

Outsider art

Contesting boundaries in contemporary culture

EDITED BY

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and

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Introduction

Vera L. Zolberg and Joni M. Cherbo, Editors

The construction of a new genre

Outsider art began inauspiciously when asylum inmates, such as the Swiss peasant, Adolf Wölfli, confined as a schizophrenic from the late 1890s until his death, were encouraged to express themselves through drawing. Although their works were of interest primarily to therapist-physicians, they fascinated artists as well. The transformation of these works from therapy into art began in the 1920s when avant-garde artists became intrigued with them (Bowler, this volume). Convinced that artistic creativity was a universal human gift capable of flourishing outside the confines of traditional artistic practice, artists such as Jean Dubuffet collected the works, giving them the name *art brut* – literally, “raw art” – in the sense that they represented uncultivated, unrefined, spontaneous expression.

Despite their obvious pictorial appeal, asylum works remained on the margins of the artworld. Nevertheless, Dubuffet’s thesis was not disparaged by modern art sympathizers, who found artistic expression of interest even in works by madmen, primitives, and children. But most were convinced that it could not flower without professional association and guidance. An unlettered, untutored artist was a fluke – or a fiction.

By the 1970s the British critic, Roger Cardinal, expanded the notion of outsiders beyond mental patients to include a variety of persons making art outside the mainstream (Hall and Metcalf 1994). Cardinal’s yardstick for recognizing an outsider as an artist was the presence of an untrained impulse for making works that defied art historical classification (Bowler, this volume).

Over the years the cast of players ballooned. Besides asylum inmates and the makers of primitive art, whose works had long been recognized by the avant-garde (Zolberg, this volume), outsider artists came to encompass folk and ethnic artists, the homeless, prison inmates, elderly people in nursing homes, hospice patients, and others, confined or isolated, who produce objects or performances of aesthetic interest.

The growing pool of outsider artists further expanded the notion of outsidership itself. Some outsiders, rather than being completely detached from existing, traditional, artistic practice, received some form of artistic training through family or community sources. Others had been apprenticed to artists, and as inmates were given artistic instruction of sorts. Furthermore, a number of outsider artists aspired to recognition

in the larger art world and had few qualms about seeking and accepting publicity and remuneration (Dubin, this volume). Gone are the noble savages (Goldwater 1986 [1938]), the peasants of Toennies (1963), and proletarians. Gone, too, with deinstitutionalization and drug treatment, are many of the long-term asylum inmates (Bowler, this volume).

In the face of a booming art market in the 1960s and 1980s (Szántó, Dubin, this volume), dealers and collectors began looking beyond established artistic institutions for promising new forms and creators. Outsider art appealed to art world cognoscenti, not only visually, but because of its congruence with Romantic notions of the authentic, misunderstood, creative genius. Outsiders possessed purity, spontaneity, sincerity, authenticity, as opposed to the contrivance, artificiality, and insincerity of civilized society (Goldwater 1986 [1938]). Given today's world, these outsiders came to represent our lost soul. As outsider art became fashionable, outsiders became insiders.

The success of outsider art is illustrated by the fourth annual Outsider Art Fair, held at the Puck Building in New York City in 1996. Thirty-five exhibitors from the United States and other countries over a four-day period drew crowds paying an admission of ten dollars to see the latest outsider discoveries as well as those already known. Many of the works were priced in line with mainstream art. A 1992 piece by Wölffi was marked at \$40,000. Drawings by the Mexican painter, Martin Ramirez, who spent the last years of his life in a California asylum, were listed at \$35,000. Recently, a Ramirez drawing fetched \$180,000 (Bowler, this volume). Clearly, outsider art has migrated from an existence beyond the pale, acquired its green card, and become naturalized into the art world.

The import of this latest newcomer is that it is a snapshot of an ongoing process. From a historical perspective, the incorporation of outsider art into the mainstream is the latest manifestation of the valorization of new forms of expression and creators, an essential hallmark of modern and postmodern art, particularly in the visual arts.

