Insider Narratives about Outsider Art:
Race, Class, and Biography in the New York Art Market

by

Olivia Giblen

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Sponsor: Dr. Rudolf Gaudio
Second Reader: Dr. Sarah Warren

Abstract

To truly understand the power and operations of the insider art world, it is imperative to discuss the outsider art world superstars known as the Gee's Bend quiltmakers. Since their initial rise to institutional fame and market value, the post-slavery, impoverished, black women of a rural Alabama swamp town have been spun into many things: "cool quilters", creators of "some of the most miraculous modern art to come for America", whose quilts are said to "rival the best abstract art shown in any art museum". Major museums have displayed these quilts, inadvertently institutionalizing them and feeding into their market value. Based on ethnographic research on how the Gee's Bend quiltmakers and other so-called outsider artists have been framed and discussed in the contemporary art scene in New York City, this paper explores the concept of *authenticity value*: what it is, how it is constructed, and what it means when outsider art becomes something of an insider affair. Particular attention is paid the meanings of "outsider art" as an umbrella term in the United States—where it prominently includes African American vernacular or folk art—and the ways these meanings compare with Jean Dubuffet's concept of *art brut* as it has been understood in Europe.

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Introduction

In 2018, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City held an exhibition displaying handmade quilts from the Gee's Bend region in Alabama. The objects had been gifted to the Museum by the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, a leading global collector of these quits from an otherwise unheard of rural swamp town. Perhaps you as the reader are unfamiliar with the importance of these particular objects, and there may be a reason for that.

These quilts now go for thousands of dollars on the art market, a world most people do not get the privilege to see if they are not involved with the art world and the larger art machine that fuels it. The women who made these objects were close descendants from slaves that all hailed from the same plantation, hence sharing the same family name: Pettway. Once the ownership of people was abolished in the United States, these freed people settled in a remote town in Alabama's wetlands known as the Gee's Bend because of the curvature of the waterway surrounding them. These women made quilts out of need, not a hankering to make art. It is the art world that assigned them value once they were brought to the surface. And now the cat is out of the bag; museums, galleries, and auction houses globally have fingers in the legacy they have built surrounding these quilts.

Following in suit of the Met's Gee's Bend show, New York galleries that specialize in self-taught, vernacular/folk art, and outsider art held their own exhibitions of black, American southern art made by the untrained. Bigger galleries, like one I interned at, were able to acquire actual Gee's Bend quilts, authenticated by time

period and maker. Smaller galleries, like another I had interned at at the same time, were only able to deal other forms of southern vernacular (folk) art made by blacks with close ties to cattle slavery and its resulting abject poverty.

Even within the art world there are levels of influence, but one thing remains consistent; everything in this machine trickles down to its market. The present day art world is notoriously exclusive, elitist, expensive, and exponential. It is often joked amongst “lay people” that contemporary and modern art is just rich people passing around their money to each other. In this world, a canvas with scribbles, as if a child was given craft supplies, sells for multi-millions at global art auctions. That which sells has inherent value. In this world of outsiders and self-taught, this value is based on different factors than art made by canonized artists. The outsider art world qualifies, quantifies, and commodifies based on the artists’ abject status-- called authenticity value.

What does it truly mean to be “outsider”? One could define it as simply not being “insider”, but this inadvertently complicates the notion more. To exist aside an established system--outside-- does not necessarily mean adjacent to. That is to say that the idea of “the other” may or may not be desirable, useful, or even easily quantifiable or qualified. This poses the question: *who sets these boundaries from outside to inside? Why do art world "insiders" need to look outside their own institutions and social networks to find authenticity? What does the perceived lack of authenticity within the art world reveal about the way art critics, historians, and curators "otherize" outsider artists?*

In the case of *outsider art* specifically, there are influential global institutional and insider art world markets that define, circulate, value, profit, and make visible what they have deemed to function outside the larger art "machine". These insider forces in the art market and even upper echelons of museum "culture" affect how lay people see and interpret the art world. When the art world, economy, and greater "machine" remains elitist and exclusive, it influences how the average cultural consumer interacts with art and its history.

Defining Outsider Art

In Charles Russell's book *Groundwaters: a Century of Art by Self-Taught and Outsider Artists*, he outlines loose parameters for what outsider and *self-taught* mean in art. He explains two of outsider art's key tenets: 1) These works come from individuals without exposure to artist training, and 2) These individuals most likely do not consider themselves to even be artists. These elements are key to understanding the abstract and broad idea of the *outsider art* umbrella term. These individuals are not artists in how an Art Historian would quantify that identity; they have no connection to the millenia of canonized artistry that came before, and have no intention of entering that world. This separation from the art institution is what makes them "outsider".

In one sentence, *outsider art* is any artwork or objects in which the production took place outside the "art world", art economy, or the art "machine" as a whole. This umbrella includes the folk arts and craft objects since these were made as items that were never intended to enter the competitive art world as we know it today. However, Outsider Art in itself can take on a different, more specific aesthetic and origin. The

term is usually used to categorize works of art brut (rough art), or works that were made in European (now also American) insane asylums, hermits, laborers, prisoners, religious fanatics, slaves and their next of kin, and other truly marginalized people. Essential to falling within the outsider realm is the lack of artistic schooling, hence making them already fall outside the central art world and art historical convention of "the academy". Russell also discusses the history of outsider art being qualified by art world and academic insiders as "opposing the 'mainstream'".

Induction into the art canon has historically predicated upon *the academy*. This central concept is the essential qualifier in art history to who is "inside". Even the most avant garde for their times--Pollack, Van Gogh, and Basquiat-- were extremely well trained artists on the inside of the world in which they produced for. The same works today; contemporary artists as seen in museums, galleries, and global art fairs all are products of larger art institutions, sometimes even holding a Master's degree in visual art production.

Sometimes people mistake "outsider art" for what is actually called "up-and-coming". These are as opposite as two things can be in the same field-- like comparing apples to tomatoes. Up-and-coming is a label used by art world gatekeepers, like galleries, collectors, critics, etc., that quantifies how long the artist has been out of art school and how known and profitable his/her work is inside the art machine. Outsider artists are not simply young RISD graduates trying to make a name for themselves in the art world, they are "non-artists"-- people making objects completely unassociated with anything the art world has to offer. They are self-taught, often marginalized, or subaltern social status, object makers who never intend to have

their creations disseminated into the larger art machine. They do not intend to enter their works into an art fair nor do they even have the resources to attend such an event. Because of their socio-economic vulnerability and lack of litigious leverage, the art world, institutional or for-profit, is constantly at odds with hazy ethical issues regarding the contexts, implications, and consequences of these objects.

