

# FOLK ART

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*Animals of the Sea  
Dwellers of the Sea*

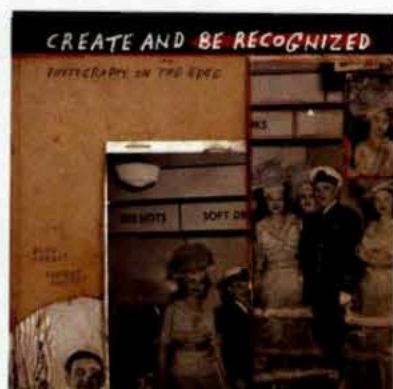




# OUTSIDER

## A Dialogue

Curators **JOHN TURNER** and **DEBORAH KLOCHKO** have organized "Create and Be Recognized: Photography on the Edge," an exhibition of photography- and collage-based artworks that is on view at the George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film, in Rochester, New York, through April 10. On November 20, 2004, during the show's run at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, in San Francisco, the curators sat down in Oakland, California, with their collaborator, art historian **ROGER CARDINAL**, to share their thoughts on photography and the genesis of the exhibition.



### Create and Be Recognized: Photography on the Edge

By John Turner and Deborah Klochko, with an essay by Roger Cardinal / Chronicle Books LLC, San Francisco / 156 pages, 155 images, full color, \$40 hardcover

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I feel the shadows are telling us how much we have overlooked that is right before us.

—FRED RESSLER, 2004

**ROGER CARDINAL** Let's think about the map we have drawn. Throughout art history there has always been a territory with different things happening, and the boundaries have been drawn and redrawn in different ways. Photography had not been thought of as a likely candidate for inclusion in the outsider canon because photography seems, on the face of it, mechanical, and it has a very strong documentary slant. We had probably envisaged it as functioning within such contexts as newspaper and book illustrations in a way other forms of art do not normally do. That ensured that it was not an obvious candidate.

**DEBORAH KLOCHKO** Photography has a relatively young history when you compare it with painting or sculpture. For the longest time photography was just trying to position itself as art. It was considered an outsider within the art field. So now, the idea of talking about folk and vernacular photography is relatively new in the field. It is not surprising that we are just now starting to talk about outsider photography.

**JOHN TURNER** Within the photography community, how are *folk* and *vernacular* photography defined?

**DK** *Vernacular* is the current, popular segment of photography. People are now looking at family albums as artistic expressions and collecting anonymous snapshots. *Folk* has always been a part of photography. The everyday uses of photography in terms of quilts, photo-jewelry, or handmade frames to display photographs have been there from the beginning. People really embraced photogra-

phy in their lives as soon as it was available. There were painted tintypes that mimicked the appearance of folk paintings. By heavily painting over the tintype you remove any kind of perspective, any sense of background, so that it looks like a folk painting. Albums, especially Victorian albums, were heavily decorated and collaged together. There was the sense of the individual really creating something that was accepted within the community and understood to be a normal activity.

**RC** I was thinking about the limners, who were these transient people who would go around doing ready-made portraits. They would size you up and knew how to do a beard, and then if you had a beard you would look like the last person with a beard, and the next one too. And presumably the photographer did much the same.

**DK** That is exactly what they did. There were itinerant photographers. They had their wagons or tents and would travel around setting up the same pose, shooting the same likeness.

**RC** And then the real moment of discovery comes in 1888 when Kodak comes out with the accessible camera that anybody could use.

**DK** It is the beginning of the "snapshot." It takes photography out of the studio and puts it in the hands of every person who can afford it. There are some limitations, but anyone can make photographs from that point on. There is a freshness that begins to happen in the images. At the same time you begin to see that certain subjects are repeated again and again. Family, trip, house, baby, possessions—these are common themes that run through the photographs.

**RC** So you have wedding pictures, graduation pictures, baptism pictures, so the big moments of people's lives get recorded.

