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Marketing Madness

THE ECONOMY OF OUTSIDER ART

HOW DOES KNOWLEDGE OF AN ARTIST'S MENTAL DISABILITY affect the interpretation of their artwork? The field of Outsider art presents a prime site for the investigation of the public's fascination with the work of the mentally disabled. Operating as an umbrella category that comprises intuitive art, visionary art, contemporary folk art, vernacular art, and self-taught art, Outsider art has expanded over the past twenty years to support a multi-million dollar marketplace in the United States. The best-selling and most well known of these artists continue to be those with a documented history of mental health issues.

The term "Outsider art" was introduced in the early 1970s by British art critic Roger Cardinal, a man who sought to promote artists he believed to be somehow "outside of culture." Cardinal embraced the same criteria for inclusion which artist Jean Dubuffet delineated for the French field of Art Brut in the 1940s. Qualifying artists were all self-taught and socially marginalized in one way or another, and considered to be working outside the influence of the mainstream art world's institutions, dominant conceptual dialogues, and formal trends. The field purposefully divorced itself from Western art historical lineage and established its own canon, resisting traditional evaluative strategies such as context and comparison. Instead, Outsider art prizes artists with biographies of cultural isolation. Mental

disability in particular operates as a kind of special guarantee that an artist's vision is original, intuitive, and raw. In this context, Cardinal famously defined the loaded and homogenizing term "madness" as a creative posture, rather than as a social or medical affliction.

Most strikingly, the field distinguishes itself from the mainstream by maintaining a widespread lack of artist statements, even in the case of artists who are high functioning, verbal, and educated. The individual artist's voice is more or less silenced within this interpretive framework, making room for the dominant narrative in Outsider art discourse to become a more generalizing romanticization of madness—what I will call the public fantasy of artistic madness. Public fantasy, as defined by feminist film scholar Teresa de Laurentis, is based on narratives that are easily and pleasurably recognizable to the general public: legible identifications and plots reiterated throughout centuries of popular culture that remain deeply entangled in our collective unconscious. As de Laurentis explains:

What I mean by public fantasies, then, are the dominant cultural narratives and scenarios of the popular imagination that have been expressed in myths, medieval sagas, sacred texts, epics, and other forms of oral, written, or visual narrative that tell the story of a people, a nation, or a representative individual and reconstruct their origin, their struggles, and their achievements.¹

In the public fantasy of artistic madness, the narrative's representative individual leads a tortured, misunderstood, and isolated existence that is only later validated through the production of idiosyncratic and transcendent artwork. This narrative is not limited to Outsider art: The pop culture profiles of the artwork and biography of mainstream artists such as Vincent Van Gogh and Jackson Pollock are just two of the many examples that appear within the art world more broadly. Yet Outsider art and its marketplace articulate another

unique dimension of this fantasy, a formula of artistic madness that I argue is aimed directly at viewer consumption. Despite the wide range of ethical and critical investments in the field of Outsider art—be they therapeutic, altruistic, or strictly commercial—this capitalization on romantic mythologies of the mentally disabled is sustained by the desire and fascination of eager consumers.

One prime example of the deployment of the artistic madness formula in the Outsider art marketplace comes from the 2011 Outsider Art Fair in New York City. This fair allows the international network of Outsider art galleries and art centers to come together and sell work to each other and the general public once a year. The wall texts of the Parisian gallery Christian Berst illustrate a particularly overt use of the artistic madness narrative, clearly departing from the gallery standard of providing artwork information such as the artist's name and the work's title, creation date, medium, dimensions, and price. Russian artist Alexander Lobanov's five drawings (*fig. 1*), for example, are presented with the following words at the lower right side of the wall:

Alexander Lobanov spent the majority of his life in a psychiatric hospital creating works inspired by Soviet iconography. His portraits feature the likenesses of Stalin and Lenin in addition to his own self-portraits, affirming his individuality. His name has become synonymous with Russian art brut and his works are increasingly rare.²

Viewers are informed within the same paragraph that these drawings were produced in a psychiatric institution and that they are rare and valuable. Lobanov's specific diagnosis is unmentioned, allowing a more generalized association of institutionalization to be equated with the work's value and significance. Another wall text in Berst's stall, for the artist Jill Gallieni (*fig. 2*), moves beyond the illusion of factuality and delves purely into narrative:

