



Investigating how interior strategies are used to displayed Outsider Art in exhibition spaces.

OUTSIDER ART PLACED

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1. INTRODUCTION

Outsider Art - artwork which is created “beyond established forms” - occupies a complicated and often conflicted position within the contemporary art world (Röske, 2017, p. 112). Although the concept is primarily a rejection of institutional norms, Outsider Art has become increasingly visible in museums, commercial galleries and public discourse. Therefore, the ways in which Outsider Art is displayed has become crucial in shaping how audiences interpret its authenticity, value and legitimacy.

Exhibition design - through surrounding context, layout and wall-positioning - guides viewers' attention, influences their assumptions and can either reinforce or challenge negative narratives about Outsider Art.

This essay investigates how these interior strategies operate in three contrasting case studies: Andrew Edlin's refined presentation of Henry Darger, the 'Art Extraordinary' display at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, and the immersive domestic environment of Ron Gittins' Ron's Place. By comparing these approaches, the study explores how interior design can elevate or diminish Outsider Art.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 About Outsider Art

The concept of 'Outsider Art' is difficult to define. The term is rooted in Jean Dubuffet's coinage Art Brut in the 1940s, with which he rejected institutional expectations surrounding artistic production. Dubuffet sought unconditional creativity in its crudest form - Art Brut was grounded in "extreme individualism" and characterised by rawness, spontaneity, individuality, repetitive motifs and total isolation from fashionable cultural influences (Maclagan, 2009, p. 167; Davies, 2009). Dubuffet celebrated forms of creativity that were unapologetically personal and untrained, often produced from found materials and marked by self-sufficiency and isolation. His fascination with the creative impulse of institutionalised individuals, particularly those living in psychiatric wards, led to an implicit link between Outsider Art authenticity and marginalisation. As Maclagan (2009, p. 37) notes, "social or psychological alienation, if not certified psychopathology, almost became a precondition for authentic artistic creativity".

Dubuffet curated his first exhibition of Outsider Art in 1947 in the basement of the René Drouin gallery in Paris and was titled Foyer de l'Art Brut. His presentation was "a frontal assault on the false standards of the established art world" and Figure (2), taken in February 1948, documents this novel display (ibid., p. 8). With Foyer de l'Art Brut, Dubuffet aimed not only to separate Art Brut from mainstream art but also to



1. Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne.

sever the ties that associated the genre with psychopathology, instead upholding the artwork as “uncompromisingly individual forms of creativity” (ibid., p. 13).

The term ‘Outsider Art’ was later popularised by Roger Cardinal in 1972, who broadened Dubuffet’s original framework. Cardinal defined Outsider Art as emerging from an “expressive impulse” that materialises, unobserved, in a way to oppose cultural standards of mainstream art (Carollo, 2025). This expanded the concept to include self-taught artists, visionary creators, contemporary folk artists and other works beyond institutional systems. Outsider Art is often regarded by advocates as “more powerful, more exciting and more original than mainstream art”, yet the term remains highly contested and difficult to stabilise (Maclagan, 2009, p. 7).

Today, Outsider Art is an ever-shifting definition - everybody understands the term differently. The boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ has become increasingly unclear as Outsider Art has gained institutional visibility and commercial value in more recent years. It has gone under many different names, including ‘naïve art’, ‘folk art’, ‘primitive art’ and even “eccentric amateurs” (Ardery, 1997, p. 329). Andrew Edlin - one of the world’s leading curators of Outside Art and the owner of the Outsider Art Fair - defines the genre as “independent of both the academic and historical tradition and the mainstream art system” (Conollo, 2025).

Lynn’s (2024, p. 840) definition, however, adds a depth to this, that many outsider artists “have experienced some form of marginalization”. As such, Outsider Artists face considerable challenges in the modern art world. A lack of scholarship and institutional support means the artwork is not only overlooked, but also artists are excluded from institutional networks, which bolster career opportunities for traditionally-trained artists. Moreover, this lack of engagement with the established art world means that its artistic status is difficult to authenticate, especially now that the gap between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is blurred and Outsider Art is now gradually being absorbed into the mainstream (Davies, 2009; Maclagan, 2009).

2.2 Displaying Outsider Art

Curators of Outside Art - as designers of complicated narratives and a cohesive interior space to accompany them - face challenges in catering for outsider artists today. Historically, outsider artists have been exploited and therefore, a deep-rooted lack of trust in the cultural system means that curators struggle to welcome the genre to their galleries. Although artwork made by artists from psychiatric hospitals are sometimes visually perplexing, curators have a duty to foster a “philosophical focus on consent, harm and benefit, exploitation, respect and trust” through their gallery design to respond to the concerns of Outsider Artists (Jones et al., 2010, p. 6).

