To what extent can we experience autistic art in contemporary culture as ‘art’ without the ‘outsider’ tag?

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Abstract

The widespread acceptance of the term ‘outsider’, continues to impact on the interpretation of work by autistic artists, classifying them as ‘other’ and positioning them outside of the canon of art.

The overall purpose of this dissertation is to facilitate a greater understanding of how autistic artists find themselves positioned within the contemporary art world. This is in order to dismantle the term outsider and expose its inadequacies, and to highlight more inclusive ways of integrating autistic experience into the gallery environment.

This research investigates the obstacles autistic artists face when competing as artists, in particular their categorisation as an outsider artist. This dissertation also examines different ways that ability and talent manifest in both autistic and neurotypical artists, and how the term ‘autistic’ is interpreted differently when applied to each of these groups.

The study draws upon findings from previous research, to generate discussion in three chapters focusing on factors associated with art and autism. Alongside this literary research, this dissertation conducts interviews with autistic and neurotypical contemporary artists to create primary information that can be considered in relation to the secondary research.

This dissertation argues that autistic artists are misrepresented and misunderstood within the contemporary art world and that this is facilitated to a large extent by the art institutions that choose to exhibit their work, and by accepted cultural norms.

Thus, this dissertation proposes a shift in attitudes, initiated by the abandonment of the term outsider, in favour of inclusivity, and a consideration of autistic artists as purely artists. In doing so, it proposes an increased understanding of autistic sensual experience, as a means of establishing more accepting art world environments.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my participants who gave up their time to talk with me. I also thank them for allowing me to use their perspectives to further my research and understanding. As well as this, I thank them for letting me use their artwork as primary imagery in this dissertation. Without their time, artwork and sharing of information I would not have been able to create a personal and primary-based body of research.

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Introduction

> 'If the word autism doesn't appear as a title or a label' when viewing artworks 'then we would never know the art is created by someone with autism'.[1]

With this statement, Keri Bowers presents the argument that the work of autistic artists is equally as valid as work by neurotypical artists and should therefore be appreciated in the same way. Her statement questions pervading structures within the art world and within society in general, that dictate the way art by autistic artists is viewed. She suggests that there is a lack of understanding of the autistic condition. This leads to autistic artists existing within a contradiction. On the one hand, their work operates within and conforms to a neurotypical context. On the other hand, when the art world draws attention to the uniqueness of an autistic artist's vision, they are typically 'fetishised' as 'other', or 'outsider'. [2]

The term outsider was originally introduced by Roger Cardinal as a way of referring to Jean Dubuffet's 'Art Brut' creators.[3] Today it is used as an all-encompassing term to describe any artist, regardless of their practice, that has a disability, is untrained or suffers from social exclusion.[4] This research sets out to deconstruct the term outsider when applied to the work of autistic artists by highlighting the problematic nature of its usage. The intention is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between autism and contemporary art by answering three key questions.

First of all, when we know an artwork is created by someone with autism, how does that affect the way we read it? Secondly, how is an autistic artist's role different from that of a neurotypical artist in the contemporary art world? And finally, why do we marginalise autistic

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[1] Keri Bowers, "Art: The Conscious Use Of Skill And Creative Imagination", in *Artism: The Art Of Autism* (Art Today, 2011), p.6.
[2] Alan Yentob, *Imagine Documentary - Turning The Art World Inside Out* (BBC, 2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98RUUhVgLR0> [Accessed 5 September 2020].
[3] Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972).
[4] Raw Vision, "What Is Outsider Art? | Raw Vision Magazine", *Rawvision.Com*, 2015 <https://rawvision.com/about/what-is-outsider-art> [Accessed 30 November 2020].

artists as being ‘outside’ of the canon of conventional art? To answer these questions, it is also necessary to ask other questions targeting specific topics associated with autism and art. This will provide context for the discussion and facilitate a deeper understanding of the positioning of autistic artists. These questions will be explored in the chapters ‘The Role of Senses’, ‘Savant Skills’, and ‘Outsider Art’. Once these questions are addressed, it is intended that a more complete understanding is obtained which will help to dismantle the generalised categorisation of autistic artists as outsider artists.

Although there are existing pockets of research exploring these questions, there is currently no body of research directly addressing the relationship between autism and contemporary art. This dissertation sets out to draw upon the work done by others, in an attempt to fill this gap and initiate a deeper understanding of the relationship. In turn, this dissertation will define the position of autistic artists in relation to the contemporary art world and how they find themselves ‘outside’ of it. It presents ways to disrupt existing ideologies and assert a more integrated proposition of ways that these artists and their work can be considered in the same way as non-autistic artists.

The inspiration for this dissertation and the point from which these questions arose, came from accompanying an autistic friend to a ‘relaxed opening’ of the ‘Anthony Gormley’ exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2019. The opening catered specifically for people with autism spectrum conditions or sensory processing difficulties. Experiencing art through this non-neurotypical lens opens our visual perceptions further than expected, as you become aware of how your other senses augment the visual. During the opening, what struck a chord was how differently autistic people interact with art as an audience. It prompted the realisation that this might also be true when someone with autism creates art.

Greater insight into the ways an autistic audience interacts with art facilitates an awareness of the positioning of autism in contemporary culture. It also opens up new possibilities for

how art can be created and experienced. This insight stems from the knowledge of how an autistic person experiences art, both as a creator and receiver, and how those experiences are different from what we consider neurotypical. This deeper understanding contributes to the contemporary art conversation, rather than sitting outside of it. If autistic artists are fetishised and attention is drawn to their condition, ahead of the art itself, this creates a situation where someone with autism will feel like an outsider in a neurotypical gallery environment. However, if we take a more informed approach driven by a desire for understanding and an ideology focused on inclusion, as illustrated by the Gormley opening, we can take steps towards integrating autistic experience into the gallery environment.

Methodologies are used in this dissertation to address the questions that have been identified. These include research from literary sources, research into practising artists, exhibition analysis, interviews and scientific studies. By making sense of existing materials, the resulting research will contribute towards providing a renewed perspective on the positioning of autism within artistic practice that disassembles the outsider tag.

Bowers writes about a lack of understanding of the relationship between autism and art. She proposes that, to understand autistic artists, we must find a way into experiencing their artworks purely as artworks.[5] By doing so, their work will be able to 'take us on a journey' in which we experience the emotions, events and potential of their lives first-hand. [6] When discussing autistic artists, Bowers suggests that artworks are used as a form of communication and act as a 'bridge' for the artist to disclose personal, 'intimate' and 'deeply compelling' stories with their audience.[7] This concept of art as communication will be discussed further in the 'The Role of the Senses' chapter. It could be argued that all artworks act as a form of communication, so although Bowers' observations are specific to autistic

[5] Bowers, p.6.
[6] Bowers, p.6.
[7] Bowers, p.6.

artists, they can apply to non-autistic artists as well. Furthermore, Bowers writes ‘we are gifted by the sharing of their talents, through which we discover the universality of the artistic impulse and new windows into our souls’ suggesting that work by autistic artists is something powerful for all.[8] From this, we can conclude that autistic artists already add life into contemporary practice, but that they are overlooked. This is made clear when reading Bowers alongside the other literary sources discussed that point out there are things in place preventing the autistic artist from operating freely as an ‘artist’. In particular, the term outsider adds a layer of interpretation to the work, which therefore prevents the artist from ‘taking us on a journey’ in the way they would truly envisage.[9] If we identify and challenge these barriers we can disrupt current perceptions of autistic artists and encourage a greater sense of inclusion.

Debra Hosseini argues that we should shift our perspective of autistic art and ‘recognise the art as the unique expression of the person’ in doing so we would ‘allow the art to illuminate creativity rather than ‘disability’’.[10] Hosseini builds on Bowers’ argument that we should appreciate and recognise the talent of autistic artists. She stresses that we shouldn’t isolate autistic artwork as autistic talent but artistic talent, the same as any other non-autistic artist.[11] This attitude, Hosseini argues, would only bring about positive responses and enforce a sense of equality. Both Bowers and Hosseini suggest that there is a fine line between the terms autistic and artistic, which is reinforced later in the book by Colin Zimbleman, when he writes ‘is there a coincidence that the word autistic is often confused for artistic?’.[12] All three authors recognise the important role that art can play in the lives of people with autism and that consequently, a sensibility or ‘talent’ for art-making can be developed. However, when delving deeper into these sources, there is confusion over wh

[8] Bowers, p.6.
[9] Bowers, p.6.
[10] Debra Hosseini, *Artism: The Art Of Autism* (Art Today, 2011), p.8.
[11] Hosseini, p.8.
[12] Colin Zimbleman, "At Society's Growing Edge", in *Artism: The Art Of Autism* (Art Today, 2011), p.113.

ether appreciation for this talent should be attributed to the artist's autism, or whether their artistic talent should be evaluated in the same way as artists who are not tagged as outsider.

To gain further insight into how we can effect change in the reception of autistic artists, we must look into disability studies. More seems to have been achieved when talking about disability generally as it encompasses a wider field. Hence we can use disability studies as an example, to see how more can be achieved for autism specifically. This is emphasised in Michael Oliver's book *The New Politics of Disablement,* which was released as a result of his first book *The Politics of Disablement,* in 1990. Oliver states that since 1990 there has been an increased focus on disability studies within academia, which has produced 'meaningful social changes'.[13] However, disability is still regarded as a health and social issue by politicians, practitioners and the general public, which means these views become 'authoritative' and 'provide generalised explanations for multiple deprivations associated with disablement'.[14] From this, we can learn that it is beneficial to see change academically but we also need to see change elsewhere in society for disability to be widely accepted. This same approach is evident in the way Hosseini asks for autistic art to be seen as individual expression, to appreciate the creativity not the disability. Although Oliver's studies are on disability in general, we can conclude from his findings that celebrating the artist as an individual, rather than as someone with autism, is one way of alleviating the social oppression he writes about. This relates especially to the use of the term outsider when describing autistic artists.

[13] Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes, *The New Politics Of Disablement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan. C., 2012) <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=t8YcBQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false> [Accessed 17 November 2020], p.3.
[14] Oliver, p.11.

