Material Culture Review
Revue de la culture matérielle

The Aura of Eccentricity: Reflections on Outsider Art Rhetoric and its Impact on a Critical Discourse

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Cite this article

Article abstract

In the field of Art History, affecting art with the artist's aura is a central mechanism of canon creation that mythologizes artists into objects of desire. This tendency permeates outsider art whose appeal is rooted in biographical exceptionalism and eccentricity rather than aesthetic aptitude (see Morgan 2018). Reviewing the work of Henry Darger, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, and A.G. Rizzoli—artists whose works are accumulative, some suggest compulsive, in reiteration and magnitude—this essay explores the pitfalls of projecting an aesthetic affect onto the artist and in turn building their value upon a fabricated aura of eccentricity. The aura of eccentricity resides at the nexus between material and idea. It is both real and mythologized, materially communicated through excess, opulence, and exaggeration of shapes, scale, colour, and medium yet ideologically created in the realm of differentiating adjectives and semantic flourishes. Engaging with Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, this essay argues that material culture demands self-awareness of our own interpretive prejudices, in this case fashioning the artist outsider with eccentric narratives retroactively projected upon them through the interpretation of their work.

CORTNEY ANDERSON KRAMER

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Résumé

Dans le domaine de l'histoire de l'art, le fait de répercuter l'aura de l'artiste sur l'art constitue un mécanisme central de création d'un canon qui mythifie les artistes et en fait des objets de désir. Cette tendance imprègne l'art marginal, dont l'attrait s'enracine dans l'exception biographique et l'excentricité plutôt que dans une aptitude esthétique (voir Morgan 2018). Passant en revue les œuvres d'Henry Darger, Eugene von Bruenchenhein et A.G. Rizzoli – des artistes dont les travaux ont un caractère cumulatif, certains diraient compulsif, du fait de leur réitération et de leur ampleur –cet article explore le danger de projeter un affect esthétique sur l'artiste et en retour de construire la valeur des artistes sur une aura d'excentricité artificielle. L'aura d'excentricité réside au croisement du matériel et de l'idée. Elle est à la fois réelle et mythifiée, elle se communique matériellement par l'excès, l'opulence et l'exagération des formes, de l'échelle, de la couleur et du médium, tout en étant créée, sur un plan idéologique, dans un royaume où fleurissent les adjectifs distinctifs et la sémantique. Dans un dialogue avec Walter Benjamin et Theodor Adorno, cet article avance que la culture matérielle exige que nous soyons avertis de nos propres préjugés interprétatifs, qui consistent dans ce cas, lorsque l'on interprète les œuvres de l'artiste marginal, à projeter rétrospectivement sur lui un narratif d'excentricité.

Abstract

In the field of Art History, affecting art with the artist's aura is a central mechanism of canon creation that mythologizes artists into objects of desire. This tendency permeates outsider art whose appeal is rooted in biographical exceptionalism and eccentricity rather than aesthetic aptitude (see Morgan 2018). Reviewing the work of Henry Darger, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, and A.G. Rizzoli—artists whose works are accumulative, some suggest compulsive, in reiteration and magnitude—this essay explores the pitfalls of projecting an aesthetic affect onto the artist and in turn building their value upon a fabricated aura of eccentricity. The aura of eccentricity resides at the nexus between material and idea. It is both real and mythologized, materially communicated through excess, opulence, and exaggeration of shapes, scale, colour, and medium yet ideologically created in the realm of differentiating adjectives and semantic flourishes. Engaging with Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, this essay argues that material culture demands self-awareness of our own interpretive prejudices, in this case fashioning the artist outsider with eccentric narratives retroactively projected upon them through the interpretation of their work.

