

On the Very Idea of 'Outsider Art'

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There has been little serious philosophical reflection on whether, and in virtue of satisfying what conditions, 'Outsider Art' is art, as is standardly assumed. I critically examine a number of responses to this question implicit in curatorial practice and the critical literature. I argue that none of these responses carries conviction, and propose, on the basis of broader considerations in the philosophy of art, that the arthood of 'Outsider' pieces must be settled by reference to their individual provenance. This supports a parallel approach to questions about the artistic status of 'primitive', 'tribal', and more generally non-Western visual art.

Recently, there has been a noticeable rise in curatorial interest in 'Outsider Art' or what Jean Dubuffet termed 'Art Brut'.¹ The last few years have seen major exhibitions of Outsider Art in a number of European galleries—for example, *Beyond Reason: Art and Psychosis* (1996–7) at the Hayward Gallery in London, *In Another World* (Summer 2005) at the Kiasma Gallery in Helsinki, and *Inner Worlds Outside* (2006) at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, the La Caixa Foundation Exhibition Hall in Madrid, and the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin.² In the latter case, selected 'Outsider' and 'Insider' pieces were exhibited alongside one another with no direct indication as to their status. As is clear from the exhibition catalogue,³ this was in part an attempt to undermine prejudices against Outsider Art.

What is perhaps surprising, in light of this curatorial interest, is the dearth of serious philosophical reflection on the assumptions concerning the artistic status of Outsider Art that seem to underlie such interest. No articles on Outsider Art have appeared in the past 25 years in either the *British Journal of Aesthetics* or the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and, apart from exhibition catalogues, there is a paucity of other published material.⁴

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- 1 Roger Cardinal, who introduced the term 'Outsider Art' in his *Outsider Art* (London: Studio Vista Publishers, 1972), intended his term as a corrective to, and a generalization of, Dubuffet's 'Art Brut'. For details of both the evolution of Dubuffet's understanding of *Art Brut* and Cardinal's differences with Dubuffet, see pp. 22ff of Roger Cardinal, 'Towards an Outsider Aesthetic', in Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr (eds), *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), pp. 20–43. Given the argument of this paper, I should make it clear that, as I use the term 'Outsider Art', it functions as a name rather than as a description. It denotes the class of objects so-labelled in curatorial practice without entailing that those objects are actually works of art.
 - 2 Also noteworthy are *Jungles in Paris*, a 2005–6 exhibition at Tate Modern in London of works by the proclaimed 'naïve' artist Henri Rousseau, and a 2006 exhibition at the Amstelkring in Amsterdam of pictures by institutionalized patients who had been shown paintings by Rembrandt.
 - 3 Felix Andrada, Eimear Martin, and Anthony Spira (eds), *Inner Worlds Outside* (London: Whitechapel, 2006).
 - 4 For helpful overviews and discussions of Outsider Art, see Colin Rhodes's *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), and the papers collected in Hall and Metcalf (eds), *The Artistic Outsider*.

However, those who have written on the subject—in particular, those directly involved in the promotion and/or curation of Outsider Art—have made a number of claims that provide a useful platform for more general enquiry. Not least among the questions that need to be addressed is whether, and in virtue of satisfying what conditions, so-called ‘Outsider Art’ is indeed *art*, as is standardly assumed. I shall critically examine a number of arguments for the artistic status of Outsider pieces, and propose an approach more firmly grounded in broader considerations in the philosophy of art.

These issues are, I think, of more than parochial interest. For, if discussion of the artistic credentials of Outsider pieces has been at a premium, the same cannot be said for what might seem to be a related issue. The 1984 MoMA exhibition on ‘*Primitivism*’ in 20th Century Art, for example, prompted heated debate over the artistic status of ‘primitive’ artefacts and, more generally, of artefacts produced outside the broadly Graeco-Roman tradition.⁵ Central to this debate has been the bearing of anthropological evidence on the claim that such artefacts are properly viewed as artworks, given the various religious and sociocultural functions they seem to have served and our often tenuous understanding of these functions. In the case of Outsider pieces, on the other hand, the facts about provenance are generally more accessible. We usually know how such pieces were produced, and by whom. Furthermore, by definition, Outsider artists belong, in one sense, to our own cultural and art-historical context, although it is their ‘standing apart’ in some way from this context that is taken to be constitutive of their status as Outsiders. Thus it might be hoped that the issue concerning the artistic status of Outsider pieces would be more tractable, and thereby serve as a basis for clarifying more complex issues relating to pieces produced in cultural contexts very different from our own.

What is ‘Outsider Art’?

Jean Dubuffet, who, in his capacity first as collector and then as curator, was one of the main promoters of *Art Brut*, defined the latter partly in terms of qualities such as rawness, spontaneity, and individuality.⁶ But his most cited definition of *Art Brut* also required that the creator be socially isolated and exercise his or her creativity in complete isolation from external cultural influences. In the case of *Art Brut*, according to Dubuffet, the creative act is a matter of exercising the constructive impulse ‘entirely independently’, and of ‘exploiting [the artist’s] own resources for his own personal use’.⁷

5 The “*Primitivism*” exhibition was accompanied by a monumental two-volume catalogue of scholarly papers, including a lengthy statement by the then director of MoMA, William Rubin, of the theoretical assumptions underpinning the exhibition. See William Rubin (ed.), *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Vols I and II (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1984). A scathing critical review of these assumptions is contained in Thomas McEvilley’s ‘Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief’, in his *Art and Otherness* (Kingston, NY: Macpherson & Company, 1992), pp. 27–56.

6 On Dubuffet’s role in setting up the Collection de L’Art Brut in Lausanne, see the following books by recent directors of the Collection: Michel Thévoz, *L’Art Brut* (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1980), and Lucienne Peiry, *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art*, trans. James Frank (Paris: Flammarion, 2001).

7 Jean Dubuffet, ‘Honneur aux valeurs sauvages’, in *L’Homme du commun à l’ouvrage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 105.