Although there is a lack of writing specifically about autism within the contemporary art world, literary sources on contemporary art and disability studies can be used to activate an understanding. Alice Wexler and John Derby write about well-known disability slogans, for example, 'Art belongs to everyone'.[15] This slogan was voiced in response to the fact that 'people with disabilities are still controlled and regulated by non-disabled 'experts''.[16] Wexler and Derby suggest that 'self-organisation' should be encouraged, rather than organisation being run by abled people as 'first-hand perspectives… are more accurate than interpretations'.[17] This reinforces the idea of portraying creative individuality, and that we should not generalise disabled artists just as we should not generalise disabled people. We can argue that by demanding individuality for disabled artists we can begin to see the same happen for autistic artists. The nature of non-visible disabilities like autism, compared to visible, could be a reason why people view autistic artists differently. It could also explain why more seems to have been achieved for disabled artists in general and not autistic artists specifically. It is positive that academic research and social changes are occurring for the wider population of people with disabilities, but this dissertation highlights change for autism specifically. It would also go against the proposals of these literary sources if this dissertation generalised autistic art under the umbrella of disabled art. Therefore, although these sources can contribute towards a broader understanding, they do not specifically address issues relating to autism within contemporary art and the outsider tag.

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[15] Alice Wexler and John Derby, "Participatory and Community-Based Contemporary Art Practices with People with Disabilities", in *Contemporary Art And Disability Studies 2019* (Routledge, 2019) <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=e0LBDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&authuser=0&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false> [Accessed 3 November 2020, subsequently removed from the internet], unpaginated.

[16] Wexler and Derby, "Participatory and Community-Based Contemporary Art Practices with People with Disabilities".

[17] Wexler and Derby, "Participatory and Community-Based Contemporary Art Practices with People with Disabilities".

From reading and analysing these texts, we find that they only touch the surface of trying to understand autism within contemporary art. Although the subject of autism has been explored through popular culture, for example in the film *Rain Man*, it has yet to be explored in the field of critical literature relating specifically to art. The chapters will formulate a wider understanding of the condition and its role within the art world. Scientific studies will also be used alongside this research to make sure there is an evidence-based understanding, as well as a literary understanding. The intention is that this dissertation will present a more complete response to the positioning of autism within contemporary art and propose a shift in the way it is interpreted.

The inclusion of artist research provides concrete evidence of how autistic artists operate within the current environment. By examining the work of specific artists, we can gain insight into what they are making, where and how they are making, ways they are exhibiting and how their work is received. This research draws awareness to these artists, who may or may not be known for their autism, but are currently working and exhibiting in contemporary galleries. The research looks into their current positioning in the art world and how their practice is received. Once this has been established, we can then gain further perspective on the balance between the promotion of autistic talent and the fetishisation of that talent.

This dissertation will also include interviews with autistic and non-autistic artists currently working in the contemporary field. This is intended as a way of keeping the research primary and each chapter will include information from the interviews. Interview responses will be considered against findings from the literary research, either supporting or challenging them. This will help to ascertain whether the research findings are dependable or relevant for current, practising contemporary artists. The participants will be identified as A, B, C & D for conciseness, however, they will be named in the appendix alongside a brief synopsis about them. They were also asked to send examples of their artistic practice to corroborate their interviews and these artworks are featured in each chapter. This means that they are not

officially published anywhere, they are the personal possessions of each interviewee. It is apparent that disclosing the participants as autistic and neurotypical has the potential to create preconceptions in the mind of the reader, however, it has been done entirely for purposes of clarity. This will enlighten the reader regarding the differences and similarities between these artists. Thus, enabling a shift in attitudes to eliminate future preconceptions and helping to confirm this dissertations argument. The interviews investigate if and how the interviewees are aligned, by themselves or by others, to the outsider tag. The interviews will also evaluate whether or not the interviewees believe the term should be used and how their experience of this labelling might impact their overall experience of existing and operating in, or outside of, the contemporary art world.

The research is intentionally focused on the contemporary period. It is only within the past century that attention has been drawn to autistic people practising as artists, and the autistic condition has been accepted within society as a whole. As a result of the work of Dubuffet, Cardinal and others, autistic artists have experienced increased opportunities under the auspices of being outsider artists and have gained a presence and an audience in the contemporary art world. Narrowing the scope of this dissertation will enable a more focused evaluation of the current situation for autistic artists and the validity of the term outsider today. We can then shed light on the way art by autistic artists is created, critically viewed and received.

Chapter One: 'The Role of the Senses'

What role does art play in the mental and emotional development of someone with autism?

What are the aspects of art-making and art viewing that gain heightened importance for autistic artists and the autistic audience?

What are the similarities and differences between an autistic art experience and one that is neurotypical?

This chapter gives insight into how autism can affect sensual experience in autistic people and how this in turn affects the way autistic artists create and experience art. Heightened sensual experience is intrinsic, both during the process of creating art and in the viewing experience. For many autistic artists, the senses form the core of how they personally communicate and how they speak through their artwork.

The questions explored in this chapter are aimed at providing an understanding of the similarities and differences between how autistic artists and neurotypical artists draw upon their senses in an artistic setting. It also explores how the senses can impact on the way we view or experience art. This will help take the emphasis away from the term 'outsider' and instead take a more holistic approach to how artists and audiences interact with art on a sensual level. From the literary sources already discussed we have seen that art can be beneficial when communicating for autistic individuals, so what role do the senses play here? In general, as an artist, the senses are prominent when creating and receiving information. Thus, It can be argued that all artists rely on sensory experiences to produce their artworks. What interests us here is how autistic and neurotypical artists respond to their senses, and how their experiences might be different. Insights can be gained through interviews and research sources, however, first we need to understand how the senses are affected by autism before we can discuss how they impact on artistic practice.

Many people with autism experience difficulty when processing sensory information in day to day life. Autistic individuals can be either 'hypersensitive (over-reactive) or hypo sensitive

(under-reactive) to sensory input', they can also experience disjointed and distorted perceptions.[18] This can make sensory overload more likely as autistic individuals may be over-sensitive to particular sensations. This can also mean that they can be stimulated by just a small amount of sensation.[19] Thus, sensory overload happens when something overstimulates just one or multiple senses.[20] This means that there is too much information for the brain to process. To avoid sensory overload most autistic people learn what their triggers are. Autistic creatives often use art as a tool to perform an action and therefore control or reduce the anxiety produced by these triggers. Artworks developed in this manner will be discussed later in the chapter. It can be argued that these are common ways that outsider artists in general make artworks, which may explain why autistic artists are easily classified as outsider. As stated in the introduction, the term outsider has been used to collectively label artists from a range of backgrounds and group them as one entity. This can be problematic because it creates a framework from which to consider these artists and makes it difficult to assess the work purely on its merits, something which is not an issue for other artists. These issues are discussed further in the 'Outsider Art' chapter.

Research into art therapy can provide an understanding of the relationship between art and the senses for autistic people and the role art plays in the mental and emotional development of someone with autism. Nicola Martin argues that art can be used to regulate sensory experiences, by being something to focus on, to distract feelings and reduce stress.[21] This suggests that creating art can be helpful for individuals with autism, as a means of communicating that is easier than talking. Martin further writes that art therapy is a

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[18] Autism Tasmania, "Sensory Differences - Autism Tasmania", *Autism Tasmania* <https://www.autismtas.org.au/about-autism/key-areas-of-difference/sensory-differences/> [Accessed 7 September 2020].
[19] Autism Speaks, "Sensory Issues | Autism Speaks", *Autism Speaks* <https://www.autismspeaks.org/sensory-issues> [Accessed 7 September 2020].
[20] Ellen Braaten, "What Is Sensory Overload?", *Understood.Org* <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/child-learning-disabilities/sensory-processing-issues/what-is-sensory-overload> [Accessed 3 November 2020].
[21] Nicole Martin MAAT, LPC, ATR 'Art Therapy and Autism: Overview and Recommendations', *Art Therapy,* 26:4 (2009), 187-190, <DOI: 10.1080/07421656.2009.10129616>, p,188.

natural fit for autistic people because art-making is a 'rich sensory experience' that has the 'ability to encapsulate and organise complex topics'.[22] This suggests that art-making is used as a parallel strategy to cope with the daily sensory struggles experienced. This method of using art as a way of coping and communicating is also adopted by many neurotypical artists. However, this is due to other factors like social and mental difficulties as well as sensory difficulties. Communication is key to developing an understanding of ourselves and others. The notion of art as therapy is not unique to individuals with autism, it can apply to anyone and can be present in the practice of all artists. The point here is that this aspect of making is often heightened in autistic artists, but is not unique to them. By considering these artists for their contribution on an artistic level we can bypass the outsider tag and look more clearly at the work as 'art'. To do this, we must look at how autistic and neurotypical artists approach art-making as therapy differently.

Primary research through conducting interviews with autistic and non-autistic artists enables us to see these differences. Participant A demonstrates how their artistic practice is used as a way of communicating their autism. They make cartoons that depict a caricature of themselves going about their life portraying the anxieties, the tiredness and elation they feel daily, as seen in figure 1. In interview, participant A explained how they use their artwork as a way of understanding themselves, but also how they create it for neurotypical people to be able to understand them, as they quote, 'they don't understand me, but if my work is clear they'll understand me'.[23] Here they suggest that most people do not engage with them as an autistic individual and cannot communicate on the same level. Instead, information that will enable an understanding for neurotypical people is better communicated visually. Participant A's use of cartoons is successful here as they are easy to understand and have universal appeal, they are not solely applicable to the autistic condition. On the other hand, neurotypical participant D communicates on a personal level through their artwork but says

[22] Martin, p.188.
[23] Participant A, Interview on being an autistic artist (Online, 27.10.2020), [see appendix 1.A].

that their work is not for someone else to try and understand, it is more to do with 'personal expression than direct communication'.[24] This expression is shown through the abstract style in their piece *Untitled*. Here we can see a difference in how the idea of communication is approached through both participants' artworks. It can be argued that, the autistic artist holds a stronger need to communicate their state of being to an audience whereas the neurotypical artist does not have the same pressures and creates work with a more personal emphasis and sense of freedom. Therefore, this can emphasise the difference between how autistic and non-autistic artists approach communication in their art practice.

