

RAW REVIEWS

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM

NOT THE SAME OLD FOLK ART MUSEUM ANYMORE

NEW YORK—As this issue was going to press, in New York a debate was raging on among architects, critics and architecture aficionados about the Museum of Modern Art's early-January announcement of its latest expansion plans. Having purchased the small, neighbouring property to the west of its sprawling, mid-block campus (on 53rd Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues in Manhattan), where the now-abandoned American Folk Art Museum building still stands, MoMA made it known that it would raze that structure in order to keep building and growing to the west.

AFAM, wrestling with crushing financial problems that led its trustees to even consider unloading its precious permanent collection, felt forced to sell its distinctive building to MoMA in 2011. Designed by Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, AFAM's first-ever

building of its own opened in 2002. Architecture buffs had hoped that MoMA would at least try to preserve the empty folk art museum's façade in its next-phase growth scheme.

Meanwhile, farther uptown at AFAM's exhibition space across from Lincoln Center and at its offices in a separate, nearby building, the folk art museum's administrators have put the institution's recent, troubled past behind them. Today, a palpable sense of renewal and forward movement characterises AFAM's programming and the outlook that is shaping it. Leading the museum's creative charge, or at least articulating the fresh-sounding ideas that seem to be fuelling it, are AFAM's new executive director, Anne-Imelda Radice, a former director of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC, who has been in her job since late 2012; longtime chief curator and director of exhibitions, Stacy C. Hollander, who has added "deputy director for curatorial

affairs" to her job title; and Valérie Rousseau, a Canadian from Québec, whose academic background includes studies in anthropology and art history, with focuses on folk art, Art Brut and the creations of self-taught art-makers in all their diversity.

Rousseau's job title—she is the museum's "curator of art of the self-taught and Art Brut"—reflects something of a revised approach on AFAM's part to the consideration of just about everything she and her colleagues might think about acquiring or showing. Whereas her predecessor at AFAM headed up a so-called contemporary centre, a kind of conceptual place within the museum whose programming focused on works made by self-taught or outsider artists which, strictly speaking, probably should not have been placed under a folk art rubric, as Rousseau noted in an interview with *Raw Vision*, that section of the institution has been dissolved.

In its place, a "council for the study of Art Brut and the self-taught" has been established.

Now, notably, AFAM is unabashedly using the term “Art Brut,” which for some outsider/self-taught art aficionados and specialists will evoke Jean Dubuffet’s classic definition of a kind of art that is made by and for creators in settings or contexts that lie outside the social-cultural-commercial mainstream. In their work, Rousseau and her colleagues are and will be using “Art Brut” in a more expansive way.

“Museums are constantly evolving,” she said, adding that “even the term ‘Art Brut’ is being redefined.” What’s important, she explained, speaking for curators and museums in general, “is that we have to be responsible for the concept we’re developing—responsible, too, to [different] cultures that might not be based on the same sets of values.” Embedded in that notion, of course, is a recognition that, by definition, through their singular creations, outsider or self-taught artists who do not make folk art, per se, in effect devise original cultures, too, whose



sister gertrude morgan

values their works express and embody.

Traditionally, Rousseau noted, folk art has been seen as “representing collective values.” But what if certain works of folk art were to be regarded as forms of Art Brut and examined accordingly? In an exciting development, Rousseau pointed out that this

current of thought is one that has played a significant part in AFAM’s preparation of its big, new exhibition, “Self-taught Genius: Treasures from the American Folk Art Museum.” Opening on May 13, 2014, in New York, where it will run through August 17, the exhibition has been funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. After its first showing, it will travel to six other museums in the USA. Its tour will last through early 2017.

The exhibition will bring together objects from the mid-eighteenth century through the late-twentieth century, works traditionally viewed as folk art creations as well as paintings, sculptures and other objects made by autodidacts who are normally regarded as self-taught or outsider artists. Among them: Henry Darger, A.G. Rizzoli, Sister Gertrude Morgan and Mary T. Smith.

Reflecting a fluid critical–curatorial approach to the material to be displayed,

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Rousseau said, “Some of the folk art works in the exhibition could be seen as Art Brut, because they express [the] more personal visions” of the people who made them. “Folk art is popular art,” she noted, because, often, folk art objects have utilitarian functions. However, Rousseau added, “For me, folk art also refers to exceptional objects [that are] not part of the larger, collective exchange [of cultural values].”

Sometimes, she explained, a folk art object is “a unique piece made by someone who never gave it away or who maybe gave it to one person.” In other words, the characteristics of certain folk art creations can and sometimes do resemble those of works that would normally be classified as Art Brut. Rousseau said that, in examining any of the works in the exhibition, a question to think about is, “How would [any work under consideration] respond to the idea of ‘self-taught’?”

“Self-taught Genius” will be divided into

numerous thematic sections, some of whose titles include *The Messengers*, *The Encoders* and *The Travelers*. Those labels refer to different characteristics or functions the works on view in a particular section will represent. “Self-taught Genius,” Rousseau said, will call attention to the inventiveness and originality of a wide variety of artists and also “show how our collection has grown, and how this museum is evolving in its field.”

The exhibition will be the first big one AFAM has organised and mounted since the sale of its building. The museum no longer has a stand-alone home of its own. Still, for the moment perhaps no structure can adequately contain this ambitious institution, whose mission and purposes are evolving, with fervour, making it one to sit up and watch in ways with which its former neighbour on 53rd Street, despite its gargantuan size, simply cannot compete.

Edward M. Gómez