Critics of Dubuffet have focused on the second element in this definition, which attempts to delimit *Art Brut* by reference to the social marginalization and cultural isolation of its creators, claiming that the purported 'cultural isolation' of the figures presented as paradigm exponents of Outsider Art is a myth. Roger Cardinal, for example, who introduced the term 'Outsider Art', stresses the evidence of 'scavenging' in Outsider Art, commenting that 'the art of even the most doggedly self-reliant creator is likely to include allusions to the ambient culture, reflecting the impact of an era and an environment upon the individual consciousness'.⁸ And James Elkins, expressing a general scepticism concerning the notion of Outsider Art, claims that 'Outsider Art is an oxymoron, and its naiveté is seldom as pure as it appears': most so-called 'naifs', according to Elkins, are at best semi-naif, and are usually 'faux naifs' in one sense or another.^{9,10}

Once we bracket off the sociological, psychological, and institutional elements in Dubuffet's definition of *Art Brut*, we are left with the idea of a kind of art that is marked by its spontaneity, its rawness, and its idiosyncratic and obsessive motifs. But these qualities can also be found in much modernist 'Insider Art', and, in particular, in the art of those Expressionists and Surrealists who were drawn to the work of Outsiders for precisely this reason. Thus, it might be thought, we should think of Outsider Art as lying along a kind of continuum upon which we can also locate the works of such Expressionist and Surrealist artists. Creators of Outsider Art, then, would be distinct only in their lack of formal training, and would be properly seen as 'simply an extreme case of [the] general trend to self-justification through the pursuit of a distinctively personalised style or strategy of expression'.¹¹ This, I take it, is what the curators of the *Inner Worlds Outside* exhibition encouraged viewers to conclude in juxtaposing without commentary works by Insiders and Outsiders.

In these deliberations about the proper way to understand Outsider Art, an unquestioned assumption is that the painted or drawn surfaces produced by figures such as Henry Darger, Madge Gill, Scottie Wilson, Adolf Wölfli, and Michael the Cartographer are works of *art*. Even Elkins, who describes the idea of 'Outsider Art' as an oxymoron, is concerned with the classification of the pieces produced by such figures as 'Outsider', given that the latter did not act in complete isolation from what was going on 'inside' the artworld: he does not question the classification of such pieces as *art*, given those facts about their provenance that render the classification 'Outsider' inaccurate.

It might be thought that the fact that the pieces classified as Outsider Art feature in major exhibitions at reputable art galleries renders unproblematic their artistic status. But to reason in this way would be to accept a very crude kind of institutional definition of art. I shall assume that we have reason to preserve the intuition that objects are exhibited in art galleries because they are art, and not vice versa.¹² Let us suppose, then, that there is some

8 Roger Cardinal, 'Worlds Within', in *Inner Worlds Outside*, pp. 15–27. The quotation is from p. 24.

9 James Elkins, 'Naifs, Faux-Naifs, Faux-Faux-Naifs, Would-Be Faux-Naifs: There is No Such Thing as Outsider Art', in *Inner Worlds Outside*, pp. 71–78. The quotation is from p. 73.

10 For a different objection to the use of the term 'Outsider Art', see Lucy Lippard, 'Crossing into Uncommon Grounds', in Hall and Metcalf (eds), *The Artist Outsider*, pp. 2–18.

11 Cardinal, 'Worlds Within', p. 19.

12 For a rehearsal of some of the reasons why such a crude institutional definition of art is unacceptable, see pp. 243ff of my *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

consideration in virtue of which Outsider pieces exhibited in art galleries in the contexts cited above are properly regarded as works of art. What might that consideration be? While writers on Outsider Art rarely furnish us with explicit reasons for viewing the pieces in question as works of art, certain arguments for so viewing them are at least implicit in the literature. In the next two sections, I shall consider a number of such arguments, none of which, I shall argue, is persuasive.

The Artistic Credentials of ‘Outsider Art’

Similarity in Manifest Properties

Prinzhorn, who was responsible for assembling the first collection of Outsider Art in Heidelberg in the early twentieth century, remarked upon the impossibility of distinguishing the art of the mentally ill from ‘normal’ art by reference to any ‘external signs’. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that this is true.¹³ What bearing, if any, might it have on the artistic pretensions of Outsider Art? For anyone familiar with late modern visual art, and the philosophical reflections to which it has given rise, any suggestion that the possession of certain kinds of manifest properties is either necessary or sufficient for being a work of visual art is highly suspect. As Danto famously argued, and as others have echoed, what identifies something as an artwork is something the eye ‘cannot descry’. Mass-produced objects perceptually indistinguishable from Duchampian ‘Readymades’, ‘perfect’ forgeries of old masters, and an object perceptually indistinguishable from a genuine art painting but produced accidentally by an explosion at a paint factory, are only some of the counter-examples to any attempt to define being a visual artwork purely in terms of manifest properties possessed.¹⁴

All of this is familiar terrain. But to properly gauge its implications for the artistic status of Outsider pieces, we need to consider further *why* we cannot provide a criterion of arthood for the visual arts in terms of manifest properties. It is not that artworks are those objects, possessed of certain manifest properties, that have somehow been accepted into the ‘Artworld’, construed as a system of presentational institutions. While the latter view has its defenders, it lacks explanatory power.¹⁵ And to assume that arthood is conferred by merely being taken up into the ‘Insider’ institutional framework of the ‘Artworld’ begs important questions if we are asking about the artistic status of Outsider Art. For a deeper and more illuminating account of why arthood in the visual arts cannot be determined by manifest properties, we need to examine the relationships that obtain between the visual appearance of an entity and its functioning as the vehicle for an artwork.

13 In fact, I think this misrepresents the viewer’s experience at an exhibition such as the Whitechapel’s *Inner Worlds Outside*. Mastery, or lack of mastery, of colour and composition are highly reliable, albeit not infallible, indicators of the status of a piece even in an exhibition that goes out of its way to conceal that status from the viewer.

14 See Arthur Danto, ‘The Artworld’, *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (1964), pp. 571–584; and *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1981).

