OUTSIDER ART—FORTY YEARS OUT

by

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Abstract

French artist Jean Dubuffet delivered an anti-cultural manifesto in the 1940s. He fought against the status quo in the art world and argued against the traditions of art history, where art is studied in the context of its historical development and where art standards are the result of cultural conditioning and the opinions of art critics. To illustrate his thesis, Dubuffet went on to create an art collection, which he called art brut, from artists who he believed were not influenced by culture or social norms. In 1972 Roger Cardinal, a British scholar, wrote a book about art brut, calling it outsider art. Many new definitions of outsider art subsequently evolved, particularly in the United States, and there has been little agreement on the definition of outsider art or the terminology coined to describe it.

This thesis examines the American and European perspectives on outsider art and suggests the underlying biases, ideologies, and social factors that informed the definitions, such as the myths surrounding mental illness, movements towards social inclusion, and movements away from the marginalizing effect of labels. As outsider art gains more recognition in the art world, some defend its categorization as a separate genre of art while others challenge the need to keep it separate from mainstream art, and those reasons are explored. Finally, it is suggested that there may be little value in attaching labels to any genre of art because every definition of outsider art reflects the biases and personal logic of its author. Dialogue and debate are encouraged and suggestions for continuing research are outlined.
Preface

Ethics approval for this research was granted by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The Ethics Certificate Number is Outsider Art H14-02811.

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Linda Rainaldi.
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Dedication

For Luca, who has always supported my dreams.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Thesis Inquiry

Until I met an outsider artist about 20 years ago, I believed the genre of art brut ended when Jean Dubuffet housed his eccentric art collection in a European museum. That coincidental meeting was the starting point of my journey—literally and academically—into the world of outsider art (as it is now called). At every turn I marvelled at the human need for self-expression—to invent and create with passion, and to be content as a solitary witness to the process and the outcome. My interest took me to outsider art exhibits outside Canada and led me to discussions with art dealers, collectors, and curators of outsider art collections. I read extensively on the topic and met with the artists themselves.

I looked for Canadian outsider artists at every exhibit and found none. I asked American experts if they knew of any Canadian outsider artists, but they did not. In turn, they asked me why no Canadian outsider artists were represented at public exhibitions and I was unable to answer that question. It was a conundrum that I felt compelled to address.

I learned that few people in Canada are familiar with outsider art. I felt certain that outsider exists in Canada, but that perhaps it goes by a different name or was included in the category of folk art. I searched the literature but found no evidence of either theory. Since it seemed that outsider art had not been thoroughly studied in Canada, I created a blog in 2011 to document my findings and to connect with others who were interested in the field. I heard from both Canadian and international readers who were curious about my research. I gathered a considerable amount of information about outsider art in general and learned of several artists in Canada; unfortunately, the definition of outsider art was still
unclear to me. If I hoped to strengthen my understanding and appreciation of outsider art and initiate a discussion about it in Canada, it was important for me to learn more about the various forms of outsider art and the labels attached to them.

I discovered that there was little agreement internationally on what the term outsider art actually encompassed and this “term warfare” (Fine, 2004, p. 26; Zug, 1994, p. 42) proved to be frustrating and confusing. I began my research into outsider art in a linguistic maze.

My desire to define outsider art led to a series of questions that required an answer: Why did outsider art in Europe and the United States have different aesthetic features? Who decides what labels are given to various types of outsider art? And, finally, why were there so many categories?

As I began to examine these issues, it appeared that the terminology debate began in 1972 when Roger Cardinal published a book about art brut, but named the book *Outsider Art*. The term itself was vague, allowing more possibilities to emerge, particularly in English-speaking countries. I felt, however, that the terminology dispute had to be based on something more than the labels themselves, for that would not likely engender such dissention. I probed deeper, thinking it was perhaps rooted in the complex social and cultural histories of the populations who created the labels.

My research took me to the United States and Europe, and both offered intriguing perspectives that contributed to my knowledge of the genre. The roots of outsider art are in Europe: the Sammlung Prinzhorn museum at the University of Heidelberg houses the collection that inspired Dubuffet’s anti-cultural manifesto and Dubuffet’s personal
collection is on view at the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne. The European collections gave me both an historical and contextual overview of the genre and, most importantly, helped me appreciate the radical thesis that Dubuffet articulated in a very different world over seven decades ago. It was instructive to start at the beginning before moving into the contemporary world of outsider art.

Exploration of outsider art in North America gave me a fresh perspective. In addition to the ease of conversing in my own language, I witnessed artists at work on their projects, did an internship at an outsider art museum in Chicago, attended art fairs, and spoke in depth with many people with a dedicated interest in the genre. The uniquely American perspective, so closely tied to its cultural history, prompted me to consider different opinions and prepared me for future research of the Canadian landscape.

The title of my thesis—Outsider Art: Forty Years Out—references the status of outsider art forty years after it was renamed. The task before me is to articulate my own understanding of outsider art and how that might be expressed to a new audience in Canada who, in my experience, share commonalities with both European and American cultures. Many issues have come to light during my research: the myth of the mad genius is one example; the reality of social marginalization is another. And, while I initially accepted that the subject of my research was art, I was forced to examine that assumption at several junctures.

I hope my research will resonate with the outsider art community. I anticipate that it will, at a minimum, contribute to the international dialogue about outsider art and the terminology used to rationalize its categories. It will shed light on the underlying ideologies
that inform the various definitions of outsider art; at best it may illustrate that outsider art is rooted in cultural, social, and political histories that are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. Finally, it will serve as the groundwork for defining outsider art in Canada, as we articulate our own definition of the genre.

This thesis asks the reader to reflect on the biases, prejudices, and assumptions that we make about art and its makers and, in the final analysis, whether it matters what art is called.

**Terminology**

One of the main difficulties in discussing outsider art is that the terminology is not used consistently. Further, there is little agreement as to how certain terms are defined. For the sake of clarity and consistency, I have used particular terminology in this thesis, as described below.

Dubuffet coined the term *art brut* in the 1940s, and I have used it only to describe work in his original collection. Roger Cardinal coined the term *outsider art* in 1972 as the English translation of art brut. Outsider art is a term commonly used in the international art world and I have used it as a generic term to describe all forms of artwork that fall under its umbrella.

The term outsider art has fallen out of use in the United States in favour of self-taught art; the former is considered to be a pejorative term that references the artist’s position in society. I have, however, chosen to use the term outsider art to avoid confusion with another specific category called ‘self-taught art.’ No disrespect is intended. Although
outsider art is often called art brut in Europe, I have chosen to use its English equivalent for the sake of consistency.

All other art is referred to as **mainstream art** unless a specific genre is named.

Although it does not perfectly describe art that is ‘not outsider art’, it is a term commonly used in the outsider art world.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review traces the definition of outsider art from the time art brut was first described by Jean Dubuffet in the 1940s to its expanded definition today. The history of art brut, and the collections that were created, have been explored in scholarly publications. However, there is no consensus on the definition and boundaries of the wider category of outsider art; every author and every country seems to have defined the genre in a different way. In Europe, for example, the definition of outsider art has remained true to Dubuffet’s definitions of art brut and ‘neuve invention’ whereas in the United States, the definition has expanded far beyond that.

Although the term outsider art is now used as an umbrella phrase to describe many different styles of art, there is a lively debate among scholars and collectors as to what should be included in the genre and what should not. While an expansive definition of outsider art may enhance the richness of collections, it can be challenging to understand why artwork has been deemed appropriate or inappropriate for inclusion.

This literature review begins with a description of artwork that was collected at a psychiatric institution in Germany, reviews the historical and current parameters of art brut and outsider art, and ends with a discussion of whether a distinct genre is even relevant in the art market today.
The Creation of Art Brut

*Image making*

The history of art brut (literally, raw or uncooked art) began with a small collection of art gathered in a psychiatric hospital in the early 20th century (Cardinal, 1972). Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933), an art historian and psychiatrist at the University of Heidelberg, argued that his institutionalized patients’ artwork should be appreciated for its own merits rather than being examined for signs of mental illness. He expanded a collection of art created by his predecessor and published a book of his patients’ work. In his view, psychiatric patients did not have the freedom, self-awareness, or skill of ‘sane’ artists. They did, however, have the ability to see into new worlds, along with children and ‘savages’ (Beveridge, 2001). His study of the relationship between creativity and mental illness resulted in a book; *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (generally translated as *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, originally published in 1922), was a study of art produced by schizophrenic patients (Prinzhorn, 2011). He used the term *bildnerei* (image making) as opposed to *kunst* (art) to distinguish the patients’ creative output from the work of artists.

*Reaction to institutional art*

Not everyone embraced Prinzhorn’s interest in his patients’ art. While ‘madness,’ to some, was a metaphor for total freedom, others said genius is a form of *moral* insanity and artists are innately degenerate types. Psychiatrist and criminologist, Cesare Lombardo, for example, argued that the art of psychiatric patients indicates a return to an earlier stage of human development (Rhodes, 2000).
The most extreme act of blocking the so-called degenerative influence of art was the Nazi movement to remove modern artists and curators from their positions in the art world (Peters, 2014). A degenerate art exhibition put together by the Nazis in 1937 displayed the work of modern artists (such as Picasso) and Prinzhorn’s collection. Degenerate art was deemed to be deplorable because it did not represent all that was good about Germans and Nazi Germany. All degenerate art was removed from galleries and museums. A more horrific scene followed as many artists disappeared and were presumed to have been exterminated. Interest in new and alternative art forms was squashed (Peters, 2014).

**Challenging the status quo**

Beyond the obvious devastating effects of WWI, political, cultural and social norms were over-turned. In particular, the cultural climate in Europe after the war was receptive to new ideas or, perhaps more accurately, it was ready to reject accepted values and societal norms. Prinzhorn’s book had been circulating within the art community in France for some years and fit well with their search for creative authenticity. Many artists, Dubuffet in particular, argued against what they perceived as the traditions of art history, claiming that art is studied only in the context of its historical development. To Dubuffet, traditional art was like a parlour game where players must understand a secret language to appreciate the artwork (Glimcher, 1987, p. 55). It “is an art of communication in which the grammar and syntax are agreed upon a priori” (Messer, 1986, p. 27). The artist knows that the public will understand him directly or when an art critic has interpreted his work. The critic can persuade the public to embrace the artist by relating her work to the already accepted work of an earlier era (Messer, 1986, p. 27).
Dubuffet’s agenda was two-fold: to subvert and expose the emptiness of conventional modern art and to explode the traditional solidarity between artist, critic, and public. In his view, art standards are the result of cultural conditioning and stereotyped opinions where no one dares question the value of a work. We have come to accept that only art that hangs in a museum is worthy of consideration. Cardinal explains:

art is the monopoly of the privileged intellectual and the professional artist.... [T]he art system is sustained at the centre by a cultural ideal that is untouchable and inalterable, based as it is on the unshakeable belief in such things as our “cultural heritage,” the legacy of the past, and the fetish of the “great masterpiece.” (Cardinal, 1972, p. 9)

Dubuffet asked that we not blindly accept the status quo, but rather, embrace other kinds of art. Art that is unadulterated by culture, Dubuffet said, is visual creation at its purest—a spontaneous psychic flow from brain to surface (Raw Vision, n.d., n.p.). Those who are outside culture, he said, draw on their own pure, unrefined, artistic expression to create work that springs from their own obsessive need to express themselves, forcing each one to invent his or her own language and means of expression (Glimcher, 1987). Most importantly, he asked that we consider this question: what else could art be like (Cardinal, 1972)?

Art brut

In answer to his own question, Dubuffet created a private art collection in 1945, which was ultimately housed in the Collection de L’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland and remains there today. Dubuffet did not ‘discover’ art brut, but rather identified a category of artists who created art the way he believed it ‘should be,’ that is, free from cultural influence. Its creation was direct, uninhibited, original, and unique; the creators did not
consider themselves to be artists, nor the work they produced to be art. Study and imitation of African art had already been explored in France; it has been suggested that art brut was Dubuffet’s way back to primitivism (Rhodes, 2000).

The ‘innocence’ of the art brut artist was Dubuffet’s ideal, and they included those who were far removed from the mainstream art world: psychiatric patients, self-taught artists, and isolated individuals. His collection included works by:

- patients in psychiatric institutions;
- mediums and clairvoyants;
- prisoners; and
- those without access to cultural convention (e.g., women, the elderly, isolated provincials, or those without formal education) (Glimcher, 1987).

Dubuffet’s artists were isolated outcasts who achieved their goals in unconventional ways. They did not ask to be understood; their art did not lend itself to even a minimal requirement to communicate (Messer, 1986). He created a category of art whose creators were unaware of being artists—the ‘unculture’ of the art world. They were “ignorant of any order but their own obsession with image-making” (Messer, 1986, p. 32).

Dubuffet was deliberate in his categorization of art brut art and artists. In setting its boundaries, he specifically excluded work that had some aesthetic similarities, including:

- primitive and folk art, because they have their own traditions and cultural stereotypes;
- naïve art, because the artists emulate cultural traditions;
• children’s art, because children do not have the psychic depth necessary for true creation and are easily influenced by their audience; and

• art made by psychiatric patients at the request of doctors to aid diagnosis and cure (Glimcher, 1987).

