

Venice Biennale Italy

Outsiders no more

Rejected from the canon for so long, self-taught artists are taking centre stage at the Biennale—but are museums ready to follow suit?

By Anny Shaw. Venice, Issue 247, June 2013
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Encyclopaedic Palace of the World in situ, Marino Auriti (1891–1980), Kennett Square, Pennsylvania

The most distinctive aspect of Massimiliano Gioni's Venice Biennale show is the unprecedented number of so-called "outsider" artists who feature—a reflection of the growing integration in the art world of alternative and mainstream practices. The Biennale's main exhibition, "The Encyclopaedic Palace", takes its title from (and includes a model of) the self-taught artist Marino Auriti's *Il Enciclopedico Palazzo del Mondo* (encyclopaedic palace of the world). "Designed to hold all the works of man in whatever field, discoveries made and those which may follow," as Auriti put it, his imaginary, all-inclusive museum was patented in 1955 but never built (see picture).

In an interview by telephone, Gioni says the point of the show is not so much about outsider artists *per se*, but to question the very notion of what it means to be inside or outside, which, he agrees, is potentially a political line of enquiry. "What kinds of artists are expected to be included in a biennial?" he asks. A broad and complex spectrum of practitioners therefore feature—from Morton Bartlett and Achilles Rizzoli (who Gioni says are "traditionally recognised as outsiders") to Rudolf Steiner and Hilma af Klint ("figures in this milieu, but who are not the same as the folk artists") and from Roger Caillois and Carl Gustav Jung ("who are certainly not outsiders, but operated in other disciplines and still made visual works") to artists such as Walter De Maria ("professionals who cultivate a proud detachment from the art world").

This inclusive approach towards artists, as well as the variety of objects and images they produce, is a growing trend among curators. In 2011, Lynne Cooke, a professor at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and formerly at the Reina Sofia in Madrid, organised an exhibition of Rosemarie Trockel's work that included works by outsider artists such as Judith Scott, who was born deaf and with Down's syndrome, and the self-taught bird collagist James Castle. Other pieces not produced by fine artists, such as botanical drawings and a triptych made by an orangutan called Tilda, also formed part of the show. Cooke says the current interest in art made outside of the traditional canon has precedent, pointing to the Surrealists and Dadaists, as well as to Jean Dubuffet, who coined the term art brut (raw art) in the mid-1940s. But, she says, a "critical mass" is currently developing, not least through the Hayward Gallery's summer exhibition, "The Alternative Guide to the Universe" (11 June-26 August) and the Philadelphia Museum of Art's show of outsider art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz collection (until 9 June).

However, the inclusive view espoused in these exhibitions—and indeed by Auriti—is still not shared by most mainstream museums, says James Brett, the curator and founder of the Museum of Everything in London, which is showing gouache paintings by the Italian artist, Carlo Zinelli, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia, as well as hosting a series of debates on the idea of exclusion. "There's a covert bigotry at play in our museums," Brett says. "Curators are not bigoted themselves, but they are in an institutional dead end."

Part of the problem is the terminology used to describe alternative practices. "'Outsider' is a denigrating term because it implies there's an inside," Brett says. "In the art world, the 'inside' is no better; moreover it is irrelevant." Cooke goes further. "Folk art, naive, visionary, self-taught—all terms are problematic in a way," she says.

The market for outsider art is also gaining momentum. "Outsider art dealers are not the Gagosians or the Zwirners of the universe, but the art is still commodifiable," Brett says. Andrew Edlin, the Chelsea art dealer who recently took over the Outsider Art Fair—tripling attendance in his first year—says collectors are now looking for more authentic types of art, regardless of whether the artist is self-taught or schooled at art college. "For a long time the art world thumbed its nose at authenticity," he says. "Maybe that's run its course."