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The Outsider Fair Made Art 'Big' Again

By ROBERTA SMITH JAN. 19, 2017

New York's Outsider Art Fair, which opened Thursday, is celebrating its 25th anniversary. It made its debut in 1993 in the 19th-century Puck Building in SoHo's northeast corner.

I saw the first iteration, reviewed the second and wrote about it many times after that. I enjoy most art fairs for their marathon-like density of visual experience and information, but the Outsider fair quickly became my favorite. It helped make art big again.

One of Morton Bartlett's half-size anatomically correct prepubescent girls from 1950. Credit Morton Bartlett, Marion Harris

The focus of the fair, according to its founder, Sanford L. Smith, known as Sandy, was the work of outsider artists, a catchall phrase for many kinds of self-taught creators. (Mr. Smith credited the phrase to Roger Cardinal, the art historian and author of "Outsider Art," published in 1972.) Outsider work connoted a certain purity — an unstoppable need to make art that was unsullied by the "insider" art world, with its fine-art degrees and commercial machinations that always struck me as rather hoity-toity.

Distinct from folk artists who usually evolved within familiar conventions, outsider artists often worked without precedent in relative isolation. They could be developmentally disabled, visionary, institutionalized, reclusive or simply retirees whose hobbies developed an unexpected intensity and originality. The term has long been the subject of debate, and its meaning has become elastic and inclusive. But however the category was, or is, defined, the Outsider Art Fair, compared with other fairs, seemed the least pretentious, the least focused on money, the rawest, liveliest and most full of surprises.

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An untitled painting by Henry Darger of his intrepid Vivian Girls. Credit 2017 Henry Darger/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Andrew Edlin Gallery

It was often extraordinarily uneven, yet it proved that just beyond the borders of the professional art world there lived a parallel universe of art-making, every bit as good as the (also uneven) insider one. And so much wilder and more diverse in every way.

Ionel Talpazan's "Visionary Art and Science U.F.O." (2001). CreditIonel Talpazan, American Primitive Gallery

Year after year, the Outsider Art Fair hammered this point home, usually quite effectively, and on increasingly global terms. It played a crucial role in changing the shape of modern and contemporary art. Each successive version confirmed the status of the self-taught masters, some only recently discovered, or rediscovered: Adolf Wölfli, who died in 1930; Bill Traylor, in 1949; and Martín Ramírez, Joseph Yoakum and Henry Darger, who worked into the 1960s and '70s. The fair exposed their work to a wider audience, while insinuating an alternate 20th-century canon.

It is almost shocking to recall that the achievement of the great Morton Bartlett (1909-1992) was unveiled at the first 1993 fair by the dealer Marion Harris, who had acquired his work after his death. Harvard-educated, Bartlett was a freelance photographer and graphic designer who, between 1936 and 1963, devoted his leisure time to making and photographing anatomically correct half-size prepubescent girls (and the occasional boy) and their wardrobes. His work was as calm as it was obsessive, as perverse as it was innocent. It fit almost seamlessly into a history of insider setup photography that extended at least from Claude Cahun and Hans Bellmer to Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons and James Casebere.

Bartlett vaulted instantly into the outsider pantheon, while disturbing the insider-outsider division. As did James Castle (1899-1977), introduced at the 1997 fair by the J Crist Gallery of Boise, Idaho. Born deaf and mute, Castle spent much of his life memorializing his family's Idaho farm, the interiors and exteriors of its buildings, its surrounding fields. His drawings, sculpture and books were usually made with a combination of cardboard, string and a mixture of soot and saliva to resemble charcoal. They often suggested Vuillard at home on the range and also the quiet, inward art of Jasper Johns.

The list of artists whose work received first or early exposure at the fair is staggering and continues to grow. Some of the better-known names include the developmentally disabled sculptor Judith Scott(1943-2005), whose wrapped-yarn assemblages were shown at the fair by Ricco-Maresca Gallery in 2001 and given a retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 2014; the Nebraska farmer Emery Blagdon in 2004 — who until his death at 78, in 1986, created wire-metal scrap sculptures and environments that he saw as healing machines, not art; and Melvin Way, shown by Margaret Bodell, also in 2004: a mentally disturbed, homeless New Yorker whose small felt-tip drawings embedded mysterious equations in areas of darkness, evoking higher math pulsing through the night sky.