It is important to remember the boundaries of Dubuffet’s original definition of art brut. Since its creation in 1945, an international interest in this art has led to new terminology, definitions, and beliefs about the artwork and its creators, so much so that it is difficult to engage in a meaningful dialogue about the genre.

Despite the lack of agreement on what art brut (and more recently, outsider art) is and is not, Dubuffet’s list of defining characteristics have become standard markers in the art world: compulsive repetition; chance; automatism; microscopic or macroscopic views; rejection of perspective, scale, proportion, naturalistic colouration; combining images and writing; and bricolage (using found or unorthodox material). If these characteristics bring to mind a discordant image, it is fitting to remember Dubuffet’s conviction that art is not about beauty. Art is to address the mind, not the eyes (Glimcher, 1987).

**Beyond Art Brut**

Much has transpired since Dubuffet introduced his art brut collection to the art world. Some art theorists have followed in his footsteps while others have gone in a new direction. As a result, we no longer share a common vision of art brut; it is not clear what it looks like today or what it will look like in the future. What follows is a brief description of the various outsider art categories that are discussed in the art world today.
**Neuve invention**

As Dubuffet’s art brut collection grew, it became clear that some artwork did not quite ‘fit’ into the restrictive category of art brut. Although the work was powerful and inventive, the creators’ contact with society and awareness of their own work precluded their inclusion in the art brut category (Raw Vision, n.d., n.p.). It is now generally accepted that it is impossible—and always was—to be totally acultural (Cardinal, 1994; Glimcher, 1987).

These artworks were moved into the Annex Collection and re-named neuve invention. Dubuffet described these as “works which, though not characterized by the same radical distancing of mind as art brut, are nevertheless sufficiently independent of the fine-art system to constitute a challenge to the cultural institutions” (Rhodes, 2000, p. 47). In deciding what should be included in the art brut collection, it is said that Dubuffet created a paradox he hoped to avoid and, without intending to do so, he created a new orthodoxy of inclusion. By way of example, Dubuffet reluctantly excluded two great artists from his original art brut collection: Gaston Chaissac and Louis Soutter. Chaissac, a member of the French rural working class, sought input and instruction on his artwork from prominent painters; Louis Soutter, a professional painter, produced remarkably different work after succumbing to a mental illness (Rhodes, 2000). In hindsight, establishing the neuve invention collection marked the beginning of taxonomy problems, “setting up a two-tier and elitist distinction between first and second class outsiders” (Cardinal, 1994, p. 27). It is interesting to observe that some works were moved back and forth between the art brut
and neuve invention collections (Maizels, 1996). The margins of art brut began to blur as soon as the genre was named.

** Outsider art **

Art brut continued to exist, for the most part recognizing the two categories that Dubuffet defined: art brut and neuve invention. Roger Cardinal, a professor at the University of Kent, set out to write about art brut in 1972. His publisher insisted on a catchier title, and so *Outsider Art* went to press. Cardinal explains:

Well, it all happened when I produced this book. I wanted to call it ‘Art Brut,’ and I had studied the Dubuffet collection, and had a lot of examples from the collection and some that I’d chosen myself, but fitting into the general rubric of Art Brut. And with that, with Dubuffet as the coiner of that particular concept, and his definitions fairly clearly in mind, I showed the publisher what I wanted to do, and I said, ‘Well, you’ve got Art Nouveau, and you’ve got Art Deco, now you’ve got Art Brut and everybody will get on with it.’ But the publisher was very worried about this particular title and wanted something more easy to get on with for the English ear and said, ‘Well, shouldn’t we call it something else?’ And we went through hundreds of titles: ‘The Art of the Artless,’ I remember was one of them. But ‘Outsider Art’ came up at some point and seemed a catchy title. I was a bit worried because of the idea of the Outsider, a romantic and thrilling sort of idea, a sort of highwayman, or a thief, someone that steals by in the night.

Rather than what most of the people involved actually are, simply, if you like, externally quite ordinary and often quite accessible but having an intense inner life....

People have used it since then, and have misused it, and have stretched it, and have applied it in all sorts of ways.... But to apply it to just anything obviously will eventually make it meaningless. (Cardinal, as cited in Volkerz, 1998, p. 24)

The term outsider art was not used in the text of the book, but Cardinal intended it to be synonymous with art brut, and from the outset it encompassed the categories of both art brut and neuve invention (Volkerz, 1998). Cardinal defined outsider art (and art brut) as “strictly un-tutored and exists outside of the normal concept of art. Not hooked up to
galleries and certain expectations. It should be more or less inwards-turning and imaginative—self contained as it were” (Volkerz, 1998, p. 25).

Although it was not Cardinal’s intention, the narrowly defined and closely guarded world of art brut was turned upside down. The term ‘outsider’ was taken literally, triggering a debate about the meaning of that word as opposed to the art. Consequently, in recent years, outsider art has become an umbrella term used to describe art brut and many other artistic styles, particularly in North America. It often refers to “any artist who is untrained or with disabilities or suffering social exclusion, whatever the nature of their work” (Raw Vision, n.d., n.p.). What follows is a list of terms commonly used in the world of outsider art.

**Self-taught art**

The term ‘self-taught artist’ as opposed to ‘outsider artist’ is often used, particularly in the United States, to avoid terminology that would place an artist on the outer limits of society because of prejudice and discrimination (Raw Vision, n.d., n.p.).

**Visionary or intuitive art**

The generally accepted characteristics of outsider art are not necessarily present in visionary or intuitive art. This category can include urban folk art from developing countries and work arising from personal religious experiences (Raw Vision, n.d., n.p.).

**Naïve art**

Naïve artists are typically sophisticated, but untrained painters. They often illustrate scenes from the real world such as people, animals, or landscapes; they sometimes incorporate fantasy images. Many wish to be recognized as professional artists (Raw Vision, n.d., n.p.).
**Visionary environments**

“The environments, buildings and sculpture parks built by intuitive artists almost defy definition” (Raw Vision, n.d., n.p.). Common terms that are applied to environmental works like the Watts Tower are visionary environments and contemporary folk art environments. The term outsider art is generally not used to describe these environments because some feel the label is inappropriate, as the creators are often integrated members of their community (Raw Vision, n.d., n.p.).

**Folk art and contemporary folk art**

Folk art is a term that is normally used to describe indigenous crafts and traditional decorative skills of rural communities in Europe. The term was later applied to the simply made practical objects of colonial days in the United States. “In contemporary terms, Folk Art can cover anything from chain-saw animals to hub-cap buildings as well as the work of artists that would easily fall into the realm of Outsider Art” (Raw Vision, n.d., n.p.).

**Marginal art and art singulier**

Marginal art is a term that is often used in Europe to describe artists who are usually self-taught. In appearance, the artwork is close to art brut and outsider art. “These are the artists ‘on the margins,’ that grey area of definition that lies between Outsider Art and normal mainstream art, very similar to Dubuffet’s neuve invention category. Art Singulier encompasses French marginal artists” (Raw Vision, n.d., n.p.).

**Defining Outsider Art**

Seven decades after Dubuffet exposed the self-serving biases of the established art world, we may have accepted the otherness of non-mainstream art but cannot agree
whether it should be lumped into one category or distinguished by markers that reference stylistic features or characteristics of its maker. In an effort to establish the border of outsider art, I have been told that the term art brut is sometimes restricted to Dubuffet’s original collection in Lausanne, although I understand the term is still frequently used in France. To restrict the term art brut to describe the original collection would, at least, shorten the list of possible descriptors for an artwork. Cardinal (1994) has proposed a spectrum of ‘outsiderness’ that references the position of the artist along a spectrum of psychological experience. Others, like Dubuffet and his followers, note stylistic indicators (Glimcher, 1987). Another group points to class issues and marginalization as defining factors (Lippard, 1994; Metcalf, 1994). All struggle with the problems inherent in a collection of art that runs parallel to established art history and shares few common characteristics within the category itself.

**The expanding definition**

Since introducing the term outsider art in a book of that title, Cardinal cautions that to “apply it to anything will eventually make it meaningless. And if everything becomes Outsider Art, then we will have to find another term to start all over again” (Cardinal, 1994, p. 27).

Cardinal warns that applying a set of outdated rules may result in one of two outcomes: either setting up an elitist distinction between classes of outsider artists or having the category crumble completely under the strain. However, because the term outsider art is now used throughout the world, he calls for a looser definition, even though it may decrease our ability to discriminate among creators and their creations (Cardinal,
He therefore proposes an outsider aesthetic by arguing that in the end, the evidence that carries the most weight is provided by the works themselves. He describes it thus:

We may experience something a little unusual, though perhaps not altogether surprising, in that our taxonomic reflex is found to coincide with our aesthetic response, when confronting the artwork, we recognize it as outsider art at the very moment we submit to its visual allure. (Cardinal, 1994, p. 27)

Unfortunately, this description of the viewer’s aesthetic response is not particularly useful and does not add to our taxonomy in the slightest. It is akin to saying: I know it when I see it.

**A spectrum of “outsiderness”**

In an effort to clarify the concept of outsider art, some authors have proposed a spectrum of art, with outsider art being at one end of the spectrum and mainstream art (that is, art from the commercial art world) being at the other (Cardinal, 1994):

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Outsider>>>Mainstream
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There can be many ‘degrees of outsiderness’ along this spectrum. But what factors determine where to place an artwork along the scale? Four opinions have been expressed:

- The artist’s biography;
- Stylistic indicators (aesthetics);
- The artist’s distance from the mainstream art world; and
- Social factors and marginalization.

Using the spectrum brings flexibility to defining outsider art, but it is not without its own problems. Where does one place artwork along the scale? Is one style more ‘authentic’ than another? What is the result if an autistic outsider moves into the mainstream art
world? Does he or she cease to be an outsider artist? These viewpoints are explained below.

**The artist’s biography**

For some, the artist’s biography (i.e., pedigree) is the key factor that defines his or her status as an outsider artist. The ‘polar outsider’ is an autistic who renounces any sort of contact with the world. The term ‘autistic’ is not meant in its clinical sense, but rather suggests an ‘autistic air’ or a distinctive intensity, which reveals itself in the style of the artwork. It “catches our attention, inspires our fascination, and quickens our sense of an Outsider aesthetic” (Cardinal, 1994, p. 33).

While Dubuffet believed that mental illness allows entry to interior worlds that ordinary people cannot access, the current definition has expanded to include those with any type of mental disability, such as Autism and Down syndrome. I have not found an explanation for their inclusion, although I suggest this pre-requisite has to do with authenticity. In other words, these artists, like those with mental illnesses, are deemed able to express fresh perspectives and access truths that the ordinary person cannot. This approach raises some concerns; if the artist’s biography is of primary importance, what hope do we have for intelligent discourse? There is little left to discuss beyond a medical diagnosis.

**Stylistic indicators**

Dubuffet and his followers noted stylistic indicators (Glimcher, 1987) and they have sometimes been proposed as a way to define outsider art. Dubuffet proposed a set (Glimcher, 1987), as did Cardinal many years later (Cardinal, 1972). While the two authors
did not disagree on any particular indicators, the lists are quite different; read together they provide a comprehensive description of common features of outsider artworks. Dubuffet proposed these aesthetic considerations:

- representation of inner psychic and mental states rather than the visual world;
- compulsive repetition;
- chance;
- automatism;
- microscopic or macroscopic views;
- rejection of perspective, scale, proportion, naturalistic colouration;
- combining images and writing; and
- bricolage (using found or unorthodox material). (Glimcher, 1987)

Many years later, Cardinal (1994) identified these primary stylistic indicators:

- dense ornamentation;
- dense and hermetic;
- compulsively repeated patterns;
- metamorphic accumulations;
- appearance of instinct through wayward symmetry;
- configurations that occupy an equivocal ground between the figurative and the decorative;
- other configurations which hesitate between representation and enigmatic calligraphy or which seek the perfect blending of image and word; and
• certain favourite subjects (e.g., self-portraits).

Secondary stylistic indicators have also been identified. Cardinal (1972) notes that stylistic affinities emerge among artists who share a common culture. Second, those who create outdoor environments and monuments share some stylistic features. Third, he acknowledges that access to only unsophisticated art materials may contribute to our perception of stylistic concordance.

Cardinal (1972), however, cautions against making generalizations about the work of outsider artists. He describes art brut as a “teaming archipelago rather than a continent crossed by disputed borders. The only connection between each ‘island of sensibility’ is that they are all distinct from the cultural mainland. The only likeness is within the work of a single artist” (p. 52).

While the aesthetics of the artwork and personal traits of the artist are important indicators of outsider art for some authors, others take a radically different view.

**The artist’s distance from mainstream art**

Another definition of outsider art references the art world rather than society. In other words, the artist need only be marginal in relation to the culture of art (that is, oblivious to it) and outside the trends and discourse of contemporary art practice (Rhodes, 2000). In many ways this imperative echoes Dubuffet’s original concept—that art makers must escape the confines of conventional art and those who define it. Again, this is not as clear-cut as one would hope. Artists may move from a marginal position to a full participant in the art world. This may take her out of the outsider art category, even though her work remains unchanged.
Social factors and marginalization

Outsider art, for some, is defined in political rather than aesthetic terms. In other words, it is rooted in cultural elitism and class differences—a belief in the binary categories of us and them (Lippard, 1994; Metcalf, 1994). The term outsider is taken literally, as an example of the self-proclaimed elite members of society marginalizing certain individuals and groups, thus forcing them into the position of outsiders. Lippard (1994), for instance, asks: outside of what? She maintains that the term means outside of society, a situation that has arisen from class differences.

