

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Book Review by David Maclagan**

**Outsider Art and Art Therapy: shared histories, current issues  
and future identities**

**Rachel Cohen**

**Jessica Kingsley 2017**

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I found this a very frustrating and disappointing book on an important topic. It is quite American, both in its subject-matter and its style, and is not very well written. Most of the principal issues are flagged up, but not early enough, and proper discussion of them, which is often cursory, is often postponed until towards the end. Knowing the expense of reproduction, I was surprised that half-a-dozen of the plates (e.g. Hogarth, Pinel, Blake & Rousseau) were all-too familiar and not really relevant, besides being rather murky. I am afraid that this is not a book I would recommend, and it is a pity that it now looks as though the subject has been covered.

Rachel Cohen is an art therapist working mainly in a rehabilitation studio in Brooklyn. As she points out (p. 18-21), this form of art therapy differs significantly from what she calls 'psychodynamic' art therapy. In a way this mirrors some of the differences between Dubuffet's Art Brut and Outsider Art: the former's strict criteria for aesthetic originality and complete social or

psychological isolation (in theory) have gradually been replaced by the latter's more loosely defined and socially recognized features. Likewise, the distinction between art as art and art within a strictly therapeutic context has now been blurred. This has many positive aspects to it, which the author emphasizes; but there are also difficult aspects, such as the assumption that making art is therapeutic in itself, that she doesn't really explore.

For example, the author refers to all the participants in her programme as 'professional artists who do not work within traditional contexts' (p. 127), and claims that the art therapist there has a dual role '...as both therapist and sales agent or gallerist [and that] the therapeutic benefits of both the artmaking and art setting can in some way link both sides under the art umbrella.' (p. 129) The original inspiration for this conflation of 'therapeutic' and commercial benefits was surely Leo Navratil's 'Artist's House' at Gugging (part of the Klosterneuberg psychiatric hospital near Vienna). Navratil maintained that sales improved patients' self-esteem and therefore constituted a form of art therapy. There are serious and difficult questions here that reach beyond the issues of the kinds of help and encouragement given to studio members on a simply human level, or of the ethical handling of profits from sales. An additional complication is that many such studios have become hunting grounds for dealers and collector of Outsider Art, in much the same way as, fifty years ago, psychiatric hospitals were a major source for Dubuffet's collection.

Rachel Cohen's book quite rightly looks at the historical background to all this. Unfortunately, it does this in ways that are too often piecemeal or curtailed. It would have been better to have flagged up the problematic relations between art and art therapy early on, and to have gone into them later in greater depth. For example, the problem of the aesthetic value of art therapy images is introduced on p. 22, but not engaged with until p. 126-7, and then in an unsatisfying way. It is a shame that several major British writers on this topic, such as Marion Milner, Rita Simon or Martina Thomson, are not even mentioned. On the other hand, do we really need an abbreviated history of

attitudes towards mental illness that takes up 20 of the book's 175 pages and is readily available elsewhere, and in better form?

Chapter Two, which attempts to cover the vast area of the relation between conventional art and exotic, primitive or avant-garde art, also bites off more than it can chew: the material on p. 149-51 would have done just as well on its own. Once again, key works, such as Hall & Metcalf's 'The Artist Outsider', are not even mentioned. The book's American bias does, however, throw up some interesting material in Chapter Three on Florence Cane and Edith Kramer, and their defence of the art component in art therapy (p. 107-10).

Obviously, when it comes to art studio practice, Cohen is writing from her own experience, and here at least she is on firmer ground. But the four or so pages she devotes to it do not go into any detail about how members are selected, their work reviewed or staff supervised, let alone any more problematic issues. Early on she makes the peculiar confession that

'As an art therapist working in a studio day habilitation program for adults with developmental disabilities I can honestly say I never practiced art therapy, but I used it all the time.' (p.127).

The reader is left to work out the meaning of this for themselves.

In the early years of Outsider Art (and certainly of Art Brut) the strikingly 'original' quality of the work was underlined by the artist's supposed insulation from any kind of culture, high or low. Of course this couldn't really be the case; but what now seems to be happening, in the kind of studio that the author works in, is a flood of imagery derived from such popular sources as adverts, comics and TV. The result, in all too many cases, is something like a kind of artificially cultivated naïve art (as a dozen of the illustrations in this book show). The recourse to popular idioms that can be readily recognized and thus be seen as some form of communication or expression is familiar to many art therapists working in the area of severe disability, but it raises some uncomfortable questions, which this book does not address.

By the same token, such art studios need to protect their members from harm or exploitation at more than a commercial level. It is surely a cliché that even famous artists can suffer from the side-effects of their fame. The author claims that

‘...ignoring all aesthetics while asking people to create under the guise of ‘art’ negates many of the potential benefits that the individual can reap from the creative act. If the product becomes something to hide and keep between therapist and client, the potential for empowerment, celebration of creativity, and even a closer connection to the role of artist, is diminished...’ (p. 170).

There is, however, a shadow side to this encouragement, because we cannot always be sure what the inner effects of exhibition (in every sense) might be on the artists concerned, many of whom may be unable to articulate them. This might not apply to Cohen’s own LAND gallery, but it is a real issue nonetheless, which deserves more discussion than she gives it.

### **References**

Hall, M. & Metcalf, E. (1994) *The Artist Outsider*, Smithsonian, Washington.