



# RAWVISION

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# OUTSIDER ART: THEN, NOW, TOMORROW

**The 25th Outsider Art Fair, which took place in New York in January, was a milestone in the outsider art field. Its success offers an occasion to look back on the evolution of this unique sector within the broader international art world. *Raw Vision* spoke with some leading dealers who have been involved with the fair for many years. How do they see the main developments in the outsider art field and the market that has grown up in support of it? And how do they predict where it may be headed?**

Compiled and edited by EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



photo: Ted Degener

## ANDREW EDLIN

Andrew Edlin opened his eponymous New York gallery in 2001. He also heads Wide Open Arts, a company that has produced the Outsider Art Fair since 2013.

**T**he biggest changes in the field over the last 25 years revolve around its exponentially greater recognition by the art world and general public. This is due to a gradual evolution in the understanding of outsider art, from [formerly regarding it in] a folk art context to [nowadays regarding it in] a contemporary art context. Outsider material is no longer relegated only to specialised collections and museums. The most visible and respected institutions are exhibiting and collecting this art, and major auction houses are taking it seriously, too. The Internet and social media have played a vital role in disseminating information about outsider art.

Our fairs have generated a higher volume of news about the field than any other entities, and we work very hard at sharing these articles with an international audience. The press has also become

more interested in the work and better informed about it. We're also seeing a new and energetic generation of scholars in the field, which is becoming more international in its scope and worldview.

Categorical boundaries will continue to weaken. There are many interesting artists who, while formally trained, are creating work that is not based on art-historical precedents or trends. Their work might be considered closer to outsider art, [bringing to mind] the term "*neuve invention*", which Dubuffet coined to refer to art [forms] that he admired and collected, but which didn't quite adhere to the more stringent qualifications [he had established that would allow them] to be considered "*art brut*". The goal continues to be that art [should be] evaluated along a spectrum of being interesting or uninteresting, rather than as "outsider" or "insider" art.



## AARNE ANTON

Aarne Anton's American Primitive Gallery opened in New York in 1981 and has taken part in the fair since it began in 1993.

Reflecting on this field's evolution over the past 25 years, I think back to my walks through each year's Outsider Art Fair and the diversity of the works different dealers have presented there. Many artists whose works have been shown at the fair have passed away. Some of their works have become iconic. Most exciting to see are the new discoveries each year.

This field continues to become broader in scope as it embraces artists from more and more nations around the world, and as new connections [between dealers, collectors, artists and others] continue to be made. Another trend I've noticed is that of increased attention to this field on the part of artists, dealers, writers and critics in the larger, mainstream art world. For me, the fact that, after 25 years, we still cannot agree on a single term to use to name this kind of art is a good sign; it means that it is still giving off sparks.

Looking ahead, I expect more museums will catch up with what is happening at the grassroots level and mount more exhibitions and pursue more scholarship in this field. Twenty-five years is a short time. In fact, this field may still be in its infancy.



## JOHN OLLMAN

John Ollman heads Fleisher/Ollman in Philadelphia. The gallery has been an Outsider Art Fair mainstay since its inception.

The most significant changes concerning artists who are essentially self-taught have come with regard to their acceptance within the bigger picture of the global art world. The artificial boundary of "otherness" [that has long applied to such artists] is far less important today than it was ten years ago and it is greatly different than it was 25 years ago.

When you can see, as you can now, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, a William Edmondson sculpture next to a Glenn Ligon painting, without any qualifying explanation [for the presence of the Edmondson work], then you know things have changed! Hopefully we will arrive at a point at which we will discuss all art as art, and all artists as artists. Meanwhile, as long as we treat some of them as "others," discussion will continue to be problematic.



## HENRY BOXER

The London-based dealer Henry Boxer opened for business in 1976 and has participated in the fair since it first took place.

There are now more events and venues than ever before at which the public can engage with outsider art, and a wider range of publications - from scholarly books to popular journalism - which do justice to the originality, creativity and power of outsider artists themselves. This has led to much greater appreciation of the best examples of such work, and to a greater understanding of their importance, both historically and within the art market. Thus in some cases, for example the artists Martin Ramirez, Henry Darger, George Widener, Charles Benefiel, Lubos Plny, their works have now become sought-after by contemporary art collectors, and the market values of such works have risen and been reappraised accordingly.

