

## Fake Identity, Real Work: Authenticity, Autofiction, and Outsider Art

In the 1970s, the French novelist Serge Doubrovsky coined the term “autofiction” to signal the admixture of fact and fiction that characterized his literary work. Autofiction, as articulated by Doubrovsky, is rather more *and* less than complete fiction. It is situated simultaneously in invention and autobiography, though either may be made up. Autofictional practice might involve the retention of one’s real name and persona while maintaining insertion into imaginary life, or the creation of a fictional clone who narrates the author’s real existence.<sup>1</sup> As elaborated subsequently by Vincent Colonna, autofiction transcends the idea of genre and instead should be understood as “an *agencement*, as an assemblage of strategies” with the capacity, even imperative, to function as a critical procedure (Bloois 2007). The idea of autofiction as articulated variously by Doubrovsky, Gérard Genette, and others has recently been expanded in order to be brought to bear on the conceptual practices of artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Adrian Piper, Bruce Nauman, and Sophie Calle in a form of “visual autofiction” (Bloois 2007).

It also has tremendous resonance for and applicability to the field of Outsider Art in terms of its capacity to function as a mode of critique. In part, this is due to a peculiar feature that has become endemic to Outsider Art: the maker’s identity and social marginality. There exist important intersections between autofictionalization and Outsider Art. This essay argues that the centrality of biography to Outsider Art is not only an integral component of its categorization and valuation, but something which, through autofictional praxis, can be deliberately co-opted as savvy marketing device, or made to function as a potent mechanism for a critique of the category itself and the foundations on which this particular classification are predicated.

When Roger Cardinal coined the term “Outsider Art” in 1972, he set in motion a discursive conundrum that has yet to be fully resolved. What is “Outsider Art” outside of? Is there art that is outside Outsider Art but is not “insider”—or canonical—art? Does Outsider Art have mobility; that is to say, can it slip across the dividing line between outside and inside? What and who determines its location as outside? The term gestures towards, in other words, but cannot achieve certainty, despite definitional attempts at accuracy. As Colin Rhodes and others have noted, the label Outsider Art has been used to describe a wide array of artistic activities, which share only the common characteristic of being situated outside, or in opposition to, mainstream

aesthetic concerns (Rhodes 2000). “Insider” art is also problematic, requiring carefully attentive negotiation. The notion of Outsider Art is especially vexing, particularly in recent years, as it has been used to denote an increasingly wide array of artistic activities, and as its market value has skyrocketed as its profile has risen.

The disconcerting inexactitude of the label has led to different categorizations offered up as attempts at precision. For instance, the terms grassroots art, naïve art, intuitive art, visionary art, and marginal art have been proposed as both alternatives to the vague generality yet seeming specificity of Outsider Art, as well as intimating some distinguishable difference within the works thus tagged. Michel Thévoz, Curator of the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne, defines Art Brut and Outsider Art as synonymous, with both consisting “of works produced by people who for various reasons have not been culturally indoctrinated or socially conditioned” (qtd in *Raw Vision*).

Cardinal meant the term Outsider Art as the English language equivalent of Jean Dubuffet’s Art Brut,<sup>2</sup> defined by Dubuffet as consisting of objects and images that were in their “raw” state, uncooked by cultural and artistic influences. Even Dubuffet’s Art Brut, however, has run headlong into a lexicological game of inclusions and exclusions. The problem of those producers who were not entirely “uncooked” by culture (but close to it) led Dubuffet to develop the notion of *Neuve Invention*. This “annex” to Art Brut could include those who were peripheral to artworld institutions such as commercial galleries and dealers but not completely disconnected from such structures, even as though the artists might not be full participants in society. Dubuffet’s *Neuve Invention* category, according to the journal *Raw Vision*’s taxonomical breakdown, can accommodate someone like Albert Loudon, who has been rejected “by the Outsider Art orthodoxy because of [his] artistic ambition” (Rhodes 2000, 15).

Given the elasticity of the label, it seems rather ironic to use a phrase such as Outsider Art orthodoxy. After all, there is a considerable, decidedly heterodox range of the visual that might fit under this umbrella term: from S.P. Dinsmoor’s concrete socio-political Garden of Eden (and eventual mausoleum) in Lucas, Kansas, to Herman Divers’ pull-tab creations, to Simon Rodia’s found-object architectural assemblages, to Lee Godie’s altered photo-booth self-portraits, to Henry Darger’s scripto-visual magnus opus, the 12-volume, 19,000-page *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*.<sup>3</sup> What, one might ask, could possibly tie these disparate works together? After all, these are not just stylistic differences, but differences also of medium, of intent, of content, and of public versus private.

