Naïfs, Faux-naïfs, Faux-faux naïfs, Would-be Faux-naïfs: There is No Such Thing as Outsider Art

[Originally published in: *Inner Worlds Outside,* exh. cat., edited by John Thompson (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 71–79.]

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The first thing that needs to be said about outsider art (and for the moment I will lump outsider art with naïve art, *art brut,* raw art, grass-roots art, primitive art, self-taught art, psychotic art, autistic art, intuitive art, vernacular art, folk art, contemporary folk art, non-traditional folk art, mediumistic art, and marginal art) is that it does not exist. At least I would like to say that, but actually I can't: outsider art does exist, and it has been an object of continuous interest since the beginnings of modernism. In the scope of this brief essay I will say exactly why I would *like to say* outsider art does not exist. I will leave it to the many exhibitions, catalogs, and monographs to continue exploring the fact that outsider art does, in fact, continue to exist.[i]

There are three fundamental senses in which outsider art does not exist.

1. *Outsider art is unimportant*. It is invisible to a plurality of art historians who study modernism and postmodernism. By that I mean they don't study it, they don't teach it, and they don't include it in their anthologies. The most striking recent example is *Art Since 1900,* the textbook co-written by Yve-Alain Bois, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, and Benjamin Buchloh. In that book outsider art plays no part in the essential stories of modernism and anti-modernism. If it were possible to generalize about that exclusion, it might be said that outsider art appears as a popular, simplified, and perhaps more accessible version of the genuine avant-garde at any given moment. According to this logic, what matters in modernism is what happens at the center, among the artists most fully engaged with the discourses of art. If some of their revaluations, such as their projection of

authenticity onto tribal art, find resonance among artists in the broader culture, then that is not of immediate significance to the ongoing dialectics of modernism and postmodernism.

This way of plotting twentieth-century art casts outsider art in a supporting role, or worse: outsider art becomes a minor entertainment, or a popularization, or a partial misunderstanding of developments that are understood as more central. What matters is what Picasso did with Rousseau, not what Rousseau himself thought he was contributing, and certainly not what he actually contributed to modernism, which would be seen as nothing much more than a foil for the serious investigations of the "primitive" that were done by Picasso and others. Rousseau's position, considered aside from Picasso's interest, would be considered wholly unimportant. The story of modernism and postmodernism, in other words, could be adequately told without Rousseau: it would require only the *idea* of Rousseau, or the "case" of Rousseau, and not his work.

2. *Outsider art is impossible*. Strictly speaking, as a philosophic matter, outsider art is not possible. The reason is the concept of the avant-garde: anything that appears genuinely new will either become an avant-garde, and take its place at the very center of artworld interest, or else be considered as something outside of art itself. If outsider art actually appeared as radically new or as significantly different from existing practices, it would not be understood as standing outside of anything. A practical sign of the truth of this philosophic position is that outsider art is not at all incomprehensible — often it is not even unfamiliar-looking. On the contrary, its quirks and oddities are almost instantly comprehensible, and that is an indication that it is already inside: it is comprehensible in terms of some specifiable art-world practice. It is neither genuinely outside nor central: it is an often comfortable, easily assimilable companion and complement to modernism.

That is the philosophic argument. In practice, outsider art has proven to be impossible because of the pervasiveness of art-world influences. It is a possibly sad fact that virtually no twentieth-century artists worked entirely outside the western art world. There is always some hint of influence, some sign that the hermetically sealed artist has broken the seal and peeped inside. Bits of Picasso somehow find their way into Appalachian outsider art, pieces of German expressionism into Weimar Republic art made by mental patients, elements of social realism into folk sculptures in eastern Europe and

Russia. Hence the dilemma: outsider art is an oxymoron, and its naïveté is seldom as pure as it appears.