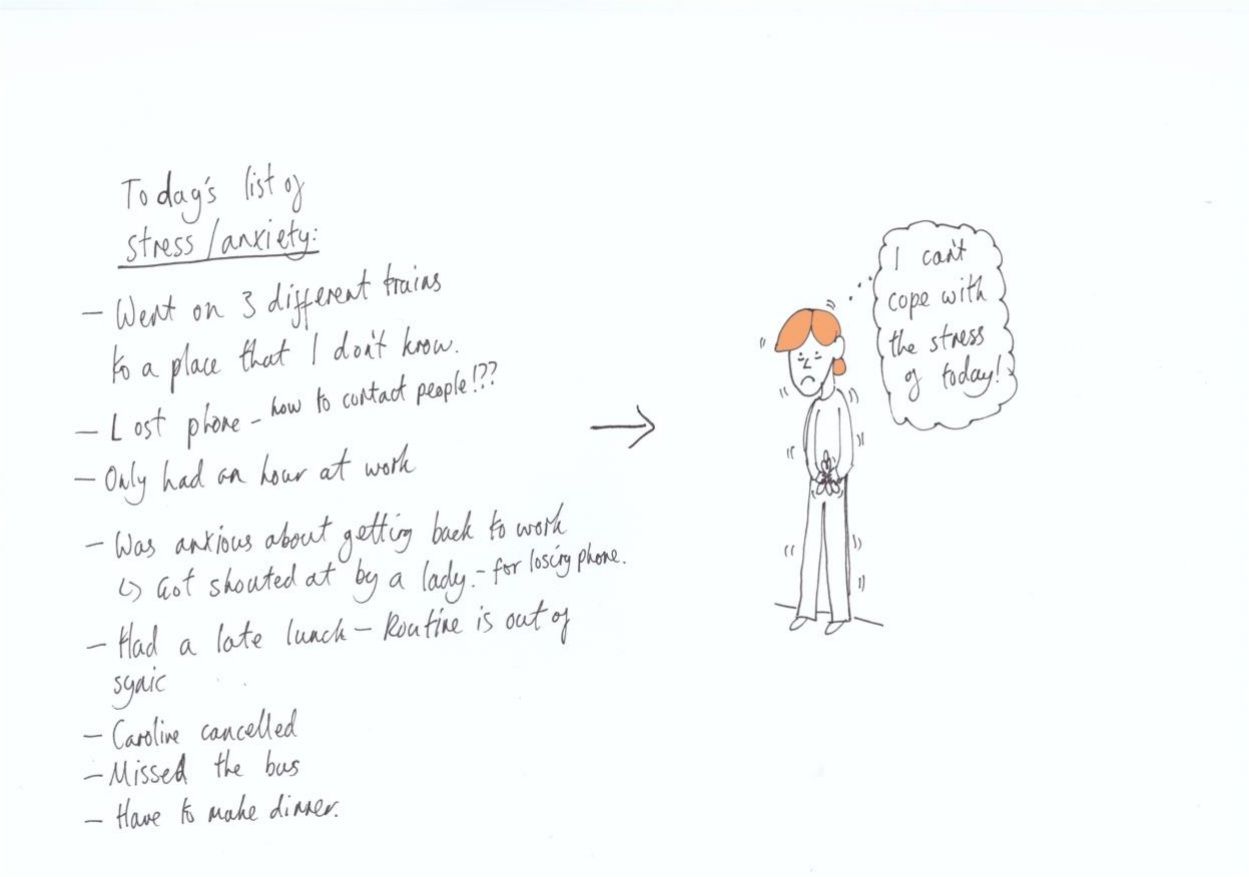

Figure 1. Participant A: 'I can't cope with the stress of today'

[24] Participant D, Interview on being a neurotypical artist (Online, 24.11.2020), [see appendix 1.D].

Figure 2. Participant D: Untitled

Another example of art being used to aid communication is the case study of autistic artist Iris Halmshall. Halmshall was non-verbal until the age of 6, prior to this she avoided eye contact and hadn't developed any language.[25] From a young age, her parents introduced her to art materials and let her create freely. Halmshall was highly sensitive to noise and was often irritated. However, when she was creating art her demeanour was a lot calmer; using tactile materials gave her confidence and provided a distraction, so she was better able to process more of her immediate surroundings.[26] This meant that her parents could communicate verbally and physically with her when they normally couldn't. Halmshall has found worldwide success and has used her profits to pay for speech therapy, which as a result of, she can now communicate with others verbally.[27] This is a prime example of art

[25] Arabella Carter-Johnson, "About Iris Grace", *Iris Grace Painting* <https://irisgracepainting.com/about-2/> [Accessed 3 December 2020].
[26] Arabella Carter-Johnson, "About Iris Grace".
[27] Arabella Carter-Johnson, "About Iris Grace".

being used as a means of communication and gives insight into the role art plays in the mental and emotional development of someone with autism.

Having gained some awareness of the role art plays for someone with autism, we then need to understand what aspects of art-making and art viewing gain heightened importance for autistic people. Anna Berry is an autistic artist whose practice demonstrates a need to place importance on the role of the senses when interacting with art. Berry's piece *Breathing Room* is an immersive experience that invites the audience to travel through a kinetic tunnel lined with paper cones that 'breath'.[28] The tunnel gently moves and is designed to create a strange multi-sensory experience. Where the research relating to participants A and D was concerned with how artists use their senses to create artwork and cope with communication, Berry instead incorporates sensual engagement into an experience for her audience. Her piece involves tactile, physical materials that you can touch and auditory sensations created by the kinetic motions. In her artist's statement, Berry says that she tries to 'reflect something about the world from a truly outsider perspective, to allow people to see something about their world to which they are otherwise blind'.[29] This suggests that she is trying to make her audience aware of the motions and noises preoccupying her mind every day as a person with autistic symptoms. Inspired by her own sensual experiences, *Breathing Room* is an attempt to translate those experiences for her audience and for them to experience something similar. The work encourages viewers to appreciate autistic sensory symptoms in what is normally a neurotypical context.

Personal accounts by family members give insight into the ways that autistic individuals use art in response to an involuntary heightening of their senses. They also help us to

[28] Anna Berry, *Breathing Room*, 2014, site-specific artwork, Milton Keynes, available at <http://www.annaberry.co.uk/breathing-room/> [Accessed 3 November 2020].
[29] Anna Berry, "Post-Alternative-Statement: You Want The Truth? You Can'T Handle The Truth…", *Anna Berry* <http://www.annaberry.co.uk/3-2/about-me/artists-statement/post-alternative-statement-you-want-the-truth-you-cant-handle-the-truth/> [Accessed 3 November 2020].

understand the factors that make the art-making experience both similar and different to neurotypical artists. Eileen Miller introduces us to her daughter Kim who has hypersensitive hearing and would scream to block out other sounds in the room or make them stop.[30] As well as this, when she was over-stimulated she would squint to 'filter' her surroundings.[31] Kim would 'utilise art as a form of release and communication' as a distraction from the auditory triggers.[32] This illustrates that although fluctuations in her senses could be overpowering, she used making and creating artwork as a release to lessen the intensity of her sensory experiences. By limiting the painful visual and auditory triggers and being aware of sensory overload it is possible to reduce the heightened sense of stimulation that exacerbates the symptoms of autism, which is what Kim achieved when drawing. For example, when sounds caused her pain she drew images depicting this. Later on in the book, Kim writes 'after many years of creating, I realise that I have become a liberated autistic individual not confined by mere words'. [33] This emphasises how she recognised that her artwork was part of who she was and that it was her language, freeing her from sensory disruption. The fact that she could communicate this through words demonstrates how much art helped her to be able to process speaking and writing, which are both highly visual and auditory processes. While it could be argued that using art in this way distinguishes Kim from conventional artists, it can equally be argued that her immersion in, and dedication to, the making process, positions her as a valuable contributor to the development of contemporary art practice.

Participant A experiences similar auditory triggers to Kim. They also cannot work in a noisy environment and get easily distracted, due to their autistic symptoms. In order to cope with these sensory disturbances they use headphones to block out the sounds and create an

[30] Eileen Miller, *The Girl Who Spoke With Pictures* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008), p.41.
[31] Miller, p.36.
[32] Miller, p.36.
[33] Miller, p.203.

'uninterrupted environment'.[34] Sometimes they listen to podcasts they've listened to before to help tune into their creativity and keep focused, instead of listening to music which is too distracting. In contrast, neurotypical participant C explains how art is therapeutic for them, but that they feel controlled by environmental or social factors. They believe that their senses are the 'core' to their being and they use audio as background noise to accompany their artwork, which helps to focus their emotions. However, using audio is not fuelled by a need to respond to sensory triggers. As such, they wish to 'not be worried and fixated on external factors' and to create artworks stimulated by a simple response to their sensory environments.[35] While both interviewees describe the senses as 'core', each has a distinct approach to involving the senses in their art-making. Participant C is preoccupied with the social and environmental factors in their life rather than being aware of their immediate senses, whereas, participant A is overwhelmingly aware of their senses, which are what cause struggles within their environments as an autistic individual. Making art is the product of their response. These separate approaches illustrate the ways autistic and non-autistic artists create and experience work in response to their senses, and how these are different.

Greater awareness of how autistic people experience life and art through reliance on their senses will enable cultural institutions to adapt and become more inclusive of the autistic public. An example of such an adaptation is the 'relaxed opening' of the 'Anthony Gormley' exhibition at the Royal Academy, which took place for an hour before the museum opened to the general public. Handouts and maps were provided prior to the opening and on arrival which highlighted the dark, bright, quiet and noisy areas of the gallery and exhibition, see figures 3 and 4.[36] Simple graphics of the artworks on the map referenced any triggers you were to expect. In considering these resources, we can see that if sensory warnings are

[34] Participant A, (Online, 27.10.2020), [see appendix 1.A].
[35] Participant C, Interview on being a neurotypical artist (online, 11.11.2020), [see appendix 1.C].
[36] The Royal Academy, *Anthony Gormley Sensory Map*, 2019 <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/event/relaxed-opening-antony-gormley-sensory-processing-difficulties-autism-spectrum-conditions-access> [Accessed 10 December 2020].

given, this helps viewers to try to reduce the sensory overload and anxiety that they may experience. These strategies allow a neurotypical experience to be transformed into something more inclusive for autistic viewers. Other galleries are also moving forward in light of developments in disability studies to address restrictions within their institutions. Thus, we are experiencing removal of some of the barriers that normative and ableist practices present, within the contemporary art world. The Royal Academy's relaxed opening demonstrates how we can make the art world more accessible for autistic people and demonstrates how more galleries can follow suit. A shift to more integration will come hand in hand with a greater understanding of autistic artists and enable a more holistic view that moves away from viewing these artists as outsider.