15 See note 12 above.

It will be helpful, here, to introduce some terminology.¹⁶ In our attempts to appreciate a particular artwork, one of our primary concerns is to determine what the work is rightly taken to represent, or to express, or to possess as formally significant properties. We may employ the term 'artistic content' to capture these kinds of properties of works that bear upon their proper appreciation. To determine a work's artistic content, we must at least attend to the entity through the generation of which the artist has articulated such a content. We may term this entity the 'artistic vehicle'. In standard cases in the visual arts, the artistic vehicle is a physical object that confronts us in a gallery or other place where works are presented for appreciation. In such cases, the manifest visible properties of the artistic vehicle are readily apparent, and, as we have seen, may be indistinguishable from the manifest visible properties of something that is not the vehicle for an artwork. To understand how this can be the case, our question, now expressed in terms of the vocabulary just introduced, is how an entity's possessing certain manifest visible properties can serve to articulate a particular artistic content, where no such content is articulated by another visually indistinguishable entity.

Three kinds of considerations mediate between the manifest properties of an artistic vehicle in the visual arts and the artistic content articulated through that vehicle.¹⁷ First, *which* manifest properties of an artistic vehicle play a part in articulating the artistic content of a work depends upon what Kendall Walton terms the 'category of art' to which the work belongs.¹⁸ As illustrated in his 'guernica' example, a given entity can bear different artistic content in virtue of different sets of its manifest properties when it is taken to be the vehicle for works belonging to different artistic categories.¹⁹ Second, suppose that an entity is the vehicle for an artwork belonging to a particular category, and that a certain subset of that entity's manifest properties bear thereby upon the artistic content articulated through that vehicle. Then we need to know how specific realizations of the properties in that subset serve to articulate specific contents. For example, in a particular painting, a given distribution of pigment on canvas may serve to represent a bearded man against a backdrop of African artefacts, as in the case of Picasso's cubist *Portrait of the art dealer Kahnweiler*. In grasping this, we draw on certain understandings, which we take ourselves to share with the artist, that doing *this* with pigment on canvas counts as articulating *that* content. Such shared understandings may be termed an 'artistic medium' upon which an artist draws in manipulating the vehicular medium.²⁰

16 I draw here on the vocabulary introduced in ch. 3 of *Art as Performance*. Nothing in what follows, however, requires that one accept the view of artworks as generative performances for which I argue in that book.

17 In late modern visual art, matters are further complicated by the need to determine the nature of the artistic vehicle itself, which may only be documented or otherwise indicated by the entities on display in a gallery. On this problem, see my 'Telling Pictures: The Place of Narrative in Late-Modern Visual Art', in Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (eds), *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2007), pp. 138–156.

18 Kendall Walton, 'Categories of Art', *Philosophical Review*, vol. 79 (1970), pp. 334–367.

19 Alternatively, we might factor the category of art into our conception of the artistic vehicle, in which case the vehicle would always be a set of properties of an entity rather than the entity in the fullness of its properties. For simplicity, I ignore this possibility in the present context.

20 Here, again, there are alternative ways of describing what is going on. For example, we may include such shared understandings in a given 'category' of art, in which case Cubist paintings and Impressionist paintings belong to different categories.

Third, while an artistic medium is usually something upon which different artists may draw for different articulatory purposes, some aspects of a work's artistic content may also depend upon how a given artist chooses to exploit that medium, where this is a matter of the artist's individual *style*.²¹

How does this bear upon an attempt to establish the artistic status of Outsider Art by pointing to visual similarities with Insider pieces? Take a piece like Dubuffet's *Man with a Rose* (1949), and compare it with an Outsider piece displaying a similar 'childlike' or untutored quality, such as Heinrich Anton Müller's *Two Faces* (1917–22) (see Figures 2 and 1, respectively). What bearing do perceived resemblances between the Dubuffet painting and the Müller piece have upon the status of the latter as art? As we have seen, to grasp the properties that interest us in our perceptual engagement with an art object such as Dubuffet's canvas—the artistic content articulated through that canvas, as artistic vehicle—we must do a number of things: treat the canvas as the vehicle for an artwork belonging to a particular category of art, treat that vehicle as the articulation of a particular artistic content in virtue of the use of a particular artistic medium, and take account of the artist's style in order to correctly identify expressive or formal properties of the work. We are justified in classifying an object treated in this way as the vehicle for a work of art if we are justified in positing a certain kind of process whereby the object was formed, and a context in which that process occurred. This requirement is motivated by the need to preserve a distinction between something being a work of visual art and something being treated *as if* it were a work of visual art. Nothing prevents me from treating a naturally occurring design—say a particular distribution of moss on a rock—as if it were the articulation of a particular artistic content. All I need do is imagine that the design originates in a process of making guided by the right kinds of categorial and articulatory intentions and occurring in a context of shared understandings that yield a determinate artistic content. But the design is not, in virtue of my imaginative act, a work of art.

In attempting to determine the content articulated through a given art-object, we posit the creator's ability to conceive of her labours as producing something belonging to a given category, to avail herself of the shared understandings that make up an artistic medium in the interest of articulating a particular artistic content, and to employ the vehicular and artistic media in ways that reflect her broader artistic style. It will make sense to see a product of Outsider activity as the articulation of an artistic content, and thus as an artwork appreciable in virtue of this content, only if it makes sense to posit such a generative process. We may indeed have no reservations about seeing some products of Outsider activity in this way. But in other cases there are legitimate reasons to doubt whether the piece has such a provenance. First, as we noted, the specific artistic content articulated through a visual array depends not only upon the manifest qualities of that array, but also upon its location in a space of possible arrays delimited by a category of art, an artistic medium, and the style of the artist. It is only by locating what the artist did in such a space of possible arrays that the overall artistic content of her piece can be grasped. We assume a range of

21 This point is developed by Richard Wollheim in section 31 of *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1980). This follows his critical discussion (sections 25–30) of what he terms the 'Gombrich argument', according to which the expressive content of a work must be gauged by reference to the artist's *repertoire* as revealed in her *oeuvre*.

