art field and the institutions with which they are associated,"[133] because "access to power and discourse is unequal and aesthetic experience is class-based."[134]

An interesting observation by all three cohorts of interview respondents was that despite canonical exclusion, public audiences remain unconcerned with whether work is 'outsider' or not. One *Artist* respondent suggested this could be due to the increasing popularity of social media platforms for artists to showcase their work. By showcasing their work publicly as individuals on platforms like Instagram, audiences will not necessarily be privy to the artist's educational background or previous professional experience; it is simply an aesthetic experience and audiences can curate their own social media feed that includes only art that resonates with them in some way. The benefits of this individual online curation is useful not just for audiences, but for artists too. This was touched upon by *Artist* A when they noted that the art world has *"been more democratized with the use of the internet,"* adding that *"having that forum to have your own presence and something you can control – I think quite often as a visual and creative person, you want to do more than maybe a curated show allows you to do."* Two further artists suggested that everyday audiences might in fact prefer less traditional art, with N commenting *"whenever I've had people round sorting out the shower or doing the gas check, they're just normal people like workmen and tradesmen, If I was making some contemporary stuff, I don't think they'd have much respect for it."* *Artist* B suggested that outsider art is in fact more prominent in communities at a grass roots level, with audiences outside of the art world feeling like they have more in common with outsider art than mainstream art: *"If you don't feel that you've got access to the art world as an audience member, maybe an artist who doesn't have access to that art world is more relevant."* B added that it's likely a small percentage of

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[131] Suvorova, Op, Cit., p 162
[132] Op. Cit., p 164
[133] Langfeld, Op. Cit.
[134] Ibid.

audiences who engage with mainstream art exhibitions, due to reasons like the cost of attending, travel barriers or language barriers, *"so they are probably more likely to see outsider artists on social media or artists that work locally."*

The *Curator* responses reflected this idea that audiences do not place as much importance on an artist's background, with Martin suggesting that audiences are in fact excited by the opportunity to see something outside of the canon; *"I think that's a fascinating social trend that is not about the straight white male, great artists, you know, that greatness can actually take all kinds of other forms and sometimes it can be completely in private. I think people are fascinated by that."* Although this observation is interesting as Martin still focuses here on the biographical life of an artist and how personal stories might interest audiences. Parry notes too that *"it's easy to overestimate the general public who is not necessarily thinking about art every day, they actually might not think that much about it – it's about the work, and if it's exciting, and if it's appealing and visually strong."* This assertion was echoed by the *Outsider Arts Professionals* who spoke about the receipt of outsider art by those other than cultural gatekeepers. Gibson noted that *"there's a sort of mutuality, neutrality between our studio and other studios within Glasgow. There's just a synergy between different communities in Glasgow. It's quite an inclusive environment. We don't have an issue with our artists being separate from that, it doesn't feel like that."* Similarly, Catto notes that *"I think definitely artists get it. It's always been the case at Studio Voltaire that we had artists wandering in and out… people will stop, and they have conversations with us just like they would with any other artists."* She continues, referring to audiences, *"I think audiences get it. I think the work speaks to them. So if we have exhibitions and open studios, people will come in."*

The suggestions made by respondents that ultimately general audiences are less concerned with an artist's personal or educational background and prior professional experience is instrumental in highlighting that it is ultimately the art world that has created – and continues to create – a distinction between traditionally trained mainstream artists and those artists who could be considered outsider. The opportunities offered by rising online access are touched upon by Payal Arora and Filip Vermeylen, who talk about the bridging of the conventional institutional art world and the online spaces increasingly inhabited by artists:

> The bridging of these two realms begs the following questions: Are conventional experts under threat? Do social media dismantle age-old hierarchies and level the playing field in art evaluations? Are amateurs the new experts in the digital art world? What then is the role of the

expert in the construction and evaluation of art in this digital age? And can we assume that mass participation results in better judgements? [135]

Despite these optimistic questions about the impact digital spaces might have on less conventional types of art and art connoisseur, Arora and Vermeylen wonder whether more democratic spaces would "necessarily lead to questioning of their [curator, art critics] expertise? Will there be a revolution after all against the ivory towers of the art world?" [136] As explored in the next chapter, there is more to be done to democratize the spaces that art is able to occupy and to challenge the existing spatial hierarchy and its impact on cultural validation.

2.6　　Conclusion

What was most apparent from the three sets of interviews was the disparity between the attitudes towards the term outsider art. The *Curators* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* spoke with some authority about how they would or would not use the term and why it would or would not be used, but with what seemed an oversight around how the artists encompassed under the term might view it. Offering a more positive opinion on the term, the *Artists* also remembered the pivotal moments when they realised that they did in fact see themselves as belonging to this category. H noted that *"I didn't really class myself in that place until I got my autism diagnosis really. That was in 2019. I had to sort of readjust my sort of vision of myself, and like, oh right, there is another world out there that I started to explore a bit more,"* and on the same subject K notes *"now I'm much more open to embracing that I might fit in that category, because I don't mind. I see it as a positive thing."* B suggested that *"since then [getting sick] I think I found a very different art world, I guess it's the outsider art world, I'm not sure. But a lot of the relationships feel a lot more genuine."*

The differing attitudes between the cultural actors and the artists themselves reflects the paternalism that shaped the emergence of outsider art as a category and the stigma that has historically surrounded not only the art, but the creators themselves as people excluded from society more widely. In what has likely been done with good intentions, the interviews with the *Curators* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* show that the label has almost been dismissed as stigmatising without consideration for what that means – or what a lack of a term altogether means - for the artists it encompasses. Of course, use of a term like 'outsider' does come with implications, but what was noticeable in the *Artist* responses was a desire for a sense of

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[135] Arora, P and Vermeylen, F., 'The end of the art connoisseur? Experts and knowledge production in the visual arts in the digital age,' in *Information Communication and Society,* 2012, Vol. 16, No 2., p 4
[136] Op. Cit., p 8

belonging that a label or term can bring. In 'Reclaiming Stigma' (2014), Jessica Eckstein and Mike Allen aim to offer an alternative to Erving Goffman's 'oversimplification' of stigma, claiming that "stigma can provide recognition as well as establish affect towards the target."[137] In a 2012 *The Lancet* article, Niall Boyce wrote:

> In the world of mega-exhibitions and diamond skulls at the Tate Modern, when the dollar value of a work of art is its main talking point, is an Outsider Artist something to be? Maybe a category which, with good intentions, patronised and to some extent stigmatised people with mental health problems can be reclaimed to everyone's benefit.[138]

In Barbara Roddick's examination of the relationship between labelling and stigmatising, the author noted the 'unitary construct' of labelling ultimately means that many labels are reduced to only being seen in a good-bad binary. [139] This has for some time been the case for outsider art and is tied to the language of the term itself, with its reference to the 'other' and therefore its suggestions of a delineated exclusive 'inside' category. However, Roddick notes that as soon as we look more closely at any label or category, "it becomes apparent that there are many aspects to this process and that there can be negative and positive consequences of labelling or not labelling." [140]

Roddick references JJ Gallagher's summary of positive and negative consequences of labelling (in reference here to children with dyslexia), suggesting that negative consequences of labelling occur when:

> 1. The professionals are labelling for its own sake, without suggesting any form of treatment or support, 2. As a way of maintaining the status quo by keeping minority groups at the bottom of the social hierarchy, 3. To maintain focus on within child problems and not address the environmental factors which have produced or exacerbated the problem. [141]

This summary can be applied to the labelling of outsider art as identified in the analysis of interview responses for this thesis: 1. Oftentimes curators or other arts professionals are the ones applying (or not applying) the labels, without consideration – and oftentimes without support - for the artists they are labelling. 2. Curators and other mainstream gatekeepers can keep a check on the hierarchies that exist within the art world by continuing to exclude non-traditional artists

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[137] Eckstein, Jessica, and Mike Allen. 'Reclaiming Stigma: Alternative Explorations of the Construct'. *Communication Studies* 65, no. 2 (2014): 129–31, p 130

[138] Boyce, Niall, 'The art of medicine: Outsider art,' in *The Lancet,* vol. 397, 2012, pp 1480-1481, p 1481
[139] Roddick, Op. Cit., p 653

[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.

by labelling them as something 'separate' and 'different' to the mainstream, and 3. By maintaining it is innately the artists who are a barrier to themselves, the art world relieves itself of the task of looking inwards at the persevering institutional power structures that keep non-traditional work on the 'outside.'

Unlike other genres of the modern art world such as Surrealism, Impressionism, Futurism, the nature of the term outsider art has led to its continued contestation since it was first coined by Cardinal in 1972. Ultimately, this contestation has led to a sense of confusion and reluctance amongst curators in how they would or could use the term in any relevant or meaningful way, instead, preferring to focus on the 'self-taught' identity of artists means they are able to remove themselves from engaging in any way with the outsider-insider discourse. For the *Outsider Arts Professionals* the term is problematic but can be a useful tool for commercial gain when applied in the right way by the right people and with the knowledge and agreement of the artists being labelled. The *Artists* found that the term provides a sense of belonging but appreciate there is stigma attached to using it – as was identified in the *Curator* interview responses. The artists felt a sense of empowerment in taking back control over the use and meaning of the term, similar to other instances of term reclamation that have happened in recent years.

From the interview responses it seems that outsider art as a term exists on a spectrum that ranges from too-vague to too-binary, with little understanding around how to apply the term in the present day. The *Curators* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* appeared comfortable leaving the term in the past as an historical label that belongs to a certain moment in cultural history. It is true that the original term and understanding of it are probably not fit for purpose in today's world, but this raises questions for contemporary artists who find affinity with the term – or if not *the* term, then *a* term that gives their work value and importance outside of mainstream constructs. It could also be argued that it is impossible to leave the term in the past when it was never canonically embraced during its moment in cultural history, and when, as suggested by Myrone, its time for canonical re-evaluation has come and gone. Outsider art's lack of inclusion in the traditional canon is a vital factor affecting its validation and therefore reception within the cultural mainstream. For as long the term continues to be contested, and for as long as it continues to remain outside of the traditional canon, exhibitions showcasing work by outsider artists will struggle to be critical or meaningful enough. Term contestation will continue to remain at the centre of the discourse, enabling cultural gatekeepers to keep outsider art outside the constructs of mainstream validation – whether intentional or not – and meaning that the wishes of the artists themselves remain a secondary consideration, mirroring almost identically the paternal structures that have shaped the category since its first emergence.

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3.   Spaces and Places

The role of the exhibition in the creation of reputation for an artist or an artwork is highlighted in Becker's *Art Worlds*, in which the author notes that being selected for exhibition by a museum is "the highest kind of institutional approval available in the contemporary visual arts world; no more can happen that will make work more important or allow it to add more than it already has to the artist's reputation."[142] And more specifically, the highest honour, according to Becker, is to be selected for a solo exhibition in a museum space. [143]

Becker's sentiment above is particularly relevant to the interview findings, as a dominant theme that emerged from all three sets was an evidenced relegation of exhibitions of outsider art to peripheral spaces: community, education, hallway, attics – anywhere but the main curatorial spaces of a gallery or museum. This was overtly stated in the *Outsider Arts Professional* and *Artist* interviews but was more covert in the *Curator* interviews and was uncovered during the analysis of patterns and themes that emerged in the way the *Curators* spoke about non-traditional art in relation to their gallery spaces. As well as the relegation of outsider art to peripheral physical spaces, this chapter also explores concepts that emerged during the interview analysis that suggest that relegation has also occurred in less tangible spaces and places. The *Artist* and *Outsider Arts Professional* interviews spoke to a trend in the validation or inclusion of outsider art within the growing arts and health agenda, rather than on a more aesthetic level within the cultural mainstream, and the *Outsider Arts Professionals* suggested that the type of funding received for outsider art often focused on social, community or health outcomes rather than aesthetic ones. The *Curator* interviews suggested something similar in that their programming of outsider art could be seen as a tick box exercise in meeting diversity agendas, and they identified the potential for this to lead to reductive programming within their organisations. The *Artists* spoke of relegation more broadly, focusing on the wider demotion of creativity and art making to a 'nice to have' or a hobby by society more widely – predominantly due to western capitalist beliefs - and many had experienced a dismissive approach to the importance of creativity, or specifically *their* creativity, by their parents and wider family units when they were growing up. This chapter will explore how these spaces and places that outsider art is permitted to occupy and exist within could have an impact on how it is received and validated within the cultural mainstream.

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[142] Becker, Op. Cit., p 117
[143] Braden, L. E. A., 'Networks Created Within Exhibition: The Curators' Effect on Historical Recognition', in *American Behavioural Scientist,* Vol. 65, No. 1., 2021, pp 25-43, p 32

3.1   Physical place

Not overtly stated in the *Curator* interviews, but a theme that emerged on analysis of the responses highlighted the issue of physical space and place that outsider art is permitted to occupy. *Curator* respondents Lewis, Parry, Myrone and McMullan all spoke about learning and community or secondary spaces in relation to this type of work. Parry, describing the spaces at Turner Contemporary, said that *"our main gallery spaces are over 600 square metres, so often that will be quite high-profile artists showing in those spaces. We also have a downstairs space where we have a learning studio where we show a wide range of exhibitions from school children to community groups that we are working with."* Myrone, talking about the folk art collection at Compton Verney: *"it's stuck in the attic, so you have to go up three floors."* What was apparent in the analysis of the *Curator* interviews was that the respondents all appeared keen to diversify their exhibitions, but they did not propose whether this diversification would – or should – happen in the main curatorial spaces.

McMullan, curator at Watermans, spoke about their work as part of the Creative People and Places project in Hounslow. The programme's aim is to *"strike for high quality work, professional working, the art work we want to show is out in community spaces like libraries, cafes… so I want people to go and see work that they might see in a 'proper' art gallery. I want local people to be able to go and see what they might see somewhere like the Tate or South London Gallery, but in their local library."* The inclusion of high-quality art in community spaces is seen by McMullan as a way to bring local people together with art in spaces they might normally visit in day-to-day life. But despite this inclusion of art in everyday spaces, the group McMullan works closely with still consider a gallery space as the main place for the validation of art works. McMullan illustrates this by speaking about their experience with an older member of the group: *"he's a local artist, probably in his 70s, and he was like, if it's not in a gallery it's not good."* For the wider group, this preconception still exists – McMullan adds *"we've got a new media gallery, which is programmed. And they're like, we really have to be there. They see it as like a sort of epitome of kind of validation or accreditation of what they're doing. There's a sort of real barrier about, we want to have an exhibition, and only an exhibition is good enough."* McMullan suggested this view can be more embedded for non-arts audiences: *"I think it's probably come from experiencing a lot of prejudice and a lot of barriers in the past. Actually, Grayson Perry - there was a trailer for his Art Club where it was, let's put all the work in a gallery because that's where art looks best. And it's like, that sort of attitude is kind of embedding that problem."* Although there is a recognition amongst the *Curators* that art does not have to be exhibited in a main curatorial space to be perceived and valued as art, there is a proliferating attitude amongst wider audiences – and as highlighted by Becker - that the gallery space continues to be the ultimate tool for cultural validation.

This relegation of marginalised people and their art to peripheral spaces can be damaging to its legitimation within the art world. In a New Zealand based study focusing on learning disabled people and their integration into the wider community, Paul Milner and Berni Kelly found that the participants they interviewed as part of their project "could not have been clearer about the danger of becoming ghettoised within disability settings."[144] This removal to peripheral spaces also echoes the conception of the field of outsider art in Europe; where much of the most renowned historical outsider art was discovered in medical establishments, like psychiatric asylums, by medical professionals, and has its roots in the exile and marginalisation of people with mental health issues, physical and learning disabilities that has been a part of western history since the mid-seventeenth century:

> For the day came when this man, banished in the same exile all over Europe in the mid-seventeenth century, suddenly became an outsider, expelled by a society to whose norms he could not be seen to conform; and for our own intellectual comfort, he then became a candidate for prisons, asylums and punishments. In reality, this character is merely the result of superimposed grids of exclusion. [145]

The relegation of outsider art to community or peripheral spaces is highlighted too by a survey respondent in Arts Council England's 2017 'Making a Shift' report, when they say that "work that explores disability or the experience of disability is often identified as 'worthy,' lower status, or as a community project – which is also considered as low status within most sections of the art world. Also, identifying myself as a disabled artist can be counterproductive, with assumptions that my work must be of a lower standard."[146] Similarly, a person responding to Curating for Change's 2021 consultation noted that "museums and galleries often feel like an extension of 'state' – from their signage to their covert behavioural codes. Whatever the subject, they frequently hold up the culture of a tiny minority (e.g. just Kings, landed gentry, etc.) as representing the 'whole' of our country. They have a fetishism of 'objects' above ways of commemorating 'experience' or 'community' – which is not forward thinking. Experience and community are often relegated to a side room or children's activity." [147]

The *Outsider Arts Professionals* identified that although there has been an increase in smaller-scale exhibitions of outsider art in more recent years, these exhibitions have predominantly been

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[144] Milner, Paul and Berni Kelly, 'Community participation and inclusion: people with disabilities defining their place,' in *Disability and Society,* Vol. 24, No. 1, 2009, pp 47-62, p 59

[145] Foucault, Michel, *The History of Madness*, Routledge, 1972, p 79-80

[146] Arts Council England and ewgroup, *Making a Shift Report*, 2017, p 25

[147] Fox, Esther and Jane Sparkes, 'Curating for Change: Disabled People Leading in Museums,' *Accentuate Report*, July 2021, p 17

relegated to these peripheral spaces. Gilbert notes that *"people just don't respect it enough to put it in their main spaces. And if we do see it, it tends to be in the learning spaces;"* and Sutton: *"Their art [learning disabled artists] would be put in the learning engagement, usually in a dark room in the back of a gallery somewhere that you might find if you're lucky."* Catto agrees, saying *"that's where community groups go, and that's where educational groups go, the artists need to be in the curatorial space. And the thing that I'd be really unhappy about is if they take all of the work they want to do in this area and they class it in the community section, and then continue doing what they were doing before in the curatorial spaces. Well, why does the work have to be in the community space? Why can't it be in the curatorial spaces?"* Catto, talking about artists they work with at ActionSpace adds *"you know, we've got people who have got really strong CVs; stronger than in some cases the people they're talking to if they are artists."*

This relegation could be due to a direct lack of real support from key cultural funders in this area. Despite a recent drive for organisations to prove their commitment to the diversity agenda, there is little guidance from funders on where this diversity needs to happen, with most reports commissioned in this area focusing on diversity within the workforce and amongst audiences and visitors, rather than amongst those who are represented within mainstream curatorial spaces. Catto identifies this, saying *"a lot of this is lack of leadership from the Arts Council, because they're all getting on board with the idea that they have to increase diversity and inclusion. It's one of the four principles that we're all going to have to take on board, And a lot of them are looking at their community programmes and their community spaces and education programmes. A lot of the conversation is about we need to pull that up, and that's going to be as important as the curatorial spaces."*

This relegation happens, too, with relatively established outsider artists. Catto gives an example of an artist who has had several successful residencies at large arts organisations and has had work exhibited all over the UK. When the supported studios the artist works with approaches other potential venues for an exhibition or collaboration, they oftentimes respond by saying *"let's put it in the community programme,"* or *"can [artist] come and do a workshop for us?"*

The *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents had, in many cases, been able to secure spaces for exhibitions that had been very successful, however, Sutton explained that *"most of our exhibitions have been in smaller places. We've not been able to get work shown [in bigger venues]."* The constant suggestion that this work belongs in the community or education spaces within galleries has led Verrent to decline any offers now of partnerships with education departments. They note that *"there is no issue getting work in educational settings, having workshops with disabled artists… we don't do any education work deliberately because*

otherwise everything gets shoehorned there… it becomes a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy; if people take those opportunities, then people assume that's where the work belongs. There certainly hasn't been an exhibition at the Tate, unless it's part of the Tate Exchange, which is a learning platform again." Verrent advocates for a boycott of educational and community spaces for outsider artists but does understand why artists do still take up these opportunities. Verrent's experience is evidenced by Amanda Ravetz and Lucy Wright's research which found that "unhelpful distinctions between different kinds of gallery involvement lead to lower status for artists working with communities, which some reportedly sought to conceal in their CVs and websites."[148] Importantly, they quote one respondent who says that "a lot of artists that I know… don't talk about any work that they would do for the education department… in fear that this would mean that they would never… be invited to do a show in the gallery,"[149] and the authors of the report conclude that "artists may experience their practices being side-lined when positioned in gallery and museum education contexts."[150]

This peripheral existence of outsider art was also noted by two of the *Artist* respondents, with H saying *"there's always the exhibitions are in libraries and stuff. And they're in you know, they're not – or they're in specialist galleries, they're not in the main galleries. And on the whole, you just don't really see it when you go in the main ones. It's always separate."* Likewise, T adds *"if it is from the community, it's in a separate section. And I think the only way we're going to make progress is by breaking down these barriers and saying okay, so because it's from the community, and because it's by a trained artist, that kind of space needs to be created to say you know, this piece of outsider art is just as valuable as Damien Hirst."*

Compounding this peripheral nature of the spaces outsider art can take up is the lack of any permanent space for outsider art in the UK. This was identified by the *Outsider Arts Professionals* and *Artist* respondents. Gilbert noted that *"we have these big blockbuster shows that kind of come in, are there for a few months and then disappear. I think it would be more recognised and more supported if there were things on year-round that people could come to, but because it kind of gets shipped in and tends to get a lot of negative press, and then gets shipped out again, it is not really changing the mindsets of the people that visit the mainstream galleries; the big art enthusiasts."* Gilbert continues, adding *"I think because the big*

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[148] Ravetz, Amanda, and Lucy Wright. 'Validation beyond the Gallery'. Manchester Metropolitan University, June 2015, p 15

[149] Ibid.