Fieldwork Setting

I did the majority of my fieldwork in one summer when I interned for two different art galleries in New York City's SoHo district. I chose the locations because these two particular galleries focussed on dealing and exhibiting outsider art. So, for a time, I was working as something of an insider--though just an unpaid, undergraduate student-- amidst the very realms that decide the rules of the outsider art game. In addition to this kind of participant observation, I also collected data at other locations including museums, art fairs, and viewed online resources.

Ethnographic research is necessary to truly analyze the insider/outsider model of authenticity value. Influential figures in the art world, like curators and gallerists, assign authenticity value to works of outsider and folk art that they deem "peripheral" enough to fall into the category.

I focused my research on some specific elements I noticed were patterns in this insider art world. *Visibility* and *representation*--who creates the artwork and how a narrative is constructed around the artist-- matter. Hence in 2014 the Metropolitan Museum of Art displayed the Gee's Bend quilts of Alabama made by impoverished, *abject*, black descendants of recently freed slaves displayed these folk objects in the

Modern Wing when they were on view to celebrate them. *Made in America* at the same time as other artists like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnet Newman were creating tapestry-like expanses of paint on canvas, who is to say that these quilts, though from frugal, self-taught means, should not be shown with canonized artists like the abstract expressionists? Does *institutionalizing* them like this change where they lie in an art historical context? In 2014, immediately after the Met's exhibition, galleries sold these quilts for upwards of around $30,000 each. Major auction houses like Christie's are dealing them. I observed how galleries and curators art world gatekeepers quantify, qualify, and classify, and commodify art objects and artifacts these works made by the insane, illiterate, impoverished, "ethnic", unschooled, and self-taught that were never meant to enter the art machine. How does that change the *authenticity value*? Authenticity, as far as outsider and folk art goes, is primarily concerned with how *other* was the object's creator. "Otherness" can be found in *ability/disability*, *ethnicity*, *ancestry, gender*, *class*, *mental health/soundness*, etc.

PART I: History and Theory

What *outsider art* means varies in different parts of the developed world. Outsider art's construction comes from the invention of *art brut*. The quantification and qualification of art made by someone outside of the canon starts in Europe starting in 1922 when psychologist and art historian Hans Prinzhorn published his data from his studies on patients in Europe's insane asylums. This seminal work, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill,* was the initial catalyst that would later cement the conceptualization of art brut. The book was widely accepted in the contemporaneous art world along with another similar 1921 publication by physician Walter Morgenthaler titled *A Mental Patient as Artist: Adolf Wölfli*. In these early beginnings, mental illness was the main focus and fetishes as an exotic means of "unbridled creativity".

"Hyperinteletualism" sprang around Wölfli's injection into the art institution. Charles Russel explains in his book *Groundwaters: a Century of Art by Self-Taught and Outsider Artists* how Morgenthaler used him as a symbol is anti-establishment in an attempt to get contemporaneous artists to "free themselves from the strictures of the academy… [and to] seek to return to specific artistic fundamental elements through a systematic destruction of previously existing forms".[1] By doing all this, Russell poses

[1] Russell, Charles. *Groundwaters: a Century of Art by Self-Taught and Outsider Artists*. London: Prestel, 2011. Page 13

the notion that artists were able to add an element of "authenticity" or "instinct" ("enjoyed by the ill)[2].

Prinzhorn published his findings alongside plates depicting his subjects' works of art. His compilation canonized figures in the outsider realm, in turn influencing European artists like German expressionists, dadaists, surrealists, and other institutional artists that saw an innocent, non-western, "anticultural", "other art" "aesthetic" in the Art Brut (ie: rough art) that major league painter Jean Dubuffet helped usher in after World War II. In his article *French Clinical Psychology and the Art of the Untrained Mentally Ill*, Mark Gisbourne writes of the 19th and 20th century fascination with creativity in the mental asylums, specifically honing in on the French clinical psychiatrist research done on the "untrained mentally ill". He writes of three essential themes for understanding this element of art brut history and conceptualization: *invisibility* versus *visibility*, the "fruits of unreason"[3], and *legacy*. Scholar Howard S. Becker explains the phenomenon in his article *Art Worlds and Social Types*: "art brut creators are either ignorant of cultural institutions and the norms and values of official art, or else they are indifferent, even hostile to them."[4] These ideas are still held at the core to understanding the cycle of how art made by the suffering, disturbed outsider is valued, quantified, and qualified.

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[2] Russell, Charles. Page 14

[3] Mark Gisbourne, "French Clinical Psychiatry and the Art of the Untrained Mentally Ill" in *The Artist as Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, ed. Halls, and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. Washington: Smithsonian Inst. Pr., 1998), pages 228-251.

[4] Sarah Lombardi, and Lucienne Peiry. *Collection De l'Art Brut Lausanne*. Paris: Skira Flammarion, 2012. Page 18

Art brut was idolized after the Second World War because of its perceived separation from modernity's corruption that caused such senseless bloodshed. At the time, Europe was horrified with what inhumane, barbaric atrocities their "civilized" society was capable. Jean Dubuffet--celebrated French painter and a major figure of the post-war modern art world-- sought for something that would reject all the conventions of the world that he felt had failed humanity. The meaning of the term *art brut*, its creator, and the historical context can all be traced back to renowned French artist Jean Dubuffet and his invention of Primitivism and Low Art. It is important to note that Art Brut is innately European and of a specific *model*. This is a more "classical" approach to outsider art and mainly only concerns asylum art, naïve art, children's art, and "primitivism"-- all made in Europe. This subset still uses Dubuffet's term *art brut*, meaning art that is crude, raw, unrefined, simple. Soon after WWII, Dubuffet coined the term *art brut*-- "completely pure… raw… reinvented… artistic operation… an unparalleled inventiveness, unlike cultura art, with its chameleon- and monkey-like aspects" to paraphrase his included direct quote from the painter himself. Dubuffet, he saw this type of art as "a model" because the artists' "cultural awareness was rudimentary".[5] Though that may sound demeaning, there is some validity to this perspective when taking into account the contemporaneous historical-cultural context. It is Jean Dubuffet that finalized art brut's place in art history as a source of aesthetic inspiration for canonized artists.

[5] Sarah Lombardi, and Lucienne Peiry. Page 18.

Because art brut was essentially "invented" in Europe as its own milieu of self-taught art, the majority of the art brut market to this day stays in Europe-- particularly France. The Outsider Art Fair (OAF) takes place in both New York City and Paris. Having worked for the gallery that owns and "puts on" the Outsider Art Fair, I can attest that when one looks at the vender list, almost all the booths at the Parisian OAF are European galleries that exclusively art brut. In the United States, however, the story is different behind the outsider art market. The US interest in outsider art surrounds more folk art endemic to a specific locality or national region. Hence, the American market is mostly concerned with what has been coined *African American vernacular art of the south*.