Introduction

In the field of Art History, affecting art with the artist's aura is a central mechanism of canon creation that mythologizes artists into objects of desire. This tendency is no stranger to outsider art whose success is rooted in biographical exceptionalism and eccentricity rather than or in addition to aesthetic aptitude. Referencing three outsider artists whose work collectors discovered postmortem—Henry Darger, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, and A.G. Rizzoli—this essay will explore the artist's affect as a non-aesthetic space that shapes the aesthetic experience. Moreover, by choosing deceased artists, I will focus on the power of discourse to produce, circulate, and reinforce the artist's affect (real or mythologized) as part of their oeuvre.

It is imperative that we recognize the impact of how we talk about "outsiders" because while the field has become more inclusive in terms of who museums and discourse represents, we still actively dichotomize art by race and class and by how we talk about the artist. By using colorful rhetoric to describe the artist's eccentricity, we re-establish their place outside of critical discourse, making it nearly impossible to disentangle the historiographical roots of insiders and outsiders.

After a brief theoretical summary, the essay is organized into three sections, each centered on one artist whose myth or aura entered art world terrain after their death. Perhaps death is an uncommon qualifier, but there is something critically and affectively evocative about considering the artist as a constructed myth or phantom that shades the work when the artists themselves were phantoms. As phantoms, their works were inherited by individuals with their own sets of motives, often fiscal or professional, which required them to appeal to a consumer, most apparently ranging from avid collectors to casual museumgoers. By crafting narratives of authenticity, genius, and most importantly eccentricity, writers reduce the work—which intuitively seems as though it should be at the center of conversation and critique—to an index of the artist. Outsiders' art becomes no more than numinous objects (see Maines and Glynn 1993).

Affecting the Artist

The writings by and following Walter Benjamin (2010) concerning the "aura" of art—and the frameworks by which aura relates to labour, evidentiary presence or historicity, and aesthetic—help elucidate the static or "white noise" of romantic biography that colours outsider art and the viewer's experience of it. Although the definitions of aura are varied and at times conflicting, generally aura is art's ability to "look back." For the purposes of this argument, aura is the sensation of presence within an object, often produced through associations with personalities, deities, historical figures, etc. In the case of outsider art, its discourse participates in constructing the artist's aura as a central part of the viewing experience. In other words, the stories and language of eccentricity that permeate scholarship on the artists participate in constructing the viewer's experience of the work as eccentric.

Risking oversimplification, Benjamin identified aura, or the loss of aura, as early symptoms of the transformation from Modern to Postmodern (Kaufman 2002). The loss of aura coincided with the development of photography and the mass production and commercialization of art, "severing the links with which art is tied to cult and ritual" (Puppe 1979: 274). The rupture occurred with postmodern discourse countering the modern priority of individuality and expressionism with reproducibility and seriality. Inspiring a second fissure between the artist and the artwork, Roland Barthes' 1967 essay "The Death of the Author" is broadly acknowledged as shaping this dissolution in which the art world proper changed its trajectory toward the interrogation of the artist's "fingerprint."

If we were to think of the dissolution between art and aura as an historical period in which the artist's fingerprint becomes a matter of contention, it becomes apparent that aura was recouped elsewhere, specifically within the construction and commercialization of the "outsider." While the field has evolved over the past one hundred years, it has worked through names such as primitive, naïve, self-taught, folk, and outsider. None of these qualifiers communicate a period, place, or medium-based identity, but instead qualify the work according to the artist. It is the artist and their so-called singularity that determines

where their artwork fits in museums, textbooks, and so on.

In his writings on self-taught art in the marketplace, Gary Alan Fine (2003) argues that biography is a fundamental asset that translates into cultural and, more importantly, fiscal value. However, allegedly authentic biographical narratives constructed or curated by art experts are not necessarily representative of the person's actual lived biography. Fine describes living self-taught artists that struggle with their identity (for them, perceived as serious and nuanced) being wedged into a narrative that filters out everything except for qualifiers like poor, minority, uneducated, or disabled. Fine concludes by coining the term *identity art*, articulating that based on economic interest, identity art is that whose formal quality and character are as important as the quality and character of biography. Fine's work is central to the aura of eccentricity because it interrogates the market's influence on cultural value and vice versa. Such value apparatuses shape the narratives surrounding these artists and in turn shape the viewer experience.

