

**So-Called “Outsiders”:
A Case Against the Moniker**

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Abstract

In the margins of Art historical texts, the corners of prestigious museums, and the far banks of art fairs, live the works of those who've been deemed "Outsiders". Developed by professor and art historian, Roger Cardinal in the early 1970s, the term defies all conventional classification of art (i.e. geography, media, period, subject, or style), instead creating a genus of makers bound together by their shared otherness. Initially generated as an English language equivalent to artist Jean Dubuffet's, Art Brut, Cardinal defines "Outsiders" term as "untrained artists whose position in society was often obscure and humble".¹ While the category began as a limiting classifier of artists not included in the mainstream canon of art history, over time and in the hands of an art world perpetually wanting for definitions and order, the moniker has become even more restrictive yet widely applied. This study explores the "Outsider" moniker from its initial inception to its current implementation. I do this first by discussing how categories and classifications develop in the art historical process, giving specific interest to the role western aesthetics play in shaping these terms. I then analyze common tropes and stereotypes often applied to "Outsider" artists such as reclusive lifestyles, mental illness, and naivety regarding their own artistic pursuits. I make the case that these experiences and attributes are widely accepted as consistent among all artists under the "Outsider" moniker, yet apply to few, leaving many of individuals true biographies unexplored and under-researched. I use the landscape artist Joseph E. Yoakum as an example of this issue of assumed biography. I argue that the "Outsider" term is rooted in a history of systemic prejudice and that its continued application is a hazard to the integrity of art historical practice and the perception of artists not included within the mainstream canon.

keywords: "Outsider", Art Brut, "primitive", categorization, canonical, aesthetics, modern art

¹ *Outsider Art*, 10

Introduction

“Culture had become addicted to classifying and situating all products offered it.”
~ Jean Dubuffet¹

On February 8, 1979, Roger Cardinal and Victor Musgrove delivered a list of “fundamental points” regarding the characteristics of “Outsiders” to the press, before the opening of their long-awaited exhibition *Outsiders: An Art without precedent or Tradition* (Figure 1).² That list, in full, was presented as follows:

1. Originality, inventiveness, imaginative, unprecedented work
2. These artists are nearly all self-taught.
3. They need to be situated outside the context of official art: they are not a ‘school’ or a movement.
4. Neither are they derivative of any tradition or style
5. At the same time, they are in no way inferior to official art.
6. They are scarcely known and deserve to be seriously and properly celebrated
7. Each artist is distinct and unique: each had elaborated style for his own purposes.
8. Not to be confused with naive art (Sunday painters or modern primitivism) psychiatric art or art therapy.
9. Multiplicity of media- pencil drawings, brush paintings, sculpted wood, boxes, books, ink on calico, stuffed sculptures, metal sculptures, and mobile objects. Others have created houses, towers, huge architectural structures, and ambiances.
10. Creativity for its own sake, not a commercial enterprise.³

¹ Jean Dubuffet, Mark Rosenthal, Kent Minturn, Anny Aviram, and Acquavella Galleries, *Jean Dubuffet: Anticultural Positions*, (New York: Acquavella Galleries, 2016), 14.

² Here and throughout this thesis the term “Outsider” will be presented in quotes in a manner to emphasize the skepticism I have toward the application of the term.

³ Victor Musgrove and Roger Cardinal, “List of Points to Deliver to Press Regarding Outsiders: An Art without precedent or Tradition, Hayward Gallery,” (London, Hayward Gallery 1979).

I include these points in their entirety because together they capture the core principles of what it was to be an “Outsider” artist when the term was in its earliest applications. While the ten points listed here are deplorably vague in their generalities, they give us a grounding point for our discussion on the term’s development and exploitation in contemporary art historical practices.

Developed by Roger Cardinal, one of the architects of the aforementioned exhibition, the “Outsider” term was initially intended to provide an English equivalent of “art brut” (raw art) as it was defined by artist Jean Dubuffet in the 1940s. Unlike Dubuffet, Cardinal had not created his terminology to part as an effort to condemn the application of a more derogatory word, as was the case with Dubuffet and “primitive”. Rather, “Outsider” was offered in an effort to continue the study and interest of “art brut” to broader audiences geographically, by acting as an English translation and exposition. Perhaps best explained in the words of Dubuffet himself, the aim of “art brut” was to “seek out works that as far as possible, escape cultural conditioning and proceed from truly original mental attitudes”.⁴ Like many artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Dubuffet was in search of a kind of inspiration that was not influenced by the formality of academia. As relayed by Cardinal in his 1972 book *Outsider Art*, the “range of material designated as art brut”, was “derived from three broad types of artists- schizophrenics, mediums and innocents”.⁵ It is important to note that, in a contemporary context, the terms I just listed are limiting and derogatory in their own right, however, both Dubuffet and Cardinal’s efforts were to bring attention to the art of these groups, which was often lost due to social prejudice.

⁴ Kent Minturn, “Dubuffet, Lévi-Strauss, and the Idea of Art Brut.” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 46 (2004): 257. Accessed January 17, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20167651>.

⁵ Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 35.

Over time, and without regulation, the term “Outsider” has mutated into a category nearly unrecognizable from its original form. In a simple internet search, one can find that the label is considered synonymous with the classifications of vernacular art, naive art, folk art, visionary art, art of the insane, and primitive art. While much of this misapplication is due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the scope of “Outsider” art by those who use it, I argue that the term itself is not suitable for categorization in art historical practice. Defying all conventional classification (i.e. geography, media, period, subject, or style), the term essentially functions to categorize artists based on their shared otherness. Yet even that “otherness” lacks a clear definition. As Marc Steene, director of Pallant House Gallery, noted in a panel discussion on “Outsider” art, held at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, “unlike classifications such as cubism, impressionism, or surrealism for example, ‘outsider’ is the only term that works by collectivizing a group of artists, whose only common denominator is their difference”.⁶ Both Cardinal and Dubuffet were aware of the power of categorization within the practice of art history. Dubuffet even wrote that “culture has become addicted to classifying and situating all products offered to it”.⁷ In a footnote included in his book, Cardinal admitted to the fact that in publishing his scholarship, he too was participating in the same limiting process of classification.⁸ However, even this awareness does not absolve the authors from developing a category that, in its generality, allows artists to be defined by that which others them.

⁶ Stephen Fry, Marc Steene, Ian Sherman, John Maizels, Thomas Roeske, and Sarah Lea. “Joseph Cornell as an outsider artist,” March 22, 2016, in *Royal Academy of Fine Arts*, produced by the Royal Academy of Fine Art, podcast, audio, 12:26:01, <https://soundcloud.com/royalacademy/joseph-cornell-as-an-outsider-artist>.

⁷ Jean Dubuffet and Mark Rosenthal, *Jean Dubuffet: Anticultural Positions*, 9.

⁸ Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, 26.

As one might gather from the list of characteristics by which I began this discussion, the “Outsider” moniker carries with it a certain set of prescribed attributes. Not only do these traits create a broad understanding of what an “Outsider” is, but they also act in a manner that restricts an artist from being seen as anything beyond the term. In other categories of art, an individual can be classified by more than one attribute. For instance, an American artist can also be a painter, a post-war artist, and an abstract artist. However, when an artist is referred to as an “Outsider”, rarely, if ever, is that category paired with additional information. This distillation of an artist to a single term often leads to further assumptions about their identities. One might notice that if they were to explore biographies written about “Outsider” artists, little evidence can be found to substantiate the many claims made about them. It is also worth noting that there are alarmingly few formal biographies written about these artists, to begin with. Take the American artist Joseph E. Yoakum for example. Consistently deemed an “Outsider”, Yoakum’s biography remained largely unexplored until the end of the 20th century, nearly twenty years after his death in 1972. During that time, numerous narratives were perpetuated about his life that fit the “Outsider” stereotype, yet few claims have been proven true, a topic we will explore later in our discussion. Put simply, the category of “Outsider” has led to pervasive misconceptions and assumptions being applied to artists who simply do not fit the mold of the mainstream.

It is no new concept that the history of art is restrictive. To borrow a phrase perhaps more regularly applied to the stories of war rather than the stories of art, “history is written by the victors”.⁹ The biographies of civilizations, similar to narratives in art, are told by those who are given the social and academic authority to be deemed experts on the subject. This governance is therefore decidedly human and perilously variable, influenced by every bias and prejudice

⁹ This quote is often attributed to Winston Churchill but its origins are often disputed.

ingrained in the chronicler.¹⁰ Therein lies the limitations of history, both art and otherwise.

Partiality is the predominant reason for omissions in social narratives, why certain people are lost to time, and why specific culture goes undiscussed. Furthermore, in some cases, if a concept or detail does not suit the narrative accepted by the teller, it is not expunged altogether, but instead used as an example of “otherness” in the story. We see this in the biographies of the western world, where the cultures found outside the Occident are not simply erased, but rather regarded as “savage” or “primitive”.¹¹ By retaining the presence of these peoples and cultures as characters in their plot, the West branded them as a contrast to their own civilized society. It is through this practice, that the prejudices or racism, sexism, and classicism, became systemic, bound to those considered counter in the culture of the West. It is through this practice that the “insiders” become distinguished from the “Outsiders”.

Applied to art history, this notion of prejudice continues to a pervasive degree. Historically, the artists who have occupied the accepted canon have been regulated to include a homogeneous margin of individuals. Excluded from its ranks, are the artists whose lives and works, in some way deviate from the socially accepted standards of the day. By continuing to use categorical terms whose basis is grounded in this othering, be it “primitive”, “art brut”, or “Outsider”, we reinforce ingrained notions of prejudice in our field. This thesis examines the issues of the “Outsider” classification from its earliest origins to its contemporary applications, in order to best understand the need for the term's ultimate retirement in art historical practice.

¹⁰ Peter Burke. Review of *The Social History of Art*, by Janet Southorn, Patricia Fortini Brown, and David Freedberg. *The Historical Journal* 33, no. 4 (1990): 990, accessed April 16, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639808>.

¹¹ Francois Furet, “History & ‘Savages.’” *RAIN*, no. 8 (1975): 4. accessed April 17, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3032279>.

Historical Context: Interests Beyond the Boundaries

This thesis is guided by the history and scholarship in social critical theory, Western aesthetics, intersectionality, and a host of studies on disparities in diversity and inclusion in art history. While a broad collection of themes, a commonality lies in their shared analysis of judgements, perceptions, as well as their collective effect on the scope of art historical practice. I am influenced in this study by the scholarship of John M. MacGregor, David Novitz, Robert Goldwater, and Allan Beveridge, all of whom have contributed to chronicling the history of art as it pertains to the evolving social interest in work not grounded in formal training and Western aesthetics, effectively, the development of the “Outsider”.

While the term “Outsider” was not developed until the 1970s, issues pertaining to the disparities in categorization and labeling in art, began to emerge at the start of the twentieth century. With growing unease in the world, politically, i.e., the events leading to the first World War, artists began to rebel against establishments as a whole. This meant that the institutional approach to academic art training and the glorification of formalized techniques and styles that dominated the past, was being questioned, and in most cases, abandoned. As John M. MacGregor noted on this shift, “it is not exaggeration to speak of a cultural and artistic revolution that expressed, in part, a profoundly altered conception of how pictorial images functioned in human life”.¹² By uprooting the academic principles that had become the foundation of art practice, artists began looking to the world around them for inspiration. The visual culture produced by societies outside of the Occident and academic curriculum led artists to experiment with a trove of new ideas.¹³

¹² John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989), 3.

¹³ Ibid.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the creative material of other cultures and peoples had only recently become accessible as legitimate forms of art in the West during this period.¹⁴ Before the turn of the century, work created by so-called “primitives”, people of non-western or non-academic backgrounds, was not considered “art” in a formal sense. Instead, they were “artifacts”, a category defined by their function and coincidental attention to form.¹⁵ This classification was derived from prejudice, ingrained into the milieu of the Occident. How could the work of peoples, ‘too lowly and uncivilized’ to even be considered a society, be elevated to the same classification as the work of trained western artists? However, in 1938, with the publication of *Primitivism in Modern Art*, art historians Robert J. Goldwater and William Rubin, chronicled the imitation of “primitive” styles and techniques by modern artists, dating back to 1889 at the Paris Exposition.¹⁶ While not a glowing example of inclusion, as the book maintains many of the prejudiced opinions about other cultures typical to the period, it does provide a detailed account of the evolution of modern art, in light of “primitive” culture. The text reads, “The arts of the primitive peoples have widened our concept of what “art” is, and has made us realize the many shapes art can assume, the diverse roles it can play”.¹⁷ This book not only substantiated the effects of non-western art on the scope of contemporary art of the time but provided further credence to the value of the visual culture of “primitives” as works of art in their own right.

¹⁴ This is not to say that art of non-western culture had not been prevalent in the West prior to this period but that such material culture was considered artifacts and not art.

¹⁵ David Novitz, “Disputes about Art.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 2 (1996): 155, accessed March 13, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/431087>.

¹⁶ Robert John Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*. (Enl. ed. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1986), 25.

¹⁷ It should be noted that this quote is from a later printing of the text in which Goldewater reiterates the primary themes of the earlier publication.

Similar to the modern era's interest in "primitive" art, work by patients of mental institutions also became a viable source of inspiration during this period. Perceived as a "visual demonstration of mental illness", the work of asylum patients was originally considered the product of medical practice rather than works of art.¹⁸ Interestingly, the visual matter created by the "insane", became of interest to artists and scholars, over a hundred years before the work of "primitive" cultures entered their creative sphere. The first mention of art of the mentally ill, came in 1806, with the publishing of French alienist, Philippe Pinel's, *A Treatise on Insanity*. A study of various forms of illness and treatments, the book provided two examples of patients whose behavior involved both drawing and painting.¹⁹

Well into the late nineteenth century, psychiatrists and scholars continued to examine the visual creations of asylum patients. It must be stressed however, that the work was still not considered "art", but rather evidence of illness and instability. The uniquely unconventional and creatively free works of these makers, however, were a prime source of inspiration for this era of artistic discovery. Artists, in search of captivating material, began to take a vested interest in the work of asylum patients, often visiting hospitals and coordinating viewings of the work.²⁰ In his 1922 publication *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, derided past attempts "to search for diagnostic clues in the creations of the mad, arguing that such art should be approached as the work of individuals rather than inspected for signs of insanity".²¹ This

¹⁸ Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill ; A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*. (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1972), 16.

¹⁹ Philippe Pinel, *A Treatise on Insanity: In which are Contained the Principles of a New and More Practical Nosology of Maniacal Disorders Than Has Yet Been Offered to the Public*. (United Kingdom: W. Todd, 1806), 198.

²⁰ MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, xvii.

²¹ Allan Beveridge. "A disquieting feeling of strangeness?: the art of the mentally ill," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 94 (11). (2001): 596, doi:10.1177/014107680109401115.

move to recontextualize how the work of the mentally ill was analyzed, urged the artistic and academic world to consider it as authentic “art” without qualification or reserve. While this material was influential to artists a century prior, its acceptance as legitimate “art” was largely caused by the revolutionary ideas of the modern era.

Along with this shift in influence, came a host of new artistic movements in modern art, including the Fauvists, Surrealists, and Abstract Expressionists. Each new classification of art led to greater questions about the differences between the new work and the material that inspired it. For instance, rarely was the visual culture of non-western societies or non-academic peoples discussed as “art”. For example, in her book *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, Ann Eden Gibson describes the mentality of the Expressionist artist as “the fulfillment of a dream of producing works that escaped ideology; works that were free of politics, convention, history”.²² She goes on to note that “this strategy allowed the Abstract Expressionists to identify themselves as modern-day primitives, producing art that was untouched by the vagaries of contemporary life, except in that it served to escape”.²³ The significance of this point is that it demonstrates the appropriation of non-western ideas and aesthetics and the perpetuation of the white academic artists as the perfecters of the very style they were influenced by. In other words, leaving the non-western, non-academic, untrained artists, outside of the very movement they inspired. This process of exploitation continued into the mid and later parts of the twentieth century, becoming a systemic issue in both art-making and art historical practice.

²² Ann Eden Gibson. *Abstract Expressionism : Other Politics*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), xxix.

²³ Ibid, xiii.

Research Questions

The goal of this study is not focused on letting what is “outside” in or taking the “inside” and letting it out, rather it is about dismantling the metaphorical spaces built by the classificatory terms we allow to dictate our perceptions of art and artists. In her book *Outsider Art from the Outsider Archive: London*, Monika Kinley writes of “Outsider” artists, “To a society which seeks always to establish normative values, their work is hard to place and difficult to categorize. The authoritative voices of official culture are reluctant to hand its approval to artists, whose work remains marginal to its customs and institutions”.²⁴ In other words, “Outsiders” artists are grouped not by their similarities, but by their differences from prevailing cultural aesthetics. Furthering this notion, I aim to examine how “Outsider” became a term of vagaries and misconceptions, a kind of catch-all category for art and artists who do not fit the conventions of society. My thesis will pursue the following questions: How did categorical terms come to exist in art historical practice? In what ways had the “Outsider” term changed since its invention in 1972? What impact does the moniker have on the careers of artists to whom it is applied? Is the existence of an “Outsider” category necessary for this art to function within contemporary art practice?