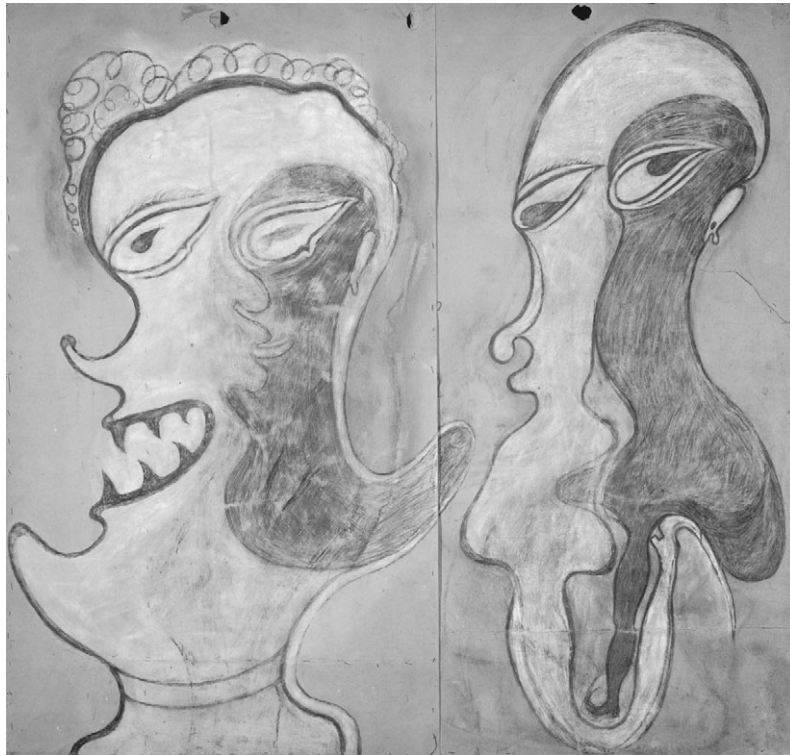


Fig 1. Heinrich Anton Müller, *Two Faces*, c. 1917-22. Black crayon and chalk, 78 x 82 cm. Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne. Reproduced with permission.

options open to the artist, relative to which artistic content is to be determined. Artistic content, so construed, includes the way in which a given subject is represented. The manner of representation expresses a particular way of conceiving the subject only when located in a broader space of possible representations.²² To the extent, however, that the creator of an arrangement of pigment on canvas is limited in the range of arrays she can produce, the expressive potential of this arrangement will itself be limited.²³

Consider, in this context, the raw and 'untutored' quality of Dubuffet's *Man with a Rose*. This contributes to the artistic content of the painting because it is chosen as a way of representing the subject, and therefore bears both upon how we see the subject and upon more general thematic meanings that we may ascribe to the painting. In the case of the Outsider, Müller, whose way of drawing Dubuffet seeks to emulate, on the other hand, the 'untutored' quality may simply reflect a lack of training, or the operation of various

22 On artistic representation as a matter of representing a subject in a particular way, see Roger Scruton, 'Photography and Representation', in *The Aesthetic Understanding* (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 102–126.

23 I assume here that the expressive and representational content articulated through an artistic vehicle are determined not by what the artist intended to articulate but by what she succeeded in articulating, as determined by the judgements of a suitable audience who grasp relevant facts about artistic medium, *oeuvre*, and context of generation. I defend such a view in my 'Intentions et signification de l'énonciation', *Philosophiques*, vol. 32/1 (Spring 2005), reprinted in English as 'Semantic Intentions, Utterance Meaning, and Work Meaning', in David Davies and Carl Matheson (eds), *Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Literature* (Toronto: Broadview, 2008).

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Fig 2. Jean Dubuffet, *Man with a Rose*, 1949. Distemper on canvas. Location currently unknown. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2008. Reproduced with permission. Photograph © MaXx Images Inc. Reproduced with permission.

psychological forces. If so, the mere similarity in visual properties does not license taking Müller's canvas as a vehicle for the articulation of the kinds of contentful properties articulated in Dubuffet's painting, or, indeed, for the articulation of any other determinate artistic content.²⁴

Furthermore, as defenders of Outsider Art acknowledge, a salient feature of many Outsider creations is indeed a very limited range of available options, as is apparent if we look at the 'faces' in the pictures of Madge Gill or Henry Darger.²⁵ Indeed, a distinctive feature

24 Rhodes makes a related point about those pieces by Dubuffet, Klee, and members of the Cobra group that draw upon children's drawings: 'The economy of means and apparent spontaneity achieved in the work of trained professionals does not signal a continuation of childhood, but a "recovery" at a highly sophisticated level of certain childlike features' (*Outsider Art*, p. 33). He quotes Klee: 'If my works somehow produce a primitive expression, this "primitiveness" is explained by my discipline, which consists of reducing everything to a few steps. It is no more than economy, that is the ultimate professional awareness, which is to say the opposite of real primitiveness.'

25 Darger's figures were in fact traced from old colouring books, comic strips, and magazines. See Rhodes, *Outsider Art*, p. 109.

of much Outsider Art is a reliance upon what Cardinal describes as 'a distinctive repertoire of motifs and devices, which become the components of a closed architecture', which provide that artist with 'a refuge . . . and intimate nest'.²⁶ In a similar vein, Colin Rhodes states that 'the tendency to elaborate obsessively on simple forms or to repeat mechanical actions in increasingly elaborate and often chaotic ways is a characteristic of much outsider production'. In the case of Wölfli,

in spite of the highly complex nature of his drawings, Wölfli worked spontaneously without advanced planning, in a way that is akin to much outsider production. . . . In most cases, having barely outlined some contours, he begins to draw at some point at the edge of the paper, usually completes the border first, then proceeds by successive layers or sections towards the centre.²⁷

This raises serious doubts as to whether, in the case of pieces produced in such an obsessive and quasi-mechanical manner, with minimal planning and reflection, and with a limited repertoire of resources each of which is a reservoir of private meanings, there is any basis for positing the kind of process necessary if a visual manifold is to be seen as articulating a determinate artistic content. It is not clear that it makes sense, here, to ask the kind of question that is central to our interrogative exploration and appreciation of visual manifolds in the fine arts: what is the reason for (and not merely the cause of) these marks being here? Nor is it clear that Outsider pieces can be ascribed an artistic 'style'. Jon Thompson, for example, claims that the manifest similarities between the different pieces produced by a given Outsider are not so much a matter of individual stylistic choice as of an inner compulsion that is exteriorized in a particular way.²⁸