**DK** Photography is basically a mechanical process. The original image is made with a camera usually, with some type of film, and there are exposure issues that you have to at

# PHOTOGRAPHY



UNTITLED  
Richard Sharpe Shaver  
(1907-1975)  
Summit, Arkansas  
n.d.  
Hand-colored gelatin silver  
print mounted on board  
10 x 8 1/2"  
Collection of Brian Tucker  
Shaver, a science fiction  
writer, used photography to  
illustrate his belief that  
rocks contained the visual  
record of an ancient under-  
water race of extraterres-  
trials he called the Mermis.  
He would carefully slice and  
then photograph segments  
of rocks and hand-color the  
prints to give emphasis to  
particular patterns; some-  
times he projected his  
images onto canvas and  
built up the surface with  
glue and paint.



least be somewhat aware of. There are a lot of rules. What is exciting about outsider photography is that those rules don't apply anymore.

**RC** There are rules with regard to certain standards. People were aware that a good photograph should conform to a particular set of expectations. In the world of photography, people like Ansel Adams would actually write the rules by saying, "This is how a photograph should be. It should be in focus, it should have such and such an exposure time, and it should aspire to be an idealization of the landscape." Which is a paradox because a photograph is meant to be simply objective, dispassionate. Now, the outsiders in a way are on a similar track, going toward transformation rather than replication of what they see.

**DK** No, I don't agree. Photography, I think, appeals to the outsider artist who uses it because of its validation, its truthfulness. That is why many individuals gravitate toward photography. It seems real and can be interpreted as real. From the introduction of photography people have embraced it as truthful, and individuals who have a different grasp of reality gravitate toward using photography because it adds elements that are seemingly very real.

**JT** The artists we have selected for "Create and Be Recognized" used photography as another tool in their vocabulary of expression. Roger has talked about outsider photography as being personal and private, and created for usually an audience of oneself. Whenever outsider art is discussed, we run into the same problem—that there are big differences between one artist and another. So it is actually very difficult to generalize about the uses of outsider photography. In some cases it is a documentation of the private and personal, in other cases it is a means of letting people visualize what the artist is trying to say about the world and their surroundings. Richard Shaver and his "rock books" are a good example. He went through the process of slicing rocks and photographing them to support his notion of the prehistory of the world.

**DK** For Shaver the photograph is evidence. He embraces it as proof of his beliefs. For him the accepted truthfulness of photography helps justify what his visions are. What he actually sees.

**RC** He is quite pedagogic. His work presupposes an audience that wants to know and that may be misguided. It is training us how to see properly. [Fred] Ressler, equally, is telling us that the foliage on the wall is there for everybody to look at. If you just train your eye, you will actually have a more poetic insight into the world. Somewhat of a mystical insight.

**DK** It is also the notion of photography as "scientific" evidence, which was one of the early uses of photography.

**JT** Like Shaver, Ressler sees it as a documentation of the truth.

**DK** Alexandre Lobanov is the other one whom I wanted to point out because he is also using it as evidence. Evidence of his existence, evidence of the visual vocabulary he has created because of his inability to speak or to hear. He had to create this way of communicating to the world. To overcome his powerlessness, because of his institutionalization and his inability to really communicate except through this rich imagery of weapons—after all, photography is about shooting . . .

**JT** What is also interesting about Lobanov's series of photographs is the position of prominence he has constructed by using oversize frames, placing himself front and center, surrounded by his weaponry. His own fantasy world placed in front of the camera. By putting himself within the frame he gives himself a level of importance and validates the fantasy. What is remarkable about these documentations, which he did over a period of years, is you can see him literally age in these photographs.

**DK** The presentation of his finished image is reminiscent of both Russian icons and early photographic portraiture. The cased daguerreotypes and ambrotypes show the sitter from the head down to the waist, centered, with a frame around the image. Lobanov is referencing these two different approaches.



© FRED RESSLER

**LILA, NATIVE AMERICAN PRINCESS (DAUGHTER)** / Fred Ressler (b. 1941) / Florida / 1996 / Fujicolor print / 6 x 4" / private collection

Ressler photographs the play of shadows from sunlight passing through trees onto the side of his Florida house; when the first image he had taken was printed, he discovered in it the features of a face—in his mind that of an angel or a spirit.

