

**OUTSIDER ART BECOMING INSIDER: THE EXAMPLE OF HENRY
DARGER**

by
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OUTSIDER ART BECOMING INSIDER:
THE EXAMPLE OF HENRY DARGER

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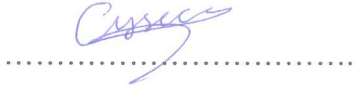
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ABSTRACT

OUTSIDER ART BECOMING INSIDER: THE EXAMPLE OF HENRY DARGER

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Thesis advisor: Prof. Ayşe Gül Altınay

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This thesis focuses on the outsider art also known as mad art. The question of how a mad becomes an artist by the art world is examined through the example of Henry Darger, one of the most famous outsider artists. Different biographies of Darger show us the process of construction of outsider artist image. The main aim of this thesis is to question the dynamics of the art world and to discuss how it creates its own limits while creating a new identity. It is discussed how the mad, the subject of psychiatry, is reconstructed in the art world and how this construction affects the art world. In this process, biography is treated as a commodity and considered as the most important element in the establishment of the outsider art.

ÖZET

DIŐARIDAN SANATIN İÇERİDEN SANATA DÖNÜŐMESİ: HENRY DARGER ÖRNEĐİ

BADE NUR ÇAYIR

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Anahtar kelimeler: dışarı sanatı, delilik, Henry Darger, psikiyatri

Bu tez dışarıdan sanat olarak adlandırılan deli sanatına odaklanmaktadır. Bir delinin nasıl sanat dünyası tarafından sanatçı haline getirildiĐi sorusu bilinen en ünlü sanatçılardan biri olan Henry Darger örneĐi üzerinden incelenmektedir. Darger üzerine yazılan farklı biyografiler bize deli sanatçı kurgusunun nasıl işlediĐini göstermektedir. Tezin ana amacı sanat dünyasının dinamiklerini sorgulamak, yeni bir kimlik yaratırken nasıl sınırlar çizdiĐini tartışmaktır. Psikiyatrinin öznesi olan delinin sanat dünyası içerisinde nasıl yeniden kurgulandığı ve bu kurgunun sanat dünyası nasıl etkilediĐi tartışılır. Bu süreçte biyografi bir meta olarak ele alınır ve dışarıdan sanatın kurulmasındaki en önemli öĐe olarak ele alınır.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mad art gained a remarkable popularity both in the art world and art market over the last decades. There have been books and specialized journals, international exhibitions and art fairs on this subject. Throughout history, mad has been welcomed enthusiastically by different art circles as a source of inspiration. Yet, the interest in the artistic production of mad began as a means of psychiatric therapy. Transformation of these works into art began when avant-garde artists became intrigued with them in the 1920s (Bowler 1997). Over time, mad artists became more than just a muse and started existing in the art world with their own genre. In other words, the psychiatry's "mad" entered the art world as "artist".

In this thesis, my aim is to trace how mad gain a new identity in the art world. I am particularly interested in the opportunities and constraints of this new identity. I will discuss in what extend mad can exist in the art world and art market. While doing that, I will take art world as a discursive field, similar to psychiatry, and analyze the power relationship between different groups in the art world. In the case of mad artists, majority of them do not produce for a market but create works for themselves¹. There are cases where the artists are not acknowledged about their artistic status, yet their art is sold for million dollars. So, I am interested in how they are marketed and promoted in the art world. I argue that, biography plays a crucial role in their construction and how they are marketed in the art world. Furthermore, I argue that mad is able to transform into an artist because of her/his life story. This is about how biography turns into a commodity and with our changing habit of consumption, mad turned into a commodity in the art market. In order to discuss these issues, I will focus on one of the most famous

¹ There are of course some mad/outsider artists such as Adolf Wölfli and Lee Godie who become aware of their market value and even take commissions. I will discuss these cases in the following sections.

mad artists of the art world; Henry Darger. Darger is an excellent example to discuss many issues regarding mad art. Yet, my main argument about Darger is that he had to become mad, before turning into an artist. So, in this thesis, I will explore how Henry Darger turned into an outsider artist. Before getting into his background and why I chose him, I will briefly talk about the way he is categorized in the art world.

