

2020

The Uselessness of Education

Daniel Cottom
University of Oklahoma

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jx>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cottom, Daniel (2020) "The Uselessness of Education," *Journal X*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jx/vol5/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal X by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

The Uselessness of Education

Daniel Cottom

Daniel Cottom is David A. Burr Chair of Letters at the University of Oklahoma. His most recent books are Cannibals & Philosophers: Bodies of Enlightenment (Johns Hopkins UP, 2001) and Ravishing Tradition: Cultural Forces and Literary History (Cornell UP, 1996). This essay is adapted from his latest project, a study of contemporary hostilities toward higher education.

1. How Not to Do Things with Art

For many years now I have dwelt among university folk, especially those who cultivate the fields of the humanities. Anyone who has studied these people knows that one of their most cherished tales has its initial setting in a provincial town in Germany in the late eighteenth century. It is there, we are told, that Immanuel Kant, the legendary Sage of Königsberg, set out on the pathway to the world of beauty. He documented this adventure in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), in which he reported his discovery that the fundamental criterion of beauty is uselessness.

As the folktale would have it, this discovery proved influential because it was so brilliantly suited to the conditions of modernity as they were developing around Kant and his contemporaries. If it were to be modern, art could no longer exist as an object of patronage, just as individuals would be enlightened only if they were awakened from the dogmatic slumbers of tradition, culture, and history. To be modern, art would have to be autonomous. Fulfilling the purposiveness of its purposelessness, art might then model for us the harmonious perfection of consciousness, communication, and civilization toward which humanity strives to find its way.

As all who have heard this tale know, Kant's argument has been passed down from generation to generation in many versions. (As just one example, I might mention Clement Greenberg, whose doctrine of formalism proved very impressive to a coterie of the Ab-Ex tribe gathered at the Cedar Tavern on the

isle of Manhattan around the middle of the twentieth century.) As is only to be expected, these retellings were accompanied by various quibbles, cavils, and outright objections; and recently many have actually claimed that the Kantian legend has come to an end. In league with various allied movements, such as poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonial studies, postmodernism is said to have relegated Kant's universalist aesthetics to a past that we may now look back upon as a simpler, more primitive time. Yet it is evident that Kant's influence has not simply disappeared, as we may gather from a recent collection of essays, *Revenge of the Aesthetic*, which is dedicated to Murray Krieger and to his argument that the aesthetic undermines all the coercive uses words may be made to serve.

I will have more to say of these matters in what follows. For the moment, however, I wish to draw attention to a specifically pedagogical form in which the aesthetic criterion of uselessness has been popularized.

In the second half of the twentieth century, and especially in its last two decades, the uselessness of aesthetic education became a compelling proposition in the Western art world. The criterion of uselessness thus jumped from the artwork, formally considered, to the artist, considered in terms of his or her formal training. Thus we arrived at the categories of the self-taught artist and of outsider art, and it is to these categories, and to the tales appertaining thereunto, that I now turn my attention.

2. When the Legend Becomes Fact . . .

John Ashbery's *Girls on the Run* is an homage of sorts: "after Henry Darger" is the annotation following its title. In the fleeing girls of Ashbery's title we may recognize the heroines of Darger's "outsider" art, and ekphrastic moments that call attention to this connection are scattered throughout the poem. "I was looking at a book he created, glued and spliced" (23), for instance, evokes Darger's working methods.

Henry Darger, like Kant, is now a legend of some kind. Of what kind?

3. How to Succeed in Art without Really Trying

Outsider art is defined from the viewpoint of the presumed insider. More specifically, it is distinguished from art by academically trained artists on account of its institutionally eccentric origins. Outsider artists do not hold MFAs from Yale or from Cal Arts or even from Ball State University, and they often have no more than the most elementary schooling in the most basic of subjects. They may never have set foot in a museum; one does not find them sipping wine at *vernissages* in Soho; often they do not even dress in black except when they are going to church or a funeral. The men among them are not given to sporting tiny ponytails, and the women do not seem to favor Oliver Peoples for their eyewear. In short, it is safe to say that they have not heard of Kant, not even as strained through the vernacular of Walter Benjamin or Jean Bau-

drillard. They appear to be a people unto themselves: that is their distinction and their virtue. In the words of Arthur C. Danto, “They live and create in worlds of their own, often, as in the case of Henry Darger, for no one but themselves, with no ambition to become part of the artworld” (27).

