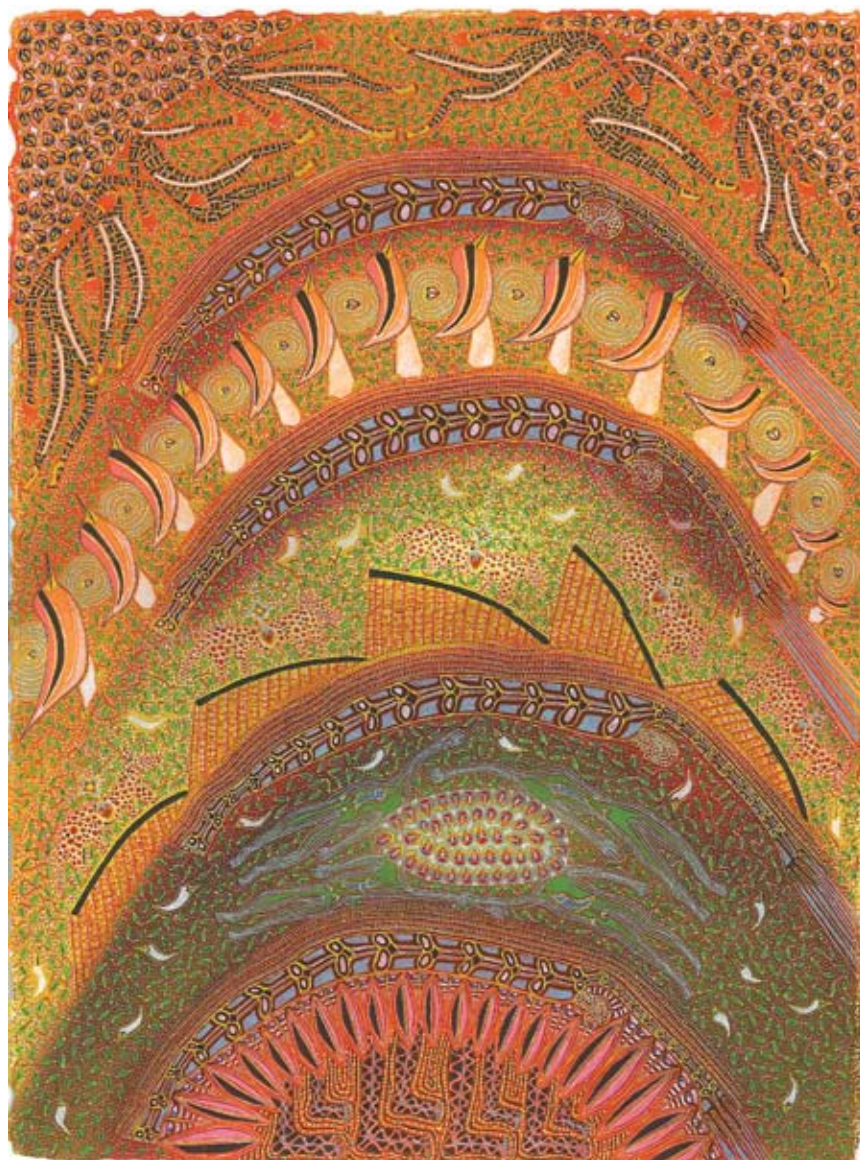


Art on the Margins

**OUTSIDER OR SELF-TAUGHT ARTISTS' WORK IS HOT,
AND SO ARE THE ISSUES SURROUNDING IT.** BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ



This year marks the 60th anniversary of the founding, in Paris, by the modernist painter-sculptor Jean Dubuffet, surrealist leader André Breton, art critic

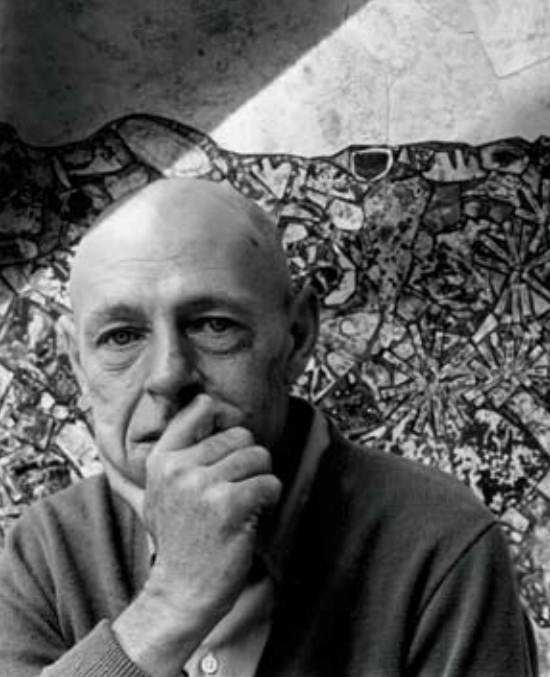
Michel Tapié and others of the Compagnie de l'Art Brut, a non-profit association dedicated to the investigation and promotion of a kind of art that had nothing to do with the work honored by