1.1. Outsider Art

Mad artist is associated with different concepts and categories in art literature. There are broader terms like *Outsider Art*, *Art Brut/Raw Art*, and *Self-taught Art* or more limited concepts like *Insane Art*, *Psychotic Art*. In this thesis, I use Outsider Art as my umbrella term and focus mostly on artists who have been diagnosed or referred as “mad/mentally ill” at some point in their life. The fact that this art form is given so many different names initially led me to a confusion while writing this thesis. For example, those who came from the anti-psychiatry tradition embraced the concept of mad rather than mentally ill, while the first scholars of this art form preferred to use the concept of insane art. In what follows, I use “mad art” to refer to the times when the term outsider art did not exist and used “art of the mentally ill” when I discuss issues related to psychiatry. In most cases, I use the umbrella term Outsider Art, as it is the most common term in the literature. However, I should note that the term Outsider Art is more than the art of those who are diagnosed as mentally ill. According to Anne Bowler, Outsider Artist is generally reserved for “the work of artists which little or no formal artistic training, in particular, socially marginal individuals who, for various reasons and without prior instruction, begin to paint, sculpt or draw, artists thus presumed to be both ‘outside’ the influence of the established art world and ‘outside’ mainstream society” (Bowler 1997, 11). So, children’s art, prison art and folk art also considered in that category as well. I argue that it is a quite paternalistic approach to put children, primitive and mad into the same category. I discussed that issue in the first chapter. Moreover, using the term outsider art comes with another problematic term, *insider art*. Ben Street defines insider and outsider as; “The ‘insider’ (trained, therefore knowing) makes work that anticipates acceptance through combinations of pre-existing ideas or images: the world knows what it is about to receive. The ‘outsider’ (untrained,

therefore guileless) makes work for ‘a culture of one’, answering to internal, not external, imperatives” (Street 2013). I use insider art in a similar manner; to refer to those who are, trained, active and have power and voice in the art world². Yet, I should note that these concepts are not given and will be critically discussed thought out this thesis. The only reason why I use these concepts is to follow the current literature. However, I am aware that usage of outsider art reinforces the boundaries of the art world. I specifically discussed that issue in the last chapter. Even though it is defined as the art of the mentally ill, it is born out of the search for the actors of the art world. So, the mad artist phenomenon it is not a ‘natural’ part of a mental illness. It is a construction.

1.2. Henry Darger

Henry Darger (1892-1973), is often identified as the most famous outsider artist of the 20th century. He has been the subject of numerous solo and group exhibitions, has been the subject of several books and documentaries, He is a hot topic for both private collectors and museums. His paintings are sold up to 400.000 € and exhibited all around the world.

Born in Chicago in 1892, Darger lost his mother at a very early age. He spent his childhood in Catholic Boy School and was later institutionalized at the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Illinois. His diagnosis was recorded as “his heart is not in the right place”. According to John MacGregor that meant self-abuse, a euphemism for masturbation (MacGregor 2002). In 1930, he moved to North Chicago and worked as a hospital janitor for almost the rest of his life.

² I discuss the problems of these concepts in the following chapters.

Figure 1.1 Henry Darger's painting from Realms of The Unreal series "*Untitled*"



Shortly before his death, his landlord discovered that the house Darger spent his 43 years was like a sanctuary full of drawings and writings about a fantasy tale called "The Story of the Vivian Girls: In the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion". The story of Vivian Girls is about seven little girls fighting against evil men and saving other children from enslavement. The content of the paintings is often found horrific because there are scenes where men choke and torture little girls. Moreover, those girls are often naked and illustrated with male genitals. There are many debates about contradictory nature of these paintings and meanings behind them. In this thesis, I will refer these debates and discuss how they play a role in construction of Darger's outsider artist identity.

Figure 1.2 Henry Darger's painting from Realms of The Unreal series "Untitled"



1.3. Why I Chose Darger?

When I decided to write about Outsider art, Darger was not the first name in my mind. I was planning to write about Carlo Zinelli, who fascinated me with his eccentric style and colorful drawings. Apart from his style, I was drawn to his work because I thought they represent his secret and private inner world³. While I was researching for Zinelli, the articles I read were mostly about how outsider artists are unique in terms of creating their style and subjects “without the influence of the outer world” (Yentob 2013, Dubuffet 1948). So, I was quite surprised when I first saw Darger’s works. They were quite similar to the drawings in the children’s books passed me from my mother. As a child, I used to imitate those books when I tried to draw on my own. At first glance,

³ Later, I understood that directly linking artists’ creation to their mental state and their inner world is actually quite problematic. I will also discuss this issue in the following chapters.