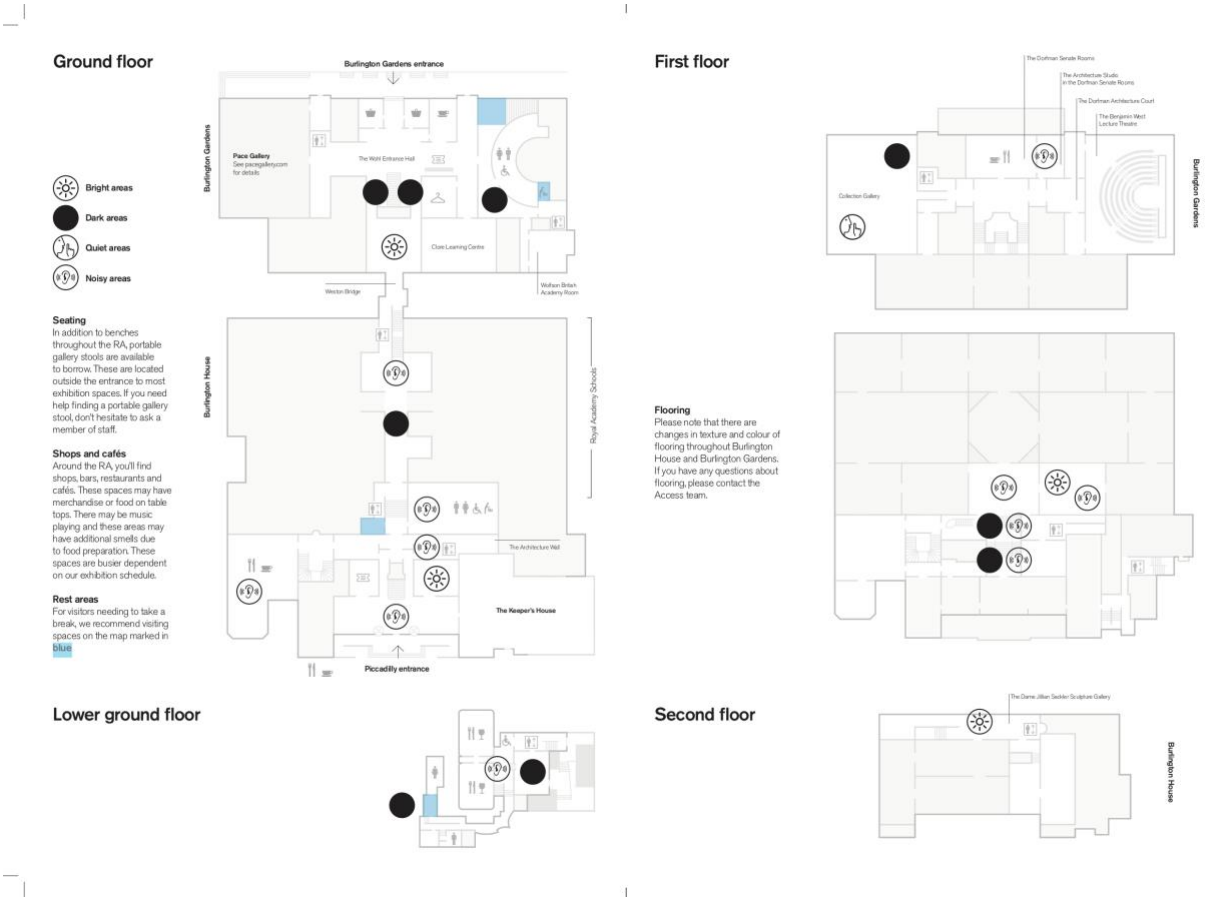

Figure 3. Sensory Map of the Royal Academy

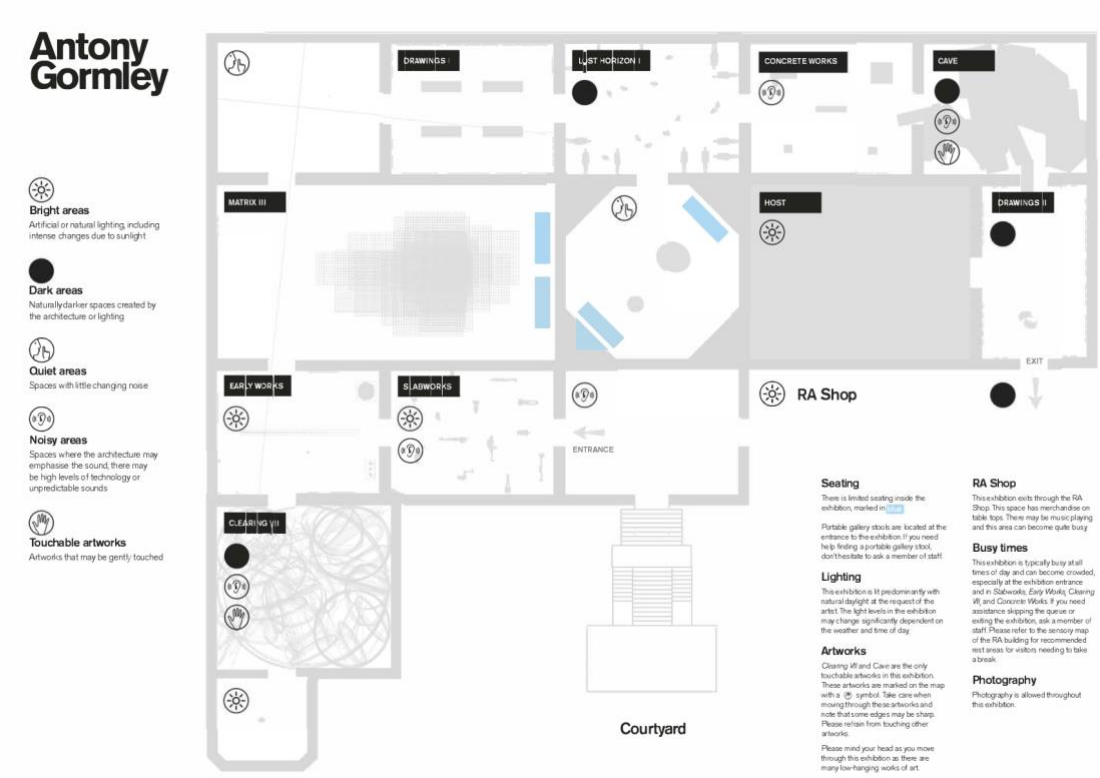

Figure 4. Sensory Map of the Anthony Gormley exhibition

A study by Ben Fletcher-Watson and Shaun May supports the modification of current cultural norms in a review of the *Autism Arts Festival*. The review concludes that if more discernment is shown towards sensual experience, then autistic individuals are more likely to get involved in events and experiences. The experiment results show that before attending the festival, 85% of respondents strongly agreed that 'changes should be made to shows to make them accessible to everyone'.[37] After attending, 100% of participants said that the festival was 'very accessible'.[38] This provides evidence that the festival was successful in transforming a usually neurotypical experience into an inclusive autistic experience. It also highlights the fact that inclusive strategies could be applied to other cultural events, for example fashion shows, making them more accommodating for autistic people. Significantly, this approach demonstrates how autistic and neurotypical people can

[37] Ben Fletcher-Watson and Shaun May 'Evaluating the Autism Arts Festival, Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance', *Enhancing relaxed performance,* 23:3 (2018), <DOI: 10.1080/13569783.2018.1468243>, p. 418.
[38] Fletcher-Watson and May*,* p.418.

work together. If adopted more widely within the arts, such approaches would offer opportunities for autistic people to participate in areas like curation. As a consequence, it would integrate autistic approaches more centrally within contemporary art.

Undoubtedly, both autistic and neurotypical artists rely on their senses to create artwork. In many cases, both use art-making as a means to either help them develop or to communicate their experience through sensual interaction. Sometimes this can be for common or shared reasons but the main differentiating factor for autistic artists is the autistic symptom of sensory overload.

It is evident that an understanding of the role of sensual engagement for autistic people, and in particular the phenomenon of sensory overload, has yet to be fully appreciated by art institutions in general. This means autistic artists are by default, given outsider status. Implementation of new practices based on such understanding, would provide more inclusive environments and experiences for autistic people within contemporary culture. As a consequence, the desire to use the term outsider would be diluted, and the focus instead shifted to considering how both neurotypical and autistic people explore and interact with the senses in cultural settings. This would create more opportunity and experience for all involved.

This chapter looked at how the senses can be at the core of mental and emotional development for autistic artists, and can act as a coping mechanism. This is contrasted with a more selective approach available to neurotypical artists. It also looked at the role of the senses for the art audience and ways that sensual experience can be explored. A further question has yet to be considered, whether a sustained reliance on one or more of the senses can create more control and ‘ability’ for an artist. We also need to ascertain whether a noticeably high level of ability in art-making can influence our judgement of an artist, and whether our judgement is different for autistic and neurotypical artists.

Chapter Two: 'Savant Skills'

Can autism aid and heighten creativity?

Is autism beneficial to autistic artists?

The definition of savant is 'a person affected with a developmental disorder… who exhibits exceptional skill or brilliance in some limited field',[39] and around 10% of the autistic population are recognised as savant.[40] In contrast, the prevalence of savant syndrome within the general population is approximately 1 in a million, many times less than among those with autism.[41] Savant skills are generally associated with memory, with exceptional musical and artistic ability listed as common. What is not included in the statistics is the prevalence of artistic ability among the 90% of the autistic population not considered as savant, and whether this is at a more significant level than the general population. With the senses at the forefront of daily routines, as described by our interviewees, we can assume that autism is both a spectrum of 'disorder' and 'ability'. Thus, creativity is more a part of daily life for those with autism, than within the broader population. This brings into question whether neurotypical artists and autistic artists have the same spectrum of ability.

The questions explored in this chapter will help to identify the similarities and differences between being a talented artist and being a savant artist. Does incredible ability in a limited field mean complete mastery? The savant skill can make an autistic individuals' mental processing so advanced in one ability that it is far beyond their actual age. However, this

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[39] Merriam Webster, "Definition Of SAVANT", *Merriam-Webster.Com*, 2020 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/savant> [Accessed 19 October 2020].
[40] ABA Education, "What Is An Autistic Savant?", *Appliedbehavioranalysisedu.Org*, 2020 <https://www.appliedbehavioranalysisedu.org/what-is-an-autistic-savant/> [Accessed 27 November 2020].
[41] Kenneth Hyltenstam, *Advanced Proficiency and Exceptional Ability in Second Languages*, (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2016) <https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Advanced_Proficiency_and_Exceptional_Abi/wubCDAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0> [Accessed 28 November 2020, subsequently removed from the internet] p. 258.

also means they can lack control and ability in other areas which decreases their overall mental age.

It is argued that the imbalance created by having savant abilities beyond your mental age but having other abilities lower than your mental age can impede your ability to achieve artistic 'success'. Many autistic artists have meticulous style, they have an 'eye for detail' and a 'relative preference for local versus global processing' which according to Francesca Happé is a distinctive trait of autism.[42] This can also be found in neurotypical people; highly talented individuals may not share the same social-communicative difficulties with autistic individuals, but they could share a cognitive style.[43] If having a savant skill can occur within autistic artists and having extreme visual talent can occur within neurotypical artists then what are the differences between the two? Thus, why is the work of neurotypical artists readily accepted into the canon of art, but the work of autistic savants is not? A suggested answer is that it is due to autistic individuals' mental age, excluding the savant skill, being much lower than their actual age, which causes what Donald Treffert describes as a 'jarring juxtaposition of ability and disability'.[44] This means that savant artists cannot compete against neurotypical artists socially and economically, particularly in an environment where contemporary institutions are often exclusive of disability. Inclusivity for all would enable neurotypical and autistic individuals to coexist, by working together socially and economically.

