OUTSIDER ART  Visionary Worlds and Trauma  Daniel Wojcik
Praise for Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma

“Lavishly illustrated, many of the images never before seen by the public, this indispensable volume is steeped in details about the lives of outsider and visionary artists. Authoritative, informative, and accessible, this groundbreaking volume is a work of art itself as well as a monumental achievement in scholarship, one that forces us to rethink conventional notions of art and creativity.”

—Michael Owen Jones, professor emeritus, Department of World Arts and Cultures, University of California, Los Angeles

“By exploring personal histories and traumatic experiences of creative people sometimes living at the fringe of society, Daniel Wojcik brings new insights into the phenomenon of outsider art. This comprehensive study will influence how outsider art is now seen and evaluated; it blurs the boundaries between insiders and outsiders and contributes to our understanding of art today. Engagingly written and wonderfully illustrated—in full color!—this is an essential resource that takes the reader on a mesmerizing and inspiring journey. Where are my paint brushes . . . ”

—Peter Jan Margry, professor of European ethnology, University of Amsterdam

“Wojcik’s new book seems destined to become an essential text for understanding the field today. Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma now brings a great deal of clarity and understanding not only to one of the major hotbeds of activity in the international art market, but to the creative act itself. It is a must-read for anyone serious about better understanding this fascinating subject.”

—Roger Manley, Director of the Gregg Museum of Art & Design at North Carolina State University and curator of exhibitions of self-taught art at more than forty other institutions, including the American Visionary Art Museum

“Wojcik’s informed writing—demonstrated by an almost encyclopedic knowledge of self-taught and outsider art and history—his original research, his balanced and nuanced thinking, the representative examples he discusses, and his ability to articulate his findings make this book required reading for anyone interested in outsider, self-taught, or contemporary folk art.”

—Carol Crown, professor emerita, University of Memphis, and coeditor of Sacred and Profane: Voice and Vision in Southern Self-Taught Art
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During the past three decades, the phenomenon of outsider art has moved from the margins of cultural awareness toward the mainstream of the contemporary art world, captivating an international community of collectors, curators, dealers, scholars, and artists, as well as the general public. Often characterized as “raw art” that is created spontaneously and for entirely personal reasons, outsider art historically has been associated with individuals who have no formal artistic training and exist outside of the dominant art world—psychiatric patients, visionaries and trance mediums, self-taught individualists, recluses, folk eccentrics, social misfits, and assorted others who are isolated or outcast from normative society, by choice or by circumstance.

The allure of outsider art has spawned an industry of galleries, publications, museum exhibits, art fairs, and auctions. The community of outsider-art aficionados itself has been the subject of ethnographic study and journalistic exposé. A canon of classic outsiders and visionaries has been established, and grants, commissions, and international awards routinely recognize and reward outsider artists. Their work has penetrated popular culture, adorning postage stamps and rock-and-roll album covers, and outsider artists have been depicted in musical scores and off-Broadway shows. Their creations have been enthusiastically embraced by A-list artists, musicians, actors, scholars, and celebrities from Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, and Jean Dubuffet, to David Bowie, Leonard Nimoy, Robin Williams, Susan Sarandon, Jane Fonda, Jonathan Demme, Tommy Lee Jones, John Waters, and Bjork. Films about outsiders and visionaries have received critical acclaim, such as Séraphine (2008), In the Realms of the Unreal: The Mystery of Henry Darger (2004), and Junebug (2005). Even Homer Simpson is celebrated as an outsider artist after his failed attempt to build a backyard barbeque pit, a disaster of metal parts stuck in cement, is discovered as a masterpiece by an
excited gallery owner who informs him, "Outsider art couldn't be hotter!" The outsider category has now extended to other expressive forms as well, including the off-beat music by self-taught individuals such as underground cult luminaries Hasil Adkins, Daniel Johnston, Lucia Pamela, the Shaggs, Wesley Willis, and Lonnie Holley, among others. With the opening of the Museum of Everything in London in October, 2009, advertised as "a space for artists and creators outside modern society," the art of self-taught outsiders achieved a new and trendy level of recognition. More than three-quarters of a million people have visited this travelling venue of creative exhibits, with its homespun, hipster vibe and inventive collaborations involving an entourage of artists, collectors, and celebrities including Cindy Sherman, David Byrne, Maurizio Cattelan, Ed Ruscha, Damien Hirst, Sir Peter Blake, Pete Townshend, Nick Cave, John Zorn, and Annette Messager. At the 55th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2013, the work of self-taught and outsider artists had a dominating presence, and the Museum of Everything’s official affiliated exhibition of such art was a popular attraction. The director of the Biennale, Massimiliano Gioni, integrated outsider art into the show, exhibiting it alongside that of formally trained artists. The main exhibit was entitled Il Palazzo Enciclopedico (The Encyclopedic Palace), in honor of the self-taught Italian-American artist Marino Auriti (1891–1980), the working class owner of an auto body shop in the town of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, who in his spare time constructed a sculptural prototype for a massive imaginary museum, meant to be the tallest building in the world and contain the history of all worldly knowledge, from the wheel to the satellite. The Biennale’s outsider-art emphasis made international headlines, with many commentators considering the event one of the best art exhibits in recent years and applauding its infusion of non-mainstream and outsider art into international art-world sensibilities as an overt challenge to the commercialization of contemporary art. New York Times art critic Roberta Smith proclaimed that 2013 "was the year that outsider art came in from the cold," and that increasing recognition of the importance of outsider art could be seen in recent acquisitions of major outsider-art collections by institutions such as the American Folk Art Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Milwaukee Art Museum, as well as influential exhibits of outsider art internationally (Smith, 2013).

No longer a rogue genre, outsider art commands attention more than ever before, having captured the popular imagination as a form of unharnessed and pure creativity. In turn, both the public and the market have embraced the notion of an "authentic art" that provides an alternative to the elitism and commercialism of the professional contemporary art world. John Maizels, an authority on the subject and the editor of the influential Raw Vision magazine posits, "It is no coincidence that the growing stature and influence of Outsider Art has happened over a period when the esteem of professional contemporary art has been held increasingly in question. The great avant-garde movements have faded into history and many feel they are faced today in our museums and galleries with an art which has become increasingly obscure and inaccessible."
Maizels further suggests, "It is no wonder that an art with immediate appeal and immediate responses, that needs little critical explanation to be fully appreciated, an art that has real meaning, that stems from the roots of genuine creativity, that is forever innovative and original and truly reflects the individuality of its host of creators, cannot fail to touch an increasing and appreciative public" (1996: 228).