**UNTITLED** / Alexandre Lobanov (1924–2002) / Russia / c. 1970 / color photograph / 7 x 5" / collection of abcd, Paris

Lobanov, deaf and mute from the age of seven and institutionalized as an adult, created elaborately staged self-portraits with the help of a local studio photographer. He constructed props, backgrounds, hats, and frames for his compositions, most of which reflect his fascination with guns, the military, and Soviet symbols.



**UNTITLED** / artist unidentified / France / c. 1860–1870 / albumen prints mounted on paper / 13 x 10" / courtesy Galerie Sabine Schmidt, Cologne, Germany  
These images are part of an album of photographs discovered in France in the 1980s. While the original intent of the images—many of which are disturbing—remains unknown, the elaborately well-planned scenes represent an early example of photo-collage, manipulation, and tableau.



**RC** There must also be a Russian symbolic context, all the emblematics of the image, the czar, the sacred icon with the kind of heraldic surround that might appear on coins or banknotes.

**DK** The nineteenth-century anonymous French album is very engaging to look at and to think about in the context of photo history. It is following all the rules and yet breaking all the rules at the same time. Obviously, the maker used a large-format camera; the process of the day was the albumen print and wet collodion negative. So he or she coated their own glass plates. There is a very formal quality when you look at a finished image made up of a collection of photographs that were cut and pasted together. The edges of the final image are completely ignored, or at least not dealt with in a traditional manner. So you have this funny breakup of the edges from the center of the photograph, and it is the story being acted out that is really important. I believe the story becomes so powerful for the person creating it that they don't really care what the edges look like. Again, using photography makes it real even though it is completely staged!

**JT** Howard Finster used family snapshots, images that were normal shots of the family on vacation, the family in front of the church, things of this nature.

**RC** The prints hang around, he picks out one of them one day and says, "I can use this," then incorporates it in one of his designs.

**JT** He used some of the photographs to reference his own fame and to elevate his importance. The other collection of photographs he used was more or less in a scrapbook format, a family album in which he introduced himself, his relatives, and his environment to the world. It was his autobiography.

**RC** Yes, it is, and that is also pedagogic, talking to the audience. "Gather round folks and I will show you who is here—this is my brother, this is my aunt, and this is where we are all going."

**JT** Finster really did not have a serious connection to the world of photography, but he valued the photographic image in terms of representing and consolidating his fame. He also used photography as part of his pastoral work. He would write a sermon about, I don't know, about the ant moving the mountain, then at the top of his sermon would be his portrait, the fellow who wrote that sermon. So he was connecting word and image, and giving the image as much import as the written word. He used the same photo-portrait of himself on calling cards that he made from pieces of scrap paper. Finster always told people that not only are the paintings and the message important, but so is who gave him that message. Even though he would say, "It came from the almighty God," he made it clear that it also came through the body of Howard Finster. A lot of his analogies about how life worked were based on photography. One of the quotes that we used in the show talks about how thoughts are like pictures that end up getting developed in the brain. So he was conscious about the use of photography and he used it as a form of self-publicity.

**DK** As this conversation progresses it is becoming clear how difficult it is to come up with a definition of outsider photography.

**JT** I think through this discussion we are basically pointing out what it isn't.

**RC** Our methodology here is still very primitive. We are looking at only about fifty potential candidates. If we had five hundred, we would be more confident of which way to go. We have got to be careful not to say that we already know what we want.

**DK** It is exciting to consider that there may not be a straight definition for outsider photography, so that there is still the possibility of discovery out there. That is why the exhibition has three fairly broad categories in which to begin a dialogue on outsider photography: collage, photomontage, and manipulation/tableau. There is a quote from Rudy Rotter that we used in *Create*: "If I keep my eyes and mind open, I see new things that I

haven't seen before." As the curators of the exhibition we have found it very exciting to look for what we have not seen yet.

