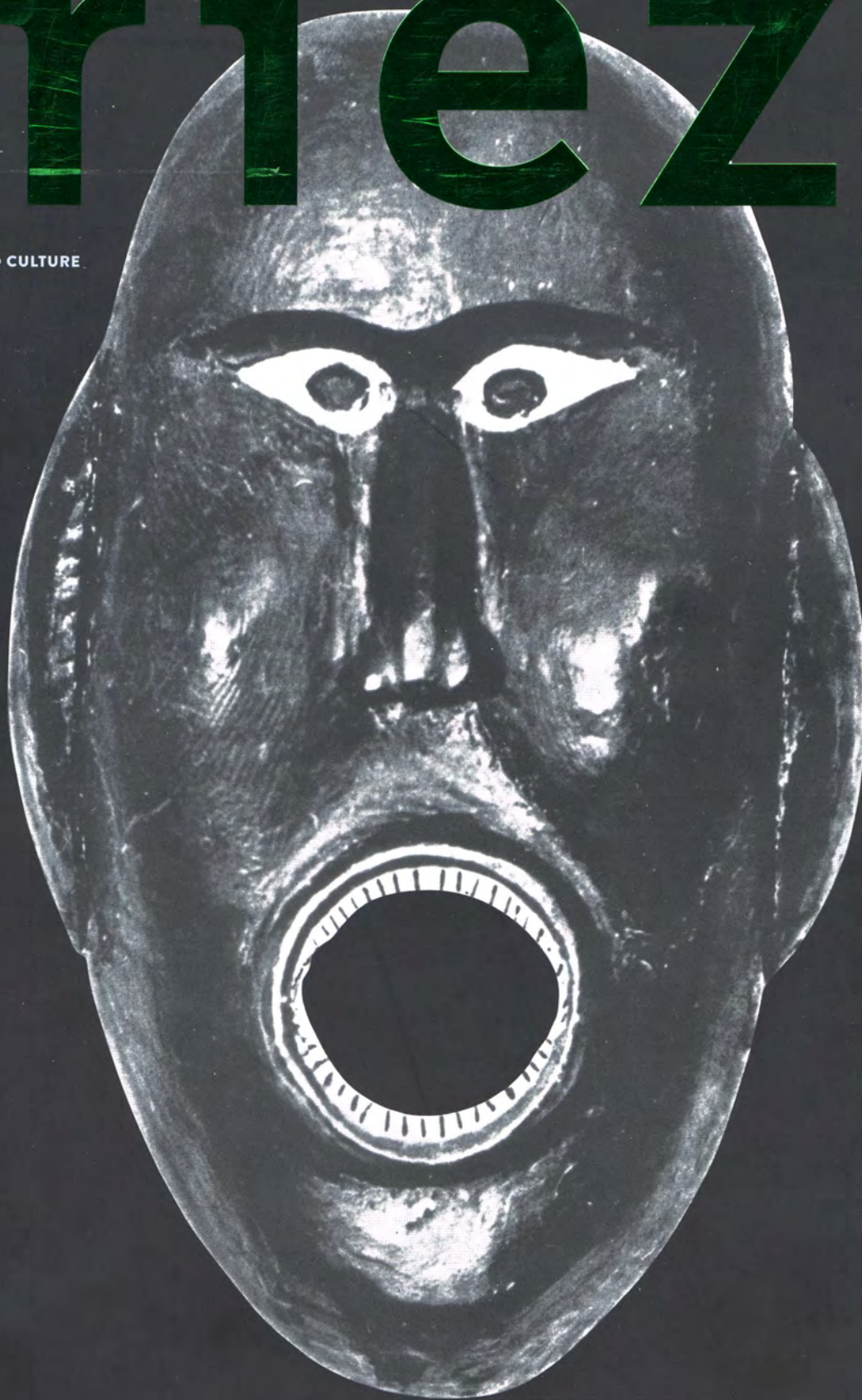


frieze

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

NO. 150 OCTOBER 2012



JIMMIE DURHAM *Life & Death & Singing*

GETA BRĂTESCU *My Influences*

OUTSIDER ART? *A Round Table*

Artist Project by **ROE ETHRIDGE**

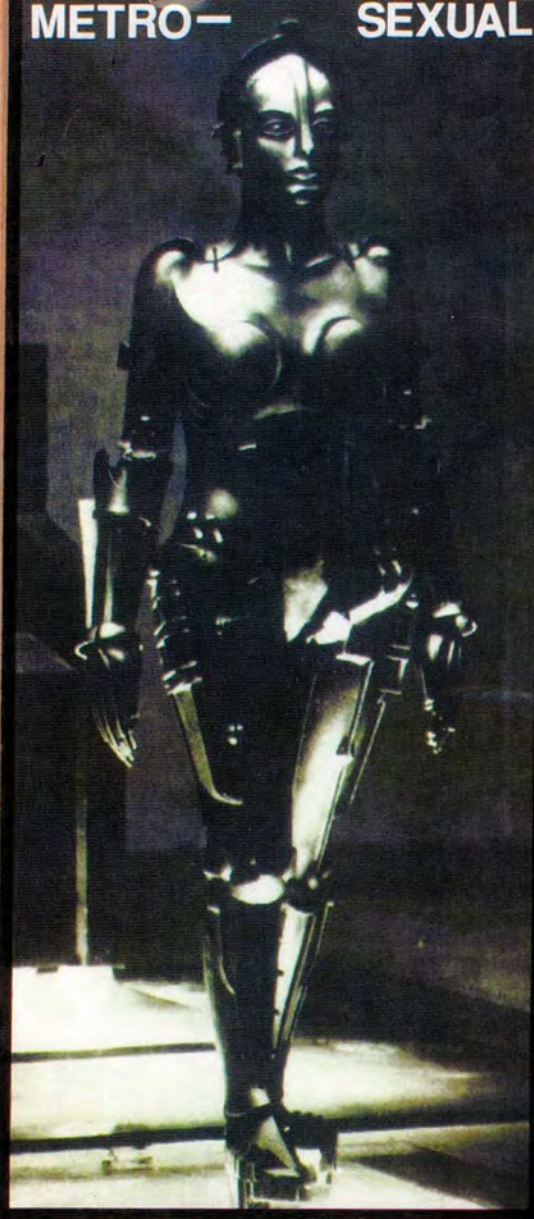
UK £5.95 US \$10 €10

Frames Of Reference

Paul Laffoley
The Sexuality of Robots (detail),
2009-10, mixed media,
79 x 79 cm

In recent years, the work of self-taught artists has come to be contextualized within larger narratives of contemporary art. How is Outsider Art best understood and what does this definition mean when 'inside' and 'outside' become blurred? How does it relate to fraught issues of education and exclusion, originality and exploitation? *Jonathan Griffin* invited Robert Gober, Matthew Higgs, Paul Laffoley and David Maclagan to discuss these questions

METRO - SEXUAL



GORT
STARTS TO
REACT TO
VIOLENCE
BY HUMAN
INDIVIDUALS



THE
HOMUNCULUS



FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER

METRO - POLIS
MOTHER CITY

FEMI - SAPIEN



THE
GOLEM



(1917-2008), MARVIN MINSKY (1927-) BELIEVE THAT ALIEN ROBOTS ARE MOON



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In the late 1990s, when I was a student, if my parents asked me teasingly, 'How can you tell it's art?' I would usually answer, 'Because it's made by an artist.' If they then asked who I'd consider to be an artist, my stock response was, 'Somebody who went to art school.'

Today, such a casual designation seems naïve. And not because there were, 15 years ago, fewer self-taught artists receiving recognition for their work, or fewer venues for them to exhibit it in. On the contrary, ever since Jean Dubuffet established his collection of Art Brut in the 1940s and, later, Roger Cardinal coined the more inclusive category of Outsider Art in 1972, there has been a thriving market for – and discourse around – work by untrained artists which has existed more or less separately from the parallel milieu of contemporary, academic art. The Outsider Art Fair, in New York, this year celebrated its 20th anniversary.

