Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences

cambridge.org/eps

Contemporary Outsider Art

This Section of *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* appears in each issue of the Journal and is dedicated to all forms of creative production born of an intimate and individual urge, often secretive, unbound from the conventional art system rules. Through short descriptions of the Outsider art work of prominent artists and new protagonists often hosted in community mental health services, this Section intends to investigate the latest developments of the contemporary art scene, where the distances between the edge and the centre are becoming more and more vague.

Carole Tansella, *Section Editor*

Cite this article: Barajas AKG, Ho RTH (2023). Catharsis in art: sexuality and self-knowledge. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* **32**, e6, 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796022000804

Received: 30 November 2022
Accepted: 7 December 2022

Author for correspondence:
Ana Karen González Barajas,
E-mail: u3006314@connect.hku.hk

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

Catharsis in art: sexuality and self-knowledge

Ana Karen González Barajas[1] and Rainbow Tin Hung Ho[2]

[1]University of Hong Kong, Social Work and Social Administration, Pok Fu Lam, Hong Kong, Hong Kong and [2]University of Hong Kong, Social Work and Social Administration, Centre on Behavioral Health, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Sexuality is intrinsic to all humans, although people forget that it is also fundamental for individuals with mental and intellectual disabilities. For people with cognitive, motor, sensory and psychiatric disabilities, it is difficult to be recognised as individuals with basic private necessities. They face discrimination in multiple aspects of their life and encounter barriers to sexuality that seem to be pervasive in most environments (Charlton, 1998). In some developed countries, social movements try to make more activities for their families and for them to understand this part of their lives. Initiatives of assisted sexuality are frequently seen in countries like Spain, the Netherlands and other cultures with more open and inclusive societies. Expressing sensuality, sexuality, romance and aspects related to sexuality is an essential part of life for people presenting any disability; it is also expressed in their artwork. People with disabilities can have difficulties with speech; hence art can serve as a tool to express or communicate their inner impulses. However, topics related to sexual expression in this population are still stigmatised and under-researched, as well as representativeness in art. The overall purpose of this article is to identify, describe and understand diverse topics and the manifestation of sexuality in adults presenting a type of disability in Outsider Art. Additionally, it includes a description of the themes used, feelings and needs regarding sexuality. The data was extracted from interviews and biographical information from public collections, museums and galleries to gain an in-depth understanding of their artwork.

The representation and invocation of sex through art have been part of human nature. Back in the cave times, the representation of erotic depictions was commonly observed in daily life (Snow, 2013). They were represented as any other type of art and were as important as other primogenial desires such as hunt and rituals. (Levine, 1957) There is no direct evidence of the use of these representations; however, it is speculated that they may have been used for sexual and religious purposes. Greek civilisation laid the foundations of the modern world, where the cult of the body, specifically the male body, was reflected. 'The Dark Ages' marked the downfall of the Greek and Roman empires; this marked a cultural blackout; invasions and wars seemed to mentally block artists from nude representation (Bentley, 1984). Nudity was also not considered improper during the Renaissance; however, for Christians, the nude body was used to represent biblical passages, and other types of representations were considered disturbing and for personal desires. In the nineteenth century, a mix of humanism and sexuality was considered disturbing and a topic that was never discussed. Nowadays, society has been more open about these representations. However, erotic works can still be perceived to be created solely for sexual arousal, and their artistic qualities are constantly questionable (Döpp *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, the meaningful depiction of the human body has been constantly aspired to be represented, a form of diversity of expression, and simultaneously a constant conflictive theme that has been complex for humans.

Themes referring to human sexuality are constantly avoided since it is challenging to address with a general audience and so on for individuals with disabilities. Additionally, sexuality as a form of pleasure and an expression of love is even harder to be recognised by this population (Tepper, 2000). The medical model has insisted on making their sexuality a pathology, making this topic one of the most significant barriers that individuals with disabilities face regarding their sexuality as a societal misconception (Neufeld *et al.*, 2002). The social model of disability was developed in 1976 by the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation. They refer to disability as a social construction that excludes specific individuals from social resources, employment and positive identity (Galvin, 2005).