Darger's paintings were adorable and innocent looking. I was so surprised to realize, upon closer examination, that they are actually full of brutal elements. If I did not know the term Outsider Art, I would assume that Darger is a contemporary artist who uses old children's books to criticize the pornography of violence in the media. Yet, he was not classified as a contemporary artist. So, I began a comprehensive research on Darger and his works.

Darger is the first result that comes up when you search "famous outsider artist" in the Google search engine. He is the sine qua non of exhibitions and auctions devoted to outsider art. His life story has been written many times and with every biography new mysteries added to his story. He has influenced and continue to influence many contemporary artists of our time. As well as inspiring a poetry book *Girls on the Rub* by John Ashbery, a fashion design by Anna Sui, a British rock band the Vivian Girls, a video game *Sissy Fight*, and a theatre play *Jennie Richee* by Mac Wellman (Boxer 2000).

The reason why I chose Darger, apart from his interesting life story and controversial paintings, is because of the way he is categorized as an outsider artist even though he does not quite fit into that category. His artistic style is different than the contemporary art of his time. Yet, he is influenced by comic stripes, magazine ads and children's books. Darger's major drawing style is based on tracing on popular media images. So, his characters are actually adopted from the magazines and books. In that sense, he differs from the ideal 'outsider artist' image which is believed to be isolated from society and culture. Segedin argues that, his paintings are not "essentially unlike those of mainstream Western artists. Not only does he use his resource material, subject matter and techniques as they do; his compositions are also traditionally Western" (Segedin 2006, 1). Yet, he still continues to be classified as an outsider artist. In other words, Darger is constructed as an outsider artist even though he does not quite fit into that category. So, he is a great example to examine Outsider Art as a constructed concept.

I find Darger important in order to understand why the art of the "mentally ill" attracted attention and found a place for itself in the art world. In this thesis, my main argument is that mad is able to transform into an artist because of the artist's life story. Even

though, the entrance of the mad art into the art world is associated with avant-garde groups' search for a critical tool to the existing art traditions, I argue that it is the artists' life stories that made it possible for mad art to exist with its own genre. In order to develop my argument, I use Priscilla Frank's phrase 'Genre with a story, not a style' (Frank 2017). Frank compares Outsider Art with other movements such as Abstract Expressionism and Cubism and argues that they denote a specific set of aesthetic guidelines and traditions, whereas the label outsider art "reflects more the life story and mental or emotional aptitude of the artist" (Frank 2017). In that sense, I find it significant to analyze Darger's life and works around the "genre with a story" discussion since it is his life story that shaped his visibility in the art world. He is an excellent example to discuss the effects of life stories on the status of the artists because his story is re-established and interpreted in different times by different authors. It is quite difficult to understand who is Darger with the lack of information about his life and personality, but those biographies make it even harder because they are more about the authors than Darger himself. I argue that every author wrote his story according to their interest. Moreover, with every new biography his status and image in the art world changed. In the coming chapters, try to track this change with the news in the media and the exhibitions he was a part of.

Furthermore, the way he does not fit into the classical definition of outsider artist will help me to argue that outsider art is a constructed notion. "How has Darger become an artist?" is actually a complex question because there are different institutions and actors that played a role in the construction of outsider artist in different periods of history. There is the psychiatry institution which provided a place for these artworks to be produced but also constructed the marginalized image of the mad which was later adopted by the art world. There are also the avant-garde artists which I mentioned earlier whose aim was to find a new source of inspiration in a quite romantic manner. I argue that changes in the consumption habits are another factor since the Outsider Art enters the art market in 60s and becomes the new consumption good for the collectors. There are also different cultural mediators and artists who constantly try to expand the boundaries of the art world. The way they promote and use outsider art has resulted in the expansions of the art world (Fine 2004). In this thesis, I explore these factors adopting a historical approach. In other words, I write a short history of the Outsider Artist and situate Darger in that history.

