



SIGN OF THE TIMES

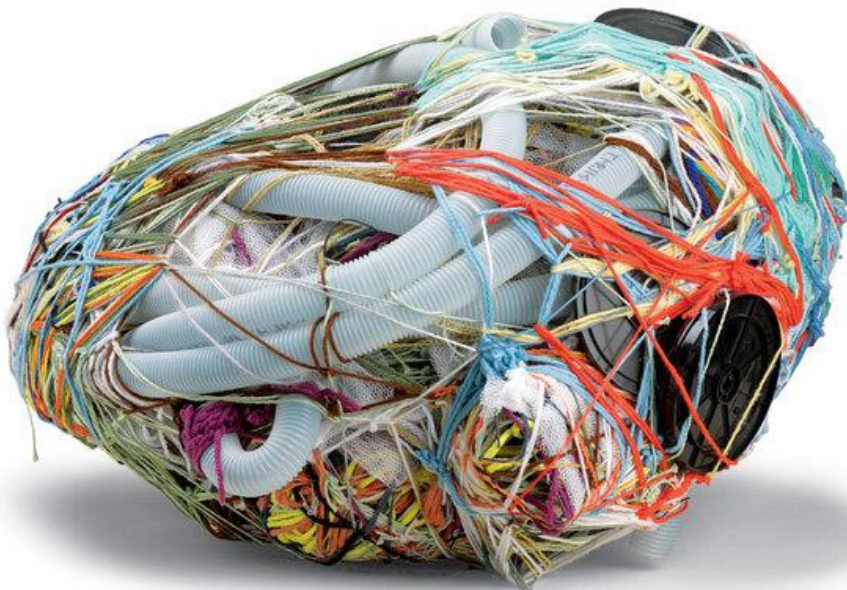
# Outside In

CULTURE

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*'Outsider' work is finally being welcomed into major institutions, but the sense of difference with which we used to approach it might offer valuable lessons in how to look at all art.*



The celebrated sculptures of Judith Scott (1943-2005), a deaf-mute artist with Down syndrome, were made by wrapping wool around sometimes precious objects, and refuse simple interpretation. Credit "Untitled," 2004, Judith Scott, the Smith-Nederpelt Collection, ©Creative Growth Art Center. Photo: Sarah Desantis, Brooklyn Museum

According to one theory of language, a word means something only because of its opposite. One term conjures the other, like an afterimage that hovers on the surface of the retina. So it is that we cannot say “up” without suggesting “down” or “good” without raising the ghost of “evil”; we know “presence” only because it is not “absence.” Inevitably, each word pair summons a hierarchy, a story of power. *White/black* — lately that one seems more brutal, more intractable than ever. *Male/female* — that one looks to be, if not collapsing outright, at least becoming a little more flexible. Meanwhile, in the art world, one of the most profound shifts has been that of so-called outsider art, which has finally come all the way inside.

From “[Glossolalia](#)” at the Museum of Modern Art back in 2008, which mixed drawings by self-taught artists like Joseph Yoakum and Pearl Blauvelt with works by Louise Bourgeois and Jim Nutt, to the recent acquisition by the Met of 57 works by Southern African-American artists from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation (including 20 quilts by the women of Gee’s Bend, Ala.) to the [inaugural exhibition](#) at the new Whitney Museum of American Art, which includes a drawing by Bill Traylor, who was born into slavery and only started to make work in his mid-80s — artists who had previously been left out of the canon are finally being given their rightful place. The diversity of the artworks that have previously been excluded only serve to show how narrow, or perhaps how worryingly broad, was the term “outsider” to begin with.

“Outsider art” is a rough translation of “art brut,” a phrase coined by Jean Dubuffet in the 1940s and used mostly to describe art made by prisoners and the insane. Over the decades, the category expanded; it could signal that an artist was poor, or black, or Southern, or disabled, or just plain old. A way to subordinate and exoticize, the label turned the circumstances of artists’ lives — their deafness, say, or their reclusive natures — into pathologies that overshadowed their work. It also made the canon seem far too normal: What, after all, is really more unexpected — that schizophrenic Martín Ramírez would have made collages and drawings while trapped inside a mental hospital, or that Agnes Martin would make graph after graph in gray?