In art, nudity and erotic themes have been a shelter for people with disabilities. If they are not socially allowed to practice it due to the constant social sanctioning, oppression and the perpetuation of being considered children, where else can they express it? Some of them have found their voice in art, where not only a liberation of desires is contemplated but also a free space where heteronormativity and patriarchal social systems are not usually recurrent as in the neurotypical world. For the Greeks, the representation of women was usually linked to prostitutes; their view had little room for the sexual expression of women. (Döpp *et al.*, 2012). Women with disabilities struggle to reclaim their sexuality as they face societal stigma regarding gender and impairment (Esmail *et al.*, 2007). In Outsider Art, it is observed

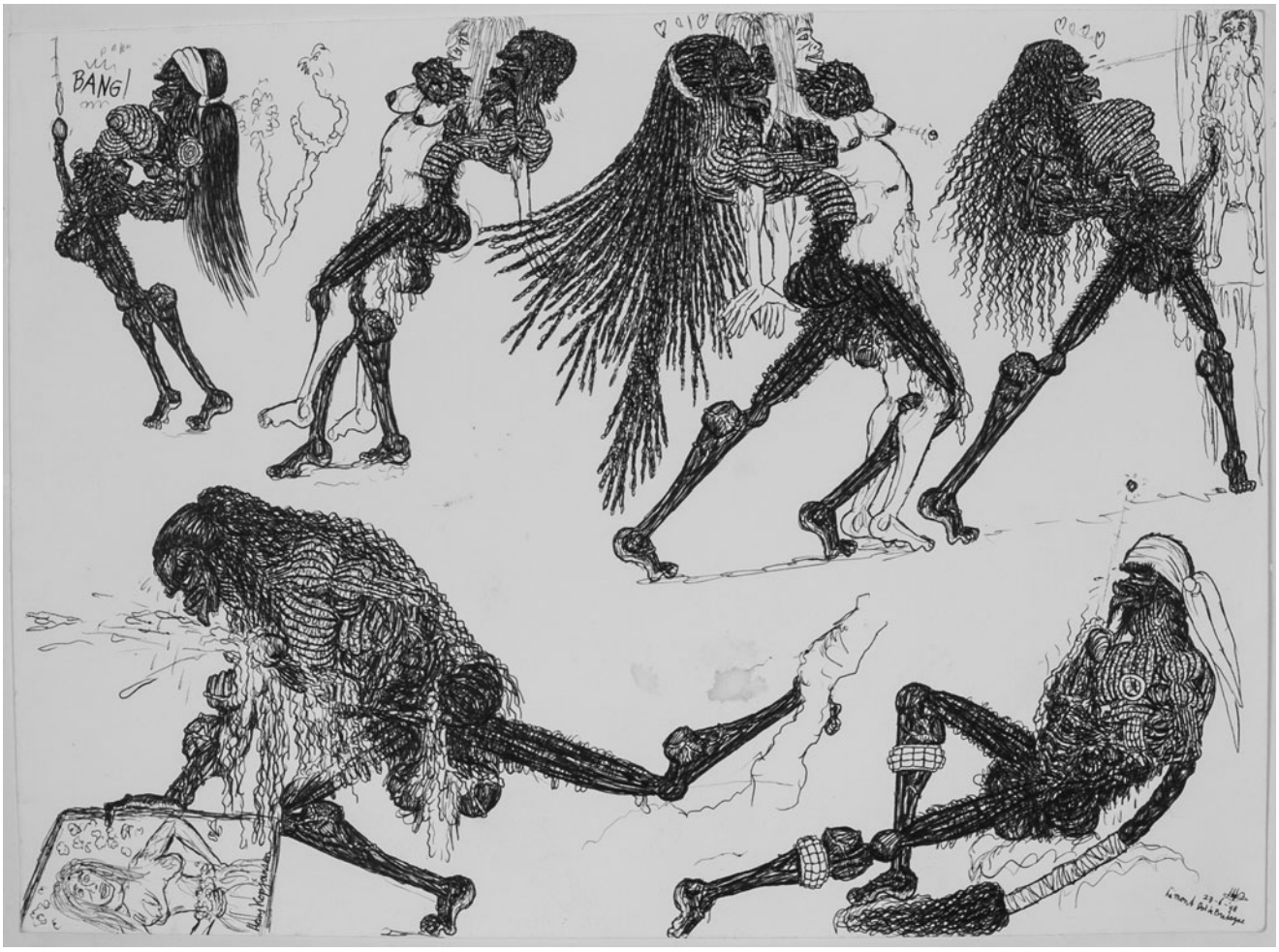


Fig. 1. Hein Digemans from Herenplaats archives

that both male and female represent their inner desires and sexual preferences, leading to thinking about the liberation art can give to this population group.

