

# THE ART OF NOW: OUTSIDERS (FINAL)

## BBC Radio 4 / Boom Shakalaka Productions

### R4 ANNOUNCER INTRO

Now on BBC Radio 4, THE ART OF NOW. This week, we ask: can anyone declare themselves to be “an artist”, regardless of their background? David Tovey considers how open the established art world is to “OUTSIDERS”.

0’00”

DAVID: They make us feel like imposters. The orb of the art world, the establishment. They’re trying to say, no, you need to fit in with us. It’s “them and us”.

LIV: I don’t wanna really make work that they care about, the stuff I wanna do is a bit too spiky and dangerous.

GABRIELLE: I’m just believing more and more that marginalised identities do make the best art!

TONY: The problem is that to get somebody like me sat around your table, you’ve got to get rid of somebody like you. And that’s a very difficult thing for “them” to contemplate.

KATIE: It can’t be about “them”.

DAVID: It’s “them and us”

KATIE: It’s got to work for us.

0’45”

**In a lot of documentaries, this is the point where a more “refined”, posh presenter’s voice comes in.**

**But actually – shock horror – I got asked to present this one!**

**And it feels weird, because I’m not a radio presenter. At least, I wouldn’t say I am.**

**It still sounds strange to say I'm an "artist". I call myself a "social artist", an "ex-homeless artist", never just an "artist"... "the artist David Tovey!"... it's like I won't let myself.**

**Who says I'm an artist?**

**Who says I can paint?**

**What gives me the right to have my work in an art gallery?**

**Or, as I'm doing at the moment, to write the music for an opera?**

*WILL GOMPERTZ RADIO CLIP FADES IN*

**Who says I can go on Radio 4 and talk about "the arts"? I'm not flippin' Will Gompertz!**

**I don't sound anything like him!**

**1'40"**

*WILL: "...According to the Tate Guide to Modern Art Terms, 'Outsider Art' is art that has a naïve quality – often produced by people who've not trained as artists, who operate outside the world of museums and galleries, and to an extent, society itself. Psychiatric patients, prisoners and hermits, all fit the brief..." (from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/entertainment-arts-22852766/what-is-outsider-art>)*

**This wouldn't be my definition of "Outsider Art". Some of us have had training... we do get stuff in galleries – sometimes... and we're certainly not "outside society".**

SUE: I never left society, society left me.

**This is Sue. She comes to one of my art classes, for people who've experienced homelessness.**

SUE: Obviously we've been to the National Gallery, we've been to the Tate... I always said I wasn't very keen on Modern, but I think we've begun to understand how it works, more the concepts and that, so yeah.

## **Sue says she could describe herself as “an artist” ... one day.**

SUE: Yes – maybe not a commercial artist! (laughs) ...but yes.

ART CLASS ATMOS

DAVID: The concentration on your face then – it’s very nice! Very nice.

**2’51”**

MARTINA: Who says you ARE an artist? Every artist is different, I’m not an artist, but that’s what we are trying to do on Wednesdays, so.

## **That’s Martina, another of my students. And this is Nancy.**

DAVID: Nancy – why is your signature a mushroom?

NANCY: Cos I struggled with quite a bad drug addiction. And I learned to just have fun with it now. Everything will have a mushroom on it. Because obviously, stuff has happened. The reds to me, in mushrooms, means anger, but then the whites are the hope and the light coming through. Symbolises the hope, and just getting through loads of stuff.

ART CLASS ATMOS... “make sure it’s dry on the back as well...”

NANCY: My Nan, she went to the Rennie Mackintosh art school in Scotland. I’m not really artistic! I hated art from like, young. I was really bad at it as well. But then I met David, and, at first I didn’t wanna do art, I thought it was boring, I’d rather do something else. But then, when he didn’t judge what I’d done, I learned how to have fun with it. And now, I enjoy it.

**4’14”**

## **That thing Nancy says about me “not judging” ... when someone’s still vulnerable, that’s a tricky one.**

DAVID: I get it myself – like, people say “oh your art work’s amazing!” and stuff – but it can’t all be amazing. There’s a lot of art work I do which I absolutely hate. And I just think, Jesus, that’s a load of rubbish. And people say “yeah but it’s amazing, it’s amazing, to be able to do that after what you’ve been through”, and I’m like, “hang on a sec... just tell the bloody truth”.

