

BILDNEREI DER GEISTESKRANKEN

EIN BEITRAG ZUR PSYCHOLOGIE UND
PSYCHOPATHOLOGIE DER GESTALTUNG

VON

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DR. PHIL. ET MED. NERVENARZT IN HEIDELBERG

MIT 187 ZUM TEIL FARBIGEN ABBILDUNGEN IM TEXT
UND AUF 20 TAFELN VORWIEGEND AUS DER BILDER-
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VERLAG VON JULIUS SPRINGER · BERLIN · 1922

Hans Prinzhorn, *Bildneri der Geisteskranken*,
published by Verlag Julius Springer, Berlin 1922.

Outsider Art today

– on the road to inclusion on the art market

What is now known as Outsider Art – remarkably inventive artistic works by people without formal artistic training – has only been held in high aesthetic esteem for about one hundred years. French psychiatrist Paul Meunier (1873–1957) was a pioneer in this field. In his paperback “L’art chez les fous” (published in 1907 under the pseudonym Marcel Réja), he was the first person to accord artistic value to certain drawings and texts by inmates of psychiatric institutions. A much more comprehensive book in a similar vein – “Bildnerei der Geisteskranken” (Artistry of the mentally ill) (1922) by German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933) – enjoyed a considerably higher circulation. This book was created on the basis of a collection of more than 5000 drawings, paintings, sculptures and textile art that he compiled for the Psychiatric University Hospital Heidelberg after the First World War (laying the foundation for today’s Prinzhorn Museum Collection in Heidelberg). Prinzhorn reproduced 170 examples of such art in his book, some in colour, enabling the “art of the insane” to reach a wider audience for the first time.

What had previously been regarded as merely a curio or a diagnostic tool now gained increasing attention as special artistic expression, particularly amongst artists, some of whom were even guided by it. Expressionists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde saw it as the expressions of an authenticity that they themselves were unable to achieve. The Surrealists hailed Prinzhorn’s book as their “Bible” and seized on certain visual processes so as to, as the author put it, send “the viewer into a labyrinth without an exit”. Other painters and illustrators shared their enthusiasm: Paul Klee, Richard Lindner, Oskar Schlemmer, and later Georg Baselitz, Arnulf Rainer and many others: the history of 20th century art would undoubtedly have run a different course had it not been for the “Bildnerei der Geisteskranken”. French artist Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985) went a step further in 1945 by coining the term *art brut* (raw or rough art). By creating this term, Dubuffet attempted to liberate exceptional art by the institutionalised from its psychiatric context, putting in on a par with works by other loners. For him there was “no such thing as art by the mentally ill [...] just as there is no such thing as art by dyspeptics or knee patients”. Once again, artists such as the CoBrA group followed this call for orientation towards art beyond “cultural art” (it is surely no coincidence that both of these awakenings occurred after a devastating world war). And it was primarily artists who collected this art beyond art, notably Dubuffet himself, whose extensive *Collection de l’art brut* is now permanently housed in a museum in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Another chapter in the history of Outsider Art was opened in the early 1970s. In 1972, when Roger Cardinal introduced the term “Outsider Art” in his book of the same

name (originally conceived as a translation of *art brut*), exhibition organiser Harald Szeemann integrated works by Swiss psychiatric inmate Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930) into *documenta 5* in Kassel, which he was commissioned to curate. This was the first time that the work of a “madman” was put on a par with contemporary art in a prominent place. Professional dealing in this type of art commenced at around the same time. In the USA, commercial galleries started to specialise in Outsider Art, soon to be followed by European galleries. For this reason, “Outsider Art” is to be understood as a label for the art world and art market. The inventive works under this label were no longer considered to be counter-art, but a special form of art. The aim of the term, now some forty years old, is to classify and differentiate it, as is also the case with other labels in the art world. In light of past experience, artistic works find it difficult to be considered for exhibitions or on the market in the absence of such a classification. In this respect, we will have to live with a paradox for the time being, seeing that “Outsider Art” actually sounds quite discriminatory, seemingly contradicting the intention of integration.

One way or the other, Outsider Art has indeed been increasingly included in the exhibition world in the past twenty years, and not only in the USA and Western/Central European countries. Finland, Italy, Spain and Japan have since discovered “their” Outsider Artists – and now it is Norway’s turn. Specialist museums have opened at various places, a number of art museums in Europe and the USA have accepted donations of Outsider Art collections, setting up special sections accordingly. Major modern and contemporary art venues have exhibited exemplary overviews or retrospectives of individual Outsider Artists, placing works of Outsider Art alongside pieces by exhibition artists. The movement reached a temporary peak at last year’s 55th Venice Biennale, where the largest combination of this kind so far could be viewed under the title “Palazzo Enciclopedico” (The Encyclopedic Palace). The heated debate triggered by this concept of curator Massimiliano Gioni, especially among art critics, shows that we are still a long way from truly including Outsider Art in the world of art. But it won’t be long before the first museums for 20th and 21st century art specifically purchase works by such artists so as to arrange them in their permanent collections – as art alongside other art. The movement is irreversible. I congratulate Norway in joining it with this first exhibition.

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