What has changed is that the contemporary art world has become ever-more reluctant to discriminate qualitatively between different forms of art-making. The criteria for what might be considered art – and what might be worth thinking about as if it were art – have continued to loosen. This year, the participants of DOCUMENTA (13) fell into nearly 80 official categories, including agroecologist, economist and psychoanalyst. Elsewhere, artists who hitherto might have been considered Outsider artists have been proposed for serious consideration by curators who have hung their work without fanfare alongside that of conventionally schooled contemporary artists.¹

When Dubuffet first evangelized about 'works created from solitude and from pure and authentic creative impulses – where the worries of competition, acclaim and social promotion do not interfere',² he was not interested in finding a place for Art Brut in the historical canon. As Michel Thévoz, the curator of the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne wrote: 'Whatever it was for Dubuffet, Art Brut was not a new source of inspiration [...] instead, Art Brut strengthened his resolve to repudiate his heritage in favour of an art without antecedents.'³

Despite Dubuffet's intentions, Outsider Art is today an important chapter in the story of art since Modernism – and, as such, has exerted considerable influence on artists trained in art schools. Its popularity, however, raises a number of thorny questions. What, for instance, does it reveal about our latent feelings concerning the centrality of higher education in art? Is it anti-intellectual? Does its popularity reflect a widespread frustration or disillusionment with the current state of professionalized contemporary art? Is Outsider Art a reactionary throwback to anachronistic ideas of artistic genius, suffering and dysfunction? Is it exploitative? Is this work actually good? How can we tell? Is it even art?

