

Insider Art: An exhibition of offender artwork at the BSC Conference, Northumbria University

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Each year the organisers of the BSC conference try to pull something new out of the bag; whether it's an after-dinner speaker telling tales of bombing around the countryside, visiting prisons, watching Tower Bridge open up for a boat load of criminologists to float down the Thames, or listening to a Welsh male voice choir. This year, the team at Northumbria University are holding an art exhibition with pieces primarily coming from prisoners housed in the North East's institutions. The exhibition is affecting, beautiful and, sometimes, challenging. Gallery North, one of the University's two exhibition spaces, is showing watercolours, charcoal, oils, textile art and sculptures that have all been produced by offenders who are currently serving sentences.

Work produced by artists who are not considered to be part of mainstream artistic communities is termed 'outsider' art. The work is sometimes naïve and often craft based. This label is something that can certainly be applied to the work in this exhibition, and the contradiction between being 'inside' and producing 'outsider' art is particularly intriguing for us. Some of the pieces illustrate sociologies of imprisonment; this is especially true of the collection of white paper bird cages made by men from HMP Grendon under the guidance of artist in residence Lorna Giezot. But it is also clear that the creative processes are just as important as the topic for the artists. Expressing yourself in a creative way, whether that's through painting, playing a musical instrument or taking part in drama, is part of what it is to be human. If we aim to punish people humanely, then it's important that creative activities are part of life in prisons.



Many of the art staff who worked with the artists commented that taking part in art classes helps develop coping and social skills, which are important in the government's criminal justice 'rehabilitation revolution' agenda. Rather than focussing on the negative creativity that might be considered part of offending behaviour, this exhibition outlines the positive creativity and effective novelty that can be drawn upon in a regulated environment. Understanding the role and impact of enrichment activities (a shorthand for all of those initiatives and endeavours that can be considered artistic, creative or spiritual) within the criminal justice system is a relatively under-researched area, but is something that is within BSC members' areas of understanding and expertise.

Curating an art exhibition is another thing entirely. As criminologists who have been involved in prison research for a number of years, Louise Ridley and I thought that we knew how we might start to go about getting in touch with those with responsibility for artistic activities in prisons. But, as

Rideout, an organisation which specialises in creative practice in the CJS, have discovered, making sure that you get the right contact is not always easy.

We met with the Deputy Director Custody for NOMS in the North East, who was encouraging and said that he would support our work. And after quite a lot of discussion, we went to HMP Frankland to talk to the head of learning and skills. He had heard about the possibility of the exhibition and wanted to make sure that we started the process before he retired! We walked around the art rooms, met the staff from the main prison and the Westgate Unit and some of the prisoners who were taking part in classes. The excitement from the staff and prisoners was incredibly cheering.



The enthusiasm was contagious and both Louise and I would talk to anyone who would listen - and often those who wouldn't listen - about what was going to happen in Gallery North. It was through one of these discussions that Laura Caulfield at Birmingham City University, told us of the project that was taking place at HMP Grendon, and she volunteered their work for the exhibition too. So by early spring we had got promises of art from a number of prisons and promises of space, time, help and support from our colleagues at Gallery North.

One of the most moving elements in the process of getting the exhibition together was a visit to Gallery North by the art teachers from HMP Frankland. They came along one Tuesday afternoon just before Easter to look at the empty gallery, to take photographs of the space to show the prisoners, and talked about what the possibility of having work on display meant to the men they were working with. We were joined by the gallery director and one of the technicians, and they proceeded to chat about space and light, then moved onto discussions of framing and labelling, while throwing in comments about whose work would look good in which positions. They all turned to us and asked about what the theme would be. We didn't have a theme. The Koestler Trust has a theme every year - Jeremy Paxman's chosen theme for the 2011 exhibition is 'help'. We hadn't thought of one and didn't realise it was the done thing. It was about this time that I rather grandiosely started to think of it all like the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition, where people submit whatever work they want. This was, unsurprisingly, greeted with pursed lips and raised eyebrows.



The work chosen for the exhibition tells stories of art history classes, learning how to work on portraits and still life compositions, as well as the images of anger and repression of the prison environment. There are a number of pieces that show the impact of war and military destruction. Not all of the art submitted could be displayed in the gallery, but the work has all been photographed and during the conference it will be displayed on screens throughout the venue.

This adventure into art curating has affected so many people; Louise and I have learnt some of the techniques of choosing, displaying and disagreeing about work; our colleagues from the gallery have learnt about the role of arts in prisons and the prison art staff have worked with the prisoners towards a different goal. Each time we have spoken to a prison contact they have expressed the prisoners' delight

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at having their work in a gallery. The exhibition comments cards will be sent back into the prisons to demonstrate the impact that this has had on visitors.

This exhibition may have simply started as an innovative element to the BSC conference, but will develop into a close research and practice collaboration between the regional prisons and the University on enrichment activities. This can only mean more exhibitions in the future.