Even as this widespread fascination with art created outside the structures of the art world flourishes, the definition of outsider art remains elusive. The term itself is the subject of ongoing debate, promoted by some dealers and critics as a valid category, rejected by others as a deeply offensive concept, and often embraced in resignation for lack of a better word, or conflated with other terms such as "self-taught art," "visionary art," "art singulier," "autodidact art," "naïve art," "idiosyncratic art," or "contemporary folk art." Adding to the confusion, the concept of outsider art has different and very specific associations in Europe, where such art was initially identified and studied. In the United States, the awareness of outsider art is relatively recent. In the European context, outsider art is equated with art brut, a term that refers to works created by people with no artistic training, who are somehow disconnected from conventional culture and outside the art world, such as the mentally ill, trance mediums, self-taught isolates, and societal outcasts. Their work has been celebrated as unique, idiosyncratic, and seemingly without precedent. In the States, by contrast, dealers and critics often use the term outsider art loosely, in reference to a melange of non-mainstream works created by a varied demographic: untrained artists, children, inmates, contemporary folk artists, naïve artists, artisans from so-called Third World and developing nations, and members of specific ethnic groups. As a result, definitions of outsider art are unstable and contested, and "term warfare" has been waged on numerous occasions. Still, the concept of outsider art thrives as a term of convenience, a catchall signifier and marketing label for art outside the mainstream.7

Surveying the field of outsider art today, one encounters an astounding assortment of drawings, paintings, sculptures, embroidery, carvings, art environments, assemblages, and other artworks. This plethora of creative output is produced outside of the fine art echelons by a wide range of individuals. Some were diagnosed as mentally ill, such as the

Above: Madge Gill, The Crucifixion of the Soul (detail), commenced June 1, 1934. Black and colored inks on calico, 17 ¼ x 17 ¼ feet (56 cm x 5.25 meters). Image and dimensions courtesy London Borough of Newham Heritage and Archives.

Right: Howard Finster, VISION OF A GREAT GULF ON PLANET HELL, 1980. Enamel on plywood with painted frame, 35 ¼ x 18 ½ in. (90 x 47.2 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum; gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr. (1988.74.5).
highly acclaimed Adolf Wölfli, Aloïse Corbaz, August Natterer, Martín Ramírez, and Carlo Zinelli. Others were inspired by religious experiences, dreams, or trance states, such as the Spiritualist mediums Madge Gill and Augustin Lesage, the apocalyptic visionaries Howard Finster and Sister Gertrude Morgan, or the Haitian Vodou practitioners Hector Hyppolite and Pierrot Barra. The work of self-taught southern African Americans is ubiquitous in the outsider-art world: Bill Traylor, Minnie Evans, Bessie Harvey, Thornton Dial, William Edmondson, James “Son” Thomas, Sam Doyle, Royal Robertson, Purvis Young, Mose Tolliver, and Lonnie Holley are just a few of the many highly regarded artists. Individuals who have constructed entire art environments also have been included in the outsider and visionary art category: Sabato (Simon) Rodia and his Watts Towers in Los Angeles; Ferdinand Cheval’s Palais Idéal and Raymond Isidore’s La Maison Picassiette in France; Nek Chand’s Rock Garden in Chandigarh, India; Helen Martins’s Owl House in Nieu-Bethesda, South Africa; Grandma Prisbrey’s Bottle Village in Simi Valley, California; and Richard Greaves’s anarchitectural structures, hidden in the countryside of Quebec. And then there are those who defy categorization, such as James Castle, James Harold Jennings, Alexander Lobanov, Luboš Plný, Ionel Talpazan, Melvin Way, and George Widener, among many others.

Unlike folk art, which is rooted in collective aesthetics and in the traditions of a particular community or subculture, outsider art is usually considered to be an expression of a uniquely personal vision that preoccupies the creator, who is often regarded as disconnected from the broader culture or community. Most of the literature about outsider artists portrays them as self-taught individuals who create things with no regard for recognition or the marketplace. As described by Michel Thévoz, author of
the book *Art Brut* and the former curator of the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, outsider art “consists of works produced by people who for various reasons have not been culturally indoctrinated or socially conditioned. They are all kinds of dwellers on the fringes of society. Working outside the fine art ‘system’ (schools, galleries, museums and so on), these people have produced, from the depths of their own personalities and for themselves and no one else, works of outstanding originality in concept, subject and techniques. They are works which owe nothing to tradition or fashion... [These artists] make up their own techniques, often with new means and materials, and they create their works for their own use, as a kind of private theater. They choose subjects which are often enigmatic and they do not care about the good opinion of others, even keeping their work secret” (Thévoz, no date). Outsider art also has been defined by its qualities of originality and intensity, and described, often in breathless prose, as a truly inventive form of art that is “potent, evocative, provocative, intensely personal, selfconscious, expressive, enigmatic, obsessive, vital, disquieting, brutal, subtle, exotic, close-to-the-ground, challenging” (David Steel, quoted in Manley, 1989: ix).9

Above: Inside one of the structures at Tressa Prisbrey’s Bottle Village in Simi Valley, California, early 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.