Jonathan Griffin

John Hiltunen
Untitled, 2012, collage,
30 × 21 cm

“Outsider” is a category a bit like “barbarian”; civilization will always hanker after a bit of rough trade, which may not always live up to expectations.’

DAVID MACLAGAN

ROBERT GOBER

An artist based in New York, USA. His work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions including retrospectives at Schaulager, Basel, Switzerland (2007), and Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, Norway (2003). In 2012, he curated a presentation of work by Forrest Bess for the Whitney Biennial, New York. He also curated 'Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield' (2009) at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA (which travelled to the Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo, USA, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

JONATHAN GRIFFIN

Contributing editor of *frieze* based in Los Angeles, USA.

MATTHEW HIGGS

An artist, writer and curator based in New York, USA. Since 2004, he has been the director and chief curator of White Columns, New York. He has also collaborated on more than 20 projects since 2003 with artists associated with the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, USA, presenting their work in exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Berlin and Paris.

PAUL LAFFOLEY

An artist living in Boston, USA. Having trained in architecture, in 1968 he founded the Boston Visionary Cell, the studio where he still lives and works. Recent solo exhibitions include 'Secret Universe' (2011) at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany, and 'Chasing Napoleon' (2009) at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France.

DAVID MACLAGAN

An artist, art therapist and former university lecturer based in Yorkshire, UK. He has published widely on Outsider Art, including the books *Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace* (2009) and *Psychological Aesthetics: Painting, Feeling and Making Sense* (2001).

JONATHAN GRIFFIN

Paul, do you, or have you ever, considered yourself an Outsider artist?

PAUL LAFFOLEY

My relationship to the art world has always been one of a lightly touching tangent. It is neither 'inside' nor 'outside' of the mainstream of fashion. In fact, the best way to describe my position is by an analogy to the shape of the Klein bottle. This form has no inside or outside, and is a continuous surface in which the third dimension of spatiality connects to the fourth.

JG In recent decades, we've seen the erosion of the once tightly controlled boundaries of what Jean Dubuffet called Art Brut, which

unsatisfactory term Outsider Art. David, as someone who has had a long professional involvement in the Outsider Art world, what are the arguments in favour of maintaining it as a category?

DAVID MACLAGAN

However tempting it might be, in view of the rampant exploitation of the genre, I think that trying to make Outsider Art a clear category is a rearguard and defensive move. Whereas Art Brut can be protected retrospectively, Outsider Art is bound to be a prospective concept, continually enlarging itself, not least because of the commercial pressures driving it. At its most optimistic and generous, it is a celebration of a wild and unsophisticated creativity; but its association with the excluded and marginalized, however admirable, brings complications, including some degree of distortion to the aesthetic criteria it depends on (what amounts to positive discrimination). Outsider Art's situation, somewhere between classic Art Brut and mainstream art (whatever that is), was anticipated 30 years ago when Thévoz set up the Neuve Invention annex to Dubuffet's Collection de l'Art Brut: the floodgates were opened and so many artists claimed to belong to this no-man's-land that, in 1993, it had to be closed down. 'Outsider' is a category a bit like 'barbarian'; civilization will always hanker after a bit of rough trade, which may not always live up to expectations. I think of Constantine Cavafy's poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians' from 1904: 'night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come. / And some who have just returned from the border say / there are no barbarians any longer.'

JG Does that mean it would be more appropriate, in future, to disregard these categories altogether?

DM Well, of course, we cannot stop the term being bandied about. But it's now more like a general term of enthusiasm and excitement, a bit like how 'surreal' became detached from any actual allegiance to Surrealism. However, we have to watch out for situations in which one set of criteria – social and psychological marginalization, for example – get treated as if they were passports to Outsider Art. Work produced in special studios for the disabled sometimes gets treated as a likely candidate for Outsider Art status, simply because the artists are obviously marginalized, and because their work might look closer to some kind of uncontaminated and 'original' creativity. In fact, most of these artists are not only to some degree aware of an audience for their art, but they also work in a setting where technical assistance can contaminate their innocence.

JG Matthew, when you curate exhibitions that mingle work by marginalized or developmentally disadvantaged people with that of other contemporary artists, surely there is a



‘Perhaps the issue is not so much that the term “outsider” is increasingly meaningless but that there is no identifiable “inside” to be positioned in relation to.’

JONATHAN GRIFFIN

interests? How does that affect your decisions about the presentation of the work?