Because verifiably outsider art has always been rare, museums and galleries settle for mixed examples, collecting outsider artists who have a minimal awareness of modern art. The Halifax Gallery of Art in Canada exhibits several generations of local Canadian painters and sculptors. The earliest pieces are the oddest, and the most free from knowledge of the art world. The newest pieces, which are contemporary, look like Red Grooms or Dubuffet. The gallery shows them all: first-, second-, and third-generation painters and sculptors who are naïve, semi-naïve, and really not so naïve.

Semi-naïve artists have been continuously discovered ever since the 1910s. In Chicago, one of the most prominent is Henry Darger (1892-1972), whose pallid murals of soldiers — they have a weird similarity to Puvis de Chavanne's wall paintings — derive from mid-century comic books and popular magazines.[ii] He had paranoid fantasies, but he was not cut off from contemporaneous art — on the contrary, his work is the same distance from commercial comics as Robert Crumb's, but in a different direction.[iii] As the art historian Reinhold Heller once said to me, while we were looking at an exhibition of the Prinzhorn collection, nothing in outsider art is not of its time.

In addition to naïfs and semi-naïfs (and semi-demi-naïfs, and so on), there are false naïfs. Henri Rousseau was a semi-naïf, by which I mean he believed in the purity and honesty of what he did, and at the same time he was influenced by parts of the art world.[iv] The same cannot be said for the tidal waves of naïve artists who followed him: painters such as Louis Vivin (1861-1936), André Bauchant (1873-1958), Camille Bombois (1883-1970, an artist discovered by Wilhelm Uhde), and Séraphine Louis (1864-1942, another Uhde discovery, this time his cleaning lady). Some of them knew they were playing the role of naïfs, and all were steeped in modern art as well as popular illustration.[v] Bombois is a wooden Balthus: the same obsessions, "direct and lusty in the Rabelaisian tradition," but with oaken limbs substitued for fleshy ones.[vi]

What happened on Montmartre happened slightly later in other cities and countries. Dubuffet's collection of Art Brut, now housed in Lausanne, includes a number of artists who were versed in modernism: Aloïse, Gaston Duf, Auguste Forestier, and Jeanne Tripier.[vii] Beginning sometime around 1980 — the date is hard to fix — artists trained

in art schools found they could will themselves to become naïve. Their naïveté was of a different order than artists who worked largely, if not completely, outside the western artworld, or from those who worked their way into the art world from outside. This kind of outsider art begins inside, and tries to force its way back outside. An exhibition in Taipei in 1998 called "Dix-sept naïfs de Taiwan," showed the depths of dissimulation that are now commonplace.[viii] The seventeen artists in the Taipei show struggled to adulterate their art world styles until they looked genuinely emotional and culturally authentic. One artist ended up painting a crude version of Chagall, another an unskilled Dufy or Utrillo, and a third made bad Chinese social realist painting (awkwardly drawn farmers happily sowing a field). A fourth offered a cross betwen Matisse's early figural style, as in the *Danse,* and an especially ungainly Keith Haring. Even styles that were already intentionally unskilled were made more so: there were also paintings in the show done in the style of Dubuffet, but an even more premeditatedly crude and childlike.

I expect viewers of the exhibit recognized Dubuffet, Chagall, Matisse, Dufy, Utrillo, and some of the other painters that the Taiwanese artists took as models; presumably such viewers would also have seen the game that was being played. The new generation of faux-naïfs are *faux* in that they aren't really naïve; and they are also *faux* because they don't declare they are dissimulating their naïveté. Yet these doubly-dissimulating artists are also, for the most part, entirely sincere.[ix] In that way their outsider status, as sullied as it is, retains the essential criterion of apparent truthfulness.

