



BRINGING THE OUTSIDE IN – RUTH ROSENGARTEN.

The Alternative Guide to the Universe

Hayward Gallery, 11 June – 26 August 2013.

[Slideshow](#)



Souzu – Outsider Art from Japan

Wellcome Collection, 28 March – 30 June 2013.

[Slideshow](#)



The overlap of two exhibitions dealing with outsider art in London this spring /summer (*Alternative Guide to the Universe* at the Hayward Gallery, and *Souzu – Outsider Art from Japan* at the Wellcome Collection) in all probability is not a random coincidence, throwing light on an appetite for works that are more personal and direct than the cool, highly mediated works that have enjoyed market success over the past couple of decades. Viewed in relation to three exhibitions of more mainstream artists – the *Diaries of Dieter Roth* at the Camden Arts Centre; *AxMe*, a mid-career retrospective of the obsessively detailed work of Afro-American artist Ellen Gallagher at the Tate Modern, and an exhibition of quirky sculptural pieces by Mexican artist Damián Ortega at the Freud Museum – these shows suggest, too, that there is a desire to extend the parameters of the category of ‘outsider art’, bringing it, so to speak, in. Together, these five exhibitions intimate that there may be a continuum between the outsider artist and his or her opposite: would that be an insider?

The wish to bridge the split between ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ has been most spectacularly realised by the nomadic Museum of Everything (‘the world’s only wandering institution for the undiscovered, unintentional, untrained and unclassifiable’), established in 2009. In acknowledgement of the loans made by this collection to *The Alternative Guide to the Universe*, Ralph Rugoff, the director of the Hayward Gallery and curator of the show, has extended the Hayward’s Project Space to Nek Chand Saini, an Indian artist whose work was included in the first exhibition organised by the Museum of Everything in Primrose Hill in 2009. The Museum of Everything has played an important role in opening up a discussion about the dichotomy between outsider and mainstream art, expanding, in its very structure, the field of museology itself (its remit has been to contribute an ‘alternative universe’ to the London art scene). Yet there seems something disingenuous about the rhetoric of dissolving the dichotomy.

If ‘insider’ is not the term favoured in opposition to ‘outsider,’ to use it would be unapologetically appropriate. As an artist, to crack into the art world is, without question, to become an insider. Though ‘questioning the assumptions of the category of outsider’* chimes more politely with the pressures of correctness, political and otherwise; and though there may be a spectrum of activity or overlap between them, especially where mental illness is concerned, the two states remain generally distinct from each other. For however much they may harness a naive intensity of expression, intricately repetitive marks, or quirky materials and graphic styles, however much they may deal with inner states and reveal a need for the catharsis of self exposure, artists working within the parameters of the art world and its

institutions enjoy a knowingness, and a control of their artistic idioms and, above all, of the institutional and critical circuits that their works might navigate, that the outsiders are not able to achieve autonomously.

Since Jean Dubuffet and other members of the European avant-garde in the first half of the twentieth century championed the art of the marginalised, various outsider artists have been discovered, annexed by the mainstream art market, and sold at high prices, often posthumously. The term 'outsider art' itself has been taken on board as a marketing strategy, incorporating the folksy and autodidactic, in line with a general nostalgia for purported states of innocence, for instance the New York Outsider Art Fair, (www.outsiderartfair.com). The Henry Boxer Gallery of Outsider and Visionary Art includes the categories 'Modern-British,' 'Naive,' and 'Self-Taught' (www.outsiderart.co.uk). Two celebrated historical examples of outsiders that have been appropriated by the insider art world: a substantial body of work by the extraordinary and now celebrated Henry Darger (1892-1973), a reclusive janitor in Chicago, who for years kept obsessive weather journals, personal diaries, an autobiography, and two enormous, beautifully and disturbingly illustrated epics, is now housed at the American Folk Art Museum, and he has been the subject of many exhibitions and a source of inspiration to several figurative contemporary artists. American outsider artist James Castle (1899-1977), probably illiterate and certainly isolated by his profound deafness, created works on salvaged paper and card and other found materials: his work chimes so directly with certain idioms of contemporary expression that it has enjoyed retrospective exhibitions at institutions otherwise devoted to contemporary art. In contemporary practice, there was the exhibition of diary drawings by performance artist Bobby Baker at the Wellcome Collection in 2009, and her publication of some of these drawings, charting her breakdown and ten years of mental illness, in an award winning book (*Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me*, 2011); or the two exhibitions at the Riflemaker Gallery in London of dazzlingly coloured and patterned self-portraits in Indian ink by Josephine King, with their self-exposing block texts announcing bipolar disorder, breakdown, suicide attempt, and the resuscitating power of painting.