4. Everyday People

No poetry is more mandarin than Ashbery’s, and yet none better stakes out the utopian ground on which people both “mainstream” and “idiosyncratic” and both “high” and “low” might communicate with one another, fully and peacefully. His lines are designed to allow “birds” and “ earmuffs” (4), “pee” and “crinoline” (7), or “bowls of muesli” and “the sidelong bats of evening” (14) to be as the lion and lamb of Edward Hicks. This sort of encounter goes on and on, with even the last line of the poem — “The wide avenue smiles” (55) — recalling both the sanctified pavement of John Milton’s canonical heaven and the perversities of surrealist streets. The diction of his characters is similarly generous, as when Talkative speaks of skies that are “gilded and armored” and then of the chance to “get out of hock, / redeem Daddy’s dear old coupons” (53).

There could be no one more unlike an outsider artist than Ashbery, with his academic background, prestigious awards, and international recognition, and it is of such perceived disjunctions — of their beauty — that this poem is made.

5. Folk Heroes

The popular assumption is that the phenomenon of outsider art proves that education is not only useless but even worse than useless in matters of aesthetic creation. In Sidney Janis’s pioneering book on this subject, a quotation from Horace Pippin, one of the most famous of self-taught artists, serves to exemplify this conviction: “To me it seems impossible for another to teach one of art” (189). Devotees of outsider art adore this kind of quote, collecting it in much the same way that “pickers” drive down dusty backroads looking for unworldly makers of paintings, sculptures, and other stuff to which the art world might extend its tender mercies.

To folks who are neither insiders nor outsiders, these sorts of dealings might call to mind Pat Boone’s harrowing appropriation of the art of Little Richard. Yet in this case it must be said that outsider art people generally have not sought to remake works in a different form so as to cater to a different audience. Those who gag at the spectacle of well-heeled tourists eating the Other may be justly suspicious about these artworld goings-on, but it is important also not to oversimplify the case, from which we have much to learn about the culture of educated folk at the end of the twentieth century.

In an era when MFAs in art, like those in creative writing, were coming to be both popularized and relentlessly criticized, outsider artists were brought forward as “folk heroes, models for some of the most adventurous and impor-

tant artists” in the mainstream of things. In making this observation, the curator Marcia Tucker went on to describe these heroes in the context of a “desire to leave the ‘ivory tower’” (5). A governing paradox in the entire conception of outsider art, in fact, is that these self-taught creators are supposed to be a lesson to the rest of us.

6. School’s Out

“School was over, / not just for that day but forever and for seasons to come” (20): in this state of being, too, things both high and low, the refined appurtenances of leisure and the relaxed impulses of undisciplined nature, may be imagined to share a common ground.

7. Ab Ovo

Outsider art is supposed to free us from the accumulated ignorance represented by our colleges, museums, galleries, and scholarly traditions. One of the virtues attributed to this art, in fact, is that it can be described as the product of unconscious compulsion. In the context of an art world characterized in terms of narrow traditions, institutionalized training, and tendentious critical discourse, this compulsion represents freedom. This is not simply a freedom from academicism but from education in its broadest sense and thus from every aspect of culture.

