

Contemporary Outsider Art: The Global Context Conference

Artists Stream Report

The first session was a panel discussion chaired by Sue Roff, including speakers from Project Ability (UK), NIAD Art Centre (USA) and Art Enables (USA), who each described their working methods before a panel discussion delved into the lived complexity of art production. The panel addressed the apparent paradox of social inclusion and outsider art in the context of supported studios. All speakers described the term outsider as problematic in the context of supported studios, however there was also an acknowledgement of the strategic value of the term in advocacy and securing funding for their work.

Session 2 focused on different global perspectives on the field of outsider art and featured speakers with experience of art production in Cambodia, Israel and China. While these different countries have emergent discourses on outsider art, the main point of discussion was the lack of support for outsider artists both within, and outside of, the mainstream art world in these contexts. Discussion pointed to the idea that a division between mainstream and outsider doesn't hold up easily in non-western contexts, and in fact the very idea of an 'outside' might be culturally specific. There was also in the discussion a questioning of the idea of the artists' inner compulsion to create, suggesting a more pragmatic relationship between art production and the system of art's reception.

The third session of the artists' stream included two parts, firstly a presentation by the Beyond Access research team at the University of Melbourne followed by a talk by artists from the Dax Centre. The Beyond Access session emphasised the value of appreciating diversity within the field of disability studies and suggested that work by artists with experience of disability is worthy of greater critical attention. The session also highlighted the importance of the voice of artists in addressing and transforming stigma associated with disability. The artists talk featured three artists from the Dax Centre who described their perspectives as artists and reflected on the idea of the "outsider". Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly all three artists embraced the history, and also the strategic value, of the identity of the outsider. Discussion suggested that the position of the outsider might provide a point of critical difference from mainstream society for some artists, enabling a sense of agency for those who are disaffected with societal norms. The field of outsider art acknowledges difference and creates a space of belonging for those with experience of mental illness.

The fourth and final session of the day addressed the idea of collaboration between artists from supported studios and mainstream artists. The speakers on the panel drew out the similarity in quality and contemporary significance of art produced in supported studios and compared this with art produced in art schools – breaking down the idea of inherent binary opposition between the two, and allowing for greater diversity of aesthetic and conceptual approaches within the field of outsider art. An interesting point that arose relating to supported studios was importance of the right for artists to say no, disagree, and not conform to the preferences of arts workers, tutors and peers. In the last part of

the session, artists from DADAA in Western Australia took part in a facilitated discussion where they reflected on their work, aesthetics, processes and the way their work was received in the exhibition *From the Outside*. This was followed by lively discussion with the audience.