[150] Op. Cit., p 17

blockbuster exhibitions have just brought it in for a short period of time, it means that every time you have an exhibition of outsider art, it's always about the same thing, because it's always 'Roger Cardinal coined the term in 1972, etc.', and there's always a panel discussion around what outsider art is." This leads to a certain stagnation in relation to the field of outsider art, where there is little evidence of real critical exploration of the subject through a more contemporary lens, and instead, each new display of outsider art in the UK relies on reiterating the same historical narrative that has come to define and encompass its trajectory. In addition to this, as mentioned in Chapter 2, there has been no obvious canonical re-evaluation for the category of outsider art (mentioned by *Curator* respondent Myrone), as there has been for other movements throughout the twentieth century; like German Expressionism whose re-canonisation came about as a result of a political and ideological shift in society following the Second World War.

The non-existence of a permanent physical space for outsider art was acknowledged by four of the *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents as a tangible reason why there is an ongoing lack of visibility and validation for this category in the UK. There is, Slominski noted, a rising interest in this type of art but *"there's a lack of an entry point. What access points do we have in the UK? I feel like a lot of people don't know."* Maizels identified the struggle champions of outsider art face due to a lack of such space: *"there's no museum in this country… we've got a huge gap because people can't see it. There's nothing in the Tate Britain… it really hinders the appreciation of outsider art in this country… I think it'd be much more accepted if there was a place all the time."* This view was also highlighted in the *Artist* responses, when C spoke about the Gallery of Everything being the *"one outsider art gallery we've got – it's not accessible! That's just crazy!"* A permanent exhibition space would also allow for a more robust critical exploration of outsider art and all that the term encompasses, rather than returning again to the Cardinal paradigm or the discovery narrative. In terms of the outsider art world, this is a problem that is almost unique to the UK, as a substantial number of countries worldwide boast at least one – and in the US and Europe more widely, usually several – permanent gallery or museum spaces dedicated to the year-round showcasing of this work. In *Against Outsider Art*, Prinz lists the countries that feature at least one permanent space for exhibiting outsider art, and it is extensive: "Australia, Belgium, Brazil, the Czech Republic, China, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, India, Japan, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Switzerland and the United States."[151]

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[151] Prinz, Op. Cit, p259

Art historian Claire Bishop writes extensively on the impact that the relegation of non-traditional art to peripheral community and participatory spaces has in their book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Bishop argues that this relegation maintains the cultural hierarchy that exists within the art world, where "art is ultimately produced for, and consumed by, a middle-class gallery audience and wealthy collectors." [152] She claims that "this insight can be extended to the argument that high culture, as found in galleries, is produced for and on behalf of the ruling classes; by contrast, 'the people' (the marginalised, the excluded) can only be emancipated by direct inclusion in the production of a work."[153] Bishop claims this thinking extends to funding bodies, who assume that "the poor can only engage physically, while the middle class have the leisure to think and critically reflect."[154] Jacques Ranciére supports Bishop's thinking, noting that this divide between participatory and curatorial spaces "preserves the status quo by never confronting the 'aesthetic thing directly,"[155] and in his 1992 essay, 'The Uses of Democracy', Ranciére notes that "participation in what we normally refer to as democratic regimes is usually reduced to a question of filling up the spaces left empty by power." [156] For Bishop and Ranciére, it is safe for the cultural hierarchy to give over community and participatory spaces to non-traditional or outsider artists, as these are spaces and positions that hold relatively little power within the overall system.

The relegation of outsider art to peripheral, power-less spaces speaks to the wider power dynamic of the cultural sector. Although all cohorts of interview respondents noted that audiences more widely were interested in this type of work and enjoyed exhibitions of outsider art, McMullan mentioned anecdotes highlighting that although audiences are more accepting of this work, they still view the gallery as the main tool of validation. It is also pertinent to note that many public galleries in the UK offer free access to their collection exhibitions and exhibitions in their learning and community spaces but charge to access their main gallery – usually temporary – exhibition spaces. The charges for the main temporary exhibitions can be as high as £22 per person[157], which is a fundamental financial barrier for many people. Pricing entry to main exhibition spaces like this decides in some way who can access these exhibitions, and therefore, who these exhibitions are by and for. If outsider art is not allowed access to these main spaces, audiences are not being shown that this is work to be valued. Additionally, by only

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[152] Bishop, Claire, Op. Cit., p 37
[153] Op. Cit., p 38
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Op. Cit., p 283
[157] Source: Tate Modern ticket prices on their website, accessed 27 July 2022

showcasing outsider art in peripheral spaces, galleries are making a political statement: this work is permitted in our spaces, but not in any space where it can hold any sort of real power.

3.2   The aesthetic vs social space

On analysis of the *Artist* interview responses, it became clear that several of the respondents had navigated their way to the art world through an arts and health lens with six of the *Artists* citing that their health and social circumstance was the key reason that they had initially started making art. L: *"creativity has been a complete lifeline for me with my own personal struggles. And when I have a day that I feel like I can't say how I feel, I can create something;"* M: *"I was ill with depression about 10-15 years ago, I did one session of art therapy. Then I wasn't able to do anymore sessions, so I just carried on really and did it at home;"* P: *"to me, since I've been doing arts I've more or less stayed away from any of the official sort of clinical stuff [for mental health];"* E: *"So I thought that was a kind of a way of great escapism, you know, because being an asylum seeker, all your rights have been taken away, all your autonomy has been taken away and doing art, I felt great, I have gained back that freedom or the autonomy I could do when I wanted to do it;"* B: *"That's where my work turned more towards visual art. And because it was something I could still communicate similar ideas, but I could work on my own from home and send that work out to meet people so rather than before, where you have to go and be in a venue or physically be in the space, and with visual, I could make things and then that would go away and I could stay put."*

Once they had navigated their way into the arts and health arena, the artists identified that this is where they have had most of their success. C, talking about recent exhibitions of their work, noted that *"so the one at [exhibition] it's actually through a psychiatric hospital. So again, it's not really mainstream. And obviously the Outsider Art Fair, again, it's this self-taught, outsider art realm."* C followed this by talking about their success – or lack of – in the mainstream art world: *"Whenever I've applied to anything mainstream, I've not got it. So I have tried, I do try, like especially last year, I did quite a few applications. And I just don't even get anywhere really."* Similarly, E spoke about an exhibition of theirs opening in an NHS mental health trust, and G talked about a friend who *"has been very successful, but she has been successful as an outsider. Her art is outstanding, and she has – but only through the channel of outsider art."* Finally, P mentioned that they have *"had a couple of solo exhibitions – and I've had pieces in other exhibitions though they do all tend to be in either arts in health or something, something related to that."*

The divide between arts and health related work and the mainstream is evident too in the existence of ghettoized funding streams, as identified by the *Outsider Arts Professionals* who

saw this as a contributing factor to outsider art's visibility as it matters where financial resources come from and how they are distributed because where the money comes from will inform how the work is assessed and therefore validated. Responding to why we need specialist funding streams for outsider or disabled artists, Verrent said *"we absolutely shouldn't. It's due to the systemic discrimination inherent within the funding system and the art system as a whole."* Verrent added that *"we don't want to be doing this any longer than we have to – the majority of artists that we work with do not want to come to a dedicated disability related fund, they come to us because they are not met within the current system."* Rhodes noted that this ghettoization of funding for disabled or outsider artists will continue until *"the Arts Council is really thinking about how we judge all of this stuff on equitable lines rather than having a sort of ghetto scheme for stuff that isn't 'proper' art, which is the implication."*

In Ravetz and Wright's 2015 report, the authors note that arts organisations working in a more social capacity tend to generate much of their income from outside of arts funding streams. The report found that "whilst socially focused sources offer validation in terms of the extrinsic value of the work commissioned, given their priorities they are arguably less likely to promote the artists themselves or the intrinsic value of the work as art." [158] When writing the report in 2015, Ravetz and Wright also noted that investment from Arts Council England was "largely gallery-based, with only one organisation that currently specialises in socially-engaged art making it into the 31 highest funded visual arts organizations in the UK"[159] (although this has positively changed in more recent years).

Calls for a more democratic art world have resulted in quite substantial reform in Arts Council England policy over the past decade. The funding body's introduction of the Creative Case for Diversity in 2011 saw increased funding being given to individuals and organisations who work with artists and audiences from more diverse backgrounds, and in summer 2022, Arts Council England released a new strategic policy called *Creative Health and Wellbeing*. The strategy implores a new focus on the benefits that creative activity can have on health and wellbeing, stating that Arts Council England will work more closely with the National Health Service on their social prescribing agenda, and that more funding will be dedicated to individuals and organisations who use creativity as a tool to improve health and wellbeing.

This is seemingly positive news, highlighting the importance of creativity and the arts in everyday life for all human beings. However, this move has the potential to conflate art made by

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[158] Ravetz and Wright, Op. Cit., p 3
[159] Ibid.

artists who happen to be experiencing health issues and art that is used as a tool to improve health and wellbeing. In a conference paper read by Elspeth Morrison and Vic Frankelstein in 1991, the authors declared that as disabled people:

> We are viewed as tragic individuals who, to a varying degree, are 'socially dead' – i.e. we exist to have things done to us, not to actively do things, and certainly not to be creative beings in ways other than carefully controlled two hours a week at the day centre for 'rehabilitation' purposes. [160]

The premise of Morrison and Frankelstein's quote is reiterated in another conference paper read by Colin Barnes at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts in 2003, where the author noted that "those disabled people viewed as inadequate and incapable have been given art as therapy in the context of special schools, day centres, and segregated institutions. Such initiatives have not just individualised and depoliticised creativity, advocates have also sometimes used them for commercial purposes, such as charity Christmas cards." [161]

In a 2006 research project, Hester Parr interviewed 40 paid staff and artists making up the client bases of the Trongate Studios in Glasgow and Art Angel in Dundee; both accessed by artists experiencing mental health issues or artists with a learning disability. Parr asserted in the article that community arts projects – and, in particular, community arts projects focusing on mental health – were "unlikely to attract labels of national cultural significance." [162] Parr noted that "caught between dwindling city resources and lack of evidential credibility from NHS services, organisations like Art Angel struggle for sustainable funding and therefore a guaranteed place in the cultural city." [163] Parr identified too the importance of exhibiting outsider art in mainstream cultural spaces, noting that this is a "pivotal way in which people discuss their sense of belonging or outsiderness in artistic communities." [164] Interestingly, Parr recognised a paradox for these artists working Glasgow "as full-time artists located in the cultural quarter of the city, but who do not occupy fully insider positions through – ironically – not being categorized as

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[160] Morrison, Elspeth, and Vic Finkelstein. 'Culture as Struggle: Access to Power'. London: Shape Publications, 1991.

[161] Barnes, Colin. 'Effecting Change: Disability, Culture and Art'. Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts, 2003.

[162] Parr, Hester. 'Mental Health, The Arts and Belongings'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31, no. 2 (June 2006): 150–66, p 160

[163] Ibid.

[164] Op. Cit., p 161

sufficiently 'outsider', but nor being 'good-enough', trained or time-served professionals, means that their sense of artist belonging is often ambivalent and tenuous." [165]

The rising arts and health agenda with its distinct pots of funding, and therefore distinct type of validation for outsider art parallels Bishop's concerns about the arts (participatory in particular) being used as a tool for social cohesivity and political gain. In the UK, Bishop uses the example of the New Labour government of the late 1990s. Under this leadership, public spending on the arts shifted to have a more socially engaged focus. Based heavily on Francois Matarasso's 1997 publication *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*[166], New Labour's cultural policy focused on what the arts were able to do for society; "increasing employability, minimising crime, fostering aspiration – anything but artistic experimentation and research as values in and of themselves."[167] The key phrase utilised by New Labour was 'social exclusion': "if people became disconnected from schooling and education, and subsequently the labour market, they are more likely to pose problems to welfare systems as a whole."[168] This new leaning towards the societal impacts of art were deeply criticised by the far-left because they seemed to seek to "conceal social inequality, rendering it cosmetic rather than structural."[169] Cultural theorist Paola Merli noted that these new 'uses' for art would not change structural conditions, they would only help people come to accept them. This politicisation of participatory arts, Bishop states, is:

> Less about repairing the social bond than a mission to enable all members of society to be self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatised world… In this logic, participation in society is merely participation in the task of being individually responsible for what, in the past, was the collective concern of the state.[170]

It is in this instance, like the arts and health agenda of the present day, that art becomes indistinguishable from government policy. Arts projects that prioritise societal outcomes are sociological rather than artistic. The idea of art and creativity as political agenda has seen arts projects evaluated solely on their positive impact on individuals and communities rather than on

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[165] Op. Cit., p 162

[166] Matarasso, Francois, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts,* Comedia, 1997
[167] Bishop, Op. Cit., p 13
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Op. Cit., p 14

any aesthetic level and this is another relegation for outsider artists, where their work is seen on a medicative or social rather than aesthetic level.

3.3   Ticking a box

In their interview responses, the *Curators*' illustrated an understanding of the growing need for diversity in all areas of gallery and museum spaces and programmes, and in the interest the public and other art-going audiences have in seeing work that might be considered more non-traditional. Parry says that *"I think representing different and diverse voices is really important in the programme."* Despite this recognition, there was a still a sense of risk adversity when it comes to making any real and meaningful change in diversifying programmes and spaces. Hughes, reflecting more generally on the art world, said that one thing that frustrates her is that *"we bang the drum that art is essential, and we should all have it as part of our lives, but we don't actually do that in our programmes. We don't look at things that are necessarily essential."* As a charging organisation, Martin believes it is key to ensure there is diversity in Pallant House Gallery's programme. They note that *"given that we are a paying organisation, how do we make sure that our programme has diversity in it. And that's an important thing for us. And that ranges from making sure we are proactively representing and showing women artists, artists of colour, artists who may have disabilities or other aspects of kind of diversity really, and I think thinking about outsider artists falls within that."* But, Martin reiterates, any exhibition has to make sense in relation to the gallery's permanent collection and overarching mission statement.

What was apparent was that for several of the *Curators*, exhibiting outsider art would be considered part of their mission for diversity. There was a sense that rather than this work being something that is historically important to the trajectory of UK art history and – more widely – societal history, the integral elements of much outsider art encompass many of the themes of recent protest movements in relation to diversity, with Martin noting that *"I think the contemporary gallery going public are very interested in this because actually, they want to question things, they're interested in how and why an art format is, why it has not reached the mainstream, and I think, in the same way that Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movements in recent years, I think outsider art has come completely hand in hand with other movements that have looked at those non-centralized groups of artists or individuals."*

The utilisation of outsider art as a way of diversifying programmes or spaces has for several of the *Curators* raised issues around reductive programming. Hughes noted that *"when you see so many galleries have sort of agendas looking like we're really great for social good, then you become really reductive."* To exhibit an artist's work purely because of their diverse

biographical credentials in many respects challenges the whole notion of diversity. Hughes continues by saying that *"I think that's one of the difficult things that arts organisations can do really clumsily, is be like, we're bringing you in because we want your art work to speak to this, and that's where you don't get a universality of experiences. You're asking someone to paint by numbers, and then it becomes really reductive."* On working with Yinka Shonibare, Hughes remembers that he *"gave loads of anecdotes, where people at different points in his career have tried to sort of project onto him what they want his art work to be. So at any given point, they might want his art work to be around race,"* and on working with Lubaina Himid: *"there's an element where you could say, well, we've approached a black woman artist like that, it fulfils a lot of the directives at the moment, but when we were talking to, when we said we'd like to curate the show, she very specifically said to us, I'm not going to do a show about being a black woman artist."*

Such a reductive approach towards programming exhibitions of work by artists from more diverse backgrounds masks deeper inequalities that exist within the UK mainstream art world. It seems that many of the major UK arts institutions are working hard to diversify their programmes, but beneath the surface, a reductive way of looking at diversity rarely leads to lasting change. Myrone says that this surface level celebration hides bigger, more complex questions about the wider cultural validity of outsider art: *"there is a big line drawn, if you can afford to put a Mary Linwood on display for a couple of months but you can't afford you know, £350 or whatever her work costs to bring her into the collection. That isn't just an economic question. In that case, it is a question of cultural value."* In the *Outsider Arts Professional* interviews, Rhodes was cautious too about cultural agents being too relaxed in light of the growing diversity agenda and seeing it as 'job done', noting that *"sometimes one achieves few victories and everybody goes 'ok job done.' They go, we've established this now. No it's not job done. It's one of the biggest dangers of all, I think, that sense of achieving a few victories. And then it's very easy, for want of a better word, the mainstream or the dominant structures to go 'sorted'."* With Arts Council England's focus on an arts and health agenda and recognition from curators that diversity needs to happen within all cultural spaces, it would be easy to assume that the job here has been done. What these interview responses have uncovered is that an understanding of the need for further diversity in curatorial spaces is often not reflected in reality in a meaningful way.