We can bring these points to bear upon two further arguments that seem to be implicit in some 'Outsider' curatorial practice. First, it might be argued that we find the same artistic themes articulated in Insider and Outsider pieces. In the *Inner Worlds Outside* exhibition, for example, Insider and Outsider pieces were grouped together under such themes as 'The Erotic Body' and 'Faces and Masks'. But, if the preceding account of what is required for a perceptual manifold to function as an artistic vehicle is correct, then the 'theme' of a painting or drawing in this superficial sense—its most obviously discriminable representational content—can no more determine its artistic status than can its other manifest features. Any useful classification of the products of artistic activity according to theme must be in terms of *higher-order meanings articulated through the work*, not in terms of lower-order meanings through which the higher-order meanings are themselves articulated. It is what the individual is doing with faces that matters for classifying artworks, and for their being artworks, not the fact that faces are manifest features of a painting or drawing.

Second, one of the aims of the *Inner Worlds Outside* exhibition was to bring out 'the impact of unknown Outsiders on some of the greatest names of twentieth century art'.²⁹ We have seen, however, why it would be incorrect to infer from such relationships between

26 Cardinal, 'Worlds Within', p. 19.

27 Rhodes, *Outsider Art*, pp. 153, 74.

28 Jon Thompson, 'The Mad, The "Brut", the "Primitive", and the Modern: A Discursive History', in *Inner Worlds Outside*, pp. 51–69 at p. 61.

29 *Inner Worlds Outside* catalogue, p. 11.

Outsider pieces and Insider works that the Outsider pieces are themselves works of art. For example, in the case of Dubuffet, his decision to paint in a 'primitive' style licenses the viewer to ascribe particular kinds of content to his paintings in virtue of the manner in which subjects are represented. In the case of the Outsider paintings that influenced him, however, it is questionable whether we can justifiably take them to be expressing conscious choices to paint a subject in one way rather than another. A judgement as to the artistic status of an Outsider piece must be grounded in a judgement as to the process whereby that piece was generated.

It might be thought that, if artistic status depends upon the nature of the process generative of an artefact, then, since we often lack decisive evidence concerning that process, the artistic status of many pieces is indeterminate. But a measure of indeterminacy seems unavoidable once we recognize that arthood cannot be determined on the basis of manifest properties. Indeed, our knowledge of anything partly identified in terms of human intentionality admits of this kind of indeterminacy. Human actions, as the subjects of historical enquiry, may be indeterminate in this way. In all such cases, however, we must marshal the best evidence for our judgements, while admitting their fallibility.

The preceding point about Outsider pieces generalizes to other products of creative human agency upon which Insider artists have drawn for inspiration. For example, it does not follow from the fact that painters like Modigliani and Picasso were profoundly interested in and influenced by African masks that the latter are rightly viewed as works of art. Arthood is not conferred retrospectively in this way, by reference to visual resemblances and influence. For, again, what matters is how the designs and patterns found in African artefacts were employed in the articulation of meaning by the makers of the artefacts and the communities in which they worked.³⁰

'Expressivist' Arguments

In response to the doubts expressed in the preceding section as to the artistic status of at least some acknowledged Outsider pieces, it might be objected that, even if it is difficult for us to grasp the content of such pieces, their content is fully articulate to their creators. Why, then, should we restrict visual artworks to those designs created with the intent to make contents intersubjectively available? And do we not find examples of Insider artists whose style is just as idiosyncratic, idiomatic, and hermetic as that of Outsiders such as Gill? To add further fuel to this line of objection, is it not questionable whether art must involve the sort of calculating manipulation of a medium for communicative purposes that seems to be presupposed in the preceding argument? Are there not celebrated Insider artists who would repudiate such a view in favour of a more irrational model of the artist as one 'possessed' and expressing herself spontaneously in the grip of such possession? Isn't Outsider Art artistically enfranchised once we opt for a more 'expressivist' conception of artistic activity?

30 For a criticism to this effect of assumptions underlying the 1984 MoMA exhibition, see McEvelley, 'Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief'. On the implications of my discussion of Outsider Art for the artistic status of 'primitive' artifacts, see Section IV below.

As noted earlier, Outsider Art has attracted the interest of a number of Insider artists. The very qualities of spontaneity, rawness, and individuality that Dubuffet took to be distinguishing features of *Art Brut* were taken by artists like Klee, Picasso, and some of the German Expressionists to be crucial values in artistic activity.³¹ The ideal, here, was of an artistic practice in which spontaneity replaced traditional notions of rational control and the exercise of cognitive skills, in the interests of an art expressive of more fundamental aspects of the human psyche. For the Surrealists, who also found in Outsider Art a model for their own artistic practice, the assumption was that art should explore the unconscious through somehow subverting the repressive agency of the conscious mind. The works of Outsider artists, who were not 'corrupted' by a knowledge of formal rules, conventions, and a tradition of artistic making, and who in some cases (the 'mentally ill') were also viewed as irrational, were seen as offering unmediated access to the unconscious. André Breton, for example, spoke of the 'total authenticity' of the art of the insane.³²

What united these different artists in their attention to Outsider Art was an interest in, or a commitment to, an art that externalised in a pure and cognitively uncorrupted way the inner states of the artist. If art is so conceived, then it might seem that the artistic credentials of Outsider pieces stand in need of no further justification. Indeed, this is the predominant argument for the artistic status of Outsider Art, not just for Dubuffet, but also for later theorists such as Cardinal. The pieces produced by Outsiders, Cardinal maintains, are responses to 'some unusually strong internal impulse, spontaneous and unprogrammed and . . . having no specifically artistic character'. It is definitive of the Outsider that 'he or she should be possessed of an expressive impulse and should then externalize that impulse in an unmonitored way which defies conventional art-historical contextualization'.³³ We should therefore view the fabrications of Outsiders such as Gill as 'metaphors of interiority and ways of expressing or configuring the impulses which inhabit psychic space and "embody" it as a great network of interdependent pulsations'. The creative sensibility of such artists is to be thought of as something whose 'formative energies are projected into the external shapes of drawing and painting', and the pieces they create 'can be construed as distinctive reports on psychic life, as so many allegorical portraits of inner space'.³⁴ Outsider pieces 'bring us face to face with the raw process of creation'.³⁵

Jon Thompson also maintains that Outsider Art expresses in a purer form the psychological ground of Insider Art. He cites Gauguin, who viewed 'primitivism' in art as the result of an unmediated transference from the artist's preconscious mind to the paper or canvas, and relates this to the ways in which Outsiders use their artistic activity as a way of

31 For details of these connections, see the 'Introduction' to *Inner Worlds Outside*. See also Thompson, 'The Mad, The "Brut", the "Primitive", and the Modern', and Angel Garcia, 'The Other Side of the Avant-Garde', in *Inner Worlds Outside*, pp. 29–49.