If there is little consistency in these regards, and little accord in the way of definitional boundaries, there is nevertheless something of an orthodoxy of attributes and especially of biographical ascription. The making of environments, particularly those that demonstrate a certain degree of repetitiveness, is a prevalent feature of art labeled Outsider, as is the utilization of mundane and often discarded materials. The transformation of society's detritus into a compelling visual statement serves as a poignant metaphor for the marginalized status of the maker. Most important is the fact of the producer's distance from or irrelevance to the institutions of culture—that is, Outsider Artists must offer through some detail of their biography the guarantee that they are indeed outsiders. Without this crucial sign in place, the authenticity of their creations cannot be determined. Outsider Art is produced by a careful structure of narrativization, where one buys the authenticity of the Outsider Art object through the acceptance of the biography that locates the maker in a social space discursively limned as Outsider.

It is this peculiarity of Outsider Art that Gary Alan Fine has identified as containing the greatest potential for abuse, since it is “an artistic domain in which the authentic is a central defining feature, conferring value on objects and creations” (2003, 153). That authenticity is bestowed almost entirely by their makers’ “location in social space” (2003, 155). Fine’s caution is that this very real aspect of Outsider Art’s situation, along with its tremendous popularity, exposes Outsider Art to appropriation by those wishing to capitalize on its marketability. He is not alone here; Craig Garrett has written of the emergence of the “professional naïve” (130-33) and Tom Patterson warns of what he calls “a series of dust storms” in the parallel visual universe of Outsider Art, which includes “increasing numbers of academically trained artists trying to pass themselves off as outsiders” (36). This is not to say that the objects are wholly unimportant, but that the biographies can coat the art with an additional and necessary insulating rhetorical layer of authenticity, and direct, unmediated, self-expression.

Consider the case of Clyde Angel, who according to the available biographical scraps, is the paragon of the Outsider Artist. Homeless, and thus socially marginal, he is said to wander the back roads and highways of rural Iowa, near Clinton township. On occasion he has been institutionalized for bouts with mental illness. Fearful of society and of being committed to a mental institution, Angel fiercely protects his privacy, further ensuring his isolation. He makes work out of scrap metal that he picks up in his travels, cobbling them together into human or animal forms.

More socially enmeshed, perhaps, but no less an Outsider Artist for that, is Arthur Middleton, who began in 1983 to paint portraits of the presidents of the United States. Working in acrylic on Masonite and referring loosely to pictures found in the *Colliers Encyclopedia*, Middleton relied on his own vision and a book entitled *Portrait Painting Made Easy* to produce thirty-nine paintings depicting presidents from George Washington to Ronald Reagan. Or there is Emma Whorley, a librarian for 47 years and with no prior interest in art. On April 1, 1982, the occasion of her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, Whorley began painting a prolific series of biomorphic forms on the pages of dismembered books. Like many other Outsider Artists, Charlotte Black's foray into art-making was born of emotional trauma. Having been stood up at the altar, Black began painting images, copied from her local newspaper's wedding announcements, of brides on black velvet. Fervently held religious beliefs and a sense of obligation to express those beliefs in the transcribing of Biblical passages is another frequent occurrence in Outsider Art. Thus, Max Pritchard's religious tracts, hand-printed on cereal and cracker boxes, fall well within the range of Outsider Art productions. E.B. Hazzard of Oleander, Alabama, manifesting what might perhaps be thought of as a kind of inter-galactic variation of Stockholm Syndrome, began making "Communication Devices" out of random found objects including hub caps, a folding metal cot, duct tape, and over 300 flattened tin cans in a desire to be reunited with the aliens he claimed had abducted him, kept him for 34 months, and forced him to procreate with an alien being. Lucas Farley's inspiration for making art is located closer to home—the death of his mother prompted him to paint simplified faces on vinyl records that he hung on the fence outside of the home he shared with her.

The work of Middleton, Whorley, Black, Pritchard, Hazzard, and Farley is part of the George and Helen Spelvin Collection, comprised of over 900 objects, now housed at the University of Tennessee. The Spelvins began collecting this kind of work in 1979 after a chance encounter with Farley; they ended up purchasing all fifty of the painted records they saw hanging on the fence outside of his home, which sparked a passion for finding the visually rusticophilic—rustic, authentic, and natural, as defined by Eugene Metcalf in his 1994 *The Outsider Artist* (Oppenheimer 2002; Lyons). Citing the community-embeddedness of the majority of the artists in their collection, Helen Spelvin disliked the term Outsider Art, but the works she and her husband gathered shares much with the "uncooked by culture" toward which Cardinal's term gestured.