The arts today exhibit a degree of fluidity, openness to new possibilities, and inclusiveness that is historically unprecedented. The barriers between high and low art, art and politics, art and religious rite, art and emotional expression, art and therapy, art and life itself have been significantly breached. Led by a changing body of practitioners, art can be intended or unintended, made by professionals or non-professionals (Rosenberg 1964).

Genres we now accept unquestionably as art were once not part of the mainstream. Photographs, prints, lithographs, modern dance and jazz once existed on the outskirts of what was accepted as art. Craft, ethnic dance, rap, new age music, video art, kinetic art, happenings, site specific performances are recent entrants into the artistic fold. Tattoo art and computer art are waiting in the wings.

We have grown accustomed to crossovers in the arts – the opera singer, Barbara Cook, who records Disney favorites, or trumpet virtuoso, Wynton Marsalis, who moves with ease between jazz and Bach. Hybrid arts, a cross between an art form and a previously unrelated domain, such as computer art, have come into vogue. Once distinctive types within an art form have become melded into artistic mutants. Jazz, once

a variety of rhythm and blues, gospel, and dance accompaniment, has evolved into a distinct musical genre. The mixing of diverse arts with other cultural forms into a unique expression stands as the creolization of the arts. Zingaro, for example, is a classical dressage troupe that unites horsemanship, circus acrobatics, ethnic music, and dance into an uncommon theatricality.

Late twentieth century art has incarnated a continuing process of absorbing, sampling, appropriating and amalgamating new and unusual forms. When piles of bricks are displayed in museums, when music is composed for performance under water, the boundaries between genres have become so fluid that once conventional understandings of art are suspended or nullified. When the periphery becomes valorized beyond all expectations, how can we speak about an aesthetic center?

Today, we would be hard pressed to identify a center as distinct from a periphery. While we could trace the biographies of successful artistic practitioners, identify social forces that contribute to artistic recognition, and situate strategically placed art-world actors empowered in the social construction of what is art/non art, the center would still remain elusive.

What then are the historical roots of this phenomenon?

The aesthetic canon

Outsider art implies an insider art. Insider art implies a canon around which artistic products and their makers are evaluated, along with a body of work that represents those standards.

In the western European tradition, the domain of fine art came to be conceived of as an elevated autonomous sphere, structured with a hierarchical ranking of artistic genres and techniques. While other civilizations have glorified the arts, none has produced such a distinctive and lofty aesthetic realm (Alsop 1982; Geertz 1983: 95–98). Indeed, without such a social construction, there would be no outsider art. It can only arise where art itself is constructed with clearly delineated boundaries, in which an aesthetic canon mandates the modalities and outcome of creation. A sociology of outsider art starts from this premise.

The historical and institutional roots of this unique conception and practice hark back to the rise of the French Academic system and its valorization of the fine arts. This institutional structure became the prototype of the idea of an artistic core (Boime 1971).

Although its underlying ideas originated with the decentralized, powerful cities and families of Renaissance Italy, the Academic system attained its greatest importance in France. Its development started through the efforts of guild and independent painters and carvers to improve their standing by association with monarchical patronage, at a moment coinciding with the centralizing agenda of the absolutist French kings. By the eighteenth century, the stature of Academic art had come to be on a par with the intellectual, liberal arts, rather than the lesser, artisanal, craft guilds (Heinich 1993).

The Academy flourished over the better part of the nineteenth century, maintaining a monopoly over the practice of art. It fostered a topical hierarchy dominated by

history painting, inspired by classical motifs, portraits and scenic works depicting the achievements of monarchs and nobles, while relegating landscape and genre painting, often of domestic scenes, to lesser stature. It mandated correct painting techniques. And it guided and sustained substantial professional careers for most of those who came into its fold.¹

However, in the course of creating a defined and dominant aesthetic center, the Academy excluded alternative expressions and creators. While space for experimentation existed, straying too far from the established canon meant consignment to relative oblivion and financial insecurity (Corvisier 1978; Hauser 1951; Kempers 1992). Regardless, many painters became disenchanted with the Academy's rigidity and narrowness, perceiving it as fossilized in style, cherishing predictable art, and unresponsive to innovation and experimentation. Almost by definition, the academic structure made it likely that a class of *refusés* would emerge.