The purpose of this essay is not to uncover hidden biographical truth cluttered and distorted by narratives of eccentricity. To rewrite the biography and claim to revise the narrative of authenticity would be to perpetuate the reliance on romantic individualism that casts these so-called outsiders as "modern primitives," a qualifier dating back to the Museum of Modern Art's 1941 exhibition by the same name. The exhibition of *Modern Primitives* followed and contributed to the tradition of rhetoric permeating discourse concerning naïve, self-taught, folk, and outsider art. The field's one collectivizing feature is the artist's identity. What makes them worthy of acclaim is their exceptional artistic vision vis à vis their occupational ordinariness, creating a sort of "against all odds" narrative. The museum described it's exhibited outsiders in the following terms: "All share the common denominator of Western culture at its most democratic level and all express the straightforward, innocent and convincing vision of the common man, ignorant of art or unaffected by it" (Museum of Modern Art 1941: 1). They describe evaluating the artist's work according to their position as "common man" and disconnection from the art world. While postmodernism interrogated these types of artist-centric evaluations, the sort of cult of the artist lived on in outsiders, whose appeal relied upon their biographical otherness relative to the art world.

It is impossible to discuss aura as existing in a mutually reinforcing relationship with value without acknowledging viewer desire. Desire can be the pursuit of pride, status, lust, authority, or a myriad of other wanted objectives, but desire for something, physical or idealistic, drives what David Morgan (2018) describes as "enchantment." Like enchantment, aura connotes any number of affective experiences produced by an object's presence, aesthetic character, and/or its numinous associations. But most importantly, enchantment is the power of an object to elicit desire (for the object itself, but moreover for what ideal it represents) and influence perception. Enchantment often references spell-casting because of its power to alter perception and thereby alter behaviour. In terms of art, the enchantment or desire for the strange and unique drives outsider art narratives, producing a vision through which only that interpretation is possible.

The aura of the eccentric pervades outsider art as though it were a relic from the romantic era of individualism and artistic authenticity. Therefore, Benjamin's conception of aura as entangled with commerce, artistic labour, and singularity is my starting and stopping point because aura, like Sara Ahmed's (2004) affective economies, leaves traces yet is nearly impossible to pin down. It exists in the interstitial space, in rhizomal networks that construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the artist's aura, producing a sort of phantom through which we view the work.

Instead, I hope to take an account of the over-reliance of biographical otherness, which, as I have argued, colours the viewers experience. After raising an awareness of the affective economy which exists between who the artist was and the quality of their work, I hope we can make the effort to peer beyond discursive screens that moderate the viewing experience and encounter the work with a vision unimpeded by the aura of eccentricity.

Henry Darger (1892-1973)

Arguably the most popularly recognized outsider artist, Henry Darger is the quintessential representative of hermitic self-taught artists. Darger produced an enormous body of work from his home with few people ever knowing until his landlord discovered the work after his death in 1973. This moment of discovery and surprise—this encounter with the unexpected in which who Darger was expected to be was suddenly usurped by artistic and eccentric genius—set the tone for every subsequent essay, exhibition, and book that followed. Fueled by the curiosity and mystery surrounding Darger's life (the strangeness of the unexpected discovery parochially seemed to belie his artistic proliferation and technical acumen yet explain his creative motivation and illustrative symbolism) every interpretation centers its narrative on biographical evidence.

