

After reading Athol Fugard's play, *The Road to Mecca*, I wanted to know more about Helen Martins. The portrayal of her in the play presents her as a conventional little old woman. I became curious as I believe artists to be unconventional human beings and Helen Martins was unconventional even as an artist. She is called an Outsider Artist.

- The term outsider art was coined by [art critic Roger Cardinal](#) in 1972 as an [English](#) synonym for

art brut

... ("raw art" or "rough art"), a label created by

[French](#)

[artist](#)

[Jean Dubuffet](#)

to describe

[art](#)

created outside the boundaries of official culture; Dubuffet focused particularly on art by those on the outside of the established art scene, such as

[psychiatric hospital](#)

patients and children.

- While Dubuffet's term is quite specific, the English term "outsider art" is often applied more broadly, to include certain [self-taught](#) or [naïve art](#) makers who were never institutionalized. Typically, those labelled as outsider artists have little or no contact with the mainstream [art world](#) or art institutions. In many cases, their work is discovered only after their deaths. Often, outsider art illustrates extreme mental states, unconventional ideas, or elaborate fantasy worlds. (Wikipedia)

As Helen Martin created art without reference to established art norms, was she unconventional only as artist not as human being? Fugard portrays her as a confident artist at the end of the play; but at the beginning shows her as a typical old woman, allowing herself to be bullied. The bullying is gentle, in the form of an offer of a conventional solution to the problems of growing old; it ignores the reality of her existence as an artist. She is being subjected to societal norms that regard the old as having no purpose in life, being helpless, child-like and needing to be baby-sat while they wait for death.

And it is a dominee, curator of convention, Marius Byleveld, doing the bullying, while she sits tongue-tied, a weak woman who cannot confront a strong man. Ironically, his strength comes from his compassion; he genuinely wants to protect her but he looks with ordinary eyes at an extraordinary human being who is beyond his understanding; he is trying to drag her into a

normality that she has long rejected. How can he understand anyone who is a challenge to fixed understandings of existence? She sees the words, “God”, “Heaven”, “Hell” as “stones”. For a man of the church this is blasphemy. Elsa, her friend, says that Marius loves Helen as a man loves a woman. That sums him up as a man whose instincts are divorced from reason. He could never understand a woman like Helen. His love for her is an instinctive response to the freedom that emanates from her being, from the enlightenment that comes with creativity. But as a conventional man, he does not understand it and cannot not give himself that kind of freedom. He translates it into conventional terms of sexual attraction. He unwittingly loves her for her unconventionality even though he is trying to extinguish it. “I am trying to go. It’s not easy ... trying to find the first moment of a life that must be lived out in the shadow of something that is terribly wrong.” (74) He cannot see that they are totally incompatible; that what he is offering “is terribly wrong” for her.

According to all accounts of her life, Helen Martins was an artist driven to create, and she fulfilled this need without reference to outside acknowledgment, recognition, encouragement – in fact she created in the midst of suspicion, derision and hostility. In the play, Helen’s creativity is presented as a mystical compulsion, divorced from conscious effort. She waits for a complete vision of that to which she must give form and must capture it immediately before it fades from her mind. This view of her creativity turns her into a kind of Virgin Mary, into a vehicle for her creations rather than the author of them.

In reality, Helen Martins was inspired by writings in the Bible, the poetry of Omar Khayyam and William Blake – indicating that her creativity, which expressed her passion, was distilled through the processing of thoughts and ideas. As her artistic vision was given form by others, Johannes Pienaar, Koos Malgas, it had to be consciously formulated in order to be transmitted.

Fugard’s play is itself based on thinking processes; external stimuli were consciously merged into form. In “A Note on Miss Helen,” the foreword to the play, he admits to knowing her story; was stimulated to explore it on receiving a request from an actress for a play about two women, and on seeing a photograph of Helen and her friend (Elsa in the play) who struck him as:

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- “a very strong, a very remarkable person, with a strong social conscience, a strong sense of what South Africa was about, a strong sense of outrage at what was wrong with it. **I couldn’t help thinking**

(my emphasis) of the anomaly of this sort of stern decency in encountering the almost feudal world of new Bethesda. (

The Road to Mecca

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Art is informed by passion and thought. Perhaps Fugard regards Outsider Art as mystical because it does not reflect the logic of Art as developed in its institutionalisation. The Owl House reflects Helen Martins' logic to which we do not have the usual institutionalised access but that does not mean it is not the product of thought processes.

Fugard's play is set in the years when Helen Martins was going blind and finding it difficult to continue her artistic work. She accepts that she is coming to the end of her creativity but she will not end her life waiting to die.

In real life she did not.