To conduct my analysis, I have consulted with many specialists in the field of “Self-taught” art, the socially preferred term at this time. I have also examined studies and publications on the topic from the perspectives of art historians, critics, sociologists, and educators, to provide a comprehensive and well-informed study of the “Outsider” art subject. Specifically, I conducted my own research, by way of archives and databases, to provide a substantiated account of the life

²⁴ Monika Kinley, *Outsider Art from the Outsider Archive: London* (Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto Shoin International Co., 1989), 11.

and work of the artist Joseph E. Yoakum, who I will be using as a case study in this thesis. Collectively, these sources of information and analysis allow for a thorough investigation of the “Outsider” term and its application in modern art historical practice.

The primary motivation for conducting this research was to address the systemic issues of categorization and classification in the field of art history, specifically concerning underrepresented and under-researched demographics, such as “Outsider” artists. While there is a plethora of exhibitions and scholarship on “Outsider” art in its applied form, studies of the artists categorized under the moniker, as well as a true analysis of the term’s evolution, have not been as thoroughly investigated. My hope is to correct that deficit in some small manner. However, it is necessary to acknowledge, that without the scholarship of the minds who came before me this analysis would not have been possible, and the work of many of these artists may never have been acknowledged at a.

I am aware that in disavowing a term like “Outsider”, and suggesting to instead position these artists in conventional classifications (i.e. geography, media, period, subject, or style), many may argue their rarity would be lost. However, it is not my intention to suggest that we forget the uniqueness of this work or the artists who create it. Rather, I hope is that art historical practice begins to recognize these artists, not as having made art despite their conditions or circumstances, but simply as artists whose work and biographies cannot be solely distilled and interpreted by these circumstances. Each of these “Outsider” artists exists as individuals with influences and experiences specific to themselves and should no longer be grouped and defined by their shared otherness.

Theories

My thesis examines the evolution of the term “Outsider” within art historical practice in a manner to expose the word’s limiting categorical definition and ultimately the need for its elimination from contemporary applications. Through the course of this study, I borrow theories from scholars including Jean Dubuffet, Roger Cardinal, Ann Eden Gibson, John M. MacGregor, Vera L. Zolberg, and Joni Maya Cherbo.

In *Anticultural Positions*, a lecture given in 1951 by artist and scholar, Jean Dubuffet, it is argued that the reluctance of the Occident to accept and embrace the art of non-western, “primitive” societies, has fundamentally stilted the artistic progress of Western culture. He explains,

We [the West] are beginning to ask ourselves whether our Occident doesn't have something to learn from those savages. It could very well be that in various domains, their solutions and approaches, which have struck us as simplistic, are ultimately wiser than ours. It could very well be that we're the ones with simplistic attitudes. It could very well be that they rather than we are characterized by refinement, mental ability, and depth of mind.²⁵

Throughout his lecture, Dubuffet emphasizes the limitations of prejudice, not on the excluded culture, but rather on the society unwilling to grow beyond the parameters of their own set of accepted standards. He argues that the West’s reluctance to accept the work of other cultures is rooted in a constructed understanding that only Occidental traditions and principles are intellectually evolved and therefore deemed civilized. It is in this claim that Dubuffet warns against constricted perceptions of culture, and instead encourages an elastic notion of beauty and art. Roger Cardinal echoes these theories in his 1972 book, *Outsider Art*, in which he explores

²⁵ Jean Dubuffet “Anticultural Positions,” (lecture, The Arts Club of Chicago, December 20, 1951), 1.

“artists outside culture”.²⁶ In the text, Cardinal writes, “Inasmuch as we are all affected by the culture in which we are brought up, it seems idle to consider any benefit in [our] posing the question; ‘is this all?’.”²⁷ By offering this query, somewhat despondently to the reader, Cardinal is encouraging us to locate the limits of our own understanding of art, and in doing so, to reflect on what may lie beyond. Like Dubuffet, Cardinal warns against a blind acceptance of tradition and social standards, instead highlighting the abundant creativity and originality that may exist outside of the familiar culture. In essence, both authors are discussing concepts of institutionalized prejudice that create a restrictive social climate and ultimately, exclusionary practices. The “Outsider” term was developed from these ideas, in an effort to account for the artists often left beyond the limits of art history due to social prejudice and cultural rejection. My thesis engages with these theories, by both discussing their contribution to the “Outsider” moniker and encouraging a continuation of their principles by eliminating the term which has become restrictive in its own right.

The Discovery of the Art of the Insane by John M. MacGregor, an art historian and trained psychiatrist, expounds on the profound influence of marginalized, and often entirely unrecognized artists, on the scope of modern art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. MacGregor’s work examines the social history of the art of the mentally ill, and in doing so, charges art historical practice with trivializing the role of these artists in shaping modern art as we know it. He describes his work and its impact by explaining,

The systematic historical reconstruction of these processes of aesthetic mutation, these unexpected patterns of changing perceptions and influence, is necessitated by the fact that these newly discovered images [of artwork of the mentally ill] may prove to have been as

²⁶ Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, 7.

²⁷ Ibid.

important for the art of this century as the sequences of Classical revivals was for the art of the Middle Ages.²⁸

In conducting this research and analysis, MacGregor is advocating for the inclusion of these artists into the art historical record, thereby clarifying their influence and ensuring they are no longer erased from social memory. Similarly, Anne Eden Gibson's text, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, examines the erasure of certain demographics from the history of Abstract Expressionism based on issues of race and gender. She argues that the patriarchal and Eurocentric ideals of the twentieth century contributed to the work of women and African Americans being overlooked in the realm of abstract art. Gibson's text "demonstrates a way of thinking about the purposes and methods of art history that address the multiple levels—economic and sociological, as well as aesthetic—on which questions of value are determined".²⁹ MacGregor and Gibson's theories regarding the dismissal of marginalized demographics from the record of art history influenced my own ideas pertaining to the historical treatment of "Outsider" artists.

Vera L. Zolberg and Joni Maya Cherbo's book entitled *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*, analyzes the inception and function of "Outsider" art through a lens of sociological theory. The authors, both trained sociologists, explore the fluid nature of categorization in art historical practice, using "Outsider" art as a case study. The theories central to the text involve the essential role of a social governing body in constructing channels for identifying art. Their study, as well as my application of their work, involves the influence of social standards and perspectives in creating the "Insiders" and "Outsiders" of the

²⁸ MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, 3.

²⁹ Eden Gibson. *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, xxxvii.

art world.³⁰ Naming the “gatekeepers” of artistic recognition as the “organizations, influential individuals, publications, and media, popular and commercial or elite and scholarly”, Zolberg and Cherbo emphasize the wide-ranging influence of society on art.³¹ I employ their theories to explain the mutation of the “Outsider” term from its creation in 1972 to its contemporary uses, emphasizing the changeability of definitions of artistic categories based on public reception.

I depend on the scholarship of Dubuffet, Cardinal, Gibson, MacGregor, Zolberg, and Cherbo, in creating the theoretical foundation of my thesis, as I explore the genesis of the “Outsider” moniker, its transformation into its contemporary form, and finally the need for its elimination from art historical practice.

Thesis Structure

This thesis’s structure is as follows: Chapter one examines the genesis of the term “Outsider”, from its original definition and roots in “art brut” to its contemporary applications. Within this delineation I will analyze the manner in which the “Outsider” moniker has been altered and modified over time, to fit the needs of those who wield it, thereby leaving the term nearly unidentifiable from its original form. Chapter two reviews the development of art historical classifications as it pertains to Western academia, covering the development of the Academy itself, to its jurisdiction over the contemporary art world. I do this to explain the socio-political role of classificatory terms within art historical practice as well as to provide context for the metaphorical “inside” and “outside” that is at the core of our discussion. Additionally, in this section, I will be putting artist Jean Dubuffet’s lecture, *Anticultural Positions* in direct

³⁰ Vera L. Zolberg and Joni Maya Cherbo. *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*. (Cambridge, U.K. ;: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

³¹ Ibid.

conversation with notable enlightenment writings on art and beauty. I do this in a manner to reckon with the ideals of Occidental aesthetics that have altered how art is perceived as beautiful and the ways in which this has aided in the conception of terms such as “Outsider”. As “Outsider” artists are regularly considered unconventional or even oppositional to Western standards of beauty, this chapter will provide historical context for those charges. Chapter three focuses on the misapplication of the “Outsider” term, using the life and work of American artist, Joseph E. Yoakum, as a case study. Consistently classified as an “Outsider”, due to assumed aspects of his biography and overtly biased readings of his work, Yoakum’s career has been significantly impacted by a term whose principle characteristics, do not apply to him. Here I will provide a detailed biography of Yoakum’s life, extrapolated from primary source research I have conducted on the artist, as well as a close reading of two of his works. Finally, my Conclusion ruminates on the alternative methods in classification by which contemporary art historical practice may benefit, in an increasingly changing and diverse field.

Chapter One: Building the “Outside”

On the first of January 1972, Roger Cardinal’s now infamous book, *Outsider Art*, was published. This scholarly text was created in response to Jean Dubuffet’s early lectures and writings on art which existed beyond the western academic culture of canonical art history, or “art brut” as Dubuffet called it.³² While the modern artistic period in which Dubuffet began his initial work on the subject was becoming more elastic, accepting more experimental and non-traditional styles of art, stigmas were still prevalent in the perception of untrained and non-western artists. Work by artists of other cultures, mental states, and classes began to interest members of the mainstream art world, however, their creations were rarely recognized as more than reference material. The same ingrained biases which impacted the reception of “art brut” in the early 1940s retained their influence in the postmodern period, as the publishing of Cardinal’s book demonstrates. The work of artists whose lives and practices contradicted the accepted standards of the time remained restricted to a lower class of social opinion.

Even now, exactly half a century removed from the inception of Cardinal’s text, the art historical world still classifies the work of these artists as irrevocably different. What’s worse, is the parameters of this difference which dictate the boundaries of the “Outside” are routinely blurred and manipulated to suit the preferences of the prevailing societies of the time. If left unaddressed, the issues affecting “Outsider” artists will extend further into the history of art, continuing the cycle of exclusion and discrimination for future generations of artists. To better understand the persistence of the term, we will now examine its origin within art historical practice.

³² For the purposes of our discussion, “canonical art history” or the “canon” will refer to the group of artists whose work is widely accepted and celebrated as “great art”. Their work has become a sort of goal post by which new and emerging artists and art forms are measured. The construct of the canon is rooted in Western institutional practices.

History of the “Outsider”

It is no new concept that Enlightenment thinking created, or at the very least reinforced, social divides in the Western world. Kant’s definition of enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity” categorized those who, by his standards, attained the capacity for reason from those who remained innocent. Society was made up of guardians and the guided; members of the “literate world” and those bound by nature; those who are civilized and those who are savage.³³ The distinctions seemed to suggest, and in many instances state outright, a superiority of mind among those who fit within the enlightened parameters. Those who remained under the yoke of immaturity needed to be categorized as such and were therefore “primitive”.³⁴ What’s worse is that rarely was the word “primitive” defined in certain terms. Much like “Outsiders” misapplication in the present day, the “primitive” designation was used as a pseudo synonym for the uneducated, the non-western, the uncivilized, the innocent, the simple, the savage, etc. Decidedly vague, the word was adapted to fit the needs of those who wielded it, denoting that which was lesser or inferior by the values of their society. Jean Dubuffet, the famed French artist, and sometime-scholar, in his 1951 lecture *Anticultural Positions*, charged the “values” of the Occident with disparaging those of the “so-called primitive people”.³⁵ He claimed that specifically with regards to notions of the natural, the civilized, and the beautiful,

³³ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is enlightenment?* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1992), 2.

³⁴ Throughout the course of this paper, I will be placing the word “primitive” in quotation marks as it is a word I do not agree with the use of and find that its use unchecked often leads to misconceptions.

³⁵ Jean Dubuffet “Anticultural Positions.”

Western definitions simply limit to the point of exclusion. How can anything that had not been made in the vacuum of the society which created these postulations have any worth within it?

Presented as a lecture at The Arts Club of Chicago, Jean Dubuffet's aforementioned *Anticultural Positions* was intended as a kind of anti-establishment manifesto. A shout into the void that was the art world, demanding a kind of recompense for how Western civilization had denigrated art, that was not their own, i.e. primitive. Dubuffet himself saw his work and his ideals as far more aligned with the Bohemian counterculture that came to be after the end of the first World War. However, before the lecture, in 1923, he had read Dr. Hans Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, a now-infamous book that examined the artwork of asylum patients in Heidelberg Germany, and found himself inspired, like many other artists of the time, by the unconventional styles of the untrained.³⁶ This artwork ranged in medium and method but overall blended the figural and abstract in a manner that foiled the clean lines and hyper-simplistic forms of the Bauhaus, a school of modernism from which the artist and his cohort rebelled.³⁷

Around 1940, Dubuffet began to incorporate aspects of the work he had seen in Prinzhorn's book, along with characteristics of non-western and untrained artists into a new style he coined as "art brut". Translated to "raw art", the application of this term, while varied, tends to denote work that resists the academic principles of fine art, or "cultural art" as Dubuffet called it. This art employed an assortment of media, much of which was equally unconventional, including dirt, glass, and rocks. Aiming to disrupt social concepts of subject matter in art,

³⁶ Jean Dubuffet and Mark Rosenthal, *Jean Dubuffet: Anticultural Positions*, 9. Prinzhorn's book was groundbreaking for its study of works by asylum patients in the early nineteenth century. This scholarship, as well as Prinzhorn's extensive collection of this artwork, was highly influential to modern artists.

³⁷ Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, 15.

Dubuffet created works about what was around him, scenes of urban life largely left unrecorded by the artistic elite. However, it is important to note that in embracing this new style of art, Dubuffet was participating in the appropriation of the cultures he intended to celebrate. Even still, the intention behind Dubuffet's proposal to recontextualize what was then "primitive" art as an acknowledged source of inspiration, rather than work to be dismissed, seems primarily well-meaning. While not a lasting solution, the premise of "art brut" proved a significant step forward in the face of a systemic issue, the "othering" of peoples and material culture based on prejudice.

In the late 1960s, art critic and professor of literary and visual studies, Roger Cardinal began to explore the subject of "art brut" while working on his first book, a study on the artistic movement of surrealism entitled, *Surrealism: Permanent Revelation*. Co-authored by Professor Robert S. Short, the text explored the genesis of the Surrealism movement, including the pervading influence of non-western and non-academic material culture on the artists of the early twentieth century.³⁸ The Surrealists, among other artistic groups of the period, including the Expressionist and Fauvists, were heavily inspired by the art of "primitives", a term that, as previously mentioned, predated "art brut". Artists such as Andre Breton, Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, and Jean Dubuffet himself, were excited by the idea of art created outside of the vacuum of western academia. Cardinal's text on the subject allowed for continued exploration of the art world's early interest in "primitive" art as well as the eventual development of "art brut". However, with the lack of an English book on the subject, Cardinal set out to create a comprehensive text on the study of "art brut" to include many of the artists recognized by Dubuffet with additional makers of the postmodern era. The result was *Outsider Art* though it

³⁸ Roger Cardinal, interview by Roger McDonald, "An Interview with Roger Cardinal, 'The Father of Outsider Art' (Part 1)," *Diversity in the Arts Today*, June 07, 2019, <https://www.diversity-in-the-arts.jp/en/stories/12639>.

seems the original title of the publication was *Art Brut*. The story goes that when Roger Cardinal presented his editor with the manuscript for the book, the editor expressed initial concerns over whether or not an English audience would be able to correctly translate the term “art brut”.³⁹ Posed as a solution to this issue was the alternative, “Outsider art” and thus the term was made.

Aiming to contextualize and extrapolate the notion of “art brut” by examining the origins of the classification as well as its contemporary examples, the text essentially took Dubuffet’s original theories one step further. Cardinal’s study emphasized the presence of unconventional artists within the context of familiar culture. He explains,

...the ‘alternative’ art to which the present book [*Outsider Art*] is addressed is to be sought not in cultures different from our own [the West], since these do not break away from cultural norms and set figurations, but in true artistic heresies *within* the boundaries of our immediate system.⁴⁰

In other words, the traditional art of other cultures is curious to the West merely because it is not our own, therefore it is not “Outsider” art but simply art of another society. Instead, Cardinal applies his “Outsider” term only to art that is created within western civilization yet does not adhere to its prescribed standards.

Included within the study are twenty-nine chapters, each dedicated to the abridged biography and artwork of an individual “Outsider” artist. To Cardinal’s credit, not one of these histories is presented as a kind of “discovery” of an artist, as is often the case with largely unknown makers, but rather a chronicle of their practice and an analysis of their work. Like Dubuffet, Cardinal’s scholarship seemed to be developed to promote the work of these artists to a world whose opinions were significantly influenced by the biased canon of art history.⁴¹ In

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, 39.

⁴¹ Roger Cardinal, "Outsider Art." *Leonardo* 7, no. 1 (1974): 96. Accessed August 12, 2021. doi:10.2307/1572785.

broadening access to the subject of “art brut” to an English-speaking public and acknowledging these artists as accomplished makers, his work marked a notable shift in the study of non-canonical artists. However, the term was still rooted in the belief that these artists were too dissimilar from their contemporaries to be included in existing conventional classifications. Over time the focus on these differences overshadowed other details significant to the artist and their work leaving the “Outsider” moniker and its definition to serve as an exclusionary term in art historical practice.