Lippard suggests these artists are sometimes outside their own social contexts and usually out of the mainstream. The negative name, she says, was given by an ethnocentric society, “based on what is not rather than what is; the margins are defined by the center” (Lippard, 1994, p. 5). Cubbs describes outsider artists as “readymade outcasts,” those on the margins of culture: social isolates, eccentrics, religious visionaries, city slum dwellers, and mental health patients (1998, p. 85).

In a similar vein, Metcalf (1994) notes the highly political nature of art definitions. Poverty separates, he says; to consider context is to consider class and economics. Others say that outsider art is a stronghold for cultural elitism and racism. We believe the noble savage still exists and will create an ‘other’ we can “collect, embellish with theory, and still seek to control” (Lippard, 1994, p. 11).

Of the few discussions I have had about outsider art in British Columbia, the topic is highly politicized: the artist is outside only because of his or her marginalized status. Thus, the artist is dismissed twice: first by those who hold the power (by status, wealth,
education, or privilege), and second from the mainstream artworld. It is a no-win situation.

For those who propose this interpretation of outsider art, there should only be one art world and the elite should not control it. Gallery Gachet in Vancouver, for example, describes itself as an outsider art gallery. Its submission guidelines are stated as follows:

> Gallery Gachet supports artists who have experienced marginalization due to their mental health, addictions, trauma and/or abuse experiences, by working for cultural and economic justice. It is not necessary that those submitting have experienced mental illness or social marginalization personally, however the work must speak to our mandate in specific and interesting ways. (Gallery Gachet, n.d., n.p.)

In one sense this position echoes Dubuffet’s complaint that “art is the monopoly of the privileged intellectual and the professional artist” (Cardinal, 1972, p. 9). In another, it strays from Dubuffet’s original concept in a significant way: he did not define the issue in political terms. His artists were not excluded from the mainstream art world because, in fact, they never sought to be part of it.

Further, while outsider art galleries may frame their vision in terms of social justice issues, there is little appreciation for the fact that all artists—professional or otherwise—struggle to obtain gallery representation. Acceptance into the world of commerce is dependent on a multitude of factors, ranging from self-promotion and competition, conforming to the art gallerist’s personal vision and interests, and most importantly, the aesthetic features of the work (i.e., quality). In the end, it is a business decision; will the artwork sell or not? Feeling excluded from the mainstream art world is not unique to outsider artists. It is the reality of being an artist.

Since Dubuffet declared his anti-cultural manifesto, political institutions have formed and fallen, social movements have changed the structure of Western society, and
personal attitudes have shifted far beyond what Dubuffet may have thought possible. In particular, our understanding of mental illness has undergone a radical transformation; development of effective pharmaceutical strategies, de-institutionalization of psychiatric patients, and admitting the reality of marginalization are but a few examples. Although Dubuffet insisted that art brut was not restricted to artists with mental health issues, that characteristic was an important qualifier for those who believed that mental illness and creative genius were inextricably linked. Given our better understanding of mental illness today, I set out to explore whether contemporary attitudes towards mental illness are reflected in the current definition of outsider art and more generally, how the search for authenticity in art has continued.
Chapter 3: The Search for Authenticity

Introduction

The search for authentic expression is the thread that ties seemingly disparate categories of outsider art together. In addition to the work of artists with mental health issues, the label has been applied to dissimilar forms of art rooted in specific cultural milieux, arising from evolving social policies, or reflecting certain political positions. The following discussion explores authenticity and suggests how it has been interpreted to justify various art forms called outsider art. It also explains the evolution of outsider art categories.

Authenticity and Mental Illness

Prinzhorn’s book created significant interest within France’s art community. Extolling the liberating work of psychiatric patients who took voyages of discovery to the unconscious, the surrealists, led by André Breton, created their own ‘cult of insanity’ (Beveridge, 2001). As a way to explore the unconscious mind, they studied dreams and practised automatic writing, activities they believed approximated madness because there was no logic, reason or structure. Creativity, they said, came from deep within a person’s subconscious and is more powerful and authentic than any product of conscious thought (Nadeau, 1973).

As a member of the surrealist group, Dubuffet sought the source and expression of pure creativity. His initial art brut collection was driven by the artists’ biography, that is, he looked to artists who were far removed from society and the mainstream art world, such as
psychiatric patients and uneducated, reclusive individuals. Although work by patients in psychiatric institutions formed the basis of his original collection, he argued against the art of the insane. There was no such thing as “the art of the mad any more than there is an art of people with sick knees” (Messer, 1986, p. 33). However, he believed that “madness unburdens a person, giving him wings and helping his clairvoyance” (Glimcher, 1987, p. 104). He said, “For me, insanity is super sanity. The normal is psychotic. Normal means the lack of imagination, lack of creativity” (Hamburger, 1975, p. 27). Thus, the artist’s mental state was not a defining characteristic of art brut, but it was unquestionably linked to the authenticity of expression. Mental illness has remained one of the hallmarks of an outsider artist, and even today, belief in a connection is rarely challenged in the world of outsider art. Its popularity is evident at lectures and discussions at outsider art gatherings.¹

**The mad genius persona**

Madness has been connected with visionary power from the time of the ancient Greeks. Plato, for example, introduced the concept of divine madness, but in a very different context. Madness was a creative inspiration delivered by the gods, more like a muse than a mental disorder. The story of art brut and its link to mental illness began in the 19th century—the Age of Romanticism—when the savage was noble, the genius was mad, and the hero was a misunderstood outcast.

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¹ *The Outsider Art Fair, 2014,* offered a panel presentation on art and paranoid psychosis. Unfortunately, the presentation was deferred due to bad weather and I have not been able to obtain a transcript. The Creative Growth organization in California offered a presentation in October 2015 on the intersection of psychoanalysis and outsider art.
Madness was a metaphor for freedom from the constraints of society; the madman travelled to new planes of reality and was granted special status, being free from social convention and having access to profound truths (Beveridge, 2001). To the Romantics, madness was both a piteous and exalted condition and a welcome reprieve from dreaded normality (Becker, 1982). Éluard, a Romantic poet, summarized it thus:

>We who love them understand that the insane refuse to be cured. We know well that is we who are locked up when the asylum door is shut: the prison is outside the asylum, liberty is to be found inside. (Éluard, as cited in Beveridge, 2001, p. 597)

The idea that madness fosters creative genius reinforces the stereotype that a life of psychological torture is the price one must pay for this gift. Sadly, it also trivializes the reality of mental illness and glamorizes the profound truths it can apparently reveal. But the question still remains: do those who suffer from mental illnesses create works of genius?

Many believe this is so, despite a dearth of scientific evidence that such a connection exists.

In the 20th century, studies have explored the connection between mental illness and creative genius. While some research purports to confirm the connection, others dismiss any significant relationship. One vocal critic describes the dramatic presentation of mad geniuses in the media as the insanity hoax, presenting information as fact, not theory (Schlesinger, 2009). She challenges the research as unscientific and anecdotal at best, and self-serving at worst:

>Such misunderstandings help perpetuate the mad genius idea, but the romance, the schadenfreude, the comfort, and the alibi of it are all too enjoyable to let anything shatter the myth, including science. And because this madness sells, the media will continue to hammer its connection to creativity... And the bottom line is that society may well be stuck with the idea forever, regardless of what any researchers do, or don’t do. (Schlesinger, 2009, p. 70)
The persistent myth of artist as a tragic figure, as well as Western culture’s empathy for the anti-hero—particularly those alienated and uncommunicative figures of the artworld—never seems to wane. Perhaps such sentiments account for our interest in the outsider artist’s pedigree as much as her artwork. There is great danger, however, in accepting the myth of the mad genius. First, to view the artist through a warped, generic lens reduces her creative output to a product of mental illness. Second, the myth becomes a cultural truism. If one finds it irresistible, one may fail to question whether it is based in science or wishful thinking (Schlesinger, 2009). And third, it may be tempting to praise whatever the artist produces, for surely it is the work of a genius.

Van Gogh is the poster boy for the mad genius (Schlesinger, 2009). We know he cut off his ear and are familiar with the self-portrait of his bandaged head that followed, yet all that many remember about Van Gogh is that he suffered from symptoms of mental illness: his unique paintings, his mood swings, and his ultimate suicide. What we do not acknowledge are his poverty, loneliness, artistic failure, epilepsy, absinthe poisoning, and tertiary syphilis (with symptoms that mimic the mood swings and psychosis of bipolar disorder). His life circumstances alone would surely lead to grief and despair. I question why a posthumous diagnosis of mental illness is so inextricably linked to appreciation of his artwork.

Opponents of the mad genius theory argue that there is no universal definition or measurement of either variable (genius or mental illness) and that in itself is a reason to dismiss it. Another concern is that research said to reveal a potential link between genius and mental illness was done without a control group. At worst, the opponents say the oft-
cited study provides only self-serving proof that one researcher’s bipolar disorder elevates her to the status of genius. In the end, the critics say, the mad genius myth is far too alluring to give up—it is old and glamorous and shimmers with a pseudoscientific patina (Schlesinger, 2009).

In the world of outsider art, acceptance and promotion of the mad genius myth is common, so much so that art gallery collections often reference diagnosed mental illnesses and the foundation of many European collections is based on the work of artists with mental health issues (e.g., The Gugging Psychiatric Clinic in Austria). Some private collectors, for example, only want the work of schizophrenic artists (Fine, 2004). Similarly, galleries often reference the psychological status of their artists, as in this biographical excerpt posted on a Parisian gallery’s website:

Charles Steffen, born in Chicago in 1927, is one of those Art Brut creators who, like Louis Soutter, started out as an art student before mental illness took them further, deeper, elsewhere—to a place far removed from cliché, where genius and madness intermingle, where pain occasionally gives rise to beauty. (Berst, n.d.-a, n.p.)

The aura of mental illness can trump any other identifying characteristics that might define an outsider artist, for a diagnosed mental illness is proof of authenticity (that is, creative purity). For example, it is generally accepted that an outsider artist must be self-taught. However, a mainstream artist who succumbs to a mental illness can qualify as an outsider artist (e.g., artists Louis Soutter and Gaston Chaissac). What does this mean? Does the artist forget or relinquish all his or her professional skills upon becoming unwell? Does the artist acquire special abilities and insight by reason only of that illness? I do not believe

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so. Whether or not one accepts the veracity of the myth, it is accepted, without question, among many in the outsider art community (Thevoz, 1994).

Many argue, however, that mental illness is a cultural and social construct:

To be ‘crazy’ is a social concept; we use social relationships and definitions in order to distinguish mental disturbances. You can say that a man is peculiar, that he behaves in an unexpected way and has funny ideas, and if he happens to live in a little town in France or Switzerland you would say, ‘He is an original fellow, one of the most original inhabitants of that little place’; but if you bring that man into the midst of Harley Street, well, he is plumb crazy. (Jung, 1976, p. 35)

And, it has been said that trying to divide madness from reason is itself a form of madness (Foucault, 1988). In deconstructing the concept of madness, Foucault examines its various characterizations from moral defects to chemical imbalances and concludes that they can only be provisional definitions that will be subject to skeptical review by our successors. It is a cultural construct, meaning different things at different times, and always clouded by the moral presumptions of the viewer (Hollis, 2013).

**Overlapping Concepts and Terminology**

To pictorially describe the world of outsider art would result in a series of overlapping circles of art brut, outsider art, self-taught art, folk art, contemporary folk art, and African-American self-taught art from the South. The perimeters of some circles are blurred, there may be more than one term used to define a circle and, most importantly, it will depend on which country those circles are in. In Europe, there are two distinct circles: folk art and outsider art. In the United States, there are five distinct circles: folk art, contemporary folk art, self-taught art, outsider art, and African-American self-taught art from the South.
**Folk Art in Europe**

Two distinct genres of non-mainstream art are common in Europe today—folk art and outsider art (generally called art brut). Folk art refers to handiwork and crafts from peasant communities—traditions handed down from one generation to the next. The work is regional and tied to family, ethnic, religious, or cultural traditions (Gomez, 2014a; Gomez, 2014b).

The concepts of folk art and mainstream art shifted in late 19th century Europe. Until then, the aim of the artist was to become more competent in depicting perceptual phenomena. After the advent of modernism, however, art history was no longer seen as technical progress in representation (Danto, 1998). While the exact reason for this shift is unclear, art historians have noted that attention to folk art coincided with the beginnings of modernistic painting: in particular, Manet’s Olympia in 1865. At this point, they say, the meaning of painting was defined as something other than exact representation; there was a possibility that artwork from other cultures could inform artwork with greater authenticity. Folk art was an escape from formalism.³ To start seeing folk art as art required a significant shift in our perception.