It is in the context of the growing interest in outsider art that Ralph Rugoff proclaims that *The Alternative Guide to the Universe* not only extends its reach beyond 'the parameters of the so-called art world,' but also reaches 'outside the parameters of the so-called outsider art world.' There is a great deal of 'so-called' in talk of outsider art. If we are honest, we may acknowledge that there remains, on the whole, a distinct dividing line between outsiders and the others. For while the others – the insiders – might appropriate the language of those on the margins, the outsiders do not enjoy the freedom of being able to negotiate the frontier between outside and in, expand it, play with it. Not to put too fine a point on it, they cannot *but* be where they are.

Perhaps it is just the terminology that is riling. This term we now find so awkward that we have to frame it with quote marks or qualifiers, 'outsider art,' is a rough English translation of the French term *art brut*, which was coined by Jean Dubuffet to describe works whose independence from the stylistic and intellectual tics of mainstream art he admired and sought to emulate; work that was produced on the margins of mainstream culture, in particular that made by children and the mentally ill. The French term more accurately transmits a sense of unschooled rawness, though not, perhaps, the extreme and sometimes delirious ordering to which much of this work subjects itself. But the English term communicates in more precise and unadorned fashion the marginalised status of these artists within society at large. For more often than not, they are not 'so-called' outsiders, but people suffering from a profound sense of social and psychological isolation, though they are by no means necessarily uneducated.

A defining feature of such outsider art, then, is that it is forged not dialogically – not in dialogue with other artists – but rather, in isolation, as a monologue, sometimes with a didactic or therapeutic end. The work is therefore – at least in its motivation – detached from the vicissitudes of fashion that inflect the art world. Yet at the same time, the works in both the exhibitions reveal the extent to which this isolation is nevertheless embedded in broader cultural contexts, reflecting an awareness of predominant concerns in science, technology, the environment, urban planning, cinema and fashion. So in *The Alternative Guide to the Universe*, we see time machines, ornately gothic cathedrals and cityscapes, plans for reconstruction after a nuclear catastrophe, theories of matter, alternative physics and visions of outer space, engagement with computerised technology and robotics, all dazzlingly and hyperbolically alluding to representational conventions we recognise from the drafting table of other professions, or from the imagery of science fiction. In *Souzu – Outsider Art from Japan*, however introverted the world from which the work stems – all the works in this exhibition were made at mental health institutions and welfare centres – its formal realisation is recognisably linked to culturally coded traditions, such as those of calligraphy, manga, cinema posters or ceramics, employing materials readily identified with Japanese handicrafts, old and new. Text and script, language and handwriting have a role to play in both exhibitions: perhaps a structuring role, like line itself, for these works are nothing if not structured, fervently imposing order on chaos.

It is perhaps because of its link with obsession, with isolation, with learning difficulties and with (often severe) mental illness, that this work has such a compelling effect: we see in each of these creations, in ways that are unguarded if not unmediated, the workings of an individual mind, a unique and unquiet psyche. In invoking beautiful but strange and imprisoned minds, these works inevitably prompt in us a mechanism of 'othering' whereby we separate ourselves from the disadvantaged (selves and others, us and them). Such a mechanism protects us like an amulet in our tenacious (if also tenuous) hold on sanity: 'there but for the grace...'