The category of outsider art was not created by artists themselves, nor should one consider outsider art an artistic style or historical movement like Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, or Abstract Expressionism. Instead, it is a classification that has been defined and imposed upon individuals by collectors, art critics, and dealers. Those who have been labelled outsider artists seldom have contact with each other, and usually have little interest in defining their own work in such terms. Many so-called outsiders do not consider themselves artists at all, and they often make things for entirely personal reasons, whether in response to a traumatic event, for instance, or as an expression of a visionary experience. Such works, often created by individuals with no thought of financial gain or personal acclaim, have increasingly been introduced by others into the high-stakes realm of the professional art world, and may sell for tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of dollars at galleries and dealers’ fairs. Major auction houses such as Sotheby’s and Christie’s now handle high-end outsider art; in March of 2011, for example, a drawing of the Virgin Mary on crinkled brown butcher paper, made in a psychiatric hospital in the early 1950s by Martín Ramírez, was auctioned for more than $400,000, while a work created by the reclusive janitor Henry Darger sold for nearly $750,000 in December 2014, setting a record for outsider-art sales at the time.10

Connoisseurs of outsider art have their own preferences and criteria for those who should be included in the pantheon of outsider-art superstars, but a sampling of those universally acclaimed as “masters” include Aloïse Corbaz (1886–1964), a Swiss governess who was institutionalized after developing a delusional infatuation with Kaiser Wilhelm II, and

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Above: Heinrich Anton Müller, with machines he invented (whereabouts unknown), in the courtyard of the Munzingen Asylum, near Bern, Switzerland, c. 1914–1922, © Kunstmuseum Bern, Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Psychiatrie.

Left: Aloïse Corbaz, Napoleon III at Cherbourg (The Star of the Paris Opera), (Napoléon III à Cherbourg (L’étoile de l’Opéra Paris)), between 1952 and 1954. Colored pencil and juice of geranium on sewn-together sheets of paper, 64 1/2 x 46 in. (164 x 117 cm). Photograph Claude Bornand. Collection de l’Art Brut, Lausanne.
who scavenged found materials and created a color palate from crushed flower petals, toothpaste, and other substances to produce radiant scroll-like images of sensuous women and their romantic suitors in royal contexts; the psychiatric patient Heinrich Anton Müller (1869–1930), who had a psychological breakdown after his invention of a grapevine-pruning machine was stolen, and while hospitalized he created abstract drawings of strangely distorted human figures and odd creatures, as well as huge mechanical perpetual motion machines that were elaborately constructed with movable parts made from discarded materials and lubricated with his own excrement and bodily secretions; and Willem van Genk (1927–2005), a Dutch man diagnosed with psychosis who created intense travel scenes, train sculptures from debris, and fetishistic raincoats that he believed had protective powers. Of equal status in outsider-art circles are the beautiful fiber sculptures by the autistic artist Judith Scott (1943–2005), who created enigmatic cocoon-like objects woven with colored yarn and scraps of cloth; the surrealist and sexually charged caricatures and death-infused picture poems by the petty criminal and vagrant street occultist Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern (1892–1982); the ornately wired and energy-filled “healing machines” constructed by the once itinerant hobo Emery Blagdon (1907–1986); and the work of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910–1983), who built thrones and crowns of chicken bones, produced photographic erotica of his wife and muse Marie, and created more than one thousand luminous finger paintings of apocalyptic landscapes, mushroom clouds,
and intergalactic cityscapes. The obsessively detailed pencil drawings of the Polish shopkeeper Edmund Monsiel (1897–1962) are equally valued; traumatized by his experiences of Nazi occupation, Monsiel hid in an attic for the duration of the war, working by candlelight to create hundreds of intense and intricate images swarming with uncanny mustached faces, staring eyes, and religious figuration that he continued to produce in secret for the last twenty years of his life. The art of Sava Sekulić (1902–1989), a Croatian of Serbian ethnicity, also emerged in response to life trauma—a childhood of isolation and poverty, a World War I injury that left him blind in one eye, and the death of his wife and only child, he began creating an extraordinary pantheon of thousands of hybrid human-animals, bizarre figures, and folk-fantasy creatures. In the American context, Henry Darger (1882–1973) is considered the embodiment of the outsider-art phenomenon: abandoned and traumatized as a child, as an adult Darger, a quiet and reclusive janitor, lived alone in a small apartment in Chicago. There he secretly wrote a 15,145 page, single-spaced manuscript that describes the ongoing battle between the angelic and heroic Vivian Girls (little girls with male genitalia) and the brutal Glandelinians, who practice child enslavement. Darger illustrated this epic struggle, in some cases on scrolls twelve feet in width, with elaborate scenes of gruesome torture and slaughter as well as sentimental depictions of idyllic childhood bliss.

In recent years at the Outsider Art Fair in Manhattan and Paris, at the Slotin Folk Fest in Atlanta, at the Museum of Everything’s traveling shows, at the Venice Biennale, and at dozens of other galleries and

venues internationally, the variety of work on display has included art by the self-taught, the socially marginalized, and the religiously inspired, as well as that by memory painters, hobos, Holocaust survivors, Vietnam War veterans, refugees, prisoners, alleged UFO abductees, people with autism, and other individuals considered to be non-traditional, untrained, undiscovered, or non-mainstream. In addition to the compelling paintings and drawings by those individuals who are established in the outsider-art canon, the objects now included in the seemingly all-encompassing outsider-art category include tree-root sculptures, wire fetish objects, enigmatic doomsday calendars, folk pornography, illustrations of flying saucer visions, handmade dolls drenched in mud and blood, robots made from coffee pots, carved skateboards, erotic whirligigs, Haitian beaded flags, painted chewing gum, peach-stone carvings, outsider collage and photography, bottle cap art, illustrations of Jesus on recycled toilet-paper tubes, miniature embroidery stitched out of sock thread, and the ink drawings of legendary tattoo artists. This scattering of examples illustrates only a fraction of the hundreds of fascinating hand-made things now contained in the outsider-art world’s cabinet of creative curiosities. Despite attempts to identify some recurrent features of outsider art (intensity, originality, unselconscious, idiosyncrasy, compulsiveness, visionary impulse, obsessiveness, dense ornamentation, bricolage, repeated patterns and motifs), there is little, if anything, that unifies its creators except for the ways that they are viewed by dealers and collectors as marginal, unusual,
or disconnected from mainstream society, creating art in an untutored way or singular style that is outside the dominant art-world paradigm and conventional understandings of art.¹²