3.4   The value of art in societal spaces

An interesting point addressed by several of the *Artist* respondents was that the lack of validation for outsider art (and in fact art more widely) was an issue not solely confined to the

spaces of the art world. They spoke about a wider societal relegation of the value of creativity in the western world, and about how artists and creative people are seen through the eyes of capitalism. G raised this issue by noting that *"through lockdown, when people had more time – there was more creativity, more cultural engagement. And I think coming probably to the upper layer of it, capitalism doesn't value that. They want to feel that everyone is working and – this is number one, otherwise you are described as economically invalid, not functioning."* G went on to add that *"lots of people are creative if they're given the chance – some of them have not even had the opportunity to do so. That's another layer. But we are taught 'you're a dreamer, you're too idealistic, try a proper job."* In line with this, K noted that *"society needs to change its attitude to art in general. And be more inclusive,"* again, adding that *"being in a more supportive environment that's more open to be able to explain and perhaps get understanding for the work helps it to thrive and gain value in recognition. So it's more about understanding in society in general, in being more valued and accepted."* N noted that this wider societal attitude towards creativity and its contribution to capitalist society mean that *"the public seem to want to know that they've [the artists] gone through the system a bit and sort of almost like got their credit that they can, and then they can be a proper artist."*

The attitude to creativity in societal spaces more widely was experienced too by many of the *Artist* respondents in more individual spaces, through their domestic environments during childhood. J noted that *"my family were artists in the 20s and 30s, but I wasn't allowed to do art. My dad literally said, go and join the army, do something vocational."* This parental stigma was also experienced by K who said that *"in terms of career, I guess there's always a lot of people saying, oh art is not a career. And I think I strongly had that from my parents. And they felt like why would you be doing art if you've got the ability to do another academic subject."* And again, L recalled their experience as a child: *"I didn't realise for a long time that I had been almost conditioned by my upbringing to devalue anything that was creative,"* remembering that *"I was told by my parents, or specifically my mum, that colouring in wasn't a proper career. I've always been minimised in what I do creatively, it's always been seen as something you do in your own time. Not a proper job. You know, you can't make money from it."* The final artist to share this childhood experience was N, who spoke about taking a more vocational creative route by studying for a design-based qualification: *"I wanted to do creative stuff, and of course my parents thought right, you're gonna have to get a job at the end. So that was more the one that sort of sent you into it."*

These domestic and wider societal attitudes towards creativity had affected some of the *Artists'* own views about what makes someone an artist and what it means to be creative. L spoke about how their experiences had affected their own ability to see themselves as an artist, noting that *"maybe the perception of what art is, what's holding me back. I feel like I've been handed this*

idea of art, which is something that's 50 hours plus, and it's painted, and it hangs in a guilt frame, in a specific institution. And everything else is just arts and crafts." They added, with some remorse, that *"for the longest time, I didn't call myself an artist, I called myself a creative. I would say that I've really only considered myself a fully-fledged artist in the last six months. But I've been trying to own that for the last couple of years."*

The idea of flourishing creativity needing support in domestic spaces is explored in Joan Freeman's report, 'Children's talent in fine art and music – England', which found that the "measurably talented children came from families which had given them particular encouragement and extra financial support, even when the parents were not involved in music or fine-art."[171] Freeman also found that schools' support for creative activities had a significant impact on children feeling readily able to explore art or music. Talking more specifically about 'talent' – which is divisive in itself – Freeman noted that there were whole schools that had not produced a single musician or artist, and "in these aesthetically impoverished schools (usually in poorer districts) both parents and teachers tended to be dismissive of school time spent on 'frills'."[172] Similarly, in Lina Pugsleys research into how the influence of the home environment can affect how children's creativity is nourished and encouraged, it was noted that increased creativity in childhood can be perceived as creating more non-conformist behaviour in children by their parents. Pugsley noted that "early findings generated by parental responses to the Torrance Ideal Child Checklist consistently revealed that parents often ignored or discouraged their children's creative behaviours in favour of characteristics that reflected conformity."[173] The research found that, "unsurprisingly, parents who had more positive attitudes and values toward creativity prepared a more creative home environment is significantly and positively related to support for creative characteristics."[174] This assertion is reinforced in Bourdieu's text *Distinction*, in which it is claimed that "scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education,"[175] and where the authors notes that:

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[171] Freeman, Joan. 'Children's Talent in Fine Art and Music - England'. *Roeper Review* 22, no. 2 (2000): 98–101, p 101

[172] Ibid.

[173] Pugsley, Lina. 'Supporting Creativity or Conformity? Influence of the Home Environment and Parental Factors on the Value of Children's Creativity Characteristics'. *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 54, no. 3 (2018): 598–609, p 598

[174] Op. Cit., p 605

[175] Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction,* Routledge and Kegan Paul, first published in French 1979, p 1

> Even in the classroom, the dominant definition of the legitimate way of approaching culture and
> works of art favours those who have had early access to legitimate culture, in a cultured
> household, outside of scholastic disciplines.[176]

This relegation of non-mainstream creativity to peripheral spaces within society is further illustrated by the nature of outsider art's emergence in the twentieth century. The initial seeds of outsider art, in Europe specifically, were sown in the confines of monumental psychiatric asylums; an emergence which by its very nature positions outsider art outside of cultural spaces – and, to go further, outside of societal spaces. As an interesting addition to this, and something that could be explored more in depth in a subsequent research project, is how some of the most prominent outsider art museums (particularly in Europe) are still situated in the grounds of a mental health hospital or retired asylum. Arguably the UK's largest 'outsider' museum, Bethlem, is situated in the grounds of a still-operating NHS mental health hospital, and this is the same for some of the bigger outsider art museums in Europe (Museum Dr Guislain, Belgium; Galerie Gugging, Austria).

The relegation of outsider art in society more widely is two-fold. Firstly, creativity that is performed by people who have not 'trained' professionally through art school, is side-lined societally as a nice-to-have, a hobby, and not a profession, as has been the experience of many of the *Artist* respondents. Secondly, with a history rooted in the medical field rather than cultural, reframing outsider art as an aesthetic endeavour has proved fundamentally more challenging.

3.5   Conclusion

As noted in the preceding chapter (Chapter 2), the notion of the term outsider art by its very nature semantically means that it has remained and continues to remain a separate 'space' distinct from the mainstream. This, combined with its actual physical relegation to peripheral spaces – and in less tangible spaces – as suggested by the interview respondents compounds its identity as a separate category of art, and therefore continues to affect its reception through the usual vehicles of validation within the mainstream (to Becker, an exhibition in a main gallery space – or, even more specifically, a solo show in a prestigious gallery space). It could even be said that the term and space it occupies is a heterotopia, as first defined by Foucault, or more specifically a heterotopia of deviation: "those in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed."[177] In Foucault's writings on heterotopias,

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[176] Bourdieu, Op Cit., p 2
[177] Foucault, Michel, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,* 1967, presentation

the author talks about heterotopias that appear to be open spaces, but that "generally hide curious exclusions."[178] In this sense, the category of outsider art provides a promising 'open space' for non-mainstream artists to find support and showcase their work, but the reality is that the provision of a separate space could be seen to exacerbate its exclusion from more mainstream physical curatorial spaces.

This chapter has explored the three cohort's experience of the different spaces and places that outsider art has been permitted to occupy, and the potential implications of a peripheral occupation on its reception within the cultural mainstream. The implications of this peripheral occupation are threefold: its relegation to predominantly peripheral spaces in galleries and museums (education and community departments, hallways, attics, anywhere but the main curatorial spaces) has an impact on its visibility as an historically and culturally important genre of art; its proximity to the increasingly present arts and health agenda raises questions around the distinction between an artist who is living with health issues and creativity as a tool for improving health and wellbeing; and its use in plugging the gaps in institutions' diversity agendas reframes its purpose to somewhat of a box ticking exercise. Added to this is the wider societal and capitalist struggle to accept creativity as a reputable career, relegating it (once again) to the role of 'hobby' or 'nice-to-have,' something that was experienced in particular by the *Artist* respondents who had perhaps not experienced growing up in communities (familial, educational or otherwise) that valued artists and artmaking, as well as the challenge outsider art faces in overcoming its initial emergence which happened in predominantly non-cultural spaces.

Through both subtle and overt assertions in their interview responses, there was a general consensus that spatial relegation has contributed to the underrepresentation of and therefore a lack of validation of outsider art in the mainstream. The *Curators* in their responses spoke about the spaces within their institutions that were 'available' to outsider art; most notably education and learning spaces, and not main curatorial spaces, and that their work with outsider artists would help them meet prescribed diversity agendas. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* spoke more about the practicalities of funding streams available for outsider art, and how this meant the focus was too often on health and social outcomes rather than aesthetic outcomes, and they touched upon the lack of a permanent exhibition space for outsider art in the UK, despite there being numerous such spaces in Europe more widely as well as in the United States. The *Artist* respondents shared that much of their success had come from moving away from aesthetic and artistic outcomes ('Art for arts' sake') and towards the health and social agenda that has become

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[178] Ibid.

increasingly prominent in the art world in more recent years. They went further than this to suggest that there is a wider relegation of the arts and creativity societally and in familial and domestic spaces; particularly with reference to art made by those who have received no formal training or have not taken the traditional academic path to becoming an artist.

Although subtle, these continued spatial relegations of outsider art can contribute greatly to its lack of visibility and inclusion within the mainstream art world. They suggest that the work has been done; outsider art appears in galleries and museums, so what then is the problem? But as Foucault states, with the continued micro-relegations of outsider art, or indeed the continued distinction of it as a separate category altogether, "everyone can enter into the heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion – we think we enter whereas we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded."[179] If outsider art continues to remain only in peripheral societal and cultural spaces, then by default it will be excluded from the mainstream spaces it hopes to inhabit.

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[179] Foucault, Michel, Op. Cit., 1967

4. Powerful People

In 'Mapping Intermediaries in Contemporary Art According to Pragmatic Sociology', Heinich uses Marcel Duchamp's 'Readymades' as an example of the importance of cultural intermediaries and gatekeepers. In 1917, Duchamp presented *Fountain* to the *Salon des Independants.* It was left in the lobby, seemingly a decision by gatekeepers at the *Salon* who did not consider the urinal a work of art. It was forty years later, when Duchamp made replicas of the *Fountain*, selling them to private galleries and public museums, that the importance of cultural intermediaries once again came to the fore. They did their work, "treating and framing the thing as a work of art, insuring, describing, selling or exhibiting, lighting and commenting on it."[180]

The above example of the influence of individuals and gatekeepers in imbuing value on a work of art highlights the third key theme that emerged from the interview responses. This theme explored the impact that individuals – or more specifically, cultural gatekeepers – can have on the visibility and reception of outsider art within cultural spaces. There was much consideration from both the *Outsider Arts Professionals* and the *Artist* respondents around the role of the curator specifically and how this has historically had an impact on what type of work is selected for and therefore shown in exhibitions. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* noticed a reticence or risk-adversity amongst curators in profiling work by outsider artists, and the *Artist* respondents felt they had little to no access to curators. They also identified a sense of feeling below curators in the cultural hierarchy. The *Curators*, unsurprisingly, did not see themselves as a powerful art world entity and instead contended that their power was muted by the wider structures of the art world; in particular, by issues related to funding and decisions made by those 'higher up' the cultural ladder. The *Curators* and *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents also recognized a reticence to cover and critique outsider art from art critics, which they identified as having an impact on how it is seen and evaluated by the wider cultural sector. Not only was a lack of critical reception identified by the *Outsider Arts Professionals*, but so too was the predominantly negative critical coverage of outsider art that has occurred previously and the impact this has had on its validation within the cultural mainstream.

The *Curators* touched upon the discovery narrative, which can demote outsider artists to a secondary position behind the gatekeepers who find, collect and exhibit their work. And related to the discovery narrative in many ways, all three cohorts acknowledged that the selection

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[180] Heinich, Nathalie, Op. Cit., 2012, p 696.

processes currently used in the mainstream art world have a huge impact on what works are made visible and therefore appreciated as art, as often selection panels will contain a very small number of people who are making very subjective and quite often homogenous decisions.

This chapter looks in turn at each set of individuals highlighted by the interviewees, and the impact these individuals have had on the acceptance – or non-acceptance - of outsider art within the cultural mainstream.

4.1   The curator connoisseur

In the twenty-first century, the art world curator has been identified as one of the most influential actors in the art world; something that was acknowledged by the *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents. The curator is able to make decisions about whose work is exhibited, and – perhaps even more potently – how and where it is exhibited. The phenomenon of the influential curator is a relatively new concept in Britain, as noted by David Balzer when he discusses the curator of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who was "by most accounts… not much of a free agent." [181] It was only really in the 1970s that the predominantly custodial position of the curator was usurped by a new role; that of the curator connoisseur. This moment, Balzer asserts, solidified the presence of the new age curator, who's "new position entailed duties of ringleader, translator, mediator, diplomat, gatekeeper. It was a full-time job, and a completely new one."[182] This new position saw the curator wielding more power than had ever been seen before; and from the 1990s onwards, "most prominent artists didn't just want a curator as an advocate, but needed one to initiate, realize and in many cases give meaning to their work."[183] JJ Charlesworth says that it is worth reflecting on the fact that "the curator has become one of the most talked about and significant personalities within the cultural institutional economy of contemporary art,"[184] and Susanne Janssen and Marc Verboord ascertain that over more recent years, curators have "taken on an increasingly crucial role in the development of artistic careers and reputations as well as the formation of cultural tastes and consumption patterns."[185]

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[181] David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else,* Coach House Books, 2014, p 40
[182] Op. Cit., p 50
[183] Op. Cit., p 71
[184] Charlesworth, JJ, 'Curating Doubt,' in *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance,* Intellect Books limited, 2007, p 91
[185] Janssen, S and M. Verboord, 'Cultural Mediators and Gatekeepers,' in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences,* Vol. 5, No. 2, 2015, pp 440 – 446, p 440

Despite an acknowledgement of increasing acceptance of outsider art amongst artists and the public more widely, the *Outsider Arts Professionals* identified a reticence from curators in validating this work within mainstream arts institutions. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* were perhaps able to speak about these frustrations more openly than many of the *Curators*, who in the most part, were employed by large institutions that have a certain amount of influence and impact over the mainstream art world. The reluctance amongst curators to engage with the exhibiting of outsider art was observed by three of the *Outsider Arts Professionals*, who spoke of a curatorial or institutional nervousness in the treatment of outsider art, with Catto noting that *"from a curatorial point of view – I think they are just a little bit nervous. I think they're used to having a curatorial policy that has to do with schools of thought and cultural heritage and cultural importance."* Adding *"I suppose it's the engine of the art world that is anxious about saying what they do and don't like, and who need work to fit into 'you came from this art college, you have this, you know, this pedigree'. They need a narrative for the work without actually looking to see what it is."* This curatorial timidity was also recognised by Verrent, who said that *"there seems to be a real block at curatorial level, in relation to understanding the work of disabled artists. There's a sense that curators are not comfortable with the subject matter, or with conversations around access,"* adding that, fundamentally, there is *"an assumption that the work is not good enough or not as good."* In addition to this, the elevated role and influence of the mainstream curator over the past decades has created some problems for outsider – or harder to categorise – art, with Rhodes claiming that *"one of my beefs about the superstar curator is this notion where the superstar curator is often an utter colonizer of art. They take stuff from wherever they like and make it theirs. Their flattening of categories is actually about raising the curator to the status of a kind of demi-God and all that kind of stuff."* And Verrent notes that *"I think curators, some curators – old-fashioned curators – believe they're the only people who know those artists who can make work."*

In his 2013 Reith Lecture, artist Grayson Perry put curators at "the top of the tree of validation," claiming that over the last century, "they have probably become the most powerful giver-outers of brownie points in the art world,"[186] and in 'Curating Critique' Dorothee Richter and Barnaby Drabble claim that since the 1990s, "barely a week passes without an article focusing on the figure of the curator and for the most part curating is controversially described and debated as a new and powerful form of cultural authorship."[187] In a paper presented at a Tate Modern conference in 2007, Bishop stressed the changing role of the curator since Duchamp's *Fountain*

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[186] Perry, Grayson, *Reith Lecture: Who Decides What Makes Good Art?*, 11 October 2013
[187] Richter, D and B. Drabble, 'Curating Critique – an introduction' in *On Curating,* No. 9, pp 7 - 10

(1917); today "authorship is no longer a singular, but a 'multiple authorship' more akin to that of a film, a theatrical production or a concert."[188] The curator has in a sense usurped the artist to become the creator. Storr makes a comparison between modern-day curators and a film director who "has the final cut – but also to a literary editor who negotiates with publishers and writers to get the 'best' version of work that can be attained." [189]

The *Outsider Arts Professionals* saw curators as wielding a particular cultural power, and suggested that curators' cautiousness was compounded by a disinterest in actively looking for new work in different places. This was recognised by the respondents as having an instrumental effect on artists who are less visible and less able to advocate for themselves and their own work. Verrent noted that *"they're [curators] not reaching out to the collectives and the studios that are run by disabled artists. They're not stretching their tentacles into those places where they could have that conversation,"* with Peto agreeing that the promotion of more non-traditional work *"needs people to be looking in different places, rather than just relying on studios and degree shows."* He added that *"they [curators] get so fed up with people sending things that they think why would I ever need to go out and look for things when I am getting bombarded with it."* Gilbert notices that *"curators are saying we haven't got time to go out and look for new artists… we need curators to build more time into their weeks to be able to go out and look at studios."* Slominski asked whether curators would know where to go to look for more non-traditional work, *"if some of the curators want to be more diverse with untraditional artists, do they know where to look to learn more?"* Interestingly, this identified disinterest in actively seeking out new work by non-traditional artists is in many ways compounded by outsider art's lack of a permanent cultural space in the UK (as outlined by the *Outsider Arts Professionals* and *Artists* in Chapter 3). But, as noted by the *Outsider Arts Professionals,* a lack of permanent space should not prevent curators from seeking out existing collectives and studio groups to expose themselves to different types of visual art.

The *Artist* respondents highlighted similar frustrations in their interactions with curators. Seven of the respondents suggested that the only way to achieve any element of mainstream success was to know someone in a gatekeeping position. G said that *"I know it's just the clique [on not getting accepted for proposals]. Not saying these are the establishment, but it's about people who know each other."* J said that *"to use a Clinton phrase, it's a cabal of people who are the 'in set',"* and N that *"I sort of feel like I'm excluded. It seems very, I think it's mostly about who you know, seems to be the main thing in the art world. Even in the Royal Academy summer*

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[188] Bishop, Claire, 'What is a Curator', paper presented at *Shifting Practice, Shifting Roles: Artists' Installations and the Museum,* Tate Modern, March 2007
[189] Ibid.

show – my friend knows people who are friends with people at the place, and they get work in every year." Two of the respondents noted that a solution to this could be more artist access to curators and other influential gatekeepers. R noted that *"number one for me would be if curators were more accessible and visible, because sometimes they just disappear, it's like they don't exist, you go to the place, even when you're putting up an exhibition, they've disappeared, they're like not there,"* and O reiterated this sentiment by suggesting that *"more creative curating opportunities would be useful. Even just to have a chat with a curator. I can't remember where I was but I won it in a competition – to have a chat with a curator, which was exciting."*

Two of the artists spoke about their experience of feeling below curators in the art world hierarchy, despite being the ones providing the content for an exhibition. R suggests that *"that's a tendency I've found with curators, and don't get me wrong, there are some really lovely ones, but they tend to make you feel like you're the lowest of the low. And you can feel very intimidated by them."* R said they felt that curators saw themselves as more important than the artist, and many would *"consider themselves too busy and too important to sort of go to your show, even if it's not that far out for them."* R spoke about feeling like they are walking on eggshells when it comes to working with curators, because *"you think, well what if I do something that upsets them, then I've lost that."* R expands, noting *"if you say anything, like in the contract, there was a ladder, why haven't I got a ladder? And why have I spent the entire day negotiating for a ladder to put up this piece? You can feel like, if you voice your concerns, however reasonably, that it can impact afterwards, because it's such a small world and they talk and that this may mean that you won't get a show elsewhere, or in the same venue. So yeah, I always feel like I'm walking on eggshells with curators."* This feeling that the artist sits below the curator in the greater art world hierarchy was echoed by L whose ambition is to become more involved in the curatorial questions, *"not because I want to leave behind being an artist, but because I believe that artists need to be more involved in the big picture thinking,"* adding that *"at the moment, my belief is the artist is almost like the last person considered."* Finally, R noted [about artists] *"we're quite often left out, there's a blank space. And because it's so hard, because you don't want to voice your experiences or negative experiences or concerns or criticisms, because you feel it could impact on you."*

Unsurprisingly, these views were not shared by the *Curators*. There was recognition amongst the *Curator* respondents that yes, they were themselves gatekeepers with decision-making abilities, as seen in Martin's comment that *"in a certain sense, museum curators and directors are tastemakers because we have this privileged position that we're almost saying to the public, this is what we think is important and you should be valuing this artwork, or this artist, or this*

group of artists," but there was also a recognition that their influence only went so far within the existing structures of the institutions they work within. It is important to note here that the *Curators* interviewed all worked for public institutions rather than private galleries, meaning they are possibly more at the mercy of a wider institutional (state) power and they are also burdened with the responsibility of spending public money. There was a sense of resignation to a feeling of powerlessness amongst the *Curators*, working under and within the 'wider' institution of the art world. Lewis reflected that *"we're never going to do a blockbuster [of outsider art], you know, we'll never take over GOMA [Glasgow Museum of Modern Art] or populate the whole museum with this collection [the Art Extraordinary collection], it's not going to happen. There are no plans to have an outsider art gallery in Glasgow that's dedicated to just outsider art, we haven't got any money."* Likewise, Myrone stated *"I think it's just a sense that the oeuvre [outsider art] is not significant enough or substantial enough to maintain a full-scale exhibition."* Hughes acknowledged the impact individuals can have, identifying that *"if it's just our small team that's always curating these exhibitions, it's just the same perspectives all the time."* And there was acknowledgement that they themselves as curators were part of a wider process, with Martin noting *"whenever we do anything we kind of have got to play the game to a certain extent."* This was reflected in a comment by Myrone, who spoke about how larger arts institutions have the power to shape public opinion and value, suggesting that these organisations are *"big, ugly, expensive machines that cannot afford to take very great risks."* He adds that these machines of cultural validation are *"bound to a very powerful machinery for the reproduction of cultural value, which is crudely expressed as the canon of British art."* The institution is, for the *Curators,* bigger than the sum of its parts, and there is, according to Myrone, *"a disconnect that's to do with the ways in which institutions are bound, that perhaps against the will, or the interests of the individuals who actually, you know, run these institutions or their curatorial teams."* There was a sense of resignation amongst the *Curators* in their responses, that belied the influence the other two cohorts (*Outsider Arts Professionals* and *Artists*) applied to curators as important cultural gatekeepers. This resignation was interesting in its evidencing of a self-perpetuating cycle within the cultural mainstream that continues to keep outsider and non-traditional art excluded. It is apparent that without increasing institutional validation and canonical inclusion, curators feel less able to programme shows of outsider art. But without more shows of outsider art programmed at major cultural institutions by curators, there is less opportunity for it to be institutionally validated on an equal footing to mainstream art.