32 Cited on p. 44 of Rhodes, *Outsider Art*.

33 Cardinal, 'Toward an Outsider Aesthetics', in Hall and Metcalf (eds), *The Artist Outsider*, pp. 20–43. Quoted passages are on pp. 29 and 30.

34 Cardinal, 'Worlds Within', pp. 22–23.

35 Cardinal, 'Singular Visions', in *Outsiders: An Art without Precedent or Tradition* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979). This is cited on p. 44 of Joanne Cubbs, 'Rebels, Mystics, and Outcasts: The Romantic Artist Outsider', in Hall and Metcalf (eds), *The Artist Outsider*, pp. 77–83.

‘configuring themselves to themselves as replete, sensing subjects’.³⁶ He buttresses this with the idea of a universal and innate basis for artistic expression which manifests itself in the creations of both Outsiders and Insiders. Following Chomsky, he posits a genetically determined initial state for the human visual system which provides the framework for all image-making pursuits, ‘some kind of tendency towards structural coherence arising between the eye and visual cortex and the rest of the cognitive system that renders the world and its sign systems visually legible’.³⁷ He also suggests that strategies employed by modernist artists in exploring the possibilities of the visual sign parallel mechanisms posited by Freud in his account of the ‘dream work’ whereby unconscious thoughts are transformed into visual images, and that the art of the mentally ill is the result of the operation of the same sorts of transformative processes that are central to the modernist enterprise in the visual arts. And Angel Garcia proposes that the products of Outsider and Insider artists are the expressions of ‘an urge to make art’, which is ‘something like an artistic instinct’ connected with what Prinzhorn termed an ‘urge to give form’ to be found in the creations of Outsiders.³⁸

But, however plausible these empirical claims may be, they do not establish the artistic status of Outsider Art. For it cannot plausibly be argued that all entities whose generation draws upon such mechanisms or instincts are works of art. In all sorts of practical contexts, such as the drawing of maps or the knitting of sweaters, we may see evidence of the mobilization of an ‘urge to give form’ or of an innate ‘visual grammar’, but this does not establish that such products are artworks. To argue that, whenever our innate ‘visual grammar’ is activated in the generation of a design, the result is a work of visual art is no more plausible than to argue that, whenever our innate grammatical knowledge of language is activated in the generation of a linguistic token, the result is a work of literature. Arguably, there can be no works of literature whose generation does not involve the activation of such innate linguistic capacities, but to hold the converse would be absurd. Similar considerations apply to the purported analogies between the mechanisms employed in Freudian ‘dream work’ and those characteristic of modernism in art. Even if we grant both the legitimacy of the posited Freudian mechanisms and their mobilization in the process of modernist artistic making, it cannot be maintained that whenever such Freudian mechanisms are activated, the product is a work of art, lest we make artworks of all our dreams!

Arguably, however, there is a more specific confusion in Cardinal’s attempts to artistically enfranchise Outsider Art by pointing to a commonality of generative mechanisms with Insider Art, a confusion also manifest in Dubuffet’s earlier enthusiasm for *Art Brut*. As a number of commentators have remarked, the ‘expressivist’ conception of art rehearsed a few paragraphs back is a legacy of Romanticism. Rhodes identifies, as one of two principal themes in the discourse of Outsider Art, ‘the Romantic emphasis placed on expression rather than technique’, evidenced in Dubuffet’s concern, in the Outsider pieces he collected, with ‘the raw, unpremeditated nature of their art, arising out of an imperative of their inner selves’.³⁹ And Joanne Cubbs, in a detailed study of the Romantic conception of

36 Thompson, ‘The Mad, The “Brut”, the “Primitive” and the Modern’, pp. 60–61.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

38 Garcia, ‘The Other Side of the Avant-Garde’, p. 43.

39 Rhodes, *Outsider Art*, pp. 90, 9.

the 'outsider', argues that the discourse of Outsider Art is 'a re-entrenchment of those Romantic sentiments that continue to support the notion of original, unmediated expression and the belief in an art which is somehow able to "spring from pure invention"'.⁴⁰ She cites, in illustration, the following passage by a commentator on Outsider artists:

Their works are the product of long, tortuous journeys into the depths of the human psyche, into the very sources of human creativity. Here uncontrollable forces give rise to strange, powerful artistic expressions which are often haunting and disquieting.⁴¹

If the 'expressivist' case for the artistic status of Outsider pieces is so grounded, however—and the passages cited earlier from Cardinal suggest that it is—then it stands or falls with the Romantic view of art as 'expression' so conceived. That view is open to the objection that 'expression', in the Romantic sense, does not determine whether something is an artwork. The 'expressivist' view of art, it can be argued, conflates two distinct conceptions of 'expression', which we may term *psychological expression* and *artistic expression*, or p-expression and a-expression. An action—say the applying of paint to a canvas in a particular way—is a p-expression of rage or sadness, for example, if it is rightly seen as causally generated by a token of the relevant mental state type. The product of such an action—say, the canvas generated by that action—is an a-expression of rage or sadness when such an expressive quality would be rightly ascribed to it by a suitably qualified viewer cognisant of the relevant facts about artistic category, artistic medium, and *oeuvre*.