One might also look at the case of Joseph Wagenbach, whose biographical details are every bit as poignant as those of Farley or Angel or any of the others. The circumstances under which his work was discovered are also quite moving and fit neatly with the paradigm of Outsider Art.

In June 2006, the story goes, Wagenbach suffered an acute illness at his home on Robinson Street in Toronto, Canada. A longtime resident of the neighborhood, Wagenbach was apparently almost fanatically reclusive, rarely venturing out and preserving his privacy by taping newspapers over his windows. Despite his extreme estrangement from his neighbors, the different character of this latest absence was noted, and thus the authorities were summoned, his home breached, and he was removed to a care facility. The unassuming exterior of the house did nothing to prepare the authorities for what they found inside: hundreds of handmade objects, many rendered of wax and plaster, and a proliferation of ephemeral detritus accumulated as if over years: in other words, a complete reshaping of the domestic by compulsive, hermetically private creation and collection. Because of the potential cultural significance of the Outsider Art environment within Wagenbach's home, a committee of experts, including an archivist, was dispatched by the city to conduct an assessment (Kingwell 2007; Agrell 2006; Carson 2007).

It is a story that has parallels elsewhere, resonating, for instance, with the circumstances of Henry Darger, who moved through life as if a shadow, living in the same rented room at 851 Webster Street on the north side of Chicago for 43 years. Upon his death in 1973, his landlord, the photographer Nathan Lerner, discovered a lifetime of collecting—hundreds of Pepto-Bismol bottles, shoes, eyeglasses, nearly a thousand balls of string, and stacks of old newspapers, magazines, and comic books, which may have provided Darger with some of the pictorial inspiration for the Vivian Girls and other characters that people the decades long undertaking *The Realms of the Unreal*. There is, certainly, a strong similarity in the contours of the life stories of Darger and Wagenbach. Except that Darger actually existed; Wagenbach did not. Or, to put it more precisely, Wagenbach existed only as a fabrication of and psychic extension of the German-born, Toronto-based artist Iris Häussler. The house, the sculptures, the biography, the discovery, the archiving—all were part of an elaborate, immersive, site-specific installation in which Häussler also performed as chief archivist.

Similarly, the other artists mentioned above—Middleton, Whorley, Black, Pritchard, Hazzard, and Farley—also do not exist, except as components of an elaborate work of conceptual art. These characters and the objects assigned to them, along with the collectors themselves, George and Helen Spelvin, are entirely the invention of Beauvais Lyons, self-identified director of the Hokes Archives and professor of printmaking at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. As there is in the homonymic Hokes/hoax, there is a clue hidden in the name of the collectors—George Spelvin is the fictitious name used in the credits of Broadway productions to conceal the fact that an actor

is playing dual roles.<sup>4</sup> But what Lyons and Häussler are doing is more complicated than merely doubling their roles—curator and creator simultaneously. Nor are they simply making “faux” art under artistic aliases. The conceptual depth and complexity of their respective projects propose that both are taking recourse to a strategy of autofictionalization. In part, such a strategy might be deployed in order to combat what Berthold Brecht called *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the “alienation effect” that keeps an audience at an emotional distance from an illusory world. Through works made by avatars, Häussler and Lyons can critique the orthodoxy of Outsider Art from the inside and reveal it to be *itself* an elaborate fabrication. Their projects are not simply exercises in faux histories; the layered fictions they have created function in a critical capacity.

There is critical but covert aporia at the heart of Outsider Art that the autofictional practices of Lyons and Häussler both reveal and take as a point of departure. This aporia not only permits but *makes* possible the richly layered signifying suffusion of their respective projects. Both Lyons and Häussler trade on the shibboleth of an evident authenticity which is revealed to always be rendered visible through the discursive. It is a notion of authenticity that is rehearsed and must collapse back into biography—what Gary Alan Fine calls “identity art” (2003; 2004) or art whose truthfulness, whose valuation, is located not in the plastic realities of the objects themselves, but in the capacity of the makers’ location in social space to wash over those objects and images and coat them in a taxonomically valued rhetoric of authenticity.