The magical protective power of the erect phallus was taken for granted for hundreds of years; it did not have an erotic connotation since, in ceremonies, the priestess or acolytes were often nude (Döpp *et al.*, 2012). In the artwork of Hein Digemans (1962) from the atelier Herenplaats, this symbol of power and fertility has been shown gradually. His first creations had the phalluses hidden behind metal guitars and other body parts; with time, these have been shown to increase in size due to an 'overdose' of Viagra pills.

For Hein Dingemans, human anatomy has been his preferred theme when drawing since he was 13. Primitive societies from South Nigeria, Rwanda, Polynesians and aborigines from Australia are his main inspiration. His drawings are also accompanied by text that describes the sexual encounters or activities of these particular figures. The male representations in his artwork can be read as exotic objects of desire and symbolic self-portraits (Rhodes *et al.*, 2013). In this context, art can be understood as an opportunity for self-exploration and a safe space for expressing sexual desire. He explains these figures as the representation of how he would like to look and as a way to release his wish to find a mate. Dingemans explains how having a relationship can be challenging due to his 'light form of handicap'.

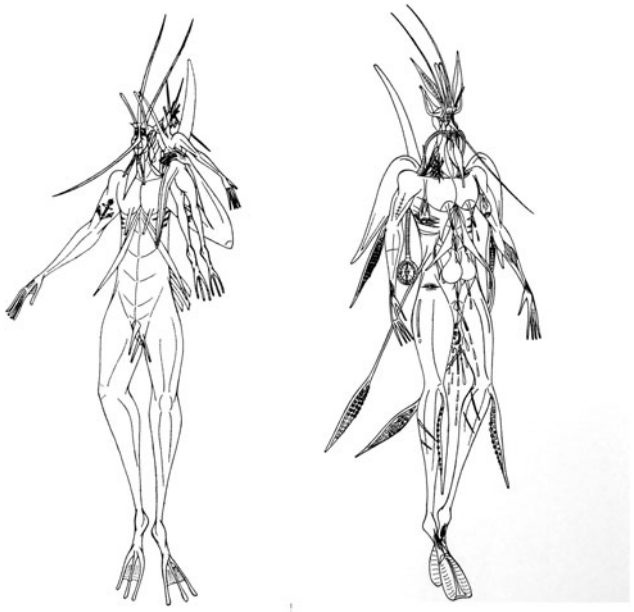


Fig. 2. Marco Polo Phllowers (MarioMSMarckos) Marco Polo Hidálgo (MariuMKMayrck)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796022000804 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The representation of genitalia and sexual arouses in Outsider Art lack the typical taboos in society. Fátima Calderón has represented 'Marco', always considering his particular genitalia. Although the content and description of her drawings are not sexually explicit as the ones from Hein Dingemans, it is hard to ignore the importance of the representation of the phallus in its anatomy. The stories accompanying some of her drawings describe Marco's body with big muscles and long extremities. However, in her written description, the body details are considered, except for the phallus. In some of her drawings, drops from nipples and the phallus suggest seminal fluids can be observed. This sexualised and anthropomorphic character made by Fatima has human characteristics in a corporeal and behavioural form. Fátima's creations have detailed characteristics that show different variants in these figures that seem to come from the same family species. It can be observed that they have distinctive anatomical features, from fins to genitalia, that vary from one character to another. All of these creations in the universe she has created are male, and the quantity of phalluses seems to vary between one 'Marco' to another type of 'Marco'.

The heroic features, like the adventurous activities, such as climbing buildings and saving people from danger, prompt the masculinity of these characters. Some of these figures seem to have enjoyment from activities such as visiting nudist beaches where they 'finally love themselves'. The suggested homosexuality of these characters is essential to emphasise, as it is a topic underexposed within this population (Stoffelen *et al*., 2013). Recent studies have found that individuals presenting autism are more likely to be gender diverse. This variety of identity representation could reinforce the theories about gender social construction; however, being both neurodiverse and gender diverse can lead to being socially marginalised.



Fig. 3. Aloïse Corbraz from ABCD Art Brut Collection

From a Medical Model perspective, Aloïse Corbraz (1886–1964) was suffering from an érotomanie type of delusion that consists of the central theme of being in love with another individual. The person is usually of a higher status and can be a complete stranger. Social sanctioning of what constitutes acceptable behaviour for people with any type of disabilities has been historically oppressive, and for Aloïse, it was not an exception.