- While Jill and Miss Helen wrote her will together Jill asked Miss Helen if she was afraid of dying, to which she replied that "...when you get older, you realise that dying isn't the problem. Living is the problem... My agony would be to 'live dying' without being able to work" (Mitchell,33)

And she did not wait for death; she embraced it. Helen Martins drank a mixture of caustic soda and crushed glass and suffered for three days before she died. Caustic soda by itself is lethal; it was a fairly well-known way to commit suicide in those days. Why did she add crushed glass? Crushed glass was a substance she used in her art. The walls and windows of her home were transformed by a mixture of paint and crushed glass into reflections of colour and light. Did she add crushed glass to the caustic soda to turn herself into an art work in death? To overcome the "darkness" that would end her creativity? To turn death into a reflection of light?

Whatever one may think of her suicide, it was a conscious act to bring her life to a meaningful end. I find in the suicide an act of creation. What I have read about Helen Martins, forces me to reject the view of her death as a moment of despair. She was a woman who had turned her

existence into a work of art in the face of rigid conservatism. And she was inspired by her own understanding of the Bible, by what she had learned from Omar Khayyam and William Blake. She was the personification of the unconventional. She was not in need of women's liberation; she experienced freedom at the highest level. Her unconventional life expressed this freedom.

Consequently, I cannot see her suicide simply as a form of surrender to the inevitable – the blindness that would end her creativity. Her suicide may have been weakness in one sense but, in another, it was strength – the strength of a human being giving her own unique definition to her life – the final touch that turns death into the completion of artistic endeavour.

In the play, Helen's freedom stems from her creativity. To me it seems to be the other way around. Helen's nonconformity was her freedom; it stimulated her desire to create both her way of life as well as her art work.

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- "...Â Miss Helen demonstrated a disregard for the social conventions of her context. Even though her father was opposed to the marriage, she proceeded to get married, and she did so in a private dwelling instead of in a church. This was an action which would have been highly frowned upon by her church-orientated community. She befriended and visited coloured people. As this occurred during the time of apartheid, her involvement with coloured people violated the social code. In addition, she illegally made and sold liquor to coloured individuals. Also, after the death of her mother she refused to take any responsibility with regard to the care for her decrepit father. ... Miss Helen also (had a) quarrelsome friendship with Miss Frances. (Elsa in the play)" (Mitchell, 48)

Helen in the play is not that unconventional. In the play, Helen's husband is Stephanus and she stays with him till he dies.

The real Helen married Johannes Pienaar and with him went on tour in theatrical performances. They divorced after six incompatible years. Then she went home to look after her ailing parents and stayed with them until they died. Finally freed of that responsibility, she turned her attention to art and began converting her home into an art work. She apparently became involved with Johannes Hattingh, who was helping her transform her home and building the statues she dreamed up. He was a married man. Their affair seemingly continued for twenty years and Helen may have had an abortion or two. It is believed that her marriage to Johannes Jacobus

Niemand was her attempt to force Hattingh to leave his wife and children. The marriage to Niemand lasted a few months. When Koos Malgas came to work with her, she was suspected of being intimately involved with him.

That her existence gave rise to much speculation, attests to her independence; she could not be put into a box. Society resents those who do not bow to its conventions; those who, like Helen, live life according to their own beliefs and requirements. She was clearly a nonconformist – both as artist and human being.

In the play, she is turned into a somewhat stereotypical old person. All the characters appearing or mentioned in the play are made to conform to stereotypical notions. Koos Malgas, the Coloured man who helped her build her statues, is turned into a drunken, abusive husband, and is not acknowledged for his contribution to Helen's Mecca. In the play, he is not Helen's friend; he has a wife, Katrina, who is Helen's friend. Katrina also conforms to the conventional; she is childish, young, trapped in marriage to an abusive husband, has a child and is a servant. Elsa represents the women's lib type, strong-minded, rebellious, defying patriarchal authority. Being somewhat stereotypical black and white women, their depiction carries subconscious racial attitudes.

Helen in the play, exhibiting traits of a weak, old woman, depends on Elsa's strength to help her resist the attempt to draw her into conventional society and a living death. Perhaps it was a need to embrace the cause of liberation for women that determined the invention of Elsa and Katrina. Tying the story to social causes, reduces Helen from a passionate, intrepid artist and formidable human being into a somewhat weak old woman vacillating about the need for life-support.

Helen Martins as a vehicle for women's liberation is a poor substitute for Helen Martins, the Creator.

References

1. Athol Fugard. *The Road to Mecca*. 1985. London: Faber and Faber Limited.

2. Donna Mitchell. *A Psychobiography of Helen Martin*: MA Thesis