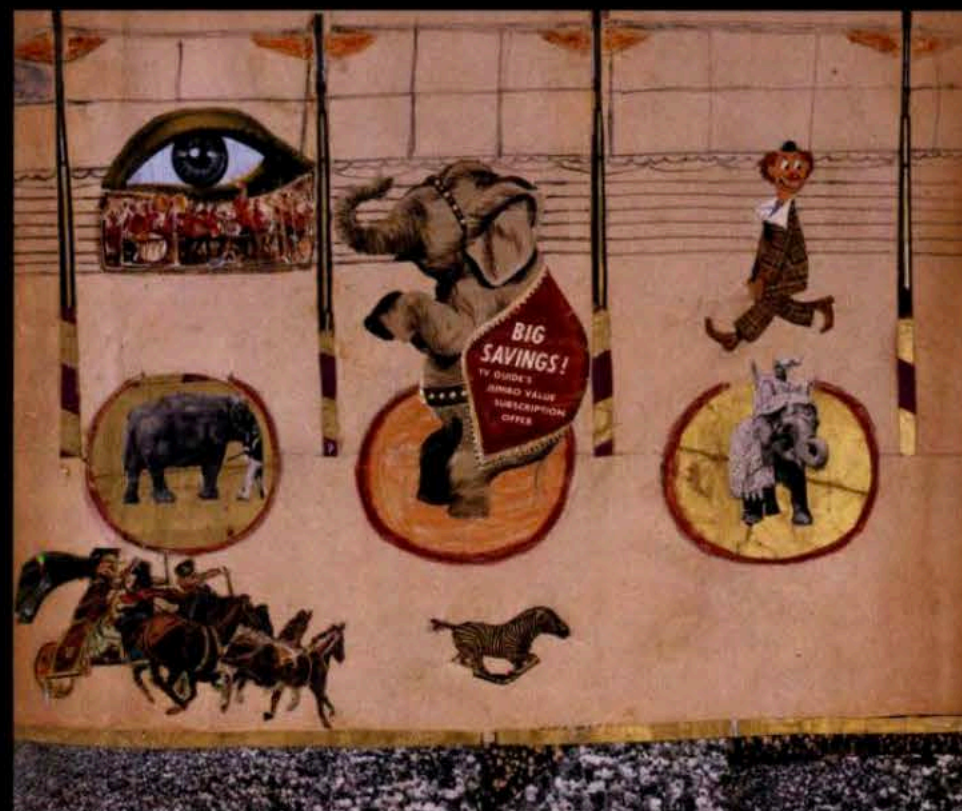
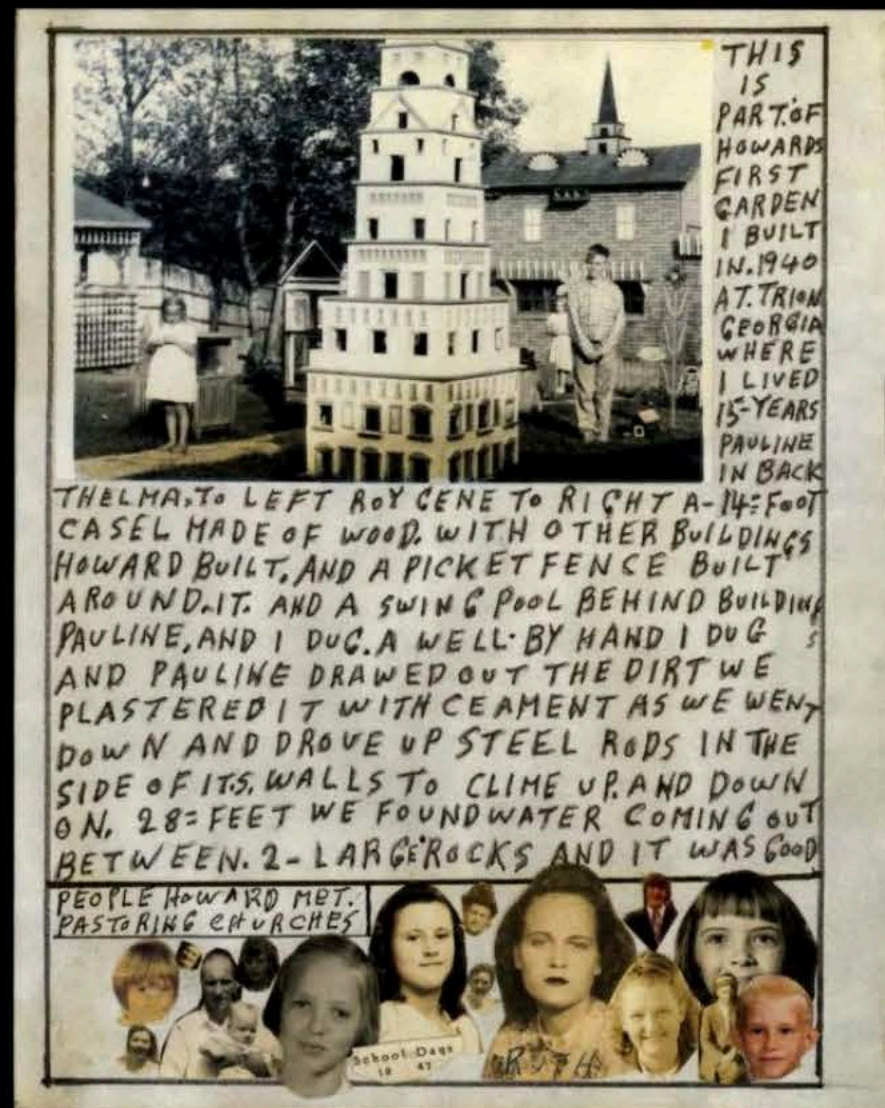
**JT** People without a background in photography may think that a photo is constructed only through pushing a button. We have to be very clear as to why we are using a photographic-history model for this particular exhibition.