FIGURE 1—Alexander Lobanov's work in the Galerie Christian-Berth booth at the 2011 Outsider Art Fair, New York



FIGURE 2—Jill Galleini's work in the Galerie Christian-Berth booth at the 2011 Outsider Art Fair, New York



*Gallieni, in a desperate attempt to overcome mental problems from interfering with her daily life, began transcribing her prayers to Saint Rita, patron of desperate cases. She rendered them indecipherable and only recently has agreed to share her work with the public.*³

In the span of two sentences about Gallieni, the word desperate is invoked twice. The “mental problems” she was trying to overcome are not defined in any detail, allowing a more general assumption of madness to rise up to the viewer’s mind. And once again, the value of the work is emphasized to the viewer: “only recently has [she] agreed to share her work with the public.” Outsider art is a small niche, and the opportunity to purchase new works on the market should not be missed.

Galerie Christian Berst’s presentation was the first time Gallieni had shown her work. The context of Art Brut and Outsider art clearly enabled her artwork’s visibility and provided her with the opportunity to profit from it. But what is the cost? Viewers have no way of divorcing their experience of the work itself from the accompanying narrative of the artist’s trauma. Does the end—heightened visibility for disabled artists—in any way justify the means, which involve their caricaturization and homogenization through Outsider art discourse? And why does the public fantasy of artistic madness remain so deeply appealing to viewers and potential buyers of artwork? A deconstruction of the assumptions inherent in this discourse, and their affects on viewer interpretation and desire, are necessary if we are ever to inoculate ourselves against its allure and reveal the limitations it imposes on the evaluation, autonomy, and conceptual richness of Outsider artworks.

This essay aims to deconstruct Outsider art’s marketing of artistic madness through an investigation of the canonization of two mentally disabled artists who are top sellers in the Outsider art market: Martin Ramirez and Judith Scott. That these artists are positioned

similarly despite their very distinct work, their differing diagnoses, the forty years between their peaks of artistic production, and the differences in their creative practices underscore an intrinsic method in the field’s discourse for dealing with mental disability. I must make clear that I believe the intentions of Outsider art scholars and historians originate in an intense admiration of and fascination with these artists’ work, and in no way do I intend to argue that any of these scholars are writing with exploitive aims. However, analyses of artwork within the Outsider art category continue to construct a simplified and disempowered identity for the mentally disabled, within which the appeal of evaluating and promoting the work often becomes entangled with the appeal of the romanticized, historically loaded, and homogenizing myths of “madness.” This *modus operandi* becomes a web of guilty pleasures. It reiterates a narrative that inaccurately represents mental disability in the United States since the advent of anti-psychotic and anti-depressant medications, supportive therapies, inclusionary programs, disability advocacy, and federal support for people with mental disabilities. I believe that this indulgence is dangerous on two fronts: it obscures one of the few venues where mental disability is allowed to be visible with critically restrictive tropes and it ghettoizes important bodies of twentieth-century artwork, separating them from the mainstream art historical canon.

Unlike physical disability, the signifiers of mental disability are not always clearly marked or legible on the body. Because of this, mental disability has the inherent potential for concealment, a hidden sickness that can appear anywhere and in anyone. I assert that the anxiety of this realization implicates all people, especially viewers, who, when gazing upon the work of the mentally ill, require additional reassurance of their own sanity. In an engagement with what is perceived as an other, the risk of too much identification can be a

threatening possibility. Thus the commercial constructs of Outsider art, in an attempt to appeal to the “healthy” public, cement the simplified binary of sanity and insanity. These tactics frame the artists as oblivious idiot savants who require the gaze of an informed critic and an astute audience in order for their work to be seen as art. In order to understand how the framing of artistic madness came to be, I will look at how Outsider art arose from the field of Art Brut.

Building a Category: Transplanting Art Brut to an English-Speaking Market

OUTSIDER ART’S ROUTE TO COMMODIFICATION BEGAN WITH THE labeling and theorization of a large and diverse body of work already in existence, throwing together uneducated, impoverished, and socially marginalized artists from the United States and Europe and characterizing them and their practices as “outsider.” When British art critic Roger Cardinal coined the term in his 1972 book *Outsider Art*, the category embraced the same criteria for inclusion that French artist Jean Dubuffet had delineated for the field of Art Brut in the 1940s: artists must be uneducated and sufficiently isolated from mainstream society so their artwork could then be seen as evidence of a fundamental creative impulse, an utterly original raw vision. Cardinal modeled Outsider art purposefully after Art Brut in almost every way, presenting it more as the earlier movement’s English language reiteration than as a new field.