MATTHEW HIGGS

My engagement – as a curator – with the work of self-taught artists began about a decade ago when I moved from London to Oakland in California. It was there that I came across the Creative Growth Art Center. Founded in the early 1970s by Dr Elias Katz and his artist wife, Florence Ludins-Katz, Creative Growth is a studio programme, workshop and gallery space that serves adult artists with mental, developmental and physical disabilities.

I would say without reservation that it is the most important cultural organization I have ever encountered. The Katzes sought to integrate the work produced at Creative Growth – as well as at Creativity Explored in San Francisco and at NIAD in Richmond, California, which they also founded – into the larger narratives surrounding visual culture without any of the usual prejudices or hierarchies. Their ideas were, and remain, radical. My engagement with the work of

Creative Growth and its artists is wholly informed by the Katzes’ original ambitions. I see this as a life-long commitment, born from a straightforward desire to introduce as many people as possible to the Katzes’ ideas and the extraordinary work produced in the three centres they founded. Curating is ultimately a means of authorship in which art works are temporarily re-contextualized in the form of an exhibition. I don’t see my responsibilities to the work produced at Creative Growth as being any different to my curatorial relationship with work produced in more conventional circumstances.

JG Paul, do you feel that it is important for people to know anything about you personally when they are looking at your paintings?

PL I have been subject to Asperger’s Syndrome all my life and that is the reason why I have had such a dramatic change to my IQ – from 79 to 183 by the time I graduated from Brown University in 1962. And sometimes I move back down and up again. That is what’s responsible for giving people the impression

turning into the consummate ‘insider’ of art. I also do not know when the change is about to take place. It often occurs in the most embarrassing moments. It happened once during a lecture so I had to push on for another three hours until I came out of the dip. My clue that it had happened was the audience’s reaction.

JG Do you like your work to be shown alongside proclaimed Outsider artists or do you prefer it when it is exhibited with artists who most people would consider to be ‘insiders’?

PL Refusing to exhibit one’s work, or attempting to get into shows, are two sides of the coin of artistic snobbery. My attitude has always been to wait until I am asked to enter an exhibition, and always to accept when I am asked. Who could possibly decide between listening to someone playing the violin or twanging on a Jew’s harp? Both are instruments of sound-making. Recently I was included in an exhibition called ‘Towards a Warm Math’, at On Stellar Rays in New York. At the opening – I go to the opening of every show in which I am included – I came across the work of Ionel Talpazan. I met him in 1984 in a gallery in midtown Manhattan where we were both showing. We share an interest in UFOS. He did not attend the On Stellar Rays reception. In fact, the last time I saw him was outside the front door of the Outsider Art Fair. I asked him what he was doing hanging around the door with all his art work on the sidewalk. He explained that he had been ‘kicked out’ of the fair for being ‘too outside’. I did not think it was possible to be ‘too outside’, unless of course snobbery had finally caught up with him.