To achieve this, spatial frameworks and interior features can “enhance the visitor experience, making art more accessible and enjoyable”, increasing visibility and engagement, and ultimately, viewer admiration for the work - a true form of authentication for Outsider Art as ‘real’ art, which doesn’t depend on biographical torment (Call for Curators, 2025). Galleries act as mediators between artist/artwork and audience and therefore, it is crucial that, through their design practices, curators enable open discussion to allow appreciation of Outsider Art in the same way as an ‘insider’ piece would enjoy.



2. Exhibition including works from Charles Ladame's collection in the Foyer de l'Art Brut, in the basement of the René Drouin gallery, Paris, February 1948.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The research examined in this essay centres around three case study examples of how Outsider Art has been exhibited. The investigation questions have been fulfilled through primary data collection, which I conducted through research of online sources, as well as several art gallery visits, namely to Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, in Glasgow and the National Galleries of Scotland: National, in Edinburgh. While visiting these sites, I produced photographs and sketches of my observations, which were subsequently used for an evaluation and comparison of how interior design strategies have been used to display Outsider Art in each.

The selected investigation topic is focused primarily on examining how Outsider Art is exhibited within gallery spaces. At the beginning of the primary research process, I selected certain interior strategies to define the parameters of my data collection. This successfully narrowed the scope of material required and allowed for a more thorough analysis of the presentation of Outsider Art. Before conducting site visits or online research, I settled on various strategies that I thought might be significant in this context, including layout, flow of the room, surrounding objects, lighting and colour. However, after preliminary research had been undertaken, it became apparent that several should be disregarded or reframed due to their irrelevance in the material selected. Therefore, the following interior strategies remained and were observed and evaluated throughout each example: surrounding context, layout and wall-positioning.



3. 'Art Extraordinary' sculptures, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum.

Moontree, undated

Paul thought that these three ceramic

The qualitative data that I collected is supported by a robust body of secondary research. I strived to source objective and up-to-date publications with reliable narratives, such as peer-reviewed articles, in order to ensure strong academic reasoning. For example, the historical narrative of Davies's (2009) 'On the Very Idea of Outsider Art' allowed me to establish a sound baseline for understanding the socio-cultural debate that surrounds Outsider Art and consider this when analysing the various design methods which have been used to present it. On the other hand, given that Outsider Art's low-status has made it an "understudied art gene", I sometimes struggled to find such rigorous sources (Lynn, 2024, pp. 844). In these instances, I found that lesser-academic sources, such as blog posts, were similarly useful in illustrating my arguments. In particular, Maclagan (2009) provides a convincing background on Outsider Art and its exhibition, while also writing passages of strong subjective opinion. Although personal preference cannot be considered high-quality academia, the text gave me a greater insight into the variety of complicated arguments there are about how Outsider Art should be displayed.

Drawing on both the primary data collected and the secondary research at hand, the three case study examples have been comparatively presented in Chapter 4, accompanied by a short contextual synopsis covering the interior strategies utilised in each. Through this, I aim to discover and discuss how these design methods have been used to display Outsider Art in a modern gallery setting in the most effective manner.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the observations made of interior features in the three selected case studies.

4.1 Henry Darger at the Andrew Edlin Gallery

Henry Darger is a “self-taught visionary” of Outsider Art, regularly recognised as “the greatest talent” in the genre (Andrew Edlin Gallery, 2006). Between the 2nd November and 23rd December in 2006, Darger’s work was displayed in an exhibition titled ‘The Vivian Girls Emerge’, at the Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York. Andrew Edlin has been owner of the Outsider Art Fair since 2012 and his museum in New York is “one of the most respected galleries specializing in this field” (Carollo, 2025). Edlin (in Carollo, 2025) believes that the context in which Outsider Art is displayed is critical in authenticating the artwork from the viewer’s perspective and therefore strives to maintain high standards in his displays.



4. Suspended frames at Henry Darger: The Vivian Girls Emerge.

The exhibition is displayed in an industrial-style interior with white painted walls and an assortment of exposed materials, such as a polished concrete floor. Framing is consistent throughout the exhibition and the artwork is cohesive on the walls: Edlin has employed high co-visibility, with similar mediums, styles and motifs displayed side-by-side (Schlackman, 2024). In Figure (4), two large artworks are suspended from the ceiling, acting as partitions (dictating the room's layout), which frames another piece of artwork on the wall. Information about the artist is limited to a simple title of Darger's name printed onto a wall near the entrance of the exhibition (highlighted in Figure 5).