In the early 1940s Dubuffet was a moderately successful artist practicing in the art world’s prevailing style. Modernist movements such as Expressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism had already dealt decisive blows to earlier artistic traditions, and Dubuffet sought a new aesthetic revolution, one to which he could claim the ownership of discovery. His interest in the mentally ill may first have been piqued

by Dr. Walter Morgenthaler’s 1921 book *A Psychiatric Patient as Artist*, which described the work of Adolf Wolfli, a patient at Morgenthaler’s Waldau clinic in Bern, Switzerland. Wolfli was one of the first artists to have his work given the label Art Brut and subsequently Outsider, and he is considered one of the three Outsider art masters, along with Martin Ramirez and Henry Darger. Dubuffet also possessed German psychotherapist Hans Prinzhorn’s 1922 book *The Artistry of the Insane*, in which Prinzhorn details his collection of works by his artistically inclined institutionalized patients. Both books were circulated within the avant-garde European art world at the time. Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Andre Masson, and Wassily Kandinsky all claimed that the books provided inspiration. In the words of Surrealist leader Andre Breton, the art community believed that the hallucinations and illusions of the madmen “drew upon the wellsprings of the imagination.”⁴

Bringing together many of the artists who shared his fascination with artistic madness, Dubuffet created the *Compagnie de l’art brut*, a group committed to collecting and examining the artwork of the mentally ill. They visited mental institutions throughout Western Europe, developing relationships with administrators and doctors and accruing an extensive collection. In many cases, *Compagnie de l’art brut* was finding and saving work from the ruins of World War II, much of it made by institutionalized people who had since been exterminated by the Nazis. Dubuffet perceived the work as raw and brutal: the instinctual, intuitive creations of people solely dedicated to their own impulses. He positioned Art Brut in his writings as the opposition or antidote to what he perceived as the heavily theorized, over mediated, and inaccessible works championed by the New York and Paris art worlds.

Over time, however, Dubuffet sought to include artists working outside of psychiatric institutions, including the self-taught, many of

whom were desperately poor and illiterate; children; prisoners; eccentrics; mediums; and visionaries; as well as artists from “exotic ethnic groups.”⁵ Breton, who felt Dubuffet was being too inclusive, broke with the *Compagnie de l'art Brut*, claiming the fusion of these styles was “inconsistent and illusory.”⁶ Cardinal, however, fully adopted the category’s openness, constructing Outsider art as a field that incorporated the work of the self-taught, contemporary folk artists, religious eccentrics, prisoners, people from isolated communities worldwide, and children.

This all-inclusive stance has inaugurated a kind of term warfare in the United States. New categories have arisen to cover markedly similar or mildly different territory: Self-Taught art, Visionary art, Vernacular art, Intuitive art, and Naïve art are the most prominent examples, some of which have given birth to institutions, foundations, and periodicals across the United States. Even folk art has claimed that Outsider art has encroached on its territory by relabeling artists that have been housed within folk art’s longer and more established pedigree. Reflecting upon the confused state of the field he helped to create, Cardinal asked in 1994, “Does the bickering and disputes over labels and boundaries display a basic fear of genuine critical dialogue? This dialogue can only flourish when there is an agreement on a fixed nomenclature.”⁷

While Cardinal dilutes his argument by proceeding to argue for his term Outsider art to continue as the sole classification due to its history and institutionalization, his reflection has some merit. Term warfare has allowed this category to remain unchecked on the whole, without pertinent critical theorization, reflection, or accountability for the claims it makes about both mental illness and artistic creation (and the dangers of romanticizing these constructs). Art Brut, while bearing a similarly problematic history and set of criteria for inclusion, has

become a private and closed collection curated by Michel Thevoz that is open to the public in Lausanne, Switzerland. Outsider art, on the other hand, established a marketplace and has rapidly expanded and commercialized over the pasty thirty years in the United States.

Central to Outsider art’s formula of artistic madness is the notion of authorial naïveté: the claim that the artist had no idea that they were an artist or that what they were making was art. The major monographs on Judith Scott and Martin Ramirez, two of the most well-known and critically examined artists in the category, bear blatant assertions of authorial naïveté. I explore these assertions as well as their relationship with photographic portraits of each artist in the context of their monographs.

