

Creating Lives through Art – An Introduction to Outsider Art in China with Reflections on Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma by Daniel Wojcik

艺术创造生活 《中国原生艺术》的引言介绍及对 Daniel Wojcik 《原生艺术：幻想世界与创伤》的反思

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Abstract

A feature presentation of Outsider Art in China coordinated by Guo Haiping together with an exploration of Daniel Wojcik's *Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma* (2016). The introduction to the special section by Shaun McNiff places the Chinese art within a larger world context and discusses how Wojcik's book furthers an understanding and appreciation of these artistic expressions. Emphasis is given to how the term "outsider" is misleading since, as Wojcik and Haiping show, each artist creates within a particular social context. The work is viewed positively as persons creating themselves through artistic expression and contributing to their communities – an approach which is also fundamental to the East Asian Taoist, Confucian and Chan Buddhist traditions. Chen Shushan interviews Guo Haiping who gives a history of the development of the Nanjing Outsider Art Studio and the program's emphasis on cultural ecology and mutual help. Illustrations of the artists' work are shown. Shaun McNiff interviews Daniel Wojcik – exploring how his involvement with grassroots and vernacular art took shape through folklore studies. The Chinese art shown in this issue is related to the larger international community with illustrations of the work of Sabato Rodia, Tressa Prisbey, Howard Finster and Ionel Talpazan.

Keywords: outsider art, vernacular art, *l'art brut*, raw art, grassroots art, Hans Prinzhorn, Nanjing Outsider Art Studio, cultural ecology, mutual help

摘要

中国艺术家郭海平通过《中国原生艺术》做了特别呈现，我们通过探讨美国教授Daniel Wojcik的《原生艺术：幻想世界与创伤》(2016)进行了回应。对于 Shaun McNiff特别部分的介绍将中国艺术置于更大的世界背景之下，并讨论Wojcik的著作如何促进对这些艺术表达的理解与欣赏。正如Wojcik和郭海平呈现的，每位艺术家都在特定的社会背景下进行创作，我们强调了“原生”艺术这一术语会如何产生误导。这些作品被看作是积极向上的，因为通过艺术表达和贡献社区人们创造了自己，这也是东亚道教，儒家和禅宗佛教传统的基础。陈书山采访了郭海平，介绍了南京原生艺术工作室的发展历史以及该项目对文化生态和互助的重视。文章展示了原生艺术家作品插图。Shaun McNiff采访了Daniel Wojcik，探讨他如何通过民俗研究参与到基层和白话艺术的。在期刊的这一期显示的中国艺术与更大的国际社区有关，这在Sabato Rodia, Tressa Prisbey, Howard Finster, 以及 Ionel Talpazan的作品插图都有所呈现。

关键词: 原生艺术, 白话艺术, 艺术风格, 原始艺术, 草根艺术, 汉斯·普林茨霍恩, 南京原生艺术工作室, 文化生态, 互助

Human dignity and artistic accomplishment, East & West

The featured interview with Guo Haiping on Outsider Art in China has occurred in synchrony with the publication of *Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma* by Daniel Wojcik. The two complement one another; the book offers a broad international context for art made in Nanjing and for Guo Haiping's discussion of what I believe to be the first global showing of art of this kind from China. Daniel Wojcik joins us for a conversation about the interview, his book and the essential nature of what has been called "outsider art."

I was introduced to this worldwide stream of artistic expression five decades ago when working in a state mental hospital with chronic mental health patients. At the time, Hans Prinzhorn's *Bildneri der geisteskranken* (1922) was not translated into English and my mentor Rudolf Arnheim (1904–2007) – then Professor of the Psychology of Art at Harvard University – read the original German text as a basis for our discussions. I found the book to be stunning and by far the most evocative and inspirational source available to me at the time. It affirmed my essential sense of the life-enhancing and transformative qualities of artistic expression that have since informed my work with art and healing.

Arnheim resonated with Prinzhorn's emphasis on the universal urge for expression and what he considered to be innate compositional and design qualities that humans everywhere utilize when painting and drawing. Some examples include: ornamentation for its own sake, the use of repetition in design and the expressive role of distortion. Rather than viewing so-called naïve and primitive perspectives as mistaken, Arnheim viewed them as inventions that fit the two-dimensional surface and make an expression "most visible" – as illustrated in the Guo Haiping interview of the two paintings made by Wang Jun: *Three Mountains* and *Tractor*. This use of perspective can convey a more complex and complete sense of what is experienced, known and seen when compared to vanishing point techniques originating in the European Renaissance that generate "the kind of image produced by lenses through optical projection" (Arnheim, 1986, p. 159). When discussing Prinzhorn's work and the art of Switzerland's Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930) – perhaps the best known of the world's asylum artists – together with the art made in my hospital studio, Arnheim celebrated the artistic accomplishments of people often living in the most difficult conditions.

The work of Guo Haiping and Daniel Wojcik renews and advances this tradition. I am both taken aback and aesthetically delighted once again by such varied artistic expressions. In both this issue's showing of art from Nanjing and in Wojcik's book (174 illustrations) we also have the opportunity to see the art in such vivid color as was not available in the English translation of the Prinzhorn text.