MATT: Critics come now, and we get bad reviews sometimes, and that’s great. Because it’s being taken seriously. I don’t want 100% bad reviews, but some are really good! (laughs)

## **This is Matt Peacock. He's – you know what? He can introduce himself!**

MATT: I'm the founder of Streetwise Opera, a charity that works with people who've experienced homelessness using music, particularly opera.

**I've known Matt for years, and he's always been honest with me about my work. He also says "what you've been through" can make art so much more exciting, creatively.**

MATT: Art is about technique – but it's not just about technique, it's about your whole self, it's about you as a human, what you've been through... whether it's an opera, or if you're a visual artist... I often find people in this realm of homelessness arts almost trying to talk themselves into a feeling like they have to get up to a certain level, a professional level. I don't agree with that. I feel like, performance is about emotion, they believe so much in what they're doing, they're committing themselves to the stage 100%, so that's incredibly compelling.

**5'50"**

**So what about the critics? They don't get much more honest than these two...**

GABRIELLE: I'm Gabrielle de la Puente, I'm 23, from Liverpool.

ZARINA: I'm Zarina Muhammad, I'm from London, I'm also 23. And – we shouldn't say 23! We're turning 24 in a few weeks!

GABRIELLE: Yeah! By the time this comes out we'll be old as.....

*MUSIC UP*

GABRIELLE: We run a website called The White Pube, so we have this shared identity as art critics together, where we just spew gossip, and also just speak very frankly about what we think of the art world.

DAVID: Do you think, then – like, I run an art festival for homeless people. And sometimes you have to be brutally honest with people, you know. If I don't like your art work I tell you I don't like your art work... but that's my opinion. So, if you were going to a show which was done by, suicide survivors, say, would you think – maybe we can't be as brutal as we normally would be? Or do we hold back a bit? Or do we go even further into it?

GABRIELLE: Well about a year after we started The White Pube, we got a really interesting commission from Shape Arts – which is a disability-led charity – asking us if we would review Unlimited Festival. And the email that made the invitation, kind of laid out clearly that disabled artists are not written about with enough respect. Like, it's written about with, through an able-bodied gaze...

ZARINA: Which we're still writing from...

GABRIELLE: ...yeah completely, but it's from people who take pity. Or it's from people who are so scared to say anything that they honestly think. That there's no way to talk about quality in these circles, for fear of saying the wrong thing. So we just wrote as honestly as we do anyway, and we made sure it was no different. I think from that point onwards we had a better confidence. And a better understanding that disabled students, for example, in universities, are not getting the critique that they want – just as much as brown students being spoken to by predominantly white tutors, there's this massive disconnect. And it's because, for example, with Shape and the disabled arts community there aren't enough people who've been empowered to be disabled critics.

8'08"

## **Over in Southport, I meet the chair of the organisation that invited Gabrielle and Zarina to review that festival.**

TONY: Tony Heaton – I am a sculptor, I was chief executive of Shape for ten years, and I'm now the chair of Shape.

DAVID: As an artist, do you think of yourself as an "outsider"?

TONY: Essentially people label YOU, you don't label yourself. So often, I'm labelled as an artist if I'm doing art stuff, I'm labelled as a disabled person cos that's what I look like...and you kind of inhabit the label at some point, I suppose.

DAVID: Is it YOUR choice that you choose to be a disabled artist, or you choose to be an artist? And should it be your choice, or should it be the choice of the establishment?

TONY: No, that's a really good question. I do choose to make what I would call Disability Art, because I'm reminded that I'm a disabled person with every encounter I have with other human beings, and the physical environment that I operate in. And like lots of artists I get inspiration from the world that I inhabit. So it's natural that I would use what Alan Sutherland called "the impedimenta of disability" in my work – collecting cans, wheelchairs, walking sticks, invalid carriages, charity collecting cans... all that stuff is good material! The oppression comes usually from non-disabled people who say, "oh you don't wanna get caught in that little ghetto of disability arts, cos that'll screw your career".

9'49"

NANCY: Because obviously, stuff has happened. And I learned to just have fun with it now.

