

Beyond the pale: psychotic art and the boundaries of genius

Between 1930 and 1933, an exhibition of art by psychiatric patients toured nine German cities, mostly in art association spaces. It originated from the Heidelberg psychiatric hospital, whose large collection of psychotic art had already achieved fame outside of the psychiatric community through the publication of Hans Prinzhorn's richly illustrated book, *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (Artistry of the Mentally Ill) in 1922. By revealing creative work produced by people institutionalized because of psychiatric illness and presenting it as art proper, the show aimed to remind the public of this group's continued humanity in the face of psychological and physical suffering.

This position flew in the face of popular opinion that mental health problems somehow rob subjects of their personhood. And in another place and time, the exhibition 'Art of the Mentally Ill' might have been hailed as a sign of the reevaluation of work previously regarded at best as medical curiosity and now elevated to the status of art. As it was, however, the very possibility of this work being offered as art, in spaces reserved for art, generally confirmed the belief of conservative German audiences that contemporary art in general had become debased. Its very visibility and the fact that it was being taken seriously played into the hands of hostile critics. Formal comparisons with contemporary professional art were made by them not to celebrate the achievement of the psychiatric patient, but to demonstrate the supposed degeneracy of the modernist artist; to argue that the system of art production, display and criticism had reached a state of transgressivity that threatened general social wellbeing.¹

In 1933, coincident with the final year of the tour of 'Art of the Mentally Ill', an exhibit opened in Dresden whose sole purpose was to demonize and pathologize modernist art. The title of the exhibition, *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) unapologetically placed modernism within a particular model of disease that was already widely questioned within the scientific community, but which had taken a firm hold in popular thought, and which connected modern art directly with criminality and mental illness. There were no pictures made in prisons or psychiatric hospitals in this show, though, only modernist art, and moreover art that had been given an official stamp of approval through being acquired for the Dresden public collections.

In pandering to popular prejudice the Dresden show might have been easy to dismiss as a relatively harmless exercise in reactionary spleen venting. But it signaled the emergence of a new paradigm. Both modern art's supporters and detractors argued for its supposed 'lawlessness', though with different inferences. On one side it was argued that modernism was an art of liberation, not subject to civil moral and penal codes. But this is what made it dangerous to the model of absolute state control envisioned by the new National Socialist government in Germany. The Nazi view was that the modern artist was a criminal, because s/he encouraged lawless behavior by normalizing it through representation or, as they would have it, by duping the public. The staging of so-called 'Art Chambers of Horror' and 'Abomination Exhibitions' by ultra-conservative art associations and curators in the 1930s was therefore endorsed and encouraged.

The idea of criminal insanity was repeatedly utilized to attack modern art by figures ranging from Alfred Rosenberg and Paul Schultze-Naumberg to Adolf Hitler. In a 1935 speech, for example, Hitler said: 'It is not the mission of art to wallow in

filth for filth's sake, to paint the human being only in a state of putrefaction, to draw cretins as symbols of motherhood, or to present deformed idiots as representative of manly strength. ... We will no longer discuss or deal with these corrupters of art. They are fools, liars, or criminals who belong in insane asylums or prisons'.² In this way, chillingly, hyperbolic critical rhetoric was converted into state policy, revealed in the confiscation of modernist art from all German public museums by the Nazis and the removal of all curators and art professors unacceptable to the regime from their positions.

Supposed links between criminality, insanity and genius received their most complete theoretical treatment in the nineteenth century in the work of the Italian psychiatrist and criminologist Cesare Lombroso. His main claim was that genius is a form of 'moral insanity',³ and that artists are innately 'degenerate' types; that is, that they are particularly likely to display atavistic characteristics. In such a view this can have positive effects, where insight gained from 'returns' to simpler states is harnessed and put in the service of culture. Always, though, there is a risk of losing control and surrendering to basic urges.