Daniel Wojcik's book stands together with Prinzhorn's classic as an equal that updates the original and restores its wonder and life-affirming message about the human urge for expression – all the while adding its own unique and enduring contributions. It

is a volume that offers aesthetic stimulation on every page and invites repeated reading over time with each thread of inquiry suggesting fields within fields of future exploration.

The book is a gift to the arts therapy community from a professor of English and Folklore Studies – from an “outsider”! It is by far one of the most stimulating and informative works that I have read in recent years regarding art and human well-being. While written from outside the arts and therapy field, it gives an accurate and comprehensive account of contributions made by the profession. It displays the kind of writing and artistic presentation generally absent in today’s arts therapy journals that increasingly echo ever-narrowing social science conventions and constructs (McNiff, 2014a). This insularity – compounded by academic pressure to reference only “studies” conducted according to approved formats, thus excluding the research discussed here – threatens the vitality of any discipline (including social science) that attempts to understand the intricacies of human experience. Wojcik’s book is a “must-read” for everyone training to work with the arts in therapy because of its unparalleled breadth and inspiring variety of illustrations of how art heals persons and communities. The value of this evidence is furthered by its relative impartiality. It is neither generated nor shaped to support particular theories or ways of practice; rather it strives to let the art and life experiences of the artists speak for themselves.

Daniel Wojcik significantly advances the creative and life-enhancing energy of art healing. His book vividly, expansively and conclusively affirms how artistic expressions – accompanied by sensitive contextual reflections – are the evidence the world needs to see in order to understand what art contributes to human well-being (McNiff, 2014b). The same applies to the work of the Nanjing artists shown in this issue. The art is the evidence.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Wojcik book – in addition to simply showing the compelling art – is the sensitive and in-depth discussion of the personal, social, artistic and psychological functions that the artistic expressions serve. Detailed attention to the lives of individual artists and – the exploration of why the art is made – affirm their human dignity. It also helps audiences to approach the work with greater awareness and compassion – a prerequisite underscored by Guo Haiping’s mention that popular misunderstanding is still an obstacle to appreciation in China.

Language that reflects “what it is.”

In keeping with the mission of this journal, I have – in earlier issues – identified elements of Chinese and East Asian traditions that can both inform and inspire the worldwide work with the arts and wellbeing. These include the appreciation of artistic expression and healing as integral aspects of nature’s purpose, the creative and life-enhancing energy of *ch’i/qi* (氣) that is realized through a person’s authentic (*te* [德]) and natural artistic expression and the emphasis on the on-going process of creating oneself as a person through actions that correspond to the transformative forces of nature (McNiff, 2015 & 2016; Wei-Ming, 1993). Where the West has been known to celebrate the individual, the East has arguably been more attuned to community and thus the creation of a personal life is integral to the ongoing creation of the context in which it is embedded.

These “broad brush” distinctions are of course not absolute – in that both personal and communal creations characterize all sectors of the world. However China and its neighbors have, for centuries, maintained a consistent appreciation for community life and the larger reciprocity with nature. This interdependence between the creative expression of the individual artist and the larger social and environmental context is fundamental to both the studio initiatives of Guo Haiping and to Daniel Wojcik’s explicit documentation of most of the artists he presents. These include artists from North America, Europe and Nek Chand from Chandigarh, India – all of whom serve a purpose and “broader community” beyond themselves alone.

Four of the primary messages of Wojcik’s book are in complete agreement with Guo Haiping’s description of his practice: these artists create within a context, the artistic expressions are often influenced by the particular environment, the artistic process is transformative and life-enhancing for both the individual artist together with the immediate community and, perhaps most essentially, the artists and their works are minimized when identified as “outsiders.”

Ironically, *Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma* begins with a critique of the term “outsider art,” a nomenclature that is nevertheless used in order to describe and advance this realm of human experience and change how we think and talk about it. The subtitle more accurately conveys the book’s exploration of how the individual artists transform their often difficult life experiences into visionary expressions that not only heal but also shape and create their personal lives and the environments in which they live.

In advancing this position of creating oneself through artistic expression (which is also fundamental to the three major traditions of East Asia – Taoist, Confucian, Chan Buddhist), Wojcik acknowledges the influence of his mentor in the field of folk and vernacular art, Michael Owen Jones, who emphasizes how the therapeutic function of art not only involves creating images but “rebuilding” persons (2006, p. 71). This recreating of lives has always been a primary focus of my work in arts and healing and, as a person committed to identifying and furthering transcultural human tendencies, it is affirming how the idea permeates Chinese and East Asian thought and history. Similarly, it is good to see the archetypal and essential process reinforced by Wojcik’s book and Western folk art traditions.