TONY: Like lots of artists I get inspiration from the world that I inhabit.

MATT: it's about your whole self, it's about you as a human, what you've been through.

10'16"

DAVID: I'm not embarrassed about what I've been through or who I was, and who I am. Yes, I'm an alcoholic, yes I'm a mental health patient, yes I live with terminal illness – so what?

FRONT DOOR FX

DAVID: Boris, in you go! (MIAOW!) So that's "Boris Not Johnson" – I have to be very very clear about that. "Boris Not Johnson". He's very boisterous, um – he's the friendliest cat in the world... (MIAOW!) here he comes, he's gonna attack that microphone – <THWACK!> Boris! (laughs) He's an absolute pain...

DOOR FX

DAVID: My lounge is my studio, so I paint on that wall. That's where I do all my work.

PAINTING FX

DAVID: It's funny, I never thought I could paint portraits, until two years ago. I'd never painted with oils before, I'd always used acrylics. And then I did oil, and I went – oh my word, I love this medium! It's gorgeous, I love it. ... It became really natural to me. But I still feel like I have imposter syndrome. I sometimes feel like this shouldn't be happening to me, I shouldn't be getting the shows I'm getting. But that's just because, not from people shutting me down, that's from ME shutting me down.

WATER TAP / KETTLE / GAS FX

DAVID: I do artwork which raises awareness of social issues such as mental health, homelessness, HIV, suicide and addiction. Because... I have to. These are things that I've suffered with – I still suffer with some of them.

DAVID: This one here's called, Man on Bench – so, I originally got asked to design a t-shirt by a group called 'Clothing The Homeless'. And in the end I designed a catwalk show. And, it was massive, it ended up getting on telly in New York, Russia, Germany, er Switzerland, it was just surreal!

12'47"

DAVID: The name Man on Bench comes from Gavin – the Park Enforcement Officer who saved my life on a park bench back in 2013, when I was street homeless. He stopped me when I was injecting myself with crystal meth, ending my life. And the reason I've called the project Man on Bench is to say to him that he did the right thing. Erm... it's also to – prove a point, and – sorry – you'd think after all these years, I'd be able to talk about him without crying, but... I can't, I find it really difficult. Because, not only did he save my life, he gave me a life. And that's what this art piece is about. It's about showing that if you take a chance on somebody, that they can actually turn out and be somebody great, and look what I've achieved. You know, all Gavin did was like – “What are you doing?” That's what he said to me. And, er... and that was the moment what changed my life. Changed it for ever. And I have him to thank. And, er, it was so nice, cos I got to meet him two years after, on the same park bench, got to tell him what I'd done since then. And he was so humble about it, he was like, “I was just doing my job”. But he wasn't. He wasn't just doing his job. I owe him my life. I owe him my life.

14'38"

DAVID: I still label myself as “the homeless artist, the guy who's been an alcoholic, mental health patient, suicide victim, blah blah blah” – I don't know whether I want to ever lose that label, it's part of my story, I put it into my art work. But... there are other artists out there who DON'T want that label. How do you deal with that?

MATT: It's a very very good point to say that you have the right to own however you want to project yourself. And while you talk about your experience, while doing that you inspire so many people who may have experienced some of the things you've been through, to give it a go. And they feel, wow, if he can do it maybe I can do it.

15'35"

**So – what's stopping you? What's stopping me? What's stopping any of us from being “artists”, from progressing in the art world? Let's start with paperwork and form-filling.**

LIV: I'm Liv Wynter, I'm an artist, an activist and writer from South London. At the moment I've been trying to do this application for Arts Council, and it's just not me..... when I see the change in the community that I'm capable of building, then why have I gotta write 6000 words about it? Just like, come to a thing, check me out. Ask people that have worked with me, they'll tell you I'm a nice person. Why would you not just wanna work with a nice person that is doing good stuff? Like, why have I constantly gotta be like “I'm actually a non-binary queer person...” uh, like, why am I always applying to do stuff – do you know how annoying it is, when I get emails a lot that are like, “we would really like you to apply for this role” – not even to say we want you for this job. “We would like you to spend three days working on an application so that we may or may not interview you” – no way! If you want me for the gig, book me, and if you're considering me and three others, get us in and interview us – don't make me write a horrible form, go on my website, go on YouTube – do

some legwork! We have to do it... THEY should have to do it! They're the ones with the cash, they should be hunting us down. (laughs)

16'42"

**“They’re the ones with the cash”, says Liv. Money isn’t everything – but it is important. Especially when you don’t have much of it. Here’s Zarina Muhammad of The White Pube...**

ZARINA: You know, Tate Friday night lates... sponsored by Uniqlo, BMW. Twice I’ve been emailed about being involved in a Tate late, where the organisers have said to me “yeah we’ve not been given any budget”. How – you the same?