The expression “outsider art” was popularized with the publication of art historian Roger Cardinal’s influential book *Outsider Art* in 1972, the title of which was proposed as an English equivalent for the French term *art brut*, a concept advanced by the modernist painter Jean Dubuffet in the 1940s and 1950s.¹³ For Dubuffet (1901–1985), art brut (“raw art”) was made by people free of formal artistic training, whose production was “untainted” by the culture of the academy and existed outside of or against cultural norms. Whereas the French connotation of *brut* as Dubuffet used it is “raw,” “unfiltered,” or “unadulterated and pure,” for most English speakers it suggests “brute” or “brutal,” and the word “outsider” was recommended as an alternative English equivalent. However, the term outsider art has now taken on a meaning and life of its own, often very different from the original intention of Cardinal, who followed Dubuffet’s lead. In Dubuffet’s view, art brut was an authentic form of expression that served as a critique of the pretentious and artificial nature of contemporary Western art. In the mid-1940s, he began collecting the art of psychiatric patients, spiritualist mediums, and other untrained and socially isolated individuals. In 1949, he offered the following definition of *art brut*: “We understand by this term works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture, where mimicry plays little or no part. These artists derive everything—subjects, choice of materials, means of transposition, rhythms, styles of writing, etc.—from their own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art. We are witness here to the completely

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¹ Ionel Talpazan, *Father and Son in Space*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 36 x 58 in. (91.4 x 147.3 cm). Photograph James Wojcik.
pure artistic operation, raw, brut, and entirely reinvented in all of its phases solely by means of the artists’ own impulses. It is thus an art which manifests an unparalleled inventiveness, unlike cultural art, with its chameleon and monkey-like aspects” (1988a [1949]: 33).

Surrealists such as André Breton, as well as other modernist artists, some of whom produced art that was influenced by the aesthetics (or anti-aesthetics) of art brut, embraced Dubuffet’s ideas. Although Dubuffet later modified his views, acknowledging that being absolutely untouched by culture was impossible, the idea of “raw art” that was disconnected from society and cultural influences continues to pervade the discourse about outsider art. As art therapist David MacLagan observes, “Art brut has from the start been haunted by the image of a creativity that owes nothing to any external formation or encouragement, that seems to have emerged out of nowhere, independent of any tradition or cultural context. From Prinzhorn to Dubuffet, the assertion is repeatedly made that there is no apparent source, no obvious pedigree for them... [They] appear out of the blue; instances of automatic creation that seem to constitute “art without tradition” (1997: 25). As such, the extraordinary work of the psychiatric patient Martín Ramírez often has been offered as a prime example of raw creativity divorced from culture and tradition—the epitome of the outsider-art ideal.

Ramírez (1895–1963), immigrated to the United States from Mexico in 1925 to find work to support his family, but five years later, as a result of the Great Depression and other traumatic events, he was destitute and apparently homeless. Disoriented and unable to communicate in English (according to some accounts he had lost the ability to speak), Ramírez was arrested by police in California’s Central Valley and variously diagnosed with manic depression and “catatonic schizophrenia.” In 1931, at the age of thirty-five, he was committed to a psychiatric hospital and spent the remaining thirty-two years of his life in mental institutions. In the mid-1930s he began to draw on a regular basis on pieces of scavenged scrap paper, candy wrappers, envelopes, shopping bags, and flattened paper cups that he glued together with a paste made from saliva, oatmeal, chewed bread, or mashed potatoes. Using pencils and wooden matchsticks dipped in ink and colored liquids that he created from crayons, fruit juices, shoe polish, and saliva, he produced his drawings on the floor between the hospital beds or underneath a table, and then hid his works, away from the hospital staff who cleaned the wards of trash, confiscating the scribbles of patients in fear they were infected with tuberculosis from the inmates.24

In 1948, Dr. Tarmo Pasto, a professor of psychology and art at Sacramento State College, visited Ramírez’s ward and was impressed by his drawings

and collages; Pasto encouraged him and brought him materials. Ramírez became more productive and began creating larger and more developed drawings and collaged pieces, with illustrations of trains, tunnels, horse-back riders, female figures, landscapes, churches, and animals that were framed with mesmerizing decorative patterns and synchronized lines. Some of Ramírez’s art was displayed in exhibits during the 1950s, but his work went largely unnoticed until the late 1960s, when his drawings were “rediscovered” by the artist Jim Nutt in storage bins at the college where he and Dr. Pasto taught, and then were subsequently acquired by Nutt and promoted by his art dealer, Phyllis Kind. In 2007, another discovery of more than 130 works by Ramírez, forgotten in a garage in California, created a frenzy of excitement in the outsider-art world. Ramírez’s work is now among the most highly valued among outsider-art enthusiasts; according to some critics, his idiosyncratic and minimalist compositions compete with the best of contemporary art. His schizophrenia was the assumed source for the originality and the power of his work, his muteness and complete removal from culture and reality adding further to the aura and authenticity of his oeuvre.5

The narrative constructed about Martín Ramírez embodies the assumptions that inform the notion of the quintessential outsider artist: insane and unrestrained, the outsider enacts pure and genuine forms of untutored creativity, reaches beyond the bounds of culture and societal norms, remains oblivious to the deadening hegemony and the pretense of the art world, and produces uniquely original works that evoke the tropes and qualities of the mystical. Such notions have an enduring romantic appeal and pervade broader concepts about authentic art and artists in general. Although a number of scholars and promoters acknowledge the problematic nature and inaccuracies of the outsider-art label and its associated assumptions, many seem to accept the criticisms with a shrug, apparently exhausted with the endless arguments that are regarded as passé or elitist by those dealers, collectors, and advocates invested in the category. The critiques, however, deserve further analysis.

Those who condemn the idea of outsider art argue that the term is alternately elitist, exclusionary, patronizing, racist, and dehumanizing, ultimately reinforcing notions of the “artist as Other”—and marking individuals as pathological or primitive in relation to normal people and culture.6 Curator Joanne Cubbs’s assessment encapsulates many of these criticisms: “Defined by their independence from the conventions or conformity of ‘academic art,’ the works of self-taught artists are, above all else, extolled for their uniqueness. Seeking to support this claim of originality, the writings on Outsider Art feature fantastic passages of formalist prose that marvel at the unusual creativity or intrinsic singularity of outsider expressions. The strange and ineffable aesthetic properties so assigned to Outsider Art soon dominate all other meaning as the already meager biographies of its makers are often turned into supporting tales of eccentricity and difference.” Cubbs concludes, “It is in this relentless fetishizing of difference, in the exaggeration of the work’s perceived singularity, and in the exploitation of the maker’s often real-life marginalization that the originality of Outsider Art is constructed” (1994: 89).