It is significant that both Guo Haiping and Daniel Wojcik, while using the term “outsider art,” stress the need to be wary of how it can disparage art and artists. They both emphasize the need to reflect on definitions and the language we use. Haiping, who came to art and mental health as an artist from outside established systems, discourages stereotypic labeling that isolates these works and minimizes their contributions to the whole spectrum of human expressions. He asks us to simply appreciate the work and open ourselves to its expression. These pieces and – the people who make them – are living entities that cannot be reduced to either concepts or categories. Like all things in nature, they are infinitely unique and distinct.

I have always responded to the term “outsider art,” one that has emerged in relatively recent times via Roger Cardinal in his 1972 book by the same name, by saying that these artists and artworks are the true insiders – inside artistic expression, inside the psyche, inside nature – and they model the most authentic ways of making art. Wojcik also

supports this shift from “outsider” to “insider” (p. 23) as do art therapists Malcolm Learmonth and Karen Huckvale who, in 2001, founded Insider Art in the UK. <http://www.insiderart.org.uk/>

I discovered these inherent values first-hand from my earlier experience in helping artists within the back wards of a large state mental hospital. “Inside” does not necessarily mean buried away and hidden (and thus in need of psychological excavation) – which is yet another stereotypic burden placed on the art of people dealing with difficult life circumstances. Nor does it suggest a separation from the physical world. The inner expression emerges from the body’s innate ways of expressing itself – the more natural and instinctive the better. That was what I witnessed in the hospital studio. I also see it in Wojcik’s book and in Guo Haiping’s interview. Looking at the art from the Nanjing studio, I imagined myself there – absorbed in quietly watching and witnessing the artists work just as I did many years ago in a Massachusetts mental hospital, feeling paradoxically privileged to be in such an otherwise hard place which generated some of the most inspirational art that I have seen. The hospital artists showed me how to paint in direct and visceral ways in response to the immediate environment. Far from being lost in themselves, they were creating new life together with the world around them.

The idea of indigenous and vernacular artistic expression – and perhaps Jean Dubuffet’s reference to *l’art brut* (raw art) – are closer to these ways of creating as I know them than the notion of outsider art. They have more to do with the qualities of the expression rather than placing art and artists into a psychosocial and conceptual category. The “outsider” term has perhaps resonated during an era where there has been more emphasis on attaching people to different identity groupings rather than looking at the essential qualities of artistic expressions – how they are made – and the impact they have on the various lives and the human communities from which they emerge.

No doubt the coining of the term “outsider art” is intended to acknowledge and affirm the expressions of those who create far from what might be viewed as “high art” traditions and institutions. But the label tends to further isolation rather than recognize a more realistic and integral vision of artistic expression and the unlimited varieties of it. Daniel Wojcik’s book articulates these semantic issues, contradictions and the dilemmas they present. He does not put the problem to rest by replacing the “elusive... term of convenience” (p. 6) and coining a new one. This is fine with me since I think any brand will cloud the essential nature and humanity of the art and artists.

Thus, rather than categorically define, Wojcik clarifies the conversation and context by describing operational features that characterize the work – “art created outside the structures of the art world” (Ibid.) and “Unlike folk art, which is rooted in... the traditions of a particular community... outsider art is usually considered to be an expression of a uniquely personal vision” (p. 9). This working definition applies to C. G. Jung’s *Liber Novus (The Redbook)* – another of the great works in the tradition of distinct individual visions. Just as Jung had a clear purpose informing his creative expression, Daniel Wojcik shows that the many people described in his book do too. Their expressions are motivated by a spectrum of sources connected to the conditions of their lives.

Interestingly enough, Jung had his own issues with language and distanced himself from the terms *art* and *artists*, saying that what he did “is not art” but rather “nature”

(1973, p. 186) – an attribution that might fit well in relation to this discussion, especially with regard to the East Asian focus on all things manifesting an interdependence with the larger forces of nature. The best recourse we have to this on-going tension with verbal attributions – as helpful as they can be sometimes especially when used creatively – is to put them aside and look imaginatively at the art and hold fast to the images as Jung would say.

While using the “outsider” moniker – perhaps in an effort to offer an alternative to the perspective of the widely read Cardinal book with the same primary title – Daniel Wojcik unequivocally rejects the term “outsider art” as “inaccurate” and even “offensive” (p. 23), calling it “a classification...imposed upon individuals by collectors, art critics and dealers” (p. 13). He describes how artists do not want this “tag” attached to either their work or themselves and how it continues to reinforce stereotypically negative ideas about art and madness – all of which reinforce a sense of deficiency.

I find this rejection of the very language used to discuss a phenomenon – not to mention the title of the book – to be a fascinating experience in communication and criticism. It seems that the use of the word results from the fact that it is now socially current and connotes a realm of artistic expression that is viewed in an essentially positive way by most people – even though it may not be embraced by the artists it seeks to support.

What can we do about this situation?

How do we go forward?

Regarding the artists – we might not want to label them as outsiders, yet we welcome contributions from *outside* our current thinking and practice.

With relation to the art, we can try – as Guo Haiping suggests – to see it “for what it is.” We can pay closer attention to the expressions – remain open to them, appreciate them as integral to the whole of artistic expression everywhere and perhaps even let ourselves and our communities be recreated and improved through our responses to them.

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