However, there is additional value added for an artist's connection to the black experience since the US has a long history regarding the construct. This significance in the demand for American outsider art falls in-line with how *authenticity* is used as a qualifier to quantify its *value*. Because the US has a different history than Europe regarding slavery, diaspora, civil rights, and race. Though European nations may have some involvement with the ownership of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade and through colonial settlements, it was the United States that had its own civil war surrounding it as a contention. Additionally, it was the US that still--even after a bloody civil war-- held in place legal and systemic persecution towards a non-white minority. It is America and its exaltation of individualism and "bootstrapping" that has caused such an unorthodox relationship between class and abject poverty amongst a sizable black population. The American market's fascination and demand for art mae by the marginalized population within its own "backyard" has, in a way, acted as a

placemaking device for the Gee's Bend quilts to fit within this insider/outsider paradigm given the authenticity value surrounding the region and its quiltmakers.

The Institutionalization of Outsiders: Authenticity Value, Outsider "Style", and the Insider/Outsider Paradigm

Roger Cardinal writes *Toward an Outsider Aesthetic*, which discusses how Jean Dubuffet used art brut and "primitivism" as cultural and art world weaponry. It also touches upon the "primal", "marginal", or otherwise "grassroots" quality and appearance expected of anything outsider, assisted by naïve, post-impressionist French painter Henri Rousseau. He discusses how "textbook" outsiders like Martin Ramírez-- "schizophrenic, mute, locked up for decades"[6], and how this inadvertently established a "determined, codifiable *style*"[7].

Outsider art, as a construct, can only exist next to that which is inside the system it is considered to be working on the exterior. Hence, it has a direct opposite relationship with the Western art historical cannon that is seen as default. Like an art world yin and yang, there is no establishment without some sort of *other* actor. However, the insider/outsider paradigm leaves the insider in the high end of the powerplay since it is the influential force quantifying, commodifying, analysing, and profiting from the system. This dynamic allows the insider to refract the outsider

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[6] Roger Cardinal, "Toward an Outsider Aesthetic" in *The Artist as Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, ed. Halls, and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. Washington: Smithsonian Inst. Pr., 1998), Pages 20-43. Page 33.
[7] Roger Cardinal. Page 33.

through whatever lense is advantageous at the moment, and both for-profit and non-profit institutions partake in this practise.

The Gee's Bend Quilts have become legendary in the outsider art world. The women's circumstances are the perfect formulas for gathering authenticity value. The legacy stems from the remote Gee's Bend, Alabama origins. This remote region separated by swamp, wetlands, and river, is populated to this day from the original freed slaves that lived there. The women making these quilts come from a long line of learned, ancestral homemakers-- taking old work clothes or scrap cloth to fashion these blankets used in the privacy of the home. The people in the area for the most part, until recently, shared the same last name which they bore from their previous slave-holder. All these details work perfectly with how outsider art is commodified and deemed authentic. Gary Alan Fine pinpoints the reasons for what he describes as "the desire for authenticity" and how self-taught and outsider art has fallen prey to this paradigm. This desire, he says "now occupies a central position in contemporary culture". Fine discusses how the idea of "self taught", and "poverty, racism, religious conviction, illiteracy" feeds into the trope of the "noble savage", adding to the authenticity value in the art market.

Since their initial rise to institutional fame and market value, the post-slavery, impoverished, black women of a rural Alabama swamp town have been spun into many things: "cool quilters", creators or "some of the most miraculous modern art to come for America", and are said to "rival the best abstract art shown in any art museum". When Annie May Young, one of the craftswomen who made these "original" quilts that circulate in museum and collector circles, was asked to reflect on

one of her more famous works, she stated: "I was doing this quilt at the time of the civil rights movement." This particular swamp town in Alabama was subject to manipulated isolation when government officials blocked a raft that connected this isolated black area to the rest of the surrounding municipality. It became an integral part of the chapter in American history Martin Luther King Jr. started for the black community. Like all the original Gee's Bend Quilts, the quilt she contemplates was begat out of necessity, abject poverty, and the absence of waste as a luxury. Some of the more famous quilts were pieced together from old work denim, but this one in particular consisted of "well-worn cotton shirts and polyester pants". In a 2006 article written for Smithsonian Magazine, the quilt was regarded as "jazzy, free-form squares".

Outsider and folk art is peripheral by its definition, leaving it vulnerable to iminent "re-presentation" by insider art realms. Museums stand as a universal metric for what is "important", hence an *aura* and *legacy* constructs around the objects they exhibit. The Gee's Bend Quilts are a prime example of this paradigm. Following the first public exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2002, they showed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. The same year, the New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman reviewed the quilts after seeing them at the Whitney, writing "imagine Matisse and Klee...amazingly refined, eccentric abstract designs...some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced". Of course there is an issue with comparing these folk objects to works by the highly schooled. As seen when a Milwaukee Art Museum tour guide is depicted declaring in a Public Broadcasting Service documentary *Quiltmakers of Gee's Bend*, 2005, doing that removes agency from these women who refused to be left behind by the elite

museum world.[8] The film documents the journey these women take as they leave their Gee's Bend town to visit the Milwaukee exhibition in which their quilts are being shown. Almost all the quiltmakers and/or their descendants took the bus ride to the big city, except for one: Loretta Pettway. When asked why she refused to attend the Milwaukee exhibition, even when her quilts are the most numerous on display and in the subsequent book documenting and compiling them, Loretta simply stated "*I be sick, I ain't be like you, I'm not well, I'm not be feelin' good"*[9]. Loretta has spoken of the personal context in which those quilts were made-- that of horrible spousal abuse, asking for financial support and not receiving, and fear that she and her children would not be able to keep warm. Could her refusal to attend be avoidance? Perhaps she feels it unsettling to see the toils and poverty of her and her close kin displayed on anonymous, blank, and public walls of a major art institution? She and lots of others in Gee's Bend still hang out clothes to dry and travel to makeshift houses of worship made of plywood. After the Milwaukee show, The same year, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts had their own exhibition.

In 2006, the Indianapolis Museum of Art showed Gee's Bend Quilts, and then they traveled to the Orlando Museum of Art in 2007. Evidently, these quilts and their creators (and descendants) have garnered world accolades which seemingly, inadvertently, dismantlers the entire notion of *outsider art*, with Kimmelman decrying them as "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced".