It makes no difference, aesthetically speaking, whether the object of our scrutiny is a piece of “negro sculpture” of modern sculpture, or of folk sculpture. From this perspective, there is scant basis for distinguishing folk art from fine art or modern art from negro art. Modernism, with its emphasis on form, took a step in the direction of dissolving the differences between museums of modern art and museums of folk art. (Danto, 1998, p. 21)

³ There are many examples of the early influence of folk art, such as Van Gogh’s interest in Japanese art and Gaugin’s immersion in Tahitian culture.
Outsider Art in Europe

Outsider art has very different roots. Its origins trace back to the creative output of psychiatric patients and, more generally, individuals who, because of psychological or sociological conditions, were on the margins of society (Russell, 2011).

I spent four weeks in Germany in the hope that I would gain a better understanding of how outsider art is defined in Europe. I had the opportunity to spend some time at Galerie Art Cru in Berlin. The gallery describes its artists as people with psychiatric disorders or mental disabilities. Its focus is to make the work of its artists more visible and close the distance between mainstream and outsider art.

Like many cities in Europe (and North America) Berlin has established ateliers (art studios) for people with mental disabilities and Galerie Art Cru exhibits their work. In discussing the definition of outsider art in the United States, I explained that not all outsider artists there suffer from a mental disability. I was thinking, in particular, of reclusive and eccentric (but not mentally ill) artists like Henry Darger and Morton Bartlett. This came as a surprise to gallery staff. If this were so, they questioned, how could one determine who was an authentic outsider artist? And if the source of the artwork is not from supportive workshops, where would one find artwork to exhibit?

This loose definition of outsider art was troubling to some. Equally puzzling to me was the connection between mental disabilities and visual arts. It was the word disability that caught me up. One might have a cognitive disability, for example, which might affect one’s ability to reason at the level of an adult, but what did that have to do with creativity? How could anyone have a creative disability? What did one have to do with the other? I
concluded that just as persons with mental illnesses were once believed to be free from cultural and social constraints, so must those with mental or cognitive impairment.

I learned that social inclusion was a very important goal for Germany—no one should be left at the margins of society. I discovered that there has been an international move towards social inclusion, a topic that comes up frequently in Europe, particularly France and Germany. In fact, the European Union led the movement, striving to raise the standard of living and strengthen communities by providing opportunities for all European citizens. Hence, a decision was made to include those with mental disabilities in the art world.

This new insight led me to explore the broad issue of social inclusion and exclusion. The advancement of human rights has been a large part of the modern social agenda. Following the advancement of psychopharmacology in the mid-1900s and an observable ‘improvement’ in the mental health of psychiatric patients, disability rights advocates challenged governments in the Western world to close psychiatric hospitals. The priority for deinstitutionalization was to replace hospitals with community mental health services for those with psychiatric disorders or developmental disabilities.

The rights of people with other disabilities followed later. The United Nations adopted the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons in 1971 and shortly thereafter, in 1975, it adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons. Disabilities were recognized as a universal human experience; there was a move away from the medical model to the social model for disabled persons. The United Nations has kept the subject at the forefront of its human rights agenda and adopted the Convention of Rights for Persons with Disabilities in
2006, with the intent of promoting and protecting the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. The Convention has been widely ratified.\(^4\)

The goal of social inclusion is for society to freely and openly accommodate persons with disabilities. While physical accessibility issues are important, its main purpose is cultural transformation. One way to include those who were traditionally excluded is to immerse them into mainstream culture through artistic expression. The sociology of disability and identity is far beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is important to note that it has had a significant impact in the field of visual arts.

The international disability rights movement became politically active in the 1970s and 1980s, challenging dominant social stereotypes. Activists determined that their life experiences shaped a common, group understanding of the condition of disability (Brown, 1996). Although their stories were unique, they shared a history of common perceptions about their condition. They identify as a distinct culture, most visibly demonstrated through the work of artists in every discipline. One definition follows:

People with disabilities have forged a group identity. We share a common history of oppression and a common bond of resilience. We generate art, music, literature, and other expressions of our lives, our culture, infused from our experience of disability. Most importantly, we are proud of ourselves as people with disabilities. We claim our disabilities with pride as part of our identity. We are who we are: we are people with disabilities. (Brown, 1996, n.p.)

At first blush, there may seem to be no difference between exhibiting the artwork of disabled persons and the goals of disability culture groups, but I suggest they are quite distinct. First, disability culture is self-motivated, intentional, and formed by its own

\(^4\) The United States is still waiting for Senate approval.
members. Decisions to engage in creative activities—which activities and by which members—are made within the group, not by those outside. Second, disability culture groups take an active role in championing their own rights. However, disabled artists who belong to an art studio are often selected for inclusion based on their artistic abilities. The decision to join a studio cannot be made by the artist alone; it is made by someone in charge of the group. Their artwork is championed by those who have the power to do so.

It has been suggested that the introduction of psychotropic drugs resulted in a decline in the number of discoveries of outsider artists, much to the disappointment of its strongest advocates (Thevoz, 1994). As those numbers decreased, there was a noticeable shift in outsider art culture and, in my view, it has been re-defined; artists with disabilities are now featured outsider artists. Is this shift based on evolving views of what constitutes art or are we simply responding to the imperative of social inclusion?

Social inclusion is a laudable objective and should not be scorned, but one could argue that the social inclusion directive is inextricably linked to power. How can one include people and groups into structured systems that have systematically excluded them in the first place? One author calls this dancing the dialectic (Labonte, 2004). If Dubuffet correctly identified the cultural elite as the gatekeepers of the art world, perhaps the hierarchies that support this dialectic should be challenged first.

United States

There is a clear distinction between folk art and outsider art in Europe, but the relationship between them in the United States is far more complex. Both fall under the umbrella term of what Americans call self-taught art, a term that is not used in Europe.
Although it makes it more difficult to define outsider art on an international level, Americans have added their own unique flavour to the mix, reflecting its venerated history of folk art, the civil rights movement, and the tradition of Southern art.

**Folk art**

Folk art and art brut are different types of artistic expression, but they share a common ideology—that is, belief in individual expression that is not affected by the art establishment’s rules. Understanding the history of folk art in the United States is fundamental to understanding outsider art in America today. For this reason, a brief outline of its history is pertinent.

In the United States, traditional folk art typically refers to work produced by people who have limited education, little training in art techniques, and whose work is not related to established art institutions or practices. For some scholars, that means painting and other objects that were created in 18th and 19th Century America (Gomez, 2014b).

American folk art has been collected since the mid-1800s when it was considered a discovery of “the American spirit in its essentials—a simple, almost austere directness, an engagingly straightforward honesty. They discovered their own ‘home-grown primitives’, the equivalent of tribal arts” (Fine, 2004, p. 7). By the 1930s, folk art was enshrined as the art of the people and museum collections were instrumental in shaping public awareness. When the American Folk Art Museum was established in 1961, its original emphasis was on colonial art and quaint evocations of country life (Maizels, 1996, p. 114).

At the turn of the 20th century, American folk art was recognized by those who considered it exemplified “a forthright honesty of purpose and execution that was absent
from mainstream art and that seemed to encode the very DNA of American experience” (Hollander, 2014, p. 13). In other words, this was authentic American art and the fact that the artists were self-taught was a virtue and something to boast about.

A shift in the American Folk Art Museum’s vision in the 1960s resulted in extending the traditional collection of folk art to include contemporary works. This moved America further away from the original, European understanding of folk art as the “tradition-bound household arts of peasant communities” (Wertkin, 1998, p. 9). Further, by the late 1960s, there was an influx of young people, including artists, to the Appalachian region, often connected to community activism or government programs to combat poverty. Issues of class and race were at the forefront, fostering the discovery and acceptance of self-taught art (in other words, helping the underdog).

Interest in the work of folk (and, more generally, self-taught) artists dramatically increased in the 1990s, with major American art museums adding the work of self-taught artists to their collection. It was part of the country’s multicultural agenda (Wertkin, 1998). The 1998 exhibit at the American Folk Art Museum, *Self-taught Artists of the 20th Century: An American Anthology* surveyed the work of artists who worked outside the confines of art schools, galleries and museums. As with outsider art, the museum described self-taught art as free from the conventions of art institutions and outside the art-historical canon (Longhauser, 1998).

Folk art and outsider art are similar in that they are both outside the canon of art history and do not share in a discourse that defines the world of art at any given moment. Neither genre is shaped by art institutions nor are the artists part of the art world, even if
their work is consumed by those who are. However, while there are some similarities between folk art and outsider art, folk art was never given the intellectual rationale that Dubuffet gave to art brut and there are important differences between the two (Maizels, 1996, p. 114). Folk art echoes its ‘homestead past.’ Its artists are cognizant of the fact they are making art and that there is a market for it. Their inspiration typically comes from extrinsic sources, such as daily life and religion. Outsider art, however, suggests an alternative way of being (Danto, 1998). It venerates artists who are outside society’s influences and, as Cardinal said, it hints at a connection with outlaws (Volkerz, 1998).

**Outsider art becomes self-taught art**

In the United States, admiration for the common man and, more formally, the goals of the civil rights movement were defining principles in its social history (Fine, 2004, p. 13). The United States adopted the term outsider art to describe art brut, then later chose the term self-taught to avoid the stigma attached to the former. As many of these artists are already on the margins of society as a result of discrimination and prejudice, the term is thought to offer more dignity to the artists and their position in the art world.

What does self-taught mean? The term is deceptively simple, but it can be misleading. Many mainstream artists are self-taught, and many self-taught artists are trained in another profession (Rousseau, 2014). It would seem to describe art hobbyists, but it does not. Nor is it synonymous with outsider, as the term is far too broad to include all types of outsider art that have been labelled as such. In short, self-taught art is “self-referential and fuelled by first-hand experience” (Rousseau, 2014, p. 43).
An American self-taught artist is a non-traditional, untrained artist who works outside the mainstream art world. Like outsider artists, he or she exhibits the same creative impulses, but the reason for acknowledging such art is different. Unlike outsider artists, American self-taught artists are not described in terms of psychopathology or unrestrained creative expression. Instead, they are described as ‘common men’ whose authenticity portrays culture in individual ways (Russell, 2011). In the mainstream art world, it is typically viewed as an extension of folk art. Herein lies the distinction, in my view, between self-taught art in the United States and outsider art as defined by the international community: its roots lie in folk art, not the personal biography of the artist.

The American Folk Art Museum succinctly describes the self-taught movement in the United States:

"The idea of “self-taught” in America is entrenched in a culture of self-actualization that was fundamental to the revolutionary temperament and critical to the growth and success of a new nation. To understand the special place the term holds in American experience, one must first trace its path from the genesis of genius in Europe and the principles of Enlightenment to the development of the American identity and the connotations of the term today. (Hollander, 2014, p. 17)

Self-taught became a widespread and endorsed culture that was endemic to American thought, spirit, and achievement, and that stemmed from the earlier arguments about genius and the development of faculty psychology as a tool for self-realization. (Hollander, 2014, p. 24)"

One of the fundamental differences between self-taught art and mainstream art lies in whether the artist participates in conversations with art institutions as to what art is and ought to be. The contemporary mainstream artist may move away from a preferred style but the folk artist probably will not. Without the critical dialogue between artist and art
institution, there is no impetus to move on (Danto, 1998). One art critic has summed it up as follows, and his comments are applicable to folk, outsider, and self-taught artists:

An outsider artist doesn’t belong to the art world, and has arrived at his or her art without benefit of participation in the discourse of reasons that defines the artworld at any given moment.... Therefore, it is in reference to the artworld that one should define outsiders. (Danto, 1998, p. 25)

In short, to be an artist means to have internalized the prevailing discourse of the art world. To be a [fill in the blank] artist is to be external to those discourses (Danto, 1998).

**African-American self-taught art from the South**

The civil rights movement that peaked in the 1960s was a worldwide phenomenon that initially challenged the status of women and minority groups. The black civil rights movement focussed on issues of racial segregation and discrimination against African-Americans. It was a defining event for recognition of self-taught artists in the United States (Fine, 2004).

By the time of the American Bicentennial in 1976, much attention was focused on self-taught art, particularly that of African-Americans. It is said that an exhibit, *Black Folk Art*, which travelled to museums across the country, resulted in an artistic canon for such art. (The 20 artists exhibited there established a ‘who’s who’ of black folk artists; that list is still important today (Fine, 2004)). Attention was focused on the (rural) South and until recently, in the eyes of the cultural elite, it was America’s backward and exotic internal colony. The perception of ‘region’ (a social construction) affects the search for and appreciation of artwork (Fine, 2004).
Interest in African-American self-taught art from the South has continued to grow. The Metropolitan Museum of Art recently received a major gift of work by African-American self-taught artists from the South: 57 paintings, drawings, mixed-media pieces, and quilts by 30 artists. Its donor, Arnett, had long argued that these artists deserved serious recognition and that it was the end of an era for this type of art. Acceptance of the gift signalled “efforts—and this is happening across the world—to discover neglected artists or neglected times” (Williams, 2014). The curator of an upcoming exhibit in 2016 acknowledged that these artists had been neglected and were without an art-historical record. She commented that the carefully maintained and documented collection from the donor was “a kind of rescue operation that I’ve found incredibly moving” (Williams, 2014). The museum noted that the collection adds to the American story of the 20th century, not just the African-American story.

