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Curating Loose Definitions: Inspiration “outside” the Canon

In 2013 I attended the Venice Biennale and was surprised to discover that the thematic for that year’s 55th International Art Exhibition, *The Encyclopedic Palace* (*Il Palazzo Enciclopedico*), hosted in the Central Pavilion at the Giardini and in the Arsenale, was seemingly premised on an “outsider art” aesthetic and conceptual rationale. *The Encyclopedic Palace*, conceived and organized by the New York–based Italian curator Massimiliano Gioni, appeared to be one of the most recent major

international exhibitions that conflated the work of ostensible mainstream artists with those who belong in the loosely-defined outsider art system consisting of artists who might be untrained, who have mental or intellectual disabilities, or who live in asylums or on the streets. Gioni’s decision to include the work of outsider artists seemed to precipitate a trend among other curators who followed suit around the same time, including Lynne Cooke, Jens Hoffmann and Thomas J. Lax.¹ While other curators such as Matthew Higgs and Lawrence Rinder have been dedicated to working with outsider art and artists for many years, it seems that the recent, more pronounced turn to outsider art has not only continued to expand and debate the idea of the category of “outsider,” an always already much contested category, but has also expanded the borders of curating itself. As a scholar and curator working at the intersection of disability studies and contemporary art, where one of my objectives is to create new discourse for what I consider to be an omission in canonical art history, my surprised reaction on seeing *The Encyclopedic Palace* turned into curiosity regarding this evolving curatorial phenomenon, as I wanted to uncover why other curators were taking an interest in this subject matter that remains key in my own intellectual investigations.

In the interview that follows Gioni describes how his primary interest in working with outsider art is actually more about a reorientation to art as matter and to a troubling of how objects are treated within exhibitions through his own alternative modalities of selection. Apart from *The Encyclopedic Palace* in Venice, other examples of his curatorial projects with expanded notions of the art object include *10,000 Lives: The 8th Gwangju Biennale* (2010), South Korea, 2010; *Ghosts in the Machine*, New Museum, New York, 2012; and *The Keeper*, also at the New Museum, 2016. These projects, which offered significant opportunities for experimentation, chart the development of his ideas in this realm and also offer an opportunity to consider their reception within this framework. A shared understanding of the qualities of outsider art, in terms of its “aesthetics of disruption,” whereby it continues to occupy a marginal position in the periphery, is what captivates Gioni most. This interview seeks to explore these ideas further.

Amanda Cachia: How did you come to be interested in “outsider art”?

Massimiliano Gioni: First of all, I don’t know if I would say that I’m interested in “outsider art.” I don’t want to create some sort of automatic link between the work I have shown in some of my exhibitions and outsider art, simply because I find that outsider art is a limiting definition. Part of my enjoyment in including less canonical work in my shows has to do with actually disrupting those very definitions of what is inside, what is outside, what is art, and what is not art. I

This interview took place by telephone on September 11, 2016.

1. Exhibitions organized by these curators include *Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos* by Lynne Cooke, New Museum, New York, 2012, which also incorporated work by Judith Scott; *When the Stars Begin to Fall* by Thomas J. Lax, Studio Museum in Harlem, 2014; and *Unorthodox* by Jens Hoffmann, Jewish Museum, New York, 2015–16.



Marino Auriti, *Encyclopedic Palace of the World, 1950–59*, wood, plastic, glass, metal, hair combs, model kit parts, installation view, *The Encyclopedic Palace*, Arsenale, Venice Biennale, 2013 (artwork © Estate of Marino Auriti; photograph by Francesco Galli, provided by Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee)

Image description: Sculpture of a tall, palace-like, round building resting on a large pedestal in the middle of a gallery. Black-and-white photographs on the surrounding walls.