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[8] *Quiltmakers of Gee's Bend*. Public Broadcasting Service, 2005. https://www.pbs.org/video/alabama-public-television-documentaries-quiltmakers-of-gees-bend/.

[9] Arlonzia Pettway in *Quiltmakers of Gee's Bend*. Public Broadcasting Service, 2005. https://www.pbs.org/video/alabama-public-television-documentaries-quiltmakers-of-gees-bend/.

This paper will examine just how art world insiders contort the label *outsider*, use it as marketing leverage, and ultimately establish hierarchy by holding up these folk objects to canonized artists immortalized in art history.

Museums and galleries refract these quilts through whatever lense they decide. These bodies have not only constructed their legacies but also decided the ways a viewer is meant to be conscious of them. Reflecting on how their quilt patterns are reminiscent of Mattise was not going to feed, clothe, or warm these women and their families. These women made these quilts without consulting the "art world", however art critics around the world, comparing them and their "geometric simplicity" to the Matisse cut outs or Paul Klee's Primitivism and Cubism? Once these objects become institutionalized, that also poses issues with ownership; do they belong to art history and its canon though never intended to do so, bought and sold like any other artwork, or should there be questions with repatriation? Where is the consent here? Did the women of Gee's Bend even want their chores borne from poverty to be put on display in one of the world's leading institutions? Someone has missed the mark-- the entire "outsider art world".

"Authenticity" is a value often used to quantify how "real" outsider, folk, and other self-taught art objects and their creators ring true to their alienated origins. For example, a drawing by outsider art superstar Bill Traylor who was a freed slave, illiterate, and born in a corn field to an unwed mother garners huge esteem and profit by art world insiders. This effect is *authenticity value*, and it quantifies the degree in which an outsider artist is "real" or "salt-of-the-earth". An unschooled American six year old can make a painting with cheap craft supplies, but these art world

gatekeepers refrain from finding this kind of work *authentic*, hence valuable. Elizabeth Risser's article *Insiders Curating Outsider Art* discusses the paradox of outsider as insider when insiders curate outsiders. In her paper, she outlines some possible steps that could be taken, including considering consent and above all maintaining dignity. Too often, outsider art's "authenticity value" is determined by how subjugated its creator was, in turn capitalizing and perpetuating the artists' subaltern status in order to drive up the dollar value. How can displaying artworks or objects that were never meant to make their way into the art world ever be consensual? And can someone of such an abject status really give consent given the obvious power disparities? It benefits the art world institutions to keep these creators that they have forcefully inducted outside just enough to be able to make these choices for them, but inside at a level where their works have monetary value.

To understand the logic behind what is deemed "authentic", we can take a look at how classical anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan described the Iroquois in addition to how he compared them to other "ethnical" groups of the time. In his writing, Morgan attempts to analyze humanity's scope of civilization". He comes up with a spectrum contingent on technological ingenuity, religious complexity, governmental sophistication (e.g: property), etc. His measurement starts at *savage*, requiring only hand-to-mouth, subsistence living and. At this stage, the group's idea of religion is still magical and "grotesque", "primitive", and "unintelligible". Then, once a group has begun to develop upon these elements, they are promoted to *barbarian*, defined by use

of tools like pottery and stone implements. Finally, a group can reach the coveted status of *civilized*.[10]

In many ways, outsider art (art brut) has been constructed by art world insiders. Jean Dubuffet co-opted artistic elements from works made by the severely mentally ill in order to profit from his invented style "Primitivism" which was a direct response to WWII. This, in obvious ways, is exploitative, but seemingly seems to be perpetuated by the major art institutions even today. Somehow, art world insiders are able to pull outsiders into the art machine without artists' intention and at the same time keep them comfortably distant as they rake in cash from objects never intended to feed into this complex. The trope of the "noble savage" comes to mind when examining this peculiar phenomenon.

Quilts that were never meant to see the outside of a woman's home are now part of the Met's permanent collection, making this small group of homemakers something similar to names like Sol LeWitt, Banksy, and others that sell for huge somes at blue chip auction houses. However, these works by the abject black women in remote, rural Alabama, or the severely mentally challenged like Dan Miller or Judith Scott are kept in something of a limbo state. Propped up on their outsider status but pulled in by their authenticity value, the contemporary art market is having their way with them like marionettes lost in the shuffle of a puppeteer's farce. Where is the dignity in that? The art world insiders that deal with and depend on outsider art's

[10] Morgan, Lewis Henry. *Ancient Societies*. Boston: publisher not identified, 1875.

fringe status depend on removing dignity so that it makes it acceptable to display their works in a marketplace for which they were never intended.

How can displaying artworks or objects that were never meant to make their way into the art world ever be consensual? And can someone of such an abject status really give consent given the obvious power disparities? It benefits the art world institutions to keep these creators that they have forcefully inducted outside just enough to be able to make these choices for them, but inside at a level where their works have monetary value.

Outsider art is becoming more and more present in museums, hence complicating its precarious and questionable status in the art world and machine. Can institutions be held accountable for inadvertent market spikes in folk and outsider objects? Is there a way of displaying, exposing, and appreciating these works even with the presumption that the artists are outsider? How does the institutionalization of *outsider* not disassemble the whole paradigm of insider/outsider? Are museums really neutral spaces/forums for visibility?

There is no such thing as real neutrality; every decision or action is political, even one that seemingly opts out. This has been so much of an issue that during the 1970's expanding horizons of conceptual art, many artists made works that were direct critiques of the Institution. Museum walks that spoke of drinking fountains and food courts the same way as a docent would of major, canonized artworks all the way to a giant striped "flag" draped from the center of the Guggenheim's ceiling expressly to obstruct, these were all institutional critiques from art world insiders to the machine that built them up inadvertently.

Since almost all museums are non-profit and rely on the public's taxes to fund them in part, most institutions find it would behoove them to stay as apolitical as possible. However, this idea has been challenged especially hard during the tumultuous American political climate of the past decade or so. Like I mentioned before, any action, even non-action, is political-- moderation is a form of fascisim. Simply to display European art like the Frick or have a non-Western collection but clumped together like the Met is political. Even just to encapsulate someone's art collection like the Barnes Foundation is in itself perpetuating white male hegemony. However, the Museum of the American Indian of the Museum of African American History and Culture of course are political, but at least they do not claim neutrality.

The Museum

Should the Museum even be a neutral space? Some mission statements still decree themselves as such by calling themselves forums for the public. Can an institution that acts as a projection for art, an essential lense humans have used to see and translate their inner and outer lives, truly be a space void of bias or indication? Especially since contemporary art is mostly qualified and valued for its political backing or meaning, does including these works make a statement for the Institution? By including any works by anyone, how does the Museum inadvertently add to its market value?