A 2009 exhibition catalogue produced in partnership with the American Folk Art Museum shares Darger's art through the framework of biography with chapters titled: "An Artist's Studio," "Henry Darger's Great Crusade, Crisis of Faith and Last Judgement," "Introduction to the Autobiography of Henry Darger," and "The History of my Life." The catalogue emphasizes Darger's traumatic childhood experiences and solitary adult lifestyle as constitutive of his oeuvre (see Biesenbach 2009). Similarly, the only text provided in *Henry Darger: Disasters of War* (Biesenbach 2004) is an account of the artists biography detached from art historical placement or critical interpretation despite its categorization as an art catalogue. The same follows for *Henry Darger: Art and Selected Writings* (Bonesteel 2000) and especially for *Sound and Fury: The Art of Henry Darger* where Edward Madrid Gomez writes,

> Knowing what we know about this loner's life, it seems that no one else but Darger could have produced it, in the same way that we cannot imagine the ground-breaking works of such artists as Beethoven, Picasso, Wölfli or Joyce emerging from the minds or spirits of anyone else except these geniuses, whose talents have helped define just how far-reaching and accomplished artistic creativity can be. (2006: 10)

The language verbalizes the extremes between expectation and reality that the author wishes to convey. The expectation is that Darger was a recluse, a "loner," and because of his extremely isolated lifestyle, Gomez argues that he was uniquely qualified to produce "groundbreaking" work. Comparing Darger's work to "geniuses" Beethoven and Picasso, Gomez states that the work comes from within the artist's spirit, communicating that they are somehow born with an innate vision. Wholly invested in Darger's mystery and the apparent disconnect between his lifestyle and his artistic output, the discourse positions Darger's work as tertiary. The work is in effect simply the object within which Darger's aura now resides. The work becomes a relic of the artist's creative sainthood.

With Darger's life story iterated and re-iterated over and over again, two things have occurred. Firstly, his biography has become inseparable from the work resulting in an oeuvre that is so entrenched in individualism that the work's segregation from the mainstream or formally recognized art world is its homeostasis to the degree that it resists attempts to historicize the work. Years steeped in peculiarity makes it appear incompatible with art historical discourse. Secondly, the initial strangeness becomes normative over time and repetition. The initial sense of discovery and surprise wanes with familiarity.

Faced with both obstacles, Jim Elledge wrote *Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy: The Tragic Life of an Outsider Artist* (2013), which attempts to reproduce the moment of discovery and revelation by reimagining Darger's biography through queer history. Elledge portrays Darger as an emotionally abused and abandoned child who developed into a closeted gay man, providing allegedly groundbreaking biographical evidence explaining how Darger's childhood turmoil inspired themes of struggle between good and evil in his body of work. With an ornamental vocabulary peppered with words like seclusion, shocking, fantasy, damaged, shame, fascinating, psychopath, trauma, Elledge presses Darger's artwork into the background, making it no more than a backdrop to the actual commodity: Darger's biographical aura. His phantom is the inevitable screen through which we view and experience his work and this phantom poses

the enchanting aura of mystery and eccentricity through decades of reiteration.

Finally, I think it is important to acknowledge and evaluate the impact of the Darger room at INTUIT: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in Chicago on the aura of Darger's art. It is a relatively common albeit contested art museum practice to present works of fine and decorative arts in curated period rooms that are often based on historical research, but not exclusively reconstructions of specific sites—with exceptions of places that are deemed works of art such as the reconstructed *Peacock Room* by James Abbot McNeil Whistler. There is no doubt that placement, or how something is exhibited, effects how it is viewed. A period room produces the illusion of entering into a time-capsule in which visitors can encounter objects in-situ and relative to other objects, producing a visually interesting sense of space, scale, texture, and lighting. It seems natural that reproducing the immersive quality of a period room could offer some value to visitors interested in particular artists such as Darger. While house museums of deceased artists exist around the world so that visitors can make the pilgrimage to the site of the artist's work, what specifically is the impact of recreating Darger's room in a museum setting? While it mimics the feeling of closeness to the artist, experiencing the space that they worked in, I would argue that it also perpetuates the preeminence of *the artist* over the art. Viewing Darger's apartment does not add any value to his works of art. They are not better or worse viewed in-situ like an installation. His works are watercolors on paper and are read as a book or sequence of moments in a 15,000-page illustrated text. Reproducing his apartment, then, further cements the artist, his living situation, the strangeness of that living situation, the clutter, the flurry of art materials that seem to swallow the room. The room is a diorama of Darger the person. It stands as an icon for the phantom and spatially frames the story of eccentricity, obsession, and isolation.