One of the issues, of course, with associating predominantly African-American artists from the South with self-taught American art is that it tends to give a singular and stereotyped view of African-American art: that is, even though they live in poverty and isolation, they are in touch with deeper, intuitive urges (Berger, 1998). The Romantic ideology still lives on. Instead of envying the freedom that comes with madness, perhaps marginalized groups are our new Romantic heroes.

It has been observed that outsider art collectors are almost entirely Caucasian. At least one African-American self-taught artist notes that he has never sold a work to an African-American. While they might collect African work or contemporary art from trained (mainstream) African-American artists, they may ignore self-taught works because white
collectors enshrine it as primitive, and more particularly, as the life they left behind (Fine, 2004).

In a catalogue essay for an exhibit of African-American self-taught artists from the South, rapper Jason “PyInfamous” Thompson wrote that the artists’ works are not traditional because “no artist—no person—that has endured the sweltering, seething heat of Southern segregation and sectarianism can be considered ‘traditional.’ In a land where tradition included nooses and nihilism, there was a necessity to express the anxiety and anguish that came with being Black in the South” (Thompson, 2014, p. 5).

Southern self-taught artists—most certainly African-American artists—have unique iconographies, but a shared context. Referencing Cardinal’s archipelago analogy, each artist is not an island unto himself; they live on the same continent, connected by a shared history.

The Search for Consistency

Dubuffet’s search for authenticity inspired others to identify artists producing authentic art. These other forms were embraced by some Americans who accepted that outsider art can come in many forms. Others, however, were reluctant to recognize art beyond the parameters that Dubuffet established. Inevitably, new terminology was coined to distinguish between art forms and many of those terms have never been reconciled. Yet, as many scholars have pointed out, there is little hope of reaching consensus when the art itself is so tenuously connected aesthetically, historically, and theoretically (Berger, 1998). With so much dissention among scholars, I sought out the perspectives of those who are
fully invested in the world of outsider art—the artists and the art dealers who represent them in the marketplace.
Chapter 4: The Inside View

Introduction

Although Dubuffet was vigilant about controlling the parameters of his original art brut collection, his intention was to liberate art and artists from stereotyped ideals. One can only speculate on Dubuffet’s views on the efforts to institutionalize outsider art today. The gatekeepers of this recently defined genre are not so much pushing against the established art world as defining the borders of a new territory. It has been said that this new institution—composed of dealers, curators, and scholars—controls the scene: they decide what qualifies as outsider art (and what does not), what can be exhibited at organized events, and what artists may be included in the revered art brut collection in Lausanne (Peiry, 2001).

As an observer of the outsider art world, I have noticed a shift towards institutionalization over the past five years. In 2009, the annual Outsider Art Fair in New York was housed on an empty floor of an office building in the business district. The atmosphere was casual and there was an eclectic mix of artwork on offer. A booth filled with handcrafted fabric items from Haiti was located next to a booth exhibiting classic outsider art from Switzerland; a booth of art from psychiatric patients in Norway stood next to an exhibit of American evangelical artists.

In more recent years, however, the exhibit was moved to a separate, three-story building in an arts district of the city. The vendors selling folk art curiosities have disappeared and the overall impression is more polished. I learned that new owners of the
art fair were seeking to control what artworks were exhibited, with a view to excluding work deemed inappropriate.

In my view, this shift reflects the growing market of outsider art. I questioned how art dealers were faring in the controlled environment and what effect it had on the artists. I spoke at length with one art dealer about the evolution of outsider art during her career. I also spoke with artists, on a casual and informal basis, about their practices and solicited their thoughts about being an artist. What follows are my reflections and observations from inside the world of outsider art.

The Artists

My first knowledge of outsider artists came from books, which gave me a somewhat distorted picture of their lives. My introduction to outsider artists was ‘virtual’, but my recent explorations brought me in contact with many living artists, and that has been an immeasurably rich experience. All have been generous in sharing their thoughts with me, explaining when and why art making became the focus of their lives and what it has meant to them. While, of course, every artist has his or her own personal story to tell, I have noted some common themes in their narratives.

My understanding of what it means to be a mainstream artist comes from knowing artists who live and work in that world. He or she studied at an art institution; is knowledgeable about art history, practices and trends; fosters relationships with curators, collectors and other artists; solicits interest from gallery directors; and ultimately hopes to exhibit, sell, and be acknowledged for their vision, skill and talent. In short, the goal is to be a recognized, successful artist.
What I have learned from outsider artists is very different—in fact, none of the common characteristics of a mainstream artist can be used to describe them. I have never met an outsider artist who *planned* to be an artist in any sense of the word; in fact, they are often reluctant to call themselves artists, as that label has been given by others.

Roger Manley, an American museum director, once told me that outsider artists typically begin creating late in their lives after a tragic and life-changing event, such as a terrible accident or the loss of a loved one. While I have observed that art making often begins in mid-life, there is not always a negative triggering event for the onset of creativity. It is possible that these artists have chosen not to disclose such an event to me, but I have noted that the creative urge may arrive suddenly, often to the surprise of the artist.

If there is no intention to be an artist, what motivates outsider artists to start creating? In my experience, artists describe their creative drive in a variety of ways: answering to a higher power, responding to an imperative (a compulsion), or discovering a form of self-therapy.

There are many documented cases of artists who reveal that God instructed them to create art, sometimes to convey a religious message (e.g., Sister Gertrude Morgan and Howard Finster). Through my limited introductions to Canadian outsider artists, I have met two who attribute their gift to a higher (spiritual) power.

I recently met William Anhang (1931–) an octogenarian outsider artist in Montreal. Anhang was an engineer and had no exposure to art in his life. It wasn’t until he took his children to a demonstration of copper enamelling in the mid-70s that he was inspired to create works of his own. The pivotal point, Anhang recalls, is when by chance he met a Guru
who told him to be an artist. He felt he had no option but to follow this instruction, and so he abandoned engineering and began his new life. He has been experimenting with copper and fibre optics ever since.

Anhang explained that he heard the voice of God, who instructed him to spread His word through art. In a sense, Anhang believes he is a Messiah, as God singled him out for a purpose. Anhang has had several more divine visitations since then and knows that God is always with him. Other than describing these divine appearances in personal conversations, Anhang does not dwell on his connection to God; he accepts it as a fact of his life and the source of his creative energy. I have seen hundreds of Anhang’s creations and, unlike artists Morgan and Finster, none have a religious theme. His spiritual beliefs give him motivation and purpose, but they do not inform the subject of his creations.

The history of outsider art includes those who experience mediumistic drawing, that is, they produce automatic drawings through direction from the spirit world (e.g., Madge Gill and Guo Fengyi). I was recently introduced to the work of Canadian artist, Alma Rumball (1902–1980), who produced work of the same description.

Rumball was from a pioneering family who settled in Ontario in the 1870s. She used to draw as a child, and eventually left the farm to work as a painter in a ceramics factory in Toronto. By all accounts she enjoyed a typical social life there. When she returned to the farm in the 1950s, her life took a dramatic and unexpected turn. Rumball became a recluse and did not venture out except for family functions. About that time, Jesus appeared, with a panther, and commanded her to draw and write in order to help humanity. She understood
there were other levels of spiritual existence and began to communicate with a ‘genius’—a turbaned spiritual guide named Aba.\textsuperscript{5}

Rumball referred to her spiritual guide as “the Hand.” She watched as it chose art materials and drew detailed drawings and images on its own. She said: “I’m as excited to see what the Hand will do as you are. I can’t accept credit for them (the drawings); you see, I don’t do them” (Oke, 2004, n.p.). She watched as the Hand drew images of unfamiliar forms and faces, such as Joan of Arc, Tibetan gods, and images of Atlantis. In her experience, something (like a spirit), took over her conscious self and produced the drawings. The spirit, not the artist, was the source of the message (Oke, 2004).

Every outsider artist I know describes his or her art making as a compulsion (and art dealers and collectors usually make the same observation about the artists). While one could say that every artist is driven to create, it is an \textit{imperative} for outsider artists. They might create art all day, every day. Images may be endlessly repeated, suggesting to me that the process of creation, rather than the outcome, consumes the artist. Or perhaps some internal issue is being examined. Canvasses are not necessary for painting and so one never runs out of materials: boards, scraps of paper, boxes, and walls also serve the purpose. I have seen houses so filled with artwork that it is difficult to find a place to walk or sit down.

I have heard many artists describe their art making as a therapeutic exercise. An astute observer of outsider art proposed this idea: what if your therapy became art? (Malmberg, n.d., n.p.), and that thought always comes to mind when I meet with artists. It is

\textsuperscript{5} Interestingly, the panther totem traditionally represents spiritual knowing and is said to present itself to those who are intuitive, psychic, and artistically inclined.
important to understand that art therapy and art as therapy are not the same. Art therapy is an interactive, creative, therapeutic process where thoughts and feelings that are difficult to articulate can be expressed (Canadian Art Therapy Association, n.d., n.p.). Outsider artists I know are not engaged in art therapy, but rather a personal, non-directed, and reflective act of creation. In some instances, they may have produced their work in an open art studio where an art professional provides instruction on the use of materials, but mental health workers are not involved. Their artwork is not directed or examined and is not (intentionally) used as a tool for personal insight and growth. I visited an open studio in Vancouver, sponsored by the Coast Mental Health Association. Mentors and participants told me the same thing: It is the creation of the artwork that provides the therapy, not the interpretation of it. Clearly the most important act was the process of creating art, not the end product. It is not art therapy. It is art as therapy.

I learned more about the therapeutic nature of art making from speaking directly with artists. One artist (Cooney) describes the benefits of his creative periods: the intense focus he needs to create art gives him a brief reprieve from his extreme ADD symptoms. Another (Ogilvie) explains that she discontinued medication for her mental illness, deciding she could best care for herself by dedicating herself to painting. She described herself as stable and happy; art was her therapy. And many art workshop directors have told me that art heals even when it is done for no specific purpose and without instruction.

I often think of artist Renaldo Kuhler (1921–2013), whom I met in 2011. Kuhler worked secretly most of his adult life to create the fantasy world of Rocaterrania. His fantasy nation was described in (invented) text and meticulous paintings, detailing the lives
of emperors, czars, presidents, dictators, and civilians. In talking with him, I discovered that I misinterpreted Kuhler’s opus as a fantastic tale. Rather, Kuhler explained that it was his way of dealing with his troubled life. Always a misfit, he felt ostracized, misunderstood, and a failure to his father. His complex fantasy world had elements that were easy to understand: people who did not treat him well in real life were recreated as citizens of Rocaterrania who suffered abominable events; those who had been kind to him in life were rewarded in his private domain. When I asked Kuhler which character represented him in Rocaterrania, he made the most telling statement. He said, “I am Rocaterrania.” I then understood the magnitude and depth of his practice—it was not simply entertainment, but his own form of self-therapy.

I have noted a tendency among artists to keep their art-making practices private until they feel comfortable about disclosing their work or it is accidently discovered. I have met people whom others described as an artist, but they would not allow me to see their work. In all cases, the artwork is described as “just something I do,” not believing it would be of interest to anyone else. When I ask if they consider themselves to be artists, a long pause inevitably follows. Sometimes they indicate that they have never thought about it until I asked the question; sometimes they say, “I guess so.”

Professional artists I have known are concerned about their success, which they typically define as: acceptance by a well-respected art gallery, holding regular exhibits, enjoying good reviews and frequent sales, and in general, being able to make a living as an artist. Outsider artists I have met do not define success in the same terms. To be a successful outsider artist means having access to unlimited art supplies and unlimited time
to create. Public recognition—and the money that follows—is not the goal of an outsider artist. I have explored this with many artists and have consistently heard the same response: financial reward is irrelevant. One artist I know (Krant) refused to collect money held by a gallery for sales of his work. In his view, money threatened to change his much cherished, simple lifestyle.

There is one feature of outsider art that I have not explored with others, and that is my comparison of art making to a soliloquy. I found it significant that the Central Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale housed C. G. Jung’s recently released Liber Novus. In the form of an illuminated manuscript, The Red Book (as it is now called) documents Jung’s private imaginative experiences over a period of 15 years:

From December 1913 onward, he carried on in the same procedure: deliberately evoking a fantasy in a waking state, and then entering into it as into a drama. These fantasies may be understood as a type of dramatized thinking in pictorial form.... In retrospect, he recalled that his scientific question was to see what took place when he switched off consciousness. (Shamdasani, 2009, p. 221)

Jung described this liminal place of self-induced visions as one of creative abundance and potential ruin, the same places travelled by lunatics and great artists. He called them “cryptograms of the self” (Gioni, 2013, p. 24). The Venice Biennale catalogue proposes that The Red Book is not a work of art, but rather a collection of primordial images that are capable of combining a personal destiny with a collective one. It asks us to ponder how we can rediscover the intensity of those images today (Gioni, 2013, p. 25). It is remarkably similar to the question posed by Dubuffet in his search for pure art.