This is the reason writers on outsider art relish histories of colorful characters who did not call themselves artists until collectors taught them to do so. To think of oneself as an artist, even tentatively, would be to think too much. One’s actions would then be tainted by a presumed interest in an audience, perhaps even by a concern with sales, success, and a career. And so instead of being an otherworldly force, one would be a human being preoccupied with the need for social adequacy — and thus slouching toward mediocrity like the rest of us. For the same reasons, those occupied with outsider art recount stories about people who do not call the objects they make “artworks” but rather “critters,” “toys,” or simply “things.” These things then seem to constitute art *avant la lettre*, and the encounter with them creates, for the viewer or collector, a sense of being present at the dawn of culture. This time, though — to paraphrase another folk hero, John Rambo — culture will let us win. We can all triumph because this time, the birth of culture can seem to be purely individual rather than social, historical, and political.

Accordingly, although many makers of outsider art speak of their work as being religiously motivated, the fans of this work need never take this proselytizing to heart. They do certainly record the beliefs of its makers, with an earnest show of respect, but they never so much as imagine the possibility that they might be converted by these works to a particular creed or prophecy. Such professions of religiosity — which sometimes are a major aspect of the artworks themselves, as in the texts that cover the surfaces of many of the objects made

by Howard Finster — are but another quaint design element, the weirder the better. (Similarly, when actually made a part of the artwork, the fetish value of these texts is elevated if they are lettered inexpertly and spelled idiosyncratically, *à la* Finster.) The appeal of an ante- or anti-cultural art is that it poses no risks to the viewer, who cannot be mocked, taken in, intimidated, or in any way made to feel ignorant. The spiritual motivations to which many artists testify are then valued not only for their quaintness, in a modern or postmodern context, but also as evidence of guilelessness. Didacticism is a big plus when one's concern is not with knowledge but rather with authenticity, in which case the more fervently didactic the work, the better. In these circumstances professions of faith are signifiers of innocence, of an antique purity of heart, and thus of a valuable collectible.

The conviction that compulsion liberates also accounts for the conventions governing the biographical portrayal of outsider artists, which are hyperrespectful even in the cases of those (such as Adolph Wölfli) who were incarcerated for violent acts. The snarky asides one might expect to see in articles on figures such as David Salle, Cindy Sherman, or Richard Serra never appear in accounts of outsiders, who are presented as if they can do no wrong because they never have to strive to be right. Outsider art thus promises us that we can lay our intellectual burdens down and just be our funky selves — tastefully.

8. Antiques Roadshow

Readers of poetry like to collect good lines. In fact, “That’s a good line,” said with the right attitude, can help to mark one as an insider in some poetry circles. Sometimes Ashbery caters to this folkway, as when he writes, quotably, “But the unthinkable is common knowledge now” (12). More often he seems to strive deliberately to upset it. If the “bowls of muesli crooning to the side-long bats of evening” fail to check your impulses in that direction, then perhaps you will be brought up short by, say, this line: “Under frozen mounds of yak butter the graffiti have their day, and are elaborate, / some say” (17). Or if you can still find that quotable (maybe you would allude to Gertrude Stein), one could pull out others that would be all but impossible to cherish in decontextualized glory.

A deceptively simple proposition is suggested: the fact that you can collect things does not mean you can own them.

9. What Becomes a Legend Most?

A composite of America’s favorite outsider artist, along the lines of the “People’s Choice” artworks made by Vitaly Komar and Aleksander Melamid, would turn out to be a poor, illiterate black man who has spent some time in an institution (hospital, jail, or asylum) and who now obsessively makes things in which he takes pride but which he will not give away or sell unless he happens to be in the mood to do so. It is also crucial that the artist’s materials be cheap

or makeshift: such stuff as mud, roots, scrap paper, plywood, house paint, and found objects. This is important because these materials can then seem to embody the unfranchiseable quiddity of the artist's being. The fact that drawings have been made with ballpoint pens on old shirt cardboards, say, results in the same effect that is produced by idiosyncratic spellings, religious designs, and unpretentious makers. As we know from popular movies such as *Good Will Hunting* (1997), the best packaging for genius is the most unprepossessing.