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Martín Ramírez, Untitled (Rosenquist Scroll), c. 1953. Crayon, pencil and collage on pieced paper, 51 x 18 in. (129.5 x 45.7 cm). Copyright Estate of Martín Ramírez.
Many individuals labeled as outsiders are actually “insiders” within the context of their own communities, and they create art that draws upon common aesthetic and cultural traditions; but their ways of making things are unfamiliar and appear idiosyncratic to the urban and white-dominated community of outsider-art dealers, collectors, and writers. As will be discussed in chapter three, the mediumistic drawings of Spiritualists, the apocalyptic paintings of millenialists, the spirit-driven sacred art of Vodouists, and the visionary art of particular African American artists valued in outsider-art circles are rooted in religious traditions and vernacular culture. The persistent notion of art detached from tradition and cultural influences is an illusion exposed and refuted throughout this book. To label the art of these individuals as “outsider” is not only inaccurate, but in regard to artists historically marginalized and oppressed because of their identities, the outsider tag—with its suggestions of mental illness, cultural deficiency, and other negative connotations—is particularly offensive, if not outright racist.7

Some of the problematic assumptions underlying the concept of outsider art are illustrated by the speculation about Martín Ramírez’s art. Until recently, information about his life remained largely a gap in history. Outsider-art enthusiasts did not attempt to research or understand his past at length, nor acknowledge the varied cultural contexts that could have influenced his work. Formalistic approaches embraced him as a modernist, comparing him to Frank Stella, Paul Klee, and Edvard Munch; one writer even asserts that his imagery was borrowed from Walt Disney films. Neither assessment seriously considered Ramírez’s Mexican cultural heritage; instead, they insisted Ramírez’s art stemmed from a cultural void. The unusual visual perspectives of his art, and the hypnotic forms and unfamiliar images, were interpreted as a wild outgrowth of his schizophrenia. Consequently, his madness was imagined as a privileged mental state allowing him access to autonomous and perhaps archetypal imagery, channeled directly from the collective unconscious.

After decades of depersonalized conjecture about the mystery of Martín Ramírez, more recent scholarship by Víctor and Kristin Espinosa, Randall Morris, Brooke Davis Anderson, Daniel Baumann, and others confirms the cultural influences that should have been obvious from the start: Ramírez’s masterful drawings were not summoned out of the thin air of the psychic
elsewhere but are references to various vernacular traditions and folk Catholicism, a materialization of his memories and experiences creatively reconstructed in a visual narrative—artistic snapshots and thought-forms of his life in the Jalisco region of Mexico, his migration to the United States and his separation from his family and his culture, his work in the US, his subsequent incarceration, and his negotiation of a bicultural identity. His depiction of towns, landscapes, and churches are a visual correlate that recalls his life in Mexico and maps his journeys, from abstract scenes of his hometown and its local architecture to the tumult of his American episodes. The large-scale images of the strange woman with outstretched arms standing on a globe with a snake beneath her feet is La Purísima (Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception), a common rendering of the Virgin Mary that was displayed in the church where Ramírez was married. The “bizarre” violin-playing skeleton is a rendition of well-known folk traditions of Día de los Muertos iconography. Ramírez’s powerful images of trains exiting and entering tunnels, which especially excite those inclined to Freudian interpretation, seem to speak of his own travels and labor on the railroad and in the mines of Northern California; his iconic figures on horseback are not unconscious manifestations of universal archetypes but likely portraits of vaqueros (cowboys), Zapatistas and other Mexican revolutionaries, or perhaps the jinete involved in the Cristero Rebellion (a traumatizing civil war that alienated Ramírez from his family), or maybe even Ramírez himself, who was known as a skilled horseman back home.

Ramírez’s supposed muteness has been recently refuted as well, with accounts of him speaking to hospital staff on occasion, and to a family member who visited him in the hospital. Tellingly, his diagnosis of schizophrenia is now in question too. Some researchers assert that the lack of proper care kept him hospitalized for life, but under modern medical protocols and with correct treatment, he would be an outpatient today. Handicapped by language barriers, destitute during the Great Depression, and having experienced some form of mental breakdown, he may have been misdiagnosed, institutionalized, and possibly given shock treatments, and then incarcerated for the rest of his life during a time of anti-Mexican racism that filtered into the brutal psychiatric system of the time.52 We
will never know all the details of Ramírez’s life or the exact meanings of his art, but the long overdue attention to biography and cultural contexts provides a more accurate understanding of his life and works while challenging the central and deterministic assumption: his art was necessarily the result of pathology and purely psychotic expression. As accurate scholarship replaces decades of depersonalized and romanticized misrepresentations, Ramírez is finally freed from the essentialist confines of the outsider-art category. His life and art are now more fully understood, and he is included in our world. He becomes an insider, not an outsider. His humanity and his remarkable mastery of techniques and perfection of artistic forms, combined with the imaginative power of his context-laden expressions, are reclaimed and renewed.

Alongside the decontextualized and formalist approaches that continue to pervade the descriptions of outsider art, some dealers and enthusiasts emphasize selected biographical anecdotes with an obvious tendency to embellish the eccentricity and outsider status of particular individuals, thus amplifying and celebrating a sense of their subject’s raw creativity and rare authenticity. In some instances, dealers and writers have not only highlighted the artists’ perceived madness or cultural isolation, but apparently have falsified biographical accounts as a strategy to promote and increase the monetary value of the art. As sociologist Gary Alan Fine (2004) discusses in his study of the subculture of outsider-art devotees and its community of collectors and dealers, outsider art is “identity art,” often defined by the biography and stigma of its maker as well as the stories told about artists that help to sell the work. More than other types of art, outsider-art enthusiasm often has been fueled by the “collecting of people” marked by their perceived deviance from normality, as noted by art historian and curator Thomas Röské (2006: 19). As a result, personal hardship, insanity, or trauma may be emphasized or exaggerated to increase the appeal of the art, further contributing to the idea of otherness and authenticity as central traits of the outsider-art system. The importance of the story to such art is noted by art dealer Sanford Smith, the founder of the annual Outsider Art Fair in Manhattan, the major event in the outsider-art circuit: “From the prisoner who creates small embroidered paintings from the yarn in his sock, to the sharecropper in the south who paints or creates what he has in his head from God, [outsider art] is made by people who paint their fantasies, their horrors and their wishes. . . . The exciting thing about the genre is people come and fall in love with the art, but they also fall in love with the story. Outsider art is wonderful for the novice collector because it’s reachable and it has a real emotional response” (quoted in Morgan, 2012).