Authorial Naïveté

Let us imagine an unusual situation. An artist is at work, producing soft, three-dimensional, colored objects that are original in form and expressively powerful. The abstract fiber structures she is creating are large, often larger than she is, each involving months of dedicated work. She applies herself to her creative enterprise with extraordinary intensity, patience, and care. Yet, paradoxically, this woman possesses no concept of art, nor understanding of its meaning or function. She does not know that she is an artist, nor does she understand that the objects she creates are perceived by others as works of art. Whatever she is doing she is definitely not concerned with making art. —JOHN MACGREGOR, *METAMORPHOSIS: THE FIBER ART OF JUDITH SCOTT*⁸

THE PRECEDING QUOTE INTRODUCES ART HISTORIAN JOHN MacGregor’s 2006 monograph on the artist Judith Scott. Scott, fifty-five at the time of the book’s publication, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1943 with severe Down syndrome and was institutionalized

by her parents at the age of seven. She spent most of the next thirty years of her life in the same psychiatric hospital in Ohio. In 1986, her twin sister Joyce Scott found out she was still alive and sought custody. Judith Scott then moved to Oakland, California, to live with her sister, and was enrolled at Creative Growth. This art center provides artists diagnosed with developmental disabilities with studio space and materials to create work, regularly promoting their artwork in Outsider art galleries throughout the world. Scott was deaf, mute, and unable to write, but she created fiber sculptures prolifically at Creative Growth for the last two decades of her life.

MacGregor's unapologetic claim is asserted without supportive evidence or argument. How he knew what a woman without the abilities of language considered herself or her work to be is never explained. Neither is the "concept of art" that MacGregor refers to contextualized in any detail, despite the fact that this definition is a constantly evolving, contentious, and often categorically specific one.

On what basis (psychiatric, aesthetic, art historical) is this claim of Scott's authorial naïveté made? MacGregor, an art historian who did postdoctoral work in psychiatry and is responsible for the book *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* makes no medical justifications. He does, however detail the year he committed to the close observation of Scott and her creative process, as well as his extensive interviews with Scott's twin sister, who recalled memories of their shared early childhood. MacGregor's *Metamorphosis* represents the most focused scholarship on Scott in existence. Ricco Maresca, a New York City gallery that represents self-taught and vernacular artists, holds exclusive rights to represent and sell Scott's work on the East Coast. The gallery's website, which features a biography page and video footage for each of its artists, replicates MacGregor's statement, quoted above, on Scott's authorial naïveté.⁹

This equation, in which the artist's biography and perceived identity are placed over the work itself, is present even in the images accompanying Outsider art monographs. In her 2002 essay "Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," Rosemarie Garland-Thompson delineates four modes in which the disabled body is commonly represented. These modes—the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and the realistic—are all constructions in the service of "instructing, or assuring some aspect of the ostensibly non-disabled viewer."¹⁰ Fleshing out this infrastructure by which the disabled body has been made visible is a potent tool for disability studies, as it makes it possible not only to dispute these modes' supposed factuality but also to investigate the ways in which these rubrics become routine and normalized within contemporary visual culture. Garland-Thompson's work also highlights the ubiquitous silencing of the disabled individual in the assembly of these representations, an ongoing societal practice in which the healthy speak for and control representations of the "unhealthy."

The first page of MacGregor's *Metamorphosis* is a full-bleed black-and-white photograph of Judith Scott clutching one of her sculptures (fig. 3). A dark wrinkled cloth is hung as a backdrop behind the artist and her sculpture; a similar cloth is draped over the pedestal upon which the sculpture sits. Scott is centered in the photo. Her left arm circles one side of her work, and her right hand is only slightly visible, resting on the top of the sculpture as if she was patting its head. She looks away from the camera and her mouth is slightly open, her chin hanging down to touch her outstretched shoulder.

An alignment of the wondrous and the realistic is at work in this photograph. Side by side, Scott and her sculpture take up equal space in this image: artist and creation are both on a pedestal here, intertwined and prepped for the viewer's inspection. But Scott's stare re-

FIGURE 3—Leon Bronzstein portrait of Judith Scott



mains the focal point of the image, a vacant gaze looking out into the distance. Her disengaged and unaware look compels us to concentrate on her eyes, the visible trait which most indicates that she has Down syndrome. Thus her mental disability, her otherness, is centered in this shot. She is possessive of her sculpture, affectionate toward it, yet she appears to be entirely unconscious of the process of documentation that is unfolding. We consume her as wondrous, a disabled individual who is placed “on high and elicits awe from viewers because of the supposedly amazing achievements represented.”¹¹ We are in awe of this disabled woman’s ability to make art, let alone work that warrants the in-depth study represented by a monograph, an honor rarely afforded to work produced by a disabled mind.

