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## MAINSTREAM vs. OUTSIDER – TO BLUR OR NOT TO BLUR

Metro Show, New York

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According to its classic definition, outsider art is not made in or for the so-called social-cultural mainstream. Or as purists might put it, each non-academically trained, genuinely self-taught artist's creation or collective body of work is unique; what such art-makers produce is inherently, irreducibly *sui generis*, always constituting a class in itself.

For what it's worth, such art can be contrasted with "studio art" made by trained "professionals," but should it ever have to be measured against or in comparison to mainstream art in order to earn any kind of aesthetic validation? If so, then from which persons or institutions would such validation be expected to legitimately flow; who would be empowered to bestow it? Conversely, what, if anything, is in it for mainstream art to be compared to true outsiders' creations?

Those were some of the questions that simmered below the surface of a lively panel



discussion, titled “Life After Venice,” which took place at the Metro Show, an art-and-collectibles fair, in New York in late January. The panel’s topic was the status or awareness of “non-mainstream” art in the aftermath of last year’s 55th Venice Biennale (June 1 – November 24, 2013).

On the panel: Massimiliano Gioni, associate director of the New Museum in New York; Leslie Umberger, curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian Institution’s American Art Museum in Washington, DC; Lynne Cooke, chief curator at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, in Madrid; and art collector/dealer Randall Morris, a co-founder and co-director of Cavin-Morris Gallery in New York. Morris organised this and other events in the Metro Show’s programme of talks.

The panel considered the content and impact of “The Encyclopedic Palace,” the sprawling main exhibition in Venice last year, which Gioni curated in his role as the Biennale’s artistic director. It took its title from that of a



sculpture made by the Italian-American self-taught artist Marino Auriti (1891–1980) in the 1950s in support of a patent application for the tall building it represented. Auriti’s never-erected “palace” was a museum that would have housed a collection of all of humankind’s greatest achievements, from the wheel to outer-space satellites. Similarly, Gioni’s exhibition included a wide variety of works by both schooled and self-taught artists, all of which, ostensibly, addressed or embodied the notion of the encyclopedic or the all-encompassing.

That ambitious-sounding theme notwithstanding, to date the international art media have tended to focus mainly on the big show’s provocative mix of mainstream and non-mainstream art.

In “The Encyclopedic Palace,” did works made by such self-taught artists as Auriti, A.G. Rizzoli, the Japanese ceramist Shinichi Sawada or Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern benefit by being shown in the company of that of such

marino auriti



blue-chip modern and contemporary art-market favorites as Bruce Nauman, Cindy Sherman or Robert Gober?

With such thoughts in mind, at the Metro Show confab, Morris said he was “concerned” about how some curators’ new urge to bring together mainstream and non-mainstream art forms (which can include self-taught/outsider works, so-called tribal art, folk art or other indigenous-culture creations) “could turn out to be bad for self-taught artists’ art.” He added that, if curators are “going to put works by Bill Traylor and Jeff Koons in the same room,” they have an obligation to look for and make clear to viewers “the deeper, underlying human connections between” such disparate art forms.

Cooke observed that, at their best, exhibitions that bring together unexpected kinds of objects can cause “paradigm shifts” in the ways audiences appreciate them, allowing for deeper, more satisfying understanding of their meanings, histories and affinities. Umberger noted that she valued such illuminating group shows but that she is not fond of exhibitions that mix

up disparate material merely to keep up with a “trend.”

For his part, Gioni said he is interested in “non-canonical” works of art—meaning those, like self-taught/outsider artists’ creations, which do not fall into modern and contemporary art’s established-history books—because thinking about them prompts him to consider “whether or not we can find the same kind of power in conventional art” that he believes can be found in self-taught/outsider artists’ works. Gioni also noted that one purpose of the exhibition he curated for the Biennale was the “dethroning of the artworks” that were included in it—all of them, that is—so that they could all be placed “on an even level” (an even aesthetic-value level).

Of course, such a remark begged the questions: Why? Why should an attempt have been made to affect the already established, familiar aesthetic, cultural, social, historical or other values of the works on view in “The Encyclopedic Palace” by purportedly placing them on an “even level”? At least from one vantage point, the implication of such an effort could be that such existing values were somehow

insufficient or inappropriate.

Was an underlying, unvoiced assumption of the big Venice exhibition the notion that, by being displayed alongside better-known works of modern and contemporary art, the self-taught artists’ creations on view would somehow become legitimised by the mainstream values, aura or ethos out of which those other works had emerged?

Gioni told the Metro Show panel’s audience: “I would feel irresponsible if my responsibility were to be to impose outsiders on mainstream [art].” But what about the opposite kind of gesture? Did his Venice exhibition not implicitly “impose” mainstream art—at least its aesthetic-value, not to mention market-value, vantage point, from which it assesses the worth of artworks—on certain self-taught/outsider artists’ creations? Or as Morris observed, did an exhibition like “The Encyclopedic Palace” somehow purport or propose, however subtly or unwittingly, to “justify outsider art,” in effect anointing it “as contemporary art” because of the context in which it was presented and seen?

**Edward M. Gómez**