Altogether, such discourse has constructed Darger's work as an artifact of his life. It is almost impossible to view images of the Vivian girls or the installation of his apartment without phantoms of Darger cluttering the visual field. Likewise, historians have focused on the unexpectedness of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's oeuvre as a way to prove its value and authenticity, thereby casting his work with the aura of eccentricity.

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910-1983)

Describing her experience visiting Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's Milwaukee home shortly after his death and the discovery of his art, Joanne Cubbs writes in *Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: King of Lesser Lands*:

> There was a sense of the miraculous in the atmosphere of Von Bruenchenhein's home after his death, a feeling that caused one to speak in hushed tones and to take each step with the kind of reverence reserved only for sacred spaces. It may have been the improbability of the artist's highly original creations or the sheer accumulation of his relentless creative energy, which seemed to linger in the surroundings. Filled with the relics of a life so fully given over to the aspirations of art making, the place had an odd air of holiness about it. (2016: 7)

Cubbs description epitomizes the romantically written discourse on Von Bruenchenhein: words such as "miraculous" and "improbability" emphasize the element of surprise and unexpected discovery; "atmosphere" and "energy" draw the reader's attention to the aura of the artist that rested upon the objects; "relentless" and "accumulation" point to an obsessive lifelong production; and "holiness" and "sacred" declare the artist's home and resident phantom as singular, extraordinary, or outsider. For Cubbs, the artist's aura lingered in the room.

Similarly, *Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Obsessive Visionary* (John Michael Kohler Arts Center 1988) emphasizes the artist's impulse to create fantastical worlds to the degree that his home and work assemble as a cohesive work that was the world the artist wanted to live in or escape to, again sustaining narratives based in seclusion and disconnect from the actual world.

The more recent publication, *Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Mythologies* accompanies an exhibition by the same name at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (Patterson, Grabner, Stone, and Littman 2017). The title "mythologies" prepares the reader for this compilation's central theme: the alternative world-making nature of

Von Bruenchehein's work. His chicken-bone towers, paintings, and crowns contribute to a science-fiction-like oeuvre, transforming his home into a mythological residence. The book examines this tendency more or less by its divisions according to medium, inspired by a plaque that Von Bruenchenhein wrote proclaiming himself "Freelance Artist – Poet and Sculptor – Inovator [*sic*] – Arrow maker and Plant man – Bone artifacts constructor – Photographer and Architect – Philosopher."

The first essay in the collection, titled "Dear Marie," is a hypothetical letter written to Von Bruenchenhein's wife and muse, Marie, who often posed for carefully orchestrated photographs. The letter questions Von Bruenchenhein's influence over Marie, evident by the fact that her actual name was Eveline, but he renamed her thereby casting her as a character in his art, fulfilling the role of queen within his constructed domain. The second essay, "The Danger We Face," attempts to interpret Von Bruenchenhein's work alongside global topics like Abstract Expressionism, World War II, the Cold War, the Anthropocene, the Nuclear Age, and the Great Acceleration, but is scattershot in its execution and only coheres in its perpetuation of fantastical vocabulary. The third essay, "High Walkway Connects Two Towers," chronologically surveys Von Bruenchenhein's experiments with architectural forms from his paintings to bone towers. This inventory culminates by arguing that the architectural forms were part of Von Bruenchenhein's interest in creating a utopian world, a theme recurring throughout the book. Finally, "Seed-Action" examines Von Bruenchenhein's tendency to create plant forms as an effect of his experience working in a flower shop.