The picture as a whole has an air of documentary realism. The backdrop and platform setup and Scott’s casual attire give the image an unstaged, impromptu feel, as if the artist has wandered into a room in which someone is taking a picture of her sculpture. Scott is brought up close to us and we see her in what reads like her natural state. This realism acts as an authenticator of our awestruck reaction to Scott. The coalition of the wondrous and the realistic in this portrait validate MacGregor’s assertions of Scott’s authorial naïveté, a dynamic Garland-Thompson calls, “visual rhetorics responding to the purposes for which they were produced.”¹²

Martin Ramirez: Grand Master of Outsider Art

BORN IN 1895 IN JALISCO, MEXICO, MARTIN RAMIREZ WAS A sharecropper without a formal education. He came to the United States in 1925 by train and worked on railroads and in mines for a period of time, but once the Great Depression hit Ramirez was homeless and unemployed, and couldn’t afford transport back to his family. Unable to communicate in English and apparently confused and non-

sensical, he was picked up by California police in 1931 for vagrancy and was eventually committed to a psychiatric hospital. Ramirez went on to receive many different diagnoses, from manic depression to catatonic schizophrenia, and would spend the last thirty-two years of his life in confinement at the DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, California. He ceased speaking shortly after his hospitalization, but he drew prolifically on any surface he could find, including long rolls of paper used to cover medical examination tables.

As mentioned previously, Ramirez has become one of three Outsider art grand masters, along with Adolf Wolfli and Henry Darger. Throughout his time in the psychiatric ward until his death, Ramirez earned numerous champions and supporters of his work. Dr. Tarmo Pasto, a visiting professor of psychology and art at California State University at Sacramento, saw the artist's work and made him a subject of his research into mental illness and creativity. Pasto spent several decades acquiring and promoting most of the artist's drawings.

Martin Ramirez's initial monograph *Martin Ramirez* bears one of the few photographs of the artist (fig. 4). Taken in a communal room at the DeWitt state hospital, the image shows the artist on the right, holding up a corner of his drawing. Dr. Pasto, who gazes upon Ramirez's drawing with focused intent, holds up the left corner. The artist however looks away, not at the camera and not at his work, appearing distracted or perplexed by the photo shoot. Dr. Pasto is dressed in a suit, while Ramirez wears a bathrobe and slippers, typical attire in a psychiatric ward, where one is required to be free of belts, shoelaces, or ties, all of which might double as suicide devices. The two men are different in every way: the sane doctor is focused on advocating for the artwork, and the insane patient is naïve to the power of his creations. Their dynamic illustrates Garland-Thompson's sentimental mode, which places the disabled subject in a lowly,

FIGURE 4—Ramirez and Pasto photograph at DeWitt State Hospital, CA



pitiful position that requires paternal supervision. The realism of the shoot, as suggested by its setting in Ramirez's psychiatric ward, Ramirez's disheveled appearance, and the amateur documentation, authenticates Ramirez as a mute genius who requires handlers, like Pasto, who could speak for him.

During Ramirez's 2007 American Folk Art Museum exhibition, Brooke Davis Anderson was contacted by a relative of Dr. Max Dunievitz, former medical director of DeWitt State Hospital. The Dunievitz family had dozens of Ramirez's drawings that had been stored in their garage for over two decades. Subsequently verified, this group of one hundred and forty previously unknown works was the inspiration for the exhibition *Martin Ramirez: The Last Works*, organized by Anderson and accompanied by a monograph also published by the American Folk Art Museum.