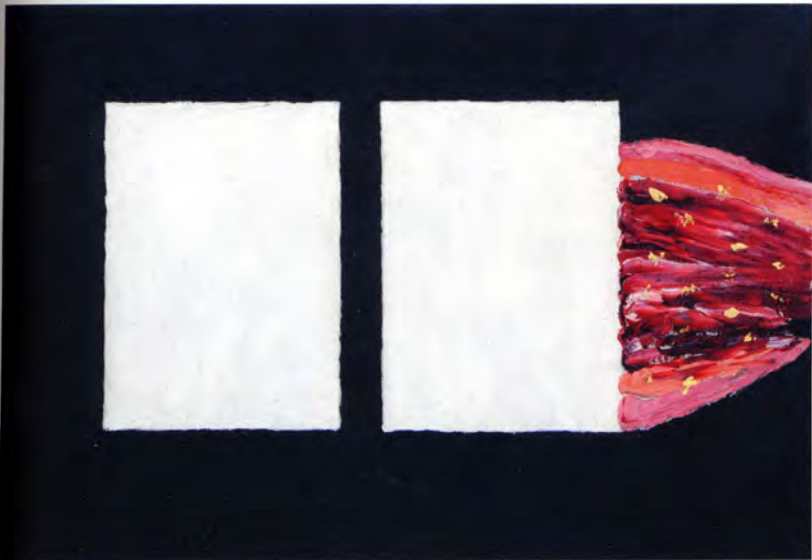
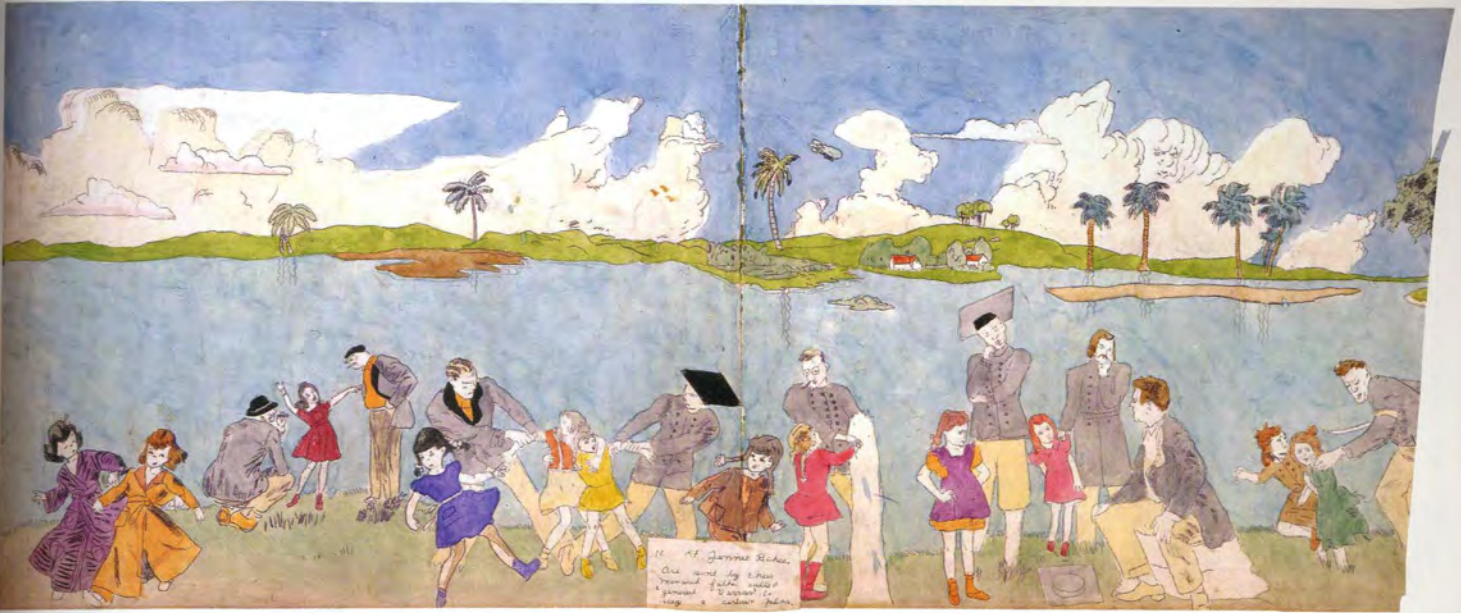
JG Robert, how did you decide to present Forrest Bess’s work in the way that you did at the Whitney Biennial this year, including texts and personal biographical material alongside his paintings?

ROBERT GOBER

The concept was his. Based on his letters I knew that he had always wanted to display his paintings along with the documentation of his genital self-surgeries and his corresponding theories. In his lifetime this never happened and I thought it would be worthwhile to give it a try. There were no clues or blueprints for how he would have organized and displayed this material. At first, I envisioned hanging the paintings and the documentary material side by side with equal footing. But I grew unsure of this approach. As I sat with the Polaroids of his altered genitals in my studio and watched other people’s reactions to them I saw how inflammatory and extreme they could be. I was afraid of overwhelming the paintings. So I made the decision to put all of that material in a vitrine and to have just the paintings and text on the walls. There was no question in my mind that this project needed a dedicated room, especially within a context as multilayered as the Whitney Biennial. People would need to focus.

JG Am I right in thinking you don’t consider Bess to be an Outsider artist at all? Is there a better way we could describe his marginalization that could also be applied to other artists of his ilk? Charles Burchfield, for example, whose retrospective you curated in 2009.

RG I have no investment in, or much knowledge of, the ‘outsider’/‘insider’ debate. Bess – as to a lesser degree did Burchfield – made a decision to isolate himself physi-