Altogether, the book stretches beyond the biography to a degree unseen in the discourse on Darger. However, the contributors wrote their essays in such a way that it is like looking into the distance through a screen door. The screen is the ever-visible aura of eccentricity resting upon the text. For instance, "The Danger We Face" begins by qualifying Von Bruencheinhein's output as only being possible because he was "stimulated by exceptional psychological states and eccentric comportment" (Grabner 2017: 79). Similarly, "High Walkway Connects Two Towers" cultivates a tone of utopianism reflecting the author's interpretation that the architectural images resulted from Von Bruenchenhein's desire for stability—"an architecture of hope" that embraced "a grand utopian purpose" (Stone 2017: 149). These examples indicate how important it is to recognize that the aura of eccentricity is not merely the product of biographical emphasis. It is not merely what is said, but how it is said. Writings on outsider art mimic the tone of the work, perceived as eccentric, rather than attending to critical distance and temperate vocabulary.

Nevertheless, there are instances, glimmers, where the screen seems to fall way. In Rousseau and Del Curto's *When the Curtain Never Comes Down: Performance Art and Alter Ego* (2015), published by the American Folk Art Museum, the editors assign Von Bruenchenhein a small, roughly two-page excerpt relating to the outsider artist tendency to embody a persona that exists within their constructed space. The book is an evocative experiment in considering outsider arts as blurring the lines between what is art and what is reality, a topic that has potential to contribute to the idea of the artist as a role that they perform. Von Bruenchenhein, they argue, performed a royal persona and his work was a performance art. The tangible works, art objects or props such as crowns and painted cities are indexes of a much more complicated relationship between life and art. The text also resists relying on romantic language, instead opting to describe his work judiciously by avoiding common words such as "visionary," "sacred," and "fantastical," which all produce affective discourse rather than critical discourse.

Historians discovered Darger and von Bruenchenhein's work posthumously and their moment of discovery is integral to the interpretation of their work. Rather than tackle the ill effects of poverty and disability that produced their lifelong obscurity, their disadvantage is portrayed as an obstacle that they overcame to produce a tremendous body of work. Their works, then, become the evidence of a supernatural against all odds story that overshadows the harsh reality of poverty and stigma.

A.G. Rizzoli (1896-1981)

The final artist in this survey has the smallest discursive presence. A.G. Rizzoli frequents outsider art books, but he has attracted less publishing interest than Von Bruenchenhein (whose work is one of the highlights of the John Michael Kohler Art Center's collection) and Darger (who is the unofficial "poster child" for INTUIT). There is, however, a documentary called *Yield to Total Elation: The Life of A.G. Rizzoli* (2000) and a less-recent book published by the San Diego Museum of Art titled *A.G. Rizzoli: Architect of Magnificent Visions* (Hernandez, Beardsley, and Cardinal 1997). The book accompanied an exhibition sharing the same name that travelled from the San Diego Museum of Art to the High Museum of Art, Museum of Folk Art, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Rizzoli lived in San Francisco for most of his life where he worked as an architectural draftsman. Formally trained, Rizzoli used his skills to create works of art best described as architectural portraits. He drafted portraits of family members and neighbors as grandiose, towering architectural forms, attempting to translate the character of the person into the character of skyscrapers, cathedrals, and Neo-Baroque buildings. Though many accounts lead viewers to believe that he was reclusive, he held weekly exhibitions that he called Achilles Tectonic Exhibit Porfolio (A.T.E.P for short) in his apartment, drew architectural portraits of friends and neighbours, and held a full-time professional job as a draftsman. He clearly resists the solitary archetype, but historians draw him back into otherness arguing the fact that he never married and lived in his mother's home after she passed as evidence for social impairment or trauma.