The influence of an organisation's director as far more substantial than that of its curators or curatorial team was identified by several of the *Curator* respondents. Hughes noted that *"we had a new director start in September last year, so I mean we're sort of settling into that at the*

moment," and Myrone that *"directors produce their document for their job interview, and then they hold by the document for the next ten years."* Myrone was speaking specifically about previous Tate Britain director Stephen Deuchar, who on coming to the role in 1998 set out a new path for the Tate that would mean investigating and expanding the existing definitions of British Art. This new direction meant Myrone was able to propose and then curate a show of British Folk Art, something that may not have been possible under the scope of another director. However, Myrone adds that *"there has been in different ways, among the directors and directorial staff, a willingness to expand definitions and to reprioritize and to embrace other kinds of art, but it's always been very partial."* This comment echoes Myrone's earlier suggestion in Chapter 2 about the importance of seizing opportunities to challenge the canonical trajectory, and to make the most of opportunities such as new directors, changing public attitudes, and important societal events to propose a canonisation or re-canonisation of specific areas of art history. Despite the opportunities that the appointment of Stephen Deuchar seemed to offer Myrone and colleagues, it was partial, and did not go far enough so as to embed more non-traditional work into the foundations of Tate's programming, collection and curatorial spaces. This appearance of change is deceptive; it is often short lived and is not great enough or deep enough to challenge the innate systems that have existed within the cultural mainstream for hundreds of years.

This wider institutional power identified by the *Curators* is no better illustrated than in the story of fist MOMA director Alfred Barr, who was in fact a great supporter of outsider and untrained art. In 1938, Barr organised *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America,* which was curated by Holger Cahill and incorporated examples of works by European and American untrained artists. Barr's interest in this type of work, however, was not widely shared amongst his colleagues or MOMA's board of directors. Russell, in *Groundwaters: a century of art by self-taught and outsider artists*, elaborates:

> At his museum and across the mainstream art world, there was little interest in either the art of the common man or non-academic work displaying 'independence of school or tradition.' Barr was made to realise this quite dramatically when Morris Hirschfield's 1943 solo exhibition at MOMA was harshly criticizes, and, soon after, the board of trustees removed Barr from the position of director. [190]

After his removal as director, Barr continued in the role of Director of Collections, but there has been very little support from MOMA for outsider art ever since. Barr's story highlights the

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[190] Russell, Charles, Op. Cit.,p 17

potential power of individuals, but more so, it highlights the importance of collective agreement and an openness amongst colleagues to support each other in the challenging of the established canon. Russell asserts that "for a brief moment, art history might have taken a significantly different direction than it has, one that could have acknowledged the work of self-taught artists within the conception of modern art." [191]

Abbing, in their book *Why are artists poor?* identifies that – as suggested by the *Curators* – cultural gatekeepers are subject to their own internal hierarchy, and Arora and Vermeylen write of the art world that "hierarchy is at the soul of its structure and identity."[192] Abbing notes that power in the art world is hereditary and tends to be passed down from one cultural gatekeeper to the similar next:

> The way the power to define art changes hands. Is it vanquished or is it handed over voluntarily? Is there an element of heredity involved in the sense that important artists and experts hand over power to their own kind rather than to strangers? Viewed from the outside, such a system of co-optation would imply yet another form of monopolization, which further abridges artistic freedom.[193]

The *Outsider Arts Professionals* noted that curators ultimately lacked a desire to seek out new work in unconventional places, and for artists who are less likely to be able to advocate for themselves and their work, this was a real barrier. They also identified a nervousness and risk adversity that meant that many curators avoided approaching outsider art in any kind of aesthetic or curatorial way. The *Curators* acknowledged they had a role to play but asserted that, ultimately, culturally important decisions are made further up the hierarchical chain – usually by directors and/or funding bodies. The *Curator* responses suggested that rather than the importance of individuals, collective decision making and agreement amongst colleagues within cultural institutions was far more important in the progressing of work that has traditionally been outside of the accepted canon. The *Artist* respondents ultimately wanted to be more involved in curatorial decision-making processes; by having more physical access to curators, and by being treated as contemporaries who have vital knowledge and experience that can contribute to these processes.

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[191] Ibid.
[192] Arora and Vermeylen, Op. Cit., 2012
[193] Abbing, Hans, *Why are artists poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts,* Amsterdam University Press, 2002, p 275

4.2   Critics and critical reception

The *Curator* respondents observed that one key way outsider art struggles for validation is in the critical reception of and reflection on the category. Lewis notes that *"it hasn't had the same kind of academic grinder put through it, that Impressionism, Expressionism, and Post-Expressionism have. So it hasn't gone through that process of production for the art historian standard."* Lewis' thoughts are confirmed in David Davies' 2009 article 'On the very idea of 'outsider art'', which notes that despite an increasing curatorial interest in the area of outsider art, "it is the dearth of serious philosophical reflection on the assumptions concerning the status of Outsider Art that seem to underlie such interest," going on to note that "no articles on Outsider Art have appeared in the past 25 years in either the 'British Journal of Aesthetics' or the 'Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism', and, apart from exhibition catalogues, there is a paucity of other published materials."[194] With outsider art's links to and oftentimes incorporation into the worlds of socially engaged and participatory art, Bishop notes that "this line of thinking has led to an ethically charged climate in which participatory and socially engaged art has become largely exempt from art criticism."[195] This is an important point, as Janssen and Verboord state, because "many studies have found an influence of media critics and reviewers on consumer preferences and the commercial performance of cultural products."[196] Referring in the most part to films, but also applicable to the visual arts (and particularly non-traditional art), they note that "the correlation between critical evaluation and commercial success has been found to be particularly strong for cultural products that have weak signalling properties for the general public."[197] Similarly, Wesley Monroe Shrum Junior notes that "sometimes there is no crowd until the critic solicits one, no audience for art until the product is explained, evaluated and legitimated for the public,"[198] and that "critics are… participants in a stream of discourse that defines the cultural hierarchy."[199] This means that the application of strong critical review to exhibitions of outsider art is even more vital than for more mainstream exhibitions.

The lack of critical examination and reflection surrounding outsider art was observed too by the *Outsider Arts Professionals*, who, in addition to this general lack of critical examination,

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[194] Davies, David, 'On the very idea of 'outsider art',' in *The British Journal of Aesthetics,* Vol. 49, Issue 1, 2009, pp 25-41, p 25
[195] Bishop, Op. Cit., 2012, p 23
[196] Janssen and Verboord, Op. Cit., p 444
[197] Op. Cit., p 445
[198] Shrum Junior, Wesley Monroe,, *Fringe and Fortune: The role of critics and high and popular art,* Princeton University Press, 1996, p4
[199] Op. Cit., p10

noticed a distinct lack of positive critical discourse surrounding outsider art. This was said to be the result of a combination of nervousness on the part of critics and a lack of knowledge of and confusion around a category of work that is not easily identifiable within the historical canon. Maizels suggested that perhaps critics do not have enough knowledge about outsider art to write about it in any meaningful way: *"they don't know about outsider art. They would have to read twenty books to know about outsider art, so they're just going to tell us this rubbish or something."* Similarly, Rhodes spoke about critics' responses to Massimiliano Giani's pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale: *"his show included all this stuff that the critics couldn't get their head around so they decided that it must be about bringing outsider art into the show."* Gilbert suggests that *"art critics need some sort of mentoring"* around this type of work, with Verrent proposing that the reasons for such a lack of critical engagement was because critics in particular *"don't have the language or are worried that if they critique it, they might get some kind of kick back, or they don't understand it, or they're worried that they don't understand it because they don't come from that perspective… If something's not written about, it seems to have a lot less credibility."* A lack of critical coverage is exacerbated in the case of outsider art in the eyes of the *Outsider Arts Professionals* because the discourse that does exist on the subject has historically been overwhelmingly negative in nature. Maizels, talking about the 1979 Hayward Gallery exhibition 'Outsiders', said that *"the critics were 100% damning of it. Using language like this would be unheard of in Europe and the United States."* Although not entirely damning, Arts Council England's Foreword to the catalogue that accompanied the 'Outsiders' exhibition, certainly distances itself as an organisation from the work that was on display. Director of Art at the time, Joanna Drew, says:

> The Arts Council does not normally invoke the cautionary note that 'the views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily of the editors'' in its exhibition catalogues. But in this case, as one of the major cultural institutions in the brightly-lit centre of the city (cf Dr Cardinal's introduction) we have been invaded, at our own invitation, by 'outsiders', and we cannot be expected to accept entirely claims of artistic and spiritual dominance made on their behalf.[200]

The more negative critical coverage of outsider art exhibitions was discovered during examination of a number of reviews of three outsider art exhibitions (2013's *Souzou: Outsider Art from Japan* at Wellcome Collection, 2013's *Alternative Guide to the Universe* at Hayward Gallery, and 2006's *Inner Worlds Outside* at Whitechapel Gallery) for the purpose of this research. It is apparent in Adrian Searle's review of *Inner Worlds Outside* in the Guardian, that the enduring myth about 'mad artists' is exacerbated by journalistic representations of the artists

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[200] Arts Council of Great Britain, *Outsiders: An art without precedent or tradition,* 1979

as "driven and troubled, ludicrous or absurd."[201] Searle's review makes use of emotive verbs and adjectives, such as "slathered" and "writhing," as well as assertions that lead the reader to believe that the makers of the work in question are completely unaware of their actions; "As if, in his urgency, the author just picked up whatever is to hand", "The image might represent a bird or a stick person, or an amalgamation of the two – it is difficult to be certain", "Maybe they're just brushstrokes, scribbles, and splotches."[202] In comparing two works in the exhibition; one by established artist Joan Miro, and one by outsider artist Von Stropp, Searle says "Miro's Personnage-Oiseau we can comfortably deal with; the other is more difficult. Miro the artist; Von Stropp the outsider, a visionary and a conundrum."[203] The journalist makes this bold assertion – that we can refer to one of these makers as an artist, but perhaps not the other – with very little explanation. This is an ongoing theme in the critical coverage of outsider art exhibitions. Writing about the same exhibition, Richard Dorment for the Telegraph claims that "a new exhibition disastrously fails to draw distinctions between the work of the sane and the insane,"[204] going on to outline concerns with the exhibition's overarching aim:

> What is objectionable is to present the art of people with severe mental illness alongside the work of Francis Bacon, Joan Miro or Francis Picabia, and then to propose that there is no essential difference between the two, that both are simply different manifestations of modernity.[205]

Dorment's distaste for the work of outsider artists is apparent throughout the review; he is "eerily unenlightened by outsider art, either aesthetically or emotionally," claiming that the works fill him "not with admiration but with dread and sadness."[206] Brian Sewell's review of *Souzou: Outsider Art from Japan* is even more damning, in his assertion that:

> Outsider Art, Psychotic Art, Art beyond reason, and the art of the insane – and perhaps, even, in these enlightened days of political correctitude when we may no longer dub a man a lunatic, an

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[201] Searle, Adrian, 'Meet the Misfits,' in *The Guardian,* 4 May 2006 [available online: https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2006/may/04/1]
[202] Ibid.

[203] Ibid.
[204] Dorment, Richard, 'Why it's made to show art this way,' in *The Telegraph*, 9 May 2006 [available online: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3652224/Why-its-mad-to-show-art-this-way.html]

[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid.

imbecile, a moron, or describe him as deranged, the art of the intellectually challenged – is
precisely (and as often imprecisely) that. [207]

Sewell's use of language through the article continues in the same vein. It is almost a frustration
that outsider art can even be considered 'art'. Of this 'non-art' he writes that "it is the art
(except, of course, that it is not art in any sense that the art historian might recognise) produced
by anyone who is, at one extreme, intelligent but mildly unhinged, and at the other, either
entirely lacking in IQ or raving mad."[208] Sewell's avid dislike of comparisons of any form
between outsider and mainstream is apparent:

> Analysts are always in grave error when they see Outsider Art in the same way as they see
> paintings in the National Gallery and discuss them in the same terms, as though they are
> aesthetically and intellectually equal; they are not; the work of the Outsider artist is no more art
> than the primal yelps of the Tourette syndrome sufferer are a song.[209]

This attitude is mirrored in Adrian Searle's commentary on the 2011 Museum of Everything
display at Selfridges for the Guardian, in which he talks about the garbled, obsessive scribbles
of unwell people. Searle also diminishes the value in this work by omitting the names of many
of the artists, an act of de-personalisation. He writes that "an Italian draws lingerie-clad, high-
heeled women and space rockets," and "another produces a kind of concrete poetry."[210] These
people in Searle's writing are not even recognised as individuals, let alone as artists. He calls the
work "immensely painful," and quite assuredly states that outsider art simply cannot be
considered in the same breath as mainstream art.

Anthony White, speaking specifically about art made by people experiencing mental health
issues, says that "a new language of criticism and appreciation is required to overcome this kind
of reaction," from critics.[211] To use the same critical framework for outsider art as for
mainstream art can perpetuate existing negative stigma. White suggests that a new framework
would provide readers and viewers with the opportunity to:

> Appreciate the experiences of individual artists have sometimes meant their marginalisation
> from society, and that this marginalisation can be overcome through having the work of these

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[207] Sewell, Brian, 'Souzou: Outsider Art from Japan, Wellcome Collection – Exhibition Review,' in *The Evening Standard,* 18 April 2013 [available online:
https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/exhibitions/souzou-outsider-art-from-japan-wellcome-collection-exhibition-review-8577709.html]

[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid.
[211] White, Anthony, 'Art and Mental Illness: An Art Historical Perspective,' in *Art and Mental Illness: Myths, Stereotypes and Realities,* Neami Splash Art, 2007, pp 24-29, p28

artists accepted as the products of people who have full, creative, three-dimensional lives outside the accepted parameters of the social definition of mental illness.[212]

Referring to critics like Sebastian Smee and Richard Dorment, White asserts that we have not yet reached a point where outsider art is reviewed and critiqued in the same way as mainstream art. White claims that "if an intelligent critic like Sebastian Smee can persist in applying fundamentally discriminatory criteria to the work of people with experience of mental illness, it seems that there is still a lot of work to do."[213]

In addition to this call for a more positive representation of outsider art within popular media channels, in the *Outsider Arts Professional* responses, Verrent called for professionals working with outsider artists to be more critical about the work: *"if you go to one of the disability collectives and go 'who's really rising up?' they go 'everybody's marvellous.' And it's like, no, there's work that might engage more but we're scared. So it's not just them [art critics], I think there's a fault from our side too, we look at everything as being so equal, we don't allow talent to be recognized or to be held up in that way. I do think we ought to have the confidence to go 'some work is better than other work.' I do think that we need to be able to differentiate between 'all work is wonderful' and 'this work shown in this way actually carries a really strong message."* This reservation to single out specific outsider works that are more accomplished relates to earlier findings in this research; firstly, the findings in Chapter 2, which highlight the challenge the *Curators* face in defining the category of outsider art, and the implications this lack of definition has on aesthetic assessment of works within the category. Secondly, it relates to findings in Chapter 3, which suggest that outsider art has been relegated to the social sphere by its receipt of funding through the arts and health agenda which in turn has led to its assessment and evaluation based on social outcomes rather than on any aesthetic level.

For outsider art to have struggled in not just gaining critical coverage and reception, but in receiving coverage in a comparable way to mainstream art, has no doubt had a major impact on its reception. The *Curators* identification of such a lack of media coverage highlights a fundamental reason why they may be less inclined to programme an exhibition of outsider art, and with the *Outsider Arts Professionals* detection of the category's primarily negative critical reception, it is not difficult to understand why there might be some reticence amongst curators when such reviews will have an impact on their own name and the institutions they represent.

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[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid.

4.3 The discovery narrative

As outlined in the introduction of this thesis, throughout its history outsider art has relied heavily on being discovered by figures who already hold a certain amount of societal power. These have included medical professionals like Hans Prinzhorn and Walter Morgenthaler; mainstream artists like Ben Nicholson, Charles Shannon and Jean Dubuffet; prominent collectors, like the Musgrave-Kinleys and Bruno Descharme, and academics like Roger Cardinal and David Maclagan. This discovery narrative has meant that for almost a century, outsider art has been relegated to a secondary position behind key figures whose names are more well-known than the outsider artists themselves. These connections have no doubt meant that outsider art has been made more visible than it would have been, but it has meant that the artists have in many instances had to relinquish their own power, agency and autonomy.