Co-exhibiting The Red Book and outsider art at the Venice Biennale challenged viewers to draw a parallel between the two; that is, both Jung and the outsider artists were
giving form to—or perhaps illustrating—their inner worlds. In my view, Jung’s drawings are indistinguishable from those of outsider artists. But one important fact was not elucidated at the Venice Biennale: in both cases, the artwork was created for themselves, not for public view. *The Red Book* was sometimes present in Jung’s office, but only a few trusted people were given an opportunity to see it. Upon his death in 1961, Jung’s heirs secured it in a vault and refused access to it by scholars and others (Corbett, 2009).

My understanding of what it means to think in ‘pictorial form’ leads me to believe that the work of an outsider artist is indeed a soliloquy: the act of talking to oneself; a dramatic monologue that represents a series of unspoken reflections (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, n.d., n.p.). The creations are not about art or about the human condition. They are about the artist’s individual experience (Cristine, 1987). New Museum, n.d., n.p.)

An outsider artist’s entire life’s work can be the creation of a private, fantasy world, sometimes to narrate their own story or perhaps to understand, reinterpret, or reinvent it. It is an intensely personal practice. And it is the process—as opposed to the outcome—of creation that is important (Zug, 1994). Perhaps it is a process of self-discovery (Cardinal, 1972), arising from their inner selves (Rhodes, 2000). “The act becomes inseparable from the individual, as a religion is for a minister” (Rousseau, 2014, p. 53). For me, the essential difference between outsider art and mainstream art is captured in this concept. Mainstream artists draw me into a dialogue; outsider artists do not. Rather, I feel that I am witness to a private event.
To illustrate this point, I compare the work of British contemporary artist, Chris Ofili with one of Prinzhorn’s patients, Brendel (Karl Genzel). Ofili used elephant dung in several of his pieces; Brendel made sculpted figures out of chewed bread dough. The New Museum offers this critique of Ofili’s work:

Ofili’s hybrid juxtapositions of high and low, and of the sacred and the profane, simultaneously celebrate and call into question the power of images and their ability to address fundamental questions of representation. (New Museum, n.d., n.p.)

Both artworks utilize unorthodox material, but Ofili’s decision to use elephant dung was intended to shock the viewer. To stand before his work is to engage in a dialogue with Ofili about the power of images in contemporary culture. Brendel, I suggest, had no such intention. Locked away in a psychiatric institution, he had no access to conventional art materials. Like many outsider artists, he improvised and created with whatever material was at hand. While there may be similar aesthetic features of an outsider piece and a work of mainstream art, the similarity ends there. As Danto (1998) said, there is no greater illusion in art than the view that similarity of object entails similarity of vision.

Some have suggested that the unique iconographies of outsider artists are a strategy to obscure their meaning (Rousseau, 2014). That is not my view. Such thinking further distances us from the artist’s humanity and romanticizes the artist’s intention. It is equally likely that the artist’s use of metaphor is simply one that we do not understand.

It is tempting to attribute meaning and intention to the work of outsider artists, but that, I believe, is only an act of conjecture. Outsider artists are not inclined to speak about their work and art dealers and scholars often supply interpretation. This undoubtedly adds to the mystery (and falsehoods) surrounding outsider art.
The Art Dealers

Art dealers and curators are uniquely positioned to observe both the creation of art and the art market and I considered it important to include their perspective in preparing this thesis. I completed a six-week internship at Intuit—the Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, in Chicago. It is the only not-for-profit organization in the United States that is solely dedicated to presenting outsider art. It offers exhibitions, resources for scholars and students, a large permanent collection, and educational programming for children and adults. Its mission statement says:

Intuit is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1991. Our mission is to promote public awareness, understanding, and appreciation of intuitive and outsider art through a program of education, exhibition, collecting and publishing.

Intuit defines “intuitive and outsider art” as work of artists who demonstrate little influence from the mainstream art world and who instead are motivated by their unique personal visions. This includes what is known as art brut, non-traditional folk art, self-taught art, and visionary art. (Intuit, n.d.-a, n.p.)

During my internship, I began to appreciate the relationship between artists, galleries, art institutions, and academic institutions. I met with university professors who taught courses in outsider art, gallery owners, artists, and of course, Intuit’s staff and Board members. I was also afforded an opportunity to review school curricula on the subject, meet teachers, and observe school children as they explored outsider art. I would not have been able to appreciate the complexity and richness of the American experience without having immersed myself in an environment that fully embraces outsider art.

6 I participated in a six-week informal internship, working mainly with Joel Javier, Education Manager. Javier received his BFA in studio art from Murray State University and an MA in Art Education from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) as a merit scholar in 2011. In addition to participating in all educational outreach programs, I contributed to the database of artist’s biographies.
I understand the mainstream art business to be hierarchical: museums and scholars are at the top, galleries and dealers are in the middle, and artists are at the bottom. By this I mean that to gain recognition, professional artists must be accepted (and valued) by those above them in the hierarchy; their career is dependent on the gatekeepers of mainstream art. Outsider art was conceived outside this hierarchy. In fact, the very reason for its creation was to challenge the institutionalization of art. Until Dubuffet assembled and named the art brut collection, outsider artists were idiosyncratic oddities.7

As interest in outsider art grew, and a market for it was established, there was a gradual shift in perception; outsider art could be identified and appraised. And, perhaps inevitably, an ‘institution’ of outsider art has developed. I hoped to learn more about that development and spoke with several art dealers in Chicago who were as bemused as I with the growing number of outsider art definitions and the shifting landscape of the genre. I have also spoken many times with New York art dealer, Marion Harris, who has an interesting perspective as a latecomer to the world of outsider art.

Harris had been an antique dealer until she discovered boxes of old photographs and hand-made figures at a Boston collectibles fair in 1993. She did not know exactly what she was buying, but suspected it was worth investigating and followed her intuition. The boxes contained an unusual collection found upon the death of a reclusive man in Chicago, named Morton Bartlett. Little is known about Bartlett, aside from bits of information from a few casual acquaintances. He was orphaned at a young age and later attended Phillips

7 See, for example, Cambridge-educated Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) who was a painter, poet, prophet, occultist and magician known for his eccentric beliefs. See also Adolf Wolfli (1864–1930), perhaps the most celebrated outsider artist, who was jailed for sexual predation, diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, and committed for the rest of his life to a psychiatric hospital.
Exeter Academy and Harvard, where he studied for two years. He never married. He worked in a series of jobs, from advertising photographer, gas station manager, and travelling furniture salesman. He did not study art professionally.

In his very private life, between 1936 and 1963, Bartlett created 15 plaster sculptures of half-size to scale children and made the clothes to dress them—from frocks and hand-knit sweaters for the girls to shorts and caps for the boys. The aim of Bartlett’s remarkable project seems to have been to photograph children doing things that ordinary children do: playing, dancing, reading, and sleeping. Except for a magazine interview he gave in 1962, he kept his life’s work private. It only became public after he died in 1992 and Harris acquired some of his personal items. What Harris discovered was the work of a classic outsider artist who taught himself, in private, how to achieve his artistic vision. His neighbours had no knowledge of his secret world.

Today Bartlett is an icon in the outsider art world, but acceptance—for both Harris and Bartlett—was slow and painful. Harris described the difficulties she experienced in bringing the work to market. In her view, the ‘intelligentsia’ of the outsider art world (powerful dealers, curators, and scholars) have tight control over all matters in the field, such as what defines outsider art, what has aesthetic value, what works can be exhibited at the Outsider Art Fair, and so on. Harris felt blocked at every turn as the gatekeepers declared Bartlett’s work to be the worthless endeavour of a pedophile. Sensitive to this accusation, Harris sought the opinion of psychologists, psychiatrists, art historians, and academic scholars who individually concluded that the body of work served as Bartlett’s
surrogate family and his need for family life. By engaging in this project, he ensured the fantasy remained just that—fantasy (Harris, 2002).

Harris compares Bartlett to Lewis Carrol, whose reputation was tarnished by rumours of his inappropriate attentions to children. There is no way to know the reality of Bartlett’s life, but there has been much speculation as to his motives. One author acknowledges the erotic nature of Bartlett’s photographs, but argues for their acceptance:

[Bartlett] would not be the first to have fashioned such intense images of desire, or invested them with a kind of life....

At the deepest level, Bartlett’s work is not about violation but contemplation. We surmise this because he took carefully composed photographs of his creations. Again, Bartlett was not the first to couple dolls, desire, and photography. Apart from Cindy Sherman’s work of the 1990s, the best-known example is that of German Hans Bellmer, who created several articulated “figures” in the 1930s and photographed them incessantly. Bellmer enacted scenes with his dolls, rearranging their parts in a full-scale assault on the female body and, overtly, on the Nazi ideology of physical perfection. Photography in this case was pornographic witness of various acts of desecration.

Undeniably erotic, Bartlett’s photos intend and achieve something Bellmer avoided—poignancy. They also reveal the power of the camera, by its fidelity to the subject, to bestow life. In three dimensions, the dolls are, finally, just dolls, near automata. But in front of the camera, they first become posed and captured individuals and then memorial, erotic remembrances. They take their place almost seamlessly among the vast archive of the once-but-no-longer-alive captured in photographs, and in death they gain a convincing vitality they do not have as objects. The double intuition of the nature of dolls and photography is Bartlett’s complex achievement. (Rexer, 2005, p. 115)

Bartlett was interviewed about his photography project by Yankee magazine in 1962. He put his project aside after that and it was not uncovered until his death some 30 years later. Art historians speculate as to the reason he stopped his work, but perhaps he was simply finished with it.
Bartlett was given the nod in 2000 when the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased part of the collection. Since then, Bartlett’s work has been placed in major outsider art collections around the world. (And, as Harris says, those who came to scorn remained to praise.)

Harris generally accepts Cardinal’s description of outsider art, which reiterates Dubuffet’s vision to a large extent: untutored; imaginative and outside the normal concept of art; not informed by or connected to the mainstream art world; and outside the traditions of art history. She stressed that commercialism is the one boundary that cannot be crossed; in other words, the outsider artist is one who is not interested in or actively engaged in promoting or marketing his or her work, for that is in the domain of an art representative.

Harris echoes the views of many others when she states that it must have an element of compulsion. In other words, the artist has an obsession to create art. She refers to artist Reverend Perkins to illustrate her point. Perkins decided one day that he wanted to paint a picture, and proceeded to paint one on his door. He declared it to be nice and covered it with a new painting. This process continued ad infinitum because, as Harris observed, he needed to do it.

The current state of outsider art is in flux. Harris describes two new categories of outsider artists. First are artists who are fully engaged in society but have no formal art training. By way of example, artist Thomashow is a physician who teaches psychiatry at Dartmouth College. Although he is recognized in the medical field, he has no formal art training. As an artist, he is somewhat obsessive about the detail in his pieces, and his work
has the feel of outsider art. Harris’s decision to exhibit the art of Thomashow at the *Outsider Art Fair* received a positive response.

The second group, called ‘crossovers,’ refer to outsider artists who have moved into the world of mainstream art. One such artist is Joe Coleman, who exhibited for six years (with gallery representation) at the *Outsider Art Fair*. The Fair’s directors then barred him because, it was announced, he briefly attended (and was expelled from) art school in his youth. This was ostensibly the reason for his exclusion; a critic, however, pointed out that another exhibiting artist was an art professor (Walker, 2002). Others believed that Coleman had become too commercial (i.e., successful and self-promoting) to be considered an outsider artist. When I met Coleman, I asked what category he was in now. He humorously replied that he didn’t know if there was a label for someone who was ‘outside the outside.’

Some say outsider art dealers wield all the power because their definition of outsider art prevails; it remains difficult to challenge, as there is no opportunity for debate (Lippard, 1994). The dealers, on the other hand, do not see it that way. A hierarchy has been established and, while dealers may establish the value of artwork, they are not necessarily in control of the entry gate. Recently, the owners of the *Outsider Art Fair* decided to vet artwork that dealers intended to exhibit in 2014. Permission to exhibit each artist was granted or denied, a practice that offended established dealers, as no guidelines were offered and no reasons were given for rejection. Some organizations were denied the right to exhibit at all. This particular effort to standardize (that is, institutionalize) outsider art was a failure. The pre-approval process was abandoned the following year when dealers refused to participate.
**Integrating Multiple Factors**

At this point, my research had not led me to a definitive statement of outsider art. In fact, I was uncertain how the genre would develop when no single voice of reason could be heard above the others. Several groups were moving to institutionalize outsider art by setting out parameters based on their own unarticulated rules; other groups (the art dealers) took offense at being told what to think; and the group on which the others most depended (the artists), kept their eyes on the task, not expressing any opinion other than their desire to keep creating.

Reviewing the history of outsider art helped me appreciate the cultural and social factors that influenced its development in various settings. One large task remained, however, and that was to determine if one cohesive definition could be crafted from its dominant descriptors: the artist’s biography, social status, and distance from mainstream art as well as aesthetic features of the work. I questioned whether outsider art had outlived its usefulness, that is, as a concept to illustrate Dubuffet’s treatise and a means to underscore the tyranny of art institutions. This controversial topic is explored in the following chapter.
Chapter 5: What’s In a Name?