Once one has learned to appreciate the beauty of unlearning, one can move on to understand why a truly ideal outsider must be like Henry Darger, who lacked only the distinction of racial otherness. Nicknamed "Crazy" when he was a boy, he spent several years of his childhood in an institution for mentally handicapped children. He was religious, attending as many as four masses a day, and he composed his immense life's work in a small apartment crammed with treasured junk. A janitor (just like Matt Damon in *Good Will Hunting!*), he worked in such secrecy that his masterpiece was totally unknown to the outside world until after his death. This is *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in what is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion* (c. 1916-73), a manuscript of approximately nineteen thousand pages accompanied by about two hundred and fifty illustrations on pieces of paper glued into sheets six to twelve feet long. The illustrations are made in large part from images of girls traced from magazines, newspapers, coloring books, comic strips, advertisements, and other sources; the beleaguered girls, who are often naked, sometimes come decorated with rams' horns, butterfly wings, or, more often, penises.

10. Free Association

Girls on the Run is delicious nonsense from beginning to end, and in this respect it is markedly different from Darger's work. Darger's writing and art are filled with violence in the forms of slavery, war, and natural disasters, and this violence is often graphic (to use the language of parental advisories). One might mention, say, whole bunches of disemboweled girls.

Ashbery's poem tones down this aspect of Darger's work. The sole reference to disembowelment is conditional: "Now it's time to surrender, or be riven asunder, garroted, eviscerated / by the actual time of the explosion" (32). Aside from a fugitive reference to "the awful bushel of shins" (29), carnage is not an issue. Bombs, explosions, war, and military matters are mentioned, but only rarely and in passing.

Yet all is not well in Ashbery's words. In this poetry of goofy clarity there are no profundities, nothing to be construed or puzzled out, just pleasure all the time. Since such a pleasure is inhuman, however, it is also a form of cruelty. It reminds us of why we may condescend to some artworks (say, some Impressionist masterpieces) by judging them *too* beautiful: so that we may refuse to recognize how they mock every miserable accommodation we make to the stupidities we dignify with the name of necessity.

Ashbery takes the same approach to Darger's mythology that he does to his violence. He remakes it into collaged images, idioms, and scenes that convey

something of Darger's oneiric intensity while eliminating, soothingly, any signs of enslaving narrative. Whereas Darger's work is generally regarded as the product of obsession, of an enslaving compulsion, Ashbery chooses to see it as a gift of an uncertain kind freely given from an unclear source and accepted for no definite end. In this way he emancipates Darger's work, granting it autonomy of a sort.

As is evident from the way Darger's work is invariably described, one of its most striking aspects is its sheer magnitude and the impression of obsessive accumulation and reiteration, beyond any conceivable practical purpose, which is conveyed thereby. Those thousands of handwritten pages, those hundreds and hundreds of stereotyped girls! Even if one reads only the poetry that Ashbery wrote prior to *Girls on the Run*, one might readily imagine why this aspect of Darger's work might appeal to him. It corresponds to the sense one gets from much of Ashbery's writing that any given line or poem might just *go on*, with its beguiling inventiveness serving as its sole and sufficient justification for existence. His writing finally does not behave in this way, of course; all sorts of cagey measures divert it from the impossible ideal of free association. Before Darger's work was even revealed to the world, Ashbery's writing was attuned to its drives toward repetition, accumulation, and expansion, just as it was attuned to the ironic enclosure of these drives within Darger's menial person and rathole of an apartment.

11. The Rise and Fall of the Outsider

Others before me have pointed out the seeming paradox that the so-called outsider is now securely institutionalized within the world of fine art. In fact, the erstwhile "modern primitives" of outsider art are now so fully accepted into the art world that one may actually hear laments about the loss of their distinguishing outsidership. The case of the Reverend Finster is exemplary in this regard. Having become so successful that he was invited on "The Tonight Show" and commissioned to do album covers for R.E.M. and Talking Heads, he has become an institution and industry in his own right, cranking out mass-produced tchotchkes for the tourists who visit his Paradise Garden in Pennville, Georgia. Aficionados of outsider art now speak of their acquaintance with Finster's earlier work much as young people in the early nineties boasted of having listened to Nirvana back in the early days, long before "grunge" came and went as a marketing ploy, when the group had not yet left Sub Pop to sign with a major label.