The *Curators* identified that links to the wider historical canon can be made for outsider art through movements like Surrealism, German Expressionism, and through the established artists and collectors who discovered them. An example of this was given by Lewis who noted that *"for me, understanding the Art Extraordinary collection is about understanding Joyce [Laing]."*[214] The *Curators* also noted that the only groupings we have available for outsider art are those made by external individuals. Martin notes that *"the only groupings really are when there's an individual that's grouped them together historically, whether that's Prinzhorn or Dubuffet."* Not to mention that many of the major outsider art collections – not just in the UK, but worldwide – are named after their collectors, or are a culmination of a lifetime of collecting by one or two individuals: the *Prinzhorn Collection*, the *Collection de l'Art Brut*, the *Musgrave Kinley Collection*. In *The Cultures of Collecting* by John Elsner and Cardinal, the authors claim that "if the peoples and things of the world are the collected and if the social categories into which they are assigned confirm the precious knowledge of culture handed down through generations, then our rulers sit atop a hierarchy of collectors."[215]

The idea that the emergence of outsider art is so closely linked to who discovers or champions it reflects Becker's theory of the 'Maverick' artist; someone who has "been part of the conventional art world of their time, place and medium but found it unacceptably constraining."[216] Becker's identification of the maverick confirms that one must know the rules of the game to play it. He notes that "mavericks are sufficiently near to art world practice, and sufficiently interested in calling the attention of the art world to what they do, that art worlds

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[214] Joyce Laing is an art therapist and collector of art. She is an advocate for *Art Brut* and put together the Art Extraordinary collection in Scotland during the twentieth century.
[215] Elsner, John and Roger Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting,* Reaktion Books Ltd., 1994, p 2
[216] Becker, Op. Cit., p 233

sometimes eventually incorporated their work."[217] Similarly, in a presentation in Nimes in 2001, Bourdieu speaks about Marcel Duchamp as the ultimate maverick. Duchamp was able to challenge the rules because "he was kind of a goldsmith, he played with the rules of art like a chess player, like he was a fish in water in the art world." [218]

There is perhaps no bigger maverick when it comes to outsider art or the preceding category of *Art Brut* than Dubuffet himself, whose existing position within the art world enabled him to shun tradition and promote such an un-canonical category with quite some success. Dapena-Tretter reflects on Bourdieu's comment in *Rules of Art* that the collector is in fact the 'creator of the creator,' and in this sense:

> Dubuffet's role as collector was itself a creative endeavour, but one in which he managed to maintain a constant position of dominance. He was the sole Art Brut inventor and controlled the terms of an artist's acceptance, their exposure to the public, and all financial negotiations.[219]

It is of course because of characters like Dubuffet that we have categories such as *Art Brut* and outsider art, but Dubuffet's role as collector and 'creator of the creator' highlights how outsider art has been relegated to a secondary position, hidden behind the names of more culturally celebrated figures, and often at the expense of the artist's own agency and autonomy. The impact that this relegation can have on creators was highlighted in the 2022 closure of Wellcome Collection's *Medicine Man* gallery. The gallery comprised of artifacts and objects collected by Henry Wellcome. In a statement from the Wellcome Collection, the organisation said "Medicine Man is 15 years old, and the world is very different now to when it opened. If we were curating the space for the first time today, we would not choose to display these items through the lens of a single person, Henry Wellcome. This approach focused attention on the person who collected the objects, rather than on where they come from, who created them and why, and therefore their full context was obscured."[220]

The importance of the discovery narrative for outsider artists and thus for the category of outsider art itself was raised primarily by the *Curators,* who identified the benefit of such a narrative in enabling them to programme an exhibition of outsider art in a way that supports their institutional requirements (recognisable names, contextual connections and comparisons, potential for media coverage). However, as evidenced by Wellcome Collection's statement, the

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[217] Ibid.
[218] Bourdieu, Pierre, Presentation in Nimes, France, 2001 [accessed online: http://www.michaelgrenfell.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ThinkingAboutArtSchoolPDF.pdf], p 15
[219] Dapena-Tretter, Op. Cit., p 19
[220] https://wellcomecollection.org/pages/Y4TdMBAAACMApB14 (accessed 2nd December 2022)

narrative can have a detrimental effect for the artists themselves as it can detract substantially from the creators' own context and creative intentions. Such a narrative proliferates the paternalistic approach that has consumed the category of outsider art since its emergence, and the danger is that although as evidenced in the interviews it can be a helpful tool for curators, its perseverance will not be beneficial for progression of outsider art. For outsider art to stand on its own; to be appreciated aesthetically on its own merit and for the creative intentions of the artists themselves to be understood and celebrated, there needs to be a new narrative that does not put individuals with existing cultural capital and *their* motivations for discovering or collecting at the heart of the discourse surrounding the category.

4.4   Expert selection processes

On analysis of the interviews, it was apparent that a primary way key cultural actors are able to control the visibility and reception of outsider art – or any art, in theory – is through the use of selection panels and processes. As Bourdieu asked in a 2011 presentation in Nimes, France, "how can you not see that you fix the prize lists by deciding who will be the judges? …To say it more formally: who will be the judge of the legitimacy of the judges? Who decides in the final instance?"[221] Speaking to this, the *Artist* respondents voiced how they felt that, often, selection criteria were not transparent, and that success in individual opportunities depended heavily on *who* was selecting. M wondered what selectors were really looking for: *"I don't know, sometimes I think they're just looking for people who are already qualified or I'm not quite sure what – because it can be down to one person judging, frustrating really in that respect."* And similarly, Q identified that *"it becomes very stressful if you don't know what they're looking for… you're basically submitting work for one person to say whether they like it or not, and you don't know what they're looking for."* Subsequently, the *Artists* were aware that success or rejection often depended heavily on one person's knowledge, subjective experience and taste. The *Artists* also acknowledged how a person's background might impact their selection, with particularly reference to the current lack of diversity within the art world. K noted that *"so the upper echelons, the Royal Academy members, they're mostly men aren't they? So there's still a long way to go with equality and lots of things. In terms of gender and ethnic diversity and all sorts of issues."* Similarly, L recognised that *"a lot of the decisions and planning meetings and, you know, directives come from a very small, select few people. They are generally – not always but generally – funded by people who have not experienced hardships in any form. They are normally well-educated, middle-management men,"* adding that *"the disconnect is always there because right from the inception, even if you take it right back to an organisation or a charity or*

[221] Bourdieu, Pierre, 'Thinking About Art – at Art School,' Presentation given in Nimes, France, 2001

foundation, if the very person pulling the strings and giving the money out at the top doesn't fully understand the needs of the person at the very end of the spectrum, they are never going to get it right." They explain further: *"there is no way a 57-year-old Etonian legacy finance bloke is going to understand where I'm coming from. They're just not. That's not his fault."*

The *Curator* responses illustrated the *Artists'* concerns when they talked about the selection processes utilised by their respective organisations. Hughes, talking about the acquisitions process for Arts Council England's collection explained *"we have an acquisitions panel, which is semi-external. So actually, I don't have a lot of say over the acquisitions at all, really. And which, you know, obviously there's a personal professional conflict over because I'd love to have more say."* This process in fact highlights how removed Hughes is as the curator from any kind of meaningful decision making. Hughes continues, mentioning that there is a mixture of artist-proposed works and works proposed by the selection committee members themselves. However, she spoke about the reality of the situation, noting that *"I think the majority of artists are the ones the selection panel has proposed. I'd say probably 20% of them will be artist applications, the rest will all be works brought to the table by the acquisitions committee."* The selection panels outlined by Hughes and Martin are made up of 'experts' or gatekeepers with significant cultural collateral, including a former director of visual arts the British Council, the CEO of a digital newspaper, an art historian, curators from external organisations, the gallery or organisation director, and often one or two established artists.

This 'expert' selection process identified by the *Curator* and *Artist* respondents is what Nachoem Wijnberg and Gerda Gemser describe as the dominant selection system for visual arts in the twentieth century western world. What is problematic about this approach is that "an innovation attains value only if it is considered valuable by the selectors that control a given selection system. This may lead to serious problems for art that contains innovations that are not valued within an existing selection system."[222] This is a problem for outsider art and its creators, considering its continued rejection from the traditional canon and therefore, too, traditional methods of valuation and appreciation. The only way to overcome this, Wijnberg and Gemser infer, is if the "innovators that champion it succeed in changing the ways in which value is determined. This often means changing the selection system itself." [223]

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[222] Wijnberg, Nachoem M. and Gerda Gemser, 'Adding Value to Innovation: Impressionism and the Transformation of the Selection System in Visual Arts', in *Organization Science,* Vol. 11, No. 3, 2000, pp 323-329, p324
[223] Ibid.

In the *Outsider Arts Professional* responses, Verrent identified how Unlimited is challenging the selection process for their funding streams by ensuring the majority of selection panels are made up of disabled artists; *"the panels are always more disabled people than non-disabled people, they're always disabled led."* Verrent acknowledges the inherent biases that exist amongst selection panels in the arts and notes that *"there isn't a fair way of doing it because it is subjective. Only by widening the number of people – the range of people – who have control over that process."* Other *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents also advocated for more diverse role models and gatekeepers in the art world, with Gibson explaining the experience some of the artists she has worked with have had: *"either they themselves didn't see that and didn't realise that was something people could do."* The need for more successful disabled and non-traditional role models - particularly in positions of authority - is an issue within the arts workforce more generally. In 2017, ACE published a report entitled *Making a Shift*, which looked at disabled people and the arts and cultural sector workforce in England. One of the key findings of the report was that only four per cent of staff in National Portfolio and Major Museum Partner organisations saw themselves as disabled, compared with 19 per cent of working age adults.[224] The 'Curating for Change' consultation highlighted a number of barriers that prevent disabled people taking up these positions of authority (as curators, as directors, as selectors). As cited in the consultation report, "in addition to the broad challenges relating to the representation of disability at leadership levels, a lack of knowledge and resulting discriminatory attitudes, those consulted highlighted the following: fear of disclosure of impairments… location and travel requirements… exclusionary application and interview process… a culture of overwork across the sector… low wages… inaccessible workspaces…low levels of confidence and self-esteem… and a lack of community and network."[225]

In 'Loser Wins', Ardery writes that for Bourdieu, the question of what makes a great painting and how that is decided upon should be critically reframed so that we ask "What social differences are enacted in the choosing? Whose verdict prevails?"[226] This idea that it is the selectors' cultural background that has the biggest impact on what is accepted and what is not accepted into the art world is what underpins Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*. Maton describes Bourdieu's *habitus* as:

> A property of social agents (whether individuals, groups or institutions) that comprises a
> 'structured and structuring structure.' It is 'structured' by one's past and present circumstances,

[224] Arts Council England and ewgroup, Op Cit., p 4
[225] Fox, Esther and Jane Sparkes, Op. Cit., p 14
[226] Ardery, Op. Cit., p 330

such as family upbringing and educational experiences. It is 'structuring' in that one's habtius helps to shape one's present and future practices. It is a 'structure' in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or unpatterned.[227]

The *habitus* is "our way of acting, feeling, thinking and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history to our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others… Where we are in life at any one moment is the result of numberless events in the past that have shaped our path."[228] The key factors that influence a person's *habitus*, as noted by Bourdieu, are their family upbringing and educational experience. All of these things have an impact on our cultural taste, and of course the cultural taste of those in positions of power. Wijnberg and Gemser mention the difficulty in reaching an objective valuation of cultural products:

> The value of most cultural products is generally hard to ascertain, in part because the standards to be used for this purpose are seldom clear and rarely obvious. In our terms, this means that the value of a product can only be determined within the context of a set of preferences of individuals and groups that act as selectors and, therefore, necessarily within a particular selection system. [229]

The impact of having a diverse pool of gatekeepers and therefore a more diverse pool of artists selected for exhibition was illustrated in *Artist* E's comment when they said *"he won first prize, you know, and you could relate to that because that person is in a similar situation, or a worse situation, and he looks like me."* In the *Outsider Arts Professional* interviews, Sutton identifies one way to make meaningful change in the arts sector is to *"get people working in museums and galleries so that curators, heads of museums and things will start to see people as people and not as people in care or that kind of thing."* Sutton advocates for employing learning disabled people in *"every area of the arts."*

4.5   Conclusion

This chapter highlights individuals and the important roles they play in validating artwork within the cultural mainstream. Curators were identified by all three interview cohorts – including the *Curators* themselves – as some of the most powerful gatekeepers, although the *Curators* questioned the scope of their power within the confines of their institutions. This

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[227] Maton, Karl, 'Habitus,' in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts,* edited by Michael Grenfell, Acumen, 2008, p 51
[228] Ibid.
[229] Wijnberg and Gemser, Op. Cit., p323-324

scope was evidenced in Hughes' reflection on their involvement (or lack of) in Arts Council England's collection acquisitions process. Risk adversity, a sense of curatorial cautiousness and a physical lack of access to curators were outlined by the *Artists* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* as factors that contribute to a continued underrepresentation of outsider art within mainstream curatorial spaces. Secondary to the role of the curator, all three cohorts identified the important role of critics and critical coverage in the reception of outsider art, with the *Curators* noting that critical media coverage simply did not exist for outsider art and that hindered its progress through the usual channels of cultural validation. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* added that if there is critical coverage, it is often negative in nature, placing it at an immediate disadvantage in comparison to its mainstream counterpart. The common focus on outsider art through the lens of the discovery narrative was also raised by the respondents. This approach embeds a paternalistic perspective that has existed since the category's emergence in the early twentieth century, with more well-known names (with existing cultural and societal capital) defining outsider art rather than the artists and art that the term encompasses. And finally, a lack of selection panel diversity and an expert selection process that relies on the subjective decisions of a small few have continued to influence what kind of art is made visible and therefore appreciated within the cultural mainstream.

The importance of key actors and the roles they play in influencing what is made visible and accepted as art is unquestionable; be it the curator selecting artwork for a new exhibition, a critic deciding on what art to write about – and how to write about it, the avant-garde artist who was responsible for 'discovering' a now well-known outsider artist, or the psychiatrist who saw outsider art as an aesthetic endeavour; more than just therapy. In *Ce que l'art fair la sociologie,* Heinich suggests that the art world is one of singularity, "which tends to favour the subject, the particular, the individual, the personal, the private," instead of the 'community world,' which is defined by "the social, the general, the collective, the public."[230] This has resulted in an exclusive art world where decisions are generally not made collectively, but by individuals with existing cultural capital. Where decisions are made collaboratively (for example, in the case of exhibition selection or collection acquisition committees), it could be said that individuals with similar educational and personal backgrounds are making homogenous decisions as a group. As identified by Bourdieu's theory of *habitus,* and in Heinich's Actor(-) Network Theory, decision making is heavily influenced by the background, education and life experience of those making

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[230] Heinich, Nathalie, *Ce que l'art fair a la sociologie,* Paris: Aux Editions de Minuit, 1998, p 11

the decisions, and when these decisions are made by homogenous groups, the ultimate result is an art world that is built on the subjective opinions of a valued few.

It is important to note here that the Artist(-) Network Theory also asserts that despite all contributing parties having influence over a given situation, they are part of a bigger whole that is much more powerful than any individual 'actor' – something that the *Curators* referred to in the interview responses. It is this whole – or the 'art world system' that makes up the fourth and final key theme in the following chapter.

5.   The Art World Machine

The fourth and final key theme identified through analysis of the interview responses was how the existing processes and structures that define the art world continue to exclude work made by outsider artists. As Foucault writes, culture is "a hierarchical organization of values, accessible to everybody, but at the same time the occasion of a mechanism of selection and exclusion." [231]

All three cohorts of interview respondents recognised the limiting nature of the UK art world as a system and the intrinsic barriers that exist within it that work to exclude outsider artists and their work. Words like 'elitist', 'pretentious', 'snobby', 'fashion-led' and 'posh' were used by seven of the *Artist* respondents to describe the art world, and they were honest and articulate about how they had found navigating the existing structures and processes that epitomise the art world. Both the *Outsider Arts Professionals* and *Artist* respondents identified art school – or lack of experience of – as a huge barrier for many outsider artists, and the *Curators* noted that the existing requirements for curators to give context and make connections between exhibiting artists and their contemporaries or forebearers means that where there are no contextual links, there is more emphasis on outsider art to stand up for itself. All three interview cohorts had experienced navigating the financial systems of the art world as a challenge; from the *Curators* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* who identified the ongoing cuts to public funding for the arts, to the *Artists*, whose own personal financial situations have had an impact on how they have been able to construct their artistic careers. There is something in the interview responses too, about how financially valuable being creative is seen to be, and about the gulf between those blockbuster artists who make millions from the sale of one piece of work and outsider artists whose motivation to make is not intrinsically financial, but who without financial support cannot find or make the time to create.

This chapter reflects the interview respondents' thoughts on the structures of the art world more widely that – whether intentionally or not – continue to keep outsider art 'outside.'

5.1   Navigating the art world

The prominent feeling from the *Artist* respondents when talking about their experience navigating the mainstream art world was one of despondence, and of exclusion. Amongst the *Artist* respondents, D noted that *"it feels like the art world seems quite elitist, and I don't really*

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[231] Michel Foucault, *L'hermeneutique du sujet. Cours au College de France,* Gallimard Sevill, 1981, p 175

feel like I fit in," And E's assertion that *"I guess the art world is quite pretentious. And you know, it's like, all this schmoozing."* F suggested that it was *"a superficial world to navigate. It's all about first impressions and snap judgements in crowds,"* and N iterated that *"it's purely about, it seems to be a status symbol – it's just like buying status symbols really and investing in trendy stuff."*

A couple of the *Artists* spoke more in depth about experiences that had left them feeling excluded from the 'elitist' world they described. H talked about feeling like the art world is a 'battlefield' and that *"you see people who are obviously able to flourish and get on top of stuff, and everybody else seems to be struggling around at the bottom. I seem to be in that pond at the moment."* Echoing this sentiment, M said that *"it's quite difficult and it's quite off putting really. When I first got involved with the gallery I was quite excited to have my stuff up. And then we went to one of these gallery viewing things and I felt like a bit of an outsider really, everyone was sort of – what's the word? A bit up themselves."*

Even the *Artist* respondents who felt more resilient in the face of the mainstream art world, and who on the surface seemed to have a lot of experience navigating the art world still felt like they struggled. O noted that *"the art world is a cold and scary place. More so than the job world, when I've applied for real jobs as an adult, that's fine, but the art world you're offering a lot more of yourself. You offer your time and skill for your soul."* Likewise, N spoke about still feeling nervous at exhibition openings and being in mainstream art world spaces: *"I mean, I've been doing this for 25 years, I'm still sort of nervous going in all those galleries and feel a bit awkward in them. It's become so elitist and so sort of referencing of the history that people feel a bit frightened of it."*

"The system has to be played," Peto, in the *Outsider Arts Professional* responses says, and *"inevitably there is a lot about how you behave and how you manage within that system."* To make it in the art world, Peto adds *"you may well have to really put yourself out there… and for a lot of people, that's either an anathema or it's impossible."* Becker notes that the 'system' of the art world is one that comes with existing rules and conventions. He notes that "we take making art in the context of an art world as the standard way to make art."[232] He continues, "every art world uses, to organize some of the cooperation between some of its participants, conventions known to all or almost all well-socialized members of the society in which it exists."[233] It is these conventions, and the 'player's' knowledge of these conventions that "make possible some of the most basic and important forms of cooperation characteristic of an art

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[232] Becker, Op. cit., p 227
[233] Op. Cit., p 42

world."[234] Texts by academics including Bourdieu, Spalding, Becker, Heinich and Bishop explore the sociological ideologies that underpin the creation and maintenance of such an 'Art world' – and its peripheries. Although much of Heinich's writing disagrees with the fundamentals that underpin Becker's work (most notably in Heinich's assertion that art making is never a collective activity), they do agree that there are rules to participating in the 'game': "He who does not play by the rules of the game is condemned to remain invisible."[235] Heinich claims that the work of the artist is very much restricted; crossing the line between what is accepted and expected and what is not can leave an artist excluded.[236]

From 2009-2010, Jean Pralong et al. conducted a qualitative action-research project that investigated the reasons why a number of artists from a small region of France had not experienced success in their artistic careers. The research found that a predominant requirement in achieving success as an artist was taking personal responsibility for navigating the art world system and all that it entails. Pralong proposed that "artists' career development relies first and foremost on individual responsibility and work. Artists must make decisions by themselves about opportunities to be constructed or career tactics to be developed."[237] Before they are able to navigate the art world, however, they must recognise the "influence of art worlds, actors, and conventions, even if it is in order to break through them… [this] is a key to success in artists' careers."[238] The impetus here is very much on the artist themselves, with the research findings showing that "unsuccessful visual artists are unable to make sense of the art worlds. Their frame of reference for these worlds, making a clear division between art and arts business, leaves them unable to take the right action when the opportunity arises."[239]

Due to physical, mental, social or economic limitations, making these decisions and accessing this world can be out of reach for many outsider artists. Nine of the *Artist* respondents identified that overall they had had a challenging experience navigating the art world. There was a sense of frustration and resentment amongst the *Artists* and a feeling that the mainstream art world is a game with rules that need to be learned and subsequently played. C gave a general view on this, noting that *"getting into the mainstream, it's really, really difficult,"* adding *"I don't even know*

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[234] Op. Cit, p 46

[235] Van Maanen, Hans, *How to Study Art Worlds: On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Values,* Amsterdam University Press, 2009, p 96

[236] Op. Cit., p 102

[237] Pralong, Jean, Anne Bombault, Francoise Liot, Agard Jean-Yves, Cathering Morel, 'Unpacking Success: Sociocognitive Barriers to Objective Career Success for French Outsider Artists,' in *Careers in Creative Industries,* Routledge, 2012, pp 237-253, p 240