Eva Kotátková, *Asylum, 2013*, installation view, *The Encyclopedic Palace*, Central Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2013 (artwork © Eva Kotátková; photograph by Giorgio Zucchiatti, provided by Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee)

Image description: large, dark gray pedestal in the middle of a gallery space containing various items, including cardboard cut-out shapes on wire stands, books, papers, a human arm extending from a cut-out hole on the surface of the pedestal, and more. People mill about the installation looking at the contents.



have included works of outsider art in my shows, but I did so as part of a broader reflection on the inclusion of various forms of material culture and art, including found objects, unusual artifacts, and other examples of works that are made by people who are not recognized as traditional artists. This may or may not include people who are mental patients and other subjects who are typically referred to as outsider artists. In other words, I don't want to immediately say, "Yes, I show outsider art," because what I search for in the inclusion of less canonical works is very much the disruption or the questioning of accepted notions of what art is, and what art is not, and who is inside, and who is outside.

Cachia: I'm curious to know what you consider to be the definition of outsider art, given that it's such a contested category.

Gioni: I have issues with the current definition of outsider art, but on the other hand, it cannot be denied that the category has a kind of immediacy and efficiency, because people in the art world tend to understand what it stands for. In my shows, I have included outsider art but I have included many other types of objects that I think have been less automatically referred to in that very specific category. I came to be interested in this work because I was curious about exhibitions that had included examples of material culture and noncanonical artworks, along with objects that were not even considered artworks in the first place. And this led me to consider artist-curated shows like the ones organized by Robert Gober, Jeremy Deller, and Mike Kelley. I was also interested in the curatorial work of Ydessa Hendeles, and Harald Szeemann, particularly his exhibitions *Visionary Switzerland* and *The Bachelor Machines*.

All of these exhibitions included examples of material culture that seemed to expand the very definitions of art. I was trying to find a way in which I could accommodate a broader set of artworks in my shows, because I believed that the definition of what an artwork is was becoming too narrow, and it was reducing exhibition-making to a mix of shopping tips [laughter]. I was getting anxious about a canon that seemed more and more rigid. So I was looking at ways to



Ydessa Hendeles, *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, 2002, 3,000+ family album photographs, antique teddy bears with photographs of their original owners and related ephemera, mahogany display cases, 8 painted steel mezzanines, painted portable walls, hanging light fixtures, and custom wall lighting, installation view, *The Keeper*, New Museum, New York, 2016 (artwork © Ydessa Hendeles and Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto; photograph by Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio)

Image description: Salon-style installation of black-and-white photographs on two floors of a gallery. On the lower floor, many glass cabinets containing teddy bears and other ephemera line the walls near the displays of photographs. The two floors are connected by silvery white winding staircases on each side of the room.

include other types of objects, and I searched for past exhibitions that opened new pathways. It took me some time to allow myself the liberty of including those objects into my projects. It took me a few years of introspection and also a consideration of the system I work in to see how I might find the possibility of including more unusual artwork. And among those unusual objects, essentially, there were some works that might be considered outsider artwork or that anyway are recognized within the category of “outsider art.”

Cachia: I’m wondering how you feel, then, about people coming in to see your projects and labeling some of the work as “outsider”? Are you comfortable with that association, or do you think this is problematic and reductive in some way?

Gioni: Whether one likes it or not, unfortunately the label of outsider art is somewhat convenient, if anything because it comes with a more or less specific understanding of what it refers to. If you and I use the expression outsider art we can understand each other, because we have a shared knowledge of what that label refers to, with all its limits, its histories, and its problems. But personally I don’t like to use that expression much, if anything because I think that many of my exhibitions also question who an artist is, so they don’t subscribe to ready-made definitions of outsider or insider art. I’m more comfortable with the label of the amateur, which also implies the notion of love and the sense of devotion to a certain practice: after all, any artist is an amateur, regardless of his or her level of success or visibility. The reason I’m suspicious and careful about using the label of “outsider art” has also to do with the recent absorption of outsider art within the so-called mainstream or within the canon—a change with which perhaps I am involuntarily complicit. My position about outsider art is not that I want Henry Darger, for example, to be exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in the same room as Max Ernst. For me, the notion of the outsider or of outsider