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[42] Francesca Happé, "Why Are Savant Skills And Special Talents Associated With Autism?", *World Psychiatry*, 2018 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6127767/> [Accessed 7 September 2020].

[43] Francesca Happé, "Why Are Savant Skills And Special Talents Associated With Autism?": 'The different cognitive facets of autism appear to "fractionate", with different underlying genetic and neural underpinnings. This means that highly talented people may share a cognitive style with autism, but may not share the socio-communicative difficulties'.

[44] Francesca Happé and Uta Frith, *Autism And Talent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, The Royal Society, 2010) <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ej_bc09i0wYC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false> [Accessed 13 November 2020], p.9.

An experiment on mental age and savant skills by Linda Pring highlights the statistical similarities and differences between talent and savant abilities. The study consisted of two trials that investigated pattern construction. These trials asked the question 'Is weak central coherence enhanced in artistically talented people in general and autistic savants in particular?'.[45] They found that a weak central coherence in autism accounts for a high frequency of savants in the autistic population.[46] They also found that artistically talented participants showed a tendency towards repetitive and obsessional behaviour which shares characteristics with the weak central coherence of the autistic participants. The suggestion here is that artistic talent in neurotypical people and an artistic savant skill in autistic people have strong similarities in production and functioning. This further highlights that visual savant skills and artistic talent both heighten creativity and ability in similar ways.

Happé describes a fine line between artistic talent and savant ability. She believes that savant skills have become a 'stock in trade' and that 'any eccentric artist, living or dead, will come under scrutiny for having traits of autism'.[47] She argues that if an artist seems unconventional in the way they present themselves then it is supposed they have autistic tendencies. However, an autistic artist with exceptional skill is never assumed to be simply an eccentric artist. This draws attention to the way that autism is romanticised to imply exceptional ability in neurotypical people yet it is not appreciated to the same degree in actual autistic people. She continues by stating that autism can reveal some important truths about creativity, which consists of 'exceptional skill, obsessive drive to practice and the need

[45] L. Pring, B. Hermelin and L. Heavey, "Savants, Segments, Art And Autism", *Journal Of Child Psychology And Psychiatry*, 36.6 (1995), 1065-1076 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1995.tb01351.x>.
[46] Francesca Happé, "Weak Central Coherence", in *Volkmar F.R. Encyclopedia of Autism Spectrum Disorders*, (Springer, New York, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1698-3_1744> [Accessed 28 January 2021]:
'The term "central coherence" refers to the "neurotypical" (NT, i.e., non-autistic) tendency to pull information together and process information in context, looking for the "big picture" and drawing out meaning, often at the expense of details. By contrast, "weak central coherence" refers to the tendency in ASD to attend to and remember details rather than global form or meaning.'
[47] Happé, *Autism And Talent*, p. xi.

to classify'.[48] These are all qualities commonly found in an autistic individual with heightened creativity and are skills of benefit when establishing a refined and meticulous style. However, these skills are found not only in savant autistic artists, but also autistic artists in general, again providing evidence of how broad the autistic spectrum is concerning art-making. Happé also proposes that savant skills can be seen in non-autistic people, so although this exceptional ability is a specific trait to autism, similar abilities are found in neurotypical people.[49] Happé's research presents the argument that it is possible to consider savant artists as highly talented individuals and that therefore their output can be considered in a fine art context alongside work by neurotypical artists. She also reveals the biases still present in society against people with autism, while conversely the term 'autistic' is used as a way of glorifying the lives and practices of neurotypical individuals.

We can gain insight into the way 'talent' and 'ability' are perceived in the art world through analysis of interviews with our participants. Participant A emphasises that the term autism 'is so broad and people are still understanding it'.[50] They point out that as an autistic artist they are aware of how large the autistic spectrum is and how disabilities can be misunderstood. They go on to stress how they believe that their artistic ability and successes are not defined by their autism and who they are, but by the work that they produce. However, this is not usually how an artist's success is judged, as viewers seek an explanation for how they created such work. Thus, although participant A is confident in their abilities as an artist, the prevalence of ableist ideologies mean it is likely that their work will be viewed as a product of their autism rather than as an artwork alone. Alternatively, neurotypical participant C believes that their ability has changed with age as they have grown older. They also think that their artwork and practice resembles who they are as a person, in terms of style and ability, as they state 'many people have said they can see my personality through my

[48] Happé, *Autism And Talent*, p. xv.
[49] Happé, *Autism And Talent*, p. xiii.
[50] Participant A, (Online, 27.10.2020), [see appendix 1.A].

practice'.[51] In contrast to participant C, participant A highlights how autistic artists are more aware that they have something to prove in terms of ability and talent, and therefore attempt to separate their success from their autism. Participant C correlates their abilities and successes with themselves and who they are. They do not have to consider their successes in relation to any struggles they might have. This helps to illustrate a difference in how autistic and non-autistic artists see themselves and represent themselves, in light of the success they receive.

This chapter has looked at ways that autism can aid creativity, but how is the ability and talent in autistic artists and savant artists beneficial to them as practising artists? As stated previously, specific skills that can help in the application of creativity, will be beneficial in the production of artworks. These skills produce a type of success that is individual to an artist's ability. Rebecca Chilvers uses Hans Asperger's quote to reflect on this where he writes 'it seems, for success in science or art a dash of autism is essential… the necessary ingredients may be an ability to turn away from the everyday world… with all abilities canalised into one speciality'.[52] Asperger suggests that there is a need to switch off from the outside world and tune into 'raw ability', which savant and autistic artists are capable of doing. However, this is only seen as one ingredient for being successful in the art world where, for example, gallery residencies and featuring in major exhibitions also contribute. Savants can struggle with these contemporary aspects, because of the need to communicate and have good social skills. Pring adds to the debate by stating that 'despite several studies exploring the nature of savant artistic talent, a key domain that has been overlooked in this group is creativity'.[53] She suggests here that savant artists' individual style and artworks are absent from contemporary conversation. Savant artists have exceptional

[51] Participant C, (Online, 11.10.2020), [see appendix 1.C].
[52] Rebecca Chilvers, "Obesssions and Special Interests", *The Hidden World Of Autism - Writing & Art By Children With High-Functioning Autism* (JKP Publishers, 2007), p.81.
[53] Linda Pring and others, "Creativity In Savant Artists With Autism", *Autism*, 16.1 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361311403783>, p.46.

skills and qualities that produce abled artworks, as do neurotypical artists. The difference, however, is that neurotypical artists are more accepted as 'artists' and therefore achieve success more easily, due to their ability to function more freely in social situations.

As mentioned in chapter one, the case study of Kim illustrates the challenges an autistic savant faces. Kim remains unemotional and unresponsive when things are taking place but she later draws the experiences, showing how much more time she needs to process an event.[54] Being aware of these challenges helps us to understand the hardship autistic artists face personally, in terms of social ability, that consistently has an impact on their everyday life and artistic practice. Although Kim's social ability is minimal, her 'visual memory is incredible in detail and nearly photographic' and 'visual rhythm comes so naturally' to her.[55] This emphasises the imbalance between extreme ability and severe disability and how it can affect autistic artists within the art world as 'unfortunately although life has rhythm, it doesn't flow at a predictable rate'.[56] Consequently, it is understandable that the term outsider would be used here in the case of Kim. She can only process social interactions after the event through her visual memory, so any in-person involvement in the art world would prove almost impossible. Her reliance on visual memory is what channels her artistic ability. By understanding that abilities are imbalanced in some autistic savant artists, we can start to provide support in areas that these artists find challenging. This will in turn enable appropriate ways of promoting and appreciating autistic and savant artists' ability, without compromising their status within the art world.

Participant A experiences meltdowns, as a result of their autism, which leads to them creating drawings in response, similar to the way Kim composes drawings after a difficult social encounter. For example, participant A draws images of daily struggles like shopping

[54] Miller, p.48.
[55] Miller, p.48,56.
[56] Miller, p.56.

and queuing. These are experiences that at the time are internalised and masked. They are later retrieved through their visual memory and expressed creatively, to help relieve stress and anxiety. Participant A collates these drawings alongside images from the time of the event and turns them into books, shown in figure 5, and this has led to some personal success. In the interview, they expressed a belief that 'if I can do this, I can do other things'.[57] For them, they are using the outlet of drawing to help them cope with these experiences and be able to battle other scenarios they find challenging. Their books have also been successful in the art world and are currently exhibited in the 'It All Comes Down' online exhibition supported by the Barbican Centre. Seemingly without a need for coping strategies, neurotypical participant C expresses that they have never had any issues with ability. Their art practice is institutionalised and to them it has been 'easy and obtainable to progress and practise as an artist'.[58] This is demonstrated in their piece *Tried to Walk* where they set up a skilful and successful projection installation. This indicates that participant C can focus on furthering their art practice and look for ways they can improve and develop. In contrast, for participant A to get to this stage they first have to manage the external factors in their life that affect them before they can think about advancing their artistic practice and trying to achieve success.

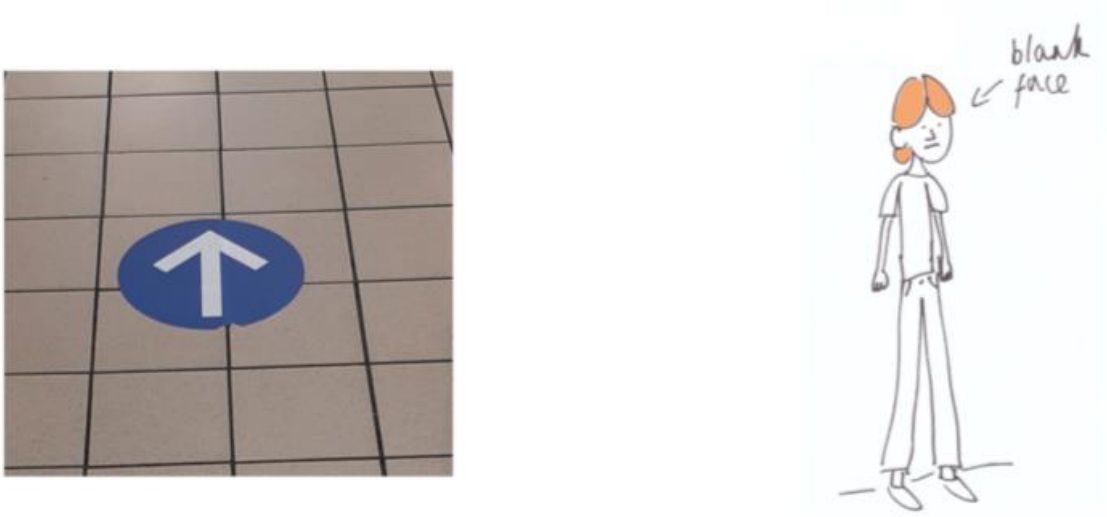

Figure 5. Participant A: Double-page spread from 'The Online Book of Anxiety and Continuous Floating'

[57] Participant A, (Online, 27.10.2020), [see appendix 1.A].
[58] Participant C, (Online, 11.10.2020), [see appendix 1.C].