Lombroso's ideas were most famously extended and turned against current fashions in art and literature by his pupil Max Nordau at turn of the nineteenth century. His hugely popular *Entartung* (Degeneration) (1895) is organised like a medical treatise rather than an art book, and the language used is that of medicine and psychology, rather than art history, giving it an air of objectivity, in spite of its polemical content.⁴ He started, characteristically for critics of modernism, from the presumption that in Western culture mimesis is that which is proper to art, and that the avant-garde of his time – Symbolism, Realism and Impressionism – represented

a retrograde step in relation to this. Moreover, following Lombroso, he argued that this was indicative of the degenerate state of the modern artist: 'Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists.'⁵ He believed that the 'Notions healthy and diseased, moral and immoral, social or anti-social, are as valid for art as for every other human activity,'⁶ making it possible to detect sublimated 'degenerate' urges in artworks themselves. He ridiculed common claims by apologists of modernism that the 'sensitivity' of the general public was underdeveloped, causing them to see bad art where in fact there was 'genius'. On the contrary, according to him, the art-degenerate is the one at fault, for though 'He believes himself to be possessed by a peculiar insight lacking in other mortals ... The unhappy creature does not suspect that he is conceited about a disease and boasting about a derangement of the mind.'⁷ Significantly, Nordau argues that direct action is necessary for the public good:

It never occurs to us to permit the criminal by organic disposition to 'expand' his individuality in crime, and just as little can it be expected of us to permit the degenerate artist to expand his individuality in immoral works of art. The artist who complacently represents what is reprehensible, vicious, criminal, approves of it, perhaps glorifies it, differs not in kind, but only in degree, from the criminal who actually commits it.⁸

This attack on the content of supposedly degenerate art accords perfectly with the general view common among many in Europe and the United States at the time that 'civilized' control mechanisms are stripped away by insanity and are congenitally absent in criminals and sex workers. In the racist terms of a still-prevalent Social Darwinism it also connects these groups with contemporary tribal cultures, which were regarded not as atavistic throwbacks, but as examples of arrested evolution,

with only rudimentary systems of law and order. In each case, what Lombroso described as, a 'fixation on the obscene and a stress on the absurd'⁹ is recognized as the 'characteristic' state. All of this comes together in early twentieth-century art, in which formal appropriations from notionally primitive art often combine with transgressive subject matter, as for example, in the practices of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner or George Grosz. And it is seemingly confirmed, even as its parameters are inverted, in much modernist polemic. In 1916, for example, the Dadaist Hugo Ball wrote of the inevitability of accepting lawlessness in creative work, in the face of a defunct society: 'The bankruptcy of ideas having destroyed the concept of humanity to its very innermost strata, the instincts and hereditary backgrounds are now emerging pathologically. Since no art, politics or religious faith seems adequate to dam this torrent, there remain only the *blague* and the bleeding pose...'¹⁰

If Nordau was able to construct a theory of the art-criminal based on Social Darwinist ideas, it is important to recognise that the modernist embrace of tribal art and culture, of the condition and products of insanity, and of the worldview and art of the child relied on exactly the same system of knowledge. Like Nordau the modernists represented these groups as more or less lawless – especially in respect of ideas – and either standing before, or in some way stripped of the complex baggage of civilisation. Occasionally, this resulted in claims that actually echoed Nordau, as in Adolf Loos' remarkable piece of invective from 1908, which neatly invoked a corruption of the biologist Ernst Haeckel's evolutionist 'Biogenetic Law' to describe state-sanctioned architecture and applied arts in Austria as 'degenerate' and their modernist forms as 'healthy':

In the womb the human embryo passes through all the development stages of the animal kingdom. At the moment of birth, human sensations are equal to

those of a newborn dog. His childhood passes through all the transformations which correspond to the history of mankind. At the age of two, he sees like a Papuan, at four, like a Teuton, at six like Socrates, at eight like Voltaire. ... The child is amoral. To us the Papuan is also amoral. The Papuan slaughters his enemies and devours them. He is no criminal. If, however, the modern *man* slaughters and devours somebody, he is a criminal or a degenerate. The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his oar, in short, everything that is within his reach. He is no criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate. ... The immense damage and devastation which the revival of ornament has caused to aesthetic development could easily be overcome because nobody, not even the power of the state, can stop the evolution of humanity! It represents a crime against the national economy, and, as a result of it, human labour, money and material are ruined.¹¹

A more common tendency among modernists at the time was to argue in favour of 'primitive' values and their atavistic reappearance in 'madness' in preference to civilized ones. The famous bathing trips and studio-environments of the Brücke artists, for example, were part of an attempt to shrug off moral and legal codes in order to create 'freely'. As Kirchner said, 'only at home did I have complete freedom in my work',¹² belying the fact that the sexual practices of the artists and the bohemian spaces they inhabited helped to situate Brücke unequivocally outside normative discourse and potentially subject to criminal prosecution.

