

# CONVERSATION

## OUTSIDERISM: A DISCOURSE ON SELF-TAUGHT ART

BROOKE DAVIS ANDERSON AND EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

*With a background in art history, museum studies, printmaking and ceramics, Brooke Davis Anderson, 47, has served as the director and curator of the Contemporary Center at New York's American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) since 1999. There she oversaw the acquisition of the Henry Darger Archives in 2000. Prior to assuming the AFAM post, she traveled extensively in Africa and served as the director of the gallery at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina, a historically black institution, where she also taught art history and museum studies. For her master's thesis at New York University, Anderson examined the work of a selection of contemporary artists of African descent in the American South.*

*Focusing on the increasingly international discourse regarding outsider artists—self-taught, nonacademically trained art-makers who work and often live outside the social-cultural mainstream—Anderson has organized such milestone exhibitions as “Obsessive Drawing” (2005), “Martín Ramírez” (2007), “Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger” (2008) and “Martín Ramírez: The Last Works” (2008). She is the author of books and numerous essays on the work of contemporary self-taught artists, and lately has given courses about outsider art as an adjunct professor at the City College of New York and at the Teachers College, Columbia University.*

*Given her deep involvement with the work of the Mexican-born Martín Ramírez (1895-1963), one of the giants in the outsider-art field, Anderson was tapped to organize a comprehensive survey of his art for the Reina Sofía in Madrid. That exhibition runs through July 12. Author and critic Edward M. Gómez, a regular contributor to Raw Vision, the London-based magazine about outsider art, spoke*



Brooke Davis Anderson at the American Folk Art Museum during the exhibition “Approaching Abstraction.” Photo Jay Potter.

*with Anderson about her work and how she has helped bridge what, for some observers, may still be a divide between the work of academically trained and self-taught artists.*

**EDWARD M. GÓMEZ** The curatorial position you occupy is unique in that it allows—or obliges—you to keep track of what both contemporary “outsider” and mainstream professional artists are doing. You’re knowledgeable about both, and you’ve organized some groundbreaking exhibitions, which opened the door to an understanding of the affinities between both kinds of artists’ creations and ideas.

**BROOKE DAVIS ANDERSON** Actually, I think there are several other curators and researchers whose work has paralleled what I’ve been doing. Some represent a younger generation of scholars who

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### CURRENTLY ON VIEW

“Approaching Abstraction” at the American Folk Art Museum, New York, through September 5. “Martín Ramírez: Reframing Confinement” at the Reina Sofía, Madrid, through July 12.

see a multitude of artistic expressions that excite them, not just outsider art. In exhibitions and essays, and certainly in spirit, they’ve been trying to bring different art worlds together. Senior curator Leslie Umberger at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan [Wisc.] and Swiss curator Daniel Baumann at the Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, share the same aims, I think. In fact, I’d say the Contemporary Center at AFAM is just one spoke in

## “INSTEAD OF ‘OUTSIDERS’ AND ‘SELF-TAUGHTS,’ MAYBE SOME OF THESE ARTISTS OF THE LAST CENTURY WERE ‘TRICKLE-DOWN MODERNISTS.’”

an international wheel, part of a growing movement that is seeking to look at self-taught artists' work in a more expansive, holistic and recontextualizing way than has been done in the past.

**EMG** That's an interesting way of positioning your work and that of

healthily explored within the discussion of modernism. Therefore, our being positioned within the American folk-art conversation may become less necessary. This material has been suitably codified with regard to American folk art of the 1970s, '80s and '90s, and I think we've utilized

ists as well as specialists in modern and contemporary art are appreciating self-taught artists' work very directly, and not as a separate category.

**BDA** Yes! However, as soon as I say that, I can immediately tell you that this tendency is not new. It's a decades-old story.



your museum. Still, aren't there some special assets that you or AFAM bring to this broader curatorial and critical-research effort?

**BDA** Because this effort seeks to recontextualize self-taught artists' work with regard to the art of its time, one could also start to imagine that, ultimately, self-taught material may leave the folk-art discourse. One of the things that might happen in time is that the subject may be very

that positioning well. I'm starting to see—and I support this—that the work of such artists as Adolf Wölfli, Lonnie Holley, Martín Ramírez and Bessie Harvey, among others, is assuming great relevance in discussions about contemporary art-making practices. As a result, there's less of a rationale for fitting this work into the folk-art model. I'm seeing an exciting, expanded forum.