[238] Op. Cit., p 241

[239] Op. Cit., p 251

how to get into it to be honest with you." F said that *"it's like one rule for the art world and one rule for everybody else… it's taken years to learn what the game is and how to play it."* There was a sense amongst many of the *Artist* respondents that the navigation of such an exclusive world was not conducive to maintaining good wellbeing, with H noting that *"it's so complicated, and I've found that wellbeing wise, it's really not great for me at the moment,"* adding that *"I sort of decided this year to stop putting myself forward too much. Because the disappointment is really hard work."* L felt that their experience navigating the art world was non-existent, because *"it's never really felt like a world I've ever been near to getting close to, because I wasn't seen as good enough or relevant enough,"* and N said that *"you do get quite bitter as an artist."*

The *Outsider Arts Professionals* did recognise that the art world is an inherently difficult system for any artist – traditional or outsider – to navigate and achieve success within. Maizels noted that *"it's difficult to explain to [non-traditional artists] that this happens to all artists. Most mainstream artists don't make any money, mostly, mainstream artists are unsuccessful. A gallery might have two or three exhibitions a year and so if they're solo exhibitions, that's only a very small number of artists."* Gibson agreed, recognising that *"it's hard for any artist to progress up that sort of trajectory,"* and Sutton adds that *"how many artists generally, even who have got PhDs, get their work seen in main galleries? So we have to kind of balance our fighting out with what the reality of the art world is."* Additionally, Gibson identifies the real dearth of opportunities for *all* artists in the UK mainstream: *"There are only a handful of independent galleries. And then independent galleries are often linked to sort of independent art groups, and it's for their members or for their cooperative members, and that reduces the numbers even more so."* In 'Sandpiles of Opportunity', Katherine Guiffre confirms this lack of overall opportunity, noting that "far fewer artists achieve national prominence than sell their work in 'starving artists' sales in fairground pavilions across the country,"[240] and Pralong et al. note that "contemporary art worlds are full of unsuccessful outsiders. Few artists achieve objective success compared with the mass who attempt it."[241]

Despite these more universal barriers, there were nuanced barriers faced predominantly by outsider artists. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* recognised that the language of the art world and an overall tendency to academicize art can be problematic for many outsider artists; again, in particular for those who have not attended art school. Talking specifically about learning disabled artists, Gibson notes that *"they just don't know what the art world is – the language or*

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[240] Guiffre, Katherine, 'Sandpiles of Opportunity: Success in the Art World' in *Social Forces,* Vol. 77, No. 3, 1999, pp 815-832, p 819.
[241] Pralong et al., Op Cit., pp 237

the networks that are involved." Rhodes agrees, claiming that *"if you're an artist with Down's Syndrome, you're not going to be writing 200-word artist statements on your own about what you're doing, you're not going to be having meetings with dealers and talking about the finer points of what you're going to sell your work for, and what kind of frames you want to use."* Verrent identifies an additional inherent barrier in the process for artists to obtain funding, or to take up exhibition opportunities, when they talk about the administration involved for many artists: *"the first draft of the contract for somebody getting £1,000 was seven pages long. It was like, that's not appropriate. Somebody's getting £1,000, you can't do that to them."*

The academicizing of art language was also identified as a barrier by the *Artist* respondents. D, talking about their experience at art school, notes that *"some of the sorts of essays we had to do, the way things are worded was quite academic, and I struggled with it,"* and H remembers that *"I think it was just there's so much emphasis on giving, putting meaning on to work and why you were doing stuff. And what was the reason behind it. That sort of took away from the making part of it because I was overthinking."* The requirement to academicize the process of art making was an issue too for N, who said that *"the thing that drives me most mad about a lot of it is it's so sort of visually – so the sort of more high end, it's so visually unstimulating. And it's often some sort of piece that doesn't really work as a visual thing with a massive explanation on the wall. So they're telling you why this is interesting. If anything requires a write up, it's completely failed."* Similarly, G describes a change in a local art gallery: *"we had a little gallery and it was quite inclusive. And I've been in contact with the people since, however, it's just been taken over by somebody modern. And now it's very – very intellectualised art. Not done with the tummy."*

Such a challenging experience of navigating the mainstream art world had led two artist respondents to remove themselves from it completely. G claimed that *"I've always been an advocate for myself. So on social media networks, I've made myself known so I'll not be depending on the establishment,"* they add that *"nowadays you need to navigate yourself differently. There are different ways of getting out and about, so you're not dependent on agents any more. Otherwise we would be doomed."* N's response was more direct: *"I really have no respect for the art world whatsoever… I really don't feel any part of it at all really. I don't really want to be."* It is interesting to note that the *Artists* who had taken steps to remove themselves from the mainstream art world were also the respondents who were more sympathetic towards the term 'outsider art' and the sense of belonging that it offered them outside of the constructs of a rigid mainstream.

The emphasis on artists themselves learning how to navigate the art world, taking responsibility for their own experience is problematic in particular for artists who face barriers due to health, social or economic circumstance. This approach means that the system itself can ultimately never be seen as exclusive, and instead, it is the artists' responsibility to ensure they become more agile and able to fit into already existing structures. This attitude is reflected in Penny Jane Burke and Jackie McManus' writing on the exclusions in higher education admission practices but can be translated to artist exclusions from the cultural mainstream. The focus of much of the UK's Widening Participation agenda within Higher Education institutions has focused on material and tangible barriers, rather than on the "cultural, historical, discursive and subjective dimensions of HE exclusions and inequalities." [242] Often methods promoting inclusion focus on the issue being the attitude of the under-represented, rather than on the much needed "transformation of institutional structures, discourses and practices that might unwittingly reproduce and deeply embed inequalities." [243]

5.2   Art school

The Conditions of Success: How the Modern Artist Rises to Fame is a transcript of a lecture given by Sir Alan Bowness at the University of London in 1989. The transcription is a powerful illustration of the expected 'traditional' route through the institutional structures of the art world. In the lecture, Bowness asserts that "there is a clear and regular progression towards artistic success. There are, in my view, conditions of success, which can be exactly described. And success is conditioned, in an almost deterministic way. Artistic fame is predictable."[244] Bowness asserts that there are four steps for any artist to take to achieve recognition and fame: peer recognition, recognition from those who write and talk about art, recognition of patrons and collectors, and recognition from the public. If an artist follows these four steps, in Bowness' opinion, they *will* achieve fame and recognition. Bowness' formulaic approach to succeeding in the art world is subscripted with his claim that "to imagine that there are unrecognized geniuses working away in isolation somewhere, waiting to be discovered, is simply not credible. Great art doesn't happen like that."[245]

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[242] Burke, Penny Jane and Jackie McManus, 'Art for a few: exclusions and misrecognitions in higher education admission practices,' in *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education,* Vol. 32, No. 5, December 2011, pp 699-712, p 700

[243] Ibid.

[244] Bowness, Alan, *The Conditions of Success: How the Modern Artist Rises to Fame,* Thames and Hudson, 1990, p 7

[245] Op. Cit., p 61

The first step on Bowness' ladder to recognition is recognition from peers, which most commonly transpires through attendance at art school as it requires an artist to have a peer group that is already well established within the art world; or at least one that is already held in esteem. The importance of an art school background was raised by the *Curators* who identified that a lack of formal art education was one of the defining features of an outsider artist, and a key reason that outsider art has not been embedded into the mainstream. Lewis notes that *"outsider artists are not seen as being one of the club, because they haven't gone through the art colleges and art schools, they haven't gone through the academies. They haven't gone through that process of production and recognition that builds on the price."* Martin noted that *"so many of the artist narratives – they had networks, they had families, they have a kind of almost supportive linear history,"* whereas the majority of artists we might designate as outsider *"weren't from a super famous, rich family."* Myrone adds that there is still *"the expectation that people who are the producers of art, which is most highly valued, will belong to mainstream or established society."* Attitudes around how someone becomes an artist, and the importance of art school in this journey, was highlighted by McMullan giving an anecdotal story about one of their gallery community members: *"He was like, if you didn't go to Goldsmith's, you know, no one wants to know."* And Hughes, talking about Arts Council England's collection, reflected on recent acquisitions: *"thinking off the top of my head of those ones that I know that we've recently purchased, I know most of them have come through the art school system."*

For outsider artists, many of whom have not – for various reasons – attended art school, this is problematic. This lack of access to the networks provided by attending art school was identified by the *Outsider Arts Professionals* as a key challenge they wanted to talk about. Gibson noted that *"the art world we all know… these people you were in college with in week one are still your buddies, and helping you make work and helping you access opportunities."* Similarly, Verrent notes that *"there's a huge barrier around networking, and an artist who might have come through the sector might be going to galleries and going to openings and learning without even knowing it, unconsciously picking up the ways to behave within that environment. And a lot of artists are not getting that. So they're not even getting casual contact, and they're not necessarily seeing the work and understanding how this system works."* Navigating the art world as someone who has not received formal training can also mean not knowing how to approach galleries or curators. Even for those artists who know that this is what the system requires of them, Gilbert notes that *"there's a definite lack of confidence there, massive anxieties about rejection… they don't know who to contact, and what format to show their work in."*

For the *Artist* respondents, the subject of art school was quite contentious. Of the 19 artists interviewed as part of this research, six had completed an undergraduate degree in fine art or a practical art subject, six had completed an undergraduate degree in a non-arts related subject, and seven described themselves as self-taught or untrained, and had no higher education degree. Interestingly, three of the respondents who had not completed an undergraduate degree in fine art found that their lack of art school experience was a very real barrier to them successfully navigating the art world. C noted that *"I think probably one of the biggest things is the fact I'm self-taught. I think that definitely goes against me for the mainstream art world,"* adding that *"artists from art school have been trained in a very particular way. So they've got a very particular way of seeing things."* On this subject, M mentioned a feeling of frustration at not having been to art school: *"it's hard to sort of get anywhere. And you definitely – when people came up through college and whatever, then they get all the contacts. And I think even in the art world, I think it seems like galleries and whatever they think it's when you got qualifications you almost – I think that seems to be they think that's better than people just doing their own artwork. That's what it feels like."* Q added that *"there's also the fact that you haven't spent three to seven years being validated by someone else and being wrung through a wringer to produce something that someone else says oh yeah, I can see that."*

Interestingly, of the six respondents that did attend art school, three reported that they had a challenging experience. D said that *"I didn't really enjoy university, I found it quite difficult. I think people were expected to know a lot already. It was really difficult."* And H noted that *"I do have an art degree. Well unfortunately, that sort of was what stopped me doing art. I had not a very inspiring experience, let's say, when I was at university, so that just made me go in another direction completely."* Two of these respondents remembered feeling a lack of support, both in terms of their creative practice and their mental health during their time at university. On this point, R talked about how there was very little direction from course tutors around developing their creative practice and the more practical side of artmaking, like trying out new techniques or experimenting with different materials: *"It was kind of like a drop in the deep end kind of thing just to see how you'd react. And it was very much a policy of teach yourself the practical skills. I can remember asking about you know, I wanted to go into oil painting, I hadn't done oil painting before. And I wanted to do some. So I asked a tutor because I knew he was a painter. And he said, get the artists' handbook from the library. That was his answer."* Alongside little practical support, H experienced a lack of support around their mental health whilst they were studying, recalling that *"I went to them and was trying to explain to them, their response was just to get on with making anything."*

The importance of attending art school is apparent in Bowness' *Conditions of Success*; if you are an art school student you become privy to connections, networks and peers that you may not

otherwise have access to. In a presentation given by Bourdieu and translated by Michael Grenfell, Bourdieu asserts that "art school gives you access to the legitimate manipulation of cultural or artistic sacred goods; you have the right to say what is and what is not art."[246] Art school attendance, Bourdieu adds, gives art students a belief and a confidence in themselves as makers and identifiers of legitimate works of art:

> Those who go to art school where 'art priests' are trained are already believers, who, already separated from the secular by their special belief, are going to be reinforced in their belief by the acquisition of competence outside of the every day which will give them a feeling of being legitimized through their familiarity with art works – the sacred being what is separated.[247]

All three cohorts of interview respondents identified formal training and attending art school as integral to successful navigation of the mainstream art world. Both the *Curator* and *Outsider Arts Professional* cohorts identified the importance of building networks and peer support and learning how to navigate existing processes and structures, most commonly achieved through the attendance of art school. For the *Artist* respondents who had attended art school, many recalled a generally negative experience that had knocked their confidence in their own ability as an art-maker, and those who had not attended saw their non-attendance as a very real barrier to their inclusion in the mainstream.

5.3   Health barriers

Six of the *Artist* respondents identified their health as a major barrier to them accessing the art world. These artists identified that the barriers very much come from within the art world and that ultimately, in their experience, the art world does not make space for people with neurodivergences or health issues. B identified the point that their health issues became a challenge to their career: *"so the minute I got sick and couldn't work, I was kind of less a commodity in that space, and it just evaporated. And that was a real shock."* They went on to suggest that *"I think to me that a lot of the relationships in that world would vary based on being able to work,"* with D noting that *"I couldn't go anywhere without my partner, who's now my carer. And sometimes you go for an interview or something and you need someone else with you, they don't sort of understand. And it felt quite embarrassing, all the other artists there on their own, they look quite independent."* Q noted that *"if an opportunity for a residency or something came up, I think actually now even if it was solely online, I would have to turn it*

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[246] Bourdieu, Pierre, Presentation in Nimes, France, 2001 [accessed online: http://www.michaelgrenfell.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ThinkingAboutArtSchoolPDF.pdf], p 16
[247] Op. Cit., p 12

down because of the expectation it would put on me." O shared that *"it's very isolating being a disabled artist. There's no kind of – I fall through the gaps because I'm too disabled for some things, not disabled enough for others."* R identified the impact on their career that taking a break due to health issues can have: *"I noticed that since 2017 until this year I've only had one two person show, and I couldn't make the most of that residency because I had chronic abdominal pains, which started in 2017. So there's a gap on my CV. I didn't realise quite how damaging that had been, career wise."*

There is, two *Artists* identified, a feeling inherent within the art world that health issues are not conducive to a successful artistic career. R noted that they remain reluctant to share information about their health issues because of the impact it might have on opportunities: *"Partly you feel like you don't want to tell anyone your problems. I mean, I didn't tell anyone for a long time… because you feel like, if professionally they know about it, even if they feel like understanding or whatever, why would they pick you to be in the show? If they can go and pick somebody else who is healthy? And you know, there's going to be no risk of them delivering the work."* Q spoke about the expectations put on artists and how this can have an impact particularly on artists who are living with health issues: *"I think how big galleries support artists with that part of it [expectations] needs to be really flexible. Because you can't expect any one person to be able to provide the same level of presence that another person can. And for those of us dealing with managing energy levels, then that becomes even more of an issue. I've seen really, really productive people, and I think that I work in this way where I may have a really blow out five years, but then it's going to take me ten years to recover."* B spoke about the wider nature of the art world and how the expectations of the way people in the art world work are not advantageous to those experiencing health issues: *"It's mostly that I just can't meet the grind culture of working all hours God sends for no money. And that seems to be a perquisite for a lot of the work in the creative industries,"* adding that *"that's the reason there's so much burn out is that that kind of work is exhausting. And also only available to people that don't have kids and can afford to do free work, and you know, have other privileges that allow that to happen."*

The experience of feeling like health is a barrier to accessing the art world is evidenced in a 2020 study conducted by Daisy Fancourt and Hei Wan Mak who concluded that health was a very real barrier for many in accessing and engaging with the arts. The study identified that "the clearest predictors of barriers to engaging in the arts related to health. Individuals with poorer physical and mental health experienced more barriers affecting their perceived capabilities to

engage in the arts, whilst individuals with poorer mental health also described experiencing more barriers affecting their motivations to engage."[248]

On top of experiencing their health as a general barrier, artists who declared existing health issues or identified as neurodivergent noted that they specifically struggled with application processes for opportunities. D said that *"sometimes the language that they use in applications is, you know, you have to write thousands of words. And it's time – it takes me days to do this sort of thing. I then have to get my partner who is also my carer to look through everything because I'm dyslexic, and I really struggle with that sort of thing."* Likewise, H noted that *"I mean it sounds daft because it's often only like 350 words, but for me, it can take me longer to do the written bit of an application than to actually make the work. It's just not a fun process, it puts me off applying for things."* And T said that *"the stuff you find on the Arts Council website is also like, really complicated to apply for. And again, that's the barrier, like if you're like me and neurodivergent, you don't always – unless it's really laid out for you, you don't always read into the context."* The amount of work required just to write a funding application was identified by O who said that *"there's a lot of work. Like there's one I applied for, it was 500 quid, and they wanted three finished works. It's like, they seem to want very much for very little."* These processes suggest that the art world holds assumptions that artists will be able to quickly and confidently apply for opportunities. It is in fact for many an unpaid time-consuming process. In more recent years, funding bodies have made efforts to increase the accessibility of applying to opportunities; for example, Arts Council England now has an Access Support fund that artists can utilise if they need support to write an application. The fund, however, does not pay the artist for their time applying, only the person acting in Support Worker capacity, and there is still a process involved in applying to the fund which many artists are unaware of.

After spending time working for free on a time-consuming application, the inevitable rejections were also a challenge for the *Artist* respondents. Even two respondents who identified themselves as being fairly resilient struggled with this particular element of the art world. R was one of these artists, noting that *"I know I'm quite good at bouncing back after you get no's and stuff, but it can really get you down. Because I tend to find that the more effort I have to put into an application, then the more upset I am if it doesn't go ahead, and it doesn't matter telling yourself well loads of people have applied for this."* And O said *"I mean, I'm quite good at sort of like going in and going this is what I can do. I'm quite – I'm anything if not resilient, so I will*

[248] Fancourt, Daisy and Hei Wan Mak, 'What barriers to people experience to engaging in the arts? Structural equation modelling of the relationship between individual characteristics and capabilities, opportunities and motivations to engage,' in *PLoS ONE,* Vol. 15, No. 3, 2020, p 8

happily just go OK I'm going to give it a go, see what happens. I feel crap for a couple of days afterwards." One of the biggest identified issues for respondents around rejection was not receiving any kind of feedback. Q recalled putting in a funding application with support from a prestigious mentor and with collaborators from across Europe: *"declined with no reason given – no reason. You can't go back to them for a response."* C said that *"I think most of them you just get a no. I kind of thought, you know, you could have said to me, we need tweaking in this way… there was time to tweak or work on something or say well, we like this, or we would like that."*

In the *Curator* cohort, Martin spoke about concerns around providing pastoral care, particularly with reference to publicising exhibitions of work by living outsider artists, noting that *"you can't put them in front of a massive audience and expect them to be conventionally eloquent or be media personalities,"* or that it's *"very difficult when you are presenting the work of an individual who might have a very challenging mental health situation – how you talk about that in the public sphere, and the assumptions that people might jump to as well."* Martin's concerns convey very real, practical considerations for curators when working with outsider artists, but they also convey a lingering stigma that continues to be a challenge for artists facing barriers due to their health. *Artist* R's hesitancy to talk about their health issues in relation to opportunities (as mentioned earlier in this chapter) is in a way confirmed by Martin's comments, and this highlights that even if curators are motivated to diversify their curatorial programmes, there are considerations that they believe come with added financial and staffing costs.

Despite several of the *Artists* recognising that health issues were the reason they had initially sought to enter the art world, these same issues were identified as a major barrier to their inclusion and participation. The systems that exist in the cultural mainstream can be limiting for those who are not experiencing good health and those who may need extra support. Often, this much needed support is not available or understood, as evidenced in Martin's response, which highlights the challenges that curators see themselves facing in exhibiting work by a living artist who is experiencing mental health issues.

