

Book review

Framing marginalised art

Authors: Karen Jones, Eugen Koh, Nurin Veis and Anthony White
The Cunningham Dax Collection, Melbourne, 2010

Reviewed by Prof Colin Rhodes

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Framing marginalised art is a book-length report prepared as part of a project funded by the Australian Research Council. Its subtitle, *Developing an ethical multidimensional framework for exhibiting creative works by people who experienced mental illness and/or psychological trauma*, indicates the grand sweep of its ambition. The project partners included an art historian, Anthony White; a philosopher, Karen Jones; curators Nurin Veis and Anthony Fitzpatrick; and a psychiatrist, Eugen Koh. Between them, they attempted to devise a set of general guidelines for exhibiting works by people experiencing mental illness and/or trauma, which they trialled and assessed by means of an exhibition, entitled 'The Art of Making Sense', held in 2009 at the Cunningham Dax Collection, Melbourne.

The report bares its multi-disciplinary nature openly, with each position given its own voice; the background is introduced from the declared separate perspectives of mental health, art history, philosophy (ethics), and museology. Consisting of four chapters, divided broadly into context, methodology, evaluation and reflection, the report attempts throughout to tread a line between fulfilling the desire to show work by mental health service users to specialist and general audiences, and concern about the ethics of making such exhibitions. As the authors tell us, "[p]eople who experience mental illness are among the most stigmatised in our society", and exhibitions of their "creative work...can be a powerful tool in increasing empathy and reducing stereotype



and stigma" (p.8). The major concern, of course, is that work thus displayed may be misrepresented and misunderstood, with negative results. The aim is to avoid this by carefully covering as many as possible of the potential dimensions of comprehension and by carefully situating audiences.

The project's didactic intent is clear. Five principles are offered, which can essentially be distilled into two: firstly, that to understand creative works by people with an experience of mental illness requires a multidimensional approach; and secondly that the "rights and

sensitivities of the creator must be taken into account” (p.8). These principles are further elaborated in a succinct and useful set of “Guidelines for Exhibiting Works” (pp.84-85) that emphasise the ethical responsibilities of curators in respect of both the creators of exhibited work and audiences. The guidelines are silent, however, on issues about quality, which all curators must grapple with, and which are peculiarly salient in the case of visual art.

The exhibition, ‘The Art of Making Sense’, stands at the heart of the project. The central assumption was that exhibitions had hitherto focused solely on “either clinical or aesthetic aspects...of the works,” and that this project sought to bring these viewpoints together and thereby enrich the viewer’s experience. In this way it aimed to “address and overcome the many problematic and questionable approaches to the display of creative works by people who experience mental illness and/or psychological trauma” (p.46). Interestingly, a certain equivocation about not only the nature of the ‘creative works’ in question, but also about curatorial assumptions, is evident from the beginning. We are told, unsurprisingly, that, “[c]reative objects made by people with an experience of mental illness are ontologically complex,” and that such works function in a dynamic set of relationships that run from “artwork” to “medical record” (p.12). This is further complicated by the sometimes radically different contexts of production of the works in which the authors are interested, from spontaneous art-making by incarcerated mental health patients or mental health service users living in the community, to work made in structured hospital art classes or within diverse formal art therapy situations. Add to this works made outside the art therapy situation, but subsequently offered to it, or objects whose content reflects on past illness or trauma, and the parameters expand still further.

The project is closely associated with the Cunningham Dax Collection, and takes its character from the foundational mission to “educate people about mental illness” (p.16).

The works were originally offered for exhibition essentially as medical specimens, and the compelling comparison to the collection’s exhibition spaces is the medical museum, rather than the art gallery. Interestingly, the curatorial perspective the project provides is overwhelmingly that of the medical collection. Indeed, one of the acknowledged challenges of the project was that ‘The Art of Making Sense’ was shown only in a space associated with mental health. This, we are told, “raised problems for many viewers” who wanted to see “the exhibition in different contexts outside the medical facility” (p.72). However, the declared subject of the exhibition was to understand mental illness through the medium of creative works produced by people who had experienced it, which renders appropriate its context.

A useful section providing a philosophical perspective puts in clear focus issues around the ethics of showing work by mental health service users. The idea of consent is foregrounded, with a useful discussion about human actions and interactions. Significantly, it is noted that “[n]ot all work in collections of works by people who have experienced mental illness have been acquired with the consent of their creators” (p.29). Consent cannot be presumed. The authors explore how exhibitions of work by people who have experienced mental illness may be a source of both benefit and harm. At its worst, distress caused by unwanted exposure can be “multiplied many times over for those who first become aware that their creative works, produced during a time in their lives that they may wish to forget, and long since thought abandoned, have been appropriated without knowledge or consent” (p.31). On the other hand, direct benefits can include artists who have experienced mental illness finding “validation for their experience in [the reception of] their works” (p.32). Ultimately the task, the authors argue, is to show respect for, and avoid exploiting, creative subjects, and thereby earn trust.

All of the above notwithstanding, the tendency in the report is to separate creative

work into an art/not-quite-art dichotomy, which can affect both the kinds of choices made in assembling work for exhibition and the visual impact of the curation. Interestingly, in answer to the rhetorical question, “Why exhibit such work at all?”, the authors focus on the social educational benefits to audiences: “Engaging with these works can encourage us to see the humanity and creativity of their creators and to reflect on our assumptions about how art is demarcated from non-art and mental health from mental illness” (p.29). This presupposes the necessary indissolubility of creator and artefact and the subsequent ‘life’ of the artwork. It also raises the more generally applicable question of whether artists ultimately own their artworks. However, nowhere is a claim made that the de facto condition of the creative works shown in the exhibition is that of art. To claim, as the authors do, that “any dimension to a created object could be of importance” (p.44) is merely to argue the importance of seeking the widest possible context in attempting an interpretation. But it is also to sidestep definitions of the works beyond simple pieces of material culture, no more or less important than a prosthetic leg or a bar of soap.