**EMG** It seems that contemporary art-

**EMG** I imagine you're referring to the first rumblings, in the late 1940s, of a modern appreciation and promotion of this kind of art, when Jean Dubuffet, André Breton and the critic Michel Tapié celebrated the works of visionary autodidacts. They called such hard-to-label creations "art brut," or "raw art."

**BDA** Dubuffet, yes. And we can go farther back. While I see this discourse widening among scholars and





Above, Martín Ramírez:  
*Untitled (Galleon on Waves)*,  
ca. 1960-63, gouache, colored  
pencil and graphite on pieced  
paper, 39½ by 25 inches.  
© Ramírez Estate, courtesy  
Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York.

Opposite, view of "Approaching  
Abstraction," showing  
(foreground) sculptures by Judith  
Scott. Photo Gavin Ashworth.

Right, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein:  
*Untitled #700*, 1958, mixed  
mediums on masonite,  
24 inches square. American Folk  
Art Museum, New York.



curators today, it's definitely a 20th-century phenomenon.

**EMG** Still, even as this discourse continues to unfold, won't those on the modern-contemporary, academically trained side have to recognize that self-taught artists like the ones you've cited were working *outside* the modern movement? They might have been working at the same time, but they weren't participants *in* it.

**BDA** Unless we can talk about different types of participants. What about a participant who was getting a sense of modernist esthetics and ideals through, say, popular-media sources—advertising, packaging, signage? In other words, through established popular culture. Instead of "outsiders" and "self-taughts," maybe some of these artists of the last century were "trickle-down modernists" . . .

**EMG** . . . who received more informally an understanding of modernism's esthetic values and sensibility.

**BDA** This is what a lot of us are starting to talk, write and make exhibitions about. It is really interesting, this art history of the everyday, and how it gets interpreted by artists of the street.

**EMG** This suggests that, somewhere in the future, an exhibition that newly looks at forms of "high" and "low" culture is waiting to be organized.

**BDA** Yes. I was just talking to a critic





William L. Hawkins:  
*Black and White Building with Collage*,  
1988, enamel on  
masonite with  
collage, 50½ by 62  
inches. American  
Folk Art Museum.

who has long wanted to further this notion of “street modernism” by organizing a show that would look at the advertising, packaging and signage of mid-20th-century America alongside the works of such artists as Darger, Ramírez and Yoakum. Also, Brendan Greaves, who recently wrote his master’s thesis on Felipe Jesús Consalvos [a Cuban-American cigar roller and self-taught collagist who died around 1960], has been championing this idea of “vernacular modernism.”

**EMG** Are there aspects of your work that might be seen as distinctly different from the work of your counterparts at modern and contemporary art museums?

**BDA** I think that what my colleagues and I in this field do—our responsibilities and practices—are the same as those of any curator at, say, the Whitney Museum, the Metropolitan Museum or the New Museum. However, one of the subtle differences is that I spend an awful lot of time defending the art.

**EMG** Really? To whom?

**BDA** To every kind of audience. I think it’s because outsider work is always surprising. So I’ve come to think of myself and my colleagues as missionaries, because we’re championing work that is not generally thought of as something you would see at the Whitney, Metropolitan or New Museum. But now, that’s not entirely so, since MoMA, for example, has shown drawings by Darger and James Castle.

**EMG** The essence of your role is that of an educator.

**BDA** Yes, I’m teaching now at Columbia and at City College, where the faculties don’t normally address outsider work.

**EMG** At Columbia, is your course offered by the art history department?

**BDA** No, but that would be great! The course is part of the art education program. We’ve gotten this art into mainstream museums. Check. Done. Now one of the projects of the missionary curator—and this isn’t my goal alone—is to get this subject matter into the academy. That’s why I’m teaching. By the way, in general, in American universities, you can write a

PhD thesis on, say, Darger or Ramírez in such fields as American studies, visual studies or folklore studies, but you can’t do it in art history—yet.

**EMG** Why?

**BDA** Partly because many faculty members don’t feel they can offer their students expertise in this field, even if some students would like to be working on such artists in their dissertations. They’re still outside the art history canon. In my case, people from both Teachers College at Columbia and City College had heard me lecture and subsequently invited me to offer these courses.