regular museums or with academic art history.

Instead, the creations that seized the attention of Dubuffet and his colleagues had been made by isolated, self-taught, sometimes visionary artists who lived and worked outside mainstream cultural traditions; some had been patients in psychiatric hospitals. Dubuffet called what they produced *art brut* ("raw art") and published a journal and presented exhibitions that explored their unusual art forms. Such works by "outsider artists," as they came to be known, included drawings by the Swiss artists Adolf Wölfli and Aloïse Corbaz and paintings by Joseph Crépin, a French plumber. Their artworks were *sui generis*, answerable, in aesthetic terms, only to themselves. Often they were characterized by techniques or formal aspects that had never been seen before, even in the experimental modern art of the early post-World War II period.

In his own art-making, Dubuffet would also be inspired by such indigenous forms of expression as graffiti, but he probably never could have imagined the depth of appreciation that would later evolve for, as he put it, the "works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture" that he passionately championed. Today, the sale of outsider or self-taught artists' works (the terms are often used synonymously) has become a recognized sector of the art market. Supporting it are countless books, exhibitions and catalogs, magazines like the London-based *Raw Vision*, galleries and specialized museums.

One of the most important of these museums is the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland. Opened in 1976, whose core holdings came from Dubuffet's own collection. Others include the American Visionary Art Museum, in



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Baltimore, and Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, in Chicago. In New York, the American Folk Art Museum focuses part of its programming on the work of self-taught artists, which, technically, is not folkloric at all, as it does not replicate or reinterpret well-established, vernacular forms. Galleries specializing in self-taught art can be found in France, Germany, Britain, Canada, the United States and other countries. A relatively new venue in Japan is Yukiko Koide Presents, in Tokyo, which calls attention to self-taught artists from East Asia.

As the outsider/self-taught field has grown, certain long-simmering issues and new developments within it have challenged the thinking of its devotees. For example, as an increasing number of collectors, critics, curators and artists learn to love the kinds of unpredictable work they encounter in this field, for some, the long-standing aesthetic divide between outsider/self-taught and good modern or contemporary art—or any kind of art—is dissolving. What's good and interesting is valuable no matter where it comes from, they believe. Some find more originality, inventiveness and soul in the works of self-taught artists

than they do in what the Boston collector Jay Davidson, after visiting last year's Venice Biennale, called the "overly planned, pretentious monuments to self-aggrandizement" that abound on the contemporary art scene.

Meanwhile, some outsider-art insiders are starting to wonder: Should there even be a separately designated "field" at all for this kind of art? Never mind that many of its aficionados are still debating just what to call it; "outsider," "self-taught," "non-academic," "intuitive" and "visionary" are all terms that have been used to describe it, but no one label adequately applies. Outsider art lovers are still defining this kind of work, too. After all, today, some of the basic art-making conditions Dubuffet had cited in defining outsider artists no longer exist. Today, for instance, almost no one is ever too far away from such culture conveyors as radios, TVs, mobile phones or Coca-Cola, so what does it mean to be "isolated from culture"?

Randall Morris, of Cavin-Morris Gallery in New York, a well-known outsider/self-taught art venue, notes, "The field has shifted and will continue to shift. The old labels need to be constantly re-evaluated.

What holds us together as a field is that we have chosen to specialize in one aspect of the art world at large." Even so, Morris also shows antique textiles from Japan, African sculptural objects and other so-called ethnographic art forms. Morris does not necessarily embrace the outsider label—his own fascination is with the universal appeal and spiritual aura of the most powerful artistic creations, whatever their origins—but he realizes that the marketplace already uses the term.