1.4. Methodology

To discuss my main question of ‘how a mad can turn into an artist’, I explore how Henry Darger is represented and promoted in the art world. In order to do that, I analyze three authors who have written about Darger. First author I choose is John MacGregor. Art historian and Freudian psychoanalyst, previously worked on *Outsider Art*, MacGregor was the first researcher that worked on Darger’s art and biography (Macgregor 1996). The second author I focus on is Jim Elledge who published a biography on Darger 16 years after MacGregor. Elledge is a scholar who mostly works on queer and gay history and published twenty-four books including a history of gay Chicago. In 2013, he published *Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy: The Tragic Life of an Outsider Artist* (Elledge 2013) which received both excitement and criticism in the media. Lastly, I discuss Michael Moon, who has a very different approach to Darger. In his book, *Darger’s Resources* (Moon 2012), published a year before Elledge’s book, instead of focusing on the sensational parts in his biography and making speculations, Moon approaches Darger as an artist who helps us understand American culture.

I am interested in these authors because every one of them grant Darger a new identity and analyze him with different motivations. Instead of making an in-depth analysis of their books, I try to engage the author’s backgrounds and their interviews and conference speeches into my discussion. I argue that backgrounds of the authors affect their reading of Darger and how they chose to represent him. I discuss how his image has changed with every new biography. To examine that change, I give examples from the exhibitions he was part of and narratives of the blog posts/newspaper articles written about him. So, I use discourse analysis method to see how Darger’s artistic image is fluid and can be interpreted differently by different people. Following the question of how ‘Henry Darger became an (outsider) artist?’ I can raise different ones such as, to what extent do we, as audience, look at outsider art in a different way from other (insider) art? Why do not we categorize outsider art as contemporary art? Is it possible for an outsider artist to become an insider and what does this transformation mean for the boundaries of the art world? Or to put it differently, can outsider artists who enter

the museum walls and the market place still be called outsider? What kind of identity does the art world offer the “mad”? How can something be ‘art’ and yet somehow originate from ‘outside’ culture?

In this thesis, my aim is to show that outsider art is not a natural art form⁴, but a construction resulting from the collaboration of different institutions. To discuss my argument, I raise questions such as: Why was such kind of work produced in the first place? What can they tell us about the asylum world and psychiatry? Why are these works, once considered to be artistically worthless, now possess significant aesthetic and economic value? Can we take the art world as a discursive field just like psychiatry?

In the outsider art literature, there are certain features attached to the outsiders: originality, authenticity, isolation from the outer world. I take all these features as a part of the outsider art construction. Following questions can be asked regarding these features; What makes an art work original and authentic? If Outsider art is private and produced in isolation, how do people come across it? Who decides a work is a genuine piece of Outsider Art? These questions can be linked to the first ones I raised: What happens when an outsider artist comes to be recognized and appreciated by others? In his book *Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace*, David Maclagan asks some questions about Outsider art that I would like to incorporate into my discussion: “Is Outsider Art something like a natural phenomenon, bursting out from some hidden wellspring of creativity that is potentially available to everyone; or is it, on the contrary, the exception that proves the rule that artistic creativity is in various ways not ‘normal’? Might it be to some extent a kind of wishful projection on the part of mainstream culture, desperate to escape from its own sophistication? How does our involvement with Outsider Art affect us? How long can the category itself survive, once it becomes incorporated into the wider culture? Is the very notion of a radically individualistic and anti-social creativity something with its own cultural shelf life?” (Maclagan 2009, p.23).

⁴ As I will discuss in the following chapter, specially the first studies about mad art argues that creating art is a natural outcome of mental illnesses. During the early 19th century, both art world and the psychiatry believed that mad has a direct relationship to creativity.

1.5 Limitations

Since Outsider Art includes different institutions and actors, it provides a ground for various discussions and issues. The limits of an MA thesis prevent me from comprehensively addressing all of the issues raised by Outsider Art. First of all, I will not get into a detailed analysis of what outsider art represents for psychiatry. I will only use psychiatry as an institution that provides a context for the production of these artworks and as a collaborator in the construction of the notion of outsider art. I will not specifically touch upon art therapy as it will carry my discussion to different directions.