3. *Outsider art is a symptom of modernism, nothing more*. Like a twitch or a rash, it points to some deeper problem. The notion here is that modernism has always required an Other: Picasso required Rousseau, just as Duchamp and Breton enjoyed Raymond Roussel's stage productions, or as middlebrow, midcentury American consumers loved Grandma Moses.[x] Apparently primitive, apparently uneducated artists were discovered in many places around the world after modernism took hold. Paraguay has an early twentieth-century primitive painter, and so does Bulgaria, and so does Argentina. Switzerland, Germany, France, and the United States have hundreds. Part of modernism is the desire for something genuinely outside the academic European tradition, and naïve and self-taught art fill that desire perfectly. If you think of outsider art this way, it no longer makes sense simply to enjoy the art directly, "on its own terms": the question has to become, "What

sense of modernism do I have that permits me to find these examples of outsider art compelling or expressive?" In other words, one asks about one's desires, and one watches one's symptoms. The many different kinds of outsider art testify not to a diversity of practices that need to be conceptualized but to changing senses of modernism. If you subscribe mainly to a high formalist modernism, then the art of the insane might seem most interesting to you; but if your modernism is more CoBrA and Scandinavian expressionism, then Dubuffet's choices might be more apposite.

Using this third model, the different kinds of art I have been lumping as outsider art can be assigned to particular ideas about what constitutes modernism. In North America *folk art,* to take one example, was not an aesthetic or market category until sometime around 1916.[xi] It responded to a growing sense of regional painting in the United States; folk art was the appropriate grounding of the new regionalism. (In communist countries in Eastern Europe, folk art had very different valences and responded in part to the perception of an international, non-socialist modernism centered in Western Europe and North America.) *Mediumistic or visionary art* has longer history; it goes back to the Romantics, and has a particular history in England from Blake and Palmer to Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelites. In the United States, the term "visionary" first appeared in an exhibition in 1974: it is therefore an importation of a pre-modern, romantic notion of subjectivity into the growing postwar outsider-art aesthetic.[xii] *Naïve art* has a well-known history, which is usually taken to begin with Wilhelm Uhde's exhibition of Henri Rousseau in 1928, although Montmartre artists were known as *naïfs* several decades before.[xiii] The close connection of ostensibly naïve art, "magic realism," primitivism, and modernism has been well studied (most recently by E.H. Gombrich).[xiv] It is interesting that the early modernist sense that a painter like Rousseau might have something in common with a Fang mask or Ife portrait head has become an object of historical interest: it no longer seems a viable connection. On the other hand, the sense that the modernism of, say, 1905-1914 needes to be understood alongside both tribal materials and apparently naïve artists persists; I take that as evidence that we are still partly inside the ongoing history of modernism.

It would be possible to go on along these lines, delineating differing senses of modernism according to the kinds of art that were taken to be their Others (their complements or opposites, their Doppelgängers) outside the world of recognized

institutional pedagogy. Outsider art, which of course comes from Camus's *l'Étranger* via Roger Cardinal's publications, is nothing more, in this sense, than a place-marker for a general structural phenomenon within modernism — in that case, a post-war English and American sense of what exists outside conventional art pedagogy.

The critic Roberta Smith has proposed we drop the word "outsider" altogether, and just ask for a "level of artistry and power" as we would for any kind of art.[xv] The problem with that, I think, is that it allows the traits attributed to outsider art to continue under other names. In Cardinal's definition, an outsider artist should create an obsessively imagined world, a place where the laws of normal reality are overturned. Outsider artists are said to have special access to "artistry and power," an obsessiveness born of inadequate technique, an immediacy and truthfulness. All of those are particular hopes for a certain moment in postwar American and English modern art.

It helps to think of outsider art as a symptom of specific moments in modernism, because I can then say: those are not my hopes. I certainly do not want to see art that is raw, unschooled and unskilled, crude, wild, obsessive, neurotic or psychotic, madly intense, immediate, truthful, or full of "artistry and power." That does not mean I am immune to outsider art: there is probably some new kind of outsider art out there that will respond to my own ideas of interesting contemporary postmodern art. When I encounter that art, I may well be taken by it, just as previous generations have been taken by everyone from Rousseau to Grandma Moses.

What is needed is a non-naïve approach to naïve art: the labels can stay, but they need to be recognized as such. When I see something that is presented as outsider art — under any of its names — I ask myself, "What understanding of modernism has led the author, or artist, to propose that this is *outside* of some practice?"