In fact, the nineteenth century was replete with outsiders: the Barbizon painters with their revalorization of the landscape genre, Courbet's Realism, the Impressionists' *plein air* painting, color experiments by Neoimpressionists, Van Gogh's expressionism, Gauguin's exoticism, Cézanne's structuralism, Cubism, Fauvism, and so on. Initially these innovators brought their works to the official salon. Some were accepted. When rejected, these painters found alternative means of support, aligning themselves with independent dealers, writers/critics, and newly moneyed patrons (Graña 1964; White and White 1965).

Gradually a pattern became established: creative newcomers produced challenging visions that found their support outside the traditional Academic practice (Zolberg 1990: 59–61). By the end of the nineteenth century, entry into the Academy stopped being the goal of *avant-garde* artists, for whom the institution had become all but irrelevant.

Outsider/insider art in the postmodern condition

Modernism undermined not only the Academic monopoly over career and aesthetics, both in France and in the countries where similar institutions had been established, but inadvertently it threw into question the presumption of legitimacy for *any* absolutist aesthetic and agreed-upon standard as to what constitutes art. The very notion of an official canon became obsolete.

Whatever else it was, modernism is the history of the dismantling of a guiding canon and a governing center. It is the history of the boundaries of art/non art being contested and re-contested, of recurring waves of outsiders struggling to become insiders.

It is understandable in this light that the New York School of Abstract Expressionists and their supporters such as Clement Greenberg made a last stab at retaining a rarified, autonomous sphere for the fine arts. They took the position that the abstractionist trend represented the inevitable, unfolding unidirectionality of modern art (Rose 1967: 235). This modernist bent – an exclusionary stance pitted against inclusivist tendencies – prevailed as an unofficial canon. It denigrated most figurative painting, narrative, regional or ethnic content and styles. But the 1960s con-

fronted abstractionism with a challenge that Andreas Huyssen sees as the onset of postmodernism.

For Huyssen, the 1960s represent the Great Divide and the beginning of post-modernism – the elimination of distinctions and the demise of the autonomous sphere of fine art (Huyssen 1986: viii). The importation of technological inventions such as print, color lithography, and photography initiated the breakdown of the barrier between fine and commercial art. With the inclusion of everyday subject-matter and commercial techniques into easel painting, the notion of a separate fine art sphere was fatally fractured (Cherbo, this volume). Despite all efforts made by the detractors of postmodernism, primarily the older vanguard artists and their cohorts, the boundaries between fine and other arts became increasingly fuzzy (Gans 1992: viii). Anything could potentially be art.

Commentators on the modern and post-modern condition note broad socio-cultural patterns and sensibilities wherein universal, fixed categories and hierarchical renderings inherited from the Enlightenment are being continually breached and reordered. The postmodern turn is characterized by a loss of certainty, a unifying center, agreed-upon standards of cultural excellence, morality, and types of knowledge. In its place are hybrid forms, an eclectic mixing of codes, validity granted to a wide range of outsider activities and mentalities, shifting power centers, and greater tolerance of ambiguity (Huyssen 1986; Seidman 1994). Not surprisingly the arts reflect this condition.

Given this new frontier, how do we conceive of outsider/insider art? What do we mean by legitimacy, recognition, and who are the gatekeepers of success? Reality has intruded on some of our governing concepts: they are ready to be revisited.

Toward a sociology of outsider art

Artistic recognition does exist, but it is no longer an all or nothing affair, identifiable and situated in a single institution such as the Academy. Rather, it inhabits the domain of a plurality of gatekeepers – organizations, influential individuals, publications, and media, popular and commercial or elite and scholarly. These gatekeepers variously have an impact at local, national or international levels. Insider/outsider distinctions have become multilayered, multidimensional, and must be conceptualized as matters of degree rather than of kind. Recognition, for instance, may be founded on the fame and glamor of stardom, sales based on commercial success, or critical or scholarly appreciation. Furthermore, because recognition is fluid, the stature and reception of any art work, artist, or movement are likely to change.