Hayward Gallery, 1979

A clear account of the evolution of the “Outsider” term from its inception in 1972 to its use in present day, can be found in the word’s application within artistic institutions, including museums and galleries. The first exhibition of “Outsider” art was presented in 1979 at the Hayward Gallery in central London (Figure 2). The show entitled *Outsiders: An Art without Precedent or Tradition*, was created in partnership with the Arts Council of Great Britain and co-curated and organized by Victor Musgrove and Roger Cardinal.⁴² Cardinal, whose book *Outsider Art* was published just seven years before the exhibition's opening, saw the show as an opportunity to promote the work of “Outsider” artists to a broader public. The scope of the exhibition, which acted as a continuation of Cardinal’s initial theories on the subject, included works by forty-two artists ranging in both period and geography (Figure 3). This selection repeated many of the twenty-nine names initially discussed in the author's book while also introducing other contemporary artists to the “Outsider” category. Among this group were the artists Henry Darger, Martin Ramirez, Anna Zemánková, Heinrich Anton Müller, August Walla,

⁴² The Arts Council of Great Britain is now known as the Arts Council England.

and Joseph Yoakum. While many of the artists included in this show were described in varying manners before its opening, from that point on they would be known as “Outsiders”.

Aside from a few coincidental similarities, such as Darger and Yoakum having both lived in Chicago for a time, nothing binds these artists thematically to one another aside from their collective “Outsider” status.⁴³ The press notice for the exhibition at the Hayward Gallery reads as follows:

The generic title (“Outsiders”) includes individuals who belong to no movement or school, who have very seldom had any instruction or training unless to reject it, and who usually lack any cultural indoctrination. They produce lyrical, powerful, delicate, or violent images, original visions served by consummate techniques of their own, an unofficial art that comes as a startling rediscovery of the power of the imagination.⁴⁴

This broad description aims to encapsulate the core makeup of an “Outsider” artist, as described in Cardinal’s original text. However, its broad scope overlooks the complex differences among the individuals it absorbs into the category. Take for instance Adolf Wölfli. Often considered the first artist associated with “art brut” or “Outsider” art, nineteen of Wölfli’s heavily detailed drawings were included in this 1979 exhibition (Figure 4).⁴⁵ His work and background, however, differ greatly from the sculptural creations of French artist, Francis Marshall, or the carvings of German-born Karl Brendel (Figure 5 & 6). Each of these artists has practices and biographies which vary significantly, yet their work is grouped under the “Outsider” classification. The companion catalog for the exhibition does make some effort in clarifying the boundaries of the term, specifically highlighting its dissimilarities from “tribal art”, “naive art”, and the art of

⁴³ I find it necessary to note that while Harney Drager and Joseph Yoakum lived in Chicago during the same period, there is no evidence that suggests they ever crossed paths.

⁴⁴ Hayward Gallery, press release for *Outsiders: An Art Without Precedent or Tradition*, From the collection of: Hayward Gallery, London.

⁴⁵ Victor Musgrove and Roger Cardinal, *Outsiders: An Art Without Precedent or Tradition* (Hayward Gallery, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979), 158.

“mental patients” made as a product of art therapy. I argue, however, that even with these noted exclusions, the parameters of “Outsider” art, framed within this exhibition, remained variable and ill-defined. While the show at the Hayward Gallery was well attended and did allow for the work of “Outsiders” artists to be accessed by a wider public it, in turn, perpetuated confusion with regards to the definition of the term and its scope within art history.

Contemporary Applications

After 1979, a series of subsequent exhibitions and gallery shows on the work of “Outsider” artists took place in Europe and the United States. Titles for these exhibitions included *Naive and Outsider* (1980), *American Mysteries: The Rediscovery of Outsider Art* (1987), *Outsider Art: The Black Experience* (1988), *Visionaries, Outsiders, and Spiritualists: American Self-Taught Artists* (1993), and *The “Outsider” Question: Non-Academic Art from 1900 to Present* (1993).⁴⁶ While a comprehensive index of exhibitions focused on “Outsider” art from 1979 to the present would fill pages of this thesis, I believe even just these few titles provide a suitable foundation for our discussion. Among the shows listed here, you may notice a progression of liberties taken with themes involving the “Outsider” term. We see “Outsider” art as the work of black artists, non-academic artists, and artists in need of discovery. We too see their work related to the art of the “naive”, the art of “spiritualists”, and the art of “visionaries”.

⁴⁶ In order as they appear, *Naive and Outsider Art in Chicago*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Dec. 8, 1979–Feb. 17, 1980; *American Mysteries: The Rediscovery of Outsider Art*, San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery (now San Francisco Arts Commission Galleries), Sept. 29–Nov. 1, 1987; *Outsider Art: The Black Experience*, Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago 1988; *Visionaries, Outsiders, and Spiritualists: American Self-Taught Artists*, David Winton Gallery (now David Winton Bell Gallery), Brown University, Providence, Oct. 16–Nov. 21, 1993; *The “Outsider” Question: Non-Academic Art from 1900 to the Present*, Galerie St. Etienne, New York, Mar. 23–May 28, 1993.

With each exhibition's premise, the “Outsider” term drifted farther and farther from its original, albeit still ambiguous parameters.

The topic of race, for example, is introduced as a characteristic of the classification in the title, *Outsider Art: The Black Experience* (1988). While “primitive”, a word often applied to non-western cultures, including Africa and Asia, before the twentieth century, was a term that led to the creation of the “Outsider”, Dubuffet’s discussion of the word was not limited in scope to non-western art. Instead, his argument questioned the dismissal of all art that did not conform to the aesthetic standards of the West, including the work of untrained artists and the art of asylum patients. In other words, the origin of “Outsider” was never directly tied to race. However, as we see here, “Outsider” art is being placed in the context of the Black experience, thereby attaching race to the public understanding of the term’s scope.⁴⁷

The same issue of misapplication can be seen in cases where “Outsider” artists are placed in connection with “naive” artists. “Naive” artwork was specifically excluded from the “Outsider” definition. As Victor Musgrave explains in his discussion of the term,

The naive artist tends to be comforting and often cosy; his maladroitness attempts to copy from life and nature can lend his work considerable charm, but his desire to please and to be accepted by his peers and the official art world excludes him for ever from the subversive universe of the Outsider.⁴⁸

The work of “naive” artists is therefore different from that of “Outsiders” and should not be equated. However, in the 1980 show *Naive and Outsider* at the Museum of Contemporary Art

⁴⁷ The topic of race in the context of “Outsider” artists is an important one given the role of racial bias in the art world and the lack of attention paid to artists of color historically. However, within the confines of this thesis it is not a topic I feel I can adequately cover. If I am to pursue this study of “Outsider” artists further the topic of race will surely be an aspect of that larger discussion, but until then I offer these sources as further reading on the subject of critical race theory in art and its role in art historical classification. Camara Dia Holloway, “Critical Race Art History.” *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (2016): 89–92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43967657>; C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp. *Saturation: Race, Art, and the Circulation of Value*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020).

⁴⁸ Musgrove and Cardinal, *Outsiders : An Art Without Precedent or Tradition*, 11.

Chicago, the two categories are placed in connection with one another, suggesting their relation to the general public. In any other context, the connection between two classifications might have a far lesser effect on the understanding of the individual terms. Take for instance an exhibition of American abstract artists, or a show comparing Impressionist and Surrealist paintings, in each of these examples we see the use of multiple terms of categorization, yet their individual definitions remain unaffected by their inclusion with one another. The same cannot be said about the “Outsider”. As has been noted previously in our discussion, the classification has become synonymous with that of folk art, naive art, and “primitive” art, yet its original definition remains wholly distinct from each of these categories. I argue that this integration of disparate terms under the umbrella of “Outsider” art has only contributed to the misuse of the term and its misattribution in an art historical context.

Parallel Visions and Outliers

Further examples of the “Outsider” monikers application in contemporary practice can be found in a series of experimental exhibitions on the subject of “Outsiders” as inspirations of the mainstream. For example, Los Angeles County Art Museum’s 1992 exhibition *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art* was the first of its kind to place the works of “Outsider” artists such as Yoakum, Darger, Ramirez, and Wölfl in direct conversation with “devotees of Outsider art” (Figure 7).⁴⁹ Works by well-known modern artists such as Paul Klee, Salvador Dali, and Claes Oldenburg were all included among the scattered pieces of the art of lesser-known makers, urging audiences to compare and contrast on their own accord. The thesis of the exhibition aimed

⁴⁹ Maurice Tuchman and Carol S. Eliel, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art*. (Los Angeles, Calif.: Princeton, N.J.: Los Angeles County Museum of Art ; Princeton University Press, 1992), 10.

to both bolster public perception of “Outsider” art and create further discussion of its inclusion alongside members of the art historical canon.

In a Los Angeles Times article published in honor of the exhibition's opening, Maurice Tuchman, the curator of *Parallel Visions*, is quoted saying, “This is the first comprehensive show to include both outsiders and modern artists and the first major museum showing of most of these outsiders”.⁵⁰ The article goes on to note that “By mounting ‘Parallel Visions’, LACMA is both legitimizing the outsider genre and intensifying the controversy surrounding it”.⁵¹ It seems that while the objective of the exhibition was to “legitimize” the work of “Outsider” artists, its execution was grounded in demonstrating their likeness to mainstream work. In other words, in highlighting the use of “Outsider” art as a source of reference and inspiration to artists of the historical canon, the worth of this art is placed in its relation to that which is already deemed valuable. This premise begs the question, would “Outsider” art still be considered legitimate had it never caught the attention of mainstream artists?

We see a similar issue arise in the National Gallery of Art’s 2018 exhibition *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (Figure 8). Organized by scholar and curator Lynne Cooke, this show focused on the “relational” aspect of “Outlier” artists within an American context.⁵² Including nearly two hundred and fifty works by eighty artists the extensive project chronicles a century of art history and a single exhibition. Like Tuchman’s efforts in *Parallel Visions*, the motivation for

⁵⁰ Tessa Decarlo and Susan Subtle Dintenfass, “The Outsiders: With Its Exhibit ‘Parallel Visions,’ the County Museum Validates a Controversial Genre--the Art of the Insane,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1992, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-10-11-tm-617-story.html>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Lynne Cooke with Douglas Crimp, Darby English, Suzanne Hudson, Thomas J. Lax, Jennifer Jane Marshall, Richard Meyer, and Jenni Sorkin, *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (Washington, D.C: National Gallery of Art, 2017), 3.

this show was in presenting a comprehensive account of the work of nontraditional artists alongside the better-known makers who were influenced by their creations. In the exhibition record of the show, the text reads, “Again and again in the United States during the past century, vanguard artists found affinities and inspiration in the work of their untutored, marginalized peers and became staunch advocates, embracing them as fellow artists”.⁵³ Here again, we see the work of “Outsider” artists presented as legitimate based on the acceptance of their mainstream counterparts.

An interesting dimension offered within this exhibition was the proposition of the title “Outlier”, as an alternative to “Outsider”. Cooke offers this substitute in an effort to correct many of the issues of definition I have presented in this thesis. The basis for her alternative is grounded in the idea that the “Outlier” term, “side-steps questions of “inside” versus “outside” in favor of distance nearer and farther from an aggregate so that being at variance with the norm can be a position of strength: a place negotiated or sought out rather than predetermined and fixed”.⁵⁴ The problem presented by this definition, however, is that it suggests a kind of agency by the individuals categorized within the classification. If the monikers of “Outsider”, “Outlier” or even “Self-taught” were chosen freely by the artists themselves, it seems the argument at hand would bear no weight. Unfortunately, it is the case that these terms are attached to artists without their knowledge and in many cases posthumously. Still, Cooke’s intention in proposing a new term works to only prove a point to our discussion, that the “Outsider” moniker has become “problematic and inadequate” in characterizing the artists to which it is applied.

⁵³ “Outliers and American Vanguard Art,” National Gallery of Art online, January 28, 2018, <https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2018/outliers-and-american-vanguard-art.html>.

⁵⁴ Lynne Cooke, *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, 4.

In these examples of exhibitions of, and including, “Outsider” art through the latter half of the twentieth century to the present day, we see a notable shift in the term’s use, as well as characteristics attributed to its artists. The expanding nature of the “Outsider” boundaries are evident in the manner in which it is routinely misapplied and equated to dissimilar classifications and styles. These errors have resulted in the definition of “Outsider” art having been modified beyond the point of recognition. Further, the function of the term itself, as a category of difference has led to many artists becoming limited by the restriction of its scope. It seems that it is now necessary to retire the moniker of “Outsider” not simply to protect it from continued misapplication but to allow the artists classified within its purview to be more properly defined within the categories of art history.

Chapter Two: Classification and Western Aesthetics a brief history

The history of categorization in art historical practice is steeped in political motivation and social bias. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Roger Cardinal's term "Outsider" was created through a chain reaction, beginning with "primitivism" and resulting in his English equivalent to "art brut". However, the word's creation is tied to a custom of classification that started long before the nineteenth century. It is essential that we have a shared understanding of what the function of classifications is before we navigate who or what regulates them. The principal motivation in categorizing a term in art historical practice is to "seek both to capture what is essential to art and, in light of this, to furnish a linguistic prescription".⁵⁵ Therefore, a category or classification serves to distill the most significant factors pertaining to a work of art, artist, or movement as succinctly as possible. Due to the brief nature of categorical terms, it is not uncommon for their application to be disputed based on a lack of nuance in capturing their subject. Now that we have a shared understanding of classification as it is used throughout this chapter we will continue with our historical analysis.

Vera L. Zolberg and Joni Maya Cherbo explain in their book *Outsider Art: Contesting boundaries in contemporary culture*, that there would be no "Outsider" art were it not for the treatment of "art itself as constructed with clearly delineated boundaries, in which an aesthetic canon mandates the modalities and outcomes of creation".⁵⁶ In other words, the ingrained

⁵⁵ Novitz, "Disputes about Art."

⁵⁶Zolberg and Cherbo, *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*, 3.

standards of aesthetics and artistic principles that have guided the art world for centuries are entirely manufactured and perpetuated within society to enforce conformity.

The architects at the helm of this plan are the political and academic institutions whose vested interest in society's allegiance to tradition is reflected in the work they promote. Art that upholds the aesthetics and techniques seen as fashionable during any given period is endorsed by said institutions. However, all culture which does not observe the regulated principles as maintained by the guiding establishment is therefore deemed unfit and excluded from mainstream acceptance. The geography created through this process, i.e. the metaphorical “Inside” and “Outside”, are therefore a product of institutionalized preferences and their ability to dismiss all art that fails to fall within the accepted purview. It is for this reason that some art, specifically the work which intentionally or not avoids conformity, has been excluded from the art historical canon.

The Academy

The development of art historical classifications can be traced back to the establishment of the French Academy in 1648. While there are alternative historical points from which one could argue a hierarchy of aesthetics evolved, such as the patronages of Renaissance Italy or the Académie de Saint-Luc in 1391, the founding of Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture (Royal Academy of Paintings and Sculptures) involved a notable shift toward formal artistic institutions rooted in “fine” art.⁵⁷ Before the establishment of this school, the social status of

⁵⁷ Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 9. The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture will be referred to as “the Academy” going forward in this discussion.

artists was fairly low. As stated by historian Nathalie Heinich, prior to the Academy, “the artist was a marginal, eccentric, bohemian figure—a figure that began in the Renaissance but in an isolated, not paradigmatic way, with the melancholy artist”.⁵⁸ The development of an academic framework by which artists would come to be associated propelled their status from artisans to prominent intellectuals. Established through the lobbying of painter Charles Le Brun, and a collective of artists set on escaping the antiquated rule of artisan guilds at the Académie de Saint-Luc, the Academy was sponsored under the reign of King Louis XIV. The primary function of the institution was as a school for the training of artists in the mediums of sculpture and painting. That charge, however, gave the Academy the ability to shape the scope of accepted artistic styles and practices of the time. In other words, the institution had the authority to mediate the “fine” art of the nation.⁵⁹

In 1667, the French Academy’s governance over the realm of fine arts was galvanized, with the opening of the Salon exhibition (Figure 9). Held at the Louvre Palace and sponsored by Louis XIV, the show exclusively displayed works by artists trained at the Royal Academy of Paintings and Sculptures. Considered a semi-public affair, primarily attended by the French elite, inclusion in the Salon affirmed an artist's worth by confirming they had royal approval.⁶⁰ Within the exhibition, the artwork was categorized into five genres which included history painting, portraiture, landscape, genre painting, and still life.⁶¹ While these categories originated during

⁵⁸ Nathalie Heinich, *Du peintre à l'artiste. Artisans et académiciens à l'Âge Classique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1993), 129.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, 91.

⁶¹ Ibid, 19.

the Italian Renaissance, their function was reinforced in an academic setting at the Salon.⁶² As these exhibitions continued, so too did their social prominence and essentiality to the career of artists. France, which already held a position as a cultural epicenter of the Western world, was now becoming renowned for its artistic pursuits.