5.4   Context and connections

The *Curator* interview responses unearthed a preoccupation with providing context and making connections, with the aim of gaining press coverage and critical acclaim for their exhibitions. This was mentioned by almost all of the respondents, with Martin noting that *"if you read a press release about any artist, no matter how famous they are, it will say Lucien Freud was great friends with Francis Bacon, and he, his model was that – it gives people all these kind of*

reference points so that they can place the artist in a context and particularly if an artist is less than known, the press release will always give you those reference points that give you – why this? Why should you be interested in this thing? And so, inevitably with outsider art, it's harder." Martin added that the connections within an exhibition help shape the organisation's internal rationale for putting on a display, and that these connections *"help from the point of view of our communications that if we're going to get press and visitors, there might be loose connections between things that appeal in a similar kind of way."* An ongoing lack of a structural scaffold for outsider art could, then, be a factor in its continued exclusion. Myrone talks about *"when an entity has brought disparate people together because usually artists on the margins by their very nature are not centralized or grouped."* This means that there is a requirement for outsider art, more so than for mainstream art, to *"stand on its own merits. There's a lot more resting on it to actually stand up for itself."* Connections can imbue work with a sense of historical value and can offer a route towards that canonical acceptance. Connections can provide context, as Lewis notes when he says *"we have this backlog of letters between Matisse and Manet, and that doesn't exist here [with outsider art]."* And Martin's observation that *"when I read artist biographies, and you see this reference to them meeting Picasso. It was probably just a hello, but it gets mentioned in the biography, as somehow, because they've known Picasso, they were therefore significant."*

Martin's view is evidenced in exhibition reviews of *Inner Worlds Outside* at the Whitechapel in London, where there was a common theme; the idea that the work of an outsider artist shows little development within their practice. Searle, in his review of the exhibition, notes that the work of now esteemed outsider artist Henry Darger is lacking a "sense of self-development or reflection," before going on to celebrate the work of Alfred Kubin, simply because he "was a fully paid-up member of the European avant-garde."[249] Here, Searle looks at Darger's body of work as a basis for this assumption, but does not do the same for Kubin – instead, he calls upon Kubin's credentials and his standing within a respected artistic community at that time. Searle even identifies that those "artists who are seen as outside of the mainstream are not looked at with the same kind of critical rigour as those for whom art is a profession."[250]

This lack of cultural scaffolding is an interesting observation from the *Curators*, who infer in some way that it is the artist who must elicit their own context and connections. This is in direct contrast to L. E. A. Braden who argues that "curators historically contextualise and promote artists by creating associations between artists through in-common exhibitions. In turn, curator-

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[249] Searle, The Guardian, Op. Cit.
[250] Ibid.

created connections directly influence the extent to which an artist is recognized in the art historical canon."[251] Here, Braden suggests it is the curator's role to make those all-important contextual connections, and similarly, Fine indicates that outsider artists will often have their own very powerful narratives, and that it is the role of the curator to build the story of the artist.

The contextual framing of artwork in exhibitions and the importance of press coverage were significant considerations for the *Curator* respondents. When discussing the increasingly expansive role of the modern curator, Bishop reiterates these significances, noting that role of the curator has come to encompass all things that "relate to marketing: there are more exhibitions because there are more venues for contemporary art, each competing for more audiences, more reviews, more funding, more sponsorship, and more profile on the international radar." [252] A new emphasis on marketing and promotional opportunities is evidenced in Bertie Ferdman's look at role inversion in relation to curators and producers of performance art, where the author references how Bourdieu "demonstrated how aesthetic reception is inseparable from the production, marketing and circulation of the work."[253]

Not only is the design and delivery of an exhibition of paramount importance, but now, so too is the ability to market an exhibition to the public – and more importantly, to the press. This preoccupation with the ability to acquire press and media coverage for an exhibition was explicitly stated by Martin in his interview. In their discussion on the Turner Prize as a valuation device, Pierre Penet and Kangsan Lee claim that heightened press and media coverage act as a valuation device for artworks and artists in a "market context deprived of consensual value standards or clear definitions of what quality is."[254] The valuation of an exhibition in high profile media publications is important to modern day curators who, as rising pseudo-celebrities and creators in their own right, have their reputation on the line. This reputational responsibility has become more pertinent in recent years, with the press increasingly dealing with an "exhibition not so much as a transparent medium produced by an institution but as the work of an individual with a particular name." [255] This is illustrated in Dorment's review of *Alternative Guide to the Universe,* which took place at the Hayward Gallery in 2013, when he says "Had the Alternative Guide to the Universe at the Hayward Gallery been yet another exhibition

[251] Braden, L.E.A, 'Networks Created Within Exhibition: The Curator's Effect on Historical Recognition', in *American Behavioural Scientist,* Vol. 65, No. 1, 2021, pp 25-43, p 26
[252] Bishop, Op. Cit., 2012, p 29
[253] Ferdman, Bertie, 'Role Inversion: The Curator Takes the Stage,' in *Performing Arts Journal,* Vol. 106, 2014, pp 53-58, p 53
[254] Penet, Pierre and Kangsan Lee, 'Prize and price: the Turner Prize as a valuation device in the contemporary art market,' in *Poetics,* 2014, p 11
[255] Heinich, Nathalie and Michael Pollak, 'From Museum Curator to Exhibition Auteur: Inventing a Singular Position' in *Thinking About Exhibitions,* ed. By Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, Routledge, 1996, pp 231 – 250, p 237

devoted to the art of the psychotic, autistic, criminally insane or merely untrained, I'd have given it a miss,"[256] adding, "repetition, obsession, and impenetrability in art (or anything else) rarely sustains my interest for very long. But this terrific show, devised and curated by the Hayward's director Ralph Rugoff, is much more original than that."[257]

The connections between artworks, artists, themes, was of pivotal importance to the *Curators* in their responses. Their assertion is that for a successfully received exhibition, artworks and artists need to have emerged from something prior; they need to have historical reference and/or contemporary connection. This is much more difficult for work produced by outsider artists – particularly those more traditionally associated with the outsider category – who often work in isolation, taking less reference and influence from the external world. The *Artists* in their responses noted that without such solid connections and references within their work, they found themselves even further out on the periphery of the mainstream. D noted that *"My work would be quite different to a lot of work in the exhibition, and I'd be worried it wasn't coming across sort of the right way, like it would be the only work about mental health,"* and Q spoke about being turned away from an oil painting society because their work was unglazed, but at the same time being rejected in the first instance from a Naïve art association, due to their work being perceived as too illustrative. The need to fit in, or be connected to, a wider cultural identity is of course particularly challenging for artists whose work falls under the outsider umbrella; after all, the umbrella is quite literally an encompassing term for everything that does not fit in, that is not connected to a wider canon or trajectory, and is not related by medium, content or theme to what is considered as mainstream art.

5.5   Financial barriers

Financial implications were raised in several ways by all three sets of interview respondents. Perhaps the most major influencing factor in how and where the *Curators* might consider programming outsider art were the financial implications. Myrone simply states that *"the way that it is possible to expand the canon or test the canon out in any genuine way depends upon resources."* Myrone mentioned that earlier in their career, they were able to make what might be considered more risky choices in terms of exhibitions, simply because there was more money around: *"When I started in 1998 [at Tate], there was money flashing around because of the millennium. It meant you could do expensive shows that you knew not many people were going to go and see."* Considerations around monetary resources were a very real concern for all the

[256] Ibid.
[257] Ibid.

Curators. Lewis claimed that *"we haven't got any money, especially after the financial crash that is going to come. There's just a desperate lack of resources."* Hughes acknowledged that *"it's no secret we went through some major cuts last year,"* and Martin asked *"how do we produce shows that will encourage a paying audience during a time when people have to be very selective about what they are going to do?"* Roberts highlighted the insidious issue of underfunding over the past decade in the arts generally, noting that *"we do have a really big issue with just reduction in funding, not only in the museum sector but from the DCMS over the last ten years and longer."* There was emphasis on the need for exhibitions of more non-traditional art to be successful every time, highlighted by Myrone's admission that the lack of popularity of *British Folk Art* at Tate had an impact on the organisation's ability to support another show of its kind: *"I guess because it didn't deliver as much as it might have done in audience, there hasn't been the momentum, behind further projects of that kind."* Despite the *Curators'* openness to challenge the canon by exhibiting non-traditional art, Myrone notes that *"it doesn't align sufficiently with the raw economics, to make something worthwhile."* Added to this is a significant reduction in exhibition opportunities as a whole in the art world due to the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, as highlighted by Parry: *"budget is a massive consideration, increasingly more so – we've just gone down to two shows a year in our main spaces, which actually, you know, going from three shows a year to two shows is quite a big difference in terms of the amount of work you can show. But that is mainly a financial reason and a little bit to do with Covid."* On this, Martin notes that *"for outsider artists to actually be able to get those exhibition slots is a greater challenge in the current world."* McMullan identified, too, the implications of rising costs generally on the art world and the public's perception of whether it is 'for them' or not: *"as the art world changes, the gallery space – particularly commercial – becomes expensive to run, it makes art expensive. It's inflating prices and that's what makes people think that art is not for them, and it's sort of shifted into the sort of consumer product that's completely unreachable."* This insight underlines the increasingly important role of public sector museums and galleries in highlighting – and validating – all types of art, as it becomes more financially difficult for independent galleries to do so.

There was recognition too of the real financial implications amongst the *Outsider Arts Professional* respondents who saw continuing financial uncertainty for museums and galleries more widely across the UK as a key contributing factor to curators' and programmers' abilities to organise exhibitions of outsider art. Catto noted that *"the practical answer is that, particularly for public galleries, they have to have audiences, they have to pay the bills… so if you have an artist who is unknown, or doesn't have a following, it is difficult to put them in a main gallery, because people aren't going to travel because they don't know who they are… I think they all – particularly the big players – felt, you know, fell back on to we have to be*

showing work that has a pedigree and has cultural importance." The austere financial climate in the UK led *Outsider Arts Professionals* to suggest that curators' assumptions around how much support or pastoral care is required for outsider artists is seen as an added pressure on cost and time, which in turn has a detrimental impact on outsider art being programmed. Gilbert suggested that curators are *"worried about the extra costs that are involved with working with these artists and the extra support they might need."* But, as Catto put it, *"that's where organisations like us come in, there's nothing wrong with needing support."* The assumption that outsider artists may need more pastoral care in comparison to mainstream artists was rebuffed by Rhodes, who claimed that *"anybody might have a wobbly during the install, it's not the preserve of artists with disabilities,"* and likewise by Catto, referring to their thirty-year career in the mainstream creative industries, who said that *"I've had to call people in the morning and say 'are you awake? Have you remembered you need to go to this? Nobody comments on that."* These assumptions are evidenced in 'Curating for Change', a 2021 report from Accentuate. The consultation with museums across the UK found that 41% of responding museums reported that "a lack of finances for supporting additional needs for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent audiences' was a barrier to engagement," and 58.8% of the responding museums reported a "lack of understanding and/or skills to provide support' was a barrier."[258]

Aside from more recent global events and their subsequent financial impact, there is also the ongoing impact that years of attacks on arts funding have had on the ability for galleries and museums to show more non-traditional work. As far back as 2002, Eleanor Heartney identified a lean towards more risk adverse programming due to serious and ongoing financial constraints in the art world, that over the past twenty years do not seem to have improved:

> A decade of conservative attacks on government funding for the arts precipitated a scramble for alternative sources of money. But such sponsorship was often accompanied by complicated agendas, and curators and museum officials found themselves forced to justify their spending by point to their exhibitions box office success. The blockbuster mentality kicked off a search for populist and popular subjects that generate major exhibitions… Without promise of sponsorship, worthy projects tend to go unrealized.[259]

This theory is reflected by Alexander, in 'The arts in society and the sociology of art', who notes that reduced funding is a common challenge for the arts globally, which can be traced back to the "neo-liberal model of economic organization in which all aspects of social life need

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[258] Fox and Sparkes, Op. Cit., p 17
[259] Heartney, Eleanor, 'What Are Critics For?' in *American Art,* Vol. 16, issue 1, Spring 2002, pp 4 – 8, p 6

to be justified in market-centred or utilitarian terms."[260] On top of this reduced funding, Alexander suggests too, that funders – more specifically the type of funding an organisation receives - directly impact the type of projects and exhibitions they produce and programme; "for instance, wealthy individuals, such as philanthropists and trustees in arts organizations, have personal (both idiosyncratic and prestige-seeking) and social class (elitist) interests, but they also act for the wider good, as they see it."[261] In another study focusing on art museum exhibitions, Alexander found that "as funders support only those exhibitions that they prefer, the proportion of preferred exhibitions increases across the entire program of special exhibitions."[262] This trend was identified in particular in the UK between 1960 and 1986, when there was an incremental increase in popular, 'blockbuster' exhibitions, highlighting a shared corporate and governmental interest in displays that had the potential to pull in large audiences.[263] As budgets tighten in the UK art world, it is a real concern that populist exhibitions will become the norm in the hope that they will pull in larger numbers of paying visitors.

A discussion on the impact of arts funding in the UK cannot be had without reference to Arts Council England and the impact such public funding has on the shape of the cultural sector. In a 2018 article, John Tattersall notes that "throughout its chequered history, the Arts Council has struggled with the question of excellence versus accessibility."[264] Tattersall talks about the institutionalised strategic aims of Arts Council England, which have become embedded over many years. Again, the idea of risk adversity, this time from the viewpoint of a national funding body, is apparent: "emphasis in funding has typically over the years been given to professional artists who by and large come from the 'high arts' organisations for it is in funding these choices that the Arts Council feels most safe."[265]

Arts Council England has in more recent years been exploring and reporting on its aim to make the art world more diverse and accessible through its distribution of funding, but "it is conceivably reluctant to set in motion changes which could threaten its own established position which historically has demonstrated a preference for the established or 'high' arts and the institutions which underpin them, with the greater sense of accountability that it affords."[266] The

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[260] Alexander, Victoria D., 'The arts in society and the sociology of art,' in *Poetics,* Vol. 43, 2014, pp 1 – 19, p 8
[261] Op. Cit., p 9
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid.
[264] Tattersall, John, 'Arts Council England: Ramifications of organisational dynamics and institutional setting on policy,' in *Journal of Evolutionary Studies in Business,* Vol.3, No. 1, 2018, pp 226-246, p 228
[265] Op. Cit., p 229
[266] Op. Cit., p 232-233

notion of the power of the individual within the organisation is present here too, with policies developed by Arts Council England functioning to serve the "interest or expectations of key individuals within the organisation."[267] There is cautiousness when it comes to making meaningful changes, and instead, "strategies based on previous policies or ways of doing things are seen as the 'right way' to do things or best practice," which can be traced back to "policies [being] attributed to powerful or influential people in or around the organisation, past or present."[268] What is worth noting is that all of the *Curators* interviewed were employed at the time by museums or galleries that to some extent rely heavily on public funding, sponsorship and donations. On this, Abbing notes that "the large presence of donations and subsidies in the arts is exceptional."[269] The author goes on to suggest that the arts in Western Europe are generally centrally funded by the respective governments, and "thus pay the numerous gatekeepers, these gatekeepers take care of the government's interests."[270]

For the *Artist* respondents, financial implications were also cited, but with a different focus to the implications faced by the *Curators* and the *Outsider Arts Professionals* – although still inherently linked to the issue of underfunding in the wider arts sector. Ten of the respondents noted that financial barriers had prevented them from taking up opportunities in the mainstream art world, illustrated by D when they noted that applying for opportunities was *"quite difficult really because sometimes you have to pay to apply and I can't afford to pay to apply – and sometimes you don't have to pay to apply, but you know, if you're successful, you have to pay like a fee to exhibit and I just can't really afford that either."* Q noted too, that *"I have lost so much money on supplies, I will be a hobbyist forever, because any money I make is not actually profit, it's just filling a hole."* The nature of being a self-employed artist was mentioned by several of the respondents, particularly in the way that the majority of administrative tasks must happen on the artists' own (unpaid) time. H identified this, claiming that *"it's like a full time job just to try and find opportunities to even apply for them,"* and similarly, K noting that *"all these things when you're, you know, just for any self-employed person, it's quite tricky to do all those things, because they're not directly making any money."*

Alongside the real, physical financial barriers faced by many of the respondents, there was also a wider, more societal financial implication identified by the *Artists* in that the work of creatives is often unpaid or under-paid. L suggests that *"it comes back to the fact that what artists do is not seen as a skill. Professions and finances are paid at premium to people who have honed, or*

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[267] Op. Cit., p 235
[268] Ibid.
[269] Abbing, Op. Cit., p 41
[270] Op. Cit., p 269

have natural talent and skill. And artists are not counted in that." Similarly, one respondent noted that monetary value is hugely prized within the mainstream art world, meaning that if your work does not sell for the big bucks, it is not valued: *"There is this thing of celebrating certain people whose work is so expensive like Damien Hirst or something and then there's this gap to the bottom where there's just no money at all."* (N).

It is important to note that research has shown that financial instability is somewhat a norm for artists more widely. Ryan Daniel and Robert Johnstone (2015) highlight that this area of the workforce is dominated by "self-employed, freelance or contract work, small-medium businesses, frequent periods of underemployment, multiple job holding in portfolio style careers, high levels of education and training and lower rates of pay than the general employment sector,"[271] and Damian Elias and Linda Berg-Cross claim that "to make a decent monetary living as a painter is next to impossible."[272] Although this is of course an issue for the *Artist* respondents, there was the additional challenge unique to many members of this group which is to earn a living through their creative practice whilst navigating the UK's benefits system. Five respondents identified this as a very real challenge, with O, talking about the Access to Work grant scheme, noting that *"they don't understand freelancers, they don't understand sort of disabled artists there,"* while B said that *"because I'm currently on ESA, any money that I get risks that like invalidating, losing the disability."* B added that *"part of me is quite worried about – it would be really frustrating to do a painting and sell it, and then end up losing my benefits, and it throws my whole financial security out the window."* E, a refugee claiming asylum in the UK, noted that *"I have an exhibition now, but I can only sell it at a certain range, because I haven't got a status yet."*

In terms of selling their work, the *Artist* respondents spoke about the importance for them in achieving validation and making a career by generating income from their work. B noted that *"selling work is something that I'm very interested in because I kind of did set out to make a career in the art world,"* and M said *"that's almost like the best bit of all of it. Somebody wants your piece… somebody wants it that much. They're gonna hang it up, that's quite a confidence booster."* However, despite how important selling their work has become to some of the respondents, many of them did not originally set out to sell their work – or at least did not have

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[271] Daniel, Ryan, and Robert Johnstone. 'Becoming an Artist: Exploring the Motivations of Undergraduate Students at a Regional Australian University'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 2015, p 2

[272] Elias, Damian M. G., and Linda Berg-Cross. 'An Exploration of Motivations of Fine Art Students in Relation to Mental and Physical Wellbeing'. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* 23, no. 4 (2009): 228–38, p 229

an interest in selling it for financial reasons. On this point, L said *"I am interested in selling my work, but not for the financial aspect, but for the fact that somebody else can see and would put numeric value on something that I've done. Or if they're buying it, it means they want to own it and have it in their home, like it's had an affect on them."* Similarly, two artists did not set out to make money from their work but found this to be an additional perk to their creative practice and it meant that they became more able to support themselves as an artist. L said *"that's [selling] something I wasn't [interested in] to start with. That wasn't the driving force. But I mean if I'm going to spend time doing it, I do need to make an income. So therefore, selling work is part of it,"* and G said *"When I did art, I sort of edited photos and people wanted to buy them even and wanted to paint my work and to purchase for a gift for family – and I thought this is it. This is my way, and that was motivating."* And D noted *"the main reason I am doing this is because it's like therapy. But I think if I'm doing the work, and I mean, it's what I'm doing with my life, I might as well try and you know, get out there and exhibiting it I think, try and do as well as I can with it?"*

Despite the buoyant recognition that selling gives the artists, two of the respondents spoke about the demoralising side – when they do not make a sale. H said that *"I've had so little success in that [selling]. Sort of, I've decided that at the moment I'm not going to make any more work to sell this year,"* and M said *"there's plenty of times where I'm not going to bother anymore."* One *Artist* had even separated their creative practice from their 'selling' practice, noting that they *"now make more pieces targeted to sell. So I'm sort of split between works that sell well and works that I probably won't sell."* (K). One artist was concerned that if their creative practice became a business and their regular source of income, that they would lose the cathartic benefits of art making: *"If I could make a living out of it – because there's selling a few pieces and there's making a living out of it – but if I made a living out of it, I don't know if it would lose it's kind of fun element."*

In their 2009 study, Elias and Berg-Cross found that financial motivation is often not a key motivating factor for those embarking upon an artistic career. Their study found that in fact, a person's mental and physical health can be a huge motivator in their want to work as an artist. In their research, the authors identified three motivation models for those choosing to begin a career as an artist. These were the Commodity Model, which focuses on "people who use their talents to produce what consumers want to buy. From craft fairs to caricature artists in town squares, many artists use their talents to make a living."[273] This model fits with a couple of the

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[273] Op. Cit., p 231

respondents, particularly those who noted that their practice was split into two; their creative work, and then the work they felt sure would sell. The other two models were the Self-Actualized Model, where "the goal of creating art is personal, not to make 'sales' or even have an audience,"[274] and the Visionary Artist Model, which "embodies the classic stereotype of an artist driven to self-expression through their own mental suffering. The Visionary's goal is not to sell work and become famous; his or her artistic endeavour is compulsive – a drive that seems almost uncontrollable."[275] This idea that the 'visionary' artist creates for reasons other than to 'sell' or have a career can be detrimental to the progress of many non-traditional artists; although despite what appeared to be a lack of financial motivation amongst the artist respondents, they did identify that the rejection of not making a sale had the tendency to affect them.