Introduction

Dubuffet’s collection of work by psychiatric patients and isolated individuals was more than a protest; it was a powerful illustration of his belief that authentic art can only exist outside museums. Since then, the art world—or at least one segment of it—has been considering his thesis. Taking on Dubuffet’s challenge of the art establishment has not been easy. In fact, it has led to acrimonious debate about two major issues:

1. What is the definition of outsider art?
2. Should we segregate outsider art from mainstream art?

This chapter explores the ongoing dissention among art scholars about the parameters of outsider art and, in particular, a discussion about abandoning the term outsider and simply refer to outsider art as ‘art.’

Reconciling Multiple Views

I suggest there are reasons why it is difficult to reach consensus on the definition of outsider art. As outlined in chapter 2, it can be conceptualized in many ways: the artist’s biography; stylistic features of the art; the artist’s distance from mainstream art; or the artist’s social status. To complicate matters, American and European views are rooted in unique cultural histories. As referenced in chapter 4, one scholar questions whether the category of outsider art can realistically explain the work of “such disparate populations as white mental patients in Switzerland and black self-taught artists in the USA? Should they be squished into a single aesthetic category?” (Berger, 1998). He concludes that we cannot
have one monolithic category as the artists are not from a homogenous group and are from vastly different backgrounds (Berger, 1998). I agree. We have travelled a long way from Dubuffet’s treatise on the biases of art institutions.

An historical review of outsider art reveals the genre has expanded to embrace the work of diverse artists: American folk artists, African-American self-taught artists from the South, marginalized individuals, people with mental and intellectual disabilities, and those who are self-taught. There are several possible explanations for this expansion.

It is possible that art brut and its more recent incarnation of outsider art may be an expression of the zeitgeist at critical points in art history. Dubuffet’s radical and avant-garde ideology reflected the principles of modernism, where authenticity and ‘art for art’s sake’ were fundamental concepts. Similarly, in the postmodern age the multiple nuances and diverse styles in outsider art are accepted and admired.

But the zeitgeist also reflects our social values. The politics of social inclusion reflect our current recognition of and sympathies with different segments of society—the marginalized and the mentally challenged—but it does not fully account for changes in the art world. It raises this question: why are some marginalized segments of society accepted into the world of outsider art while others are not? There is no suggestion, for example, that artwork by new immigrants or other excluded groups be categorized as outsider art.

When I reflect on all the sub-categories and definitions of outsider art, I note that one common feature is that it references ‘the other.’ One could argue that by continuing to push the boundaries of outsider art, we are creating an ever-expanding pool of people who are not like us. Society’s elite still decides who is in and who is out. This view may describe
the ousted artists, but it does not really address the heart of the issue: what is outsider art and why is the genre still in flux?

**Disintegration or Integration of Outsider Art?**

Does outsider art still exist or has it moved down the path of extinction? (Peiry, 2001). In addition to the longstanding debate about the definition of outsider art, a more recent debate questions the need to keep separate categories of outsider art and mainstream art.

*Keep separate categories*

Scholars like Thevoz (1994) and Rhodes (2000) take the position that outsider art and mainstream art are two different species and the distinction must be maintained. They argue that we must divide mainstream art, which engages in a complex social dialect, and outsider art, which is made by artists who are socially disconnected and idiosyncratic in style. They are on “two separate paths, which both end at two entirely distinct destinations” (Peiry, 2001, p. 255). Taking a different approach, others call for separation of the species in order to preserve the integrity of outsider art, claiming that the mainstream art world is one of prostitution. To be admitted into contemporary art museums “is tantamount to boasting of the Mafia’s approval” (Peiry, 2001, p. 255). Recognition comes with social exploitation and commercial appropriation.

*Remove the boundary*

Some commercial art galleries have blurred the boundaries between mainstream and outsider art (that is, between academically trained artists and the personal art of self-taught creators). This troubles advocates of outsider art, who believe that such a step will
dilute the outsider category. They ask why, in order to validate outsider art, it should have to be measured against mainstream art (Gomez, 2014a). Can we compare them without making a judgment?

Maizels, the founder of Raw Vision magazine, states:

I don’t like seeing contemporary art alongside outsider art, as I think contemporary art devalues it. Dubuffet forbade any works from the collection to be shown next to contemporary art, as he felt it would contaminate it. The situation could get very blurred, especially with some contemporary artists appropriating an outsider-art aesthetic into their work. Will outsider art be able to maintain its unique power if it is constantly copied and mixed with contemporary art? (Maizels, as cited in Gomez, 2014a, n.p.)

Museums, too, have taken steps to exhibit contemporary art and outsider art together. Its reception has been mixed and it is always controversial. In 1996, the High Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, hung their collection of contemporary and outsider art in a global fashion, curating the objects visually and conceptually, not chronologically, not by genre, and not by culture. I was told that it was pronounced a failure; the public didn’t like it and museum educators complained that it did not fit their way of teaching. Things returned to the norm after that, with the outsider collection being ‘ghettoized’ with ‘low art’. One wonders why this problem cannot be resolved. Is it a question of changing public expectations or challenging museum educators to find new ways of teaching?

The most recent and highly visible instance of exhibiting contemporary and outsider art together was the Venice Biennale Arte 2013—Il Palazzo Enciclopedico (The Encyclopedic Palace). The theme of the Biennale sprung from self-taught Italian-American artist, Marino Auriti’s 1955 patent application for a drawing of his enormous encyclopedic palace, much like a colossal cabinet of curiosities. His vision was to construct an imaginary museum to
house all worldly knowledge and human discovery. The Biennale declared itself to be
“about knowledge—and more specifically about the desire to see and know everything, and
the point at which this impulse becomes defined by obsession and paranoia” (Gioni, 2013,
p. 23). It was also about the impossibility of knowing everything and our inevitable
realization that we will never achieve that end. It juxtaposed artists and art makers for a
specific purpose:

Conceived of as a temporary museum, the Encyclopedic Palace blurs the line
between professional artists and amateurs, insiders and outsiders, reuniting
artworks with other forms of figurative expression—both to release art from the
prison of its supposed autonomy, and to remind us of its capacity to express a vision
of the world.... For art to function as a hermeneutical tool with which to analyze and
interpret our visual culture, art must come off its pedestal and come closer to other
existential adventures. (Gioni, 2013, p. 23)

The Biennale included the work of 18 outsider artists, all of whom would appear on
a list of ‘who’s who’ in this genre. I questioned why fifteen of these artists are deceased, as
surely this would limit the scope of the collection. I concluded that this decision may have
been for practical reasons:

• The deceased artists were internationally recognized outsider artists, thus
  suppressing any controversy as to their right to be identified as such; and

• Their consent to participate, and on what terms, was not needed.\footnote{I note that certain American artists (e.g., Gregory Warmack (aka Mr. Imagination)) were invited to exhibit at a previous Venice Biennale, but that invitation was withdrawn shortly before the event. Chicago interviewees have advised that no explanation was given. I speculate that the dissention may have centred on categorizing Warmack’s work as outsider or folk art.}

There was a mixed reaction to the inclusion of outsider artists in Venice. The
naysayers felt that it was a curatorial cop-out because it ignored the new talents who would
become the defining voices of their generation. Those in favour of the curatorial decision were open to something different: “wonkier, more homespun offerings by lesser-known talents. Here is a view of the human imagination as an untameable beast, dominated by dark desires and impulses, now finally unleashed and allowed to roam free” (Sooke, 2013).

Curator Gioni explains his interest in outsider art:

More and more, I’m interested in visual culture, or figurative expression, rather than just contemporary art. This is to expand the dialogue and to move away from the accepted canon. It’s also because I think one of the most pressing questions [to interrogate] is the role of art and artists in our “image society.” To do that, you cannot just look at contemporary art. You have to look a little further, and that’s why I included those artists. I think they provide interesting examples of attitudes towards image-making, image-arrangement, and image consumption that are important to look at to understand how we can engage with visual culture today. (Millard, 2013)

Despite the decision to include both outsider and mainstream contemporary art in the exhibition, there was a noticeable difference between the information provided about each artist. Take, for example the information offered for a mainstream artist, like Neil Beloufa, compared to that of an outsider artist, like Emma Kunz, for which there is no description of her personal style or vision:

**Beloufa:** Neil Beloufa makes art that imagines a future in which the technological mediation of experience is a self-evident component of communication. In doing so, he manipulates language and context to obviate the separation between fact and fiction....

**Kunz:** Born into a family of impoverished weavers, Emma Kunz became aware that she possessed paranormal abilities—telepathy, extrasensory perception, and healing powers—when she was just a child. During her school years, she developed an interest in radiesthesia, a form of divination that uses energy fields, and began to draw extensively in her notebooks.... (Gioni, 2013, pp. 382, 399)
While of course the deceased artists could not produce an artist’s statement, there was an unfortunate absence of commentary about their work. Throughout the history of outsider art, it has always been about the artist’s biography and how those details qualify his or her status in this unique field. I reflected on this discrepancy and concluded that more could have been done to level the playing field, if that were indeed the curator’s intention. While outsider artworks were displayed with contemporary art, their presentation hinted at an unspoken difference between them.

Many viewers of outsider art at the 2013 Venice Biennale echoed the sentiments of Dubuffet in declaring outsider art to be a counter-balance to mainstream contemporary art: “The turbo-charged commercial art world is making some of us think again about what makes art fundamentally interesting. There is a critical mass of curators who want to remind people that there is something really interesting going on that has nothing to do with money” (Sooke, 2013).

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.

Is outsider art still a viable genre?

Some lament the passing of outsider art, believing it died a natural death when psychotropic drugs were introduced to psychiatric patients in the 1950s, thus stifling their creativity (Thevoz, 1994). Others argue that outsider art was a symptom of specific moments in modernism (Elkins, 2006). It grew out of conflict with and rejection of a modern, newly industrialized society. It was simply an ideological phenomenon that marked the decentering and fragmentation of 20th-century aesthetics, society, and institutions (Peiry, 2001).
A growing population can be heard to say that ‘art is art,’ and various explanations have been offered. One group suggests that the very existence of outsider art is offensive; they warn of the danger and power of labels and advocate against them. Further, defining art reflects society’s ethics, morals and spiritual state. “Outsider art is a flawed and injurious concept that promotes and perpetuates a dehumanizing conception of art. We should get rid of the whole idea of outsider art. It does more harm than good” (Ames, 1994, p. 271). Art critic Roberta Smith has proposed we drop the word outsider altogether, and just ask for a “level of artistry and power” as we would for any kind of art (Elkins, 2006, p. 78). It is a futile effort, she says, to keep them separate (Smith, 2007).

Bonesteel (2013) acknowledges that outsider art is changing. There is no longer the purist attitude that outsider art must meet the criteria of art brut that Dubuffet defined in the 1940s. He says, “Outsider art is dead; long live outsider art” (Bonesteel, 2013, p. 26). Consider his analysis:

- Outsider art is not dead, but it is changing. The purist attitude that it must be as Dubuffet described art brut is no longer true.
- The art that Dubuffet placed in the neuve invention category is a fair description of contemporary outsider art today.
- There is no longer a sense that the work is (or ever was) acultural.
- The term outsider art has been erroneously applied to many types of folk or self-taught art, thus prolonging the confusion.
- The term outsider art was viewed as pejorative for two reasons: it discriminated against artists, suggesting their work was of lower value and it was another
example of those in power having deemed them to be outside. Bonesteel acknowledges that one who objects to the label probably has too much “art-world savvy” to be called that in the first place. And, one probably is not an outsider if she or she wants to be treated as an insider. The more politically correct term “self-taught” is now used, but it is too encompassing to be meaningful.

- The current generation of students questions the existence of separate categories of art. It is, after all, the era of post-isms.

- The category of outsider art will no longer exist in 100 years. By then, it will have served its purpose—that is, recognition that something goes missing from mainstream art when artists become too side-tracked by money or celebrity to adhere to the “spiritual nature of their practice.”

Opposing the ‘art is art’ controversy, art historians say that there are significant factors that make outsider art a separate and distinct genre from mainstream art. Outsider art is a-historic and purely personal. ‘Real’ artists break art history traditions but outsider artists do not. Cardinal notes that outsider artists cannot break traditions that they don’t know exist and declares the position of art historians as “blatant cultural prejudice, based as they are on a tautological definition of art as art-as-defined-by-culture” (Cardinal, 1972, p. 52). Aside from the issue of perceived unfairness, Rousseau sums it thus: art institutions argue that elevating the common man to the status of an artist “weakens art history, its epistemological structure, and its instances of legitimization (peers, art critics, markets, collectors, museums)” (Rousseau, 2014, p. 45). Even if we wanted to, how could we
incorporate outsider art into the art world in the face of this incongruity? Dubuffet would have declared that art is everyone’s business, but I appreciate the strength of the opposition’s argument.

The final chapter of this thesis acknowledges the diverse opinions and definitions about outsider art and my own struggle to bring the disparate views together. While I still question whether it matters what outsider art is called, a more fundamental question about the futility of creating categories takes form.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Research Conclusions

I set out to unravel a tangle of outsider art terminology by exploring the biases and assumptions we hold about art and artists. I began my research by examining outsider art as an aesthetic construct. By tracing its history, I hoped to understand what it was, how the definitions have evolved over time, and what it is today. I believed the various definitions must have historical, cultural, or social roots. Indeed, that appeared to be the case as I delved into the reasons why definitions of outsider art in Europe (the country of origin) and the United States (the secondary location) look quite different. I identified some primary factors at play: the search for authenticity in art; pervasive myths about creativity and madness; movements towards social inclusion; and movements away from the marginalizing effect of labels.