I would say that this reappraisal and interest will continue unabated. Those many art lovers and collectors who may be tired of the self-aggrandisement and egotism of the celebrity practitioners of gallery art, recognise that, in contrast, a genuine art brut artist is not concerned with personal glory but creates instead out of an inner need and instinctive passion. The deeply personal, mysterious forces in play transcend other, petty, objectives. For me, for the artists I work with, and for a growing number of enthusiasts worldwide, these are exciting times!

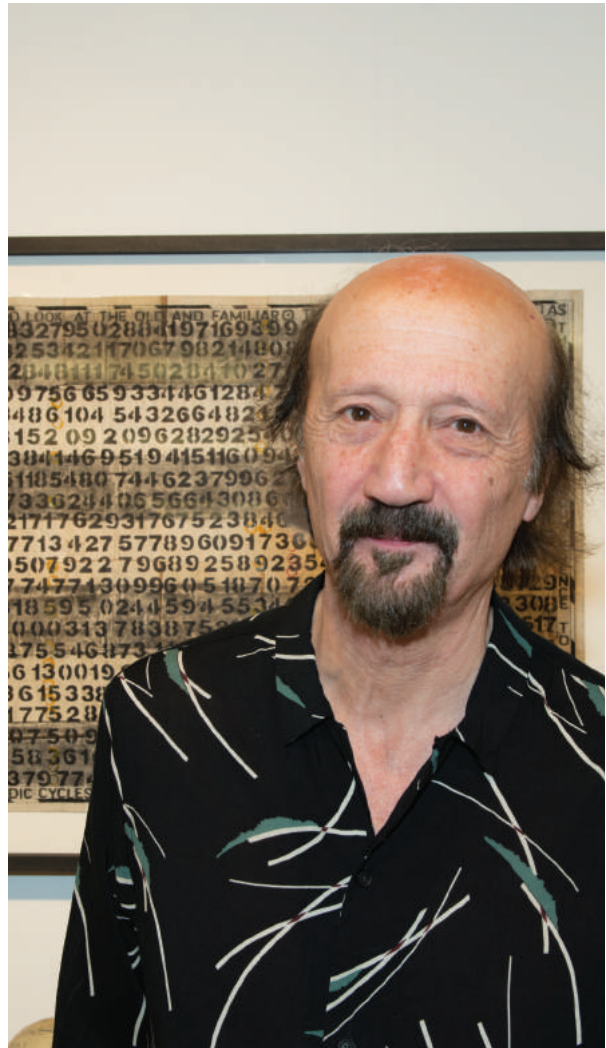


photo: Ted Degener

## ERIC GILLEY

Eric Gilley directs Gilley's Gallery in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which his late father opened in 1978. Specialising in art of the American Deep South, it has been in the fair since it was founded.



photo courtesy of Gilley's Gallery

Interest in the "old masters" of the field, such as Clementine Hunter, David Butler, Sister Gertrude Morgan and Royal Robertson is stronger than ever. I see this in my gallery, but what's even more encouraging is seeing the interest in other places, like the Outsider Art Fair in New York. We've been a part of the fair for 25 years. Many of these early collectors are still buying; their enthusiasm is still there. One of the most encouraging aspects of this fair is the number of new collectors it attracts.

Major institutions are still adding to their collections. For example, an exhibition in the recently opened, renovated folk art and self-taught galleries at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, showed works by many recognised artists [in the outsider/self-taught field], as well as new discoveries that had been added to its collection over the years but had never been exhibited in their own dedicated space.

Whereas there was once a time when a box of old drawings would be thrown out and forgotten, nowadays more and more people are considering [such material] important enough to save and research. Who knows where the next big discovery will be made? That's what excites me about this field.

# CARL HAMMER

Opened in Chicago in 1979, Carl Hammer's gallery has also participated in the fair since its first edition in 1993.

Over the past 25 years, there has been significant change in the *art brut*/outsider art field, both in its overdue acceptance, at last, by the broader art world, and in the way that artists are now being considered as having worked within this genre. Major art institutions around the world are now recognising the true significance of this kind of art and helping it to win the same kind of acclaim art made by academically trained artists has long enjoyed.