DAVID: Yeah.

ZARINA: That’s ridiculous! That’s three of us – that’s ridiculous. It’s the Tate, it’s a massive public institution...

DAVID: I didn’t get any money from the show at Tate Liverpool. So, I’ve got a piece called “Soldier’s Story” which Nicholas Serota mentioned in his speech...

ZARINA: ...so he’s happy mentioning it but not paying you? That’s tokenism! Like, it benefits the Tate, they’re getting social capital, they’re getting hard capital! They can go back to their funders, and say look how diverse our programme is because we’ve included this this this – so they’re benefitting from it. Not just in terms of clout, not just in social capital – hard capital.

DAVID: And this goes back to exposure. They say, oh well, we’ve given you exposure! And this is like – well, that’s not gonna put electric on my electric key, cos, do you know what an electric key is? That’s what powers my flippin’ house! And I’ve got a gas key as well! I can’t eat that, can I? That’s not gonna wash my clothes and wash me, it’s not hot water. This bullshit of exposure, as a payment form.

LIV: I’m from a working class family... and, I came to Goldsmiths expecting to find loads of people like me, and actually everyone was quite middle class and didn’t really understand why I was working every day, and like, why are you juggling all this stuff – I was like, it’s not through choice – this is what I have to do to be here.

18'25"

MATT: There’s too many people like me who’ve gone through privileged, middle-class life, school, uni, that’s the trajectory. And, the corridors of arts leadership are always full of people like me – which is also troubling in terms of power balance.



TONY: The art world is – well it's a middle class, white enclave isn't it? Driven by public school and money. And it's massively elitist.

ZARINA: We don't have power, we don't have authority. That is surely what diversity means, isn't it, people of colour, having people who aren't able-bodied cis het white men, like what does your – the make up of team, your curatorial staff, your press team, at all levels of the institution, not just who's in the gallery, that's what needs to be diverse as well. It's not just about who you're showing – it's about behind closed doors, who's got stakes in that conversation. Like, what does diversity actually mean to these white heads of the institution, these white directors? Is it about just visible diversity, or is it about having equity? Cos I want equity – I want stakes in institutions. Cos that's the only way I can say for sure that change is possible.

19'35"

**So... accessibility, money, power, diversity, equity – if these are the barriers, how do we navigate them?**

**Right across the UK, the funders and decision-makers all say they're "on it".**

**"Broadening access" is one of the two "essential priorities" for the Arts Council of Wales.**

**"Diversity" is at the very top of Creative Scotland's ten-year plan. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland has "promoting equality" all over its current strategy.**

**And in England, the chair of the Arts Council – the guy who used to be the boss of the Tate – he's also "broadening access" ..... cos I'm about to meet him!**

20'18"

DAVID: We're here today outside the Arts Council England office in London, by the British Museum – and we've come to interview the chair, Sir Nicholas Serota. Recently over the last couple of years, he's been banging on about diversity and equality, and I wanna find out – what's he doing about it? Is it just a tick-box thing, or is it actually gonna make a difference?

DAVID: There are nerves about meeting him, obviously he's in a different class structure to me! (laughs) I'm from a completely different background. So it'll be interesting to see how he comes across and treats me, yeah.

DAVID: Oh Jesus, that's heavy! All these offices have really heavy doors, don't they? Hiya! (laughs) We're here to see Sir Nicholas, we've got an interview with him...

WOMAN: What's your last name?

DAVID: Er, Tovey – t o v e y...

WOMAN: Make your way to the second floor...

DAVID: Thank you!

LIFT: Doors closing!

DAVID: Hi, I'm David... pleased to meet you...

NICK: Nice to meet you David, hi...

