

*The Outsider Art Fair: 25 Years*

When the Outsider Art Fair first took place in New York in 1993, it appeared as a relatively low-key cultural event on the crowded calendar of the art world's most important international hub. Still, it immediately marked a milestone in the history of a still-evolving field that had seized the attention of a growing community of inquisitive dealers, collectors and other art lovers in the United States and Europe.

That field, as it has come to be known today, had begun to emerge in the 1940s with the French modern artist Jean Dubuffet's research and theorizing about the unusual, often visionary creations of self-taught art-makers who found themselves by the force of circumstances or by choice on the margins of mainstream culture and society. He called their unique, hard-to-classify works "*art brut*" (literally, "raw art") in recognition of the direct, unfiltered creative impulse they seemed to express and which, inevitably, viewers felt when encountering them.

Later, in the early 1970s, the British art historian Roger Cardinal referred to such works as "outsider art," offering a new term that implicitly identified a somewhat broader range of art-makers. In time, that label gave way to "self-taught art," which is primarily used in the U.S. Today, "*art brut*," "outsider art" and "self-taught art" are designations that generally refer to the same kinds of art forms while also suggesting certain nuanced distinctions among them.

With the creation of the Outsider Art Fair 25 years ago by Sanford Smith, the specialized field and art-market sector that it showcased now had a high-profile forum for the exchange of information and ideas, and the presentation of emblematic masterworks and exciting discoveries alike. "The time was right when we started in 1993," Smith told me, adding, "The market activity in this lively field had begun to reach critical mass."

Five years ago, art dealer Andrew Edlin formed Wide Open Arts, LLC, and took over ownership and production of the fair. Now, as the Outsider Art Fair marks a major anniversary, we have assembled *The Outsider Art Fair: 25 Years*, a celebration that looks back at and honors its history, with one work of art representing each year of its impressive run to date. Each work on display was actually shown at the fair in the year it represents in this retrospective survey, and in several cases was part of a group of works by an artist who made his or her debut at the fair in its designated year. This exhibition also honors the artists, dealers and other exhibitors, collectors and art enthusiasts who over the years have contributed to the special energy and atmosphere of the Outsider Art Fair and helped make it an ever more popular, enduring success.

Edward M. Gómez

*The Outsider Art Fair: 25 Years* has been organized by the critic, art historian and senior editor of *Raw Vision*, Edward M. Gómez, in collaboration with Rozenn Welsh, the manager of the Outsider Art Fair. Wide Open Arts gratefully acknowledges the generosity of the art dealers and collectors who have kindly lent works to this exhibition.