1
Paul Laffoley, *Mind Body Alpha*, 1989,
oil, acrylic, ink and vinyl lettering
on canvas, 1.9 x 1.9 m

2
Henry Darger, *At Jennie Richee ...*
(double-sided), c.1940, carbon transfer and
watercolour on paper, 48 x 119 cm

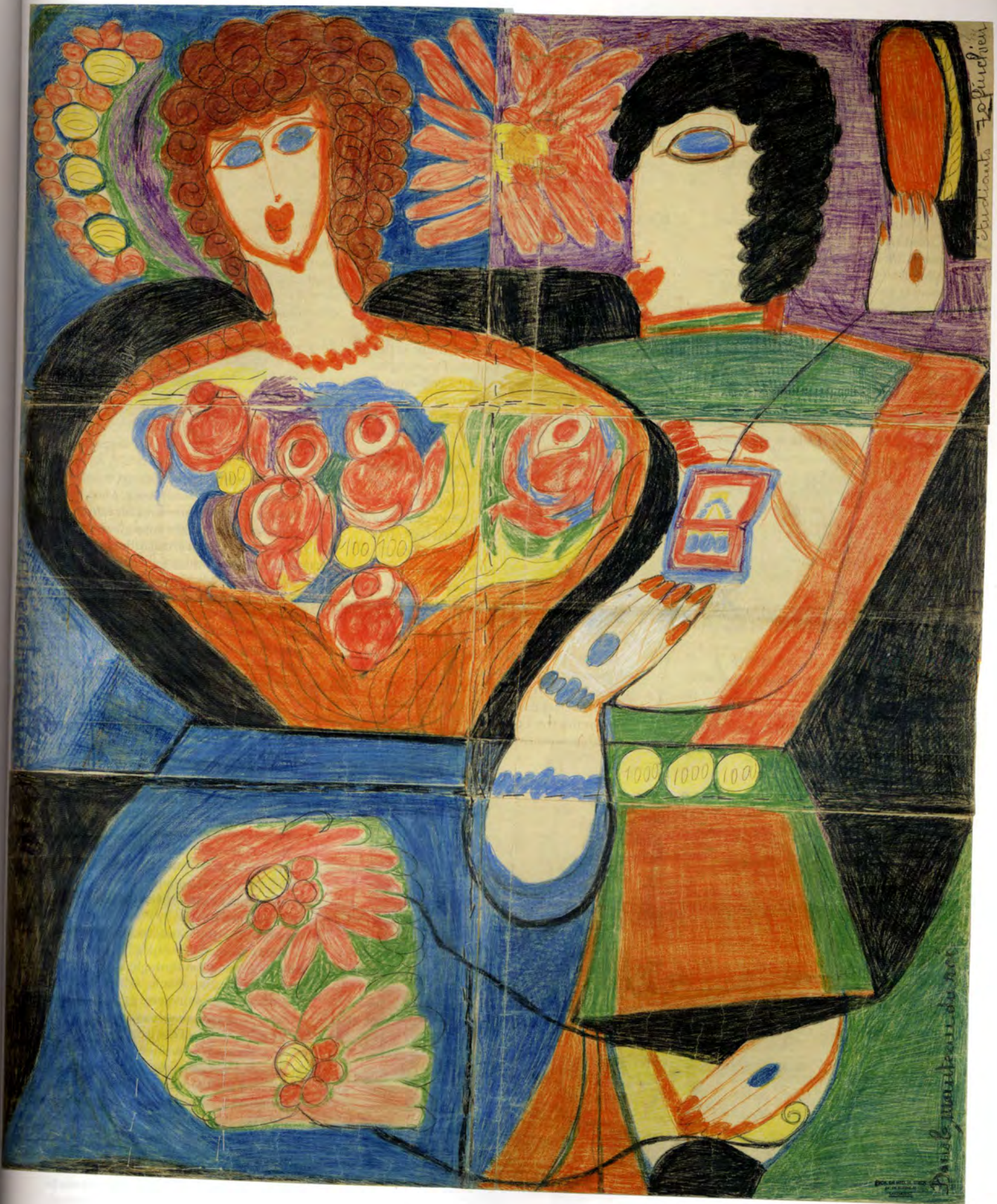
3
Forrest Bess, *Untitled No. 12 A*, 1957,
oil on canvas, 31 x 46 cm

4
Judith Scott, *Untitled*, 2002,
mixed media, 28 x 66 x 28 cm

5
Josef Hofer, *Untitled*, 2009,
graphite and coloured pencil on paper,



Charles Burchfield
The Insect Chorus, 1917, opaque and transparent
watercolour with ink, graphite and crayon
on paper, 51 x 38 cm



Aloise Corbaz, *Etudiants Zofinchen*
(Students of Zofinchen), 1951–60, coloured
pencil on paper, 105 × 88 cm

'The range of knowledge and information we have about "outsider" or self-taught artists has changed dramatically in the last decade alone.'

MATTHEW HIGGS

in very humble circumstances but he was not uneducated or unsophisticated. He chose to live in isolation but for 20 years exhibited his work with the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, alongside Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Tony Smith. And this was because he sought it out. He decided that that venue was the correct one for his work. So he was only an 'outsider' in his choice to live an isolated life, not in his engagement with the ideas of his time. And from what I have read about Parsons, she didn't view Bess as an aberration, but as a member of his generation, just living and thinking in his own unique way.

JG Does it concern you that the artists who you've brought to wider recognition through the exhibitions you've curated may always now be associated with your own work as an artist?