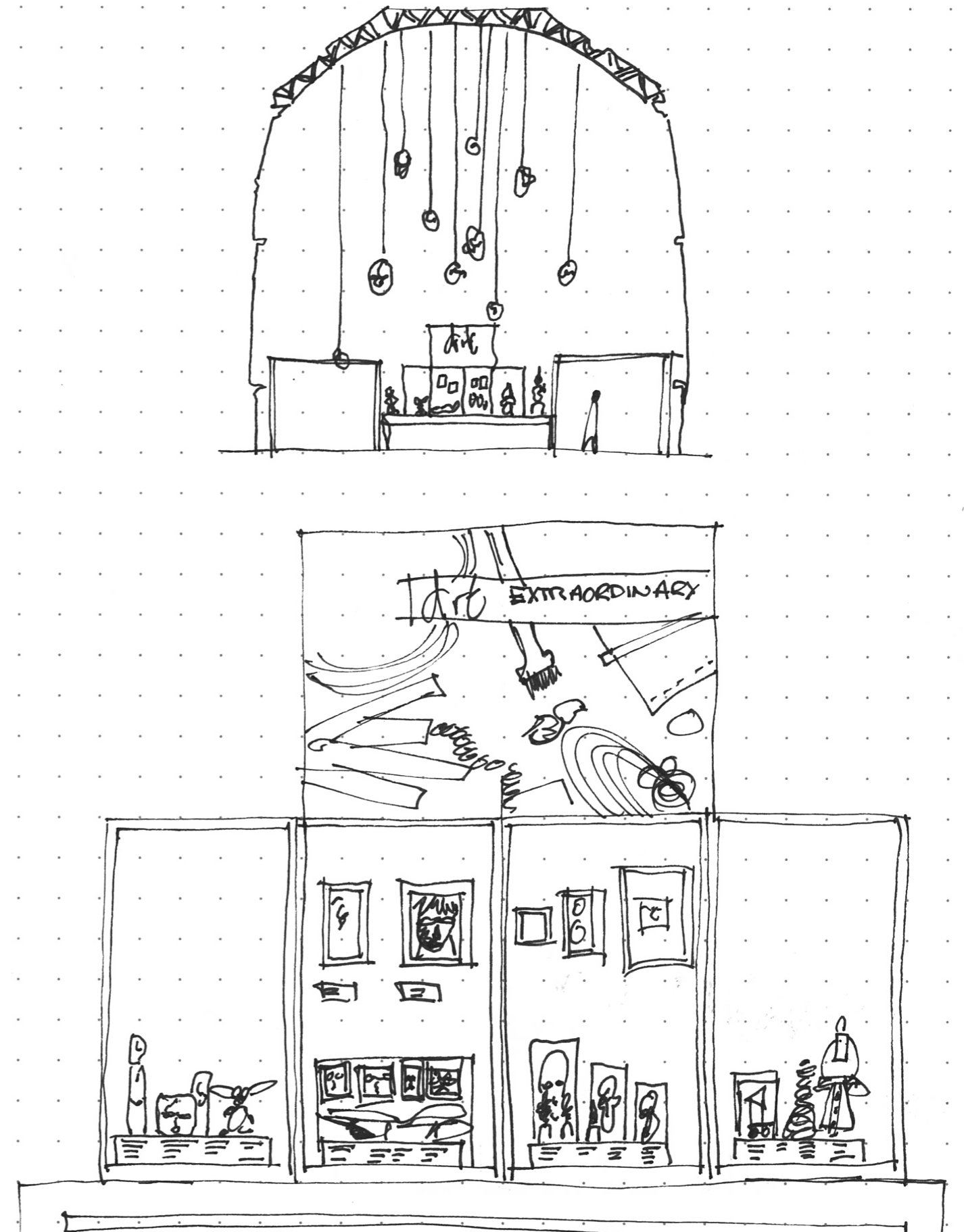


5. Title card at Henry Darger: The Vivian Girls Emerge.

4.2 Site Visits: Scottish Galleries

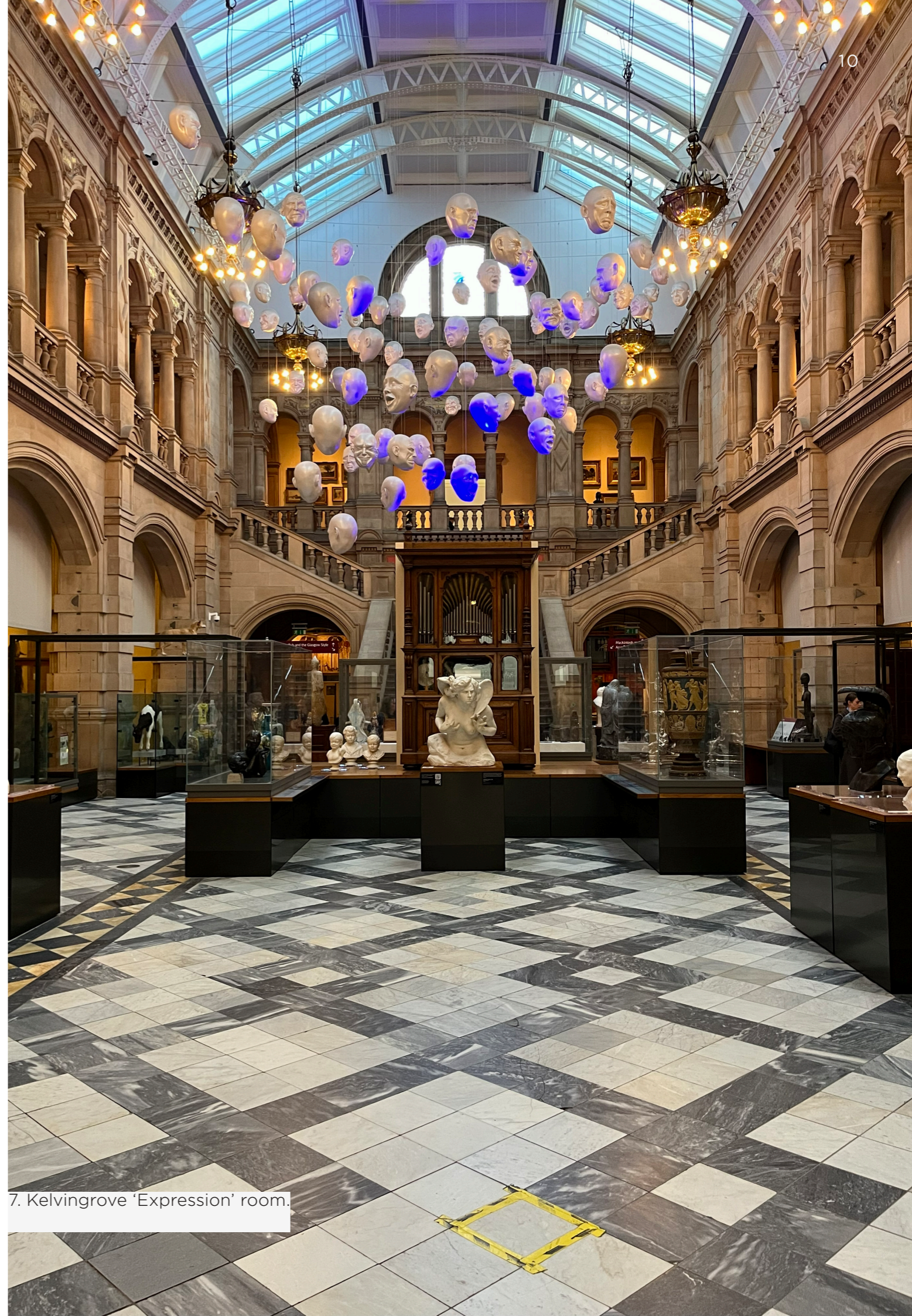
Since 2022, a dedicated and permanent exhibition of “a unique collection of Scottish ‘outsider art’” has been displayed at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow, titled ‘*Art Extraordinary*’ (University of Glasgow, 2022). The exhibition presents selected works from art therapist Joyce Laing’s accumulation of over 1,100 pieces from hospitals and prisons across Scotland and was co-curated by Dr Anthony Lewis and individuals at the Leverndale Recreational Therapy Unit, Project Ability and Gartnavel Hospital. I conducted a site visit to view the exhibition on 15th November 2025.

The ‘*Art Extraordinary*’ exhibition aims to highlight the significance of “Mental Health art and care” and is therefore presented alongside other artwork within the ‘*Expressionism*’ area of the museum (University of Glasgow, 2022). Due to the room’s layout, the exhibition is hidden out of obvious view for visitors and it is not signposted in the gallery or the guide map. However, the exhibition’s title is presented on a large display above eye-level using crafting imagery and a non-standard font. The artwork is presented in a glass display case with a white backdrop in the centre. The collection is arranged in a “top-to-bottom display”, with sculptures layered in front of wall-hung drawings (Edlin in Carollo, 2025). Accompanying each piece are typical, museum-style plaques, which provide context and act as co-curated narratives of “institutional intent” (Bowell, 2023, p. 156). These labels are consistent with the rest of Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum and present biographical information about the hospital institution where the art originated, and the artist and medium, where known.