The Museum, of course, cannot be neutral because of its immense power to institutionalize-- artifacts have been looted and never returned, dioramas of native peoples have been grouped in with those of wild, taxidermied animals, and white,

western canonized art world insiders that continue to be coveted and displayed in permanent collections. These actions cannot be neutral. From the black and brown people that operate the food courts to the white curators who plan the exhibitions, a neutral "forum" for the public does not this make. How many times do I have to see protected under glass in every major city the same cast of a Degas sculpture depicting the same young ballerina and have it still be a "neutral" space? When will the wabi sabi rock garden tucked away somewhere in the Met draw the same insatiable crowds as the Mona Lisa located in the heart of the Louvre? When will a museum ever consider it irresponsible to expose a vulnerable outsider artist who gets none of the benefits from the inevitable notoriety, press releases, and spiked market value? Only then will I ever start to consider any museum truly "neutral".

Bill Traylor was an American southern vernacular folk artist from rural Alabama. His work mostly depicts essentialized figures and scenes going about lively daily life. His art is exclusively painted with inexpensive tempera or drawn with charcoal on found cardboard, and has not only become iconographic for the entire milieu, but also part of the visual expectation for the umbrella term *outsider art*.

Traylor was born into slavery but was freed through Lincoln's Amancipation Proclimation and thus became a United States citizen. His life was long and mostly spent as a sharecropper, common work for blacks in the south. In fact, over the course of his extended lifetime, he amassed more than 1,200 drawings.[11] His work has something of a cult following in the folk and outsider art community, garnering hefty

[11] Russell, Charles

sums at auctions and fairs. Even the likes of Julia Louis-Dreyfus reminisced with the New York Times about her dead father buying and selling of the now super blue-chip, ultra-valuable, folk artist and former slave. Her father started an education and fundraising organization, The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation, which "has sold Traylors at auction before"[12], one time raising close to $400,000 when one of his works went at Christie's in 2013.

Adding to his market value even more, in September of 2018, the Smithsonian Museum of American Art held a retrospective dedicated to him, touting the exhibition as "*the first major retrospective ever organized for an artist born into slavery*"[13]. The issue here is subtle. The focus is on the Museum, not Traylor himself or even his artworks. The subtext is that the Smithsonian wants to portray itself as a leading, influential, and spectacular institution that is able to hold such an unusual--nay, the first *major*-- show to educate the masses. This is self-congratulatory, in a way, using Traylor as a trophy, rather than focussing on making him and his artwork visible. In the outsider art world, the more "self taught", and offbeat in "poverty, racism, religious conviction, illiteracy" an artist is, the more s/he feeds into the trope of the "noble savage", adding to the authenticity value.[14] And, on top of all that, now that the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) has showcased his work, Traylor's market

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[12] Pogrebin, Robin. "Bill Traylor's Outsider Art Veers Into the Mainstream." *The New York Times*. October 25, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/25/arts/design/bill-traylor-julia-louis-Dreyfus-zwirner-art.html.

[13] "Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor" Smithsonian American Art Museum. SAAM.edu. September 2018. https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/traylor.

[14] Fine, Gary Alan. "Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-Taught Art." Theory and Society 32 (2003): pages 152–80.

value is only accelerating. It is not unusual to spend more than $20,000 starting price for a Traylor work offered at the Outsider Art Fair.

PART II: Fieldwork and Methods

> ...but the Gee's Bend quiltmakers aren't exactly that outsider anymore, I suppose.
>
> -- journal field notes, July 6, 2018

As an intern, I gathered quite a bit of data regarding how outsider art is constructed and then circulates through insider realms. I worked for and among these insiders in an outsider world, who in effect, produce the idea of "outsiderness" in the art. I helped edit and update the gallery website bibliographies for the current folk artists on display in this Met inspired show. What fascinates me is how long the institutional lists are for the most valuable outsider artists. Southern vernacular black artists like Bill Traylor, Thornton Dial, and the Gee's Bend quiltmakers are heavily exhibited but are still marketed by major art purveyors as outsider. Are they outsiders because they are self-taught, lacking any formal schooling? Beverly Buchanan, an up-and-coming bluechip name, went to college and graduate school, however, is from North Carolina rather than New York. *Authenticity value* here becomes mixed with institutionalization, bolstering even more the name's asking price, exclusivity, and aura.

I happened to work in the field at what I would call a turning point for American southern vernacular art because I got to witness just how the for-profit machine "piggybacks" off of the non-profit institutions that feed into the larger art economy. The Met show was something of a catalyst for this domino effect to take place that fed into these outsider art galleries. When a major museum comes into contact with any

art work--whether high or lowbrow-- the featured objects and creator have an aura and legacy constructed around them. These structures add to the prestige and in turn allow galleries to raise prices. These galleries acquire artworks, then plan and execute their own exhibitions and shows, sending press releases about their upcoming opening events. Eventually, the day comes and the gallery opens its doors, in this case, selling quilts to people like American documentarian Ken Burns. The gallery protects the price lists, but I was privy to it working under them. Ken Burns' prospective new quilt at the time had an asking price of $26,000. A careful tango between buyer and seller takes place, in which neither party wants to show all their fiscal cards. The gallery will show the work or artist's provenance-- where s/he or the object has been displayed, what it or others like it have sold for and where, and where similar items are in institution's permanent collections. The buyer will take this into account, but also the asking price.

Authenticity value is a gallery's foot in the door to a seller. Ken Burns may or may not have been interested in some hand stitched blankets if they lacked the aura of Gee's Bend. As mentioned earlier, not only is the name a major player in the museum world, but it also has the abject status of its makers. In the American outsider art markt, race and class are prime elements to evaluating and propagating authenticity value.

History Refused to Die

During my visit at the Metropolitan, I accidentally walked in on the exhibition's young curator guiding the Museum's graduate fellows as she discussed her work behind the show.

> "I learned from the curator herself how the exhibition was conceptualized and executed. She emphasized the political context of the show, saying that her goal was to show these works not as 'outsiders'-- which would institutionally alienate the artists-- but instead simply as under recognized black artists from the American south. What was also critical in the show (ie: her thesis) was that the works and artists, she said, were not compared to the white modern artists that made it into the canon of art history."

At the very end of the tour, she pointed out the space's opening. Her finger angled to just across the way to the rest of the modern art wing that lay just outside the safety and seclusion of the small exhibition's enclave.

> "Making 'space' for these artists that was equal to that of others like Matisse, Klee, and Picasso (artists often referenced when discussing the exhibited works) is the key element of the show."