Secondly, there are many debates about ethical issues in the Outsider Art literature, as many outsider artists have no control and voice over their status and works. Displaying one's private works without consent raises serious ethical questions, which this thesis will not be able to address. For example, Darger wanted his landlord to throw his art away. Yet, his works are circulated all over the world and sold for millions of dollars. Also, there is a copyright issue. Who profits (culturally, economically and socially) from these works is highly debated. We know from MacGregor's statement that landlord of Darger allowed Macgregor to study him in the condition of not tracking down Darger's relatives that may claim his works later on (Gavin 2002). In the case of Darger, his landlords⁵ obviously benefited from his works. In the literature, outsider art works are often referred to as *orphaned works*⁶. Yet I wanted to mention them here because Darger's works can be analyze in this way too.

1.6. Significance

Although Outsider Art has gained attention in the art literature, I believe there is still a

⁵ Nathan and Kiko Lerner, landlords of Darger, holds the rights of Darger's works and they are the ones who profit from them. Kiko Lerner sold (and donate some) Darger's works to Amrican Folk Museum. So they did not want anyone to track down Darger's family in order to not to lose their owner status. Darger has a lost sister. So maybe they were afraid that she may come up and want Darger's rights.

⁶ In 2015, the European Union passed an Orphan Works Directive, which enabled cultural institutions to digitize the orphaned artworks they hold in their collections and display them on their websites.

lot to cover in this realm. I find it significant to talk about outsider artworks as a consumption good because it also shows how the changes in the habits of consumption affects our relationship with art. I argue that the literature on outsider art mostly focuses on the “liberating” aspect of art and providing a new identity aspect of the art world but not give enough credit to its possible constraints. In this sense, I believe that this attempt will serve the aim to contribute to the existing literature on Outsider Art by providing a discussion which approaches the art world as another discursive field along with psychiatry. Moreover, even though there are various books and articles about Darger, there is not much written about the power of biography on the representation of Darger in the art world.

Moreover, even though there are various books and articles about Darger, there is not much written about the power of biography on change in the representation of Darger in the art world. Lastly, research on outsider art is quite limited in Turkish literature. There is only one study about art of the mental health patients in Faculty of Medicine Psychiatry Clinic of Istanbul University. Even though I do no study outsider art in Turkey, I still think my study will add new discussions in Turkish literature.

1.7. Thesis Structure

First chapter of this thesis is constructed as a critical history of Outsider Art but more specifically mad art. In the beginning of the chapter, I give a brief history of madness in the art world and discuss how mad art evolved into a genre and entered the art market in/around 1960s. Following that, I talk about what “outsiders” represent for “insiders” and what features are attributed to the “outsiders.” In the last part, I briefly explain why I approach the art world as a discursive field.

The second chapter focuses on Henry Darger and discusses how he turned into an outsider artist. As I mentioned in the methodology section, I examined the works and speeches of three authors who highly influenced the image of Darger within the art world. I discuss how Darger is tried to fit into the classic outsider artist image and how his status in the art world change according to his changing life story. At the end of

Chapter, I talked about the importance of biography and its role in promoting outsiders to the market.

In the third chapter, I specifically focus on the outsider status of the artists and the problems of that concept. I discuss why Darger cannot be an insider and what happens when an outsider enters the insider domains such as museums and galleries. In the last part, I engage identity art debate into my analysis and discuss outsider art in a similar manner.

2. OUTSIDER ART

2.1. Introduction

This chapter is constructed as a critical history of Outsider Art but more specifically the mad art. As I mentioned in the introduction, even though the art of the insane constitutes a large part of it, the term Outsider Art is a broader category. I acknowledge insane art as the starting point of this genre, so I will give a brief history of madness in the art world and how the concept of mad was perceived in different times by various art circles. Later I discuss how insane art/ist got accepted in the art world, evolved into a genre and took the name Outsider Art.