6. Sketches of ‘Art Extraordinary’ Exhibition.

During my site visit, I came across work by JD Fergusson - a “largely self-taught” colourist - who was displayed alongside trained artists Peplow, Cadell and Hunter, separated from ‘Art Extraordinary’ (Kelvingrove, 2025b). As Fergusson fits the ‘self-taught definition’ of Outsider Art, I made a subsequent site visit to The National Galleries of Scotland: National to view more of his work. In both galleries, Fergusson’s art was presented adhering to a ‘formal emphasis’, using institutional norms for displaying ‘insider’ artwork: uniform wall-positioning along a neutral backdrop with spotlights for each piece and separate display cases for individual sculptures (Jones et al., 2010, p. 29). Artist biographies were briefly mentioned by the entrance. Otherwise, labels focused on mediums and styles.



7. Kelvingrove 'Expression' room.

4.3 Ron's Place

Ron's Place is an example of Outsider Art presented as the artist himself understood and inhabited it. Ron Gittins spent thirty-three years projecting his "fantasy world" onto the walls, ceilings and floor of his ground-floor rented flat in Birkenhead, Merseyside (Ron's Place, 2025). Although he was partially trained at the Laird School of Art, Ron "tended to work outside the parameters of the official art world" (Ibid.). Ron was known for his peculiar character and friends and family speculate he had mental health conditions. After his death in September 2019, the extent of his artistic ambition was discovered and the building was granted Grade II listed status. It is clear that Ron drew creative inspiration from personal memories. For example, he was particularly infatuated by the ancient Romans after a trip to Pompeii - this is evident with his Roman Altar installation in his kitchen (Croft, 2024). Ron made art for his own enjoyment, keeping it private for himself, and therefore, the flat cannot be considered an intentionally curated space to display Outsider Art. However, his creation is crucial in understanding that displaying this genre is completely down to individual preference.



8. Lion fireplace.



9. Roman Altar, located in kitchen.

In the interior, Ron used the entire flat as his canvas - sketches, paintings and sculptures cover every surface of the floor, walls and ceiling. Rooms seem to be themed by association: fierce animals (a lion and a minotaur) shape the fireplaces, the bathroom walls are lined with imagery of the ocean, and 'The Georgian Room' displays paintings of warships and portraits that resemble 18th-century artwork. The wall-positioning of Ron's artwork also evokes the 'salon-hang' style typical of 17th-century French exhibition curation, with artwork covering the space from floor to ceiling (Morrison, 2024).



10. The Georgian Room.

5. DISCUSSION

This discussion has been divided into three sections, each one analysing how the use of an investigated interior strategy has helped or hindered the successful display of Outsider Art, with examples from the case studies above used to illustrate.

Galleries and exhibitions act as “mediators in the dialogue between the viewer and the artist” and it is therefore critical that institutions uphold both the rights and wishes of the artist - to be visible and respected in an under-represented sphere - and the audience’s needs (Tyro-Niezgoda). For example, if the cognitive load is too high (there is too much information accompanying an exhibition, leading to forced mental effort), it can result in “mental fatigue, reduced engagement, and trouble remembering information” (Schlackman, 2024). Therefore, surrounding context, layout and wall-positioning play a crucial role in shaping how audiences interpret Outsider Art, particularly in relation to authenticity. Gallery spaces guide subconscious associations that direct attention, form expectations, and influence the legitimacy visitors attribute to artwork.

5.1 Surrounding Context

The 'Art Extraordinary' display at Kelvingrove is visually and spatially marginalised within the Expressionism room. The exhibition is small and easily overshadowed by the imposing room and surrounding instalments - notably the eye-catching Floating Heads, which loom over the exhibition and draw attention away from Outsider Art. The overlap of multiple exhibitions in this space divides visitor's attention, making it difficult to form a coherent narrative about the artwork (Tyro-Niezdoda, 2025). Smith (2018) argues that displaying Outsider Art alongside "mainstream artists" may disorient visitors who are unfamiliar with the genre, resulting in reduced engagement and minimising appreciation (Schlackman, 2024).

The exhibition's sign reinforces the separation between Outsider Art and mainstream art. The 'Art Extraordinary' sign uses non-standard, 'arts and crafts' imagery that visually distances the display from the rest of the gallery. While this has the potential to draw curious viewers in, it also risks downplaying the skill and intention involved in creating Outsider Art, passing it off as the work of a hobbyist, rather than real and raw creative practice.