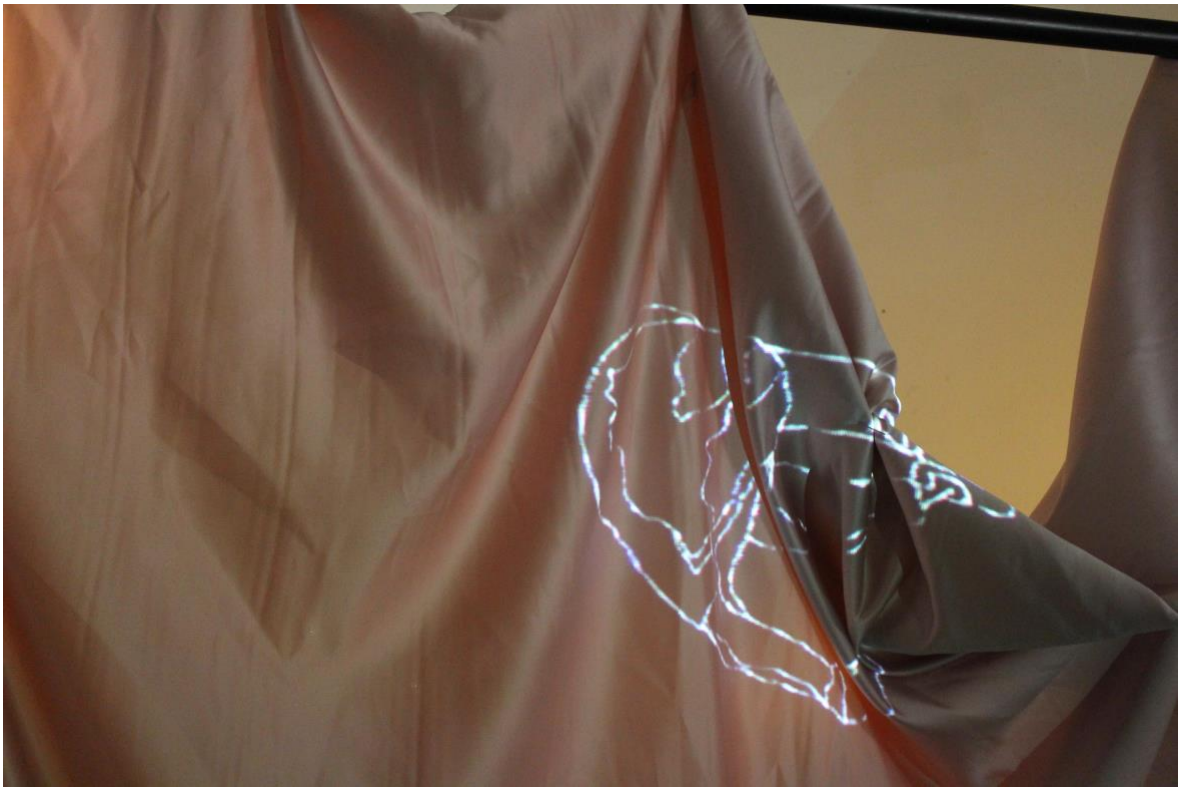

Figure 6. Participant C: ‘Tried to Walk’

Success within the art world is often measured in terms of fame and popularity, with some artists becoming a ‘household name’. Stephen Wiltshire is arguably the world’s most famous autistic savant artist and he achieved fame and success at an early age. Wiltshire has a specific ability to draw accurate representations of skylines, streets and cities after only seeing them momentarily.[59] In 1986 he was referred to as the ‘best child artist in Britain’, [60] and in January 2006 he was awarded the ‘Member of the Order of the British Empire’ by the Queen in recognition of his services to the art world. [61] When he was young he struggled in school and social situations, but as a consequence of his ongoing fame, he can now accomplish many tasks that are challenging for autistic people. Pring comments on Wiltshire’s childhood abilities that ‘when Stephen realised he could depict a controlled world

[59] Stephen Wiltshire, "Stephen Wiltshire - Biography", *Stephen Wiltshire*, 2020 <https://www.stephenwiltshire.co.uk> [Accessed 2 December 2020].
[60] QED broadcasting, *The Foolish Wise Ones QED - 1986 Part 2*, 1986 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GX2k4whjsEM> [Accessed 2 December 2020].
[61] Stephen Wiltshire, "Stephen Wiltshire - Biography".

onto a piece of paper, it allowed him to find control in his life'.[62] Despite his condition, he has been able to use his fame to build a platform as an autistic artist and not feel constrained within contemporary life. As an example, in May 2005 Wiltshire took on the largest project of his career, a panoramic drawing of Tokyo created entirely from memory.[63] This then poses questions about how other autistic artists can achieve this type of fame and success, or whether there is a degree of tokenism around Wiltshire derived from a sense of awe surrounding his ability. It is encouraging to witness the fame and success Wiltshire has achieved, and how he has personally enjoyed his life. He is very aware that he is a famous artist and relishes in it. It is interesting to note this now, in the present day, when looking back to the BBC's 1986 QED documentary series, which focused on Wiltshire's autism. In it, Sir Hugh Casson quoted that Wiltshire was a 'wonderful natural draftsman' with 'mature, self-confident artistry' which he hoped Wiltshire knew he had.[64] Casson's comments reinforce the argument that people with autism can display a high level of artistic ability. Wiltshire's story also demonstrates that the autistic condition can be beneficial to autistic artists, but within current societal structures there is a risk of sensationalism.

It is important to understand that autism can aid and heighten creativity, especially regarding savant artists. However, we also have to understand that there is a spectrum of ability and talent, both within autistic artists and artists in general. Mo Costandi references a claim by Treffert to suggest that we could all unlock incredible potential in our brains. He writes, 'I do believe there's hidden potential in us all, and I think we might be able to tap into that in some way'.[65] The article goes on to say that being aware of highly-talented artists can expand our

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[62] September Films, *Autistic Boy Can Draw Landscapes From Memory | Real Stories*, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xr3asLSyIp8> [Accessed 2 December 2020].
[63] Stephen Wiltshire, *Tokyo Panorama,* 2005, drawn panoramic artwork, Tokyo, available at <https://www.stephenwiltshire.co.uk/tokyo-skyline-panorama-drawing> [Accessed 2 December 2020].
[64] QED broadcasting, *The Foolish Wise Ones QED - 1986 Part 2*.
[65] Mo Costandi, "Do Our Brains Have Extraordinary Untapped Powers?", *The Guardian*, 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/sep/24/do-our-brains-have-extraordinary-untapped-powers> [Accessed 28 December 2020].

cultural horizons. However, the current perception associated with autistic savant artists is one of awe, hence the desire to fetishise. The outsider tag can be misused by galleries and dealers as a way to package and promote such ability, drawing attention away from artistic talent and towards autistic ‘novelty’. It is of course important to promote autistic and savant artists, but the exclusionist practice of classifying these artists as outsider is problematic. Questions in the next chapter arising from the fetishising of autistic artists need to be explored further to understand why the outsider tag is used and how we might diffuse its potency within the contemporary gallery environment.

Chapter Three: 'Outsider Art'

Are autistic artists outsider artists?

How does the 'outsider' tag affect how we critically receive autistic artworks?

What are the pros and cons of using the 'outsider' tag? Are these ethical?

What does it mean to be conscious of yourself as a practising artist, and how is this different for autistic, other outsider artists and non-autistic artists?

Since Cardinal first used the term 'Outsider Art' in 1972, it has been applied in an increasingly loose manner.[66] The development of the term has adapted to mean that outsider art is naïve, the artists are untrained and the production of these artworks is not traditional.[67] This particular definition would therefore include autistic artists. The idea of outsider art originated from Dubuffet's fascination with what he called 'Art Brut', which translates as 'Raw Art'.[68] He believed that a lack of sophistication from the artist meant complete purity in their artworks.[69] His fascination with Art Brut artists led to their work being celebrated, which in turn, led to further interest within the art world. For example, Cardinal wrote that outsider artworks are so engaging they 'widen our aesthetic experience in interesting ways'.[70] The attention generated by these fascinations has meant that artists who otherwise might have gone unnoticed, are now exhibited and scrutinised under the banner of outsider art. It can be argued that the progression from 'Art Brut' to 'Outsider Art' has been a positive one, encompassing more artists within its scope. However, this chapter explores ethical issues around the use of the term outsider, its purpose, and the impact it has on autistic artists in particular.

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[66] Cardinal, *Outsider Art*.
[67] "Outsider Art – Art Term | Tate", *Tate*, 2020 <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/o/outsider-art> [Accessed 7 September 2020].
[68] "Art Brut – Art Term | Tate", *Tate*, 2021 <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/art-brut> [Accessed 18 January 2021].
[69] Phillip Barcio, "Jean Dubuffet And The Return To The Essence | Ideelart", *Ideelart.Com*, 2016 <https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/jean-dubuffet> [Accessed 5 January 2021].
[70] Roger Cardinal, "Outsider Art and the autistic creator", *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological sciences* vol. 364,1522 (2009): 1459-1466 <DOI:10.1098/rstb.2008.0325>.

The questions addressed in this chapter allow us to consider the merits of using the tag outsider when referring to work by autistic artists. This chapter will also assess how this tag affects the way artworks by autistic artists are critically received in comparison to works by neurotypical artists. This is achieved through analysis of case studies, working artists and our participants.

Ethical concerns around the use of the term outsider are to some extent balanced with the benefits that it brings. Treffert believes that it is harmful to term autistic artists' work as outsider art as it is 'elitist, demeaning and discriminatory'.[71] However, outsider art exhibitions have created awareness of autistic artists as a minority group and helped to build an understanding of the autistic condition. They have also helped to further the careers of some artists and provide opportunities where these artists can experience success. Still, the term is problematic because it does not take into consideration the vast range of ability and disability within the autistic spectrum. Not every autistic person is the same mentally, socially and economically, so it is invalid to place all autistic artists within the same outsider grouping, and even more so when grouped with artists with different disabilities. When viewed in this way the term does not appear to be helpful or supportive. When looking again at the benefits artists gain from exhibiting as outsider artists we can question to what extent this enables success. What is the purpose of labelling in this way and who benefits from it? Is the outsider platform simply a way for galleries and institutions to build an audience and generate profit from autistic artists through the increased value of their work? To consider this we first need to look at the overlap between autistic and outsider art.