Artistic forms and makers achieve and lose varying degrees of repute over time (Lang and Lang 1990). Large-scale history paintings that once graced the walls of mansions and official buildings during the peak years of the French Academy may now be relegated to lesser spots in museums or their storage areas; they may also be revived.² Photography, once considered an artistic stepchild, now commands a significant following, financial success, a secondary auction market, and a separate department in all major museums. Rock music is a commercially successful, internationally renowned,

historically recognized movement, as witnessed by the founding of the Rock Music Hall of Fame. But it is still considered no more than a popular form of entertainment by musicologists. At its inception Pop Art garnered popular, financial and media recognition, but repute among critics, historians, and museums came later (Cherbo, this volume). Recognition today can only be understood as multilayered and multidimensional.

Depending upon their theoretical concerns, sociologists have interpreted the arts from divergent, sometimes conflicting, standpoints. Despite their differing assumptions, frameworks, levels of analysis, and political orientations, almost all see art as a social construction. Social scientists do not focus primarily on the work of art itself, leaving that to humanistic and aesthetic scholarship.³ The individual artist, artistic product, and art worlds are studied not for their own sake, but as embodiments of society, created and recreated over time, rather than fixed and unproblematic. The arts are treated as part of the social fabric of the worlds in which they are embedded (Becker 1982). In that sense the arts are integrally intertwined with the production and reception of value (Bourdieu 1995; Hauser 1951).

Artistic change may be compared to the processes of transformation discerned by sociologists of science. Like sociologists of the arts, they do not conceive of science as a closed sphere, in which change takes place through internalist processes alone. Sociologists see cultural products in the contexts of their communities of production, networks of influence (in which ideas are transmitted over successive cohorts), mechanisms of dissemination, reward, and reception (Crane 1976: 57–72). The role that outsiders play may be as important in bringing about change as is that of established participants (Merton 1972; Szántó, this volume). Thus, while Thomas Kuhn saw change as the process of exhaustion of a prevalent paradigm when confronted with anomalies (Kuhn 1970), Michael Mulkay emphasized the importation of ideas from other scientific domains by risk-taking, creative outsiders (Mulkay 1972).

Although the contesting of artistic boundaries that so vividly marks contemporary aesthetics is applicable to all the arts, it is beyond the scope of this volume to generalize about the arts as a whole. Because each art form has its own unique characteristics, history and organization, each warrants independent attention (Zolberg 1990: 171). Furthermore, within each art form differences can be dramatic. Consider the many forms of music that permeate our present, each distinctive, with its own audiences, creative centers, distribution networks, commercial and noncommercial status. This also applies internationally, where governmental bodies and laws can impinge upon artistic products. Yet, for all the arts in the postmodern era the transgression and maintenance of artistic boundaries coexist in a state of chronic tension.

This collection addresses cases and issues surrounding contemporary artistic outsiderhood and shifts in genre boundaries. Our contributors are sociologists, art historians, critics, policy analysts. One is a creative artist. Some wear more than one hat. None takes for granted the established categories of art. All are acutely aware of the flux and flow of artistic genres, the continual construction of new artistic expressions, and the role of creators, gatekeepers, audiences, and other influences in the making and unmaking of artists, art, and art worlds. Each writer contributes to an enlarged under-

standing of the fluidity of artistic taste, practice and stylistic succession in the last century. Their interests range from the works of classic outsiders – the insane, the primitive, the naïves – through forms and genres that transgress the boundaries between art and therapy, social welfare, ethnicity, the underworld, gender empowerment, and public reception as part of the art work itself. By this exploration, we hope to increase sensitivity to, and understanding of, the factors and forces that affect the permeability of artistic taste and genres. Outsider art is the cultural entity in which these processes are most clearly seen and delineated.

Notes

- 1 Albert Boime (1970) provides a detailed analysis of the French institution. On music in Paris, which followed a different path, see Elaine Brody (1987).
- 2 For example, the prominence given to dusty Academic works at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris fosters ongoing dispute.
- 3 See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of Baudelaire and Flaubert (Bourdieu 1995: 40–54), and how Tia DeNora and Nathalie Heinich examine two important artists of the nineteenth century, Beethoven (DeNora 1995) and Van Gogh (Heinich 1996).

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