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Embedded Fetish*, 2006, wood, adhesive tape, screws, nails, printed matter, painted mannequin heads, 13 ft. 9 in. x 28 ft. 8 in. x 15³/₄ in. (420 x 875 x 40 cm), installation view, 8th Gwangju Biennale, South Korea, 2010 (artwork © Thomas Hirschhorn/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; photograph provided by Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris)

Image description: A man stands and stares at an installation of shelves in a gallery; they are set up along a wall from ceiling to floor and contain many sculpted heads or busts.

art is useful insofar as it questions the order between the inside and the outside. I am not interested in trying to assimilate outsider artists and their work from the outsider art canon into the modern art canon. I am actually interested in exactly the opposite perspective, where the inclusion of less canonical work can help us understand how rigid the borders of our canons are, and help us to question them and transform them.

Cachia: Can you describe your curatorial approach through your own expanded definition of outsider art?

Gioni: Much of my initial work had been based on a rather conventional approach to exhibition making, which often implied showcasing the young and new. But I soon grew tired of this pressure to discover and consume new talents. I started getting more interested in the work of artists who were lesser known and under the radar, and this approach pushed me toward an appreciation of a variety of individuals whose work had been marginalized for various reasons. And that's how some examples of outsider art first came into my exhibitions. Second, I was getting a bit tired of a certain type of interactive or socially engaged art that seemed to be the standard of any biennial, and I was trying to find ways in which my exhibitions could tackle bigger questions or problems that to me seemed crucial in the history of art and culture. And it seemed to me that museums were mostly preoccupied with establishing hierarchies and values—not necessarily commercial values, but a set of canons and norms. It felt to me that many museums seemed satisfied with simply saying to their public, “Look, these are the masterpieces which you should look at.”

So I started getting more and more curious about other types of exhibitions and other kinds of museums—even the most problematic examples, such as the format of the ethnographic museum—in which the objects on view are chosen for



Richard Hamilton, *Man, Machine and Motion, 1955/2012*, exhibition reconstruction realized in collaboration with the estate of Richard Hamilton, installation view, *Ghosts in the Machine*, New Museum, New York, 2012 (artwork © Estate of Richard Hamilton; photograph by Benoit Pailley)

Image description: Free-standing structure of steel frames in the middle of a large gallery space, containing large suspended black-and-white photographs.

much more complex reasons. I was interested in museums where objects were presented and chosen because of a much more complex understanding of their ontological status—not only as artworks to be contemplated, but as documents of a culture, relics of a lifetime, forms of storytelling. To me it seems that many contemporary art museums are based on a sort of tautological model: “This is an artwork,” they seem to say, “and you should admire it.” Instead I grew more and more interested in other museological narratives, in which anthropology, art history, and cultural and visual studies are all combined. In a sense, I am interested in the possibility of imagining a kind of anthropological museum of twentieth-century culture. Of course I am aware of the risks and the limits of this type of discourse, but it is through this thinking process that I came to introduce in my shows not only artworks, but also other forms of visual culture. It was this approach that encouraged me to include other artifacts and different types of objects in my exhibitions, going beyond the traditional definitions of art and nonart.

To put it more simply, through exhibitions I want to look at the stories that artworks and objects can tell us, and I want to understand how these objects tell us something about the people who made them and the culture and the place and the moment in time in which they were made. We can understand more about these objects if we don’t treat them with the reverence, passivity, and stupor that I think are expected in most mainstream museums today. That’s why for me it’s of crucial importance to treat the most prosaic object with the same attention typically dedicated to a presumed masterpiece. For me, what’s most exciting about the inclusion of noncanonical artworks is the possibility of looking at a variety of objects, regardless of their presumed quality. I know this might sound disrespectful toward the works in my shows, but by doing away with conventional distinctions of quality and taste, a whole range of experiences opens up and unusual adventures can begin, and new forms of knowledge can develop.