In this chapter, I aim to present a sociological analysis of the social construction of the art of the insane. I think we need a historical point to understand how mad turned into an artist and as I will discuss in the following chapters, how Darger turned into an *outsider* artist. The history of outsider art is mapped through the intersection of a set of shifting discourses and practices which are shaped by the changing definitions of insanity over time. According to Bowler, those changes occurred in the context of “emerging sciences of psychopathology; the rejection of traditional systems of representation in the theory and practice of modern art; and the rise of a new institutional framework for the production, distribution and reception of art in response to the development of a commercial, capitalist market” (Bowler 1997, 12). In other words, there are several historical factors that have played a part in the construction of outsider art. Instead of giving a linear understanding of the history of outsider art, I will be giving reference to scholars such as Anne Bowler, Lyle Rexer, David Maclagan and Colin Rhodes and discussing the common factors they emphasize. However, I should note that, the literature on Outsider art is highly focused on North America and Europe.

The reason is that the concept itself belongs to those geographies and emerged as a result of the needs and dynamics of those regions. Since I discuss the current literature, I will also give examples from those regions. However, I should note that, being focused on a certain region and history sometimes causes problems such as labelling non-West⁷ern artists as outsider art even though they are not⁸. In chapter three, I will discuss these problems in more detail. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on the existing literature on Outsider Art which comes out of and is limited to Europe and North America.

Even though madness fascinated different groups throughout history, construction of insane art is a product of the constellation of factors that crystallized in the beginning of the twentieth century in Western Europe and North America. In this period, earliest collections of insane art were amassed, first exhibitions were organized, first studies on insane art was published. There were mainly two institutions that were interested in art of the insane: the field of psychiatry and the art world. I see the formation of insane art as a kind of partnership between these two institutions. Although their motivations towards art of the insane seem to differ from each other, insane art literature suggests that the starting point of their interest has common features (Maclagan 2009, Rhodes 2000). I find it important to talk about a brief history of madness in the art world in order to understand the interest of both of these institutions and how the ‘mad’ evolve into an artist.

2.2. Brief History of Madness in the Art World

2.2.1. Mad as a Muse – Romantics

⁷ I used the concept West mainly because of the literature I was following. Yet, I am aware that West is a controversy term just as East. Here, I preferred to use it as a geographical term but I should note that outsider art is a part of the Western thought both geographically and conceptually.

⁸ Lyle Rexer in his book *How to Look at Outsider Art*; “To complicate the matters further, many artists are mistakenly classed as outsiders because they seem to display an untutored, crude, or “primitive” style, when they are in fact working in traditions unfamiliar to Western eyes. The Haitian artist Pierrot Barra is a good example. His sequined constructions incorporate a remarkable array of discarded materials, from toys and crockery to tinsel and lace. Removed from their cultural context and plunked down among sculptures by Henry Moore or Rodin, they appear wild, primitive and raw. But the coherence and meaning of Barra’s work arise directly from the imagery of Haitian Vodou, and his method of bricolage or assemblage, springs from a practice of material recycling originating in West Africa”.

Mad entered the art world as a muse long before s/he became an artist. In Outsider Art literature, the story often begins with the 1910s and how European avant-garde artists became intrigued with madness and mad art. However, before avant-gardes, *mad* was a glorified symbol for several romantic groups in the past. In every period, condition of being mad was interpreted with the problems and events of that time. So, mad gained a new meaning and role according to that era's agenda.

Both Maclagan and Bowler argue that interest in insane art is a continuation of an old debate about madness and creativity. It has been believed that there is a connection between madness and creativity since Ancient Greece⁹, and as Bowler claims, this idea was revitalized during the Renaissance and thematized with 18th century Romantics (Bowler 1997, 13). In post-Renaissance period, the artist, as an individual expressive figure, was associated with the notion of "genius." This was accompanied by a cluster of ideas and fantasies about how originality and self-expression are embodied in works of art (Maclagan 2009, 9). It is with the Romantic movement of the eighteenth century in Europe that madness became a part of the art world not as an artist who produce art works, but as an artist which is a lonely and misunderstood figure. For Romantics, being mad was a precondition for creativity and it is a stage to be achieved (Maclagan, 9). It is a privileged condition, free from social and cultural conventions. Later, we will see the traces of these ideas in the construction of outsider art. Yet, unlike outsider art, the important thing was not the production of the artists or the people who are defined as mad by the society. Insane artist was a symbol, associated with melancholia and madness, who has a creative vision unconstrained by traditions and rules. Here I should also note that, the condition of being mad in the Romantic sense, is quite different from modern psychiatry's madness. It is not something to be cured or constrained but a condition for pure creativity. Moreover, Romantics are quite limited in terms of only focusing on the symbol of mad¹⁰, rather than the artistic production of the asylum patient. They were indifferent to the actual experience of madness. Also, even though they emphasize the link between madness and creativity, they did not set a systematic aesthetic principle, as the later nineteenth century figures such as Rimbaud or Alfred

⁹ Plato: "creativity is a divine madness... a gift from the gods"

¹⁰ As MacGregor observes; "The romantic view of madness was seldom based on any real experience of the insane. It was a fantasy, a dream of madness as a treasure trove of the imagination free of reason and constraint" (Macgregor 1989, 76).