I sensed some dissonance. This exhibition was about the Museum and its greatness, not the works or their creators. Yes, it is not the fault of the Met to be gifted all these objects, but what were the real intentions behind said endowment? Was it to make them visible and showcase them to as many people as possible, or to surreptitiously raise the value when others are put to auction. Though both parties involved (ie: Souls Grown Deep and the Metropolitan Museum) are non-profits, it would behoove them to be able to make a hefty sum at market like the William Louis-Dreyfus

Foundation. All these institutions parrot each other's feelings about the quilts resembling Mattise and other educated, canonized artists. If they were so derivative, how could they garner such fame and secure a niche in these institutions without their constructed auras an assigned authenticity value? These forces seem to cancel out one another, rendering the idea of these quilts and their creators being outside the paradigm something of an enigma .

Another issue is the execution. Though the curator's intention was visibility, perhaps it was a misstep to place it directly alongside the likes of canonized insiders who coveted their "primitive" styles. What was the goal, here-- visibility or comparison? And why were these objects even in the Met's Modern Wing? It was Jean Dubuffet who after WWII created the concept of *outsider art*. He himself was an art world insider simply using the works of the unschooled and self-taught as merely "innocent", "non-western", "irrational", and "anticultural" aesthetic elements . In fact, I would even argue that these quilts should be seen as American artifacts from the immediate post-slave south-- utilitarian objects made out of sheer necessity not expression.

Galleries and Value

I remember joking with the art handler and restorer at Andrew Edlin Gallery:

> "What if we just put them in the washer?" They were still grimey and smelly from years of use as essential household objects. He was gingerly stitching some

> peeling fabric, looked up at me for a moment, and then back at his restoration work.
>
> "That would be very bad."
>
> "They're just blankets, though. Theoretically, we could just wash them."
>
> "I don't think Andrew would want that."

This observation revealed to me how unequal the qualifications are for these works when valued compared to other art objects. When a painting from a museum's basement gets "unearthed", the work undergoes intensive cleaning, restoration, and preservation no matter how incidental the work. If it is going to be displayed, it is going to be in the most rehabilitated state possible because that is how it draws value-- whether monetarily or academically. However, from my findings, that is not the case for outsider art. The "patina" adds value; original "dirt" adds to the authenticity. If these works are to be held up to institutionalized modern American artists like they are, why do they not receive the same restoration? My assertion is that they subconsciously not seen as the same, and keeping them in this "original" state maintains an element of *lowbrow* and outsider veneer.

A lot of times, art is just in the background. This behavior is odd because most of the time, art is expensive. Before all this research, I used to intern for an antique poster gallery in my suburban Connecticut hometown. The gallery owner told me how one time he bought back a huge, super-valuable, rare poster that he had sold and framed. What had happened was after around two months, the buyers had grown tired of it, and the wife had decided that it was too big for the spot she had allocated for it in

their million dollar home. They kept it in the garage. An art hanger and friend of the gallery owner saw it standing up there and gathering dust, and he knew it was from my boss at the time. The poster dealer bought the framed poster back for a fraction of what they paid him for it. The whole logic behind this story is reminiscent of how these objects are really viewed as lowbrow art. They can be kept dirty because that is where they come from. They can be a marginal part of a display because that was the context from which they came. It makes me wonder what Ken Burns does with his quilt-- where he keeps it and where it will go.

Consistent with what I have found from working inside the outsider art world, Gary Alan Fine's statement still rings true: "biographical narrative is central to the field". I remember proofreading artist biographies on gallery websites, witnessing the constructed discussion about the artwork so cherished in this world. In this gallery realm, there is something known as a *gallery artist*. Galleries can focus on a specific artist or subspeciality (like 20th century craft objects), and then *represent* that focus or artist, subsequently publishing books about them. This is common with outsider art galleries. With exposure and representation, the gallery essentially makes a *brand* for itself and the artist. Another thing that has captured my attention is how galleries "sell" an artist's concept. I helped post on the Andrew Edlin Gallery social media Instagram. An artist's isolation and dastardly deeds are selling points included in the gallery website's biography for the artist. The more victimized, marginalized, ostracized, or undereducated the artist, the more valuable his/her works, especially if there is a limited supply. These are all marks of exclusively because that is how these works and artists are evaluated by the insider class. A drawing by illiterate freed slave

Bill Traylor is worth tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars only after his story is known to the prospective buyer or non-profit consumer. The art machine in this outsider realm relies on these "authentic" stories to sustain itself. Gallery artist biographies for poor, black artists would often present a sensationalized origin story as the first and paramount detail. On the website for the larger gallery I interned for, Thornton Dial's biography had the opening sentence: "born in a cornfield to an unwed teenage mother, Dial grew up in rural Emelle, in Alabama's western flatlands. He began full-time farm work at age five and managed to attend school only rarely."[15]

However in contrast, while I was working on updating the gallery biography for a white outsider, their introduction often highlighted their accomplishments and extensive oeuvre. Examples from the same gallery's website praise the artwork itself and attach it to the artist: "[w]hen we look at the paintings of Tom Bronk… we see a compelling meld of a most solitary mode of innovation and a profoundly different understanding of art that is by no means unaware"[16]; "Eugene Von Bruenchenhein was a prolific creator of a diverse range of distinctive images and sculptural objects, who produced his art in private over a period of about fifty years at his home in Milwaukee…"[17] I also find it interesting how similar gallery and museum shows are to

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[15] "Thornton Dial." Andrew Edlin Gallery. Accessed October 2019. https://www.edlingallery.com/artists/thornton-dial.

[16] "Tom Bronk." Andrew Edlin Gallery. Accessed October 2020. https://www.edlingallery.com/exhibitions/tom-bronk.

[17] Artists - Andrew Edlin Gallery." Andrew Edlin Gallery. Accessed October 2020. https://www.edlingallery.com/artists.

each other. Both require curation. But the museum's exhibition is a thesis, a gallery's simply a reason to show these works together in an effort to sell. Both take interest in the artists' provenance. However, where an artist has been shown and what has been said about him/her raises the price and will make the gallery more money.

PART III: Findings, Analysis, and Discussion

There are many factors at play here that construct narrative and authenticity value. Modernity has a dichotomous relationship with the folk world. Outsiders are only part of this "outsider grouping" if they function within this eurocentric paradigm (ie: outside the western art canon). How artists are portrayed and marketed (ie: blacks connected with slavery are defined first by that, wheras whites have their work more at the forefront of their "value"). All of this stems from an immense force of commodification and highbrow fascination with the lowbrow.