Once you stop looking for the “great” artwork in a conventional aesthetic sense, you find yourself working with a much wider spectrum of artworks, objects, and emotions. All this is to say that I’m less interested in establishing hierarchies within the history of art; or you could even say I am less interested in art than in the definition of the image in an anthropological sense. This approach has allowed me to look at images from a variety of sources, and that is how I came to look at the images produced by people who are not classified as artists, and by people working in different fields.

Cachia: What is your response to the feedback from Lynne Cooke in *Artforum* regarding *The Encyclopedic Palace*? In her review, Cooke says, “While Gioni’s curatorial strategy productively upends the hierarchies that conventionally classify artists as professionals or mavericks or outliers, it divests the works of all traces of the material and intellectual conditions that originally imbued them with meaning and value. The historicity of ideas is called into question when works made in far-flung locations and vastly different circumstances over the course of more than a century are cast into a timeless present.”²

Gioni: If I were to oversimplify things, I would say she is critical of my approach for the way in which it erases any distinction between art and nonart (while I disagree with her comment about my shows divesting the works of the traces of the world in which they came into existence: you only need to read the long introductions accompanying the works in my shows to realize how much I do care about the conditions in which an artwork is born). Ultimately the difference between my approach and Lynne’s approach—and I say this with great respect for her work—is that she is interested in establishing an order in which the relationship between outsider art and professional art is analyzed. Ultimately she still believes in the importance of defining what an artwork is and what a masterpiece is. Personally I am much more excited by the refusal of traditional hierarchies of taste and quality in favor of an expansion of curiosity toward any kind of object. Her criticism that I have succumbed to a type of delirium—she described my Venice Biennale as a new Babel—might even be valid, but personally I believe this tension toward multiplicity and complexity is healthy and should be what drives most exhibitions. On the other hand, I might be critical of her approach in the sense that she still tends to keep outsider art and mainstream art separate: her view is not quite as porous as mine. Then again, I look forward to seeing how this will manifest in her upcoming project at the National Gallery.³

Cachia: You talk a lot about objects, but I’m wondering what the effect or the implication of your curatorial approach is for the artist. I can’t help thinking perhaps that there’s a social justice element to this, because your strategy also suggests a revised relationship between curator and artist, where the artist is more empowered owing to this expanded notion of “art” and “artist.”

Gioni: From my experience, artists are the very first to question the definition of who an artist is and what an artwork is. Intuitively I can say that artists tend to like my shows because they find new inspiration outside canonical channels. I know that my work might appear to send an ambivalent message about the status of the artist, because one might say that I’m suggesting that anybody can be an artist. In fact I am quite torn myself, because, on one hand, I am suggesting that

2. Lynne Cooke, “World of Interiors: Venice 2013,” *Artforum* website, September 2013, at <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201307&id=42625>, as of November 13, 2017.

3. *Outliers and Vanguard American Artists* is scheduled to open at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, in late January 2018. See Victoria Stapley-Brown, “Outsider Artists Go to Washington (and Atlanta and Los Angeles),” at <http://old.theartnewspaper.com/news/museums/outsider-artists-go-to-washington-and-atlanta-and-los-angeles/>, as of November 13, 2017.



Bispo do Rosário, *Vós habitantes do planeta terra, eu apresento suas nações* [Inhabitants of Earth, I Introduce You to Your Lands], *A história universal* [Universal History], *Estrela de São João* [St. John's Star], *Dicionário de nomes A I* [Dictionary of Names A I], dates unknown, installation view, *The Keeper*, New Museum, New York, 2016 (artwork © Museu Bispo do Rosário Arte Contemporânea, Rio de Janeiro; photograph by Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio)

Image description: Sculptural objects set up on a rectangular-shaped pedestal in the middle of a gallery space. Several cloths are draped over railings suspended from the ceiling and against the wall, and a series of black-and-white photographs hang on one wall to the left.

we should get rid of any distinction between art and nonart, but, on the other, I do believe in the importance of preserving—even creating—a new sense of enchantment about some specific objects and the work of some individuals. So the risk is actually in fact not that of a hyper-democratization of the role of the artist, but on the contrary the risk is that of establishing the romantic myth of a group of special individuals united by some kind of special sensibility, a kind of “super-humanity,” and of course the problematic implications of such a world view are not lost on me.