[i] Much of the material here is taken from Rebecca Mazzei's Master's thesis, "The Problems with Outsider Art" (School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2003, unpublished, in the collection of the John M. Flaxman Library). That thesis, which I helped to supervise, is an excellent introduction to the problems surrounding outsider art. Mazzei's conclusion is very different from the one I daw here: she proposes that the various senses of outsider art can be understood in terms of the Freudian concept of *Unheimlichkeit,* the uncanny. As this essay will make clear, I would rather not try to repair the concept of outsider art.

[ii] H*enry Darger: The Unreality of Being* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1996); John MacGregor, *Henry J. Darger: Dans les royaumes de l'irréel* (Lausanne: Collection de l'art brut, 1996).

[iii] Compare *R. Crumb Retrospective* (New York,: Alexander Gallery, 1993); *The Life and Times of R. Crumb,* edited by Monte Beauchamp (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998).

[iv] An important exhibit in America was *Henri Rousseau,* edited by Daniel Catton Rich (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1942); in this context see also Maurice Garçon, *Le douanier Rousseau, accusé naïf* (Paris: Quatre Chemins-editart, 1953).

[v] See first Wilhelm Uhde, *Five Primitive Masters,* translated by Ralph Thompson (New York: Quadrangle Press, 1949); also *Inauguration de la Salle Wilhelm Uhde: Rousseau, Seraphine, Bauchant, Bombois, Vivin, Peyronnet,* edited by Anne Devroye-Stilz (Nice: Direction des Musées de Nice, 1988); *Vivin,* with essays by Dina Vierny, Wilhelm Uhde, and Jean

Cassou (Paris: Galerie Dina Vierny, 1980); and Maximilien Gauthier, *Andre Bauchant* (Paris: Éditions du Chene, 1943).

[vi] Klaus Perls, in *Camille Bombois: Femmes et Filles* (New York: Perls Galleries, 1969), n.p.; see also *Camille Bombois, 1883-1970: Memorial Exhibition* (New York: Perls Galleries, 1970).

[vii] *Jean Dubuffet e art brut: dalle collezioni della Fondazione Solomon R. Guggenheim, di Pierre Matisse e dalla Collection de l'art brut, Losanna* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1986); Michel Thevoz, *Art brut,* foreword by Jean Dubuffet, translated from the French by James Emmons (New York: Rizzoli, 1976); Jacqueline Porret-Forel, *Aloyse* (Paris: Compagnie de l'art brut, 1948); Allen Weiss, *Shattered Forms: Art brut, Phantasms, Modernism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).

[viii] *Six-sept naïfs de Taiwan,* exh. cat. (Taipei: Museum of Modern Art, May 1998).

[ix] Some of the Taiwanese painters were interested in emulating the cultural purity they saw in the aboriginal inhabitants of Taiwan. In recent years there has been growing awareness of Taiwan's indigenous cultures, as evidenced by the museum of tribal cultures. The surviving tribes do not make art work that can compete in the world art market, and so modern Taiwanese artists who want to purge their painting of modern western influences have sometimes taken up naïve painting as a second-best solution.

[x] Among the many exhibition catalogues, see *Grandma Moses* (New York: Galerie St. Etienne, 1957), which has excerpts from German and British newspaper reviews.

[xi] Beatrice Rumford, introduction to *Folk Art USA Since 1900,* exh. cat. (Williamsburg, VA: Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, 1980). Cited in Mazzei, "Problems," 14.

[xii] *Naïve and Visionaries,* exh. cat. (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1974), cited in Mazzei, 16.

[xiii] Lucienne Pierry, *l'Art Brut* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001).

[xiv] The framing terms are condensed in the title of Otto Bihalji-Merin's *Modern Primitives: Masters of Naïve Painting* (New York: Abrams, 1961), also cited in Mazzei, 19.

[xv] Smith, "Redefining A Style As It Catches On," *The New York Times*, January 22, 1999, B35.