Adolf Wölfli's "Bangali Firework" (1926).CreditAdolf Wölfli, Andrew Edlin Gallery

There were also Ionel Talpazan's radiant spaceships and galaxies, the result, he said, of U.F.O. encounters as a child in Romania, before he came to New York. You could see his work in the fair at American Primitive Gallery in the late 1990s, and when you staggered out into the January cold, Talpazan, who died at 60 in 2015, would often be there, on the sidewalk, selling pieces.

As part of the fair's current anniversary celebration, the historian and critic Edward M. Gómez has organized an exhibition of 25 works that offers an object-oriented timeline: Each work appeared in one of the fair's 25 iterations.

Entering the fair on opening night had its rituals: getting through the line at the door, past the coat check and into the relative warmth where the Puck's high ceilings, lustrous dark-wood floors and eccentric layout seemed perfect. Until her retirement in 2009, Phyllis Kind occupied the first booth. Arguably the doyenne of American outsider art dealers, she had galleries in Chicago and New York. In the early 1970s, she mounted the first solo show in a commercial gallery of Ramírez's work, soon after it was rediscovered by the artist Jim Nutt (whom she then represented). A few years later, she introduced Darger, the Chicago recluse whose illustrated epic of the battling Vivian Girls emerged only after his death in 1973.

Martín Ramírez's "Double Sided, Stag and Crowned Rider."CreditMartin Ramirez, Stephen Romano Gallery

Sharp of mind, eye and tongue, Ms. Kind was a formidable, stimulating presence. You could talk to her for days about art, and her booth was always full of great stuff. And yet I viewed her with a certain ambivalence in this setting. I couldn't wait to get to the rest of the fair, to skim, following my eye to see, and perhaps ask about, the next newly discovered artist.

I know the annual humbling of the Outsider Art Fair changed me, making me more open, less tolerant of rules and orthodoxies, more understanding of the human urgency to make art and how widespread it is. I also think it changed the art world, expanding it and in the process rendering the outsider phrase all but obsolete. It seems so 20th century now to choose one side and look down on the other. Now the art world is full of galleries that represent both; those in the 2017 fair include Nicelle Beauchene, Jack Hanley, Shrine and Y Gallery, all from the Lower East Side. A result of the closeness is that contemporary art feels more free than it has in decades.

In some ways outsider art was the antidote to the stringencies and anti-object attitudes of Conceptual Art, which like outsider art began to gain critical mass in the 1970s. It might also be seen as finishing the job of recomplicating and rematerializing art that began in the 1980s, especially with Neo-Expressionist painting.

Of course, the fair did not act alone. Many curators did their bit, including Lawrence Rinder, who introduced the great quiltmaker Rosie Lee Tompkins (1936-2006) at the Berkeley Art Museum; Matthew Higgs, who as director of White Columns, has regularly featured solo shows of outsiders including Judith Scott; and Lynne Cooke, who mounted an exhibition of the Ivory Coast artist Frédéric Bruly Bouabré at the Dia Art Foundation in 1994.

An untitled work by Bill Traylor, circa 1939-42. Credit Bill Traylor, Luise Ross

It is a measure of the speed with which these artists have reshaped the contemporary art world that in late 1993, the New Museum collaborated with the Museum of American Folk Art (now the American Folk Art Museum) on a large retrospective of Thornton Dial, the Alabama creator of haunted, gnarly relief paintings. Only 20 years later "The Encyclopedic Palace" delivered a sprawling mixture of insiders and outsiders at the 2013 Venice Biennale. It was organized by Massimiliano Gioni, artistic director of the New Museum.

The art world's fluctuating attention to folk and then outsider art forms a complex history that runs throughout the 20th century, with each generation producing its advocates and institutions worldwide. In New York, both the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, opened in 1929 and 1931, collected folk art at first and then stopped, deaccessioning many of their holdings. Now they are back, in a way, collecting so-called outsider art. The Outsider Art Fair has contributed to this immeasurably meaningful sea change.