**DK** Within the field, the definition of photography is a much broader one than just a camera with film. From the beginning, photography has been looked at as a manipulative medium. It ranges from hand-coloring, because they didn't have actual color in the very earliest processes, to the ability to cut and paste, making a new whole from various photographic fragments. Not everybody had a camera, or the skill to shoot the image or process and print it, but they did have access to the finished photograph. So they could do collage, making something more out of it. They put photo-emulsions onto fabric and from that they could do everything from homemade quilts to souvenir scarves. There was photo-jewelry and photo-buttons, items that people could adorn their clothing and themselves with, so it is not just about picking up a camera and taking a picture. It is about manipulation in all forms.

**RC** I think that manipulation is interesting. We find the outsider photographer gravitating toward such tricks as cutting out pictures from magazines and newspapers, pasting them onto a page, drawing around them to integrate them, finding one photograph that could be melded onto another, or inserting oneself into the preexisting photographs, making a joke intervention. A lot of humor goes into this, too, by way of strange juxtapositions. C.T. McClusky's use of collage is remarkable in that he is bringing together spatially antagonistic photographs, disrupting our sense of where we are standing. Thanks to the interplay of the various images, we are rushing everywhere, and these devices are very, very impressive. He is not trying to convince you that you are looking at a true photograph with

**UNTITLED**  
(School Days 1947)  
Howard Finster (1915–2001)  
Summerville, Georgia  
1988  
Photo-collage with ink and pencil on paper  
10 × 8"  
Collection of John Denton  
Finster was enamored with the power of photography and used it in several formats. In addition to collages using photographs of himself and family members, the artist sometimes incorporated into his work a portrait of himself self-linked from the plate for the image that accompanied his byline for his column of sermons that ran in the local newspaper.

**UNTITLED**  
C.T. McClusky (life dates unknown)  
Oakland, California  
c. 1940s–1950s  
Mixed-media collage  
13 1/4 × 15 1/4"  
Collection of John Turner  
Little is known about McClusky except that he worked in a circus as a clown and spent the winter seasons of the 1940s and '50s at a rooming house in Oakland, California, where he made some fifty-three collages with found materials.



all these sixteen different elements put together. He is saying this is how it's done.