In 1748, a jury was established, to oversee submissions of work to the Salon, as well as award accolades to art deemed exceptional in its field. The panel was composed of formally trained artists and scholars, primarily recruited directly from the Academy. By 1795, with the scope of artists allowed to submit their work expanded to accept non-graduates of the Academy, inclusion in the annual exhibition became a sought-after achievement for artists of the period. The exposure it provided artists to the aristocratic elites of the country had the power to make or break an artist's career. However, with this increase in submissions, came a bid to refine the works accepted by the jury into the exhibition in order to maintain a level of “quality”.⁶³ This authority over what was permitted into the Salon allowed the Academy, and the jury it had appointed, to “maintain a monopoly over the practice of art”.⁶⁴ In other words, they held dominion over the “canon” of art history for the majority of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century.

As the jury tasked with overseeing the Salon de Paris came from a homogeneous academic background, their selection of works for the Salon reflected a preference for more traditional styles of art. These pieces typically included subject matter from within the five

⁶² Zolberg and Cherbo, *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*, 3.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

genres I mentioned previously, as well as displayed a mastery of formal artistic techniques. During this period, which was largely influenced by Enlightenment philosophy, the success of a work was largely weighted in its ability to mirror nature, capturing a subject as realistically as possible. This preference meant that artists required a proficiency for depicting light, maintaining perspective, and hiding brush strokes. While demonstrating these skills confirmed an artist's adherence to the styles and techniques of the time, they also reinforced a conservative scope for accepted aesthetic standards.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, with artists beginning to explore influences beyond the walls of academic institutions, the works submitted to the Salon de Paris became more varied in both style and subject matter.⁶⁵ The avant-garde movement resulted from the lingering political tumult of the French Revolution and the expanding technology of the Industrial Revolution. From it, a new generation of artists inspired by emerging ideas of innovation and reform began to experiment with new approaches to art. Vivid colors, bold applications, and scenes of more common life became a shared interest of many artists in this modern era. However, the Salon's jury maintained its conservative preferences, rejecting many artists who strayed from the traditional approaches of formal training. Put simply, "while space for experimentation existed, straying too far from the established canon meant consignment to relative oblivion and financial insecurity".⁶⁶

It is necessary to acknowledge that some works that fit within a modern style did make their way into the exhibition, including Édouard Manet's *Olympia* in 1865 and John Singer

⁶⁵ As of 1816 the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture was included in the Académie des Beaux-Arts.

⁶⁶ Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*. (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1951), 83.

Sargent's *Portrait of Madame X* in 1884 (Figure 10 & 11). The reception of these works, however, was famously controversial, with Manet's painting, depicting a nude prostitute staring brazenly at the viewer, being called "vulgar" and "immoral" by critics.⁶⁷ Still, the majority of modern art was excluded from the Salon exhibition, thereby enforcing the notion that art made outside of the accepted aesthetic standards of the period could not be appropriately classified as "fine" art. This division led many artists to become disenchanted with the rigid ideals of both the Salon and the Academy itself, turning instead to alternative spaces in which to display their work. This decentering of institutional approval resulted in the establishment of venues such as the Salon des Refusés (Salon of the Refused) and the Salon des Indépendants (Salon of the Independents). In fact, in developing a mandated concept of what art should be or look like, the Academy laid the framework for the emergence of a class of artists who rejected the governance of the Academy⁶⁸. Many of these outcast artists are now considered masters of their craft, including James Whistler, Gustave Courbet, and Paul Cezanne. These "Outsiders" of the modern era were the impressionists, the cubists, and the fauvists, all of whom grew from ideas unregulated by the authority and influence of the academy.

While I could continue chronicling the history of academic categorization leading to the present day, I fear we would quickly lose the point of this discussion. My intention in reviewing this information is not solely to provide a context by which the classification of art began in a formal setting, but also to highlight the social and political nature of the process. In Zolberg and Cherbo's text they explain, "in the Western European tradition, the domain of fine arts came to

⁶⁷ T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life : Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Revised Edition (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), 86.

⁶⁸ Zolberg and Cherbo, *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*, 4.

be conceived of as an elevated autonomous sphere, structured with a hierarchical ranking of artistic genres and techniques".⁶⁹ Though the Salon de Paris did not employ specific categorical terms to the extent that they exist now, it did construct the institutional structure by which we divide art today.

Even the genesis of the Royal Academy of Paintings and Sculptures was rooted in a political sanction of art. Made obvious by its name, the “Royal” academy was sponsored by the crown, and therefore carried the approval of the most powerful political entity of the period. The connection between the Academy and the aristocracy enforced the notion that formally trained artists maintained a mastery of their craft worthy of the King’s attention. As Zolberg and Cherbo, “its (the Academy’s) development started through the efforts of guild and independent painters and carvers to improve their standing by association with monarchical patronage, at a moment coinciding with the centralizing agenda of the absolutist French kings”.⁷⁰ In establishing an institution that centered the monarchy as its most significant supporter, the Academy acted as a social and political tool to bolster the careers and principles of the artists who accepted its guidance.

Even in its later iterations, the work included in the Salon de Paris had to meet the standards as dictated by a jury of academics, all of whom subscribed to a predominantly traditional approach to art. As these exhibitions were publicly attended events, they were highly influential in shaping the artistic preferences of society. The bureaucratic system, dominated by the Academy, perpetuated a strict understanding of what was deemed aesthetically valuable, by

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 3.

not only affirming that which met the standards of beauty but by restricting the display of all works outside of this purview. By demarcating “fine” art from the work not fit for formal display, the Academy and its subsequent exhibitions censored the visual culture the European public was exposed to. This suppression of work was a clear display of exploiting governance over classification as an instrument for political sway. In wielding their authority over accepted artistic practices, the French Academy essentially created the foundation for the proverbial “inside” and “outside” art spaces.

The divisive conventions created during the social reign of the Academy continued long past the closing of the last Salon de Paris. In fact, at the start of the nineteenth century, as the work of modern artists began disrupting the rigidity of the Salon, came the implementation of terms such as “primitive” in art historical practice.⁷¹ As mentioned earlier in our discussion, the deployment of this word to describe visual culture, often non-western, that did not fit within the scope of aesthetic standards of the time led to the inception of the term “Outsider”. Like all subversive work of the period, the creative pursuits of those deemed “primitive” needed to be separated, both physically and intellectually from the standards of academic society. In this way, the Academy sparked the need for even further division within the formal art world. The sustained acceptance by society of formally determined aesthetic standards led to the furthering of systemic biases toward Western aesthetic values.

⁷¹ Hauser, *The Social History of Art*. 410.

Outside Aesthetics

As the early origins of the “Outsider” term are rooted in the intolerance of art that did not conform to the accepted aesthetic standards of Western culture, it is essential that we understand the philosophy behind these valued aesthetics. The artistic ideals of the French Academy during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were significantly impacted by emerging theories presented in Enlightenment philosophy. Following the French Revolution, Enlightenment thinkers encouraged a continued devotion to classical aesthetics in art, focused on capturing natural forms and traditional subject matters.⁷² As discussed, this bias toward the conservative values of beauty, and rejection of the experimental or unfamiliar led to systemic issues of prejudice to be fostered within the artistic field. The exclusionary principles based on ingrained beliefs of what art should look like led to the implementation of words such as “primitive” in describing non-western and untrained artists of the period. Artists such as Jean Dubuffet, rejected the aesthetic standards prescribed by the Enlightened theorists of the Occident, choosing instead to advocate for the value of art made beyond the academic culture of the West.

To best understand the development and perpetuation of discriminatory ideals in art, we will now take a more formal and philosophical approach to Dubuffet’s *Anticultural Positions*, and the “Outsider” moniker that followed. I will do this by placing principles discussed in the artist’s 1951 lecture in direct contrast to notions brought up regularly in canonical readings on aesthetics and Enlightenment notions of beauty.

The foundation of Jean Dubuffet’s *Anticultural Positions*, is based on three core concepts, all of which work to disillusion the Occident of their superiority over the “primitive”.

⁷² Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, 180.

The first of Dubuffet's points lies in the flawed relationship between western academic man and nature. The lecture notes:

One of the chief traits of the western mind is its habit of ascribing to humankind a nature quite different from that of all other creatures, a refusal to identify our nature with, or compare it in any way whatsoever to, such elements as the wind, a tree, a stream--except in jest or in poetic figures.⁷³

Dubuffet claims that this separation between man and nature has left the Occident with the doomed impression that their status over creation makes them “capable of acquiring a perfect knowledge of things”.⁷⁴ In other words, their power over nature allows them access to reason far more advanced than any other form of life on this earth, man is in essence, omnipotent. The “primitive” on the other hand, does not align itself with the western perspective of nature. On the contrary, primitive societies identify as a component of nature, equal in import to the trees, wind, and streams. To Dubuffet, this association of man as nature, as opposed to man among nature, is what allows a way of thinking, free from the self-focused concepts of the Occident. It is in this way that “primitive” people attain access to knowledge that is not simply gained through logic and reason, which are concepts fueled by the misconception that the world functions precisely as man understands it to. Instead, according to Dubuffet, they embrace states of mind which do not conform to logic, but rather prefer delirium. This is the point at which one might argue that Dubuffet is simply grouping all societies which the Occident deems “primitive”, as in fact, stricken by madness. This is not the case. What the artist means by delirium is not what we might think of as instability, lunacy, or insanity. Instead, delirium refers to the state of mind in which

⁷³ Jean Dubuffet “Anticultural Positions”.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

man is guided by intuition and feeling. In fact, the association we retain between delirium and madness is a result of the western allegiance to logic as the signifier of stability.

The case Dubuffet makes for the Occident's separation from nature as being partially responsible for their trivialization of "primitive" societies, is largely supported by Enlightenment scholars. In Hegel's writing *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, he claims that "the beauty of art is higher than nature. The beauty of art is beauty "born of the spirit and born again", and the higher the spirit and its productions stand above nature and its phenomena, the higher too is the beauty of art above that of nature."⁷⁵ By placing "the beauty of art" quite clearly in a realm beyond nature, Hegel is emphasizing a divide between that which is natural and that which is made by man, i.e. art. To be clear, the art referred to here is without question, art of a western culture. As the term "beautiful" is both a word and a concept of the Occident, a topic I will expand upon later in our discussion, its inclusion in the writings of the Enlightenment is used to denote art of its own culture.⁷⁶ Hegel's charge that the beauty of art maintains a value greater than that of nature, reinforces Dubuffet's claim that in western minds, nature is but a thing to overcome. Put simply, man's achievement is judged based on his ability to exist and create something elevated above the inferiority of nature.

However, one might ask, how can the West feel so severely separate from nature when nature itself is the subject of much of its art? To answer this, we look to Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In this text, Kant writes, "Nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like

⁷⁵ G.W.F Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 2.

⁷⁶ Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, 10.

nature”.⁷⁷ Here it seems that beautiful art is being described as the result of an imitation. The artist must be able to properly depict that which they are superior to, subsequently promoting nature as worthy of “beauty” for its ability to be imitated. A sunset may be judged as beautiful based on its ability to be captured in art, while a work of art depicting a sunset is beautiful for its function as a work so closely reflecting nature. This theory, which at its core intends to highlight man's ability to judge all that is below him, feels like an unwinnable argument. If the Occident’s assessment of nature was that it was lesser than man regarding reason and judgment, it seems obvious that said reason would conclude that beauty is only attained through that which man has made. Put plainly, man would not place anything natural as being superior to his own creations. Therefore, if the “primitive” is natural, it is fundamentally inferior to the work of the Occident. This concept, as it is reinforced in western literature, is simply prescribing reason to prejudice. “Primitive” societies' relationship with nature must be wrong, as they do not see their own power over the environment and creatures of the world. This state of mind cannot be accepted, for that would surrender the Occident’s dominance over nature. Instead, we denote all who do not conform as “primitive” and burden them with being equally as inferior to the western man.

The “Outsider” moniker whose origins are derived from “art brut”, and “primitive” before it, is similarly impacted by Enlightenment claims of civilized man's authority over nature. Dubuffet’s adjudication that the “primitive’s” communion with nature is not indicative of a nativity or ignorance, but an artistic embrace of originality and authenticity, is relevant to contemporary discussions of “Outsiders”.⁷⁸ Regularly compared to the art of children, “Outsider” artists are seen as inferior for their “inability” to produce work that is reflective of natural

⁷⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 185.

⁷⁸ Dubuffet, “Anticultural Positions”.

forms.⁷⁹ However, I argue that this element of “Outsider” artwork is in no way an “inability” or lack of skill, but rather a stylistic choice and preference of the artist. As was the case with the Impressionists, Surrealists, and Cubists an adherence to imitating nature through realism, has long been questioned through the stylistic choices of modern artists. Why then, are “Outsiders” still considered uniquely other for their rejection of classical forms? Perhaps in contemporary art practice, though the relationship between man and nature may have changed, the need for a culture from which the academic West can retain superiority has remained constant.

The second charge made in Dubuffet’s *Anticultural Positions* refers to the standards by which the Occident measures a society as “civilized”. Within the lecture, Dubuffet notes that “our culture is based on complete trust in language (particularly written language) and on a belief in its capacity to translate and elaborate thought”.⁸⁰ The artist claims that written language is in essence, the manner of communication of which the Occident approves, thereby admonishing communities that rely on other forms of expression. This is not to say that societies deemed “primitive” lack language in its entirety, but rather are devoid of the manner of communication of which western man can themselves comprehend. In other words, written language is the vehicle by which the Occident records and disseminates the ideas of reason, the ideas of enlightenment. Their language was created to express those thoughts and is therefore tailored to western needs. The methods by which “primitive” societies communicate, do not rely simply on written words to express multitudes of ideas, but rather implore alternate methods of expression. Dubuffet asserts in his lecture, “language, I find, is a gross, extremely gross stenography, a

⁷⁹ My intention here is to not claim the intentionality of all artists considered “Outsider” but to emphasize their artistic abilities, which are often doubted or minimized by scholars.

⁸⁰ Dubuffet, “Anticultural Positions”.

system of highly rudimentary algebraic signs, damaging rather than serving thought”.⁸¹ While Dubuffet’s declaration may seem severe, I believe the issue he is raising with language relates to an inherent limitation in conveying thoughts which perhaps exist beyond vocabulary. Written language does not allow for the range of intonations, timing, and tone needed to translate thought into understanding. Instead, he suggests “primitive” societies’ application of painting and other forms of visual culture to express ideas, to be a far more effective manner of communication. In visual mediums, feelings, passions, and a wider range of emotions can be expressed by means far truer to the original thought. Yet, even with the use of visual work as a mode of communication, the Occident remains skeptical of those who do not rely on written language to record and relay information.

In Martin Heidegger’s, *What is a thing?*, it is claimed that “where language is not present, as in the being of stones, plants, or animals there is also no openness of beings, and consequently no openness either of that which is not a being {des Nichtseidenden} or of emptiness”.⁸² I choose this quote carefully because Heidegger explored the topic of language quite extensively throughout this and other works, specifically in *The Nature of Language*. Here we see language used as a pretense of the civilized and subsequently the valuable. It is important to note that while Heidegger’s phrasing implies the issue being a lack of language generally, and not written language specifically, the work speaks further on varying examples of written English such as poetry. What is interesting about Heidegger’s perspectives on language is that while he sees words as of significant importance to the promotion of culture (western), he finds it can also be

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?* (Washington D.C.: Henry Regnery, 1970), 46.

quite limiting if not properly connected to thinking. It is in this way that the author, in fact, agrees with Dubuffet's argument that language can act as "damaging rather than serving thought". If simply left to mundane communication, not explored for deeper meaning, Heidegger believes that words fail to help men achieve greater enlightenment.⁸³ Yet even considering these notions of language limitations, words remain a tool lauded by the Occident as necessary for a greater reason. Therefore, "primitive" cultures' detachment from the written word, in favor of alternative forms of expression, signifies their inferiority as a culture.

The argument can even be made that the West's fixation on written language as proof of their civilization, inherently places "primitive" people as more akin to prehistoric beings than to modern man. For instance, in Tolstoy's work *What is Art?*, he ruminates on the notions of present artists, when he notes "it is impossible for us (the Occident), with our culture, to return to a primitive state".⁸⁴ While the author goes on to explain this line of text as a rumbling of "artists of our society and day, but not for the future artists", it is true that it is a concept long-believed by makers in the West. Tolstoy's essay in full, explores the hope for future artists to break with the very constraint we are discussing here, the rigidity of western thought, and the exploration of that which is not familiar. However, his remarks on society's view of the "primitive" are still relevant to our discussion of the term. Suggesting that artists of his time find the return to a "primitive" state as an impossibility, gives credence to the idea that the "primitive" is a condition of origin from which one cannot revert. It portrays "primitive" as a state from which man grows away when exposed to reason, logic, or formal thinking. Culture is thus the antithesis of "primitive", to the Occident. Further, if returning to such a state is unfeasible, then the

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *What is art?* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co. Publishers, 1899), 172.

“primitive” is somehow so unlike the civilized that no traits of connection remain between them. Returning to this condition would involve such a severe abandonment from culture, that it simply cannot be done. It would be like a frog reverting to its tadpole form.

What is even more interesting about the phrasing of Tolstoy’s quote, is that the grammatical use of the word “primitive” in this context suggests it is either a state of mind or a place of origin. We see here the ambiguity of the term as it is used in the western world, an issue we briefly touched upon earlier. Who knows the true meaning of the word when it is so regularly employed as a sort of catch-all by the Occident, consistently used to denote that which is other? The argument surrounding the term, to Dubuffet’s point, is often an issue of written language. Perhaps the word was not intended in its genesis, to become a weapon of the West to condemn or belittle all that did not fit under the umbrella of their civilization, but that does not negate the fact that it has. If it is Occident's belief that language is the signifier of the civilized, it seems strange that its words lack reasonable clarity.

