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above: Henry Darger, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion (Vol. I of the Story of "The Relams of the Unreal"*, bound), 1910–12, American Folk Art Museum

left: Paul Laffoley (1935–2015), *The Living Klein Bottle House of Time*, 1978, oil, acrylic, and vinyl lettering on canvas, collection of Norman and Eve Dolph

top left: Josep Baqué, *1500 Animals, Wild Beasts, Monsters, and Primitive Men, Year XV* (selection from a 454-page manuscript), 1930–60, ink on paper, various sizes, private collection, Paris

VESTIGES & VERSE: NOTES FROM THE NEWFANGLED EPIC

American Folk Art Museum
New York
January 21 – May 27, 2018

"Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic" offers a sharply focused examination of a range of technically inventive methods that 21 different self-taught artists have employed to conjoin images and texts for their varied communicative purposes. The exhibition was organised by Valérie Rousseau, the American Folk Art Museum's curator of self-taught art and *art brut*. A number of collaborating researchers contributed to its accompanying publications.

Works by definitive representatives of the related *art brut* and outsider art categories, such as the Swiss artist Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930), the American Henry Darger (1892–1973) and the German-born American Charles A. A. Dellschau (1830–1923), help set the historical scene. On the backs of the illustrated pages of his 45-volume magnum opus, in which he mythologised his own childhood and his alter ego's creation of the universe, Wölfli wrote detailed passages of a vast narrative. He also wrote on the back sides of his stand-alone drawings and within his

images themselves, making both words and pictures function to propel his big, unfolding tale. Darger's brief jottings on his drawings serve more as conventional captions, but also as prominent graphic elements within his compositions. Dellschau produced text-bearing collage works and notebooks in whose texts and images he explored his fascination with flying machines.

With "Vestiges & Verse", Rousseau proposes that, even by examining extracts from the larger bodies of work of such artists, a viewer may begin to comprehend the overall character and structure of each one's broader, deeply personal oeuvre. She has pointed out that perhaps all of the bodies of work on display here "share a certain kind of logic." Is there something inherently common among them? Viewers are invited to look for evidence that there is.

Some of the less familiar art-makers whose works are on view include the Belgian Ariane Bergrichter (1937–1996), a one-time fashion model who made psychologically and emotionally intense collages capturing everyday-life scenes,

even as she recorded in writing the degrading declarations against her of hallucinatory voices. Josep Baqué (1895–1967) created a 450-page manuscript filled with images of some 1,500 imaginary creatures, which this former Spanish policeman taxonomically classified. Tunisian-born Jean-Daniel Allanche (1940–2015) moved to France and became a theoretical physicist. Among other subjects, he was intrigued by gambling and produced colourfully illustrated casino cards and notebooks documenting his study of the roulette wheel. "Life is a game only if the stakes are high", he wrote, adding, "It is our work (action) that makes the stakes important."

As this exhibition demonstrates, it was the imaginative work of its various subjects that gave each of their lives a sense of meaning and purpose. Revelling in the aesthetic richness of their creations, viewers may also savour the ways in which they fully integrated writing with images to conjure up distinctive works of art.

Edward M. Gómez