There is no doubt that the claims made for modernist art by its practitioners and supporters affected in turn the ways in which image making by psychiatric patients was treated and judged. Psychiatrists like Paul Meunier (who used the pseudonym Marcel Réja) (1907), Walter Morgenthaler (1921) and Hans Prinzhorn (1922) argued

that such work was the result of exactly the same cognitive processes and creative impulses as art by people who were not ill. They regarded only a proportion of psychiatric patients as artists, as in the case of other social groups. Significantly, their interest tended toward those cases where artistic activity was entirely self-taught and began only after the onset of illness; in this model, the concern is not with artistic genius tumbling over into 'madness', but on the contrary, with possibility of 'madness' releasing genius. Prinzhorn identified ten schizophrenic artists in *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, going so far as to dignify them with names (albeit pseudonyms) and biographies, while Morgenthaler's book, *A Mentally Ill Person as Artist* focused on a single patient, Adolf Wölfli who was not only named in the text, but also identified by a portrait photograph. For his part, Prinzhorn utilised symbolist and expressionist aesthetic theories as the base for his psychological interrogations of schizophrenic art. And given the general rejection of learned technique in favour of expressivity in both, it is perhaps of little surprise that he concluded that the basic image-forming tendency is 'the same for 'healthy persons and those who are mentally ill. It receives its modifications,' he argued, 'only secondarily from other factors.'¹³

Morgenthaler also concluded that the schizophrenic artist shares with the 'normal' one 'the desire to express himself'. Moreover, he began from the presumption that all artists function differently, psychologically to 'nonartists'. He argued that his 'schizophrenic artist', Wölfli differed as much from other schizophrenics, a result of his artistic achievement, as he resembled other artists. Yet, he said, if 'infantilism' can be found in most schizophrenics, 'The artist in general preserves a much more immediate and naïve attitude toward his environment or inner world than the ordinary person does.'¹⁴ Thus, as an artist, Wölfli was connected to his 'healthy'

contemporaries, said Morgenthaler, by a common seeking after 'specific fundamental elements through a systematic destruction of previously existing forms.'¹⁵

The aesthetics of inwardness that characterised so much of early twentieth-century modernism accorded easily with the centrality attached to 'autism' in emerging constructions of schizophrenia. Kandinsky argued that, 'The now-dawning twentieth century is the century of the "internal", in contrast to the nineteenth, which was that of the "external"'.¹⁶ And, convinced of the sureness of his vision, assumed an imperious attitude toward public incomprehension of his work that made for easy comparisons with megalomaniac tendencies in schizophrenia. Morgenthaler wrote of 'a characteristic autism' in his patient, Wölfli: 'As soon as he is left to himself or he voluntarily detaches himself from his surroundings, he immediately breaks off most of his connections with the outside world, turns inward and builds his own universe in which he lives entirely. This world constructed around desires and delusions is more authentic to him than the real world.' Both Morgenthaler and Prinzhorn were at pains to point out the creative potential inherent in such withdrawals. For example, Prinzhorn wrote: 'The habit of using all external things only as grist for their psychic mills immediately leads even relatively modest talents into a more or less symbolic but nevertheless firm and consistent language of form – into a personal style.'¹⁷ Moreover, this could lead, he argued, to authentic insights: 'Our patients are in contact, in a totally irrational way, with the most profound truths, and have reproduced, unconsciously, pictures of transcendence as they perceive it.'¹⁸ Compare this with Jean Arp's statement: 'Dada aimed to destroy the reasonable deceptions of man and recover the natural and unreasonable order. Dada wanted to replace the logical nonsense of the men of today by the illogically senseless.'¹⁹ For

his part Prinzhorn maintained that connections between art by psychiatric patients and the moderns should be sought not in formal comparison, but in their 'general emotional attitude', specifically in a common 'basic renunciation of the outside world as commonly understood, as well as a logical devaluation of its surface lustre on which all Western art has heretofore depended.'²⁰ Nevertheless, formal comparison was used from the early 1920s as a means of attacking modern art in Germany, and by 1938 had been adopted as a major component of the state-sponsored exhibition of 'Degenerate Art' that toured the country between 1937 and 1941, when work borrowed from the Prinzhorn collection was mixed with that by the moderns.