**EMG** You played a key role in authenticating the so-called last works of Ramírez, more than 140 hitherto unknown drawings in superb physical condition that were brought forward publicly by a family in California in 2007. That revelation happened during the run of the historic exhibition of Ramírez you had organized at AFAM. The next year, you followed up with an eye-opening show there of some of those “new” Ramírezes, which the artist had made during the last three



James Castle:  
*Untitled (Figure  
with Hat)*, early  
to mid-20th  
century, soot and  
saliva on board,  
5¼ by 4 inches.  
American Folk Art  
Museum.

years of his life. Now, you're organizing another Ramírez survey for Spain—independently, though, not on behalf of the AFAM.

**BDA** Lynne Cooke, Dia's curator at large, and now also the chief curator at the Reina Sofía, wanted to do a new show, not replicate the 2007 show. She's interested in this kind of material. Keep in mind that, in 1993, the Reina Sofía presented "Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art," which debuted at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and featured a number of Ramírez works. So there's a history of interest there. Yet neither outsider art nor Mexican art has been a major focus of the Reina Sofía's programming, so it will be interesting to see how Madrid receives Ramírez. He's a very different artist now than he was at the time of "Parallel Visions," due to the great efforts of art historians like Victor M. Espinosa and Kristin E. Espinosa. I suspect that the Spanish audience, though I do not know it at all, will respond to Ramírez's work with the same kind of awe that New York and California audiences felt in response to the Ramírez exhibitions of 2007 and 2008, and that they will discover a great artist. This will be a

big show of 75 pieces, including both recently discovered and long-known works. It's titled "Martín Ramírez: Reframing Confinement," because the show's goal will be to take him out of the asylum and place him in the world of art-making.

**EMG** It's interesting that such a comprehensive exhibition has never been presented in Ramírez's homeland, Mexico. A smaller Ramírez exhibition originating in Philadelphia was shown at a now-defunct art center in Mexico City in 1989, but the artist is still mostly unknown in his native country. There are many reasons, of course, to explain why it can take a long time for outsider artists to become recognized and appreciated.

**BDA** I wonder if class has something to do with Ramírez's absence in the Mexican art discourse. Self-taught artists often are not from a privileged class. We're celebrating artists who may come from poor or working-class backgrounds. Consider Nek Chand, in India. Chand's Rock Garden in Chandigarh, which had received government funding, is often vandalized when he leaves town, and many believe it is because he comes from a low caste, one that is not normally sanctioned by government officials.

I'd like to organize a symposium about class, otherness and privilege in the arts. We've talked about race, but we have not dealt with poverty as it relates to the art world.

**EMG** Some modern art purists might say that, with the current exhibition you've organized at AFAM, "Approaching Abstraction," you've dared to suggest that some self-taught artists' works are as inventive, bold and powerful as any of the best pieces in the modernist-abstract canon.

**BDA** Most people think self-taught artists only create work that is representational and based in storytelling. I'm interested in widening the conversation, so that people don't think this field is one narrow path, but rather that it is a whole universe of different ideas and esthetics. Hopefully, I'm always presenting a richness on the part of the artists that expands the viewer's understanding of self-taught artists and their work. That's what this exhibition is about.

**EMG** "Approaching Abstraction" looks at several creative practices that can be detected in self-taught artists' works, including the obliteration of recognizable forms, the use of private codes and visual languages, and the distortion or exaggeration of depicted subjects such as human bodies or animals.

**BDA** Yes. To give some examples in the show, there's a James Castle in which a dark vertical band resembling a two-by-four bifurcates a figure's head and torso. The bold gesture breaks down the body parts into reductive slices of shape and shadow, into muted tones of charcoal and soot, which cling to abstraction. William Hawkins, for instance, attacks painting with an ardent expressionism, using distortion and exaggeration as building blocks of abstraction, and Eugene von Bruenchenhein exploits the properties of paint—whether with the brush or his fingertips, he pushed paint around the surface to imply outer-worldscapes and dizzying mindscapes.

**EMG** Conceivably, you could have made an even bigger exhibition and identified additional creative tendencies.

**BDA** I had four months to put together this show, although I had been thinking about its themes for many years. When you're a curator in a small institution, you become very handy with your given real estate, budget and time. Every curator faces this reality. ○