In the case of the “Outsider” artist, Enlightenment notions of language as a characteristic of civilized societies have extended into contemporary practice to include formal education as a qualification of the “Insider”. As “Outsiders” are typically defined by their lack of academic training or cultural exposure, it seems that the exclusionary ideas Dubuffet is arguing against in his lecture, have continued to evolve. Language, to Enlightenment theorists, was one of the many divisive subjects separating Western civilizations from their “primitive” counterparts. However, studies conducted throughout the nineteenth century revealed that these non-Western societies did, in fact, employ language as a means of communication, though it did not resemble the

alphabetic languages of Europe.⁸⁵ Presented with this information it seems that the Occident needed to implore new conditions of division to maintain superiority over non-western cultures. I argue that formalized education has taken the place of language as a stipulation of the civilized. Proof of this shift can be seen in the insistent focus on “Outsider” artist’s lack of academic training and formal techniques. While some scholars discuss this omission as a key factor to the originality and creative freedom of “Outsider” artists, as is the case Cardinal, many use it as a rationale for the work to be viewed as “lesser” art. One such case of this disapproval of the “Outsiders” absence of academic training can be found in Jan Jagodzinski’s, *In the Realm of the “Real”: Outsider Art and its Paradoxes for Art Educators*, in which the author claims, “Outsider art throws into question our [the educated] understanding of the grand narrative of artistic progress”.⁸⁶ Jagodzinski goes on to emphasize the “mediocrity” of this work and the threat it poses to the field of arts education. This reluctance to accept art by artists whose background did not include the formal academic training deemed necessary in the West is but one of the reasons why “Outsiders” remain excluded from mainstream art history. The emphasis given to language, and later education as an indicator of the civilized, reinforces systemic biases found in art historical practice.

The final and most vital point of Dubuffet’s *Anticultural Positions* is in his analysis of beauty as a construct of the Occident. In the lecture, he explains,

...this notion of beauty is one of the things to which our culture attaches so much value. It is customary to regard this faith in the existence of beauty and the cult devoted to

⁸⁵ Jan Jagodzinski, “In the Realm of the “Real”: Outsider Art and its Paradoxes for Art Educators,” *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education, Arts Module* 25 (2005): 228.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

beauty as the chief justification of western society. The very principle of civilization is inseparable from this notion of beauty.⁸⁷

Here, Dubuffet makes the case that the standards by which we judge both our society, as well as all things outside it, is by an invented concept, i.e. beauty. He goes on to note that,

The so-called savages do not believe in this at all. They do not comprehend what you mean by beauty. This is precisely the reason why we call them savages. A name reserved for anyone who fails to understand that there are beautiful things and ugly things and doesn't really worry about it either.⁸⁸

In other words, the Occident finds those who do not recognize the aesthetic value of that which they deem beautiful, as lacking the reason to be anything more than “primitive”. Causing greater insult to injury is the idea that the western myth of beauty is in a constant state of flux, what is considered beautiful one day may be deemed ugly the next. This changeability is especially dangerous when applied to art. Sourced from Greek origin, the idea of beauty in art is often found in pristine color choices and the precision of lines in denoting figures.⁹⁰ Dubuffet suggests that in doing away with the conception of beauty, “art will then revert to its true function”. A function long understood by “primitive” societies, art is intended to act as an “instrument of cognition and communication”.⁹¹ Art is therefore a language, far more effective in expressing a great range of meaning than the written words of the Occident. The language of the West has

⁸⁷ Dubuffet, *Anticultural Positions*.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Here the term “savage” is used in lieu of “primitive”. While these words are often used interchangeably “primitive” is used predominantly through *Anticultural Positions* and is thus the word I focus on throughout this analysis.

⁹⁰ Władysław Tatarkiewicz, “Objectivity and Subjectivity in the History of Aesthetics.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 24, no. 2 (1963): 160, accessed February 19, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2104458>.

⁹¹ Dubuffet, “Anticultural Positions”.

distracted us from seeing visual culture as more than just things of beauty but active records of communication.

While opinions of beauty certainly range in our course readings, some believe that it is a property of the object, while others see it as a judgment of taste, all accept that beauty is in fact, a credible standard of value. Many of our authors aimed to explain beauty more accurately than those who had come before them. For instance, in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he argues that the beautiful is identified by aesthetic judgments and is therefore not universally realized but personally identified through reason. Hegel, on the other hand, views beauty as something inherent to the object itself and is, therefore, an objective valuation. While in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel certainly does have a freer approach to all that might be considered beautiful, i.e. his acceptance of the "non-Ideal", his thinking still centers on "beauty" as the barometer of value.⁹² In truth, it is hardly surprising that this is the case, as beauty itself has been woven into the fabric of the western world since ancient times. How is anyone to move beyond the concept, if it has been so systematized into the culture of the Occident?

One might suggest that the solution to the issue of beauty is to simply include more things as beautiful. The sad truth, however, is that to order to entertain the idea of beauty, one must also recognize that which is ugly. Standards of value inherently form hierarchies by which certain things occupy the lower half of the scale. What Dubuffet is explaining in his lecture is that beauty itself must be retired as an estimate of worth for order for the art of "primitive" societies to be recognized as valuable. If an artist goes forth in making a painting with the intention for it to be accepted by society, then they are voiding their own creative practice to

⁹² Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 542.

create that which is deemed beautiful. In this way, is beauty not limiting? What if, instead, art was able to be made without the expectations of society? Is such a process even possible? Dubuffet notes that the art of “primitive” cultures is driven by spontaneity, by emotion, by expression.⁹³ It “addresses the mind and not the eye”, meaning its initial creation is not motivated toward the aesthetic but rather the cognitive.⁹⁴ In other words, creating work without beauty at the center of intention is attainable, but will lead to the art being classified as “primitive”.

Perhaps Léopold Sédar Senghor put it best in his *Prose and Poetry* when he wrote “we were ‘primitives’, as well as being ugly. We had to be opened to progress, to the ‘light of civilization’. Naturally, progress and civilization could only be European”.⁹⁵ The author, who focuses on ideas of reclaiming African cultures in lieu of accepting European ways, focuses on the word “primitive” here, specifically as it applies to civilizations considered non-western. Senghor addresses ideas very much akin to those brought up in *Anticultural Positions*, questioning how any art made by those considered “primitive” could rise to the level of the beautiful. To him, the Occident’s standard of aesthetic value is intended to be exclusionary. Even further evidence of this can be seen in the manners in which art deemed “primitive” by the Occident is often exploited as “exotic” inspiration by western artists. Once an object such as an African mask or animistic figure is captured in the art of the Occident, it sheds its moniker of “primitive” and rises to the value of the beautiful. Senghor, like Dubuffet, calls for the embrace

⁹³ Dubuffet, “Anticultural Positions”.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 72.

of alternative value judgments of art, no longer based on standards of aesthetics but rather on a work's ability to communicate and express emotions.⁹⁶ Until this notion of value changes, will art outside of the Occident ever be free of the demarcation of the “primitive”?

Like his predecessor's adjudication of aesthetic values within western culture, Cardinal questions,

If beauty is so central to the present cultural ideal, what should one look for if one is trying to find an alternative art? Not mere ugliness, not the miserable art such as serves the propagandistic ends of social realism. The proper alternative to the cold fission of beauty must be the feverish spell cast by disturbing, alien works.⁹⁷

In this excerpt, Cardinal frames the “alien work” as something that can be sought out in the occurrence that one is looking for, that which does not conform to the prescribed aesthetics of beauty or its inverse. The author's argument is almost a mirror of the issues taken on in Dubuffet's *Anticultural Positions*. In both cases, the arguments are pointing to flawed systems of thinking regarding the “primitive” and offering alternative terminology. However, each substitute proposed, i.e. the “art brut” and the “Outsider”, seemingly adopted similar tones of alienation and estrangement in contemporary art practice. Even under the guise of another name, the art did not rise to the level of aesthetic acceptance by the dominant western culture. Instead, the art of “Outsiders”, is rarely, if ever, discussed in contemporary art historical texts or included in exhibitions or museum spaces without being clearly designated as non-traditional or other.⁹⁸ It seems that in an effort to replace the word, the issues argued by Dubuffet still remain and the

⁹⁶ Ibid, 36.

⁹⁷ Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, 10.

⁹⁸ Christina McCollum, “Exhibitions of Outsider Art Since 1947,” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2017), 198, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2393/.

Western ideas of beauty have extended into contemporary art historical practice to the judgments of “Outsider” art.

Anticultural Positions functions, first in spoken form and subsequently in text, to chip away at the fortress that Occidental thinking has created. In charging western ideology with the systematic discrimination of all art made outside of its physical and academic borders, Dubuffet creates a platform for the notions of the “primitive” to be questioned. However, the discussion lends itself to examining other terms that have been derived from the word such as Dubuffet’s own, “art brut” and subsequently, “Outsider”. Dubuffet created “art brut” as a reaction to the “primitive” work excluded by the Occident, leading Roger Cardinal to pick up that same challenge in developing the moniker of the “Outsider”.⁹⁹ In each endeavor, the author was confronting the prejudices solidified in Enlightenment thinking. As we discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, while Dubuffet’s intention in creating his term was in the interest of promoting the art of the “primitive”, it still placed a noted separation between those works not accepted by the West and the art of the Occident itself. The same case applies to Roger Cardinal’s invention of the “Outsider” artist. Perhaps in taking Dubuffet’s theories one step further, by eliminating the iterations of the restrictive term from contemporary art historical practice, we will create a space for this work to be classified beyond its differences and broaden the scope of its inclusion.

⁹⁹ Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, 7.

Institutional Influence

In discussing both the establishment of the Academy and the perpetuation of Enlightenment theories, we have rendered the map separating the canonical inside from the oft unrecognized outside. While I provided merely a glimpse into the history of classification in art, a more comprehensive account would only further clarify the role of systemic prejudice and institutional bias in developing a basis by which art is categorized and regulated. As Dubuffet argues in great detail in *Anticultural Positions*, the issues plaguing the Western perception of art are rooted in a superiority of self and an ignorance to the values which exist beyond the cultural limitations of formal academia. The role of Western institutions in governing accepted values and principles within art, a topic I introduced at the start of the chapter, has resulted in the foundational understanding that art which is acknowledged by the establishment, i.e. academic institutions, museums, and galleries, is thereby accepted into mainstream society.¹⁰⁰ In other words, despite the significant cultural shifts brought forth by the modern and postmodern periods, institutions remain a dominant force in influencing the social acceptance of aesthetics and styles in art.

My intention in emphasizing the institutional dominance and social history of prejudicial classification is to demonstrate the need for a major change in the practice of art history. It is naive to consider the issues brought forth by the Academy or the concerns discussed in *Anticultural Positions*, as matters of the past. While important advancements have been made in expanding the purview of art history to include many demographics who have long been dismissed from the field, instances of discrimination still exist within the practice. In continuing

¹⁰⁰ Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, 387.

to allow for the “Outsider” term to be applied to artists and their work, we are allowing for a continuation of the very issues discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter. A category whose definition focuses on the artist's exclusion from canonical acknowledgment perpetuates a biased standard of classification and allows for institutionalized prejudice to continue within the art historical field.

The “Outsider” moniker has simply absorbed the connotations and misgivings of the many iterations of the term that have come before it. In the case of both “primitive” and “art brut”, the lack of clear and respected parameters to the classifications, has resulted in the misapplication and appropriations of the word. Even if the parameters were more precisely defined, they would still be rooted in characteristics whose application merely limits the perception of the artist and their work. If the “Outsider” term continues to be utilized as a classification in art historical practice, it will work to reinforce institutionalized prejudice within the field. Instead of continuing the cycle of exclusion by simply offering another term or recommending an existing alternative, such as “Self-Taught” or “Outlier”, I believe elimination of the classification in its entirety is the only way to properly aid in the recategorization of these artists into categories which properly represent them as individuals.

Chapter Three: Joseph E. Yoakum: Outside the Stereotype

Joseph E. Yoakum, the prolific American landscape artist, passed away on Christmas day 1972, the same year Roger Cardinal's *Outsider Art* was in its initial printings. Yoakum's practice began a decade prior when he was inspired to start making artwork in his Chicago storefront apartment. However, his career and identity would become bound to the "Outsider" moniker for the next half-century. There is no evidence to suggest that Yoakum was ever introduced to the term that his reputation would become defined by, in the year that their existences coincided.¹⁰¹ This is, however, not to say that the artist was not described using other derogatory language prior to the word's inception. In fact, in a newspaper write-up for Yoakum's first-ever show at a commercial art gallery, the Edward Sherbeyn Gallery, in May of 1968, the article begins "An exhibit of primitive art by Chicago Artist Joseph Yoakum will be on display...".¹⁰² In the decade that followed, the word "primitive", or the like, continued to be interspersed in almost every article, press release, and expose written about the artist. Other shows in which Yoakum's work was displayed included *American Primitive and Naive Art* (1970) and *The Artless Artist: Contemporary "Naive" Works* (1972).¹⁰³ Even in what was perhaps the crowning achievement of Yoakum's career within his lifetime, a one-man show of his landscapes at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the artist's drawings were described as "Those of a 'naive'".¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Cardinal's book was published on January 1st, 1972, meaning that the "Outsider" term was circulated for nearly a year before Yoakum's death.

¹⁰² "Gallery Shows Art by Yoakum" *Chicago Tribune* (21 April 1968), 139.

¹⁰³ Held at the San Francisco Art Institute (July 5- July 25, 1970) and Phyllis Kind Gallery (1972) in Chicago, respectively.

¹⁰⁴ "Whitney Museum." *Barnard Bulletin* (12 October 1972): 7.

In a 1993 Chicago Tribune article titled “A who's who list on outsider artists of stature”, Joseph E. Yoakum was listed as number two in the subcategory of *Prominent in the field*.¹⁰⁵ Among the other headings listed are *Europeans*, *Americans*, and the notable *Up-and-comers*. Following Yoakum's name is the description, “This ex-hobo and circus valet painted spiritual landscapes that sell for \$7,000 to \$8,000”.¹⁰⁶ In eleven words and one price range, the essential facts and primary characteristics of an “Outsider” artist are made succinct and easily consumable. The language that populates the blurbs of other artists included in the article is similarly reductive, boiling the life and works of their lives down to stereotypes and dollar signs.

Martin Ramirez: “mental patient”, “institution”, “obsessive-compulsive”, “\$20,000”

Henry Darger: “recluse”, “expensive”

William Edmondson: “graveyard monument-carver”, “spoken to God”, “\$60,000 to \$80,000”

Thornton Dial Sr.: “Considered to be the “Outsider” equivalent of Picasso”, “\$30,000”¹⁰⁷

In truth, Yoakum's write-up may be the least fallacious of them all, more so hyperbole than outright deceit. However, while some facts can be mined from the fiction, it is difficult to separate the two once they have been so tightly interwoven.

Like many “Outsider” artists, Yoakum's biography was left largely unexplored for the better part of the twentieth century. Over time details regarding his life had been speculated about, disputed over, and in some cases completely fabricated. It was not until 2001, with the publication of Derrel B. DePasse's *Traveling the Rainbow; The Life and Art of Joseph E.*

¹⁰⁵ Mary Daniels, “A who's who list on outsider artists of stature.” *Chicago Tribune* (Oct 10, 1993): 9.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Yoakum, that any viable research had been conducted into Yoakum's history. The book, which incorporated biographical details about the man, with art historical critiques of his artwork interspersed, aimed to correct the many assumptions and misconceptions about the artist. However, even with the enormous efforts put forth by Depasse, a self-described scholar of self-taught artists, limited information was available to researchers at that time due to insufficient public access to archival materials and what was still rudimentary database technology. In 2021, a large-scale museum exhibition of Yoakum's work was developed by the Art Institute of Chicago in partnership with the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Menil Collection in Houston. The team of *Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw* set forth to create what was the most comprehensive show of Yoakum's drawings ever presented to the public. Accompanying the exhibition was a scholarly catalog that was to act as the predominant source of academic material on Yoakum's life and work going forward. I was fortunate enough to be the main researcher on this project and was tasked with developing a substantiated account of Yoakum's history through the form of a chronology. The result of this endeavor was, what is to date, the most extensive account of the artist's life. What follows is a synopsis of that research.¹⁰⁸

Joseph E. Yoakum: Biography

Over a late and brief career, Joseph Elmer Yoakum produced more than 2,000 immersive landscapes that catalog the terrain of his nomadic youth with bold color and complex detail.

¹⁰⁸ It should be noted that within the biography of Yoakum presented here, I do include aspects of his history that fit the stereotypical characteristics of an "outsider" (i.e. spiritual motivation, nomadic lifestyle, self-taught nature). I do this in no way to affirm the stereotype, but simply to present as comprehensive a narrative as possible of Yoakum's life.