Money plays a huge role in the development and maintenance of art world structures. Because it is inherently difficult to make a living as an artist from the sale of art work alone, many individuals and organisations are dependent on funding streams as a major source of income. For the *Curators*, this dependency has an impact on their ability to take risks within their organisation, which has had a detrimental impact on the public exhibition of more non-traditional work. The *Curator* respondents were aware that they were required to programme only successful and popular exhibitions to enable them to draw down on funding; meaning that they were more likely to exhibit works by well-known artists, or by artists with common connections to other artists or the art world more widely. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* also spoke to the chronic underfunding of the UK arts sector in their concern that arts organisations avoided exhibiting work by living outsider artists due to the additional support and access costs that might be associated with this. This inherently difficult financial landscape has implications for the *Artist* respondents too, many of whom are facing economic difficulties, and several of whom are in receipt of benefits. The art world relies heavily on unpaid labour, and this can be taxing for those struggling financially, or those without other sources of income.

The financial factors affecting the art world more widely present another speculative circle that affects the visibility and therefore advancement of outsider art as a valued category. Higher financial investment would mean that curators would be more able to programme a wider variety of exhibitions, and the curation of a wider variety of exhibitions (to include outsider or

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[274] Op. Cit., p 230

[275] Ibid.

non-traditional art) would in time lead to increased financial investment (when a wider variety of art is valued, and the risk is removed).

5.6   Conclusion

All three cohorts of respondents identified the inherent art world system as an ongoing reason for lack of inclusion or validation of outsider art. The *Curators* focused on the limitations they themselves faced as gatekeepers within such a powerful system, including ongoing financial constraints and the pressure to put on a 'successful' and 'popular' exhibition – both in terms of audience numbers and press coverage. To do this, there was a sense that they needed to prioritise well-known artists, and artists who required less support – financially and pastorally. The *Outsider Arts Professional* responses showed a general understanding that the system is difficult for any artist to navigate – whether they face health, social or economic barriers or not – but it is particularly difficult to navigate for those who have not been to art school, and for those who may struggle with the over-academicization of language in the art world. In their responses, the *Artists* articulated how the art world felt exclusive and complicated, and how due to health and/or financial barriers, they struggled to find acceptance within the existing structures that make up the cultural mainstream.

Significantly, the theme explored in this chapter was the one most consensually identified by all three respondent cohorts in an overt way. What was apparent in the responses from all three groups was that to some extent they all felt like players in the bigger game of the 'Art World Machine.' They understood, for the most part, the rules they needed to follow to play, but the rules often felt complicated, out of reach – and out of touch. They identified that there was likely a formula for winning the game, but that this formula was not clear, and even key gatekeepers themselves (the *Curators*) were at the mercy of wider institutional structures that none of the respondents could fully understand or explain.

Conclusion

Through in depth semi-structured interviews with 35 individuals, combined with supporting material from sociological and art historical literature, this thesis sought to respond to three key questions of enquiry: (1) What are the attitudes and experiences of three key cohorts operating in the outsider-mainstream worlds? (2) Do their responses show a disparity in the treatment of outsider and mainstream art? And (3) What do their attitudes and experiences tell us are the fundamental factors that underpin the lack of reception and institutional validation of outsider art and its creators within the UK cultural mainstream?

The findings overall show that the three cohorts; *Curators, Outsider Arts Professionals* and *Artists*, were aware of or had directly experienced a disparity in the treatment of outsider art and art from the cultural mainstream. This was evidenced in the *Curators'* assertion that because outsider art has traditionally – and continually - confounded the art historical canon and because it lacks the contextual scaffolding that is more obvious in mainstream art, it has continued to be excluded from mainstream exhibitions. It is evidenced in the *Outsider Arts Professionals'* identification of outsider art's relegation to peripheral spaces (learning and education spaces rather than the main curatorial spaces of a gallery), peripheral funding streams (health and social justice, for example), and peripheral agendas (where the work is assessed as part of the arts and health agenda, rather than on any kind of aesthetic level). And it was illustrated in the *Artists* own experiences of navigating an art world that they found 'elitist,' where they had enjoyed very little success, and where they had struggled to overcome barriers to accessing the art world due to their health or their financial circumstances.

The attitudes and experiences identified through analysis of the interview responses highlight four key factors that continue to affect the reception and validation of outsider art within the UK cultural mainstream. These four factors are: contemporaneous views of the term outsider art and the continued contestation around the term; the relegation of outsider art to peripheral spaces; the impact of cultural gatekeepers on the treatment and reception of outsider art; and the art world system and how it inherently works to exclude work made by non-traditional artists.

When it came to the term outsider art, the interview responses showed real disparity in the attitudes of the cohorts towards the term's meaning and use. Both the *Curators* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* noted that they would be hesitant to use the term, whereas the *Artists* were much more positive about the benefits it brought to themselves and their work. The *Curators'* and *Outsider Arts Professionals'* views on the term reflected the paternalistic history of outsider art, where those in positions of cultural authority have made decisions about the use of the term (including whether to use it at all). What the *Artist* responses showed was that many of the

respondents found the term advantageous, and felt it offered them a sense of belonging. This disparity in response highlights the ongoing contestation and disagreement around the term which has ultimately had an impact on whether galleries and museums are willing or able to tackle the subject in any meaningful way. In addition to this ongoing contestation and the impact this has on discourse around the subject, the *Curators* identified that outsider art's lack of canonical inclusion – and a lack of any canonical re-evaluation since its emergence – has affected the category's cultural reception despite its well-documented influence on key figures in the art world throughout the twentieth century, and despite its growing visibility over the last decades.

The second identified theme was the relegation of outsider art to peripheral spaces within arts institutions. This relegation in physical spaces was identified by both the *Outsider Arts Professionals* and the *Artists* in an overt way and by the *Curators* in a more covert way. The *Artists* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* noted that they had experienced exhibitions of outsider art appearing outside of the main curatorial spaces within galleries and museums. This could be in educational or community galleries, hallways or attics. When asked about their exhibiting of more diverse art, the *Curators* spoke about education and learning spaces and programmes, rather than their main curatorial spaces and programmes. Not only was outsider art's relegation to peripheral physical spaces identified, but also its relegation in less tangible spaces. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* in particular spoke about the growing arts and health agenda recently employed by Arts Council England, and how outsider art is often shoe-horned into health and wellbeing programmes, resulting in its evaluation based on health and social outcomes rather than on any aesthetic level. The *Artists* identified an even wider relegation of creativity and art making as a 'nice to have' or a hobby, particularly for artists who were self-taught or those who are not considered to be 'professional' artists. This peripheral existence for outsider art has meant that it is not received or evaluated on the same aesthetic level as mainstream art, making any statements about quality or value particularly challenging. This peripheral existence is highlighted again through the semantics of the term outsider art (which quite literally states its peripherality) and its historical existence in and initial emergence from non-cultural spaces like psychiatry and medicine.

The impact and influence of (homogenous) individuals was the third identified factor, particularly around the authority and role of the curator and critic, and the discovery narrative, which has played a definitive role historically for outsider art. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* saw curators as culturally powerful individuals and highlighted that their cautiousness and reticence to validate outsider art in mainstream spaces has an ongoing impact on the category's cultural validation. The *Artist* respondents had similar frustrations around the role of the curator and experienced their own position to be located much lower down the cultural hierarchy than

that of the curator. The *Curators* did recognise their own cultural power to a certain extent, but there was a resignation to their role within the wider, existing structures of their institutions, and they identified the importance of collective agreement and decision making within cultural institutions. The lack of critical reception for outsider art was noted by all respondent cohorts as a major factor in its lack of validation, but the *Outsider Arts Professionals* also noticed that when there was critical coverage, it tended to be negative in nature, or the work was compared in a secondary way to mainstream art. The discovery narrative too, has an impact on how outsider art is validated. The *Curators* noted that the only available groupings we have for outsider artists are those made by external individuals, and providing contextual placement for outsider art is easiest when it is in relation to more well-known individuals. This narrative suggests that there is always someone who has more authority than the outsider artist, and it continues to place outsider art in a secondary position to those with existing cultural capital, taking away outsider artists' autonomy and agency. The *Artists* and *Outsider Arts Professionals* identified an issue in the use of selection panels in the art world which relied primarily on individuals making subjective decisions about what was 'good' art. Such selection processes, they noted, meant that a select few gatekeepers continued to be able to control what kind of work was selected for public view, and therefore what kind of work was institutionally validated as 'art'.

All three respondent cohorts recognised that the existing structural barriers of the UK art world are a significant factor affecting the validation of outsider art within the cultural mainstream. This theme in a way underpins all three prior themes in its identification of intrinsic structures and processes that affect the inclusion of outsider art on the same level as mainstream art. This theme was the most consensually identified by all three respondent cohorts, with the *Artists* noting their experience of, in many ways, a hostile art world that was challenging to navigate, and had the tendency to feel like a 'battlefield.' Even those *Artist* respondents who felt more resilient had an inherently negative experience of navigating the art world. The *Outsider Arts Professionals* touched upon the challenge of navigating the art world not just for outsider artists, but for *any* artist. They did however identify more nuanced barriers faced by outsider artists, such as the tendency to over-academicize language in the art world, and the level of administration involved in being a practising artist. One of these nuanced barriers was the (common) lack of art school education amongst many outsider and self-taught artists, and how this had an impact on their ability to navigate the art world. A lack of art school education was also noted as a barrier by some of the *Artist* respondents, who claimed that by not attending art school, they had missed out on vital skills and knowledge that might better equip them to access the art world. Health issues were also identified as a nuanced barrier for this group, with the

Artists suggesting that the art world does not make space for people with neurodivergences or those living with health issues – or at the very least, health issues are not conducive to having a successful artistic career. To support this, one *Curator* respondent identified their own concerns in providing pastoral care or support for artists experiencing health issues and how this might have an impact on whether they exhibit work by an artist or not. Additionally, health issues were seen as a barrier for some *Artist* respondents in their initial ability to access art school education.

Financial barriers were mentioned by all three cohorts, but for varying reasons. For the *Curators,* financial implications had perhaps the biggest impact on whether they would be able to exhibit work by outsider artists. This was also acknowledged by the *Outsider Arts Professionals* who identified continuing financial uncertainty for museums and galleries across the UK as a major factor in whether exhibitions of outsider art are programmed in mainstream curatorial spaces. Curators faced increasing pressure to put on successful 'blockbuster' exhibitions of work by well-known artists, and any extra support or pastoral care for artists facing barriers was seen as an added pressure on cost and time. For the *Artist* respondents, the financial barriers faced were individual, with the upfront cost of submitting work to exhibitions and working much of the time for free or very little income posing a challenge for many. The *Artists* also identified a wider, societal financial barrier for artists in that much creative activity is very often undervalued or seen as a 'hobby' and therefore expected to be unpaid or under-paid.

Significantly, all three cohorts understood for the most part that the art world was a system with rules that needed to be learned and adhered to, but that these rules often felt outdated, complicated and unattainable. It was recognised amongst respondents that there was likely a method for achieving success in the art world, but that this method was not linear - contrary to Bowness' confident suggestion in *Conditions of Success* - and was ultimately out of reach for many groups; particularly those facing barriers relating to health or social and economic circumstances. Even the *Curators,* key gatekeepers themselves, identified that they were at the behest of wider institutional structures that ultimately influenced what was accepted as 'art' and who could be seen as an 'artist.'

Ultimately, this research underscores the persistent disparities in how outsider art is treated and received compared to mainstream art, often in its positioning as secondary or peripheral. Having spent many years working at the intersection of the outsider and mainstream art world, my hope is that this research can contribute to meaningful change, fostering a more equitable and inclusive approach to the recognition and reception of outsider art in the UK.

The recommendations outlined below are drawn from the findings within each thematic chapter of this thesis. They are intended for all individuals and organisations working within the cultural sector. They urge a more reflective, curious and critically engaged approach to how and why certain art is made visible – and why some art is not.

The Term 'Outsider Art'

The concept and definition of the term outsider art remains unclear and contested. This ultimately makes tackling the subject difficult for cultural decision-makers to engage with confidently or in any meaningful way. However, what this research has shown is that some artists embrace the term as a means of identifying their creative practice outside of the confines of the mainstream art world. While acknowledging the difficulties and challenges of such a term, we must also acknowledge its value in offering a space where non-traditional artists can explore their artistic identity and form collective initiatives outside of the existing institutional frameworks.

We must re-evaluate the art historical canon; particularly with reference to the twentieth century, when outsider art influenced multiple artistic movements. Exploration of international approaches (such as those in the United States), can help us move towards a more inclusive understanding of art history; one that does not solely privilege the elite, but instead values the contributions of individuals living outside of traditional societal expectations and norms. Outsider art serves as an important documentation and record of these lives, necessitating systemic change in how history is constructed, valued and shared. Digital spaces offer new opportunity for taste autonomy; allowing individuals to curate and engage with art on their own terms, challenging traditional expert hierarchies. As Arora and Vermeylen ask, can "social media dismantle age-old hierarchies and level the playing field in art evaluations?"[276]

Paternalism continues to impact how outsider art is perceived. Eckstein and Allen's alternative to Goffman's oversimplification of stigma reminds as that labels are not binary; neither wholly 'good' nor 'bad.' Moving away from ongoing term contestation towards a collaborative understanding acknowledges that outsider artists and their work offer critical insights into lived experiences and alternative histories; histories that diverge from the dominant narratives spotlighted in the UK.

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[276] Arora, P and Vermeylen, F., Op. Cit., p 4

Spaces and Places

The physical placement of outsider art within institutions requires complete re-evaluation. Simply including outsider artists in cultural spaces, without critically considering the meaning of the allocated space, is insufficient. The spaces that outsider art occupies must hold genuine value and influence within the cultural sector to really make a difference.

Conceptually, associating outsider art with government-driven social impact agendas risks reinforcing the perception that it serves a therapeutic rather than an aesthetic or artistic purpose. Funders must recognise the aesthetic merit of this work beyond its perceived social function.

More broadly, we must challenge societal attitudes towards creativity, particularly the creativity of artists without formal training or those from communities or families where artistic activity is not traditionally valued. Creativity must be recognised, society-wide, as a fundamental contribution rather than an expendable luxury.

Tokenistic approaches to diversity and inclusion must be interrogated. It is dangerous for progress to assume that representation or visibility alone signifies that goals have been achieved when underlying structures, such as exhibition spaces and funding sources, continue to reflect implicit value judgements. Surface-level change is not sufficient; further exploration, challenge and interrogation is needed to ensure that institutional change first happens, but secondly, that when it does happen, it is meaningful and sustainable.

Powerful People

'People', or individuals, have played a key role in both the visibility and the exclusion of outsider art historically. We must move beyond the outdated discovery narrative when talking about outsider artists, instead recognising the artists themselves as unique individuals rather than contextualising them in relation to others. We can of course acknowledge those who have contributed to the progress of the category of outsider art, but the artists themselves should remain central in all narratives.

We must ask more of curators, key gatekeepers, to seek out and nurture outsider and non-traditional artists; to step out of their comfort zone and explore and invest in creativity that happens outside of the institution.

A key takeaway from this research is that we must reform selection processes within the arts. Decision-making structures must be scrutinised, and application processes simplified to ensure greater inclusion for those facing additional barriers to participation. Decisions in the UK are frequently made by individuals or homogenous collectives. Expanding the range of individuals

participating in decision making is absolutely essential in dismantling perpetuating systemic barriers.

Systems and Structures

What this research has found is that, ultimately, systemic transformation is needed to affect any real and meaningful change in the reception and inclusion of outsider art within the cultural mainstream. Artists should not be expected to bear sole responsibility for their success; and this is particularly so for those facing health or financial challenges. Institutional rules and structures must be re-examined; particularly those that directly disadvantage outsider artists, such as the over-academicisation of language in the art world and a reliance on artists' own articulation of their creative process.

Drawing parallels from Burke and McManus' critique of barriers faced by often-excluded individuals in the higher education sector, we must shift from viewing artists themselves as the barrier to seeing and identifying the institution as the exclusionary force. As a (not unimportant) aside; a more caring, understanding and restorative art world will benefit everyone – not just outsider artists – fostering a culture of compassion, accessibility and sustainability.

And fundamentally, the financial structures that underpin the cultural sector need to change. Sustainable funding models must be developed; models that empower artists rather than taking away their creative control. The dominance of patrons and funders in shaping artistic output and subsequently influencing the cultural landscape of the UK must be re-evaluated, and artists must receive fair compensation for their work (and that includes time spent applying for opportunities).

In short, when we think about exhibiting, showcasing or making visible outsider art, we need to ask: what does the space say about the work? Does it infer value, or is it a peripheral space that will continue to keep outsider art 'outside'? Who is making the decisions and how are they being made? Who is choosing the label, who is selecting artists, and who is ultimately deciding what should and should not be made visible? What systemic challenges are at play and can they be overcome? Can we write about this art differently; can we fund this work differently; what can we *do* differently that will stop the perpetual cycle of exclusion.

Ultimately, to change the processes we need to change the people, and to change the people we need to change the processes. One cannot happen without the other.

Reflecting on the findings and the recommendations above, further research in this area might focus on a comparison between the reception of outsider art within the UK cultural mainstream

and its reception in other global cultural systems; specifically, that of Europe or the United States, both locations that the interview respondents identified as exhibiting an openness and receptiveness to the visibility and celebration of outsider art. Such a comparison between the receptiveness in the UK and other cultural systems may highlight how the UK might and could do better. Future research might benefit, too, from a comparative analysis of attitudes broken down by gender, race and socio-economic background to explore the diversity of experience amongst curators, outsider arts professionals and artists themselves. Additionally, it may be valuable to revisit this research (that is, the collection of narratives and perceptions from key cohorts) in several years to assess the impact of these findings, and to understand whether meaningful change has occurred in how outsider art is treated and received.

As Cardinal asked: can outsider art take its place in a world that is sustained "at the centre by a cultural ideal that is untouchable and inalterable, based as it is on the unshakeable belief in such things as 'our cultural heritage,' the 'legacy of the past' and the fetish of the 'great masterpiece'?" [277] It is apparent from this research that no, outsider art has not been able to take its place on an equal footing to mainstream art as yet, but by providing four tangible factors cited by key actors in the outsider-mainstream sector as to why it has not been able to, this research is a hopeful step towards a more equitable and inclusive cultural landscape.

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[277] Cardinal, Op. Cit., 1972, p 9

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