Modernity and its Relationship with the Folk

Modernity acts as a force of fractionalization, with a communal "decline"[18], as he phrases it, removal and ultimately turning inwards. Urbanism, modernity, and by extension late capitalism, are alienating forces, especially to those considered outsiders. But when is the outsider not a marginalized group but instead, him/herself something of an insider or even privileged in different contexts? For example, a wall street broker may be an insider amongst the hustle and bustle of Manhattan's upper crust, but find himself completely alien to the good old boys in a Dallas megachurch. Herein lies the conflict. Placemaking as a form of engagement and even kinship is contentious because to who should it be afforded? Should locals be obliged to let in outsiders that otherwise are at the top of their native social strata? Can the same

[18] Morgan, Lewis Henry.

standard be held to other differentiating factors like race, creed, sexuality, etc.? The answer seems to be more nuanced than the reductive "you can't sit with us" paradigm often seen in media attempting to quantify fitting in vs. being left on the fringes.

Andre Sorrensen brings up the idea of "remaking… shared spaces"[19] writing of neighborhood preservation amidst city planning and reimagining space. This, perhaps, is the critical element. The wall street broker I mentioned before has carved himself a place in not just the business world but also society as a whole. He has a space set aside that accepts him as insider, whereas those of marginalized groups by definition do not, and therefore no space can be set aside and preserved in their name. The homeless have attempted to construct "tent cities" in Los Angeles and San Francisco as a way of placemaking, but constantly are preyed upon by police and other city officials demolishing this form of kinship and survival. Preservation is the essential ingredient to ensuring local and personal spaces are protected in the vast scape of urbanized modernity. Aggressive gentrification can be seen as a destructive factor to marginalized placemaking because it acts as a form of gross, capitalist erasure to what are usually marginalized neighborhood predecessors. It may be ok to get a drink at the local biker bar, but harmful to flood it with outsiders creating an influx of non-locals and displacing those who have already made a place for themselves in that space.

Jean Dubuffet and Primitivism.

Christie's or Sothaby's cart out these works by the mentally ill or otherwise socially ostracized until the outsider "charm" and "authentic" mystique becomes an

[19]Sorensen, Andre. 2009. Neighborhood Streets as Meaningful Spaces: Claiming Rights to Shared Spaces in Tokyo. City and Society 21. Pages. 207 - 229.

insider luxury? Can these works be appreciated and even celebrated while keeping their original intentions, to be outside of the art world, economy, and machine, gratified? Can these artists' legacies and works simply exist in their own right without being propped up next to the canonized in the Metropolitan's Modern Wing?

Surely this kind of grandstanding and institutional denial is inappropriate at best and dehumanizing at worst. These works made by vulnerable people, are just objects at this point-- objects to use as tools to climb the academic ladder or gain outsider art world prestige. Recently I saw a Judith Scott sculpture under glass in a MoMa exhibition about Fluxus (a movement premised on irony, camp, and social commentary) because her life's work and passion was considered an act of "play"[20].

Authenticity: Purity and Suffering

Alan also broaches the idea of "identity" and "creating the creator". He writes of an interview he had with a collector in which she said she actually did not even like some pieces, but once she learned about the story of the artists, she knew she "had to have them". "Ultimately self-taught art is a form of *identity art*"[21] he concludes. It seems that the more wild and dysfunctional an artist can be made out to be, the more valuable his/her art will be. Art brut in Europe surrounds itself completely in asylum art and art of the insane. Southern American vernacular and folk art collectors and purveyors obsess over how impoverished or oppressive the predicaments were of the artists. But somehow, the same treatment is not alloted to the white American male

[20] Room 410, *At the Border of Art and Life*, The Museum of Modern Art, Manhattan, New York.
[21] Fine, Gary Allan.

outsider artists. Nobility in victimization plays a role in this fetishization, as well as a form of colonization and even racism. It's disturbing how some artists can be reduced to illiterate bastards born in a remote town in Alabama, while some are just eccentric married men from Milwaukee. Identity plays some role in the artist's persona in the work, but at what point does s/he become a martyr for the sake of selling?

This notion leads me to another aspect to examine: the relevance of identity. Scott Indrisek writes in his article *When Is an Artist's Mental Health Your Business?* "[w]e certainly don't need to know everything about an artist to appreciate her output…"[22] Identity politics is complicated. When can someone appreciate an artist's identity and when can s/he be reductive by taking it into account? Is it acceptable to simply look only at an artist's "output" as he puts it? Is this facistic? Does it become art for the sake of art at that point? When can an identity not be someone else's to capitalize on? When does display and market circulation bring a positive force of visibility rather than harsh, callus exposure?

Purity as a concept also appears in more contemporary anthropological literature. *Purity*, *fixity*, and *pattern* contribute to the idea of authenticity and its value as it relates to an insider's expectation. Audra Simpson describes the notion of a "regulatory body of literature"[23]-- though in this case it would be regarding artworks-- as a "narrow model of transition as a unit of analysis for the insider to outsider." Though she writes of the white anthropologist/minority Mohawk native paradigm, a

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[22] Indrisek, Scott. "When Is an Artist's Mental Health Your Business?" Artsy, July 31, 2017. https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artists-mental-health-business.

[23] Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

similar power play and perception is present in the art world to its outsiders. In her 2014 ethnography *Mohawk Interruptions*, she discusses how outsiders, the other, the savage, and even the inducted *noble savage*, are essentized-- preserved in the academic canon as if they were too simple to change or continue progress (ie: fixity). The ideas of permanence and the primitive are key elements to any insider/outsider paradigm since whatever peripheral entity in question is an object of study to be seen at face value. Humans naturally look for patterns when examining something. Patterns are found in mathematics, nature, climate cycles, language, and social interaction. Perhaps it would make sense to insiders to expect something of a regular model when attempting to place parameters and validate foreign forces that enter the paradigm that they control.

Indrisek's article discusses suffering in the outsider art world--the delicate line curators attempt to balance between "honest explication and exploitation"[24] and relevant details instead of simply "salacious". The writing also mentions Hanz Prinshorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* and its careful preservation in Lusane, Switzerland with Jean Dubuffet's personal art brut collection. Prinshorn's "research", in addition to Dubuffet's "collection" directly fed into the influential modern artists of their contemporaneous Europe. This is similar to how a painter during the Dutch Golden age may study a book of pressed flowers as a visual reference for a still life, except at the other end of this data collection instead are people being studied like objects rather than subjects. Can these mentally ill patients give true consent to their

[24] Indrisek, Scott.

work and intellectual property being co-opted by the more privileged and established. There is obviously a drastic power disparity here.