This vexation is related to other disputes, some of which are even interesting, about the history, nature, institutionalization, and probable future of outsider art. For instance, there is the fundamental dispute about what to call this art. Although I have adopted "outsider art" here because this is the term that came to be most widely used at the end of the twentieth century, it is by no means an uncontested one. In fact, arguments over the naming of this sort of art, and hence over the interpretation of just what sort of thing it is, have been with us for as long as anything like it has been identified under any name.

Since the 1930s the names that have been ventured include modern primitives, Sunday painters, popular painters, amateurs, hobbyists, naïve artists, folk artists, creators of *art brut*, contemporary folk artists, grassroots artists, visionary artists, nonacademic artists, vernacular artists, and isolate artists, in addition to outsider artists and the name that seems to be gaining ascendancy at present, self-taught artists.

In any case, and under any name, it remains a remarkable phenomenon that so much excitement should have been occasioned in recent decades by the image of the artist set free from education. This is a phenomenon that bears a fascinating relation to other movements at the *fin* of the last *siècle*, including the so-called “return to beauty” among cultural insiders concerned with literature and the arts. As in the case of attacks on the 1993 Whitney Biennial, this return was called for in reaction against some recent art and cultural criticism, but it has also appeared in other contexts. An early contribution to this return was Dave Hickey’s 1993 book, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. From the end of 1999 through the early weeks of 2000, an exhibition curated by Neal Benezra and Olga M. Viso at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, “Regarding Beauty,” was devoted to the reconsideration of this allegedly neglected issue. A recent book by Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), is another sign of the times.

Insofar as it represents an ebb and flow of cultural energies, this return is interesting or at least anodyne. At its best, as in the aforementioned collection of essays, *Revenge of the Aesthetic*, it shows an inspiring devotion to the stimulation of art; at its worst, it is Hilton Kramer and Rudolph Giuliani. Most interesting in the present context, though, is the way this pledge of allegiance to beauty in the 1990s parallels the boom in outsider art.

As a reaction to recent emphases in criticism (cultural studies, feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and so on), the return to beauty shows a desire to reclaim a time presumed to have existed before an emphasis on marginalization shoved aesthetic tradition out of the center of things. And even though it is valorized precisely on account of its marginalization in relation to that hitherto dominant aesthetic tradition, outsider art shows the same nostalgia. In both cases, art is to be made useless again — useless for politics and economics, ethics and ethnics, identity and sexuality, and other contemporary preoccupations — so that the aesthetic may be redeemed as an experience at least of philosophical value, if not of presumptive universality. In both cases, an outsider — self-taught artist in the one case, self-evident beauty in the other — is made to absolve the educated self of the preconditions to its judgments. This self may then rest easy in its learning. For if this learning in and of itself is demonstrably useless to qualify one either to create beauty or to appreciate it, one’s education can certainly not be accounted a privilege, much less a defining part of one’s values, now can it?

12. We Are the Case

The debates over nomenclature that are de rigeur in the field of outsider art find a parallel in the drama of names in *Girls on the Run*. These names are of

such motley types as to suggest that one of the intentions of this poem is to present us with an apparatus in which we can see displayed the aesthetic possibilities of naming, with particular reference to mid-twentieth-century American culture.

Some names, then, will be exceedingly ordinary, as if taken from a forties movie or a fifties sitcom: Judy, Henry, Mary Ann, Dianne, and Peggy, for instance. This is the sort of name that appears in the greatest number of variations. Around this core we are also offered nicknames that might come from the same era, which is the mid-century recalled by the cute little cartoon girls on which Darger was fixated: Tidbit, Dimples, Tootles. These consort well with appropriate persons such as Farmer Jones, Uncle Wilmer, Aunt Jennie, Uncle Philip, and Old Mr. Jenkins, around whom we also meet predictable figures such as Mother, Daddy, the Principal, the relaxed policeman, the truant officer, the nurses, the crowd, the perpetrators, and the detective. Stuart Hofnagel, Rags the mutt, the twins, General Forester, and even Mr. McPlaster, whose name invites friendly jibes: we will not be surprised to find the girls in their company.

