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THE ONLY TRUE ART? OUTSIDER ART AS AN OPPOSITION

I want to question an attitude to Outsider Art, which is still very much around: to see it as the only true art, and somehow in opposition to contemporary art.

To me this attitude seems to be problematic, as it runs the risk of to be fencing off so called Outsider Art from other discourses within society today. I want to question two things:

1. the idea of Outsider Art as an authentic art
2. the practice of opposing it to contemporary art

There is a lot that is inspirational and also explosive in Outsider Art - for the art world and art history, but also for a lot of other areas. We should not give this power away with the wrong kind of marketing.

I will illustrate my arguments with some works from the Prinzhorn collection which is in many ways - I think indisputably - located at the spring of Outsider Art. It was collected by the art historian and Doctor Hans Prinzhorn who came to the psychiatric clinic of Heidelberg university in 1919 with the commission of augmenting an existing small collection of art by mentally ill people. In his short time at the clinic - just two and a half years - he was very successful in this job, gathering more than 5000 works from all over the German speaking countries, a collection which in its variety, age and quality is unparalleled in the world. Historically equally important is the book Prinzhorn wrote on the basis of this collection, "Artistry of the mentally ill" (1922), as, with its 170 illustrations, making the area visible for the first time to a hitherto unknown extent. Today, incidentally, it is a museum with changing exhibitions.

The attitude that Outsider Art is the only true art is based on the idea that it is authentic in a radical way. I will just mention an older influential publication which seems to me significant. His introduction to the catalogue of the famous London show "Outsiders" 1979 Victor Musgrave began with the statement: "Here is an art without precedent" (p. 8). For him it was art without recourse to any history, art, the "'chemically pure' invention" [!] which for him did not allow for any cultural comparison. With this he contrasted it to contemporary art which "is bland and supine in the well-crafted chains of its own making", "a huge machine to perpetuate incestuous sterility". There are a lot of others, collectors, writers, whom I could cite with similar statements up to today. But as it is not about people but about an attitude I am talking, I stick with this deceased.

This attitude was not new in 1979, as you probably know, and is still prevalent. It follows the footsteps of Jean Dubuffet. He did not get tired of fighting against what he called "cultural art" which for him was formalistic, arid and tedious, and he glorified the simple and lively - and genuine - language of what he called ART BRUT. As an example I show you a work by one of his favourite artists, Adolf Wölfli, in the Heidelberg collection. This serves as a kind of bridge, because Dubuffet's appreciation of an art as opposed to culture - put into words which try

to seem as fresh and raw as the art he is praising (a rhetorical feature) - may show the influence of surrealism but is mainly inherited from Prinzhorn.

Although Prinzhorn spoke of "Bildnerer" (artistry) and not of "art", because – as he said – "the word 'art' includes a value judgement within its fixed emotional connotations", his book follows the more or less secret program to show that artefacts by mentally ill people are more authentic than professional artworks. Prinzhorn's book could be called a late expressionist manifesto. At its beginning, he develops an expressive theory of art. He uses the "artistry" of the Heidelberg collection as examples for different artistic possibilities, which for him develop out of a universal expressive urge. Artistry of the mentally ill for him seemed to be ideal for serving this purpose as it came, so he believed, purely out of the unconscious of those marginalized human beings. To put a stress on this quality, he at one point even uses the biblical phrase: "for they know not what they do." (And yet under all his patients work he praised the pictures of the ingeniously gifted, trained art smith Franz Karl Bühler most, whose "Revenge Angel" he chose for the frontispiece of his book). Prinzhorn saw contemporary artists as aiming for the same results as the patient's works - but failing, because they thought too much: for him they created "nearly only intellectual substitutes." (p. 272)

Of course the praise of the madman as artist is to be seen in the context of enthusiasm for other primitivisms at the beginning of the 20th century, as Colin has pointed out yesterday: child art, tribal art, naïve art ... And of course this again is rooted in romanticism where we already find the opposition to education and over-refinement as well. But at the same time, the radicalism of the break with the existing art which Prinzhorn and Dubuffet demanded is something new. It is probably only explainable by the very special situation they both were in – after a World War, Prinzhorn in 1919, Dubuffet in 1945! They wanted to start something radically new, opposed to the culture out of which this destructive insanity could grow, answering a kind of nihilism and experience of emptiness.

It is understandable that Dubuffet stuck more or less to this idea throughout his life. But why did other people, even though the situation had changed and a lot of different art had come up meanwhile? Was it because the "academic system" stayed the same anyway, the "huge machine to perpetuate incestuous sterility", as Victor Musgrave put it?

Looking closely at Dubuffet's followers, it seems to me that they have another reason for their quarrel, which is connected to their idea of authenticity. If I am not wrong their idea of authenticity in Outsider Art is different from Dubuffet's - and Prinzhorn's. Theirs does not point to the metaphysical truth of the expressive urge, in line with the Jungian idea of archetypes, which the German psychiatrist found in the artistry of the mentally ill. And theirs is not Dubuffet's more poetical idea of the simple and true either.