We dealers have long recognised the brilliance of this kind of art. Now there is no question that this phenomenon is also being broadly accepted by the collecting community, by both private and public collectors. I foresee the continuation of this trend, yet I shudder to think that an overly enthusiastic, growing audience of collectors might have a long-term watering-down effect on the "purity" of this genre. However, if works of this kind are treated and collected carefully, their uniqueness will continue to stand out, for they represent the unadulterated creative genius of the human spirit.

On the other hand, the commodification of artworks in this field tends to suggest that it could be headed in a somewhat troublesome direction. As a purist, I hold to Dubuffet's definition of true outsider art as "being produced by people immune to artistic culture"; it is, as he observed, art in which "there is little or no trace of mimicry". Unfortunately, nowadays in this field, there appears to be way too much being presented that does

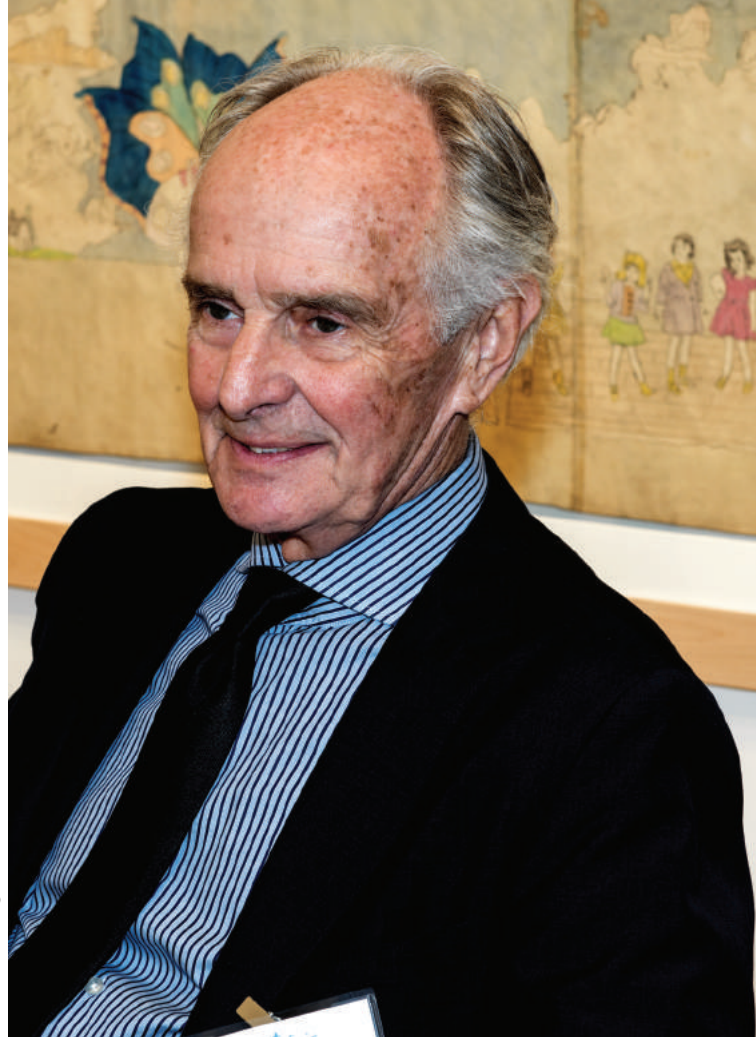


photo: Ted Degener

not properly belong. Such works, which have slowly and tacitly been accepted by the field, have corrupted it. It is extremely important that the academic/museum/art gallery world both recognise and resist this watering-down tendency.

# MARION HARRIS

New York-based Marion Harris began working as a private dealer in 1995 and has been in the fair since its first year.

The growing popularity of the outsider art field has coincided with all boundaries for every art category becoming less rigid. It seems to me that the interest in outsider art has run in parallel with the rise of high technology, underscoring a need for genuine, original, inspiring works of art instead of cerebral works. [Editor's note: Harris is referring to works of conceptual art, which are still widely found on the broader, contemporary-art scene.]