11. 'Art Extraordinary' exhibition at Kelvingrove.

In contrast, the presentation of Fergusson's work in Kelvingrove demonstrates how an artist's status can be elevated through curation. Labelled as one of the "four internationally significant" Scottish Colourists, Fergusson is framed among 'insider' artists, despite also being an outsider to academic training (Kelvingrove, 2025). This 'formal emphasis' largely ignores biographical narratives, allowing artwork "to speak for itself" through aesthetic qualities (Jones et al., 2010, p. 29). These practices at Kelvingrove demonstrate different definitions of Outsider Art can establish or suppress authenticity and "level the playing field between inside and out" (ibid.).

The exhibition of Ron's Place - both in person and online - raises an ethical question of consent. As many Outsider Artists are discovered after their death (as was Ron), or under various difficult personal circumstances, they are often "either unable or unwilling to offer any comment on their work" (Maclagan, 2009, p. 13). It is critical to emphasise that curators have a moral responsibility to uphold the rights, intentions, wishes and a certain level of respect for outsider artists. This reflects the Grade II listing status of Ron's Place which was put into effect shortly after it was discovered.



12. Fergusson and the Scottish Colourists at Kelvingrove.

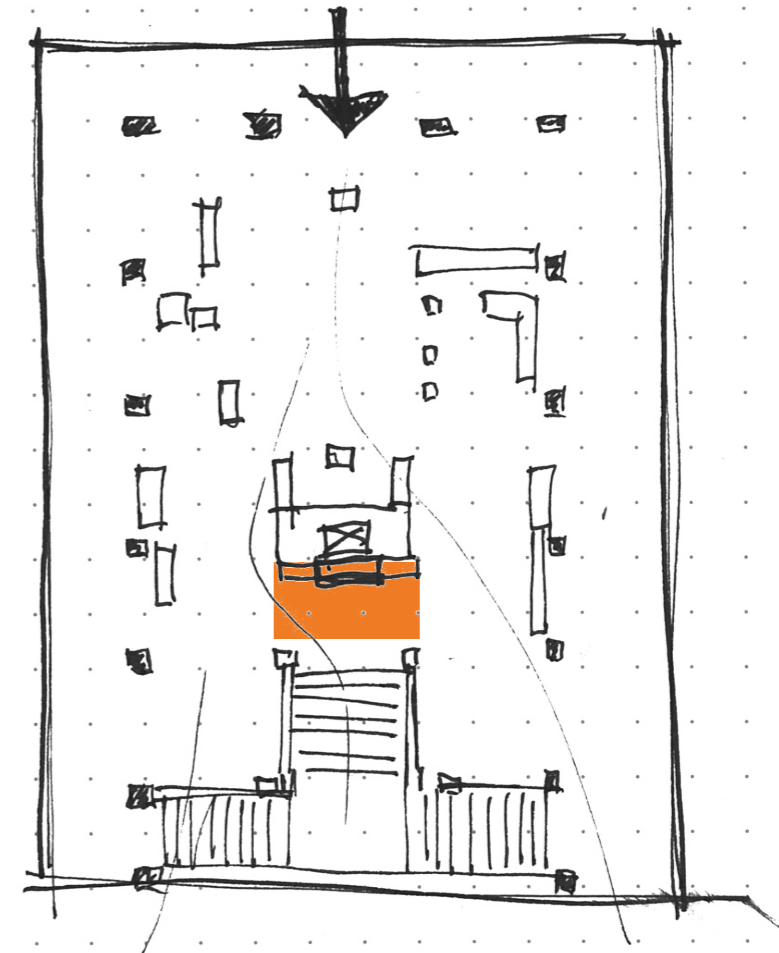
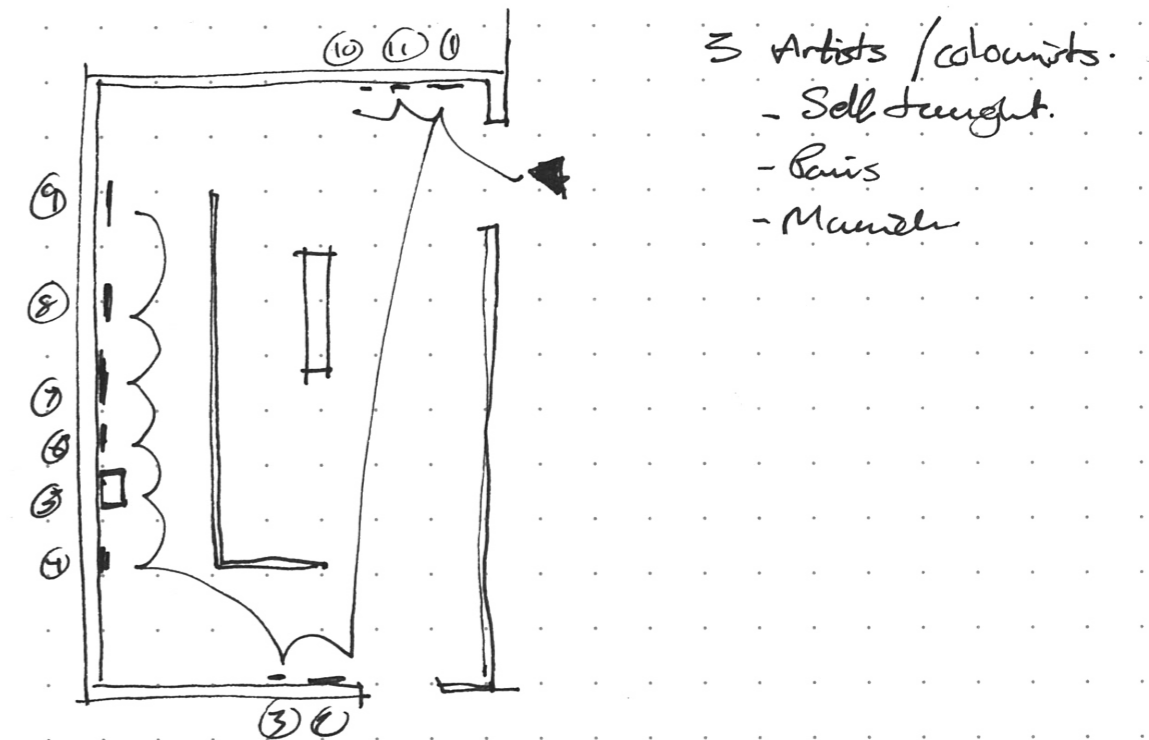
5.2 Layout