In reaction to the anecdotal storytelling, or perceived “story-selling” emphasis on the artist’s biography, a number of curators, collectors, and scholars of outsider art now insist that critical conversations and appraisals remain steadfast and focused on the formal qualities of such work: outsider art must be able to “stand on its own” and be judged purely in terms of its aesthetic qualities, techniques, expressive character, and skillful use of materials. Thus, outsider art should be evaluated by the same criteria as contemporary art produced by formally trained art school graduates. As
outsider-art commenter Edward M. Gómez confirms in his review of developments in the field, those who advocate a formalistic approach view it as a way to demonstrate that such "powerful works can hold their own alongside modern art’s more familiar abstract icons . . . . Therein . . . lies the impulse for new waves of excitement about Outsider art and for the market that supports it, whose latest discoveries promise rewarding surprises" (2010b).

Inspired by and in dialogue with recent debates, scholarship, and international exhibitions, this book surveys the contested terrain of outsider art today, examines the assumptions that have fueled the interest in such art, provides a history and discussion of the primary issues in the field, and explores the interplay between culture and individual creativity that is at the very heart of definitions and debates about outsider art. Drawing upon interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives, this study challenges the recurrent assumptions about the isolation and idiosyncratic status of so-called outsider artists and contextualizes important forms of artistic expression by individuals who have been marginalized and misrepresented. In examining the lives and works of various well-known self-taught and outsider artists, the book illustrates the influence of vernacular culture, ethnic heritage, religious worldviews, social interactions, folk traditions, and popular culture central to the understanding of such art, yet often ignored by promoters of outsider art. Unlike outsider-art advocates attempting to sell, assess, or legitimate such art, this study does not concern itself with upholding a canon of master outsider artists, or invigorating the outsider-art market with new discoveries, or determining the status of such art as more or less authentically art brut and outsiderish. No guidelines are offered for making aesthetic and collecting judgments; the imagined criteria for assessing the merit and value of outsider art have been provided by previous writers. The emphasis here on personal motivations, life experiences, and broader sociocultural contexts as they relate to the creative process is offered as a corrective to the ongoing barrage of depersonalized and romanticized portrayals of alleged outsider artists.

While some recent scholarship has paid more attention to the lives and motivations of individual artists within cultural contexts, formalistic approaches and abbreviated biographical descriptions stressing the individual’s strangeness and distance from culture continue to dominate the discourse on outsider art. A formalistic emphasis on the aesthetic aspects and stylistic originality of outsider art may be useful in promoting and validating such art, but such an approach severs the art from those who make it, neglecting personal and cultural meanings. The pristine objectivity of formalism denies the voices of those individuals who create things and disrespects their specific reasons for doing so, negating the deeper meaning of the art while also divorcing individuals from their role in defining their art and identities. As art historian Kenneth Ames observes, such an approach is perhaps acceptable when applied to the work of elite artists who themselves embrace formalist values, but when this elitist mode is imposed on the art made by people in completely different contexts or cultures, it not only erases the actual purpose of the work but prevents an understanding of individuals and cultures through a stance that is dehumanizing, exploitative, and ethnocentric (1994: 267–268).
In the alternative approach to representing outsider art, which stresses biography, the urge to mystify and fetishize often infects and distorts the depictions of individuals, resulting in embellished tales that highlight the oddness of the artist’s life and emphasize a perceived distance from cultural meanings and contexts. In this repeated strategy of misrepresentation, outsider status is conferred through depictions of eccentricity, weirdness, deviance, and the individual’s disconnection from history, society, and community. If mainstream art were viewed through the same lens, then the eccentricities of masters from Michelangelo to van Gogh, Rembrandt to Degas, would have them join the ranks of outsider artists.

A more humane and accurate understanding of those individuals classified as outsiders is offered by theorists of the aesthetic impulse such as Michael Owen Jones, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, and Ellen Dissanayake, who study human behavior and the nature of the creative process. In particular, the methodology and analysis that Jones applies in his study of the seemingly iconoclastic chairmaker Chester Cornett established the model for a humanistic and behavioral approach to artistic expression in the field of folklore studies. In his analysis of Cornett and in his research with other artists, Jones examines the intricate relationship between individuals, their communities, and creativity. He attempts to understand the complexity and multiplicity of sources that contribute to art making, from the influence of vernacular traditions and the use of tools and technology, to customer influences, social contexts, and the life

history of the individual. This perspective argues that those who study the artistic activities of individuals must consider not only the objects that people make in terms of their cultural contexts, but also the personal motivations for creating things (practical, sensory, therapeutic); the processes by which an individual conceptualizes and makes the object; the relation of personality, psychological states, and social interaction to artifacts; the associations, symbolic meanings, and use of objects; and the dynamics of the creative event itself. In contrast to the romanticizing and marginalizing of individuals as isolated Others, this ethical and emic approach attempts to get inside the art of perceived outsiders and understand the creative process. By contextualizing the lives of those labeled as outsider artists, it reveals that they are often compelled by concerns and feelings that may affect us all.