If the rehabilitation of 'psychotic' art by the likes of Morgenthaler and Prinzhorn relied on modernist aesthetics, then work by institutionalized psychiatric patients was in turn seized on by contemporary artists as confirmation of the creative value of insanity. Klee and Alfred Kubin knew the Prinzhorn Collection at first hand, as well as owning *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, and Max Ernst introduced the book to the surrealists shortly after its publication. Artists began to seek out and, occasionally, even collect 'asylum' art. André Breton declared that Wölfli's works, 'as an ensemble, represent one of the three or four most important oeuvres of the twentieth century.'²¹ And in the 1940s Jean Dubuffet placed the work of patients like Wölfli, Heinrich Anton Müller, Peter Meyer and Karl Genzel at the core of his attempt to define a category of 'authentic' creativity to which he gave the name *Art brut* (raw or unrefined art). Madness, he claimed in 'Art Brut in Preference to Cultural Art' (1949), is merely a mechanism for revealing true creativity; a sign of 'liberation' from the stultifying effects of social convention: 'Madness lightens the man, gives him wings, and promotes clairvoyance – or so it seems.'²² Once again, Nordau's 'lawlessness' is modernism's 'freedom'.

Dubuffet's position grew out of prewar surrealist thought, in which madness functioned as a metaphor for absolute liberation from natural and social strictures. Its name was repeatedly invoked as a provocation, and unquestioning acceptance of the condition claimed in the service of surrealism's revolutionary project. This is the spirit in which Paul Eluard's 1924 imperative should be read: 'We who love them understand that the insane refuse to be cured. We know well that it is we who are locked up when the asylum door is shut: the prison is outside the asylum, liberty is to be found inside. ... Accept as a postulate the principle of absolute liberty, and recognise with me that the world of the insane cannot be matched in our age.'²³ In *La Révolution Surréaliste* a year later the group called on the state to 'Open the prisons! Disband the army!'²⁴ Yet, in spite of the apparent criminal intent of their position, there was never any question of the surrealist group actually attempting to secure the release of someone like Wölfli, whose lengthy incarceration was a result of criminal charges relating to violence and sexual misdemeanour, as well as his mental health. Even when one of their own, Antonin Artaud was hospitalised, none moved to 'rescue' him.

In the wake of the Second World War, as details of Nazi atrocities – which included the murder of many of the artists represented in the Prinzhorn collection – emerged, it was perhaps not surprising to find artistic reassertions of romantic constructions of madness as a socially subversive antidote. In 1948, Breton wrote: 'I am not afraid to put forward the idea - paradoxical only at first sight - that the art of those who are nowadays classified as the mentally ill constitutes a reservoir of moral health.'

There is evidence that Nordau's book was often received as somewhat tongue-in-cheek by his contemporaries, including those who didn't care for modern art. Many might have argued that he was probably correct in his negative assessment of modernism, but over the top to the point of burlesque in the expansion of his thesis and his proposed solution. One British reviewer, for example, wrote, 'His theory opens the door to a large amount of vigorous criticism upon the fashionable crazes of the day, much of which may be read with amusement, if not with complete conviction.'²⁵ However, it is hard to recognize such an assessment in the light of the part played by the book in the development and execution of Nazi cultural policy in the 1930s. In his speech inaugurating the exhibition of state-sanctioned art in Munich in 1937, Adolf Hitler accused the modernists of degeneracy, saying that they had, in their practice broken one or other of two laws, one natural, the other penal. Either they were suffering from some congenital condition, whose further inheritance would be forcibly prevented, he said, referring to the process of forced sterilization and euthanasia that had already begun in German psychiatric hospitals. Or they were being knowingly unscrupulous and should therefore be dealt with by the police. With the physical power of an absolute head of state, Hitler was not only able to reproduce the language of Nordau, but also to act upon it. There was chilling agency behind Hitler's words when he declared that, 'From now on ... all those cliques of babblers, dilettantes and art crooks which lend support to each other and are therefore able to survive, will be eliminated and abolished.'²⁶