Born in February of 1891 to parents John and Emma Francis (Fannie) Yocum, a farmer and a housekeeper respectively, Joseph grew up the third of nine children.¹⁰⁹ Raised in Walnut Grove, Missouri, Yoakum's childhood was not unlike many youthful adolescents growing up in the rural Midwest. He attended school for a short time, no more than four months total, before foregoing his studies to help his father on his family's farm. It seemed, however, that Yoakum had bigger plans for his young life, as in 1900 he ran away from home to join the circus. Starting off in the Great Wallace Circus, he traveled with four shows including the Adam Forepaugh Circus (1901) and Buffalo Bill's Wild West show (1902). Throughout his tours with the various companies, Yoakum wore many hats, including bill poster, handyman, and horse trainer. It was during this time that he traveled across the American landscape by railroad, exploring many of the scenes that would one day be his subjects.¹¹⁰ Yoakum returned home in 1908 after staying with the Ringling Brothers Circus for 5 years as a personal valet to John Ringling.¹¹¹ By the time he returned, his home life looked much different than when he had left. His father had been killed in 1903, protecting his son, Joseph's older brother Charles, from the shot of a disgruntled townsman who was feuding with the boy over the results of a dog fight.¹¹² His mother had remarried in 1904 and many of his siblings had left to start families of their own. Soon after

¹⁰⁹ Yocum was an earlier spelling of Joseph's family name. By 1917, as recorded by Yoakum's WWI draft card, the artist began spelling his surname the way it is best known publicly. Why the spelling changed is unknown.

¹¹⁰ It is also likely that during this time Yoakum traveled to parts of Europe, Asia, and Australia with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show.

¹¹¹ Halstead Papers, box 1, folder 5, Institutional Archives, Art Institute of Chicago.; This detail, along with a host of other details about Yoakum and his life can be found in Whitney Halstead's text on the artist which was left long unpublished. It is included, in full, in the *Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw* exhibition catalog.

¹¹² "Bond of \$5000," *The Springfield News-Leader*, February 10, 1903, 23.

returning, Yoakum wed Myrtle Julian, a farmer's daughter from the neighboring town. By 1912 they had settled in Walnut Grove and started a family, five children in all.

In 1918, Yoakum left Missouri again, this time with the United States Army at the height of World War I. Stationed at the border between France and Germany, he worked to help repair railroads and maintain general supply lines to the front as a private in the 805th Pioneer Infantry, an all-African American non-combat regiment. While amid a global war, Yoakum became familiarized with the terrain of Eastern Europe, a setting that would appear in his later work. Once decommissioned in July of 1919, Yoakum had a decision to make, travel back to Missouri to be reunited with his family, or devote his life to the adventurous unknown. Leaving his past behind, he moved to Iowa in the fall of that year. Between 1920 and 1942 Yoakum's life was a series of new experiences and addresses. He never settled anywhere for too long, traveling from Valley Junction, Iowa to Chicago, Illinois, Jackson, Missouri to Polk County, Florida. By 1942, he had married for a second time and set down permanent roots on Chicago's South Side. It was during this period in Yoakum's life, that he began to take an interest in the arts. He started with ceramics, a medium he would not stick with long-term due to issues with securing a city license to keep a kiln in his storefront.¹¹³ It was not until 1962, however, that Yoakum felt called to fully pursue art. In the meantime, his second wife, Floy, passed away, causing him to move to a smaller apartment, and Yoakum retired from the handyman jobs he typically maintained in the city.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Christina Ramberg's diary entry, Whitney Halstead Papers, 1920–82, box 5, folder 2, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

¹¹⁴ Derrel B. DePasse, *Traveling the Rainbow: The Life and Art of Joseph E. Yoakum* (New York: Museum of American Folk Art, 2001), 16.

The story goes that in 1962 Yoakum was “motivated by a dream” in which a higher power called for him to make art, the next day he began drawing the works that he would eventually become known for.¹¹⁵ These drawings, mainly landscapes, depicted the locations of the man’s many adventures. Drawing mountain views, ocean fronts, endless forests, and the occasional railroad track, Yoakum chronicled the scenes of his life like postcards in an album. In 1967, a professor of Anthropology at Chicago State University, by the name of John Hobgood, noticed Yoakum’s landscapes hanging in the window of his storefront apartment. Hobgood was attracted to the work and assisted the artist in securing his first small exhibition at a cafe and recreational space at St. Bartholomew’s Church called The Whole.¹¹⁶ By the start of 1968, Yoakum had his first commercial show at Edward Sherbeyn Gallery, just six years into his artistic practice. However, this would be Yoakum’s first and final representation by a commercial gallery, as he was often taken advantage of by dealers due to his race and unfamiliarity with the business aspects of the art world.

Over the next half-decade, he showed his work at prestigious venues including the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Along the way, Yoakum’s poetic landscapes caught the attention of many artists who were inspired by his inherent style. He began to form lasting relationships with Chicago professors and artists including Ray Yoshida, Jim Nutt, Christina Ramberg, Karl Wirsum, Gladys Nilsson, and Roger Brown.¹¹⁷ One such admirer, School of the Art Institute of Chicago professor Whitney Halstead,

¹¹⁵ Norman Mark “‘My Drawings Are a Spiritual Unfoldment,’” *Panorama—Chicago Daily News*, November 11, 1967, 2.

¹¹⁶ Diane Allison, “Joseph Yoakum at the Beginning: The Show at ‘The Whole,’” *Raw Vision*, no. 2 (Fall 1996), 25.

¹¹⁷ I give these names not to affirm Yoakum’s connections with other well known artists, but to highlight the often overlooked fact that Yoakum was in no way a recluse or an artist who existed outside of society and culture.

took a vested interest in the work, becoming Yoakum's close friend and business facilitator for sales and exhibitions of his drawings.¹¹⁸ Whitney was very familiar with the goings-on of Chicago's art world and the trivialized manner in which "self-taught" artists were treated.¹¹⁹ Halstead quickly assessed that Yoakum was undervaluing his work and, because of gallery contracts, specifically that which was held with the Sherbeyn Gallery, wasn't able to control the sale of his work in the way he hoped. Yoakum, who was very skeptical in nature, began to trust Halstead for his honesty and interest in helping his career. The artist cut ties with his gallery representation, and it was not long before the SAIC professor was acting as his facilitator between venues.¹²⁰ Through his connections with both Halstead and Nutt, who eventually aided Yoakum in coordinating the sales of his art on the West Coast, the artist began to be nationally known.

In 1972, after what was an unprecedented career for any artist, Yoakum had his first major solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, co-curated by Marcia Tucker and Whitney Halstead himself. At the end of that same year on Christmas day, Joseph Yoakum passed away at the age of 81 from prostate cancer. In the final year of his life, the artist lived in a convalescent home not far from his neighborhood in Chicago. He was regularly visited by Halstead, who sat with the artist, and provided him with drawing supplies and sketchbooks with

¹¹⁸ It is important to note here that Halstead should be credited as the first biographer of Yoakum. His original unpublished manuscript on the artist had lived in the archives of the Art Institute of Chicago until 2021, when it was finally published, in full, in the aforementioned book *Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw*. While his work, like DePasse's, did not include fully substantiated material, it provided many personal anecdotes and stories told by Yoakum himself, invaluable information without which scholars of the artist would be lost.

¹¹⁹ Self-Taught was a term used prior to the "Outsider" invention, to classify artists from a non-academic background.

¹²⁰ Malcolm S. Kamin (Yoakum's attorney), letter to Edward Sherbeyn Gallery, November 27, 1968. Whitney Halstead Papers, 1920–82, box 5, folder 2, AAA.

which Yoakum continued to draw till the end of his life. After his death, Yoakum was buried at Rock Island Military Cemetery in Moline, Illinois. Halstead, who was made executor of Yoakum's estate by the artist, sold the remaining works approved for sale by Yoakum, giving the profits to the artist's relatives, and eventually donating the rest of the drawings to the Art Institute of Chicago, where they remain the largest collection of Yoakum's drawings in the world.

Art Analysis

In an interview for the 2021 exhibition *Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw*, curator Mark Pascale noted, “that the landscape drawings that Yoakum made are a picture story of his life. They are his self-portrait, his autobiography”.¹²¹ Each panoramic work acts as a snapshot of the artist's memory. They are not simply records of the location's terrain but the events and moments as Yoakum remembered them down to the last detail, the moon covered by clouds, the ship as it crashed through a choppy sea. While Yoakum did not work exclusively in nature scenes, some portraits are interspersed among his portfolio, they are the subjects he is predominantly recognized for. In creating his over two thousand drawings of sprawling mountains, falling streams, and dense forests Yoakum developed a series of techniques and patterns that made his landscapes surreally majestic.

Arguments surrounding Yoakum's “Outsider” status often refer to his unusual manner of depicting landscapes. Some scholars have critiqued his work as “childlike yet haunting”, while

¹²¹ Taylor Dafoe. “How Joseph E. Yoakum, an Enigmatic Former Circus Hand and Untrained Artist, Found Drawing in His 70s—and the Hairy Who as Admirers.”, *Artnet*, Published July 21, 2021. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/joseph-e-yoakum-art-institute-1991296>.

others have claimed he “had no grasp of his drawings as art”.¹²² These comments, while jarringly myopic, are not uncommon in the litany of exhibition reviews and gallery write-ups produced during and following Yoakum’s life. Each assessment employs tropes of the “Outsider”, underscoring the childlike skill and blissful ignorance of an artist somehow unaware of their own creative capacity. While Yoakum’s biography makes clear his agency and competency as an individual, my hope in analyzing two drawings from his portfolio is to highlight his keen awareness and creative ingenuity as an artist.

This is Moro Bay

The drawing *This of Moro Bay in Sanluis Obispo County San Luis Obispo California* from 1967, captures a steady mountain anchored within a boundless seascape (Figure 12). As the waters breach along the horizon, one wonders whether the waves are a symptom of the cautionary red sky above, or simply a breeze making its way across the ocean’s surface. There is no terrain beyond the vista’s edge, only the towering island interrupting the rising wakes with its sharp peak. While an energetic scene surrounds the mountain, it somehow appears tranquil, its mossy shoreline untouched, its patches of forest unmoved. The heather blue of the sea’s surface is peppered with streaks of pale indigo marking the foamy caps of crashing waves. From the left, a wisp of inland stretches across the water’s surface toward a whale-like island floating diagonally along the foreground. The only other land in sight, is a border of coastline that crests among the waves along the side of the sheet and falls along the lower right corner. Covering this glimpse of shore, is a forest of trees that all but disappear into the water’s curved edge. Tucked

¹²² Jay Pridmore, “Outsider artist, and his art, still a mystery.” *Chicago Tribune* (3 February 1995): sec 7., 20.; Jacqueline M. Atkins, “Joseph E. Yoakum, Visionary Traveler.” *The Clarion* 15 (winter 1990): 3.

beyond the boundary of the paper plane, the bank continues on, likely to a mainland held safe beyond the treacherous seas.

Within Yoakum's extensive oeuvre, *Moro Bay* is a subject the artist often revisited. In fact, the drawing described above exists in two other states, one shaded in lighter tones of colored pencil from 1965, and the other from the same year, rendered simply in graphite and blue ink (Figure 13 & 14). The three versions of the composition are a prime example of Yoakum's affinity for making copies of his work. Using a process that involved tracing the lines of a "patron", or pattern drawing, through carbon paper affixed to its surface, the artist was able to produce duplicates of his compositions.¹²³ In this case, the 1965 drawing acted as the base for the reproductions, indicated by its lack of color a characteristic of Yoakum's "patrons" (Figure 14). From these tracings, the artist was able to fill in and add any additional color or details to make each new version of the image entirely its own work.

Interesting details among this group of works are the small inscriptions the artist wrote along the top of the images. For instance, in the initial drawing for *This is Moro Bay...* from 1965, the text reads "Make 2 new copies' ", accompanied by a hand-drawn copyright stamp below the work's title. On the 1967 duplicate of the scene, the words read "This one not for sale 2/10-69", a note made two years after the drawing's initial creation. I make note of these seemingly minute details to highlight perhaps the most unfounded evidence offered to support the case of Yoakum's work as emblematic of an "Outsiders"; that he was unaware of his own artistic practice.¹²⁴ To this I ask, why would someone take such care in making copies of a creation if they were ignorant to its aesthetic value? Why would they make note to shield it from

¹²³ Mark Pascale, "Revisiting Joseph E. Yoakum's Chicago Legacy," In *Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw*. ed. Mark Pascale, Esther Adler, Édouard Kopp (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2021), 21.

¹²⁴ Atkins "Joseph E. Yoakum, Visionary Traveler", 3.

sale, if its worth was not apparent to them? The simple answer to each of these queries is they would not. Yoakum was aware of his craft and active in every detail, from its production to its sale. To suggest any narrative otherwise is to ignore facts for the fiction of stereotypes. While Yoakum's drawings offer immersive details and fascinating artistic techniques, their merits are lost if approached with a perspective that undermines his agency. His work lives on as a brilliant example of modern landscape, but also as an indelible record of his steadfast autonomy.

The Open Gate

In *The Open Gate to the West in Rocky Mtn Range near Pueblo Colorado* from 1966, Yoakum depicts a mountain-scape on a cloudy day (Figure 15). With no sun in the sky and a haze of blush pinks and vibrant yellows illuminating the terrain, it appears we are seeing the landscape in a moment of either dusk or dawn. A billow of gray clouds outlined in blue, hangs in the atmosphere among the mountains, with one rising like a puff of smoke from behind the profile of the ledge. It is a quiet scene, only populated by the army of trees keeping watch between the walls of the "gate". Behind them, another range of mountains emerges from the distance, perhaps blocking the sun from the vantage point of the viewer. The cliffs in the foreground seem to grow, as if they have roots were planted beneath the picture plane's edge, the one on the left elevated by a stand of vertical lines along its face and the right alp made of rocks curved and coiled to maintain their structure. Atop the mountains and hidden among their bases are pockets of forests and ponds nestled among the slopes, prompting us to wonder what other surprises might be hidden within the enchanting scene.

This work, which is composed of pen, pastel, and colored pencil, is a primary example of the immersive settings Yoakum creates in each of his drawings. Building the landscape using a

process of patterns and techniques, the artist managed to make every drawing uniquely its own. Yoakum's extreme care for mapping a scene using clean lines and strategic shading, is evident in the blue pen outlines used throughout the drawing. Specific to the work in question, we see these lines act as a kind of border, used to maintain the more flowing curves within the mountains and define the abstract shapes of the clouds. Within the landscape, we are also given a brilliant display of Yoakum's use of repetition, found among the dense trees in both the center of the composition and the small pockets of foliage mentioned earlier. In layering the tree forms, the artist creates the illusion of the forests receding into the distance, a formal technique used often in landscape work. However, Yoakum disrupts the application by toying with natural scale, placing a grove of smaller shrubs at the foreground of the work while including larger trees toward the back. This stylistic choice upsets the viewer's perspective within the scene, perhaps another point at which to be reminded that these images are not simply of locations, but of memories. In other words, they do not need to conform to a natural perspective to be successful, but rather derive success from the ability to capture the spirit of a place.

It is important to note that the drawing's setting, *The Open Gate to the West in Rocky Mtn Range Near Pueblo Colorado*, is not a site found on a map. In fact, many of Yoakum's titles are a sort of amalgamation of a few locations. For instance, the Rocky Mountains can be found in Fort Collins, Colorado, roughly 180 miles from Pueblo, Colorado (Figure 16). However, Pueblo does have scenic mountain ranges not dissimilar from the ones shown in Yoakum's drawing. Further, Pueblo is a town listed on the 1903 train route of the Ringling Brothers Circus, a show the artist is believed to have traveled with.¹²⁵ Stops also listed on the route are Colorado Springs and Denver, both towns not far from the Rocky Mountain Range. With these details in

¹²⁵ *The Route Book of Ringling Bros. Shows 1882-1914*, 137 (Collection of Circus World Archives, Baraboo, WI).

mind, it is not unlikely that Yoakum, did in fact, see both the mountainous terrain of Pueblo and the famed Rockies along his travels with the circus. Perhaps he even saw them on a cloudy morning at dawn. Regardless of your faith in the validity of Yoakum's story or lack of confidence in his ability to retain throughout his lifetime, there is one fact that remains indisputable, *The Open Gate to the West in Rocky Mtn Range Near Pueblo Colorado* is a drawing of Yoakum's life exactly as remembered it.

Narrative

While in the past, details of Yoakum's biography had largely been left to assumptions and conjecture, the truth is that he was far more man than myth. Questions surrounding his story have led to a sort of contamination of the public's perception of both the artist and his work. Speculations that follow his narrative tend to focus on Yoakum's mental state and the credibility of his stories. Some theorize that the artist was at one point admitted to a mental institution, a trope of the "Outsider" status, and a remnant from an unsubstantiated source in DePasse's book.¹²⁶ Perhaps the most common point of contention in the lore that surrounds Yoakum, concerns the subjects of his work. The artist maintained that his drawings depicted scenes exclusively from memories of his own travels.¹²⁷ This claim, as I have noted, has led many to question how a black man from humble beginnings could have managed to see so much of the world in the early twentieth century.¹²⁸ Yoakum's biography proves that he likely had seen many

¹²⁶ While speculation of a diagnosis is given by DePasse in *Traveling the Rainbow*, independent research was unable to substantiate her claim.

¹²⁷ This is with the exception of Antarctica, a location which appears in Yoakum's portfolio, but to which the artist claimed he never visited.