Around these figures we encounter others whose monikers are less conventional, at least in terms of mainstream cultural history. Damion, Laure, and Larissa, for instance, seem to come from a slightly different register than the one whence the Peggies and Tommies arise. Larry Sue might well give us pause, as might Uncle Margaret. Shuffle and Spider might lead the likes of Dimples to some quizzical thumb-sucking, and it is hard to tell in advance what topics might arise in a conversation involving Young Topless, The Overall Boys, and Bill the barrel. Then we have the characters who seem to have wandered out of the realm of allegory (Pliable, Hopeful, Talkative), fable (Cupid), literature (Lochinvar, Jenny Wren, Swann), romance (the old seer), history (the king), and religion (the Creator). Yet all these figures, too, are dispersed among the others in the most matter-of-fact way imaginable.

In addition to those either named or identified by occupation or association, we must also note an indeterminate number who appear under the cloak of pronominality or, even more elusively, as interjected voices ("Ssh, you are loud" [25]). The overall effect is then to make *Girls on the Run* a flight from the coherence of the semantic, generic, sexual, and social orders conventionally presumed to be represented in names. In this respect it is notable that aside from a few who are marked as adults, such as Mr. McPlaster and General Forester, almost all the characters here have only first names. (Stuart Hofnagel is the exception to prove the rule.) These are names without adult seriousness, or adult pretention, as the case may be. They do whatever they do without fussing about whether it amounts to beauty or art or nature or anything else. Persons do not appear here as embodied beings in mortal comradeship, love, or community but rather as impulses, sensations, perceptions, thoughts, utterances, and actions all on the same battleground or playground (Ashbery, like Darger, sensibly declining to draw a hard-and-fast distinction between the two). "We are the case" (49), it is asserted at one point, and that is about as much assertion as we can bear in this lexicon of fine art and popular rubbish.

13. We Have All Been Here Before

At the same time that it has been exhibited, popularized, and marketed in the last century, outsider art has given rise to criticism, sometimes of a withering sort. Most of this focuses on the issue of primitivism: that is, on the tendency to regard the outsider artist as a kind of Noble Savage uncontaminated by modern civilization, especially in the form of education.

To some extent such criticism has accompanied the categorization of self-taught or outsider art virtually from its inception. Most of it, however, has appeared only within the last two decades. Adrian Piper, Kinshasha Holman Conwill, Amiri Baraka, Thomas McEvilley, Lucy Lippard, and Wendy Steiner are among the scholars who have offered important critiques of the economic, curatorial, and ideological attitudes associated with outsider art. The motives behind the career of this art are not only reprehensible, however, and the future of the phenomena that have come to be grouped under this term is by no means clear.

To begin to evaluate what this future may be or ought to be, we need to understand why we should have encountered this primitivism redivivus at precisely the time when one might have thought that the aftermath of the civil rights movement in the United States, as well as the history and ongoing politics of colonial liberation movements worldwide, would have warned educated people away from the pitfalls of this attitude. After all, it was in the last three decades of the twentieth century that primitivist attitudes were being self-consciously rooted out in the discipline of folklore, to which outsider art objects would once have been relegated, as well as in the overlapping discipline of anthropology. And certainly theory and criticism in the art world fully partook of approaches critical of primitivism when not, as has often been the case, leading the way in their development. How then can we account for the career of outsider art, which even now continues to show considerable vitality, despite the criticism of scholars such as those I have just mentioned?

