

Art and the Artist: The name is not the thing

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Almost 50 years ago I made the piece titled “*Drawing of a hammer on the level*” (illus). This assemblage of old wood, plastic and metal included a hammer but, was neither a ‘drawing’, as commonly understood, nor ‘on the level’, intended to be hung vertically. As this *was* a hammer, ‘drawn’ from my direct experience, I was not trying to fool anyone. Metaphorically, it was all ‘on the level’. When I exhibited it later with the *Dundee Group (Artists)*¹ like all my other pieces it was described as an ‘artwork’. I hoped that this arrangement of junk might ‘work’ as art for someone.

The hammer had belonged to my father who, over the years, used it to make all sorts of things from discarded materials. The piece may have been a homage to him, if not all workers who *make* something new from the old, whether they used hammers or not. Scots use the term *Makar* to venerate their great poets. I don’t recall my father, a furnaceman, ever reading poetry and his writing was limited to the occasional signature. Yet he might have qualified as a poet of the everyday realm. Anyone who could *mak* something out of (virtually) nothing is a *Makar* worth venerating.

At the time my hammer piece was unusual but hardly ‘novel’. After Duchamp had named and signed his infamous urinal, *Fountain*², novelty in the visual arts became near impossible. By attributing an artistic value to a piece of mass-produced, sanitary earthenware, Duchamp had broken the artistic mould. In the 60s *Fluxus*, extended Duchamp’s iconoclasm by importing and integrating all kinds of ‘found’ and accidental sounds, events and materials into their anarchic ‘happenings’. Their haphazard, chaotic nature also allowed random interventions from the audience, projecting a broader, more inclusive view of creativity. If they said it was art it was ‘art’, an echo of Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty from a century earlier³. *Fluxus* anticipated almost everything promoted today as ‘contemporary art’, although for some, like Tony Godfrey, they were “closer to vaudeville than any form of ‘high art’”.⁴ *Fluxus* members, like Joseph Beuys and Yoko Ono, might have argued that baiting the ideals of ‘high art’ was the whole point of their work.

Arguably the crudest example of such artistic language-games⁵ came from Piero Manzoni, who took Duchamp’s conceptual approach a stage further, by tinning his own excrement (90 in total), naming it ‘shit-art’ (*Merda d’Artista*) and giving each tin the contemporary value of 30 grams of 18 carat gold⁶. The contents of the tins were never checked as that would have rendered the ‘piece’ worthless. Countless others have since tried similar shock tactics, but no one has stooped quite as low as Manzoni in creating a piece of ‘high art’.

Tony Godfrey began his ‘*Story of Contemporary Art*’⁷ with a fitting acknowledgement of the influence of Gombrich’s ‘*Story of Art*’. Returning to it in his *Afterword* he quoted

Gombrich's view that: "there really is no such thing as art. There are only artists".⁸ Godfrey took a different view: "Artists do not exist apart from their society and culture, but they do have more freedom than most. It is they who make and ultimately (sic) define art."⁹ A controversial idea, but perhaps not in the way Godfrey intended.

While looking for "Art Brut" artists like those first described by Jean Dubuffet,¹⁰ the art therapist Joyce Laing came across Angus McPhee in Craig Dunain Hospital. During the 50 years he had spent as a psychiatric patient in Inverness, McPhee had woven or knitted shoes, boots and various other garments from leaves, grasses and bits of wool he had collected. Most of these he hid under hedges often watching silently as they were swept up with the rest of the autumn leaves. He was described as an 'elective mute', who had chosen not to speak for almost 50 years. Today, thanks to the work of Laing and others,¹¹ McPhee is recognised now as a significant 'Scottish Outsider Artist'. It seems unlikely that he ever claimed to be an artist, far less defined the things he made as 'art'. More importantly, he did not enjoy anything like the kind of 'freedom' that Godfrey claims as the exclusive privilege of the artist.