Cardinal proposes that the criteria for being an outsider artist is flexible, and that outsider artists produce art from the context of 'extreme mental dysfunction'.[72] He also describes

[71] Darold Treffert, in *Artism: The Art Of Autism* (Art Today, 2011), p.52.
[72] Cardinal, "Outsider Art and the autistic creator", 1466.

ways in which autistic artistry and outsider artistry are aligned: ‘not all autistic persons can be Outsiders, but those who merit inclusion… will exercise the same fascination and stimulate the same level of excitement in the responsive viewer’.[73] Here he is suggesting that autistic artists can be considered outsider in that they exercise an attraction which goes beyond the simple communication of an appearance or an idea.[74] Jesse Prinz supports this by stating that many characteristics of outsider artists fit insider artists, for example, being ‘self-taught, medicated and socially-awkward’ which in turn causes ‘blurred boundaries’.[75] With these descriptions in mind, we can see how autistic artists can be categorised as outsider artists. However, the problem with such broad categories is that they can lead to misunderstanding. Cardinal alludes to this when he states ‘might our hesitancy about interpreting such pictures be analogous to the hesitancies of classic autism as a state of distrust and confusion regarding the outer world’. [76] This means that generally, people are wary to respond to autistic and outsider artwork due to a shared ignorance of what constitutes being an outsider. As a way of accepting the work of these artists, Cardinal suggests we should appreciate their ‘self-engrossed pleasure in their own mastery’ as our own secondary pleasure as viewers.[77] This approach could lead contemporary viewers beyond simple self-indulgent viewing, to question and learn more about autistic and other outsider art. If empathy is the key, then alienation through categorisation is a barrier, inhibiting appreciation of the work.

Alan Yentob’s documentary highlights a general reluctance to respond to outsider artwork, with autistic artwork included in this categorisation. In the documentary, Roberta Smith says that ‘the thing we look for in art is a sense of urgency, the artist could not help but do it,

[73] Cardinal, 1466.
[74] Cardinal, 1466.
[75] Jesse Prinz, "Against Outsider Art", *Journal Of Social Philosophy*, 48.3 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12190>, p. 264.
[76] Cardinal, 1466.
[77] Cardinal, 1466.

what we have in contemporary art right now is a lot of calculation'.[78] Here she suggests that contemporary art has lost its ability to express emotion, and instead is produced to meet predefined criteria. Autistic artists' work may operate in a similar way to 'insider' work but what is distinct about their practice is their earnestness in the process of creating. As a result, their work can be seen as at odds with contemporary practice, exacerbating the misunderstanding and encouraging their work to be read as outsider, so as not to disrupt the monopolisation of contemporary culture. In his documentary, Yentob proposes that if you are uncomfortable in the real world then you construct your own alternative reality, this is exactly what outsider artists do.[79] With our knowledge of how autistic artists create artwork as a form of communication, we can appreciate that autistic and other outsider artists behave differently. This is because, many autistic artists seek to allow others into their world, to be able to communicate through their artwork. This distinguishes them from other outsider artists. Despite this, the practice of grouping autistic artists as outsider artists encourages segregation within the contemporary art world.

This segregation accounts for the challenges autistic artists and other outsider artists face when competing for art world opportunities. We can particularly see this when interviewing artists working today. Participant A expressed that they mask their autistic traits to be able to 'work as an artist', this is because they have had difficulties in the past when their autism coincides with their art practice.[80] As already discussed, there is a reluctance to critique work by outsider artists and this comment provides insight into how that can impact on the artists themselves and how their work is critically received. Participant A's art tutor suggested that they separate their autism from their art practice. However, this is impossible for them to do as their artwork is a way of understanding who they are as an autistic artist and to communicate better with others. Rather than providing a solution, the tutor's comment

[78] Yentob, *Imagine Documentary - Turning The Art World Inside Out*.
[79] Yentob, *Imagine Documentary - Turning The Art World Inside Out*.
[80] Participant A, (Online, 27.10.2020), [see appendix 1.A].

serves to highlight how autistic artists can be isolated as outsider artists in an environment where many insider artists freely create artwork about their identity. Participant A further expresses how they find networking within the contemporary world 'too big and overwhelming', like a form of dating.[81] In light of this, they take comfort in social media being a saving grace for autistic artists, as this means there is less immediate social interaction. Autistic artist, participant B, also expresses social anxiety when discussing the art world and wants to advocate against segregation. Their artworks address themes of loneliness by depicting places they find comfort in. For example, their piece *Hampstead* is of an area close to home that they know well. As a way of managing social anxiety, they want to create new ways for artists to network. They recently started the *Happy To Talk* campaign to bring all artists closer together.[82] Neurotypical participant D, also expresses a desire to establish a community-based practice and has been active in creating an artist collective called *Ready Meal Sound*. They also want to be able to 'explore art with no boundaries' and 'effect as many people as possible' with their artwork.[83] This attitude is manifested in an abstract approach to art-making, as in figure 8, in which they do not need to address a specific topic. The responses of each participant highlight the differing opportunities presented for autistic and non-autistic artists. Although participant D's aims of working without boundaries are positive, the decision is effortless. It is easier for them to take this stance when they do not experience the boundaries that participants A and B face. For these artists, segregation and social difficulties restrict their ability to operate as they please. Whilst these participants do not represent all autistic and neurotypical artists, as there are many other social factors that are variables of segregation, we can clearly see for the purpose of this argument, that autistic artists are considered socially inferior within contemporary culture.

[81] Participant A, (Online, 27.10.2020), [see appendix 1.A].
[82] Participant B, Interview on being an artist (Online, 09.11.2020), [see appendix 1.B].
[83] Participant D, (Online, 24.11.2020), [see appendix 1.D].

Figure 7. Participant B: ‘Hampstead’

Figure 8. Participant D: Untitled

There are further things to consider when looking at both sides of the ethical debate. On the one hand, it is beneficial to be given a platform as an autistic artist by using the outsider tag. The term outsider has become established within the art world and is used today to provide opportunities for a range of artists who might have otherwise struggled to be exhibited and autistic artists are included in this. For example, the Gugging Gallery in Austria has housed many outsider artists over 25 years and exhibits artwork by their 'Gugging Artists'.[84] These artists live at their residencies and create artwork daily. Some Gugging Artists have exhibited worldwide and some have made up to 6000 euros per artwork.[85] August Walla is an example of a well-known Gugging artist. In 1986 Walla created a painting for André Heller's 'Luna Luna' project, amongst other famous contributors such as; Keith Haring, Jean-Michael Basquiat and Salvador Dalí.[86] In 1990, Walla received the Oskar-Kokoschka-Preis for achievements in contemporary art.[87] It can therefore be argued that institutions like this provide a space and facilities for autistic and other outsider artists to experience recognition and success.

Another 'benefit' of artists being labelled outsider is the sense of community created by movements evolving as a result of, or as a reaction to the tag. For example, since the late 1970s, the Disability Arts Movement (DAM) has evolved in retaliation to the Art Brut and outsider art movement. It has brought together a variety of activists, artists and creatives campaigning for the civil rights of disabled people and has fought against their marginalisation in cultural settings. The influence of the movement led to the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995, banning the 'discrimination of disabled people in connection with employment, the provision of goods, facilities and services' which was

[84] Nina Katschnig, "About Us | Galerie Gugging", *Galeriegugging.Com*, 2020 <https://galeriegugging.com/en/about-us/> [Accessed 3 January 2021].
[85] Yentob, *Imagine Documentary - Turning The Art World Inside Out*.
[86] Museum Gugging, "August Walla", *Museumgugging.At*, 2020 <https://www.museumgugging.at/en/gugging-art/gugging-artists/august-walla> [Accessed 5 January 2021].
[87] Museum Gugging, "August Walla".

replaced in 2010 with the Equality Act.[88] It has since led to the creation of the National Disability Arts Collection and Archive.[89] These events provide evidence that the formation of new movements out of old terminology has advanced the position of disabled people within society as a whole and the art world in particular.

On the other hand, there are ethical concerns around labelling and promoting autistic artists as 'other'. This is because there is uncertainty whether or not autistic and other outsider artists are aware of the social and economic pressures involved with being a 'famous and successful' artist. As well as this, many of these artists exist in a world of their own creation which may be too far removed from the real world to truly understand what it is to be an artist. Knowledge of this has led the contemporary art world to fetishise outsider artists as inferior, poor and struggling. Curators and collectors can take advantage of this and reap the benefits for themselves, creating a situation where outsider artworks gain significant value due to the circumstances in which they were made. This is exposed in Yentob's documentary where Joe Coleman was banned from the outsider art fair for being too 'successful'.[90] Because Coleman had reached mainstream status, he was no longer deemed an outsider artist. He had quickly been moved into the mainstream art world and lost his identity as a disabled artist. This identity was taken away from him by art world aficionados who had little personal understanding of the 'outsider world'. This reveals mainstream beliefs that the idea of success can only be applied to 'able' artists and if you have any form of impediment, you cannot then be considered 'successful'.

Jesse Prinz is against the idea of outsider art and similarly to Yentob argues that if artists are labelled outsider they are taken advantage of by the art establishment. He states that

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[88] Linda Rocco, "Reflections On The Disability Arts Movement", *Shape Arts*, 2021 <https://www.shapearts.org.uk/blog/reflections-on-the-disability-arts-movement> [Accessed 30 September 2020].
[89] Creative Connection, *Ndaca The Disability Arts Movement: Arts And Activism Infused*, 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b50RtHfaAFg> [Accessed 30 September 2020].
[90] Yentob, *Imagine Documentary - Turning The Art World Inside Out*.