Future developments in this field will surely see a continuance of the need we have to balance a high-tech, clinical world with the sincere one outsider art represents.



photo: Edward M. Gómez





photo: Edward M. Gómez

## SHARI CAVIN

Cavin-Morris Gallery opened in New York in 1985 and has been a regular at the fair since its inaugural edition in 1993. It is also well known as a venue for artworks from indigenous cultures.

One of the greatest changes we've seen is the internationalisation of the field. When we began in 1985, there were American artists and European artists. That was it. Now we have artists from almost every continent and avid collectors of their works.

Now, for this field to be taken seriously, it needs to be able to withstand the rigors of formal criticism levelled at the art. There is no reason why one should not have these discussions, for as in any other field, good work will hold up to scrutiny. Such critical scrutiny would break with the biography-heavy promotion that has long prevailed when discussing the work of self-taught artists. It would also present challenges for those who say they collect these artists' stories as much as they do their art.

Sometimes self-taught artists' interesting biographies have been used to help sell their relatively

inferior-quality art. Still, it is these artists' biographies in relation to their artistic accomplishments that help distinguish them from those of their schooled peers. Those artists have had training – they make choices as to what to create, which stimuli are important to respond to, when to change styles. That is not the reality of self-taught artists, from Judith Scott to Solange Knopf.

So the question becomes: How can we use self-taught artists' biographical information? For, after all, familiarity with it can enrich our appreciation of their art. Self-taught artists create in spite of life's obstacles. Their art-making may be seen as an act of courage in the face of life's harshness. There is an undeniable moral influence that self-taught artists exert on trained contemporary artists. Their message: Stay true to yourselves.

## RANDALL MORRIS

In the US, this field started with people almost universally calling the art on which it focused "twentieth-century American folk art," despite the fact that the work was idiosyncratic and did not emerge from traditions that had been handed down, from generation to generation. The unfortunate result was a serious downplaying of and scant paying of attention to non-American material, even from such other countries in the Western Hemisphere as Haiti and Jamaica. So a major change between then and now

has been the increasing inclusion in this field of work from outside the US, including art from Asia, Africa, Australia, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Now it is possible to build a collection that looks like no other, and we are very grateful for that.

This is a very interesting, exciting and dangerous time in which to be in this field. It is deceptively diverse. Earlier, in the US, there was a small pool of dealers, and there were even fewer galleries; all of them were going after the work of many of the same artists,

who usually were deceased. Now there are more dealers trying to push this field into the same kind of financial bordello as that of the contemporary-art world. In the near future, I see this field as being in great danger of gentrification by the mainstream art world.

The future is about how we deal with living self-taught artists, now that the prices of the works of the previous three or so generations of such artists either have risen so much that they are not easily affordable by the average, visionary art collector, or they are no

longer available. As the field expands internationally, some of its familiar gatekeepers are stepping down, and its parameters are being thrown wide open in the excitement.

This field may be seen as part of the broader contemporary-art scene but it doesn't play by its rules. Critics and new scholars constantly try to chop the body to fit the bed, but this art has its own intentions and its own rules. We can include it in the mainstream, but it doesn't include us.



## TOM DI MARIA

Tom di Maria is the director of Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, California. A studio for people with disabilities, its gallery, a popular, contemporary-art venue, opened in 1974.

I've been involved in the field for almost 20 years, with a particular emphasis on working with artists with developmental disabilities. The biggest change I have seen lies in how it has evolved from one mostly driven by a handful of collectors and galleries with a specific interest in a few outsider and self-taught artists into a field that has greater relevance in the contemporary-art world and a more diverse collector base.

If we look at specific Creative Growth artists, such as Judith Scott and Dan Miller, as examples, we see their work being presented in very contemporary venues. These two artists' works will be featured in the main exhibition at the 2017 Venice Biennale. This is ground-breaking. There, their work will be presented on equal terms with that of other contemporary artists. Similarly, within the past several years, works by

Creative Growth artists have been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. They have been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum and shown at contemporary galleries and international art fairs.