Indrisek opens up the idea of "breaking boundaries", how these artists are no longer qualified with terms like "so-called" and quotation marks to punctuate distance, in addition to the decision to slowly integrate outsider and folk artists displayed alongside "trained and professional artists". Perhaps outsider and insider artists do not have to be at odds with each other or completely separate. Maybe they all can be "artists" and outsider art just happens to be made by the unschooled, untrained, or otherwise other party. This poses a paradox because by its very definition, outsider means outlyer of the art world, market, or "community". Also, as long as these artists' life stories keep being a central focus, the perpetual *otherizing* force from inside the art world will only sustain this paradigm.

Nobility in Savagery and The "Need" for Authenticity

As Lewis Henry Morgan describes these "savages" and the cultural contexts in which they live, the idea of *isolation* begetting artistic *purity* and *homogeneity*. Authenticity value quantifies and validates this concept, making the worth measurable for folk and outsider art. He goes on to write "while [barbarians] have been adulterated through external influence"[25], describing and assigning moral value to that which is untouched, undiluted, or void of external elements. These outsiders, in the gatekeepers' views, lack the background and are a pure form of their own existence,

[25] Morgan, Lewis Henry

innocent and scarce. These “primitives” lack the complicated cognition required to create art worthy of mainstream canonization since they fall outside these Eurocentric parameters of fine art. Their value is that they act as a form of cultural “time-capsule”. Thus, WWII era French artist Jean Dubuffet coined the term *art brut* (rough art), and used these creators’ imageries to invent his countercultural art movement *Primitivism*.

I recall a booth operator at the 2020 Outsider Art Fair that I spoke with about the Gee’s Bend quilts and merchandise she was selling. She approached me and surprisingly divulged all the trade secrets surrounding obtaining these quilts now-adays. Collectors and venders act as mediators for the public consumer; they go down to the remote area, enter people’s homes, browse their wares that are priced to sell, and leave with treasures even Ken Burns himself cannot keep his hands off of. In 2014, an older quilt made by the “original” Gee’s Bend women averaged at around $28,000 depending on the name of the maker, style, and colors. Now, in 2020, I can only imagine so much. The one old quilt this white woman had at her less disareably located (ie: cheaper) booth was painfully tattered and not in collecting condition. I did not even ask the price.

The woman told me how, if you want to get a Gee’sBend quilt, you go to Gee’s Bend and get one. Guests to the town make arrangements to visit the homes of the residents, who are all close descendants of the “original” quilters. Presently-made wares are displayed, and after asking the right questions and showing you mean business, perhaps they may show you a tattered quilt kept in a chest in an attic. This woman also sold wine bottle covers that today the women in Gee’s Bend produce to quell tourist cravings. Women in the tiny swamp town still keep the tradition of

quiltmaking, but with Walmarts now easily available especially in the American south, they clearly are not made out of necessity. These quilts are not priced as high because of their lack of "authenticity value" since the maker was not of enough abject status. The major selling point for these is the Pettway name and/or direct family lineage from an *original* quiltmaker. The whole thing seemed to be reminiscent of the *Cannibal Tours* by Dennis O'Rourke in which Western tourists visit seemingly "primitive" tribal villagers in rural Papua New Guinea just to take photos with these outsiders and purchase trinkets as forms of conspicuous "discovery".

In their paper titled "Why Elites Love Authentic Lowbrow Culture: Overcoming High-Status Denigration with Outsider Art", researchers Oliver Hahl, Ezra W. Zuckerman, and Minjae Kim discuss outsider art and the consumption of its deemed authenticity. The article outlines what the writers call "the need for certain elites to address feelings of authenticity-insecurity arising from 'high status denigration'" in a "'search for authenticity'" with a hope for reaching "'authenticity-by-appreciation'".[26] The work argues that this quest for authenticity is a form of conspicuous consumption of the culturally "omnivorous", ultimately driven by the need for power and comfort with one's own identity/humility.

The paper goes on to discuss "authentic lowbrow goods" and why they seem more "real" or down to earth. One draw is that these objects are made without the

[26] Oliver Hahl, Ezra W. Zuckerman, and Minjae Kim. "Why Elites Love Authentic Lowbrow Culture: Overcoming High-Status Denigration with Outsider Art." *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 4 (2017): pages 828–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122417710642.

intention to impress or even cater to the high brow consumer-- sort of like how unreciprocated affection can make infatuation even more potent.

Conclusion

There needs to be some institutional accountability in the art world when working with artwork from sensitive origins. Can one capitalize on an object and its "aura" simply because it is, essentially, just a thing that can be bought and sold by consenting parties? He writes, "[w]e are, after all, a curious species"[27] who take interest and excitement in how an artwork came to be. However, is this at the artist's expense? The mentally ill use art creation as a coping mechanism for their painful predicaments-- is it just to distance oneself from this in order to capitalize on it? And, is this yet another othering force by making their artwork something of a spectacle? Is it ok to be curious? When can the artist's identity be a positive attribute to the artwork?

As Clifford Geertz observed in his "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *narrative*, for the most part, is a tapestry woven by someone. In most cases, it is the subjects who construct their own narrative. But for many marginalized groups, in this case *outsiders* to the art world, it is the insiders who in a way create the story-- the artist is just the one who lives it. Yes, Bill Traylor was born a slave and entered the world from a single mother with no access to midwifery. But the issues are when a global leading

[27] Indrisek, Scott.

outsider art gallery sensationalizes this fact by writing of his origins “born in a corn field to an unwed mother” and the Smithsonian American Art Museum writes a press release with the first sentence stating “*Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor* is the first major retrospective ever organized for an artist born into slavery...”, these art world elites act as gatekeepers that cobble together the narrative, circumstantially influencing *representation*. Judith Scott is dead, but her sister still lives to help reaggregate her legacy she left behind now that her fiberworks are major works for museums, collectors, and the general outsider art world.

There is still work to be done. Obviously race and class are not the only factors that subject an individual to marginalization or being *outside*. The late Judith Scott was just 61 when she died. She had severe Down Syndrome which already made it difficult for her to communicate with the outside world. Coupled with her being mute which was symptomatic of her unknown deafness, Scott faced serious existential challenges for her daily life. In 1987, Scott’s twin sister enrolled her in Oakland’s Creative Growth non-profit art space for the disabled and she finally found expression through intricate, time-consuming, labor-intensive textile sculptures in the round. The tactility of her work is poignant and her methodology inventive, wrapping random items in fabric, twine, yarn, for months at a time until she deemed the work complete. Eventually, her artworks started to gain something of notability within the art world; major outsider art museums globally own her works and the Brooklyn Museum dedicated an entire exhibition to her in 2014. This diabled, unschooled, old woman was deemed an outsider artist whose work penetrated the insider art realm. Though her circumstances

were somewhat unorthodox for outsider “induction”, the overall pattern is common within the greater art machine.

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