Jerry, or twentieth century Avant Garde art movements like Surrealism or Dadaism would do (Bowler, 14).

2.2.2. Mad Art and Psychiatry

Up until 19th century, mad was a part of the art world but only as a symbol, an ideal. So how does mad begin to be visible with their artworks and discovered as an “artist”? As I mentioned above, psychiatry is very important in the construction of the mad artist. In the beginning of the 19th century, the birth of the asylum played a crucial role in the growing interest of insane art by providing a place for these artworks to be produced. So, first studies on mad art is done by psychiatry before the art circles. Therefore, the discourse of psychiatry plays a fundamental role in the establishment of the mad artist. As I noted before, the motivations of psychiatry and art world share some similarities. The connection between madness and creativity attracted psychiatry as well as the art world. According to Bowler, the legacy of ‘mad genius’ debate in the second half of the nineteenth century, shifted its focus from romantic symbol of mad to the artistic productions of the insane as an evidence to their illness and nature of insanity (Bowler 1997, 15). Psychiatrists approached art of the insane as a means to understand the inner world of the mentally ill patients. Several doctors contributed asylum art to their research in order to understand the boundaries between madness and rationality and the relationship between genius and mad. In 1801, French asylum reformer Philippe Pinel made an important reference to the artistic creativity of the asylum patients in his book *Medical Treatise on Mental Disorder or Mania*. For him, artistic activity was a remaining link to sanity. This assumption later led Pinel to a promising recognition of the therapeutic value of art. Later, American doctor Benjamin Rush wrote that development of insanity could result in unearthing hidden artistic talents in some cases. On the other hand, in the first years of the confinement of the insane, artistic production was also seen as an evidence of deviant behaviors. For example, an art work created by a schizophrenic patient was approached as a manifestation of his messianic thought and visions (Parr 2006, 153). According to Rhodes, the most complete theoretical treatment to the connection between genius and insanity is given by Italian psychiatrist and criminalist Cesare Lombroso in his book *Genius and Madness (1864)* (Rhodes 2000, 86). Lombroso argued that genius and insane are indeed quite related to one another. He

went further and suggested that genius is a type of insanity and needs to be diagnosed as degenerative psychosis (MacGregor 1989, 4). He collected art works produced in asylums by 108 patients and used them as an evidence to support his theory. Bowler argues that; “in Foucauldian terms, the diagnostic classification of the art of asylum patients during this period is part of a containment process in which insanity is ‘produced’ as a scientifically isolatable phenomenon whose absolute distance from normality functions, in part, to legitimate medico-scientific rationality as the guardian of social order” (Bowler 1997, 15). In other words, the fact that artistic creativity was seen as tool to understand madness resulted in constructing the artistic productions as a part of madness. This also affected the potential status of creative works of patients, as their art was inherently compromised by their proximity to mental disease. As I said earlier, I see the construction of insane art as a collaboration of psychiatry and the art world. The way psychiatry identifies artistic production of the insane was later used as a marketing strategy for the outsider artists in the 1980s. Any record about institutionalization, any kind of medical diagnosis began factors that to make the art work more valuable. Even in some cases, it began to trivialize the artistic value of the work. In other words, artist’s mental state began to be used as a marketing tool by the actors of the art world. I will give examples about this issue in the following chapters.