I'm very encouraged by the number of students and young collectors who see the work of Creative Growth artists – and of self-taught artists in general – as a vital part of today's art scene. Questions about how we should consider work made by artists with disabilities in relation to that of academically trained artists have increasingly been pushed to the side. Works by self-taught artists offer romantic and humanistic encounters – filled with immediate, visceral pleasure – with the creativity of other human beings that are aesthetically engaging and personally satisfying.





photo by Ted Degener

## FRANK MARESCA

Roger Ricco (opposite) and Frank Maresca are the co-founders of New York's Ricco/Maresca Gallery, which dates back to 1979 and has been an Outsider Art Fair participant since 1993.

Twenty-five years ago, self-taught and outsider art were categories that seemed to be the specific concerns of a small group of collectors and academics. Since then, however, pioneering exhibitions and considerable media coverage and scholarship have established the concept of "crossover" between these "marginal" branches of the visual arts and so-called mainstream modern and contemporary art. This process is encouraging in terms of how it has transformed the public's perception and appreciation of self-taught artists' creations.

The definition of what it means to be an "outsider" is changing and becoming broader. This is both good and unfortunate. It's now popular to be known as an "outsider"; the romantic figure of the iconoclast is sexy and smart. However, "outsider art," as I've always defined it, is essentially a politically correct variation of Dubuffet's "art of the insane," meaning that it's produced by people working so far outside of society as we know it, that they often need to be in the company of caregivers.

## ROGER RICCO

From my perspective of over 35 years in the field and 25 at the Outsider Art Fair, I'd say that the increasing inclusion of masterworks of *art brut*/outsider art/self-taught art in the collections of major American and international museums, without regard for their specific genre category, has provided the most important kind of recognition for this art, recognition that it deserves.

As for this field's specialised market, the fact that

On the other hand, "self-taught" is a label that applies more broadly to art that is produced outside of the familiar art-historical narrative – art that is not of the academy. Nowadays, even though it might be harder for artists to be isolated from today's cultural climate, I believe there will always be gifted artists who are born with unique minds. Whether it's due to Asperger's or to finding one's self elsewhere on the autism spectrum, such people can legitimately be called outsiders and will always be out there to be discovered. Thanks to the "crossover" trend, as more and more dealers and collectors are expanding their focus from traditional modern and contemporary art to include outsider and self-taught art, too, I feel optimistic about the future.

It has always been my argument that the only criterion by which to judge anything is its quality; there's no real difference in quality between works by Matisse, Gerhard Richter, Henry Darger or Martín Ramírez. Works by these artists can be hung next to one another, provoking very interesting visual conversations.

the high-profile auction world, seeking new sales and profit opportunities, has embraced it is, I think, the biggest major commercial development in recent years.

With this in mind, someone like the African-American, self-taught artist William Hawkins would be happy, for he once said, dreaming of a day when his work would be widely appreciated, "Those young kids will see my picture hanging and say, 'Look at what that





photo: Edward M. Gómez

old man can do!"

This "field", as we tend to call it, has been the Internet or the Apple iPhone of the art world – at first it didn't exist at all, and then one day – boom! – there

it was! After all these years, I still get a thrill from and feel totally surprised by the quantity of wonderful work that is being discovered and coming forth on an international scale.

## LUISE ROSS

Luise Ross's eponymous New York Gallery opened in 1983 and has taken part in the fair since it first took place. Ross has played a key role in promoting such artists as Bill Traylor and Minnie Evans.

I have been dealing in the field of self-taught art for over 30 years, starting with the work Bill Traylor. This kind of art truly has become a force to be reckoned with. I remember the energy and excitement at the very first Outsider Art Fair. Even then we knew that there was something very special here. At that point, it was much more of a niche market, without the visibility it has now. I believe the art in this field has proven itself to be worthy of critical thought and consideration. It is not a trend or a flash in the pan – it is here to stay.

I do see it changing, though. I think technology and the Internet have had a great deal to do with that. The idea that an artist in the US could be completely isolated from the greater art world is becoming more of an unlikely concept. We see self-taught artists reaching out to galleries and promoting themselves more frequently thanks to the Internet, art fairs and feature articles in art magazines and newspapers. They are claiming the title "outsider", which has become more prominent in the art world since the early 1990s.

Self-taught art has gained a reputation for innovation and sincerity, which, by contrast, seem to be more diminished in the mainstream art world. The fact that this field is still here and is still growing is a testament to the power and honesty of self-taught artists' work. I have always been able to see its validity.

photo: Edward M. Gómez