An opening essay in *The Last Works* is written by Wayne Thiebaud, a California artist often categorized as part of the American Pop art movement of the 1960s for his paintings of cakes, pies, and other ubiquitous American foods. Thiebaud had taken art classes at Sacramento State in the 1950s, one of which was taught by Dr. Pasto and included multiple field trips to DeWitt. He describes an occasion when he met Ramirez and saw him in the process of drawing. In the final paragraph of Thiebaud's essay, entitled "Remembering Ramirez," he writes:

*Ramirez represented a very high degree of craft, expressing how much he meant what he was doing. But he had no idea that he was making art. He just wanted to create images that for him represented an alternative world, a world we would not have seen if he hadn't made it. To enter Ramirez's world, to see it, and to feel it is an expansion of our consciousness and of our knowledge about other kinds of human behavior.*¹³

Thiebaud, after meeting the artist at most a handful of times, decided that Ramirez had no idea he was making art. If we accept this claim, then we are buying into the equation that Ramirez's life's work could only be designated and named as art by falling under the gaze of the mainstream art establishment. This assertion, especially when made by an artist with Thiebaud's notoriety, carries weight in a monograph, and represents a choice by Anderson regarding how Ramirez's last works were to be both interpreted and marketed.

Like that of Judith Scott, the work of Martin Ramirez is represented exclusively by the Ricco Maresca Gallery, New York. In February of 2008, at the annual Outsider art fair in New York City, Ricco Maresca sold Ramirez's *Untitled Double Train* (a drawing measuring thirty-nine by twenty-two inches) to a private collector for \$180,000.¹⁴

The Outsider Author

THE WIDESPREAD LACK OF ARTIST'S STATEMENTS, EVEN IN THE case of artists who are high functioning, verbal, and educated, underscores a foundational distinction in the Outsider art field. This was a stance prescribed even in the earliest stages of Art Brut. Dubuffet is documented as having advised two of his artists, Raphael Lonne and Magali Herrera, against seeing themselves as "artists" in attempts to forestall the inevitable awareness of an audience that would occur when their work was put on display in exhibitions.¹⁵ The Outsider art journal *Raw Vision* continues to contend that the purest of Art Brut creators would, "not even consider themselves artists, nor would they even feel that they were producing art at all."¹⁶ The Outsider art category was likewise built and organized around specific aspects of artists' identities, yet their validity as "Outsiders" can be compromised by evidence that they had any intentions with their creative practice or an awareness of their work as art. This structure thus necessitates

“handlers,” people like MacGregor, Pasto, Anderson, and Thiebaud, who speak, interpret, and explain for the artist. In the case of Scott and Ramirez, artists who posed little threat of intervening in this monologue, their handlers are further empowered with the position to curate, amend, and emphasize this information based on the tastes of the marketplace.

The role of authorship in the field is thus a distinct one. A desirable author in this context is uneducated, without influences, without intentions, without reflection: both naïve and disempowered. In his essay “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault investigates the purpose of an author, addressing what he calls the “author function” in a text:

Nevertheless, these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological of our ways of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice. In addition, all these operations vary according to the period and the form of discourse concerned.¹⁷

Following Foucault’s insights, the naïve author in Outsider art is the projection of viewers of the work. The preliminary viewers are always the handlers: the curators, critics, historians, and gallerists who create the discourse that frames the work for the public. They are the producers of the claim for authorial naïveté, deciding which traits are pertinent and which information to leave out.

Disempowering the author in turn produces a more empowered viewer. As the first to “see” the work, the handlers are empowered with the eye of discovery. The artist has no awareness of what he is making; therefore, the work requires the handlers’ gaze and special knowledge to be transformed into art. The public takes part in this dynamic as well. They are confirmed in their good tastes, their aware-

ness, and their mental stability by finding the work artful, by grasping in it something the mentally disabled artist was unable to understand. This empowerment is desirable, and represents a unique instance in the contemporary art market in which the public feels more aware, more informed, and more insightful than the artists themselves.

Eugene Metcalf, an art historian who has contributed one of the few shrewd critiques of the Outsider art category, highlights this inverted power dynamic:

In order to begin to understand Outsider art, we must view it not as solely the aesthetic creation of individual eccentrics disconnected from culture, but as the symbolic product of a complex and ambiguous relationship between more and less powerful social groups, a relationship that helps map the boundaries and chart the nature of cultural identity.¹⁸

Metcalf points to the uneven power relationship intrinsic to Outsider art. The category’s discourse is unavoidably weighted toward the desires of the healthy and how they want to discuss and value the work of the “sick.”