21'38"

NICK: I think the first thing I'd say, David, is that undoubtedly, in terms of individual artists, we could probably do more to make it easier for people to secure funds. It will always be competitive. It is public money, and ultimately I have to be able to defend it. Um, I've defended some – all kinds of art in my life, and I will have to go on defending all kinds of art in my life, I'm sure! And I'm happy to do that.

DAVID: You wrote an opinion piece, for a newspaper, a few months ago – which was titled: "One day, diversity in the arts will not be unusual". One day? Which day?

NICK: We're about to publish a strategy for the period 2020 to 2030. We need to make really significant progress in that ten-year period. It should become mainstream. It shouldn't become exceptional that we have a black director of the Young Vic, great director that he is, he shouldn't be there alone. And, obviously things are changing... we can make progress, but in order to do so, we need to give opportunity... you know?

DAVID: So – you seem very nervous! You seem more nervous than what I feel! You're tapping your foot, I get like that when I'm nervous all the time! (laughs)... erm... anyway right! So – a few months ago, you gave a keynote speech about diversity in which you said: "Leadership plays a major role... more power should be in the hands of those who understand the need for change." Can you tell us – how are we gonna achieve this? At what point will you be satisfied that enough power has been redistributed?

NICK: When we're not talking about it – because there's no need. I think that it wouldn't be a matter of comment that a work being assessed by a critic, or written about by a critic, was by an artist who was disabled. It would simply be that this work is by an artist. I want to be in a position where the Arts Council is responding to artists, undoubtedly, but especially to those audiences and those people who feel that they have not previously had an opportunity to become engaged in the arts. So, the programme that we have called 'Creative People and Places' – now in twenty-one places across the country – where effectively a community of people, they may be people on benefit, they may be people who are unemployed, they may be people who are asylum seekers, where they – we give them a chance to articulate what arts and culture could mean for them.

24'24"

*NICK CLIP: "...where they... we give them a chance to articulate what arts and culture could mean for them." <CLICKS OFF>*

TONY: I think "we are giving" is very telling, isn't it, because it is very much "top down". "We have given the privilege to allow this wheelchair user to get on this bus", "we have made a space for this wheelchair user to get on this train", "we are providing some information in alternative formats for these people who can't see and can't hear" ... and it's a very much unequal, inequitable situation. It does need radical change.

25'05"

LIV: Everyone gets into the arts because they want to see change.

TONY: It does need radical change.

DAVID: Stop being scared of change! It's not that they don't want to change, they don't know how to change. Stop being scared of change!

25'25"

NICK: I think there's been enormous progress, but every step you go makes you conscious of how much further you still have to go.

25'35"

DAVID: Do you actually want to be part of the art world? Or do you wanna change it?

GABRIELLE: I think we need to have a foot into it, and we need to not fall through the door...

ZARINA: ...yeah – we do want to affect change, and we do believe that criticism has the power to do good, affect change, and make a better art world for us all.

GABRIELLE: And we know a lot of the texts we've written have been taken into the meetings that the gallery has then had, because they need to discuss what The White Pube has written, and they need to move forward and develop based on the critique we've offered them. You know, it's like the whole "know your enemy".

ZARINA: I mean, artists of colour, creative labourers of colour, have been doing this for time. If the art world won't accept you on your terms, just recreate the structures that you seek to change, like, recreate them on your own terms in a way that will fit around you.

26'26"

DAVID: I don't wanna be part of the art world as it is now, because I feel I'm not represented in the art world. Erm... whether I'll be represented in the future, that's the big question mark.

**And do I even want that acceptance? Do I want that big, mainstream commission? Yeah, I wouldn't mind the cash – but how would it affect my work, my freedom as an artist? I honestly don't know.**

DAVID: I think if you're working class, gone through any sort of poverty, it's extremely difficult to ever be accepted as part of the establishment. Will that change? I'd like to think so. I'd like to PROVE it, that it will change... but until that happens, the "outsider" part of the art world is probably the best place to be! It's where all the fun is! (laughs)

27'37"

R4 ANNOUNCER OUTRO

**THE ART OF NOW: OUTSIDERS was presented by David Tovey, and produced by Steve Urquhart. It was a Boom Shakalaka production for BBC Radio 4.**

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