14. But Before I Answer My Own Question . . .

I know it might seem that I am doing nothing here but breaking a butterfly on a wheel. Regardless of whatever preconceptions you may have about Ashbery's poetry, you may feel that my way of putting *Girls on the Run* into the context of all this "background information" concerning outsider art represents a pedantic approach, or worse, to the pleasures of reading. I would then be committing the perennial sin of the critic against which all returns to beauty are directed: the tedium of annotation, the heresy of paraphrase, the crime of pressing the aesthetic into the service of a foreign army (history, sociology, politics, "theory," what have you).

And yet I pay homage to Darger and Ashbery in doing so. All of Darger's art is precisely about the breaking of butterflies on wheels: about an absurdly excessive enslavement and torture of pie-eyed innocence. In keeping with Darger's example, *Girls on the Run* teaches us that "foreground" can hope to

emerge from “background,” or a given “inside” from any “outside,” only in a momentary, one-line-at-a-time way through which an obscurely motivated playfulness never resolves itself into exemplary forms. Taking a cue from one of Darger’s sources, one might call his and Ashbery’s work comic-book sublimity, with an emphasis in both cases on the terrible unknowing that Kant so hopefully identified as being productive of the unimaginable impression of the sublime.

15. Inside Out

Outsider art is at once the antithesis to and the culmination of Kantian tradition — and maybe, just maybe, it is something else besides.

It is antithetical to this tradition insofar as the surrealist movement, *art brut*, the disciplines of folklore and anthropology, Marxian criticism, and various exponents of outsidership have succeeded in their efforts to show that the autonomy of art has always been an ideological construction, not a transcendental and universal condition. Kant may or may not be explicitly evoked in these efforts, but even where they make reference only to “academic art” or to “cultural institutions,” they cannot help but refer to the Kantian tradition. After all, in his *Critique of Judgment* this legendary figure did take pains to point out that he found the notion of an unschooled artist unthinkable. Academic training is necessary to the artist, Kant argued, for the same reason that people in general ought to have an aesthetic education: because it is only through such institutionalized measures that rudeness can be tempered, taste cultivated, culture itself made possible.

Nevertheless, the conception of outsider art is also the last gasp of Kantian aesthetics: a final, belated, vulgar attempt to establish that there may be such a thing as purposive purposelessness.

Kant foresaw the possibility that his work might come to such an end and sought to head it off with his contrast between civilized beauty and uncanny sublimity, his mockery of untutored genius, and his disgust with “New Hollanders” and “Fuegians” (258), whose appearance suggested to him that the very existence of humanity might be useless. He also foresaw that in the future, people would be “ever more remote from nature” and so would “hardly be able to form a concept of the happy combination (in one and the same people) of the law-governed constraint coming from highest culture [*Kultur*] with the force and rightness of a free nature that feels its own value” (232). What he could not anticipate — even though contemporaries such as Denis Diderot were suggesting this lesson — was that the image of nature to which he was dedicated might grow so remote that it would have to be imagined entirely outside of the realm of his beloved *humaniora*, in the land of the exotic. Therefore, he could not foresee that his truest disciples, at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, would be those who disclaimed his notion of academic culture. Because it also demands that the figure of the cultural outsider must serve as the background to a universalized *sensus communis*, the phenomenon of outsider art at the end of the twentieth century represents a logical unfolding of Kant’s aesthetics.

But why should this Kantian logic, so often criticized in recent decades, find its artworld culmination in this same era and in this form? This primitivism redivivus of outsider art results from the desire to maintain a traditional conception of the humanities at a time when such a conception has been found bankrupt both within and without the fields of academe. We live in a time in which, as Vincent Pecora has put it, we are witnessing “the slow decline in the power of the university to create, legitimate, and preserve cultural capital in aesthetic forms and to convey it to its students in exchange for the price of admission” (205). Therefore, those who demand that their purposelessness must be purposive, like Kant’s, must try to revive the traditional ideals of the humanities in the only place where they can escape contemporary social history: within the untutored self. Accordingly, they must proclaim the uselessness of education. Like critics of academia such as John Ellis, Gertrude Himmel-farb, and the Blooms, Allan and Harold, they cannot accept that there may be many good reasons — cultural, historical, political, intellectual, and, yes, aesthetic — why educated persons have lost their imaginary power (and it always *was* imaginary) over taste.