At the new Whitney Museum, works such as “Walking Man” (center) by the self-taught African American artist Bill Traylor, are now being hung alongside “insiders” (here, Marsden Hartley, at left, and Thomas Hart Benton, at right). *Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times*

The clear inadequacy of the word had led some to suggest replacing it with “visionary,” which gets at the manic or fantastical quality of only certain works, like the landscapes of Henry Darger. Others prefer “self-taught,” which slyly suggests that the division might be much simpler, boiling down to those who went to art school and those who didn’t. At its worst, “outsider” fetishizes the margin; in the 1990s, desperate art students took to describing themselves as outsiders, while “outsider galleries” have been known to drop artists who got too popular or mainstream. It’s easy to understand why Carter Foster, the curator of drawing at the Whitney, thinks we’re ready to put the whole concept in the trash bin. “Outside of what?” he says, adding that, after all, outsider artists “live *in* the world.”

And yet “outsider” continues to cast a persistent, barely visible glow; you cannot, after all, abolish a history. In the best and most complicated sense, it reminds us that *this is different*. I had occasion to remember this just the other week, while gazing at two drawings by the self-taught artist James Castle, which hang in the Whitney next to a wall text that tells us that they were drawn with the artist’s signature mix of soot and saliva. They’re small and subtle and would be easy to pass over: One depicts a row of farmhouses, the other a plain interior with a wood-burning stove. But that image of the soot and the spit, that intimate resourcefulness, stopped me. It made me look closer at the shading, the lines, the scale and

perspective of the drawing. It made me think more carefully, more cautiously, about the scene of its making.

Photo



A watercolor from the "Vivian Girls" series by the reclusive Henry Darger (1892-1973), one of the most famous "visionary" artists. Credit "6 Episode 3 Place Not Mentioned; Escape During Violent Storm, Still Fighting Though Persecuted for Long Distance," (Double-Sided), Henry Darger, 1892-1973, Chicago, mid-20th century, watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 24 x 74 3/4 in., Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York, gift of Nathan and Kiyoko Lerner, 1995.23.1A. Photo by Gavin Ashworth, ©Kiyoko Lerner

Typically, we come into the museum with certain expectations: that works of art are made in order to communicate a message; that the artist wanted her work to be shown and seen; that she had a concept she was working out; that the work has a "meaning" at all. These expectations encourage the habit of quickly sizing something up for the "takeaway," the one-sentence master summary, and then moving on to the next Great Thing. But work that is made by someone who may not have had language, or for whom patronage, gallery representation or fellowships are non-concepts, is work that behaves differently. It leaves us with irresolvable questions about how and why and where the work was made, and how and why and where we look at it; about what we can say and can't say; what we can know and can't know.

Self-taught artists, then, have the power to teach us. What if we were willing to be surprised by all the art we see? Retaining a sense of the profound difference between artists — imagining that the art itself is that difference — makes us look at work with a kind of generosity, starting with the awareness of how easily it might never have been made at all. Take, for example, Judith Scott, recently the subject of [an exhibition](#) at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Scott was a deaf-mute artist with Down syndrome who, before she died in 2005, produced gorgeous, multicolored, yarn-wrapped sculptures. She only started making art after she moved into a center in Oakland called Creative Growth that serves adults with disabilities, where she shared studio space and materials and interacted with teachers; before that, she had passed more than three decades of neglect in an institution in Ohio. As

Matthew Higgs, the director of White Columns, a contemporary art space in New York that shows work by disabled and non-disabled artists, recently told me, “In every community in the world there is an equal number of talented individuals, but without the opportunities.”

We are able to say very little about what Scott’s sculptures meant to her — but the feelings they evoke are enormous. All we can do with them is hold them in our minds, bear with them, and tolerate the discomfort and frustration — *what is this?* — that they might provoke; we can treat other artworks with that same care. It wasn’t until after I read the exhibition catalog that I learned of Scott’s habit of burying pieces of jewelry and other small objects inside of her wrappings. (Once, her twin sister Joyce snatched her ex-husband’s paycheck from a half-finished piece only just in time.) The concept of outsider art now seems to me like the yarn that covers those treasures. Perhaps they are hiding them, or maybe they are just holding them, like a reminder to have the patience not to know everything about what’s inside.

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