The connection with mental illness was there from the inception of the notion of *art brut*: in his desire to free himself of intellectual constraints, Dubuffet was influenced by the book, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, published in 1922 by the

German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, which also opened the field of psychiatric art. Between 1918 and 1921, Prinzhorn, who in addition to being a psychiatrist was also an art historian, put together a collection of some 5000 works made by inmates of psychiatric institutions in Europe over the previous forty years. And as it happens, in 1996, works from the Prinzhorn Collection were shown in a large exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, where now *The Alternative Guide to the Universe* may be seen. In the preface to the catalogue of that earlier exhibition, the organisers rightly point out the extent to which interest in the art of those suffering from mental illness has led successive generations further away from Prinzhorn's original clinical observations. 'The questions which the works prompt – about the nature of individual self-expression, about intention and authenticity, about the boundaries between artistic creativity and mental disturbance, and about definitions of art itself – are ones which remain alive to this day,' they tell us.

Yes, indeed, that old chestnut, the definition of art itself: I was astonished to hear, on a cultural review programme on BBC Radio 4 covering the *Alternative Guide to the Universe*, one of the critics tediously asking whether this work was art, to which the answer might be both yes and no – but debating the issue is, surely, flogging a dead horse, and the arguments both for and against very well rehearsed. On the affirmative side, the avant-garde and post-Duchampian idea that anything that finds itself exhibited within the institutional framework of art is, well... art; while on the rebuttal side, the idea that in order for an expressive work to be 'art,' it needs to be framed by an institutional and disciplinary discourse that pertains to art, and in this sense, the scribbles of the mentally ill, like African ceremonial masks, or Palaeolithic cave paintings, are not art.

The Alternative Guide to the Universe is just what the label says: it presents work by artists who, though homeless, delusional, psychotic, obsessive-compulsive, borderline, socially marginal or simply 'maverick,' the term used by Ralph Rugoff to cover all manner of idiosyncrasy – are obsessed with issues. Big issues. These works proffer, each in a different way, not so much epistemological interrogations, as cosmological certainties. These are detailed theories about the universe, about the working of things, about the functioning of *everything*, for which the work serves as both proof and support. The show is divided into several sections that explore narratives of self, visionary architectures, responses to time and space, codes and technology, and fringe physics.

As Rugoff points out, these works are generally made not as one-offs, but in series that compulsively and compellingly prod and prise open an issue, exposing an 'abiding commitment' to some field of knowledge, and a 'sense of faith in the particular visions that they conjure and explore.' Several of the artists seem consciously to use the process of thinking through making as a form of therapy or self-healing. But a quality that is shared by all the works is a lack of hesitation, a sense of didactic – one might almost say dogmatic – certainty in the worldview they propose, whether it be based on arcane numerical patterns (Alfred Jensen) or mathematical and computational theories (George Widener), magnetic fields (Emery Blagdon), the cosmos and intergalactic travel (Karl Hans Janke), alternative theories of gravity and physics (James Carter, Melvin Way), idealised and apocalyptic notions of community (A. G. Rizzoli), deliriously re-imagined architectural design (Marcel Storr, Paul Laffoley) or utopian urban planning (William Scott, Bodys Isek Kingelez). This work gives a different – and not insignificant – twist to the term 'conceptual art.'

It is perhaps not surprising that architecture and urban planning provide such compelling iconography and focus of research, for these artists are, above all, plotting habitable and structured worlds where, in opposition to the experiential world of mental illness, there is absolute order and certainty, a homely – if uncannily homely – idealised place, scrutinised and analysed in microscopic, psychedelic detail, but often simultaneously boasting a panoramic sweep.

But perhaps the most surprising work on the *Alternative Guide to the Universe* show is that of the three photographers included, since photography is not usually a medium associated with outsider art. Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (USA, 1910-1983) repeatedly photographed his wife, Marie, often in sexually provocative poses, bare breasted or swathed in exotic garb, set against lushly floral backdrops, clearly linking an idealised vision of female beauty to a sumptuously tropical 'nature.' More disturbingly to our contemporary sensibilities, Morton Bartlett constructed fifteen plaster figures of children, (twelve girls, three boys) half life-size, and photographed them in variously staged scenarios. Bartlett's attention to detail in sewing the costumes, arranging the hair and accessories, painting the nails of these children is paired by his need for realism even in the body parts hidden from sight. With their romantic and eroticised portrayal of childhood, these works expose a sense of longing that touches upon the dangerous, but that also reveals the artist's own psychic arrest, for these children memorialise the stage of life at which Bartlett himself was orphaned, and then given for adoption.