It is in part by being a-expressive of particular qualities that an artistic vehicle serves to articulate a particular artistic content. But whether the action whereby it came to have this a-expressiveness was p-expressive of some *E* is logically distinct from whether the product is itself a-expressive of *E*. For the former is neither necessary nor sufficient for the latter. It is not necessary because, for example, a piano sonata *S* written by *C* and performed by *P* can a-express sadness even though *C* was not sad while composing *S*, and *P* was not sad while performing it. It is not sufficient because a-expression depends upon what I succeed in creating, where this depends at best contingently upon my expressive intentions, or the other mental states causally operative in my action. What matters for a-expression is how the product can reasonably be experienced by appropriately qualified receivers, and nothing in the psychological state of the creator guarantees that this state is a-expressed by the creation. To master the use of a vehicular medium as an artistic medium is, *inter alia*, to acquire the ability to use that medium to a-express particular qualities, including perhaps one's own psychological states. And our artistic interest in a visual manifold will take account of both the qualities a-expressed and the manner in which the medium has been used for such purposes. But the causal role of certain psychological states in the production of a manifold in no way determines the artistic status of that manifold. Again, as noted in the previous section, what is required is a basis, in the process generative of the manifold, for its interrogative appreciation in terms of the reasons—not the psychological causes—for its being ordered in the way that it is.

40 Cubbs, 'Rebels, Mystics, and Outcasts', p. 87.

41 Sam Farber, 'Portraits from the Outside: Figurative Expression in Outsider Art', in Simon Carr *et al.* (eds), *Portraits from the Outside* (New York: Parsons School of Design Gallery, 1990), p. 7.

If this is correct, then there is a serious conflation of p-expression and a-expression in the ‘expressivist’ defences of the artistic credentials of ‘Outsider Art’ cited above. For example, Cardinal talks of the paintings and drawings of Gill and others as ‘inner reports’, ‘metaphors of interiority’, and products of ‘formative energies projected into external forms’. But the fact that inner states were causally responsible for the drawings does not make them ‘reports of’ or ‘metaphors for’ those inner states. The latter require artistic agency on the part of the one doing the reporting or offering the metaphor. Similarly, talk of the ‘projection’ of formative energies into external forms conflates the p-expressive idea that the forms are the result of a particular causal process, with the a-expressive idea that they artistically express those energies.

Let me anticipate one possible misunderstanding. Aaron Ridley has argued⁴² that there *are* certain logical dependencies between p-expression and what is expressed by a product of p-expression. For example, a kind of facial expression is expressive of sadness because it is the kind of expression worn by sad people, even if such an expression can also be used to feign sadness. Analogously, Ridley claims, it is reasonable to assume that what is expressed by an expressive artistic manifold is the psychological state of the artist who produced the manifold. While one can produce such a manifold while not in the relevant state, the expressive import of the manifold is itself strong evidence as to the psychological state of its creator. Nothing in my argument against expressivism requires that I dispute these claims, however. For what I am challenging is not the plausibility of an inference from an expressive artistic manifold produced by an artist to the psychological states of that artist when generating that manifold, but the plausibility of the converse inference, from the psychological state of one who generates a manifold to the artistically expressive content of the resulting manifold. Only where the person who generates the manifold possesses the requisite ability to make expressive use of the relevant physical medium could we reasonably expect that the resulting manifold a-expresses the psychological states of its creator. And this is what we have reason to doubt in the case of some acknowledged Outsiders.

The Expressionists and Surrealists who championed Outsider Art on expressivist grounds are perhaps better seen as offering a new account of how we should go about creating artistically expressive works, and of the kinds of things we should try to artistically express. The claim, correct or not, would be that we should work spontaneously, and try to activate various unconscious or irrational resources. The further claim, presumably, is that, for one who is able to employ vehicular and artistic media for expressive purposes, such a creative method will result in appropriately a-expressive works. This is an empirical hypothesis that we might expect to be confirmed in some cases and disconfirmed in others. But unless one already has the ability to use an artistic medium expressively, the result of such p-expressive acts will only accidentally be an a-expressive object of the desired sort.

Outsider Art and ‘Outsider Art’

In Section II, I argued that to treat a perceptual manifold as a work of visual art requires that we posit a certain kind of process generative of that manifold. In Section III,

42 Aaron Ridley, ‘Expression in Art’, in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2003), pp. 211–227.

I defended this view against an alternative 'expressivist' conception of artworks. Throughout, I have stressed that an artistic interest in a perceptual manifold is an interest in an artistic content articulated through that manifold, as artistic vehicle. Such an interest is 'interrogative' in that it seeks to make sense of a manifold in terms of reasons for its being ordered in the way that it is. Given that articulating an artistic content through an artistic vehicle requires the use of an artistic medium, and depends upon both the category of art to which the vehicle belongs and aspects of the artist's individual style, we must posit a generative process compatible with the articulation of such a content if we are to treat a manifold as the vehicle for an artwork. Indeed, we must posit such a generative process if we are to take an interest in *how* the medium has been used to articulate a given content, and such an interest is arguably intrinsic to an interest in something as an artistic vehicle. While, as noted earlier, we may choose to treat something that we do not believe to be the product of such a generative process as if it were the artistic vehicle of an artwork by *imagining* that such a process has taken place, we are justified in believing that something *is* the artistic vehicle of an artwork only if we are justified in believing that such a generative process *did* take place.

My claim has been that, in the case of many Outsider pieces exhibited in galleries as 'Outsider Art', we have reason to doubt whether these requirements for justifiably believing that a perceptual manifold is an artistic vehicle are met, even though the manifold may resemble Insider pieces in form or theme and be the product of a complex p-expressive process. Given what we know about the provenance of such Outsider pieces, there seems to be little basis for believing that a generative process of the requisite sort took place. Thus the only justification, in such cases, for engaging in the kind of interrogative exploration and appreciation that is intrinsic to the appreciation of something as a work of art would be a practical one: while we lack the necessary grounds for believing that such pieces are artworks, we may find it rewarding to imagine that such grounds do exist and to engage with the pieces accordingly. My arguments in this paper do not challenge such a practical justification for treating Outsider pieces as art, but only address the philosophical question whether such pieces are indeed artworks.