Put another way, important, valuable objects of Outsider Art are considered such because they are authentic, untainted, spontaneous, culturally “uncooked” utterances, but that authenticity, untaintedness, spontaneity, and “uncooked” quality is rendered visible primarily through their producers’ location in social space—outside of the majority of cultural apparatuses—which is in turn revealed by the narrativizing of their biographical details. The reliance on this chain to vouchsafe for Outsider Art pries open a conceptual space in which one could use the idea of autofictionalization and the resultant metaleptic operation to critique the paradigm, the biographical imperative, and social space location of Outsider Art. This is what both Häussler and Lyons do, albeit differently, with such repletion and efficacy. Both rely on proliferating signs to convince the participant-*cum*-viewer that the works she is beholding are not only “real,” but also the real site of authenticity. Photodocumentation, biographical tidbits, memories collected from “witnesses,” carefully archived evidence of the makers’ “uncooked” state, all serve in Häussler and Lyons’ case to remind the viewer of how little the *object* is regarded in the manufacturing of Outsider Art.

Another example, the case of Mri Pilar, a self-labeled “outsider,” may be useful in elucidating the way in which the stress on biography within Outsider Art facilitates an easy cooperation, indeed even collusion, with autofictional practices. Mri Pilar moved to the tiny town of Lucas, Kansas in 2002, a year after journeying there to see S.P. Dinsmoor’s Garden of Eden.<sup>5</sup> Dinsmoor’s monumental concrete social commentary, along with the proximity of other Kansas Outsider Artists, many of whom were included in Gregg Blasdel’s 1968 pictorial commentary on Outsider Art for *Art in America* (Blasdel 1968), prompted the opening of the Grassroots Art Center in 1995, where examples of Outsider Art are preserved and exhibited.

Part of the purview of the Grassroots Art Center is the Deeble House, where Pilar and her companion went after viewing the Garden of Eden in December 2001. Beginning in 1950 and continuing until her death in 1999, Florence Deeble adorned the backyard of her Lucas home with stone and concrete “postcard” scenes, such as Mount Rushmore, Capital Reef National Park, and Estes Park. It was at the Deeble House that Pilar had her epiphany: “there was just something about it,” she claims, “I just knew it was my future.”<sup>6</sup> In January 2002, Pilar relocated to Lucas and contacted the Grassroots Arts Center with the idea of working in the Deeble House. She has since radically transformed its interior, covering the walls, windows, and ceiling with silver insulation and Mylar, which provide the backdrop for her assemblages, which she calls “Unclocks” and “Rebarbs.” The “Rebarbs” are made out of Barbie dolls, and recently (April-May 2007) netted Pilar a gallery show in New York.

Pilar’s status as an Outsider Artist is in part secured by her affiliation with the town of Lucas, long heralded for the rich constellation of self-taught artists working in the area, as is her tendency to transform her surroundings into an immersive installation using cast-off materials. The Deeble House environment Pilar constructed, which she calls the Garden of Isis, is made of refuse and recycled materials—old Barbie dolls, car parts, computer motherboards, Slinkys and other discarded toys, buttons, nails, barrettes, and board games. Pilar is also apparently self-taught, another requisite of the Outsider Artist. She is also, however, self-labeled. She eschews the term “Outsider Artist,” preferring to use the identifier “Grassroots Artist,” citing among her reasons that she “live[s] in Kansas, and that is the term used.” She further describes herself as both “a loner” and “an outsider.” In her self-narrativizing, Pilar elides her previous existence as a struggling abstract painter in Lawrence, Kansas, where she participated in various manifestations of the artworld structure, such as open studios, exhibitions at local venues such as the Lawrence Arts Center and commercial galleries, and interaction with fellow artists. She also neglects to mention

that she has been the recipient of an artist-in-residence grant from the National Endowment for the Arts through the Grassroots Arts Center, as well as a grant from the Kansas Arts Commission, and maintains a sophisticated web presence.

It seems at least possible that Pilar is assuming the mantle of Outsiderness as a performative identity. While specific biographical details are difficult to pin down, Mari Pilar seems to be Pilar's real name. Pilar's "Outsider" status, generated through strategies of narrativization, including social and, in this case, a richly associative geographical, placement, is the guarantor of the authenticity of her artistic endeavors, and simultaneously grants the inconsequence of the customary stylistic "checkpoints" of "insider" art. Mri Pilar is the autofictional identity, and the dropping of the "a" signals this subtle but unmistakable shift. Mri Pilar is Mari Pilar's most elaborate artwork—a performative collaborator and artistic doppelgänger, an autofiction whose authenticity is secured by her social and discursive position in the "Outsiderville" of Lucas.