'designated' outsider artists 'rarely enjoy the fruits of their success' because 'the market value of outsider artists depends on their disenfranchisement'.[91] This means that, dealers and investors are inclined to situate them on the 'fringes' of contemporary life.[92] Thus, suggesting that outsider artists are necessarily presented as raw and unfettered. However, this results in restricting their artistic growth, disallowing their approach to develop and mature. The misrepresentation of outsider artists in this way is used for the benefit of contemporary galleries. In the 1970s Cardinal curated a show called 'Outsider' for the Hayward Gallery and by 2002 seventy galleries were specialising in outsider art.[93] Christies' sale of a work by Henry Darger for over 600,000 euros demonstrates how artistic value can be increased by outsider status.[94] If outsider artists are kept isolated then their work is perceived to have more artistic merit and value. This encourages the art world audience to believe that the work is impressive due to the circumstances under which it was created, rather than for its artistic merit. This, in turn, diminishes the artist's achievement and inhibits their ability to operate as an established contemporary artist. As well as this, some critics believe that contact with the art world would skew the knowledge of outsider artists, losing the naivety of their work.[95]

When considering both sides of the ethical debate we can see that there are benefits for autistic artists and other outsider artists concerning the use of the outsider tag. However, the DAM would insist that it should be at the artist's discretion whether or not they want to associate themselves with, and use, the tag. Recently the outsider tag has been reclaimed by disabled artists to advance their position within the contemporary art world. DAM would argue that this should be continued as a self-promoting action, and that the outsider tag should not be used by people in positions of power who do not associate with being a

[91] Prinz, p.250.
[92] Prinz, p.250.
[93] Prinz, p.259.
[94] Prinz, p.259.
[95] Prinz, p.277.

disabled, outsider, or autistic artist themselves as this disempowers the artists. By reconfiguring the term in this way, as with the DAM, it is less likely that people who fit into this category would be taken advantage of.

As identified earlier, the DAM has been able to draw upon both sides of the debate to create a middle ground. They have repurposed the outsider tag to create a community and movement. However, they also fight against others taking pity on them through the use of tags such as 'outsider' and 'disabled', emphasised through their slogan 'PISS ON PITY'.[96] Tony Heaton, who has received an OBE for his services to the DAM, states that 'if we as disabled people don't make it happen for ourselves then it won't'.[97] We can conclude here that the presence of movements such as Outsider Art and Art Brut has motivated disabled artists to find their voices and create self-led communities, progressing the debate around exclusion even further. As a community, the DAM enables disabled artists to have self-representation and be supported by other disabled artists who are more inclined to help due to a similar level of understanding. Alan Sutherland said on behalf of the DAM that 'disability art is art' and it is 'not a hobby to keep the cripples' hands busy'.[98] He further states that there have always been disabled artists such as Van Gogh, however, their disability was treated as an impediment. What he wants to communicate is that disability is a 'fruitful subject for artistic work', lending weight to the argument that disabled art and therefore autistic art should be critiqued alongside work by other artists. [99]

Responses from our interviewees can help determine the degree to which autistic and non-autistic artists are aware of the responsibilities of being an artist. Autistic artist, participant B, is completely aware that they are an artist and emphasise that this is exactly what they want

[96] Rocco, "Reflections On The Disability Arts Movement".
[97] Rocco, "Reflections On The Disability Arts Movement".
[98] Allan Sutherland, "Allan Sutherland: What Is Disability Arts? - Disability Arts Online", *Disabilityartsonline.Org.Uk*,2005 <https://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/what-is-disability-arts> [Accessed 30 September 2020].
[99] Sutherland, "Allan Sutherland: What Is Disability Arts? - Disability Arts Online".

to do with their life. They also express how they view themselves as an outsider artist as they create works when in ‘daydreams’ and ‘in their own world’.[100] However, this does not mean that they are unaware of the external factors and financial pressures of being a contemporary artist. They explain that they make artworks to meet commission deadlines and attempt to be consistent with this. Additionally, they create political artworks that tackle social issues. In comparison, neurotypical artist participant D, explains that they are controlled by their need to produce profit in their life but see themselves as an artist ‘through and through’.[101] This is because they believe that they cannot afford to let their levels of skill and productivity slip because they constantly have to be producing profitable artwork. They believe that ‘selling paintings and earning money is the motivation behind being an artist’ and their ‘biggest reward’.[102] Although participant B views themselves as an outsider artist, their understanding of what it means to live and work as an artist in contemporary society is similar to participant D. Both are aware of the practicalities surrounding the production of work to meet demands and both can operate similarly as working artists. Therefore, they both should have the same opportunities to be represented and thrive through their achievements.

Autistic artists come under the umbrella of outsider art and are categorised as ‘outsider artists’. While this categorisation has produced success for some artists and has enabled movements to emerge, the tag is inadequate in describing the full spectrum of those it embraces. It is detrimental in advancing their prospects as working contemporary artists. Used at the discretion of galleries and art institutions the tag becomes a tool for financial gain, while the artists’ own aspirations are expendable. If society is to reconfigure its approach to become more inclusive of autistic and other outsider artists, then a shift in

[100] Participant B, (Online, 09.11.2020), [see appendix 1.B].
[101] Participant D, (Online, 24.11.2020), [see appendix 1.D].
[102] Participant D, (Online, 24.11.2020), [see appendix 1.D].

ownership of the outsider tag needs to be realised, giving artists the choice of whether or not they want to identify themselves as outsider artists.

Conclusion

Now that we have a clearer understanding of the factors associated with autism and art, we can begin to consider the three questions posed in the introduction. When we know an artwork is created by someone with autism, this affects the way we read it. Because the genre of outsider art is embedded in contemporary art discourse, we are forced to view the work from this perspective. This results in misrepresentation of the work, creating a manufactured sense of otherness. Thus, causing the viewer to fetishise the work as a way of making sense of its mystique, and veiling a lack of genuine understanding. This misrepresentation is specifically targeted towards the neurotypical audience who are reluctant to challenge the depiction of these artists as 'raw' as they do not possess a clear understanding of what it means to function as an autistic artist.

An autistic artist's role in the art world is different from that of a neurotypical artist due to the different ways in which they operate as artists, in light of their condition. However, these differences can be respected and embraced by art institutions. This would increase awareness and avoid the misrepresentation and misunderstanding autistic artists often experience in the current environment. Autistic artists are still marginalised as outsider, placing them outside of the cannon of establishment art, and as a result, excluding them from contributing to the advancement of contemporary art practice. By dismantling this categorisation and reducing its potency, it then becomes possible to encounter contemporary autistic art as 'art' without the 'outsider' tag by viewing it as we would view all art.

The methodology in this dissertation has brought together a wide body of research. The interviews were especially valuable as primary material, as they provide current real-world perspectives in support of the literary research. Although there were a limited number of artists interviewed, the primary research could be extended to incorporate more artists. The

interviews could also include people who are not artists, to gain insight into how someone outside of the contemporary art world views autistic artwork. With more connections to other working artists this could be achievable. Further, the interviews and case studies do not account for all autistic and neurotypical artists, as there are far more factors to consider regarding their position socially, economically and politically. However, this dissertation is focused on providing a basis of information whilst also presenting the opportunities for further research.

What goes amiss within contemporary practice is how autistic artists are capable of being critically received and are intrinsically creative just the same as neurotypical artists. From our research, we can conclude that the art world is not yet resolved on moving towards more inclusivity. What still needs to happen is a shift in attitudes to propose ways, as with institutions like The Royal Academy, in which autistic artists and viewers can exist alongside neurotypical artists and viewers. This can occur through the implementation of new practices that take into account the role of the senses in art production and experience, and an awareness of different types of ability and ‘talent’. Additionally, more can be done to find ways that autistic artists can function personally whilst also being able to translate themselves publicly.

Out of necessity, this dissertation has discussed the position of autistic artists specifically, but it has also considered how large the umbrella of outsider artists is. The research has given an insight into some common misconceptions and as a consequence, acts as a beginning for research into areas outside of the scope of this dissertation. Many organisations and institutions focus on disability as a singular community. This is why autistic artists are easily tagged as outsider. What this dissertation can conclude is that the autistic community, as well as one in its own right, is just one of many communities under the large umbrella of disability. Greater understanding within the neurotypical public would mean a shift in how autistic artists are perceived. A shift away from seeing them as outsiders

would instigate more opportunities within the realms of establishment art, adding richness and diversity to that environment. Therefore, inclusion can be viewed as a positive notion from which everyone benefits.

Overall, the findings from this dissertation confirm that current perceptions of art by autistic people gravitate towards inferiority and otherness. As stated previously, it is only by dismantling the outsider tag that these assumptions can be changed. Although the tag has been used as a tool to create positive change, this change has only occurred because of the need to retaliate against the tag. Ethically, the outsider tag has negative connotations when imposed upon artists by the art establishment. As part of its dismantling there is a process of reclaiming. Driven by a desire to regain control some artists have taken it upon themselves to attribute the term outsider to their artistic practice. However, as its use is dismantled there will be less need to fight against it, meaning more inclusivity and equality has been achieved. Ultimately the term is regressive, especially when used by neurotypical contemporaries. Thus, autistic art and autistic artists can and should be experienced without the ‘outsider’ tag.

Appendix

1.A
Participant A: Sam Chown-Ahern

Sam is an autistic artist, living and working in London. She studied Print and Time-Based Media at Wimbledon College of Arts. Sam is also a time-based artist who works in the mediums of illustration, film and photography. Her work focuses on autobiographical events explored through caricatures, to help visualise her autism. Currently her work is being shown online in the 'It All Comes Down' exhibition as part of the Barbican Young Visual Arts Group. Previously, her work has been exhibited at the Camden Arts Centre and Lumen Arts (Bloomsbury). In 2018 Sam was one of the co-presenters alongside Georgia Harper and Anna Richardson of Channel 4's 'Are You Autistic?'.

1.B
Participant B: Oliver Yu-Chan

Oliver is an autistic artist, currently making paintings and drawings that depict public places, such as shops, areas and events. After finishing sixth form, Oliver took a gap year before going on to study at the Arts Academy College in London. Here he began to really enjoy his art practice, as the central focus was on art-making rather than writing essays like at other universities. Since then Oliver continues to create vibrant public-based works which he circulates back into the community. Oliver is an advocate for bringing communities and people together. He has recently established the *Happy to Talk Campaign* which has seen a lot of success.

1.C
Participant C: Martha Harris

Martha is a neurotypical artist, aged 20, working on her final year of Fine Art with Contemporary Cultural Theory. She is a full-time student focusing on animation, poetry and lino printing. She has exhibited in many education led exhibitions and has had some of her works featured at music events and in magazines, for example *Issue 1* of Gemini Zine (2020). She is also a Child and Adult Welfare Befriender for the mental health charity Live Well Leeds.

1.D
Participant D: Tom Royston

Tom is a neurotypical artist aged 23. He recently graduated after completing a music degree. His music degree helps inform his creative process as an artist. His last qualification in art was A-Level Art and Design. This year he has been selling his paintings as commissions. Currently, he has his artworks shown in multiple galleries across England. He has also worked as a chef and a barista before the hospitality industry closed through COVID. Now he is completely focused on making and selling his artwork.

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