Part of the postwar artistic response was to celebrate 'anti-cultural' behaviour and states of mind, and the critical and public response has often been one of incomprehension and sometimes revulsion. In spite of everything, even today writers reach for outworn stereotypes of madness and criminality as a means of attack,

rather than critique. This from David Lee, one-time editor of the respected British journal *Art Monthly*, from his self-published 'satirical' art paper, *The Jackdaw*: 'Before long the scribbled mess is being accorded the same reverence as a drawing by Michelangelo. It is being judged by a completely new and worthless set of values, the values born of desperation and a desire not to be thought square. ... I've been party to numerous delusional discussions of this kidney (*sic.*) which, were they to have been secretly broadcast to the world as a fly on the wall documentary, could only have resulted in both parties being immediately sectioned under the Mental Health Act.' And the title of the article? 'The critical disease: How Bad Art Becomes Good.'²⁷

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- 1 As one critic, Bettina Feistel-Rohmeder asked, 'Is this display of madhouse art one last attempt to demonstrate the inherent lunacy of certain artistic movements?' (1931); as quoted in B. Brand-Claussen, 'The Collection of Works of Art in the Psychiatric Clinic, Heidelberg – from Beginnings until 1945' (in Hayward Gallery, *Beyond Reason: Art and Psychosis – works from the Prinzhorn Collection*, London: Hayward Gallery, 1996): 17
- 2 Hitler, as quoted in S. Barron, ed., *Degenerate Art: the fate of the avant-garde in Nazi Germany*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991: 57, and H. B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968: 474
- 3 see J. M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989: 94ff
- 4 Nordau himself describes the book as, 'an attempt at a really scientific criticism' *Degeneration*, London: William Heinemann, 1920: viii
- 5 *Degeneration*: vii
- 6 *Degeneration*: 325
- 7 *Degeneration*: 19
- 8 *Degeneration*: 326
- 9 Lombroso, as quoted in S. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*, Ithaca: Cornell University press, 1985: 222
- 10 Ball, 'Dada Fragments', in C. Harrison and P. Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992: 246
- 11 Loos, 'Ornament and Crime', in Y. Safran and W. Wang, eds., *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*, Exh. Cat. Arts Council of Great Britain, 1985: 100
- 12 Kirchner, Diary, 1 March, 1923, in L. Grisebach, ed., *E. L. Kirchners Davoser Tagebuch*, Cologne, 1968: 74
- 13 H. Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, New York: Springer, 1972: 241
- 14 W. Morgenthaler, *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992: 100
- 15 *Madness and Art*: 108
- 16 Kandinsky, 1911, as quoted in R.-C. Washton Long, *German Expressionism: documents from the end of the Wilhelmine Empire to the rise of National Socialism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995: 40
- 17 *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*: 236
- 18 *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*: 242
- 19 Arp, 'Dadaland', in Lippard, ed., *Dadas on Art*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971: 28
- 20 *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*: 271
- 21 Breton, as quoted in D. Baumann, 'The Reception of Adolf Wölfli's Work, 1921-1996' (in E. Spoerri, ed., *Adolf Wölfli, Draftsman, Writer, Poet, Composer*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997): 217
- 22 Dubuffet, 'L'Art brut préféré aux arts culturels' (1949); in English in A. Weiss, ed., *Art Brut* (special issue of *Art & Text*), 27, 1988, p.33
- 23 Eluard, as quoted in *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, (*Op cit.*): p.275
- 24 in F. Rosemont, ed., *André Breton – What is Surrealism? Selected Writings* (London: Pluto Press, 1978): 316
- 25 anon., *The Times*, as quoted in *Degeneration* (*Op cit.*): n.p.

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- ²⁶ Hitler, 'Speech inaugurating the "Great Exhibition of German Art 1937"', Munich', in *Theories of Modern Art (Op cit.)*: 482
- ²⁷ D. Lee, 'The New Disease: How Bad Art Becomes Good', *The Jackdaw*, March 2003: 7