The whole idea of 'outsider' art (and artists) is problematic on many levels as the New Zealand writer Janet McAllister has illustrated:¹²

"The outsider artist used to be outside of society itself, on the inside of insane asylums – folk art wasn't outsider art, for example, it was its own Thing. But the fine arts industry has inflated the outsider concept to encompass most self-taught artists – with more people on the outside, the self-appointed inside makes itself seem more elite. The label creates and imposes a binary: someone's out so someone's in. "Outsider art" is a very hard-working, enslaved, slippery little phrase: it is employed to make the work of self-taught artists credible enough to sell, but not so credible that rich collectors call into question the whole art-school-critic-curator-dealer-institution "insider" edifice".

Godfrey did not mention 'outsider art' in his book, but it is clear many 'contemporary' artists are very interested in such work, collect it and may even have drawn upon it in the development of their own insider-forms of 'high art'¹³

A few years after my 'hammer' period I left the art world to focus on academic psychiatry and psychotherapy. Here I encountered people for whom unusual experiences were central to their 'being' – from those who thought their insides were rotting to others who believed they lived in a parallel universe. In the late 70s, as Joyce Laing discovered, such people were still seen as 'mad,' in need of institutional care and confinement.

Over the years I met many people who, like Angus McPhee, I would have described as 'Makars.'^{14 15} Only a precious few such 'outsiders' gained any acceptance by the art establishment,¹⁶ most having their work recast as mere 'art therapy'.

Early on in my 40 years in psychiatry I came to appreciate at first hand the lived reality of Korzybski's vital observation that: "*The map is not the territory, and the word is not the thing*"¹⁷. Society takes great comfort in naming things which are difficult to comprehend - whether it is the 'schizophrenia' which apparently dogged Angus McPhee's life, or any of the myriad states embraced today by the notion of 'mental health problems.' But what, exactly, is the 'thing' which someone experiences? If we ask them, we might gain some sense of what such experiences might *mean* for the person?

McAllister understood why the 'art establishment' might be wary of 'outsiders.' It has a vested interest in containing, controlling and naming what is/is not 'art'. Joseph Beuys said that 'every human being is an artist',¹⁸ an expression of his belief in the dormant, potentially world-changing nature of human creativity. However, as others have pointed out¹⁹, such utopian ideals ignore the influence of the art museum, gallery and dealership networks, which made Beuys famous and control the economic worth of all the 'art' he and other artists' produce.

More than 50 years after his early death one of Manzoni's 'Shit-Art' pieces fetched 275,000 euros at auction in Milan²⁰. A few years earlier, after Angus McPhee's death, books, films and exhibitions began to appear, generating interest in the man himself and 'outsider art' in general. One wonders what kind of price McPhee's work might have commanded in the Italian saleroom.

It is commonplace for people to talk about how their lives were changed by an encounter with a 'work of art'. What might people 'make' of the Manzoni and McPhee works if they saw them for the first time, in the absence of any curator's commentary. Apart from any emotional or psychological reaction, how might they judge, value and compare the two pieces on personal, human and economic level?

¹ <https://retrodundee.blogspot.com/2011/10/junk-into-art-art-into-junk.html>

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_\(Duchamp\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_(Duchamp))

³ <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-23-autumn-2011/when-i-use-word-it-means-just-what-i-choose-it-mean>

⁴ Godfrey T *The Story of Contemporary Art* London: Thames and Hudson, 2024 p41.

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_game_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_game_(philosophy))

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artist%27s_Shirt

⁷ Godfrey T. *The Story of Contemporary Art* London: Thames and Hudson, 2024

⁸ Gombrich E *The Story of Art* 10th edn. London: Phaidon, 1960, p.5.

⁹ Godfrey T. *The Story of Contemporary Art* London: Thames and Hudson, 2024, p.292

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Dubuffet

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angus_McPhee

¹² <https://pantograph-punch.com/posts/outsider-art>

¹³ <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-major-contemporary-artists-passionate-collectors-outsider-art>

¹⁴ Barker P, Campbell P and Davidson B (eds) *From the Ashes of Experience: Reflections on Madness, Survival and Growth* London: Whurr, 1999

¹⁵ Barker P and Buchanan-Barker P. *Spirituality and Mental Health: Breakthrough* London: John Wiley