**JT** I think what we were talking about in the exhibition was not only the photographer taking a picture, but the artist being the subject of their own pictures. In essence, we show work that places the artist in front of and behind the camera. Photography is shown to be part of the outsider's artistic toolbox and vocabulary.

**DK** There are others for whom photography is more than a tool. It is fundamental to their vision, and I think Joe "40,000" Murphy is one of those. The notion of *reality*—that is the power of the photographic image. Murphy put himself at the center of most of his pieces. He was there in his uniform, surrounded by adoring individuals, some of them famous, some of them not so famous; and I do not think he could have done it in any way other than through photography.

**JT** In most of these photographs, Murphy is in the center and he is the important one. The celebrities are on his right or left and he has this confident gaze, showing that he belongs there. What is interesting about his work is that when these situations were not available he would fabricate them using collage. Cutting a picture of himself from one photograph and putting it onto another. Such as the one in which he is reviewing the ushers at the ballpark, almost like a general checking his troops. What do you think an exhibition on outsider photography might look like in ten years?

**DK** I do not think it will be called outsider photography in ten years. It will be more integrated into art in general or into the larger history of photography. But they will not be using that term. The exhibition—it is probably sooner than ten years from now, more like five years—will break away from all of the categories that we have created in defining the medium. It will be about looking at all the photographers we know and putting them in new and different categories, breaking away from the established boundaries. Removing those boundaries and beginning to move across the various



archives is really what is important. It is not so much about tightening up a definition of outsider photography, but about taking away the definitions so that we can explore the existing material with fresh eyes and new ideas. This is the real treasure—how do we rethink all of this work, what were the motivations, how many different ways can we engage with this work—because so much has been classified and put into little boxes or file folders, or specific kinds of museums or specific kinds of categories, when in fact those definitions may be limiting and very inappropriate. That is the exhibition of the future.

**JT** What do you get from looking at these photographs?

the photographer, saying "How about looking at this? Turn it upside down, have another look or come a bit closer." Shaver does it by drawing us in, as if he were saying, "Have another look at this and you will see something you have not thought of." And I think that's a very magical kind of thing.

**DK** Roger, you once said that art takes us where we have not been before, and you used the phrase—they were journeys into strange places. That is exactly what this work and the curatorial process have been about—a journey into a strange place. But it is a wonderfully strange place.

**RC** And moreover, it's not just one place, is it?

it would limit what we see or what we open ourselves up to finding out there. So it is the journey that is really important. ★

*For the past thirty years, John Turner has photographed folk environments. He is adjunct curator of twentieth-century American folk art at the Museum of Craft and Folk Art, San Francisco, and has organized exhibitions for the Smithsonian Institution, the American Folk Art Museum, and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. He is the author of Howard Finster, Man of Visions: The Life and Art of a Self-Taught Artist (1989).*

*Deborah Klockko is an author, a curator, and an educator. Formerly the director of The Friends of Photography, located at the Ansel Adams Center, San Francisco, Klockko served as executive editor of See, an award-winning journal of visual culture. She has also worked at the California Museum of Photography, University of California, Riverside; the International Museum of Photography, Rochester, New York; and the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.*

*Roger Cardinal is the author of Outsider Art (1972) and co-author of Marginalia: Perspectives on Outsider Art (2001). He*