¹²⁸ The role of Joseph Yoakum's race in shaping his identity and reception as an artist is a topic that has been addressed in various texts and scholarship. I do not specifically discuss his race within the context of this thesis

of the locations he drew, whether it was while traveling with circuses, or with the army in wartime. Regardless of what you may or may not believe about the uncertain aspects of Yoakum's biography, my hope in providing both a comprehensive account of his life and an analysis of his work is to encourage a perspective beyond the stereotypes of the "Outsider". How was Yoakum, a man who was conscious of his own artistic practice, actively participated in a social sphere of artists, and who was aware of the art market itself, considered an "Outsider" for nearly half a century? I argue that this misapplication of the term was a direct result of insufficient research into the artist's biography and, subsequently, a blind acceptance by art historians and the general public of the tropes routinely attached to "Outsider" artists.

While I use Joseph Yoakum as an example of an artist whose life and work have long been the subject of myth and marginalization, in truth, it is an issue that affects nearly every artist considered an "Outsider". It is our job to question the systemic beliefs that shape this field and the categorizations that hold those structures in place. For far too long the lives of these artists have been overlooked in the realm of academic research based on assumed narratives and accepted stereotypes. I am not suggesting we simply devote more time and research to the study of "Outsider" artists' biographies in order to correct these scholarly deficits. Instead, I argue that we do this to inform their recategorization into more appropriate and representative classifications and to finally eliminate the "Outsider" term from art historical practice.

because, while it is an important topic, it is not one that I feel can be adequately covered without having a larger, more intentional conversation concerning the topic of race as it relates to "Outsider" artists. If I am to pursue this study of "Outsider" art further it will surely be an aspect of that larger discussion, but until then I offer these sources as further reading on the subject of Yoakum's relationship with his racial identity. Faheem Majeed, "Joseph E. Yoakum, First Esteemed Nava-joe Artist on Chicago South Side in Year 1962-1972" In *Joseph E. Yoakum : What I Saw*. ed. Mark Pascale, Esther Adler, Édouard Kopp (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2021), 59-63. Kathleen Ash-Milby "Back Where I Were Born; Joseph E. Yoakum and the Imaginary Indian" In *Joseph E. Yoakum : What I Saw*. ed. Mark Pascale, Esther Adler, Édouard Kopp (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2021), 65-73.

Conclusion

In 1972, Roger Cardinal introduced the “Outsider” moniker to the mainstream art world. Offered as an English equivalent to artist Jean Dubuffet’s, “art brut”, the word was grounded in an interest to both advance the exposure of lesser-known “counter-cultural” artists and clarify their role in the history of art. Like Dubuffet before him, Cardinal was captivated by the work of these artists and how it reflected an originality unfounded in the conservative styles of western academic culture. His book *Outsider Art* as well as the accompanying 1979 exhibition, compiled a collection of artwork and details about these artists, proving the basis for the “Outsider” artist was understood. However, as can be surmised from the list of characteristics I provided at the start of this thesis, the parameters which defined an artist as an “Outsider” were quite general. As a result, the “Outsider” term has taken on vastly variable meanings in the half-century since its creation. It has become synonymous with other categories of art including vernacular art, naive art, folk art, visionary art, and primitive art. While I argue these other classificatory terms present a similar difficulty in their ambiguity, their confusion with “Outsider” art is the result of a misapplication of the term as well as an inherent issue with its premise.

Unlike conventional forms of classification, which bind themselves to typically inarguable details of an artist (i.e. nationality, period, media, or style), the “Outsider” is categorized based on perceived differences from the mainstream canon. It is as if the “Outsider” term, when applied, erases all sense of individuality or distinction from an artist, and instead absorbs them into a category that becomes their defining feature. Furthermore, this disassociation from biographical detail has reinforced tropes associated with the “Outsiders” that have resulted from generalities in the term’s definition. It is often assumed, that these artists are reclusive, unaware of their own artistic practice, and afflicted with mental illness, all characteristics that

have become attributed to the “Outsider” moniker. These features carry with them a weight of social stigma and prejudice that significantly shape way the artists are perceived. Moreover, these details are often left unsubstantiated as the biographies of “Outsider” artists are seldom pursued by scholars of art history. Joseph Yoakum, the American landscape artist, is one such example of a maker whose career and public perception was largely affected by the mythologizing of his biography based on the tropes of the “Outsider”. This combination of constructed stereotypes and assumed biographies have created a space in which “Outsider” artists are irresponsibly identified and, as a result, limited by their categorization.

The history of classification in art historical practice is a primary factor in the development of the “Outsider” term. The establishment of the Academy and the glorification of western aesthetics created the “inside” and “outside” of the artistic world. All art that did not fit within the “official” standards of the period was excluded from mainstream attention. This culture of restriction based on prejudice and social bias resulted in Jean Dubuffet’s *Anticultural Positions*, a lecture whose theories were a driving force in the argument of this thesis.

In this thesis, I have provided a comprehensive account of the history of the “Outsider” term and its contemporary applications to demonstrate its exclusionary premise and the limitations it presents to all artists classified by it. Throughout this process, I have considered the question of alternative terms and proper classification in the hope that I may provide a more agreeable solution to the issue. It seems that substitute labels such as Lynne Cooke’s “Outliers” and the more widely accepted “Self-taught” may be perceived as viable, if not preferable options to the “Outsider” moniker. However, as we look at the history of the “Outsider” it would be neglectful to not acknowledge the term itself as a replacement for “art brut”, and subsequently “art brut” as the alternative for “primitive”. Borrowing from Anne Eden Gibson’s discussion of

terminology in art, I question whether the notion of substitute terms is, in fact a progression forward in art historical classification or simply a continuation of the same restrictive practice.¹²⁹

For example, in the case of “Outlier”, there is still a geographical association of the artists and their work as “outside” the boundaries and standards of the institution, and therefore separate from the canon. Similarly, “Self-taught” affirms a stereotype that these artists are untrained and uneducated. Here I echo a question posed by Katherine Jentleson, Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art and the High Museum of Art, in her discussion of the alternative term, “How are we defining school?”¹³⁰ Even the very manner we classify education is based on western concepts of academia and the importance of “intellectuals”. In employing the term “Self -taught” we overlook the importance of social education, learning from one’s community, and gaining knowledge through experience. Each of these alternatives I fear would perpetuate the issues of the “Outsider” moniker into a new generation. Instead, I propose we forgo the replacement of the term by reclassifying these artists into the existing conventional framework of categorization in art history.

What if Adolf Wölfli was classified as a modern draftsman from Switzerland? What if Ferdinand Cheval was considered a French sculptor and installation artist (Figure 17)? In dissolving the “Outsider” term in its entirety and allowing for the artists to whom it has been applied to be classified by existing systems of categorization, I argue we would allow for their lives and work to be more appropriability represented in the scope of art history. While it can be debated that by eliminating the term these artists would simply be lost to the milieu of western art, I contest that it is not reasonable to represent individuals by their differences to gain them

¹²⁹ Eden Gibson. *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, xiii.

¹³⁰ Katherine Jentleson in conversation with Lynne Cooke, John Beardsley, and Faheem Majeed, *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (Washington, D.C: National Gallery of Art, 2017), 73.

recognition. In retiring the “Outsider” category I am hopeful these artists will be included more regularly in compressive conversations of art, not as examples of otherness but as singular artists of value. In truth, however, the conversation is larger than that. Inclusion implies an acceptance “into” a metaphorical space from which one did not originally belong. It is a shift based primarily on the decision of admittance by a more powerful entity for something that is “outside” to “step” in. By eliminating the “Outsider” term from art historical practice I am not simply arguing for the inclusion of these artists into the mainstream canon. Rather, we must consider the canon, the institution, and the geography of the space we occupy to reckon with the very limitations of the field and to make active changes in the scope of art history.

Figures

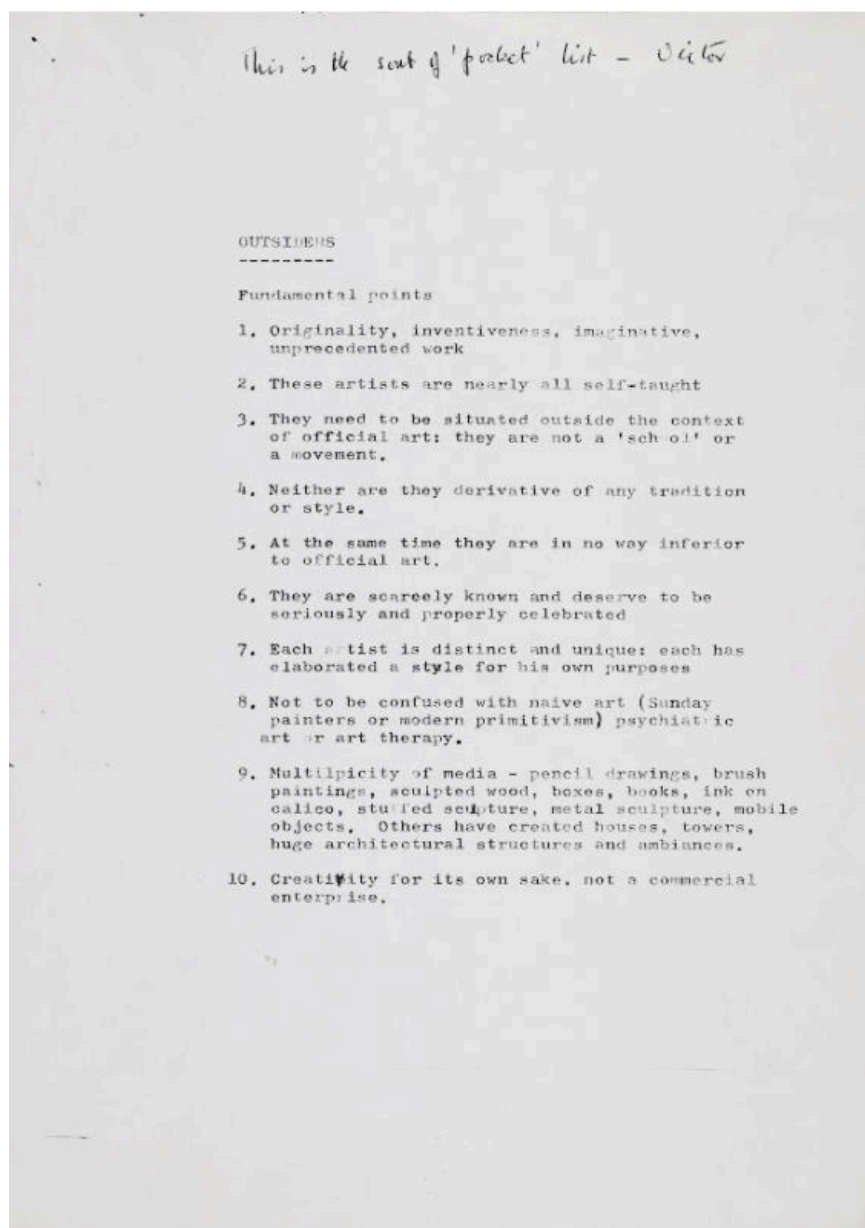


Figure 1: *List of Points to Deliver to Press Regarding Outsiders: An Art without precedent or Tradition, Hayward Gallery, Hayward Gallery, 1979, From the collection of Hayward Gallery.*



Figure 2: Installation photograph, *Outsiders: An Art Without Precedent or Tradition*, Hayward Gallery, February 8- April 8, 1979, From the collection of Hayward Gallery.

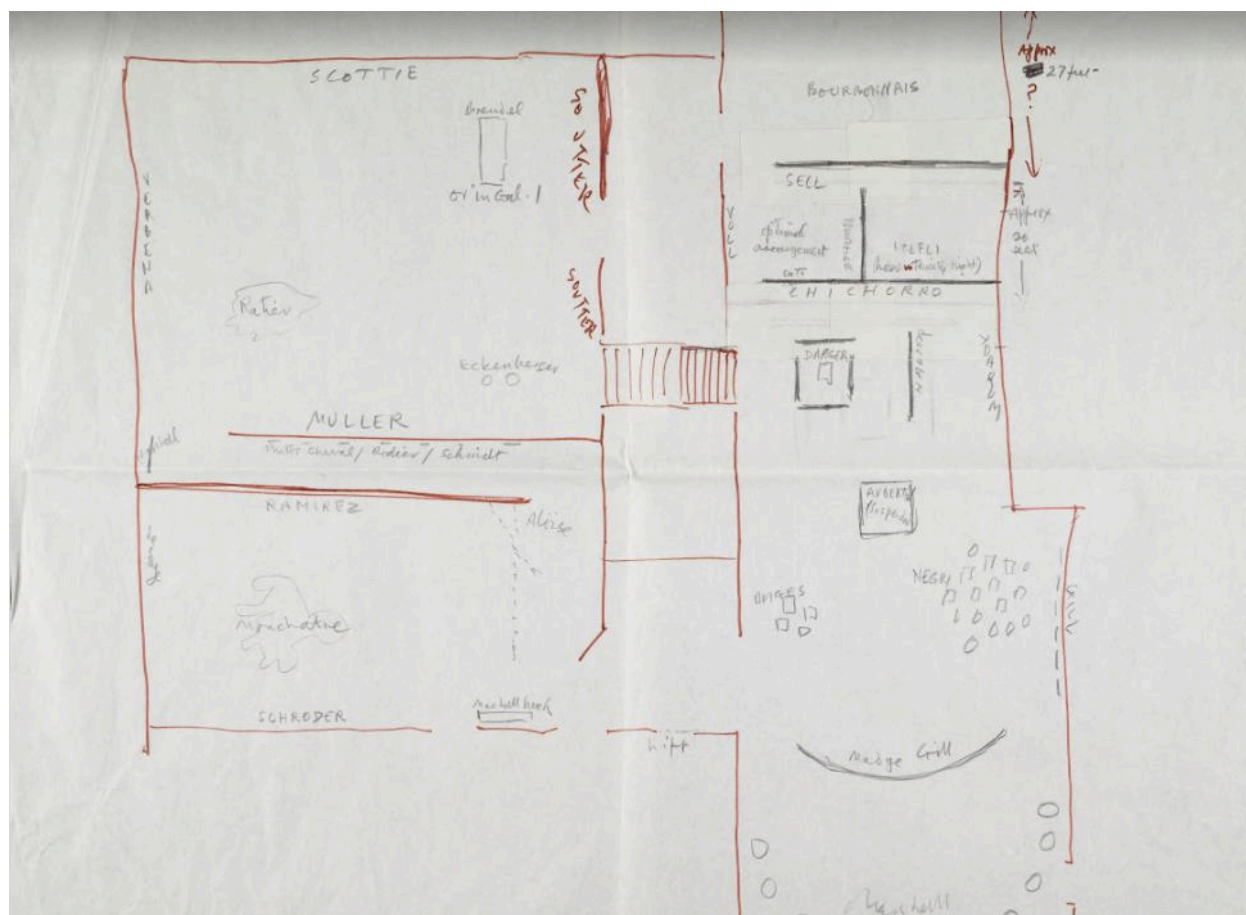


Figure 3: Hand drawn floor plan for *Outsiders: An Art Without Precedent or Tradition*, Hayward Gallery, February 8- April 8, 1979, From the collection of Hayward Gallery.



Figure 4: Adolf Wölfli, *Skt. Adolf = Raad = Hall Amazon*, 1920, colored pencil on paper 31.50 x 40 in. (80 x 101.6 cm). Private Collection.



Figure 5: Francis Marshall, *Bourrage de collants et paille*, 1978, 92 x 70 x 66 cm, Exposé à l'Atelier Jacob Musée d'art moderna de la ville de Paris: Les singuliers de l'art,



Figure 6: Karl Genzel, Man and Woman or Adam and Eve, ca. 1912-21, Wood and stone, Prinzhorn Collection.