Cachia: Part of the complicated history of outsider artists is the way that they are projected as people with mental illnesses, which turns them into objects of spectacle for the public. These artists with disabilities are treated as special, but on very separate terms compared to a so-called mainstream artist. Is this the same idea that you are suggesting may arise in your work?

Gioni: I’m aware of this history and its problems, but on the other hand, I’d rather run the risk of failing by exoticizing certain positions rather than returning to what I see as the typical mainstream narrative of most museums, exhibitions, and institutions I see out there. What I’m proposing is, in fact, much less radical than it sounds. Take the Metropolitan Museum in New York, for example. In the Roman or Egyptian galleries, there is an understanding of art and culture that is much more porous and complex, one that includes religious items, functional objects, artworks, and artifacts. On the other hand, modern and contemporary art have come to be treated under a much more narrow set of conditions. What would happen if we were to treat contemporary art in the same way we treat ancient culture? Wouldn’t our museums become more interesting and complex? Even in the most beautiful rooms of the Museum of Modern Art, I am often left asking myself: Is this really all that was happening at a moment in time? Are these



Missouri Pettway, Blocks and Strips work-clothes quilt, 1942; Quinnie Pettway, Housetop quilt, ca. 1975; Loretta Pettway, String-pieced quilt, 1963; Loretta Pettway, Two-sided quilt: rectangular blocks and “bricklayer” variation, ca. 1975, installation view, *The Keeper*, New Museum, New York, 2016 (artworks © the artists and Estate of Missouri Pettway; photograph by Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio)

Image description: Four large textile pieces of various colors, patterns, and shapes are suspended on a gallery wall.

all the questions we can ask? So I would rather err on the side of inclusion, rather than offer my audiences a very monotonous and oppressive narrative that simply reiterates the same ideas of quality, taste, excellence, and that takes the definition of art for granted.

One thing happening today is the paradoxical cycle of assimilation of outsider art. Maybe I am myself a part of this problem. I’m not naive about it: some of my shows have probably caused a reassessing of outsider art. Even Christie’s is auctioning works of outsider art these days. That’s why it is important for me to stress that I’m not simply presenting outsider art, but that I am offering a spectrum of objects, and somewhere within these objects, we can effectively find some examples of outsider art. But I am not choosing them because they belong to a specific category or because they are outsiders. I am not interested in labels or genres, I’m more interested in complexity: for me it is almost a matter of biodiversity. I want to look into a wider spectrum of images because they can tell us more about the world in which we live in. That’s what I’m excited about, and that’s what I’m trying to do: to allow for a deepening complexity, a widening of the definitions of artworks, images, and objects. I wouldn’t necessarily describe this as a strategy, but maybe more of a method, a way to encourage a polyphony or the expansion of our vocabulary.

Massimiliano Gioni is the artistic director of the New Museum in New York and the director of the Nicola Trussardi Foundation in Milan. He has curated numerous international exhibitions including the 55th Venice Biennale (2013), the 8th Gwangju Biennale (2010), the 4th Berlin Biennale (2006), and Manifesta 5 (2004).

Amanda Cachia has curated over forty exhibitions, many of which iterate disability politics in contemporary art. She is an assistant professor of art history at Moreno Valley College in Riverside, California, and director of the new Moreno Valley College Art Gallery, scheduled to open in fall 2018. She completed her PhD in art history, theory, and criticism at the University of California, San Diego, in spring 2017. Her exhibition *Automatisme Ambulatoire: Hysteria, Imitation, Performance* will open at the Owens Art Gallery at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick in fall 2018.