RG No. Not at all. Both Burchfield and Bess completed a lifetime of brilliant work. I felt my job was to reintroduce their art to people not all that familiar with it. I totally trust my presence as curator will be but an interesting footnote to all they created.

JG Does anyone really believe that there is such a thing as 'the mainstream' anymore? Perhaps the real issue is not so much that the term 'outsider' is increasingly meaningless but that there is no identifiable 'inside' to be positioned in relation to.

DM One obvious complication is that the mainstream has now absorbed – through theft, imitation or homage – a good deal of Outsider Art, as well as being inspired by its styles and techniques. But there is still a big difference between someone knowingly appropriating something in a recognizable way and more subterranean borrowings. There is also some traffic in the other direction: Aloïse Corbaz, for example, who was included in Dubuffet's collection, occasionally incorporated postcards of Renaissance art into her work, but most of her cultural references are completely translated into her own idiom.

MH I'm not sure it's a question of 'the mainstream', more that we tend now to have greater – and much faster – access to new information. Things become visible much more quickly and consequently they get assimilated faster too. This process has not only accelerated the blurring of what we might think of as 'inside' or 'outside' but it has also significantly opened up the field. The range of knowledge and information we have about 'outsider' or self-taught artists has changed dramatically in the past decade alone. This access, which has broadly democratized the field, has created not only a larger and more engaged audience for this kind of art, but has also created more opportunities for this work to be contextualized within the larger narratives of contemporary art,

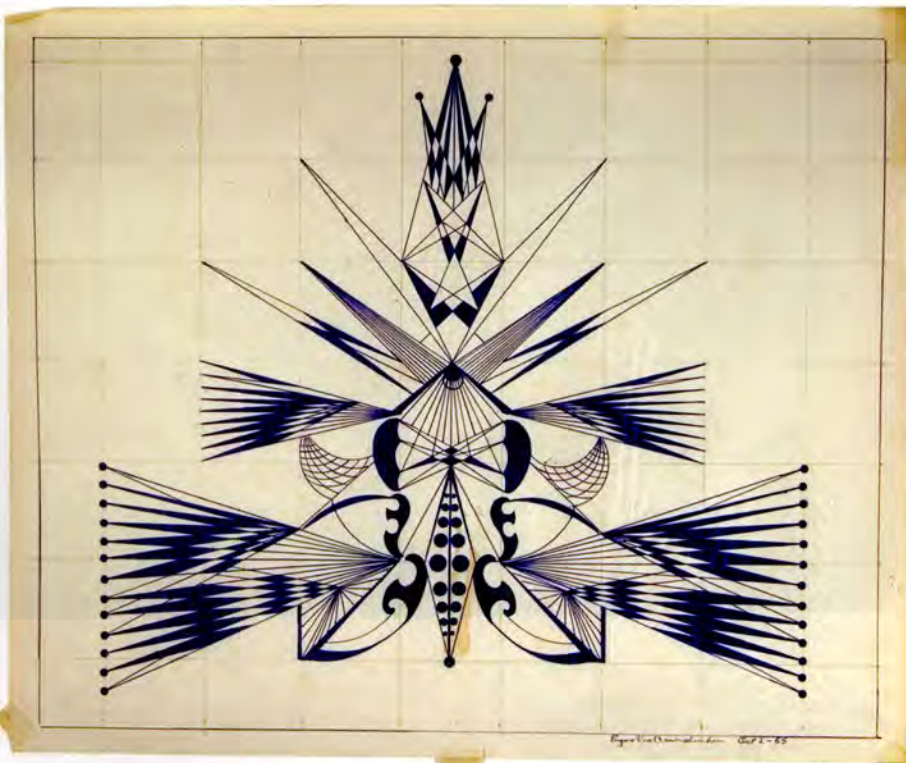


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as can be seen in the various approaches of curators such as Lynne Cooke, Massimiliano Gioni and Daniel Baumann, for example, all of whom have, in different ways, framed the work of self-taught artists within their curatorial projects. I think for the most part these curatorial initiatives are ultimately informed by contemporary artists' interests in this work and the circumstances in which it is made: Mike Kelley's investment in various manifestations of non-professional art would be one example, as would Jim Shaw's presentations of his now-seminal collection of 'Thrift Store Paintings' [2000]. Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane's 'Folk Archive' [2000–07], a collection of recent and contemporary British vernacular art, would be another. Artists, from my experience, tend to be among the earliest, most engaged and ultimately most sympathetic interpreters of this work.

JG What do you think is so attractive to people right now – whether artists, curators or the public – about art that is the product of pathological dysfunction or psychic pain? I'm not thinking so much about folk art or thrift store art, but about art made by disabled people, by people with tragic biographies, by artists such as Bess or Henry Darger who expressed intense personal anguish through their art. These are not qualities that have been as common in the art of recent years as they once were. Does the viewer's pity play a part in their reception of the work, and is that pity an acceptable response?

