

From One Fair to the Next

Philippe Godin, October 24, 2015

The 36 international galleries gathered in Paris for the third, expanded edition of the Outsider Art Fair reflect the geographic diversity of the outsider art creation. By refraining from putting up for sale the sculptures of Shinichi Sawada, which are emblematic of Japanese outsider art, the Fair also raises questions about the uniqueness of being a gallery owner for this kind of artworks.

AMERICAN FOLK ART, EUROPEAN OR JAPANESE RAW ART, AFRICAN OR SOUTH AMERICAN OUTSIDER ART

"We appreciate the open-mindedness of this Fair, which is bringing some fresh air to our very French conception of raw art"
Laurent Danchin

For its third edition in Paris, the Outsider Art Fair has significantly expanded its venue after moving into the former mansion of the Duke de Morny. The wooden floor, mirrors and original moldings of the 1,000 square meters located over three floors provide an exceptional setting for this art without contradicting its « outsider » spirit. Furthermore, the classical architecture of a venue so rich in history seems to fit perfectly with the spectral character of the artworks. Indeed, the Outsider Art Fair, despite the diversity showcased here (American folk art, European or Japanese art brut, African or South-American outsider art ...) presents artworks reflecting strongly the story of their creators. Often small, fragile, tragic stories, from which emanate unbelievable, persisting creations.

This is particularly the case of the artist Shinichi Sawada honored this year by the Outsider Art Fair in partnership with the Halle Saint Pierre. Sawada relentlessly creates sculptures like pagan deities coming out of his own mythology.

With his long, thin fingers, Sawada plants one by one small needles in sometimes circular, sometimes cylindrical forms which constitute the main body of his artworks. Showcased in many international institutions, especially at the Venice Biennale (2013) and the Halle Saint Pierre in Paris, Shinichi Sawada has become one of the biggest names of raw art around the world. But just like many outsider artists, the biography of Shinichi Sawada is characterized by an alterity that kept him away from social life from a very early stage. It was only in 2001, during an art workshop, that he started to create his sculptures, surrounded by other patients.

THE SUBSTITUTE ROLE OF ARTWORKS

As a matter of fact, for most of the artists showcased at the Outsider Art Fair, their artworks seem to have a substitute role. Whether it is a painting of Carlo Zinelli, a drawing of Joseph Lambert or a sculpture made from shells by Paul Amar, the creation finds itself almost "as a substitute" for an identity often portrayed negatively if not almost out of reach.

Among the 36 galleries, we can find the most important outsider artists, whose artworks seem to have buried an evil, ignominious biography: Carlo, Darger, Aloïse, etc. In each of these artworks, the creation shows a boundless vitality. Just like the 3,000 paintings of Carlo Zinelli, with their many characters full of dazzling graphic energy. Some of these paintings are showcased in the

booth of the Cavin-Morris Gallery from New York. As for Ricco-Maresca, who represents the Martin Ramirez fund, he is one of the newcomers who greatly enrich the Fair.

THE ART OF BEING A GALLERY OWNER

The artworks of Sawada were the only ones not for sale at the Fair. Like strange totems, these sculptures stand as the guardians protecting artworks from the fetishism of commercial art. Their exhibition within the third edition of the Outsider Art is thus a significant action from the curator as well as the director of the Halle St Pierre (Martine Lusardy). The latter has been fighting to keep these Japanese iconic pieces of raw art off the market since their discovery. For the time being, the pieces that Sawada shapes and gathers like sculptures are the basis of a trade that does not involve any money!

In the current maze of art exhibitions, the Outsider Art Fair should be given the credit for not only presenting unusual forms of art but also for implicitly questioning the very function of the gallery owner. The latter in the case of Outsider Art cannot take the sole mandate of the art dealer. He often must extend the exchange started through the artworks created in an art therapy workshop for example or in the anonymity of a social or mental dissidence. The exhibition then becomes the culmination of this "trade."

This is particularly true for galleries working with institutions for therapy or in connection with people with disabilities. The Belgium-based gallery 'S' Grand Atelier is a good example of this approach through its exhibition of Eric Derkenne or Joseph Lambert artworks. The Creative Growth Art Center of Oakland is also representative of such kind of work, especially with its most famous patient, Dan Miller, whose dramatic gestures give an explosive vitality to his graphics.

In this regard, a gallery owner is not only an art dealer but a merchant in the historic sense of the term: he's in charge of connecting the art maker with the public. In German, the word Umgang commerce means emotional, sentimental and financial "commerce." Patrick Lofredi, in charge of the Isola Art Brut gallery in Frankfurt, underlines the cautiousness needed for such an approach. Some gallery owners manage to take into account the social dimension of their work by helping the artists to overcome their isolation, without breaking the self-taught, reclusive nature of their adventure. To be in the "commerce" is to remain open! It does not necessarily mean to break up with a form of solitude that might play a positive role in the act of creation as were thinking Winnicott or Dubuffet.

THE ARTIST, THE GALLERY OWNER, THE COUNTERFEITER

If speculation is becoming the norm in the field of contemporary art, it is particularly inconvenient when it is related to artists who are against any kind of commercialization. The problem is not the sale of outsider artworks, but the fact that the commercialization often erases the fragile force behind their creation. The existential need to practice this art, and which gives to these artworks an authenticity often absent from academic practices, seems to disappear in the anonymity of the market. Hence the feeling, sometimes, that a fragment of the spirit of revolt - which was once displayed by the avant-garde and is still dormant in these outsider productions - seems to have been betrayed again.

Some knowledge about the artists' biographies must be an essential ingredient for the aesthetic appreciation of such artworks. It cannot dispense itself of a trust, albeit minimalist!

As for Storr's life and extraordinary work, please refer to our recent article published in Libération. In this respect, the number of gallery owners who are not very sensitive to the ethical dimension would probably be too big to compile in a list, and surpassing all other Fairs!

As a conclusion, we prefer to mention the counterfeit banknotes of Raimundo Camilo showcased at the gallery Isola. Wasn't the Brazilian artist himself cheated by his boss before becoming homeless at a young age? Confined in a hospital since then, he makes his own banknotes to get

back his money. He draws his money on wrapping papers and even creates colors with coffee. The only value of his money is aesthetic, even if he uses it to pay his coffee!

Is it a way to take justice into his own hands?

Anyway, most of the outsider artists create for their own personal use, images and writings, and just a few crazy ones among them, such as this Brazilian Raimundo Camilo, dare to attack money!