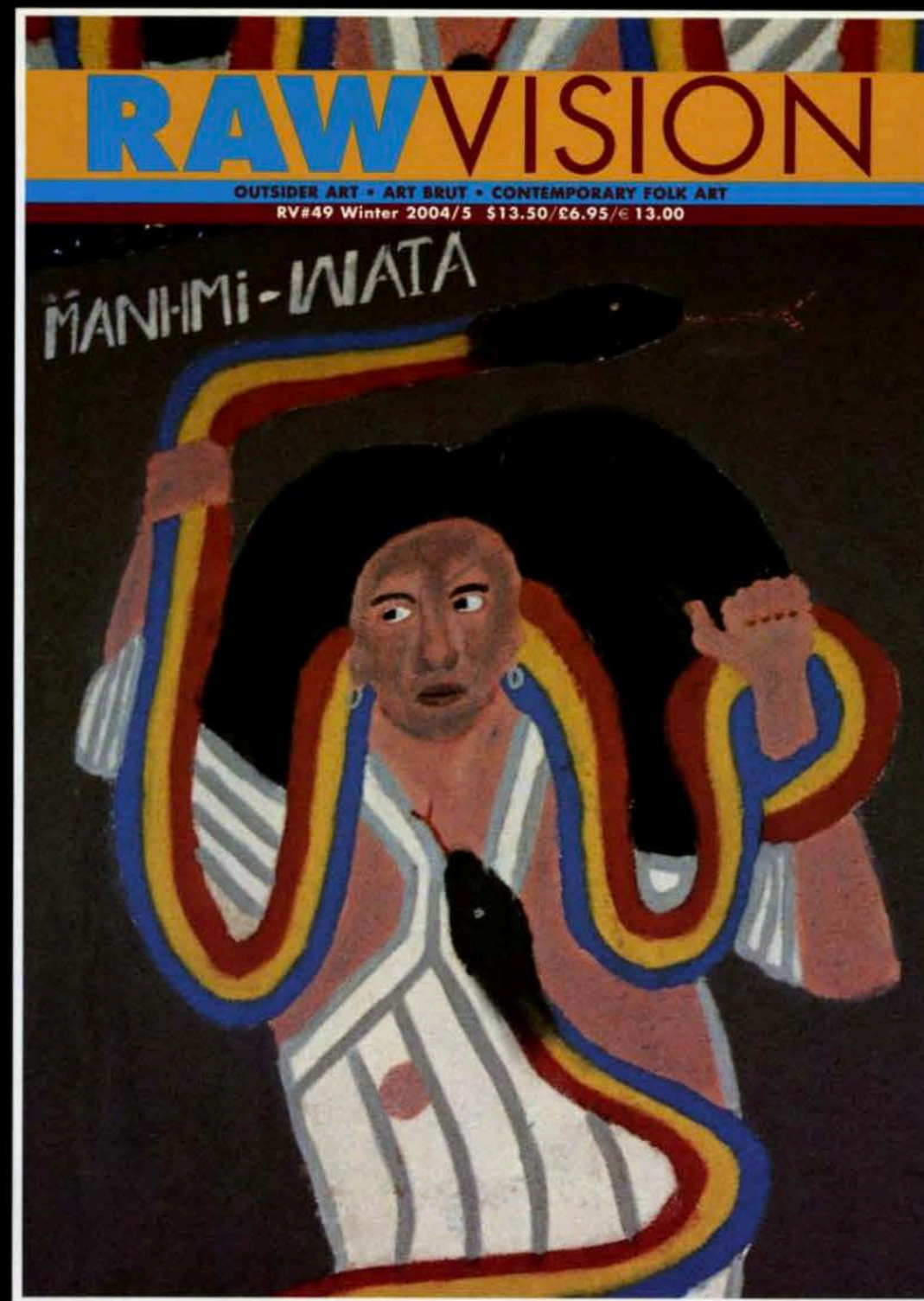
**DOROTHY WATCHES DALEY FISH**  
Joe "40,000" Murphy (1897-1979)  
Chicago  
c. 1960  
Photo-collage  
8 x 12 1/4"  
Collection of William Swislow  
Murphy worked for fifty years as an usher at sporting, entertainment, and political events in Chicago. Photographed with many of the famous and not so famous, the artist placed himself at the center of his fabricated world by manipulating his images through collage.



**RC** Oh, a sense of exhilarated awareness of the world and a strange sense that I cannot take it away with me—it has got to be in the photograph. That complicity of sharing something special, as though you get this nudge from

**DK** Perhaps the worst thing to happen in the process of doing this exhibition and book would be if we actually came up with an absolute or definitive definition of outsider photography. That might be the biggest mistake, because

*is an authority on French surrealism and is currently preparing a book about the arts of prehistory, seen in terms of their aesthetic impact. He is professor emeritus of literary and visual studies at the University of Kent at Canterbury, England.*



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