DM The trouble is that there is no necessary relation – either causal, symptomatic or expressive – between an artist's affliction and the aesthetic of their work. It's part of the mythology constructed around Expressionism, or around the work of artists such as Vincent van Gogh or Edvard Munch. Sometimes there can be something uncomfortable about being excited by work that directly relates to an artist's disturbance; or, at least, there's a conflict between the content and its artistic presentation. For me, the work of deaf and



1

1
Eugene von Bruenchenhein
Untitled, 1965, ballpoint pen on paper,
38 × 46 cm

2
James Castle, *Untitled*, undated,
collage, 28 × 18 cm

3
James Castle, *Untitled*, undated,
cardboard, string and ribbon,
53 × 37 cm

His forcefully framed figures confront the viewer with intensely expressive images of compulsive autoeroticism. On the other hand, there can also be an extraordinary discrepancy between the artist's personal history and the power of their art. The Mexican artist Martin Ramirez, who was trapped for most of his life in the US mental hospital system, allegedly mute and diagnosed as schizophrenic, would be a good example of this.

MH Our collective lives have never been more greatly exposed, whether through reality television, social media or the growing market for personal memoirs. So I think it's fair to say that people are interested in other people's stories. Historically, the focus on an Outsider artist's biography often compensated for an absence of the artist's voice, especially in the case of artists whose disabilities prevented any conventional form of communication (such as Judith Scott who was a deaf mute who also had Down's syndrome) or when the artist worked outside of public scrutiny (as with someone like Darger). What's perhaps more surprising is the extent to which biography is suppressed in discussion about contemporary artists. This absence of personal and anecdotal information might explain why *The New Yorker's* extensive profiles of artists are so popular – they provide one of the few places where we get to read about what an artist's parents did, for example, or what their partners do. Being empathetic towards, or having an understanding of, an artist's personal circumstances doesn't, I think, preclude an ability to think about their work in any number of interesting ways – this applies to the work of both self-taught and more conventionally trained artists.

RG I agree. Well put. But I would take exception to a few of the assertions in the question. Did Bess 'express intense personal anguish'? Yes, according to his letters, but he also felt and expressed enormous physical and psychic exhilaration, perhaps more so, or at the least in equal parts. And about 'pity' I am a bit clueless. I might feel pity when I look at Sue Coe's explicitly political and disturbing paintings. But not for the artist – for the subjects depicted.

JG I wanted to acknowledge that when an artist's biography is foregrounded, we tend to triangulate our response to their work with the motivations that, we imagine, produced it. For instance, when I look at Scott's sculptures, I cannot help but understand them by channeling my projection of the artist's own relationship her work. I would argue it's impossible to respond only to the subject depicted – in any work of art, by any artist – as soon as we know even a tiny bit about the maker. And I can't help imagining that life for Scott – or Bess – was very much harder than it is for me. I might well be wrong.



MH I think it's more complicated than that. At least 90 per cent of the art we currently see in contemporary art museums and galleries has broadly similar origins: the artists in question will most likely have studied at college level and they will have been exposed to an approved art history – they might even have read exactly the same texts. Even if the work of these artists is formally different there is a common ground: a set of shared experiences and concerns exist that in turn allows consensus to be formed. With the work of artists operating outside the mainstream art world, none of these unifying experiences apply. Their work actively resists this process of assimilation, partly because the respective motivations of these artists remain wholly idiosyncratic. This, of course, presents any number of problems to the institutions who have taken it upon themselves to interpret and consolidate visual culture. The nature of Outsider Art allows it to operate independently of the mainstream narratives – and desires

connection, that I'm aware of, between the work of, say, James Castle, Eugene von Bruenchenhein, Prophet Royal Robertson or Horst Ademeit. Each artist represents a radically autonomous position. Of course, this can create complications for the viewer too, as it requires us effectively to learn a new language with each encounter. This 'disruptive' quality is clearly one of this work's most compelling characteristics. Consequently I don't think we can generalize about these artists or the origins of their work, as there is literally no common ground, and it makes no sense to try and establish any. ♦♦

1 Notable recent examples include: Matthew Higgs ('B. Wurtz & Co.', 2012, Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles), Massimiliano Gioni ('Ostalga', 2011, New Museum, New York) and Connie Butler ('Glossolalia: Languages of Drawing', Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2008)

2 Jean Dubuffet, 'Place à l'incivism' (Make Way for Incivism), in *Art and Text*, no. 27, December 1987–February 1988, p.36

3 Quoted in Alan S. Weiss, *Shattered Forms: Art Brut, Phantasms, Modernism*, 1992, State University of New York Press, Albany, p.62