The reader may have noticed, however, that I have not provided any elucidation of the notion of the 'artistic' to which I have tacitly appealed in talking about 'artistic media', 'artistic contents' articulated by means of such media, and 'artistic vehicles' resulting from such articulation. This omission is intentional. In the first place, it goes far beyond the scope of this paper to clarify what it is that distinguishes artworks in general from other artefacts, and thus 'artistic media' from other means of articulating contents. I have tentatively proposed answers to these questions elsewhere, but shall not elaborate upon them here.⁴³ For, and this is the second point, my arguments do not, I think, presuppose any particular answer to these questions. They rely, in the first instance, on something common to our appreciative interest in artworks and our appreciative interest in non-artistic artefacts, namely that the interest is 'interrogative' in the sense that it seeks a reasoned account of why something is ordered in the way that it is. Over and above this, they rely on features of our appreciative engagement with artworks that must be respected by any adequate

43 See *Art as Performance*, pp. 236ff, especially pp. 249–253.

account of what is distinctively artistic—for example, our interest in the ‘how’ of artistic articulation, and not merely in the ‘what’.

It might be thought, however, that, in characterizing an artistic interest in terms of the positing of the kind of generative process set out in Section II, I have to some extent prejudged—and indeed, prejudged counterintuitively—the nature of the distinction between artworks and non-artistic artefacts.⁴⁴ For, it might be thought, the role I ascribe to a process informed by a creator’s awareness of artistic categories and artistic media commits me to the view that there can be artworks only when there are the artistic institutions necessary to sustain such an awareness, whatever we might take the latter to involve. If so, then I might seem to be committed to the kind of sophisticated ‘institutionalism’ that some ascribe to Danto when he talks about the need for an ‘artworld’ if something is to be seen as art. If we interpret this talk of an ‘artworld’ in terms of the practices, traditions, and theories familiar from the Graeco-Roman tradition, or some recent fragment of that tradition, then this might seem to prejudice (negatively) the artistic status of non-Western art. However aesthetically interesting we may find the artefacts produced outside our own tradition, it might be said, these things cannot be artworks on the sort of account I have proposed because their creators lacked the connection with our ‘artworld’ necessary for an awareness of the relevant artistic categories and artistic media. And this, it might be further argued, is deeply counterintuitive since it is part of our own concept of art that it is not restricted to things falling within our own parochial traditions but can comprise artefacts produced outside those traditions.

I shall not venture into exegesis of Danto’s conception of the ‘artworld’ and its implications for these kinds of issues. But it should be clear, upon reflection, that nothing I have said in describing the kind of process that must be posited if we are to appreciate a perceptual manifold as a work of visual art commits me to the kind of view characterized in the preceding paragraph. In leaving unresolved what counts as an ‘artistic medium’, and how it differs from non-artistic means for articulating contents, I leave open the possibility of elucidating this notion in terms of more general modes of content-articulation that can exist in quite different cultural contexts, and in the absence of anything that otherwise resembles the Western ‘artworld’. For example, if, as I have suggested (see note 43), what is distinctive of artistic media is that they facilitate certain kinds of broadly referential functions whose grasp requires intensive scrutiny of the articulating vehicle, then there is no reason why there cannot be such media in non-Western, and indeed in ‘primitive’, cultures, even if the most familiar examples are ones drawn from contemporary Western artistic practice. In fact, contact with an ‘artworld’ in the contemporary sense is neither necessary *nor sufficient* for artistic status on the view I have defended. For what matters is whether an individual is able to draw upon an artistic medium in certain ways, and to thereby engage in the kind of generative process that can legitimate the sort of interrogative interest in the resulting artefact that is characteristic of artistic appreciation. This is why evidence of an awareness of ‘insider’ art and ‘insider’ practices on the part of Outsider artists does not settle the issue of artistic status that concerns me in this paper.

44 I am grateful to a *BJA* reviewer for raising this point, and to John Hyman for pressing me to respond to it and thereby broaden the scope of this paper.

However, linking artistic status to a generative process drawing upon artistic media does clarify what kind of question we should be asking in debating the artistic status of primitive artefacts. Just as perceptual resemblance between Insider and Outsider pieces cuts no artistic ice, so perceptual resemblance between Modernist artworks and 'primitive' pieces cannot determine the artistic status of the latter. In this respect, the argument of Section II echoes the concerns expressed by Thomas McEvelley in response to the claim, by the curators of the 1984 MoMA exhibition, that 'elective affinities' between Modernist formalist pieces and 'primitive' artefacts support a universal formalist view of art. McEvelley claims that tribal artefacts were 'misleadingly presented as art objects' on the basis of perceived formal similarities with Modernist artworks. He maintains that William Rubin, the director of MoMA, ascribed an aesthetic function to the tribal objects based on such formal 'affinities', reasoning that 'the objects themselves are proof of the formal decisions made, and the formal decisions made are proof of the esthetic sensibility involved'.⁴⁵

What, then, should we make of the concept of 'Outsider Art'? It would be wrong to conclude, from the failings of the arguments considered earlier for the artistic status of Outsider Art, that none of the objects exhibited under that label are the artistic vehicles of artworks. What we should conclude is that the status of such objects as artistic vehicles depends upon the satisfaction of proveniential requirements that obtain quite independently of those considerations that have led to the groupings of certain entities under the 'Outsider' label. The distinctions we need to draw between those entities rightly believed to be artistic vehicles and those for which such a belief would be inappropriate must be made on grounds orthogonal to those enshrined in the 'Insider'/'Outsider' dichotomy.⁴⁶ We should therefore eschew the category of 'Outsider Art' while, at the same time, welcoming into the arena of art the less celebrated yet genuinely artistic products of some of the figures whose pieces have been unhelpfully assigned to that category.⁴⁷

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45 McEvelley, 'Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief', p. 44.

46 Elkins ('Naifs, Faux-Naifs, Faux-Faux-Naifs, Would-Be Faux-Naifs', p. 77) cites the art critic, Roberta Smith, as arguing that we should reject the category of 'Outsider Art' and apply to all putative artworks the same qualitative criteria, measured in terms of 'level of artistry and power' ('Redefining a Style as it Catches On', *New York Times*, 22 January 1999, p. B35). But it is important not to conflate the question whether 'Outsider' pieces are art with the question whether they are *good* art.

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