Perhaps most startling of all are the self-portraits by Lee Godie (USA, 1908-1994), the Cindy Sherman of the homeless. Living on the streets of Chicago, Godie used 'public cameras,' as she called them, photo-booths in bus stations, to photograph herself. But these are no ordinary black and white ID snapshots. With a limited set of accessories that Godie draws out of her bag – a hat, a fur collar, a jumper – and several props, she recreates herself as different characters, old and young, whether film star or socialite, tramp or vamp. These self-transformative performances in the solitude of the photo-booth were her material, but she often embellished the photographs with ballpoint pen or markers, reddening her lips, enhancing her eyes or adding a dimple, sometimes including an inscription or flamboyant signature, or sewing the photographs onto canvases. The photo-booth became, for her, both

studio and medium, in which she created several hundred images, each with purposefully struck poses and a distinct sense of composition.

Souzou – Outsider Art from Japan gathers the work of forty six artists who are all residents or attendees of social welfare institutions across the main island of Honshu in Japan. The term *souzu* has no direct translation in English, but a double meaning in Japanese: 'creation' or 'imagination'. As is customary at the Wellcome Collection, the exhibition is beautifully hung, mounted with exceptional sensitivity to the visual and conceptual links between the works. It brings together a startling diversity of materials, exposing a fantastic inventiveness in their use. In particular, perhaps, the use of fabric is inspired: from the decorated pyjamas of Takahiro Shimoda, to the wadded and embroidered circle motifs of Yumiko Kawai or the extraordinarily ordered and detailed bands of stitches in the work of Noriko Tanaka. The six sections into which the show is divided are more boldly descriptive, but simultaneously overlapping and elliptical, than the categorical divisions of the *Alternative Guide to the Universe*: 'Language,' 'Making,' 'Representation,' 'Relationships,' 'Culture,' and 'Possibility.'

In truth, these divisions are fluid, and many of the artists could fit into several sections. Some works communicate the idea of language pulled and stretched by those for whom written or even verbal communication might be difficult or impossible. Ryoko Koda repeatedly draws a transformed symbol/letter from the hiragana syllabary, in swirling patterns evocative of landscapes or cityscapes. Toshiko Yamanishi's whorls of delicate marks in coloured pencil crayon gain a more poignant, profound dimension in being described by the artist as love letters to her mother. Mineo Ito's ballpoint pen drawings rehearse many times over his name, which his father taught him to write, and which is the only thing he knows how to write. Takanori Herai's diaries are made entirely of invented hieroglyphs. Satoshi Morita's surfaces covered with tufts of wool yarn and leftover threads that he picks up from other people's sewing at his place of work, resemble delicate rows of handwritten text moving both horizontally and vertically, a kind of embroidered Esperanto.

As with much outsider art, we see here the use of repurposed materials, or of art materials unconventionally used: clay rolled and fashioned into forms of mesmerising intricacy (Satoshi Nishikawa, Mitsuteru Ishino, Shinichi Sawada, Megumi Matsui), or made into rough and rudimentary small shapes through chewing and rolling in the mouth of Komei Bekki. Coloured twist ties become minute warrior figures, marshalled into a large army on the march, weapons and all, eliciting the amazement that miniatures always extract from viewers. Shoichi Koga uses pieces of cardboard, paper, fabric and vinyl tape and marker, to make countless small sculptures of standing figures, drawn from characters in comic books or anime movies, while Kiesue Ishino uses cellophane tape, transparencies and marker to create rectangular, standing robotic figures based on anime characters. Both Koga and Ishino produce their figures by the hundreds.