In the United States, a growing population of art scholars and critics is suggesting that the debate be settled by dropping the term outsider. In their opinion, art is art. It would serve to end the debate because there would be nothing left to debate. That is one solution. Another is to concede that there is a multiplicity of definitions because one will not suffice to cover the wide and varied styles inherent in the genre. Perhaps it is better to celebrate the rich diversity of outsider art instead of lamenting the lack of consensus. Scholars have queried whether it is possible to reach agreement on a single, coherent definition (Berger, 1998). I struggled with the same issue. Having explored the complexities of outsider art from many angles, I was no closer to articulating one comprehensive definition of outsider art.
I came to understand that these varying perspectives are just that—points of view and opinions that interpret the world of outsider art. Whether we celebrate diversity or seek a common understanding of outsider art, discourse is imperative. “It provides an opportunity to reinforce power; it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it impossible to thwart it. It is a starting point for a new strategy” (Foucault, 1998, pp. 100–101).

My research led me to a better understanding of how outsider art came into being, but brought me no closer to a working definition of outsider art. I reconsidered Dubuffet’s original statement, before so many voices joined the debate:

[Art brut is]...works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture, where mimicry plays little or no part (contrary to the activities of intellectuals). 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 a completely 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. (Jean Dubuffet, as cited in Berst, n.d.-b, n.p.)

Given the multitude of perspectives that have been offered about outsider art since Dubuffet introduced his thesis, I do not think it is possible to provide a statement of outsider art; it means different things to different people. However, aside from Dubuffet’s suggestion that a person could be acultural (which he subsequently retracted), I suggest that several items in his definition stand without controversy: the artist is working outside the fine art system and invents his or her own style, techniques, and choice of materials.

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9 Dubuffet conceded that idea to a utopian vision (Berst, n.d.-b). He revised his vision from the acultural outsider to the asocial outsider (Dubuffet, 1988), and the focus shifted to artists who did not comply with social norms.
The artist is not knowledgeable about art history or art institutions. Consequently, there is no attempt to copy or imitate mainstream artwork or enter into the mainstream art world.

In offering my own conclusions about outsider art, I prefer to set aside the dissonance that ensued after Cardinal introduced the term outsider art in 1972, for that shifted focus away from the nature of the art to one of semantics. It is unfortunate that term became (and still is) so contentious, but it initiated necessary discussions about class issues and marginalization and opened our eyes to new ways to think about art. As for its meaning, I concur with Danto (1998) who holds that it refers to ‘outside the art world’.

While my views may not accord with scholars who have engaged in the debate before me, their treatises have given me much to consider. Most importantly, by revealing social and cultural biases that inform certain interpretations of outsider art, I have had to acknowledge some of my own habitual beliefs. It gives me reason to proceed cautiously and to articulate a few issues I grappled with.

First, I was forced to consider the meaning and definition of art itself. I was introduced to outsider art through art books and art exhibits and I never questioned its validity as an art form. But Prinzhorn, himself an art historian, referred to his patient’s output as image making (bildner), not art. I paused to reflect on his point of view. The impetus for assembling his collection was the relationship between creativity and mental illness. Likely intended for a medical audience, it was the attention brought to it by artists that raised it to the status of art, and I understand their reasons for doing so. It was more than a medical curiosity; it answered their quest for authenticity.
Second, learning about the therapeutic nature of art production gave me reason to reconsider my position again. If the artists did not think themselves to be creating art, why should I? Was I persuaded by those who declared it to be art? But after months of considering academic perspectives, it has not lost its power over me. Beveridge (2001) warns that the work may cause a ‘disquieting feeling of strangeness’, but it is an absorbing and beautiful strangeness to me. It doesn’t matter what it is called.

The meaning and definition of art is far beyond the scope of this thesis and I am unable to address the concerns of those who question the acceptance of outsider art as art. Perhaps it is appropriate to draw attention to the revolution between folk art and mainstream art in 19th century Europe. It required a radical shift in perception to accept the virtues of folk art (Danto, 1988) and I suggest that the art world is now undergoing a similar transition with respect to outsider art. Although it is beyond the scope of my studies to put forward a definition of art, I accept its common definition as works produced intentionally by human creative skill and use of the imagination (Oxford Dictionary Online, n.d., n.p.). And I accept that outsider art is art.

As my historical review and research concludes, I am still not able to offer a definitive statement as to what outsider art is. What is lacking in these definitions, I realized, is that they are all just definitions. They are created by people who hold particular views about the art world and the world in general. In other words, every definition reflects the biases of the speaker who applies her own logic to the classification system. It is further complicated by the fact that the debate spans two continents, each adding their own aesthetic, social, and political histories to the mix. To explore outsider art in other countries
on other continents would undoubtedly confuse the matter further. Yet, however fractured the discussion is, it must continue. Dialogue inevitably evolves through a complex set of diffuse relationships, not according to unarticulated, common world views; dissention is an essential part of the process (Foucault, 1988).

While absorbed in debate about definitions, art scholars (and I) may have lost sight of a more fundamental issue: that the process of creating categories is itself a questionable action. Foucault cautions that few things have an inherent order; rather, we impose order (and labels) on things in arbitrary ways. He illustrates his point with a description of aphasiacs asked to order coloured skeins of wool on a table. Unable to articulate a stable relationship between categories, they may place light-coloured wool in one corner, red wool in another corner, soft wool somewhere else, and those wound into a ball in another. These groupings ultimately dissolve because the characteristics that sustain them are too wide to be stable. The sorting process can continue to infinity, “creating groups then dispersing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again, becoming more and more disturbed, and teetering finally on the brink of anxiety” (Foucault, 1988, p. 111).

One can draw a parallel between Foucault’s aphasiacs and those who offer definitive statements of outsider art. It is simply not possible to maintain stable relationships between the articulated categories of outsider art put forward in this thesis. They overlap, contract, expand, and contradict each other. There is no inherent order in outsider art because the definitions spring from the intangibles of conjecture, beliefs, and ideology.
Foucault asks us to consider why one system of organization should prevail. He cautions that we must question the existing divisions or groupings with which we are already familiar and disconnect the unquestioned continuities by which we have organized the subject we wish to analyze (Foucault, 1988). Once the forms of continuity are suspended, he says, the entire field is set free.

All art (including outsider art), in its ‘neutral state’ is just that: a random collection of objects on which we imposed labels. So, perhaps the more fundamental question is not 

what outsider art is today, or what forces led to certain definitions, but why it exists in the first place. Who is formulating the questions about outsider art and what purpose do they serve? To answer that question, it is imperative to examine the forces at play in the art world (Foucault, 1988; Nochlin, 1988). Art is not a free, autonomous activity of an individual influenced by social forces, but rather, is part of a pre-existing social structure. Nochlin (1988, p. 158) describes it thus:

The total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast.

I considered the outcome if I threw out all definitions of outsider art, not with an idea to start all over again or craft my own definition, but with a view to ‘set it free’ and view outsider art as a neutral object. I returned to Dubuffet’s original discourse on art brut and queried this: What if Dubuffet’s discourse is based on a false proposition? He imposed his rebellious, non-conformist views about art onto individuals who had no voice and, in many cases, did not consider they were creating art. Instead of giving a voice to people
outside of culture, he projected his own ideas on them. It is possible that he equated artistic non-conformity with social marginality and cultural exclusion, and gave the artists a sense of intentionality and purpose that they did not have. If that were so, his discourse is a theoretical fiction. Further, if we consider art brut as a theoretical fiction, we can avoid having to reduce it to the level of a definition. Instead, it challenges us to consider the relationship between art and anthropology (Delavaux, as cited in Berst, n.d.-b).

Outsider art is nothing new; it has always existed. It is only the label that was invented and applied to a collection of art assembled decades ago. Cardinal unintentionally opened the door to new interpretations of art brut and the possible meanings of that label seemed to take priority over the art itself. That may not have been a bad thing; Dubuffet asked us to consider other ways of understanding art, in all its forms, and we have responded to that proposition with not one, but many theories. Outsider art is a social construct that cannot be reduced to definitions about the nature of the art or the characteristics of the artists. It is an idea, a concept, a model for reflecting on the nature and essence of art.

Educational Opportunities

Much can be learned from studying outsider art in the classroom. First, from an art history perspective, it illustrates the modernist views of Dubuffet who challenged us to re-evaluate our concept of art. That enquiry is still relevant as we reflect on contemporary art practices today. And, as a unique art form, outsider art speaks to the need for self-expression and how others have responded to that imperative. Exploring that aspect of outsider art offers students many opportunities for personal expression in the art room.
Second, dialogue about outsider art raises important issues of social marginalization and factors that contribute to its continuation. That, in itself, raises questions of power and control, both inside the artworld and in society at large.

I had an opportunity to observe the Teacher Fellowship Program during my internship at Intuit in Chicago. The goal of that program is to introduce self-taught and outsider art into the classroom and to educate elementary and secondary level students about the connection between outsider art and the inherent issues of social justice, cultural biases, and historical traditions. Teachers are coached to develop curricula based on the characteristics of self-taught art. In the art room, teachers are able to help students translate their personal visions into art, relying on their own creative instincts and using non-traditional materials. And, in social studies curricula, the inextricable link between outsider art and larger social issues can be explored.

While it may not be feasible to launch such an ambitious educational program in all schools in the United States and Canada, it is an interesting model for introducing social issues into curricula through art education. I believe it is possible to bring individual lessons about outsider art into the classroom simply and efficiently; Intuit provides free resource materials and prepared curricula on its website. The offerings are wide-ranging, and include such topics as the healing effect of personal treasures to the impact of outsider art on the artists and those who encounter their work (Intuit, n.d.-b, n.p.).

Outside the classroom, I hope this thesis promotes fruitful debate within the outsider art community. Although much energy has been focused on rationalizing outsider art categories, it is time to reflect on the conceptual issues raised in this thesis. While some
issues have been canvassed in scholarly publications, I do not believe they are widely discussed. The trend to ‘institutionalize’ outsider art should not continue without sober reflection on that very act itself. The time is ripe to consider both the history and future of outsider art in a broader social context.

**Topics for Further Study**

What is outsider art? That is a question I have been asked many times over the course of my research. It is a difficult question to answer, mainly because I do not know where to begin my explanation: Is it with Dubuffet’s anti-cultural manifesto, an interesting story about my favourite outsider artist, or a discussion about the forces at play in determining an artist’s status in the art world? Perhaps it is best to answer with another question: What is art (in its broadest sense)? Without soliciting that person’s own views on this complex question, it becomes very difficult, indeed, to begin the conversation. To engage with art—especially outsider art—does not necessarily begin or end with aesthetic considerations; it demands the viewer to examine his own biases, prejudices and myths about the relationship between personal expression and something she calls art. Dwelling on the definition of outsider is a productive exercise only to the extent that it raises critical issues in art and practice, such as the role of art institutions, the role of an artist, and so on.

The inspiration for this thesis was to better understand the nuances of outsider art by examining the social forces that led to a plethora of definitions. I began to realize my own limitations when I explored the parameters of outsider art in the United States. To be familiar with a country’s social and cultural history is a far cry from living it and I found myself questioning my interpretation of American class and race issues. And again in
Europe, I may never fully understand the most pertinent issues of social inclusion and mental illness; they are rooted in countless years of cultural history that is foreign to me. I am humbled to acknowledge my myopic vision. I can only, at best, offer my personal views on these issues from a uniquely Western Canadian perspective.

To open a dialogue about outsider art in Canada is a daunting task, as so little has been discussed to date. My initial research suggests that outsider art certainly exists in Canada, but it has not yet reached the level of a definition. That may be a good thing, as it affords a rare opportunity to start fresh. My first impression is that outsider art may hold different meanings across the country. Having strong cultural ties to France, Quebec may align itself with the European outsider art community. My early foray into outsider art in British Columbia indicates that it may be interwoven with issues of social justice. Overall, I have concluded that evolution of outsider art definitions is inextricably linked to national and local culture. Failure to recognize the underlying social, historical and cultural factors has led to some discord in the outsider art community. Canada, of course, has its own unique history and I can only speculate how that will shape our interpretation of outsider art.

Many individuals dwell in the domain of outsider art: artists, dealers, curators, scholars, collectors, and the public. I am deeply troubled by our failure to seek the views of artists, as they have much to teach us about the process of creation. The population of those who create outsider art is radically different from those who manage and consume it. It is the domain of marginalized individuals who traditionally have had no voice in society;
to rob them of an opportunity to speak about their own craft corroborates their invisibility. I look forward to hearing from these artists in the future.

Failing to acknowledge the unique individuals who create outsider art is but one example of inequities in the art world. Ethical practices are questionable at best and shameful at worst. Reports of unfair practices abound with respect to financial compensation and contractual relationships with artists who may have mental disabilities. Privacy and ownership rights raise legal issues that are not always recognized (wilfully or unwittingly) by art representatives. Further scholarship is greatly encouraged in this area to bring exploitative practices to light.
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