In focusing on the life histories of self-taught and outsider artists, the present book also explores how experiences of tragedy and suffering have sometimes sparked the art-making process and triggered a creative transformation among some individuals. In surveying the literature of people described as outsiders, one notices a persistent theme of personal trauma, and in studying the lives of individual artists it is apparent that a number of them began creating art in response to adversity and personal crisis. In some instances, the creative process seems to have helped people confront and cope with traumatic life events, sometimes in transformative ways. Holocaust survivor Rosemarie Koczý, for instance, used art as a way to
address her horrifying experiences in German concentration camps; her
haunted drawings express her own suffering and also memorialize those
who were killed in the camps. French artist Michel Nedjar’s art also began
as a response to the horrors of the Holocaust and his own feelings of loss.
During a two-year period of depression, Nedjar began making dolls from
old cloth bathed in mud and blood, discovering that the process of cre-
at ing things was therapeutic: “The dolls saved me” (quoted in Danchin,
2007: 39). After a series of family tragedies and deaths of friends, former
New Jersey police sketch artist Kevin Sampson began making sculptures
from found objects as a way to work through his grief and memorialize
family members and others. José María Garrido García dealt with his sor-
row after witnessing his fishing partner drown in an accident by creat-
ing a memorial museum for his friend, built out of sea shells and other
found objects (Hernández, 2013: 106–119). In an act of self-therapy, Taya
Doro Mitchell spent years decorating the interior of her home in Oak-
land, California, with hundreds of thousands of colorful recycled objects,
creating a jewel-like haven that provided emotional comfort as she cared
for her dying husband. Salvage worker Tom Every says that he began

Mr. Imagination (Gregory
Warmack) and his bottle-cap
throne, with other sculptures
in his home, Bethlehem,
Pennsylvania, 2005. Photo-
graph Ted Degenner.
constructing his enormous scrap metal Forevertron environment in Wisconsin during a period of depression as a way to transform destructive feelings into something creative and positive. In a similar manner, Dutch bricoleur Petra Heyboer created assemblages and transformed her home into an entire art environment, the creative process helping her mitigate feelings of depression and hopelessness. For Mr. Imagination (Gregory Warack), his majestically constructed thrones, sculptures, and outfits created from bottle caps and other recycled objects were directly related to his experience of being robbed and shot on the street, and he viewed his art as a means of turning traumatic experiences into healing and celebration through the creative transformation of cast-off things.

Notions of trauma have been associated with the phenomenon of art brut from its inception, as traumatic experiences marked the lives of many individuals identified by Jean Dubuffet as exemplars of art brut creativity as well as others who are now categorized as classic outsider artists. A well-known case is that of the Italian painter Carlo Zinelli (1916–1974), one of Dubuffet’s favored artists, who experienced tragedy, loss, and deprivation from an early age. After his mother died when he was two years old, Zinelli spent much of his childhood alone, and then at the age of nine he was sent away to work as a farmhand. In his early twenties, he volunteered for the Spanish Civil War, but after two months he had a mental breakdown and was then hospitalized periodically from 1941 to 1947. Zinelli suffered from terrifying hallucinations and feelings
of persecution, and in 1947 he was permanently committed to the San Giacomo alla Tomba Psychiatric Hospital in Verona with a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. He spent the next ten years in near total isolation, unable to communicate verbally, speaking only in nonsensical syllables and neologisms. During this time he began scratching graffiti on a courtyard wall with bricks and nails. In 1957, after an art studio was established at the hospital, Zinelli began to paint, eight hours each day, continuing to do so for the next fourteen years, a routine that calmed him over time. Through his striking and rhythmically patterned compositions, populated with rows of silhouetted figures (often with holes in their heads or bodies), as well as animals, soldiers, vehicles, geometric images, and other symbols, he created a lexicon that recalled his personal history and attempted to communicate in visual form what he could not express verbally. It was the uncanny strangeness, born from debilitating trauma, found in the work of Zinelli and other psychiatric patients such as Corbaz, Müller, and Adolf Wölfli that Dubuffet celebrated as forms of anticultural creativity, authentic and raw expressions free from art-world clichés and bourgeois cultural conventions.

The underlying experience of trauma shared by the artists included in Dubuffet’s Collection de l’Art Brut is noted by its former director Lucienne Peiry, who observes that if anything unifies art brut creators, it is their humble background, rudimentary instruction, and most importantly some type of devastating traumatic experience harbored within: “Each one carried inside them an existential fracture resulting from a shock or a conflict of some sort. . . . They never got over these experiences and became perpetually exiled internally. . . . They glimpsed only one way out: the creation of an imaginary world where nothing could affect them” (2001: 135–136). Clearly trauma was interlocked in the lives of the psychiatric patients whose art comprises the Prinzhorn Collection at Heidelberg University in Germany, a primary source for Dubuffet’s notions of art brut; when I asked the director of the collection, Thomas Röske, about specific artists in the collection who were particularly traumatized, he replied without hesitation, “All of them.”

While accounts of trauma are prevalent in the biographies of many individuals labeled outsider artists, there is not a simple relationship between trauma and creativity, and the personal reasons and routes to artistic activity are numerous and vary widely. Sometimes the path to creativity is stumbled upon accidently and artistic endeavors are triggered in seemingly inexplicable ways. The rural postman Ferdinand Cheval tripped over a stone one day during his postal route; he found the strange shape of the rock so fascinating that it triggered the impulse in him to construct his monumental Ideal Palace, a thirty-three-year project. Sabato Rodia was building a mosaic fence one afternoon and became so engrossed in the creative process that he forgot his craving for liquor. He later declared that the process of creativity cured him of his alcoholism. For Nek Chand, gathering recycled debris and stones and then building his Rock Garden helped him address painful memories of forced migration, allowing him to symbolically reconstruct a destroyed and traumatized past. In some cases, making art deters forces that might otherwise
destroy individuals. Vietnam veteran Gregory Van Maanen began to paint
and sculpt in order to deal with both the horrific memories of the war and
his ongoing struggles with posttraumatic stress disorder. He describes his
art making as “a suicide prevention program,” a form medicine and self-
preservation (quoted in Rafferty, 2009). After the tragic deaths of family
members, creative expression became a source of solace and meaning for
the self-taught artists Lonnie Holley, Mary Proctor, and Myrtice West,
while for Anne Marie Grigich and Ody Saban, the trauma of terrible car
accidents and other difficult life experiences significantly affected their
art. For Willem van Genk, creating things was a way to survive the daily
ordeal of mental illness and control forces that threatened to manifest
psychotic episodes. His art did not heal him, but it helped him cope with
a world that he found hostile and threatening, providing a sense of protec-
tion and fortifying his own strength to persevere.