The first heartbreak of Aloïse was when she fell in love with a former French priest that was studying theology. Later on, she left Lausanne to Potsdam, where she was the children's governess in the home of the chaplain of Kaiser Wilhelm II. There, she developed an imaginary romance with the Kaiser; she dreamed obsessively about this relationship. Later, she was forced to return to Lausanne due to the start of First World War. Unfortunately, after returning to her hometown, she soon exhibited signs of mental instability.

The creativity of Aloïse Corbraz was not limited to visual arts, she was a singer and also wrote religious songs. After believing she was pregnant with Christ's child, she screamed out loud in the streets and was committed to the psychiatric ward of Cery, near Lausanne, back in 1918. During her stay at the psychiatric hospital, she produced drawings about nudity, pregnancy, popes, princesses and queens. Her productions were full of feminine power and sensuality, where depictions of figures like Cleopatra, Mythe Atalante and Maríe Antonietta were represented. Her inclination for music, opera and theatre were common themes, and her imaginary full of romance and sexual expressions were depicted in her artwork. The personal cosmogony of Aloïse was able to be represented in her artwork, where she freely expressed her sexuality and deepest desires.

Art can be a medium for people with disabilities and mental illnesses to explore sexuality and release tensions. Sexuality is a vital form of intimacy, however, being accepted and stop perpetuating them as sexually dangerous can be more fundamental for them.

Prejudice and discrimination limit their social inclusion and opportunity to develop different relationships. Therefore, it is essential to talk about what adults with intellectual and mental disabilities express through their art, not only from an aesthetical or medical perspective but also as a way to understand them and be conscious of the stigma and difficulties they face. There is a fear of labelling artists by sharing their diagnosis; however, understanding their creation's context and the difficulties they may face is a way to normalise and narrow social division within this population.

References

Bentley R (1984) *Erotic art*. London: Quartet Books.

Charlton J (1998) *Nothing About us Without us*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Döpp H, Thomas A, Charles V and Carl KH (2012) *30 Millennia of Erotic Art*. New York: Parkstone International.

Esmail S, Munro B and Gibson N (2007) Couples' experience with multiple sclerosis in the context of their sexual relationship. *Sexuality and Disability* **25**, 163–177.

Galvin R (2005) Researching the disabled identity: contextualizing the identity transformations which accompany the onset of impairment. *Sociology of Health & Illness* **27**, 393–413.

Levine M (1957) Prehistoric Art and ideology. *American Anthropologist* **59**, 949–964.

Neufeld J, Klingbeil F, Bryen D, Silverman B and Thomas A (2002) Adolescent sexuality and disability. *Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Clinics of North America* **13**, 857–873.

Rhodes C, Maizels J and Cardinal R (2013) *Raw Erotica: Sex, Lust, and Desier in Outsider Art*. London: Raw Vision.

Snow D (2013) Sexual Dimorphism in European upper Paleolithic cave art. *American Antiquity* **78**, 746–761.

Stoffelen J, Kok G, Hospers H and Curfs LMG (2013) Homosexuality among people with a mild intellectual disability: an explorative study on the lived experiences of homosexual people in the Netherlands with a mild intellectual disability: homosexuality and intellectual disability. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* **57**, 257–267.

Tepper M (2000) Sexuality and disability: the missing discourse of pleasure. *Sexuality and Disability* **18**, 283.

Ana Karen Gonzalez Barajas Ana Karen G Barajas is a PhD student at the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong. She has been researching on Outsider Art, principally in Mexico. She is part of the directive committee of the Outsider Art magazine

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796022000804 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bric-à-Brac. She conducts social inclusion art-based workshops for women and children in rural communities and people with behavioural, developmental, psychological and cognitive disorders.

Prof. Rainbow Tin Hung Ho Prof. Rainbow Tin Hung Ho, PhD, BCDMT, AThR, REAT, RSMT, CGP, CPA, is Professor of the Department of Social Work and Social Administration, Director of the Centre on Behavioural Health and the Master of Expressive Arts Therapy program at the University of Hong Kong. She has been working as a researcher, professor, creative arts therapist, dance teacher and performer for many years. She has published extensively in refereed journals, scholarly books and encyclopaedia, and has been the principal investigator of many research projects related to creative and expressive arts therapy, mind-body medicine, psychophysiology, spirituality and physical activity for healthy and clinical populations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796022000804 Published online by Cambridge University Press