Similarly, New York dealer Phyllis Kind, a pioneer in the outsider field who also represents contemporary mixed-media artists like Gillian Jagger and Alison Saar, recognizes that the best art transcends labels. She points out, however, referring to self-taught work, that "some examples of this art are really magnificent and much more coveted than others, and therein lies a phenomenon." What Kind is highlighting is a sense that the best of this work is so unusual that it cannot be categorized—and that its uniqueness must not be overlooked. Often it is deeply personal (the imaginary-world collage-drawings of the Chicago recluse Henry Darger, for example) or technically innovative (Mexican-born Martín Ramírez's



Andrew Blythe, untitled gouache on paper (above). Compagnie de l'Art Brut co-founder Jean Dubuffet (top), 1956. Previous page: Domenico Zindato, "Untitled (171)," 2006, mixed media on paper.



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folk-futuristic pencil drawings) or inescapably spiritual (William Edmondson’s simple, gracious stone carvings). The most “outstanding” works by outsider/self-taught artists, Kind emphasizes, “*must* have been created by very special people—people for whom the artistic process itself becomes their entire concentration, their entire life, not infrequently identified as obsession.”

Roger Ricco and Frank Maresca founded Ricco/Maresca Gallery in New York in 1979 and have coauthored numerous books

about folk art and self-taught artists’ works. Ricco, an accomplished painter and fine-art photographer, echoes Kind’s remarks by noting that lately, as some contemporary art galleries have admitted “our artists” into their stables—a sign of category-dividing borders dissolving—“they simply have not worried about repositioning them.” He adds: “Astute contemporary dealers see talent, opportunity and product. They find artists and show art and promote it.” If some champions of self-taught art had long sought the validation of their field from the broader art establishment, now they have it—but could that recognition eclipse their field’s special status?

The academy has been moving in on outsider/self-taught territory, too, which is not necessarily a negative development, not when it results in such illuminating research projects as *Sacred and Profane: Voice and Vision in Southern Self-taught Art*. Co-edited by art historian Carol Crown of the University of Memphis and American studies professor Charles Russell of Rutgers University, this collection of essays published by the University Press of Mississippi examines the social, cultural and religious roots of self-taught works from one of the most fertile regions in the United States for this kind of art-making.

Jane Kallir, a co-director of Galerie St. Etienne in New York, which specializes in Austrian and German expressionism as well as in outsider/self-taught art, wrote a commentary in the *Art Newspaper* last summer in which she noted that, over time, value- and opinion-shaping influence in the art establishment appears to have passed



Henry Darger, “Untitled (At Jennie Richee, After Crossing River . . .)” (top), c. 1950, watercolor and pencil on paper. Sandra Sheehy’s work, including these two untitled pieces (above and right), is experiencing an increase in popularity and critical attention.





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from curators, critics and art historians to the marketplace. She notes, "It's ironic, though, that in the outsider/self-taught field, the opposite seems to be happening: a field that was initiated by collectors and dealers is now finally starting to develop an art-historical infrastructure."

Looking ahead, Kallir says, "The big hurdle to jump will be the quality question. For the field to grow up, a lot of its inferior offerings will have to be jettisoned." But that, she observes, could spell the end of such specialized events as the Outsider Art Fair, which takes place each January in New York. At such fairs, leading galleries in the field may turn up alongside purveyors of merchandise that, as some collectors and exhibitors have noted, is of dubious value. The moral: Just because an unschooled person produced this found-object sculpture

or that doodle does not mean that his or her creations are good art—or art at all.

"One reason we're having so much trouble dealing with the question of quality—in our field and the larger art world—is that the critical establishment has become fearful of making aesthetic value judgments," Kallir says. "Qualitative judgments can too easily be construed as being racist, sexist, Eurocentric. So we exist in a critical vacuum—and the market rules."

Would Dubuffet, who died in 1985, be impressed to see how the field he helped create has developed? He predicted that the public would come to embrace outsiders' works and show "ample disdain for the flashy, professional 'artists,' with their pseudo-'art critics' and dealers." "True art," he wrote, "lies elsewhere." That art has come into its own, as proved by its mature, international market and the intense debates surrounding it. 

William Edmondson, "Mother and Child," c. 1939, carved Tennessee limestone. Adolf Wölfli, "Monmooria, Indien: Und, Martins=Nacht, imgrossen, Ost=Meer" (top), 1919, pencil and colored pencil on paper.

Correspondent Edward M. Gomez regularly writes about outsider art. His most recent publication is HANS KRÜSI (Paris: Iconofolio/ Outsiders, 2006).