In some instances, art that begins as a response to personal adversity
grows beyond the individual and extends into the community in trans-
formative ways. Tyree Guyton started to create art as a way to deal with
the abuse and neglect he experienced as a child. As he expanded his Hei-
delberg Project into a form of street art that protested the collapse of his
neighborhood in the inner city of Detroit, he transformed his street from
ea blighted and dangerous ghetto into an internationally recognized art
environment, generating a grassroots type of urban renewal. In a similar
manner, Nek Chand’s secretive and illegal art project grew over time into
a twenty-five-acre environment that was ultimately embraced by his fel-
low citizens of Chandigarh, India. As an alternative to the alienating mod-
e rnist architecture of the city, Chand’s folk environment resonates with a
powerful and inclusive cultural meaning, offering a restorative effect on
the broader community.
Many other examples exist of individuals who have discovered the creative process as a way to deal with tragedies and traumatic events, and taken together these accounts reveal a common historical and cross-cultural creative response: individuals, with little or no artistic training, often undergo a personal transformation and discover the artistic process as the result of a profound crisis or traumatic event. The personal experiences of tragedy, hardship, or a life-changing event that ignite the creative process are diverse, including the death of a child or other loved one, the horrors of war, internment, assault, rape, immigration or cultural dislocation, illness, mental or physical disability, depression, poverty, prejudice, loss of a job, loneliness, and social ostracism. In these instances, adversity does not mechanismalistically “produce” creativity; instead, individuals engulfed by suffering sometimes transform themselves, and creative impulses are catalyzed and emerge. For reasons that are unique to the specific life experiences of individuals, people with no artistic training discover the artistic process and draw upon their own abilities to be creative in an effort to structure or reframe pain, deal with grief and loss, and by doing so gain a sense of emotional stability and restored meaning in their lives.

While ideas about the connection between suffering, tragedy, mental distress, and art making permeate conceptualizations of outsider art, assumptions about the therapeutic aspects of creativity weave throughout the scholarship and promotional materials that describe outsider artists. The history of the genre, rooted in the art of the mentally ill, is infused with an ambiguous discourse of trauma, suffering, and the possible therapeutic aspects of artistic behavior among psychiatric patients and non-institutionalized others. The connection between personal torment and creativity is approached with caution in this book, since such discourse often conveys clichéd and over-romanticized notions about the suffering artist as

Tyree Guyton and one of his transformed houses, Heidelberg Project, Detroit, early 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.
“tortured genius.” This archetype continues to pervade the popular imagination and uphold the cult of madness and creativity, a notion exemplified by the adoration of the well-known patron saints of art and insanity—Vincent van Gogh and Antonin Artaud. Focusing on personal suffering and trauma in this study might seem to perpetuate these ideas about tormented outsiders and reinforce the stereotype that authentic art is somehow interwoven with suffering. But the alternative perspective advocated here interrogates such assumptions, and attempts to understand suffering and acknowledge the ways that people confront adversity as a part of the human experience that everyone encounters to some degree.

Not all art comes from sorrow or pain, and suffering is not necessarily a cause of creativity. Art making is not inherently therapeutic, or teeming with an inevitable healing function. In some cases, the process of creating things may increase one’s suffering, evoke painful memories, intensify mental illness, and reproduce trauma in harmful ways. The perspective offered here contextualizes individual suffering and trauma and explores the ways that people try to cope with problems, adjust to stressful situations, and express meaning in their lives through creativity. To reiterate: suffering and trauma are not prerequisites for self-taught creativity. Many individuals labeled as outsider artists did not begin to create because of suffering or adversity, just as most people who experience some crisis or a traumatic event do not suddenly begin to create things. In some instances, however, individuals who encounter a life-changing crisis may discover a hidden artistic talent or impulse and realize that the creative process helps them deal with hardship, or serves as a form of solace, or sometimes
transforms trauma into healing. As will be illustrated, certain self-taught artists themselves have remarked on the therapeutic aspects of creativity as a motivation for or a result of making art, whether related to traumatic life events, grief over the loss of a loved one, or the stress of a disruptive life crisis. A number of these artists have said that verbalizing traumatic events, and the emotions they evoke, is difficult or impossible. But through the materialization of memory and metaphor in art, individuals create images and objects that represent experiences and emotions often too painful and anxiety-producing to express in words. As Michael Owen Jones tells us, “Representing issues in material form redirects inner feelings outward onto an external form. Making things can distract one from the pain, refocusing attention and energy, or even resolve issues and restore a sense of self worth. The outcome of art’s therapy is not just the creation of an object, but the rebuilding of a person” (2006: 71).

The next chapter examines the origins of outsider art, as well as the concept of art brut, notions about insanity and art, trauma, and the development of the idea of art making as a form of therapy in greater depth. Chapter three explores how religious visionaries, trance mediums, and divinely inspired individuals create art that becomes configured as outsider or “visionary,” a primary category within the outsider-art spectrum. The spiritual traditions and religious contexts that influence such art often have been ignored or presented in superficial ways. Chapter four discusses another significant category in the outsider-art compendium, focusing on the lives and experiences of those individuals who have single-handedly built large-scale art environments from salvaged debris and recycled materials. Whether such constructions are celebrated as eccentricities or condemned as eyesores, these vernacular environments have more connections to folk traditions and local culture than scholars and other observers have generally acknowledged.

An awareness of the apparent therapeutic aspects of art making among the mentally ill led to the “discovery” of art brut and outsider art as a phenomenon and contributed to the rise of the field of art therapy. The final chapter of this book, therefore, revisits ideas about trauma, therapy, and the creative process within the field of outsider art today, as experienced and expressed by specific individuals who have been labeled outsiders and visionaries. The idea of trauma haunts outsider-art studies as an enduring trope that is used to imbue individuals and their art with an aura of authenticity. Anecdotes and incidents of human suffering and adversity pepper the narratives used to market the artwork as genuine, deeply personal, and marked by the stigmas of traumatic life events. While this discourse of suffering and trauma has been used as a marketing device, a number of individuals do indeed describe the connection of their art making to life crises and personal pain, and their views on creativity and hardship are presented in chapter five. The complex relationship between art, grief, and trauma and the possible therapeutic aspects of art making are explored within the larger concern and objective of this study. The aim of this book is to provide an expanded understanding of the lives, artistic behavior, cultural matrix, and social realities of those individuals labeled as outsiders, and in doing so, allow them to speak for themselves.