The devotees of the self-taught proclaim the uselessness of education because it is now proving useless to them. It will no longer cater to their irrational sense of cultural entitlement. In the context of an American university system under widespread attack for its support of affirmative action and its programs in ethnic studies, the fact that African Americans and other minorities are so highly valorized in outsider art is then easy to explain: they have not sought admission into cultural institutions, and so they are exceedingly attractive. The fact that many of the artists in question are absolutely brilliant is irrelevant to this question of how they have been framed within the world of art. In this case as in so many others — only think of Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* — exoticism is the last refuge of the insider.

16. Exotic Kant

Another ekphrastic moment from *Girls on the Run*: “Thus, our doom, ringing with half-realized fantasies, is a promise of a new beginning on another continent” (10).

17. The Beastliness of it All

If there is an exoticism reducible to fantasies, symptoms, and ideologies generated by ethnocentrism, racism, colonialism, imperialism, and other tiresome forces, aesthetically speaking, there is also an irreducible exoticism. Neither outside (in categorically alien lands or persons) nor inside (in self-affirming images of the alien), this irreducible exoticism is what makes beauty such a beast.

In the case of Kant’s aesthetics, this irreducible exoticism appears in the figure of the genius. As beauty is unpredictable — “we cannot determine a pri-

ori what object will or will not conform to taste; we must try it out" (31) — so, too, is the genius who creates it. The genius "must be considered the very opposite of a *spirit of imitation*" and hence of the spirit of conventional education, "since learning is nothing but imitation" (176). Kant did try to domesticate the irreducible exoticism of this figure by making the genius a cultural hero, in contrast to charlatans and primitives, and by raising the figure of the scientist above him. Yet in the profoundly unaccountable nature of this figure, as in the refusal of beauty to be dictated to, Kant had to leave open the possibility that cultural heroes of another sort might one day spring forth from nature, including artists who are Fuegians or New Hollanders or even self-taught persons. For though we grant, for the sake of argument, Kant's insistence that an element of academic correctness is requisite in art, his premises still allow us to conceive that outsider artists might intuit that correctness for themselves, just as they are credited with doing by critics who compare the principles evident in their works to those followed by academically trained artists.

Despite himself, Kant showed that one cannot explain the nature of beauty, because it is beauty that discovers us. In fact, since its autonomy cannot be logically restrained by particular conceptions of nature and civilization, it actually discovers us through what is not us. In the moment in which we apprehend it, then, we are transformed by it. We may be remade, for instance, by our perception of the primitive in the humanist, the charlatan in the philosopher, or the bewildered populace in the systematic pedagogue, to name but three of the bits of nonsense Kant's art allows us to appreciate.

"[W]e shall put a brave face / on it for a time, then school will be over" (53), Talkative assures us in *Girls on the Run*, beautifully, as far as I can see.

Works Cited

- Ashbery, John. *Girls on the Run*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.
- Clark, Michael P., ed. *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.
- Danto, Arthur C. "The Artworld and its Outsiders." *Self-Taught Artists of the Twentieth Century: An American Anthology*. Ed. Elsa Longhauser and Harold Szeeman. New York: Museum of American Folk Art, 1998. 18-27.
- Hickey, Dave. *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. Los Angeles: Art Issues P, 1993.
- Janis, Sidney. *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the Twentieth Century*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat P, 1965.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. 1790. Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987.
- Pecora, Vincent P. "Culture Wars and the Profession of Literature." *After Political Correctness: The Humanities and Society in the 1990s*. Ed. Christopher Newfield and Ronald Strickland. Boulder: Westview P, 1995. 199-211.
- Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.
- Tucker, Marcia. "Preface." *Transmitters: The Isolate Artist in America*. Ed. Tucker et al. Philadelphia: Philadelphia College of Art, 1981. 4-5.