Andrew Edlin used layout and flow somewhat effectively in his exhibition of Darger's 'The Vivian Girls Emerge' to verify the value of Outsider Art. With the use of suspended artwork, Edlin creates partitions which emulates the 'vista approach' by framing attention to a singular "visual anchor". Edlin states that he found that "creating a direct dialogue between Art Brut and contemporary art" laid the groundwork for rallying institutional support for Outsider Art (Carollo, 2025). Therefore, using this established method, designers intentionally create suspense and curiosity using "sightlines and focal points" to manipulate the room's flow (Schlackman, 2024). This method conforms with mainstream practices for exhibition design, creating a sense of familiarity and comfort in the space, normalising Darger's work and elevating it to the status of institutional art.

However, some assume the position that strategies normalising Outsider Art create an issue, where this genre is being absorbed by art institutions and a clear-cut distinction can no longer be drawn. Röske (2023) expresses, with conviction, that curators are guilty of "thoughtless equalization". Therefore, Edlin's use of institutional methods of curation are not unanimously viewed as successful.

The layout of the Expressionism room at Kelvingrove severely disadvantages the 'Art Extraordinary' exhibition. Despite actively searching and subsequently enquiring at the information desk, I was initially unable to locate the display during my site visit. The fact that the exhibition faces away from the entrance into the room - completely concealed behind another installation - is compounded by the lack of signage directing visitors to the exhibition. Furthermore, foot traffic is guided around and away from the exhibition, towards 'Mackintosh and the Glasgow Style'. Therefore, the exhibition is easily bypassed by visitors, diminishing visibility and engagement with Outsider Art.

Although Ron did not create his work to be viewed by a particular audience, there is an aspect of curation in his home reflected in its layout. The thematically-coded rooms - such as the bathroom or 'The Georgian Room' - display imagery that reflects the space's purpose. This suggests that Ron acted with intention and a certain level of curation in displaying his artwork solely for his personal enjoyment and total immersion in his world. Therefore, despite not seeking a public audience, Ron still demonstrates consideration of how his art displays will be engaging for his intended viewer, himself.



