

Is Outsider Art finally over?

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With the rise of Supported Studios globally and exhibitions placing Outsider Art in the mainstream, industry leaders met in Sydney



John Demos's project with Big Fag Press at Cross Art Projects, Sydney October 2013.

Source: Accessible Arts

With the 55th Venice Biennale colloquially known as the 'outsider biennale' coming to an end this weekend, it is an interesting time to reflect on why the mainstream has become so interested in Outsider Art. Has the art world finally decided to become more 'open', more inclusive this time round?

The Supported Studio Network (<http://aarts.net.au/supportedstudios/>) (SSN), in association with Accessible Arts, took this moment to bring these issues to the table at a recent symposium held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA) in Sydney, focusing on building new networks, inclusions, markets and perceptions.

Outsider Art was coined by the editor of Roger Cardinal's famous book on the topic (published in 1972), in which keynote speaker Glenn Barclay, Senior Curator at the MCA, explained was simply, '...a marketing term. He wanted a

catchy title for the book.'

Barcley, who has curated several exhibitions by outsider artists, added, 'Somehow you fall back on these terms like *outsider*. It becomes a default position. It is never perfect. That narrative of the outsider really appeals to the public.'

It seems the baggage of the term has been with us a long time, both confining artists and selling their story. It was one of the topics that dominated discussions, as leaders and workers in the field came together to tighten up shop and cease the future.

How, then, do arts workers and their clients start to operate within this film between the assisted workshop, the art market and the mainstream art world?

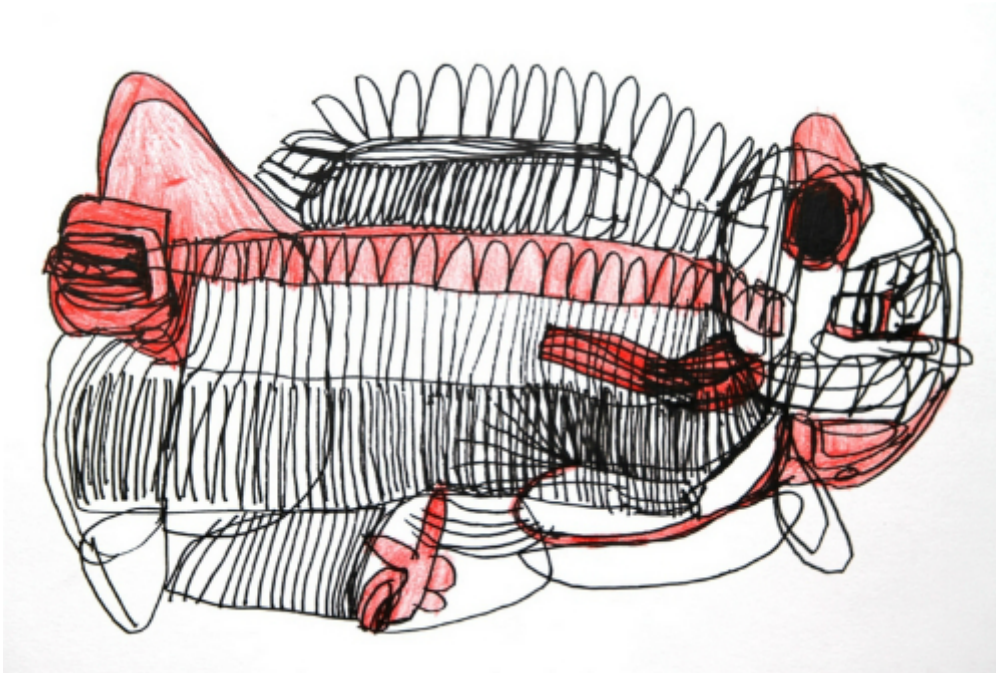


Peter Hughes, from the Brisbane Outsider Artist Studio, Queensland; Source: Supported Studio Network

Barcley kicked off the symposium by quoting a poem by American pop artist Claus Oldenberg as a grounding point: 'I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art that is given a starting point of zero.'

Barcley's refreshing presentation was well received by attending delegates, finding a break in the 'us and them' mentality of the institution. While the big picture of definitions and perceptions remained present, the symposium kept coming back to more practical challenges of growing their spaces and their artist's careers.

Josie Cavallaro, of Accessible Arts, explained that a supported studio is, 'facilitated by practicing artists; crucial to such studios are the opportunities they offer artists to be involved within wider artistic networks, thereby assisting artists to develop a professional career.'



*Joceline Lee's drawing Fish in pen, chalk and texta, Satellite-Arts Access Victoria;
Source: Supported Studio Network*

The role played by the arts worker is key, said Colin Rhodes of The University of Sydney. 'If the atelier is to be successful, these enablers need to develop close working relationships with the artists, thereby fostering, though not leading, the individual expression of each.'