I just quote here the classic, first book on Outsider Art, Roger Cardinal's publication of 1972. In it he speaks of art "consistent with their [the outsiders] innermost selves". This psychological idea of authenticity is based on the thinking of psychoanalysis, but I think its source is especially the culture of introspection of the 1960s and 70s.

The publishing of the first books about Art Brut happened – as well as the rediscovery of the Prinzhorn-collection – not by chance in the 1960s. The 60s were a period of a great interest in introspection in large sections of Western society, carried by a generation that grew up in affluence and without big concerns about life. They looked for new guidelines and turned to the inner, the

psyche, to explore the self. That period saw not only a boom in psychotherapy: with the help of drugs, many people tried to get a widening of consciousness as well. The success of Roger Cardinal's book "Outsider Art" (1972) in my opinion has to do with this current. Roger Cardinal builds his idea of authenticity of Outsider Art on Leo Navratil, the founder of the "House of the Artists" at Gugging, whose first books came out in the 60s as well: "If, as Navratil thinks, all artistic creativity has the primary function of expressing the true nature of the interior self, and, building as it were from this central locus, can recreate the self as a genuine whole, than one can say that 'originality' will be the impression conveyed when the process is most complete." (p. 44)

It is fact that this idea, that "all artistic creativity has the primary function of expressing the true nature of the interior self", which many friends of Outsider Art would still subscribe to, I am sure, has increasingly lost its value for contemporary artists since the 1960's. Therefore it is probably not only the shunned conformism of academic art which is opposed – by these same friends of Outsider Art – but an art which is not interested in authentic expression any more.

This makes for an obvious danger: In the opinion of many contemporary artists and friends of contemporary art, Outsider Art is already something old fashioned. To quote only one voice: Jeremy Deller, the last winner of the Turner Prize, refuses to include Outsider Art in his "Folk Archive" because for him, as he told me, it is already something of a cliché with a recognizable style.

The critique, by friends of Outsider Art, that contemporary art is not authentic only widens this gap. (...)

There are reasons for not sticking to this idea of authenticity in any case, which is still prevalent in many areas of society. It has been effectively criticised again lately, by Charles Guignon in his book "On being authentic", published in 2004. We do not have the space to summarise it here. It may be enough to mention that he, as a pupil of the philosopher Charles Taylor, thinks of authenticity "not as a matter of being true to some pre-given attributes of an antecedent given, substantial self, but instead as a matter of finding and coming to embody a set of defining commitments that first make us into selves. [...] What shapes your identity, according to this picture, is determined by what you identify with: the life-defining ideals and projects that make you who you are." (p. 139)

How about rethinking the whole concept of Outsider Art on this basis and seeing it also from the outside of the outsider – from society? The outsider artist is a marginal figure in society, but as such, still part of it. His or her works reflect not only possibilities in our society but also their specific view on it. He or she may have extraordinary psychic experiences, through what we still call an illness, as well as through the reactions of society to their being different. These are reflected in the works as well – maybe not expressed though the work, maybe encoded or constructed within the work.

Outsider art adds to the spectrum of artefacts in society. It is not better than other art, but it is somehow different. Should it be included in the realm of art at all? The danger is what we call in Germany "Verkunsten" ("dissolved into art"/"made artificial"). And I have the suspicion that not even those who see Outsider Art as the only true art really are aware of this danger. It would be good to keep the discussion about these artefacts open, to prevent the audience from seeing only the aesthetic qualities in them too quickly. On the other hand, every artefact that to a large extent fulfils social expectations of art and has a certain aesthetic quality deserves the label "art" and the respective protection.

Instead of a theoretical discussion on this problem, I want to end with an example of how we in the Prinzhorn collection try to work with our artefacts, whereby we are not usually using the term art. Maybe we had best discuss this.

We don't know anything about Mrs. St., but that she was a patient at the Sanatorium Ober-Döbling, close to Vienna. This was a Nervensanatorium for very rich people, like the Bellevue in Kreuzlingen at Lake Konstanz. Lack of material - as with so many cases in the Prinzhorn collection - cannot have been the reason for the choice of paper that seems to foreshadow Dadaism. It seems to fit to what Roger Cardinal wrote in 1979: "The Outsider's typical preference for indigent materials bears out this sense of veneration for humble textures. His works are made of substances that the cultural artist would never utilize [...]. There is a marked tendency amongst institutionalized Outsiders to prefer old scrap paper and blunt pencils to the shiny drawing blocks and gleaming crayons offered by their kindly guardians. [...] The works of art that arise from such habits are accordingly unkempt, marvellously rough at the edges." (p. 34)

This sounds like a description of arte povera. But what if this choice of material is not authentic in the sense of "becoming what you really are". What if it is pointing to the identity of Ms. St. as "determined by what you identify with". Then it becomes probable, that the humble material is the one she accepts because it is not used by others. The marginal space of the newspaper becomes a symbol for the marginal situation Ms. St. experiences herself.