13. Scottish Colourists and Expression rooms floor plan.

5.3 Wall-positioning

The Darger Exhibition employs wall-positioning strategies to secure broader recognition for Outsider Art within the mainstream art world. Edlin claims that, by displaying Outsider Art with “distinction and dignity...and pairing [it] with works by trained artists”, he aims to equalise engagement and opportunity for those creating outside the spheres of traditional art (Carollo, 2025). He achieves this in his gallery through consistent framing and high co-visibility. Grouping certain cohesive pieces together - which share similar mediums or motifs - is particularly effective when exhibiting a solo artist, such as Darger, as it allows viewers to directly compare pieces and identify similarities and differences in the styles (Schlackman, 2024).

Moreover, Edlin provides minimal contextual information about Darger, further encouraging interpretation through only aesthetic qualities. Maclagan (2009, p. 16) argues that an outsider artist’s situation is intrinsically interweaved with their artwork in true authentication and therefore, that this method of labelling (or rather the lack of it) “reinforces your feeling that something is ‘out of the blue’”. Ultimately, however, Edlin’s way of avoiding reductive biographical narratives frees the artwork from any negative preconceptions that a viewer may hold, even subconsciously. Therefore, high co-visibility and formal display approaches offer a middle ground for Darger: it affirms his work as legitimate art by prioritising visual and conceptual analysis, rather than confining it to one definition of the genre.



14. High co-visibility at Henry Darger: The Vivian Girls Emerge.

In contrast, the 'Art Extraordinary' exhibition at Kelvingrove displays a layered, 'top-to-bottom' arrangement, a method which Edlin attributes to "a flea market" (Canollo, 2025). This adds a sense of confusion and is often overwhelming for viewers. This is intensified by the exhibition's choice of a biographical emphasis: text on title cards initially foreground the hospitals and institutions from which much of the art originates, immediately planting associations of institutionalisation before viewers even encounter the art itself. Although Kelvingrove does not explicitly label artists by diagnosis or disability, this biographical emphasis implicitly upholds the marginalising narrative that Outsider Art is associated with "extreme otherness" (Jones et al., 2010, p. 29). This overshadows the works of art and reinforces the preconception that Outsider Art is defined primarily by personal hardship. Both the top-to-bottom arrangement and biographical emphasis can contribute to an "often strangely exhausting" experience for viewers when visiting an Outsider Art exhibition, as noted by Maclagan (2009, p. 15), and can lead to misunderstanding and a lack of real engagement with the artwork. Therefore, this display's wall-positioning features demonstrate how reliance on biography can undermine true appreciation of Outsider Art.

Interestingly, Ron's Place similarly displays a top-to-bottom approach, with all surfaces covered to achieve complete immersion in the imaginary. Moreover, in 'The Georgian Room', Ron appears to have curated 'wall-hangings' resembling 'salon-hang', with artwork covering the space from floor to ceiling (Morrison, 2024). This is particularly evident as the various objects sitting on top of the marble fireplace frame the portrait that sits above it. This once again demonstrates that Ron - although he did not have the intention of curating his space for a public audience - thought consciously about how to create a space in which he felt immersed in his private fantasy.

6. CONCLUSION

Overall, it is evident that the term and concept 'Outsider Art' is highly contested within the art world, evoking both ethical and emotional responses. Through the analysis of several case studies, I have demonstrated how three interior strategies - surrounding context, layout and wall-positioning - have been employed to varying levels of success to promote Outsider Art in exhibition spaces, elevating it to equal status alongside mainstream artists. Ultimately, however, it is critical that curators find a suitable balance in displaying Outsider Artwork to accommodate both how the artist envisions their creative presentation, and also what the audience requires for sufficient levels of intrigue, respect and assumed authenticity.

Admittedly, difficulties lie in the individualistic nature of Outsider Art set out by Dubuffet in 1940s - each artist may have differing views about how they would like their work presented and it is therefore difficult to draw sweeping generalisations in conclusion to the question of how to successfully display Outsider Art. In reality, there are few defining characteristics today which can claim to unite "this diverse group of artists hailing from a wide range of backgrounds and artistic traditions" (Smith, 2018). This barrier is compounded by the fact that many artists considered to be outside the mainstream are unable to discuss their exhibition intentions with a curator due to disability or posthumous discovery. It is in this situation where the curator must therefore rely on their understanding of implicit viewer-artwork-artist interactions and lean into what the audience needs for maximum engagement in recognising Outsider

Art as authentic and visible art.

Due to growing digitalisation, galleries have adapted and gradually moved resources online. This has presented both challenges and "new possibilities for exhibition design", particularly for Outsider Art (Call for Curators, 2025). 'Outside In' is one website that strives to provide equal opportunity for artists facing difficulties due to ill health or other circumstances, in particular through a dedicated "digital platform" for outsider artists to personally curate and display their work (Outside In, 2025b). This could be an interesting area for further research to explore.

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