So what of Clyde Angel in all of this? Surely he, this mentally ill, homeless *isolé*, is a real Outsider Artist? Well, maybe not. In 2000, Jeff Huebner, a writer for the *Chicago Reader*, recounted his attempts to track down Angel, who has been represented by the Judy Saslow Gallery in Chicago (2000; Fine 2004, 65-68). Saslow readily admits that she has never met Angel personally, receiving his work through a mediator named Vernon Willits. Huebner combed birth records in Beaver Island, Iowa (listed as Angel's birthplace), examined school records, and interviewed former residents of Beaver Island and the nearby town of Clinton. Huebner also drove area roads, hoping to locate some trace of Angel, but to no avail. "How curious," Huebner writes; "a mentally ill, artistically inclined, junk-toting vagabond would have certainly attracted notice" in a town of 30,000 (2000). Indeed; but Huebner found no evidence of Angel's existence. What he found instead was the tantalizing nominal link between Clyde Angel and Vernon Clyde Willits, Jr., the sculptor who acts as Angel's agent. While Huebner never explicitly says so, his narrative strongly suggests that Angel and his rough-hewn sculptures are both the creation of Willits.

If Angel is an invention of Willits, this would represent another instantiation of autofictionalization, similar to the case of Pilar, and thus motivated by different imperatives than either Häussler and Lyons. Lyons does not hide the fact that he is the ultimate author behind the entirety of the Hokes Archives and the Spelvin Collection, and therefore the individual components of that collection, including the invented artists and extending to fictive collectors themselves. Likewise, Häussler always intended to reveal that Wagenbach was a made-up

person(a) and that the artist is in fact not an “outsider” but an “insider” exploring the power of vernacular environments, the psychology of obsessive making, and the hermetic world of a maker whose artistic endeavors are entirely private, as well as the significance of biography as an ascriptive framing device. Nevertheless, the examples of Angel and Pilar, serve to point to how important the idea of artistic autofiction is to Outsider Art. As the star, and therefore the market, of Outsider Art continues to rise, it seems destined to become subject to an increasing number of imposters wishing to cash in, quite literally, on its popularity. It also, however, seems destined to become an important site of a metaleptic form of critique for artists wishing to stage critical inquiries into the nature of aesthetic appreciation, absorptive models of apprehension, authorial engagement, and artistic authenticity through the strategy of autofictionalization.

## NOTES

- \* This is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the 2008 Popular Culture/American Culture Association Annual Conference. It includes some material presented as a contribution to the “Contemporary Folk, Self-Taught, and Outsider Art” session at the 2007 Southeastern College Art Conference. Thanks are due Derham Groves, Loretta Lorance, Carol Crown, and Pamela Sachant for organizing those sessions and for their comments, and to Jennifer Weaver for her assistance. The argument has benefitted from the helpful suggestions of Joy Sperling, Lee Kogan, William Moore, and Cheryl Rivers. Support from a Research and Creativity Grant from Emporia State University, which funded a research trip and facilitated the writing of this essay, is gratefully acknowledged. Tremendous thanks to Beauvais Lyons, who graciously and generously made himself, his work, ideas, and archival material available to me.
- 1 See further Alex Hughes, who writes that autofiction is “a narrative mode that flags itself up as fictional whilst featuring a first-person narrator/protagonist possessed of a name and stock life-experiences identical to those of the author” (1999, 111-112). See also Hughes 2002.
  - 2 There has been some suggestion that Cardinal did not wish an English language equivalent, preferring to use the original French *Art Brut*; mentioned in conversation with the author, February 2008, by Beauvais Lyons based on a comment made to Lyons by Cardinal himself.
  - 3 Many of the watercolors were intended to serve as illustrations to *The Realms of the Unreal*, although some are understood to be independent works.
  - 4 “Who is George Spelvin?” *New York Times* 1 Oct. 1916. <<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=990CE3DE123DEF3ABC4953DFB667838D609EDE>>.
  - 5 The 2000 census lists the population as 436; 416 is the estimated population as of July 2006, according to <http://www.city-data.com/city/Lucas-Kansas.html>. The population as of July 2007, according to the same site, is 415.
  - 6 Telephone interview with Mri Pilar, October 2007. Additional information regarding and quotes from Mri Pilar come from that interview or from email correspondence between Pilar and the author in October 2006.

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