He added, 'I have no doubt that the atelier structure not only supports but also *produces* artists. I want to argue, simply, that in last 30 years or so, a new kind of academy has grown.'

It is a focus on professionalism that has driven the arts sector globally, from education to the production of curators, to perceptions of 'good standards'. Among the topics raised was training for studio managers to better broker the professional needs of artists. The results of that discussions ArtsHub will report next week.

Funding was another key topic for delegates.

Australia's first assisted studio was Melbourne's Arts Projects (now Arts Project Australia APA) established in 1974, 'its primary funding stream (from) government disability welfare'.

Louise Kate Anderson of Big Fag Press, who worked with artist John Demos on a project exhibited at Sydney's Cross Art Projects last month, captured the dilemma shared by colleagues: 'We wanted to promote John as an artist in the mainstream, as that is what would be best for his career, but at the same time it was difficult to talk about the project without mentioning that it was funded by Accessible Arts and NSW Health, and that it was part of the Supported Studio Network, so it is this double-edged sword.'

Anderson continued, 'John is funded by these bodies that help him get to the art world and yet just speaking about them means that he's put in a box we don't want to put him in.'

Sarah McEwan, whose collaborative project *8 Artists* in the Eastern Riverina area, agreed: 'It is interesting within the contemporary art context the project couldn't get funding for it, but within a disability context we could.'

Anderson added that when trying to promote an artist, 'Their disability is their personal business and it should be their choice of disclosure. The idea of consent becomes a little bit blurry, and the responsibility of the journalist should become a little bit greater.'

She added that it is not a case of 'it is good despite his disability' rather 'it is just good'.

McEwan agreed, 'That is the ideal that everyone wants to be working towards', but she felt that, 'within a regional context those kinds of barriers needed to be pushed a lot harder than what they are in the cities.'

It was a resurgent topic for delegates, to be able to build a support base among colleagues to bounce professional advice and to break down the feeling of isolation. The risk is in remaining too insular within the studio network.

One of the agendas of the SSN is to promote assisted studios nationally. Their web portal has great potential for breaking down some of the barriers in industry and opening up the market for these artists.

There is a growing friction from the traditional role of the studio to support people making art, to this new role of the studio as agent, to get the work into the public space and market. Critical is building awareness and networks beyond 'their world', and to find the right checks and balances in navigating needs and quality.

Sim Luttin, Gallery Manager for Arts Project Australia, said, 'It is always more complicated when you are dealing with artists with intellectual disability because you are acting as agent, you are storying their work. You have a huge responsibility for those artist and their careers and pricing their work is a whole other thing' in getting those balances right.

Rhodes added, 'If these artists are currently locked in a discourse of outsider art, at least their work is valued and visible. And perhaps, as the culture catches up, they and their work will come in more emphatically from the margins and take their place within the mainstream artwork.'

Perhaps it is all just swings and roundabouts; with each generation comes a slight distilling of misguided perception and greater immersion. Curiously, it was the Hayward Gallery in London that presented the first exhibition in 1979, *Outsiders: Artists without Precedent or Tradition*, curated by Cardinal and Victor Musgrave.

We go full circle. While Massimilian Gioni's Venice Biennale was framed around a work by self-taught artist Marino Auriti (1891-1980), the Hayward also returned to the outsider with its exhibition *An Alternative Guide to the Universe*, and across

town, the Wellcome Collection showed concurrently *Souzou: Outsider Art from Japan*, and Sydney's MCA presented Barclay's highly successful exhibition *String Theory*.

Robert Jackson remarked that, 'The historical return to Outsider art does little to characterise what it actually *is*, rather than characterise what the mainstream wants it to be.'

He added, 'The turn to Outsider Art is, unexpectedly not new and the mainstream art world has a habit of doing this every decade or so.' The global rise of the supported studio, while reaching back to the 1970s, has become a kind of alternative academy.

Rhodes wrote, 'Like any field, to be *in it* one has to be engaged in discourse about it, *and* recognized as being so. To be part of it is something a person has to work at...to be visible.'

This symposium and collaborative activities of The Supported Studio Network and Accessible Arts is filling the gaps in that periodical hopscotch, and fostering the vital links between supported studios and broader contemporary arts communities.

Further reading:

Colin Rhodes's paper *On Other Academy: Creative Workshops for Artists with Intellectual Disabilities* appeared in *The International Journal of the Arts In Society*, Vol, 3 No. 1, 2008

Robert Jackson's article: [Outsider Art: The Art Market's 'Cultural Capitalism' Moment](http://aarts.net.au/supportedstudios/outsider-art-the-art-markets-cultural-capitalism-moment/). (<http://aarts.net.au/supportedstudios/outsider-art-the-art-markets-cultural-capitalism-moment/>) originally posted by furtherfield.org

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