

25. January 2023

Dear members and friends of the EOA

Wishing all members and friends of the EOA a Happy and creative New Year!

At the turn of the year we saw the release of the second edition of Colin Rhodes' book 'Outsider Art', closely followed by the e-book edition of the classic publication of the same title by Roger Cardinal. Nevertheless, the term Outsider Art is proving as controversial as ever. There is an important debate to be had as to the problems the term poses. On the one hand there is the historic definition of a group of artists and their works, by people such as Dubuffet and Cardinal and on the other a position an excluded artist holds in relation to the art world. This physical distancing of artists outside of the artworld has more recently been reclaimed by artists themselves looking for a definition that they feel fits them. We could ask 'why is not all art simply called art today and is the term Outsider Art and the distinction it seeks to make superfluous?'

Although I'm not a supporter of the romanticizing idea of Jean Dubuffet, who saw in art brut the only authentic art, created by people who do not think about the art market and only draw inspiration from themselves, I have reservations about the abolition of the term Outsider Art. Because art is not a neutral term. It does not denote unencumbered normality but is rather normative and strongly ideologically charged. In 1971, Linda Nochlin answered the question "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in her famous essay pointing to the fact that the traditional concept of the great artist excludes women. Although many female artists have received well-deserved recognition since then, the fundamental concept of art has hardly changed. This is partly because successful female artists mostly just fill those positions in the art world that were previously reserved for men - instead of questioning the foundations of the art world itself.

Many artists who create what we call outsider art remain excluded from the art world. Apart from their lack of formal artistic training with famous teachers which would give them recognition in the eyes of curators and critics, they are also not able to take part in the art world machinery of self-promotion and fighting for recognition. It is hardly surprising as to be an artist is one of the hardest roles in our society. Who would want to live in this state of permanent self-exploitation with attention to the market at the same time? Especially if due to your health, disability, or life circumstance you are further removed from the art world and the majority of practicing artists. One of the questions we might consider are 'why are some artists who work in supported studios out of necessity are not deemed to be what the art world is looking for?' The art world requires and needs artists with new ideas and ways of working, drawings, paintings, sculptures, installations, the "crazier" and bigger the better. But it does not want to be confronted with the artists life situation, especially if this is challenging due to their disability or circumstance which can render them unable to traverse the steps needed to be validated and accepted. The often unique and interesting ideas behind these artists work pose challenges too and art experts refrain from hearing too much about the artists, telling the arts community that it is the art itself that counts.

However, it is not true that audiences do not consider the lives of the artists behind art works. We all know that they were created by human beings. But in a mainstream art world context instead of having this detailed knowledge of their lives and motivations we default to clichés and art world jargon. We are convinced that they are well educated and knowledgeable about the art of their time, that they are intelligent, very sensitive – and look at the world like all “normal” people do. This concept of the artist is what reigns today and to which some artists from the field of Outsider Art want to be subservient to. They do not realise that this does not mean integration or inclusion but surrendering to colonization.

The term Outsider Art might not be ideal, but it is established as denoting art works at the fringes of the art world, an area where the rigid ideology of “normal” art is less powerful and alternative concepts are still possible. It is precious to not fit into categories, it is precious not to be streamlined and easily marketable. It is precious to resist the concept of not talking about content and context, about fears and special life experience behind the art practice unless artists choose to do so. The art world is not yet ready to include Outsider Art yet with all its peculiarities. Therefore, I strongly advocate to stick proudly with the term Outsider Art.

We can have an exchange about this and other topics at EOAs international conference 2023 which will take place at the open art museum – zentrum für outsider kunst in St. Gallen/Switzerland from May 11th to 14th on the topic “Outsider Art and Tradition”. The annual general assembly is on Sunday 14 May. Hope to see you there.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thomas Röske', with a stylized, cursive script.

Thomas Röske

President of EOA

EUROPEAN**OUTSIDER ART**ASSOCIATION