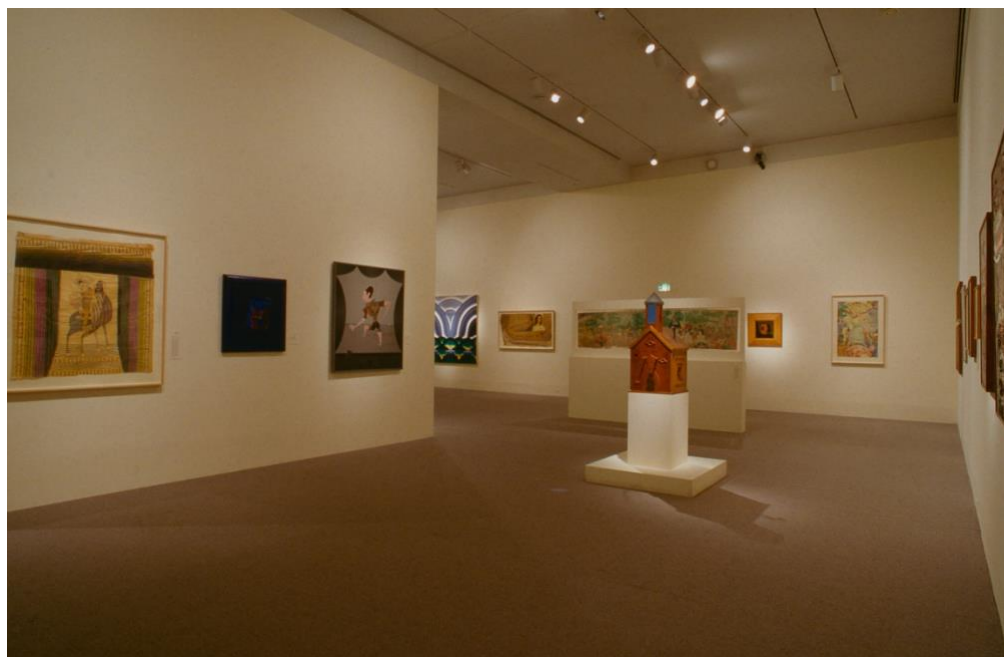


Figure 7: Installation photograph, *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, October 18, 1992–December 12, 1993

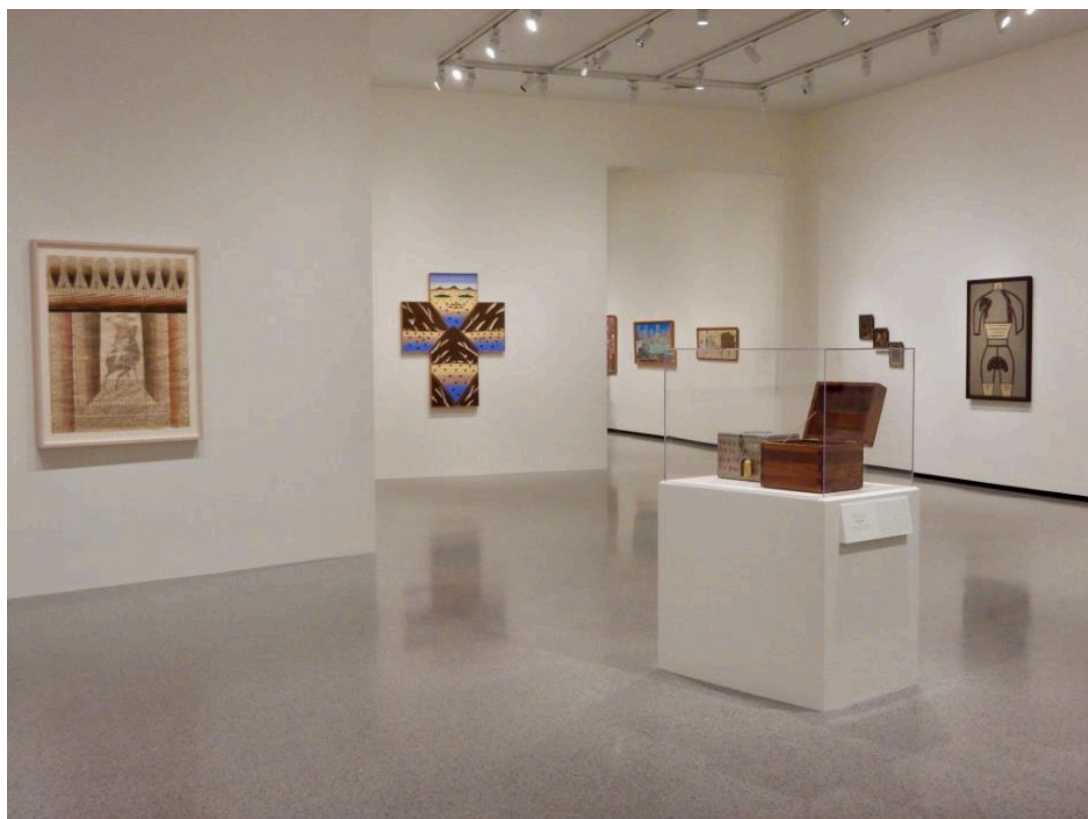


Figure 8: Installation Photograph, *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, the National Gallery of Art, January 28–May 13, 2018, Pieces by Martin Ramirez, Roger Brown, H.C. Westermann and Christina Ramberg.

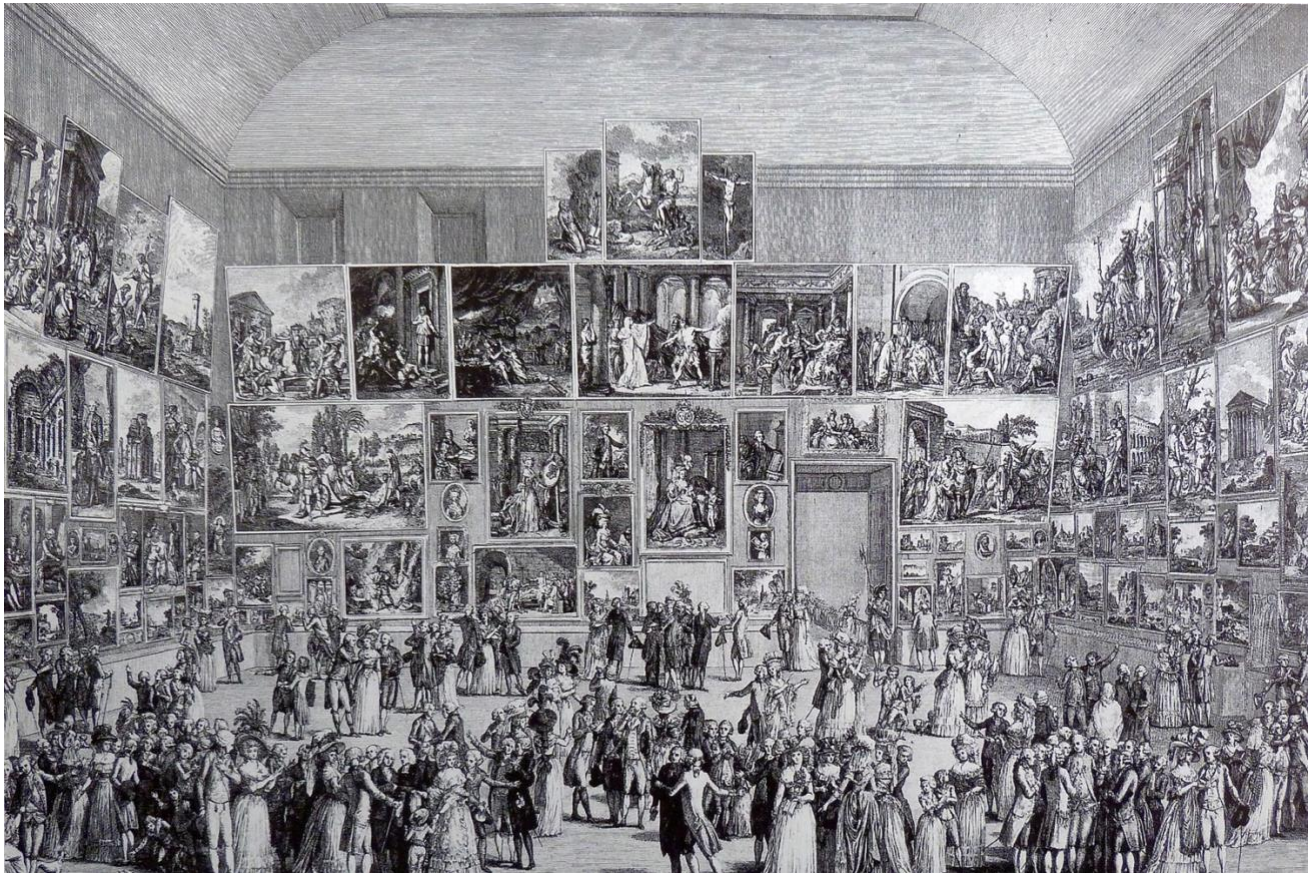


Figure 9: *Exposition au Salon de 1787*, etching by Pietro Antonio Martini published in "Aux armes et aux Arts" by Adam Biro, 1988.



Figure 10: Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, Oil on Canvas, 190 x 130 cm, Collection of the Musee d'Orsay.



Figure 11: John Singer Sargent , *Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, 1883–84, Oil on canvas, 82 1/8 x 43 1/4in. (208.6 x 109.9 cm), Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

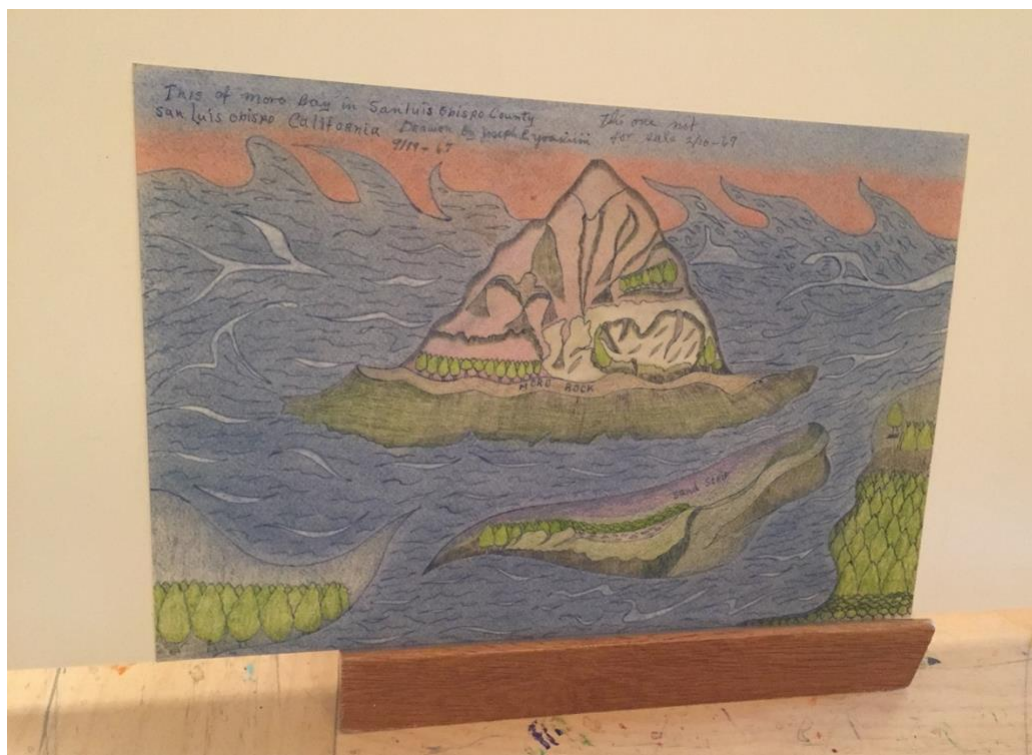


Figure 12: Joseph E. Yoakum, *This is Moro Bay in San Luis Obispo California*, 1967, Carbon transfer, blue felt-tip pen, blue and purple ballpoint pen, pastel, and colored pencil on paper; 30.3 x 45.6 cm (11 15/16 x 17 15/16 in.) Collection of Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt. Photo taken by Mark Pascale.

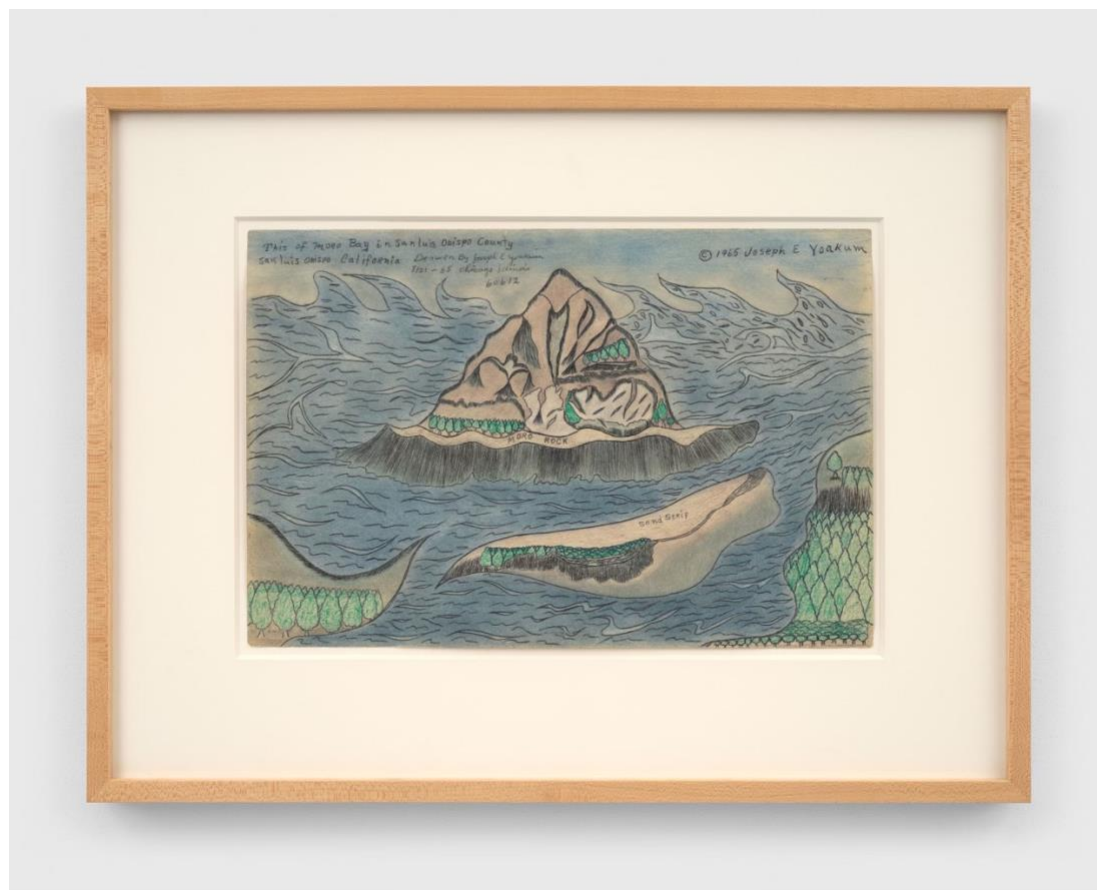


Figure 13: Joseph E. Yoakum, *This is Moro Bay in San Luis Obispo California*, 1965, Carbon transfer, blue felt-tip pen, blue and purple ballpoint pen, pastel, and colored pencil on paper; 30.3 x 45.6 cm (11 15/16 x 17 15/16 in.) Collection of Josh Feldstein.

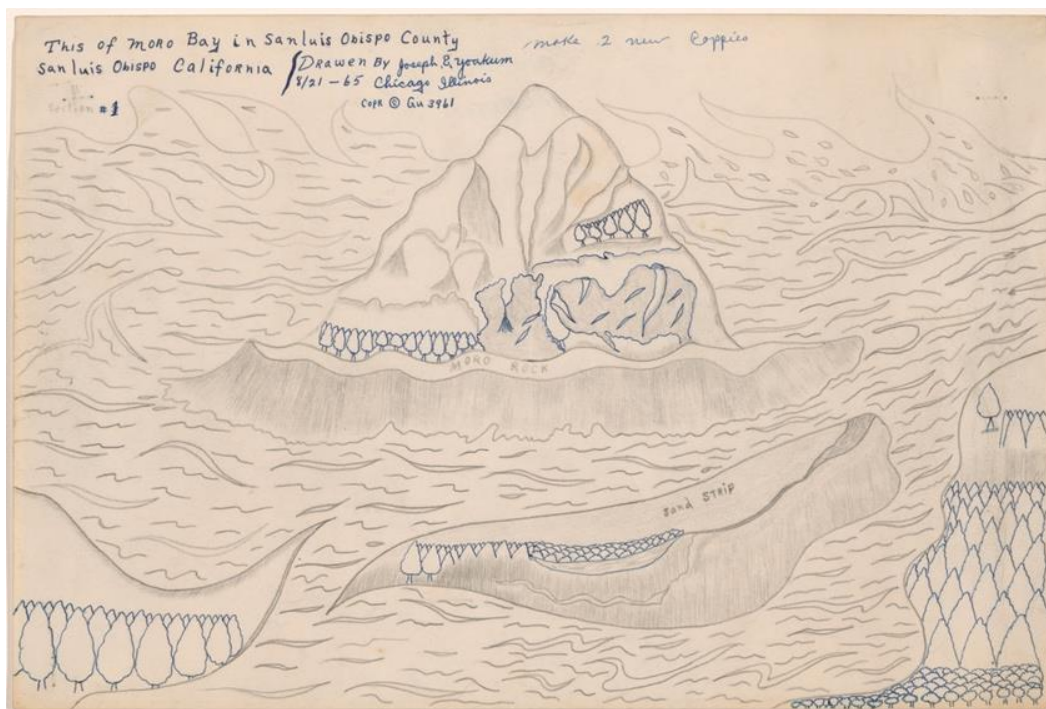


Figure 14: Joseph E. Yoakum, *This is Moro Bay in San Luis Obispo California*, 1965, Graphite, carbon transfer, and blue fountain pen on paper; 30.7 x 45.8 cm (12 1/16 x 18 in.), Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 15: Joseph E. Yoakum, *The Open Gate to the West in Rocky Mtn Range near Pueblo Colorado*, stamped 1966, Blue fountain pen, blue ballpoint pen, pastel, and colored pencil on paper; 30.7 x 45.7 cm (12 1/16 x 18in.) Collection of Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt.



Figure 16: Image of the Rocky Mountains at Sunrise from Rocky Mountain National Park, Photo by Malcolm Boshier.



Figure 17: Ferdinand Cheval, *Le Palais Ideal* (*the Ideal Palace*) 1879-1924, Pebbles, stone, lime, mortar and cement. Location Hauterives.

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