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Books // Review

Non-conformers? Encyclopaedic guidebook attempts to redefine Outsider art

Lisa Slominski's book expands the canon of "self-taught" and "folk" artists to include Hilma af Klint and the Mexican Muralists

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Ghanaian artist Kwame Akoto's *My God Apple* (no date). Akoto is a calligrapher who paints his self-portrait onto billboards. Courtesy of Françoise Adamsbaum; Victoire Dirosa; Artppol Project © Françoise Adamsbaum

In the ever-expanding field of Outsider art, aka self-taught, untrained, naif etc, *Nonconformers*, a guidebook in encyclopaedic form wrapped in something of a manifesto, is the latest effort to define and distinguish it. Much of the information here about artists who are widely known and collected will be familiar to followers. Yet Lisa Slominski seems out to rock the boat by calling her subjects “nonconformers”, a cumbersome term with a tinge of ungrammatical condescension, given that few artists since the 19th-century Paris salons would call themselves conformers or conformists.

Slominski, formerly of the London-based Museum of Everything—“the world’s only wandering institution for the untrained, unintentional, undiscovered and unclassifiable artists of modern times”—chafes at the terms “self-taught” or “outsider” as blunt definitions for not having formal training in the arts, “layered with presumptions of a segregation from cultural influence, a lack of creative agency, an unsophisticated aesthetic or process, and operation in a separate trajectory to the established art world”. *Nonconformers*, she argues, will reframe those featured “by demonstrating that they continually defy and challenge these prohibitive characteristics”. The book includes entries from 12 other contributors on more than 60 artists who are (mostly) in what is now the “canon” of self-taught art, including Henry Darger, Adolf Wölfli, Bill Traylor and Grandma Moses.

There are some new faces. Swedish abstract painter Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), the subject of hit exhibitions on several continents, is a certified nonconformer despite attending art school: spiritualism gives her that status. Niki de Saint Phalle (1930-2002), an art-world presence with a commercial gallery, was untrained and called herself an Outsider. Others joining the book’s list, like Huang Yong-Fu of the fantastical Rainbow Village in Taichung, Taiwan, and Mamadou Cissé, born in Senegal, who designs imaginative cities, are from regions that formerly got scant attention. From Ghana, the didactic surrealist Kwame Akoto is a calligrapher who paints his self-portrait on motivational billboards.

Their ranks are expanding. So too are semantic battles. Can the many Mexican “folk” artists without schooling or galleries who work in longstanding traditions be called untrained or nonconformers? Graffiti artists, who are as unschooled as anyone in *Nonconformers* but not included, are not usually grouped with Outsider artists. Yet breaking the law seems to earn them that status. And if all the youth in a neighbourhood are scrawling on walls and subways around them, can you call them nonconformers? Was Jean-Michel Basquiat, who made graffiti and never attended art school, a nonconformer or an Outsider artist? Maybe Basquiat’s success priced him out of those categories.

Slominski's handsomely produced book can still guide readers seeking an entry textbook. Its descriptions of art and artists distil the standard information, yet a section on the self-taught architecture in grand structures by Sabato "Simon" Rodia, builder of the Watts Towers in Los Angeles, and Nek Chand Saini, creator of the Rock Garden in Chandigarh, India, gives welcome attention to constructed monumental projects that self-taught designers imagine but rarely build.

As critics ponder definitions, some self-taught artists entering the mainstream are simply being considered by their work rather than their schooling, a status that we should call *L'art brut est mort, vive l'art brut!* Outsider artists Minnie Evans and [Sister Gertrude Morgan](#) travel to this year's Venice Biennale. And a selection of paintings at the [Outsider Art Fair](#) in New York, *Beyond Genres*, showed outsider artists—Peter Schuyff, Devon DeJardin, Hassan Hajjaj and others—making "contemporary art." As boundaries fall, the Outsider field, with its still-parallel market, is here to stay, whatever you call it. Too many artists with deeply, oddly personal work never crack the mainstream market, and too much of that work will always be too weird or too intimidating for museums and galleries.

• **Lisa Slominski, with contributions from Michael Bonesteel, Mamadou Cissé et al, *Nonconformers: A New History of Self-Taught Artists*, Yale, 400pp, 300 colour illustrations, £35/\$45 (hb), published 12 April**

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