As in the Hayward show, there are artists whose work charts, in minute detail, information, plans, theories: Shingo Ikeda fills notebooks with tiny marks in pen and coloured pencil, based on route maps and train timetables, while Kenichi Yamazaki draws what look like complicated circuit diagrams on graph paper, using ball point pen and the sharp end of a compass, making drawings out of delicate filigrees of holes. Daisuke Kibushi fills his surfaces with imagery from old Japanese movie posters, which, astonishingly, are perfect replicas of existing images drawn from memory. Norimitsu Kokubo draws, in hallucinatory detail, enormous cityscapes that scroll out, constantly changing scale and point of view. His piece de resistance is ten-metre long work beginning as a city map and transforming itself gradually into a more fantastical, imaginary cartography.

On the whole, these works are at once more joyful and more disturbing than the works at the Hayward. Some of the most moving works are those that focus on the individual figure. Sakiko Kono has made an imaginary world, an alternative family of beautifully sewn, stuffed dolls. With their whimsical marks, Yukiko Yamada's drawings in coloured pencil seem to disperse and rearrange the features of Japanese girls in comics and fashion prints, where 'cute' is a predominant and valued characteristic. The title: 'She is Nobody.' In a different way, Yoko Kubota alludes to the preponderance of a particular form of cute femininity prevalent in Japanese fashion and street culture. The pressure she applies to her pencil imparts on these works a sense of bodily presence, an ardent physicality. There is a similarly intense pencil pressure applied to different effect in Nobuji Higa's drawings of naked women. The intense and controlled marks forming compact surfaces of unmodulated colour have a quality at once erotic and alienated, sinuous and jagged, reminiscent simultaneously of someone like Egon Schiele and of traditional Japanese woodprints. The drawings of Takako Shibata also reveal the pressure of the artist's hand. In a series of drawings spanning some six years, she represents her mother, apparently dressed for work, always with a neat fringe of brown hair, lipstick, black earrings, an immaculate blue suit and a black tie. Represented in the first drawing as diminutive, she progressively broadens and expands, finally to fit the entire page, so that the absent mother becomes suffocating, her absence itself filling all available space.

While in Europe, the relationship of outsider art with psychiatry has tended to be diagnostic, in Japan, since the beginning of the public welfare system in 1945, it has been more closely linked to public health and educational reform. Work such as this has, until fairly recently, been all but invisible in Japan, not least because 'such artistic practice has been in the domain of social care rather than integrated in an alternative art circuit with a collector base, as in Europe' (<http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/japanese-outsider-art.aspx>). But the fact that Japanese society is so regimented and normative cannot have helped. Yet in a roundabout way, these exceptional

makers of art partake of the norms of their society, in particular, the moralisation of work as an absolute value and a marker of identity.

If, more than *The Alternative Guide to the Universe*, the exhibition of Japanese outsider art is unsettling in its 'othering' – it is hard to remove from one's constant awareness the circumstances of the all the works' production – the fact that all the artists share similar contexts of production also makes immersion in this exhibition a more coherent experience. There is no doubt that both exhibitions make a rich contribution to a conversation about the nature of art (though not, I hope, its definition). In different ways, all the works on show are impassioned, disarmingly tapping – as mainstream contemporary art seldom does, though it may do many other things – their makers' inner lives.

It is no surprise, given the current interest in outsider art, that it should now find itself lauded by big players in the art market (curators, collectors), finding its way into that *ne plus ultra* of contemporary art, the Venice Biennale. 'You can't move here for child-like line drawings and naive paintings,' Will Gompertz reports from the 2013 Biennale, works that 'are often flights of fancy produced by introverts and social outcasts carrying out an internal monologue' (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22719103>). It cannot go unnoticed that this new popularity will lead to a commodification of this work within the global art market. The question that I have not seen raised anywhere in the press responses to this thriving fashion is one that is now commonplace in postcolonial and feminist critique, and pertains to an appropriation by the economic mainstream of images whose makers have not enjoyed full agency in that dissemination. In terms of 'working' the networks of institutions that constitute the mainstream art world, the makers of these works are not *artful*, and probably will, by definition, never be so: that raises ethical problems. The question of 'value' is also one that will need to be addressed. However, the vitality and exceptional inventiveness and idiosyncrasy that these works bring, and the light they throw on the psychic role played by image making, are doubtlessly a lasting contribution.