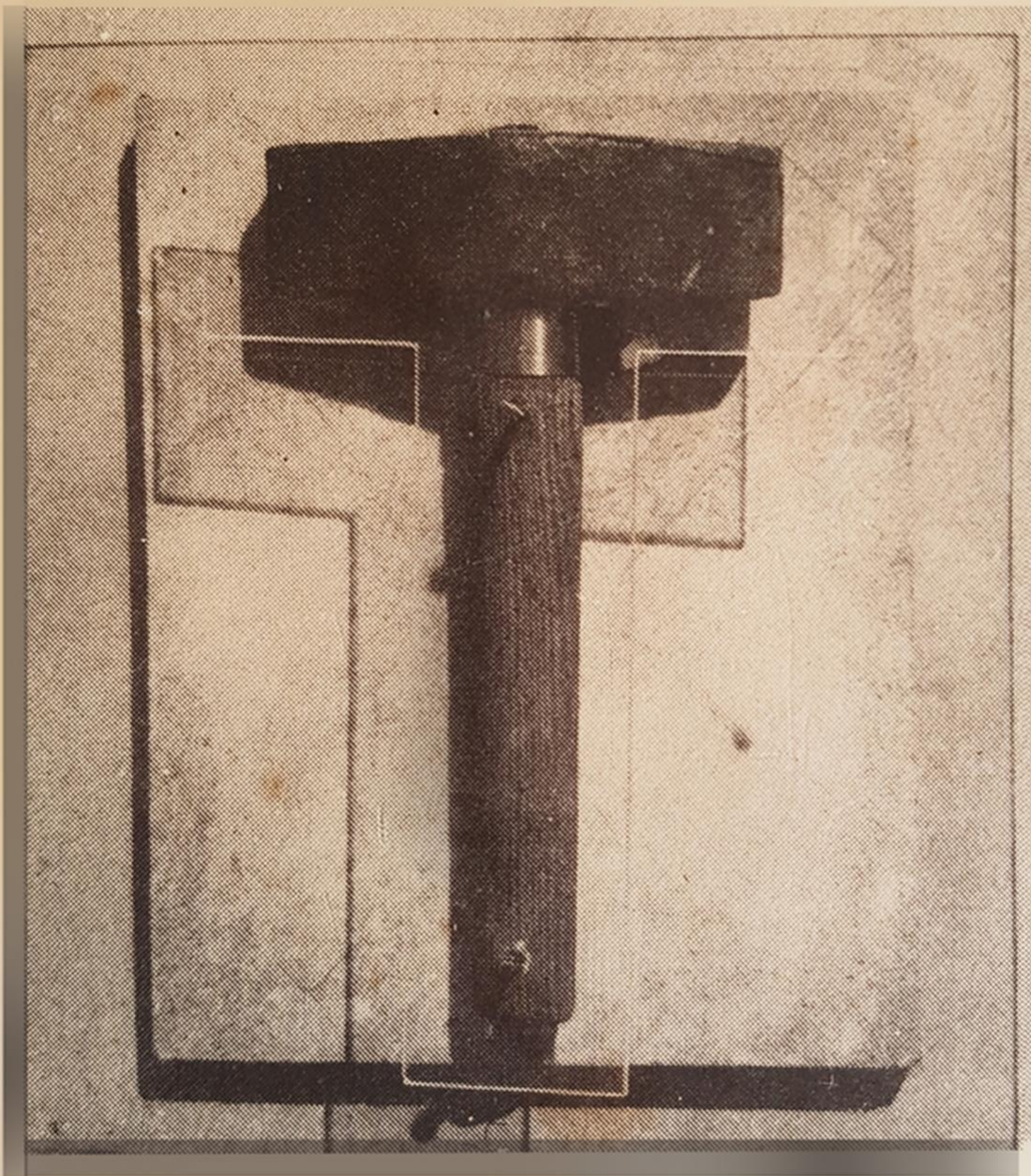
¹⁶ <https://www.realitytester.co.uk/splitmind.html>

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Korzybski

¹⁸ Beuys's statement dated 1973, first published in English in Caroline Tisdall (1974) *Art into Society, Society into Art*. ICA, London, p. 48.

¹⁹ Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. (1980). "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol". *Artforum*. 5 (18): 51.

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artist%27s_Shit



“Drawing of a Hammer on the level”.

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