In his influential essay “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes criticized the practice of reading or analyzing a work based upon aspects of its author’s identity, whether that be his or her political views, religion, ethnicity, health, or personal background. He wrote, “To give a text an author, is to impose a limit on that text.”¹⁹ Barthes’s efforts were a part of a greater poststructuralist and post-modernist project, characterized by deep skepticism of notions such as a singular identity, linear history, or objective truth. Barthes writes:

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that

*Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, the voice of a single person, the author, "confiding" in us.*²⁰

A central point in this argument is the questioning of how any spectator can know the intentions an author had for their creation. This thesis dismantles the Romantic ideal that the artist has a clear, inspired vision, which contains a universal truth for spectators to comprehend. For these reasons "Death of the Author" was a highly influential text for Postmodernism and contributed to the demise of the myth of a visionary, heroic, individual artist.

In the case of Outsider art, the real authors of the meaning viewers consume are the handlers of the work. Their decision to prioritize the artists' biographies—with particular emphasis on tropes of mental disability such as authorial naïveté—shapes the dominant lens through which the public sees the work.

Conclusion

THE APPEAL OF THE NARRATIVE OF ARTISTIC MADNESS IS ONE deeply felt by the public and has enabled and continues to enable the field. However, the complexity surrounding Outsider art is diluted if we simply vilify all the handlers and creators who have fostered the category and have profited from it. There is a wide range of critical and ethical investments among handlers in the field. One of the goals of art centers like Creative Growth is the protection of their artists from exploitation in the free market. Such art centers choose to represent their clients' work through a fair kind of stewardship.

With an avid public buying into the Outsider myth, what kind of reflection can we have about how mental disability is understood and

consumed in the contemporary United States? Do we unconsciously accept these myths because of their familiarity? Do we get so caught up in our fascination with creating "otherness" that we are willing to buy into it? Or is there a possibility for a nuanced, negotiated reading of Outsider artwork despite the way in which artists' biographies are represented? Critic Peter Schjeldahl suggests one possibility:

*It is a small thing, which makes them hard cases, exceptions proving the existence of a rule—that art, to be recognized as such, requires grounding in both individual biography and common culture. What can we do with and about the rush of pleasure and enchantment that the unlicensed genius of a Ramirez affords? I recommend taking it as a lesson in the limits of how we know what we think we know. Unable to regard such work as part of art's history, we may still have it be of our own.*²¹

I ask now if there is any way in which we can read Ramirez's and Scott's photographs against the grain, knowing that embedded in these photographs is an alignment of the sentimental, the realistic, and the wondrous. If all of these modes disempower the disabled subject, is there a way we can engage in more than just a straightforward disavowal of these images as products of a problematic and disenfranchising category? When removed from the Outsider context, apart from the texts and assumptions that pin them to a singular interpretation, can we find agency in these images? Could we see Scott taking possession of her sculpture here, concealing it from the photographer's gaze? Could Ramirez be scoffing at Pasto, knowing full well that his doctor could never understand the work as he did?

For these questions to ever gain weight beyond the hypothetical, the voice of the artist is necessary. For Scott and Ramirez, people who chose to stop speaking, who were never taught to speak and have no documentation of their feelings about their practice, a counter-

hegemonic reading may be just another assumption. I do believe, however, that it is better as viewers to acknowledge our ignorance than to automatically consume the narrative of authorial naïveté. Furthermore, the tenuous context provided by the narrative of artistic madness underscores the import of disability studies' critical work in the field of Outsider art, not only to deconstruct its past, but to open up its future.

Notes

- 1 Teresa de Laurentis, "Popular Culture, Public and Private Fantasies: Femininity and Fetishism in David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly*," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 24 (1999), 307.
- 2 Wall text for Alexander Lobanov from Galerie Christian Berst at the 2011 Outsider art Fair, New York City
- 3 Galerie Christian Berst, "Alexander Lobanov," Wall text presented at the Outsider Art Fair, New York City, 2011.
- 4 Wall text for Jill Galleini from Galerie Christian Berst at the 2011 Outsider art Fair, New York City.
- 5 Jean-Louis Ferrier, *Outsider art* (Paris: Pierre Terrail Editions, 1998), 11.
- 6 John Beardsley, "Imagining the Outsider," in *Vernacular Visionaries: International Outsider art* (New Haven, CT: Museum of International Folk Art and Yale University Press, 2003), 14.
- 7 John Beardsley, "Imagining the Outsider," 14.
- 8 Roger Cardinal, "Towards an Outsider Aesthetic," in *The Artist Outsider* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 24.
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