As with most outsider art books, the editors and contributors of *A.G. Rizzoli: Architect of Magnificent Visions* invest in the appeal of otherness and individual particularity. The introduction, "Amplifying Achilles," is a brief account of the artist's life that emphasizes hardship, as is the custom in outsider art publications. In this case, the author portrays Rizzoli as a melancholic whose tendency for solitude resulted from his inability to recover from his mother and father's death while he was in his twenties. John Beardsley's chapter "The Joy Zone: A Bit of Heavenly Architecture" examines Rizzoli's formal and technical sources, most convincingly his training in Beaux-Arts architectural theory which instructed architects to attend to the inner character of a building expressed by its external character. In other words, the exterior anticipates and compliments the interior layout and functions. The chapter also effectively comments on Rizzoli's attendance at the Panama-Pacific exposition and the inspiration he likely drew from the variety of architectural designs. However, the author cannot escape the conventional discourse that surrounds outsider art, ending his otherwise fair assessment by reinforcing the narrative of trauma:

> The sense of loneliness and longing that pervade his work make it seem that he was representing in these renderings the ideal family that he lost early or perhaps never had, with a strong father at the center … Trauma has a way of creating fixations. (Beardsley 1997: 99)

In an *Art Journal* review of *A.G. Rizzoli: Architect of Magnificent Visions*, N.F. Karlins argues that curators and historians of outsider art have responded to a consumer desire for something different, specifically something other than the highly cerebral-centric formalized art world. Instead, consumers are interested in works that inspire curiosity and foster a sense of discovery and spiritualism. It should be no surprise, then, that publications and exhibitions such as this would mimic the tone of exceptionalism, novelty, curiosity, and most importantly the discovery or expression of the inner-man brought on by what Karlins accounts are the qualifiers of outsider art. He argues that outsider artists "are mentally disturbed, economically or socially disadvantaged, [and] most have suffered a trauma of some kind that has aroused latent artistic abilities" (1997: 94). Thus the narrative follows that trauma or struggle motivates obsessive work, escapist world creation, and melancholic repetition, dooming an artist like Rizzoli to forever exist as a victim of circumstance rather than the triumphant, intelligent, and knowledgeable draftsman who sought creative expression for ways that cannot be diluted to traumatic agents.

Conclusion

This has been an art historical essay without pictures. An exercise in material culture without objects. As strange as it may seem, it is an intentional self-reflection. The viewing experience does not necessarily begin with the work of art. It exists alongside and is shaped by discourse. The vocabulary and topical choices writers make shape the aura of the artist that resides in memory projected onto the work of art. For Rizzoli, the discourse of trauma and loneliness colour visions of solitary structures, but those structures are strong, exact, and populated by crowds of visitors. Eugene Von Bruenchenhein was subjected to poverty after suffering a handicap, but he practiced ingenuity and a make-do attitude that many professional artists have likewise done. Darger was exceedingly prolific, but there must be room to shuffle off the cloak of obsession and consider his work as ordinary as ritual behaviours such as keeping a journal or knitting.

During the course of this essay, I have pointed out constructions of the artists as existing outside of society, an idea that is not limited to outsider art, but perpetuates the romance of the arts into our present day. Frank Turner (2014) calls this tendency, which he argues grew in prominence during the late 18th and early 19th century, as the "cult of the artist." The cult of the artist includes the stories we tell about talented, creative individuals that contributes to the lore and distinction of these individuals from the so-called everyday professional or labourer. Further, it is an integral tool for commercialization. In a world increasingly inundated with options and novelties, artists have invented and even performed a commercial self or persona that accompanies their work. This affective aura shapes the viewer's value judgement of importance, but also their feeling of a work, such that the lore and myth building around great works of art draws pilgrims from around the world that they might share in the presence of relics that emit the artist's greatness. For Darger, Von Bruenchenhein, and Rizzoli, it is constructions of eccentric genius.

There is no doubt that the organizations and scholars whose important works I discuss in this essay are major contributors and champions of artists whose work does not neatly fit within the western canon. But, to interpret material culture to the best of our ability—whether as a folklorist, historian, art historian and so forth—we must continuously engage in self-examination, recognizing the impact discourse has on the social life of the object. Discourse adheres to the physical object and alters our perspective of it and so we must examine our work accordingly throughout the ongoing pursuit of knowledge.

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