2.2.3. Earlier Studies: Reja and Morgenthaler

As in the case of the first studies of the patient art which appeared in late nineteenth century, medicine and psychiatry were institutional vehicle for the “discovery” of the art of the insane in the early twentieth century. For it is in this period that we find publications by psychiatrists which not only reproduce patients’ works but analyze them in artistic as well as clinical terms (Bowler 1997, 15). First publication about asylum art in terms of aesthetic rather than medical point of view was *Art by Mad*, published in 1907 by psychiatrists Paul Meunier, under the pseudonym Marcel Reja. Similar to the previous medico-scientific views, Reja saw insane art as primitive in character, but different than medical circles, he approached insane art as a way to understand artistic creativity (Rhodes 2000, 56). In 1921, Swiss psychiatrists Walter Morgenthaler published the book *A Mental Patient as Artist* on one of the first and most celebrated outsider artists Adolf Wölfli. Morgenthaler had a chance to be acquainted with Wolfli

while he worked in Waldau Asylum in Bern. He spent long periods with Wölfli and supplied him with art materials. While analyzing the works of Wölfli, Morgenthaler's aim was to understand the origin of artistic creativity and he believed that origins are more visible in the works of psychotic patients than those of sane artists (Beveridge 2001, 2).

2.2.4. Prinzhorn and Avant-Garde Artist

Figure 2.1 Paintings from the Prinzhorn Collection



One of the most influential books on insane art was published in 1922, a year after Morgenthaler's book: *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* by Hans Prinzhorn. Prinzhorn's study was based on an analysis of works amassed at the Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic where Prinzhorn assumed a staff position in 1919 and where the study of psychotic art had already begun under the supervision of Clinic director, Karl Wilmanns (Jadi 1984, 2). In his study Prinzhorn argued that the essence of schizophrenic configuration can be found in the paintings of the patients. However, as later researches revealed, there are some discrepancies in his work. Beveridge argues that Prinzhorn represented the asylum patients as people who are untutored and uneducated. However, some of the

‘schizophrenic masters’ as he calls them, had experience of painting before entering the asylum. Prinzhorn categorized schizophrenia as the most creative group, yet not all of his masters were schizophrenic (Beveridge 2001, 3). Moreover, it is argued that Prinzhorn only selected the most interesting and catchy images into his collection. Some even call his attempt the “Heidelberg project” for filtering the asylum art (Bowler, 17). Even though Prinzhorn’s book has some problems, none of the previous publications got the same response as Prinzhorn’s study. *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* evoke a huge interest especially from the art circles, including artists Dadaist Sophie Tauber, Expressionist Paul Klee to Surrealist Andre Breton, Hans Bellmer, Paul Eluard and Max Ernst. Eluard mentioned the book as “the most beautiful book of images there it” (Bowler 1997, 18).

According to Anne Bowler, influence of Prinzhorn can be measured by the increase in the appearance of the insane art in the art institutions in that period. Gallery exhibitions, collections of established artists and art journals began to add insane art to their agenda. Artists mentioned above, such as Breton and Eluard began to collect psychotic art. In the same years, Breton wrote the first Surrealist manifesto and made an obvious connection between insanity and creativity. Surrealist artist Hans Bellmer talked about Prinzhorn’s book as “to be one of the major intellectual events of this century” (Bellmer cited in Cardinal 1972). Similar to the 19th century Romantics, Surrealists glorified the figure of the mad and perceived it as a privilege position for being free from reason and influences of culture. Surrealist poet Eluard wrote;

“We who love them, understand that the insane refuse to be cured. We know well that it is we who are locked up when the asylum door is shut; the prison is outside the asylum, liberty to be found inside” (Eluard cited in Jones 2010, 9).

I find Eluard’s poem important because it shows what madness represents for Surrealists. Mad is a figure the criticize the existing system. For Eluard, real asylum is society and mad is the one who is “pure” and “untouched” by the outer world. Moreover, mad is not a passive figure. It refuses to live according to society’s rules. Rhodes argues that, madness was a metaphor for absolute freedom for Surrealist

circles¹¹. Since madness was something rejected by culture, they embraced madness and turned it into a heroic figure. It was believed by most surrealists that madness was a state in which bourgeois law had no authority. Their conception of madness was still quite romantic.

In early 1900s, artists were not only interested in insane art but also in so-called primitive art and children's art. Beveridge explains this interest as a general dissatisfaction with the established Western culture and search for new modes of inspiration and expression. Expressionist Painter Paul Klee argued that;

“In our time world have opened up which not everybody can see into, although they too are part of nature. Perhaps it's really true that only children, madmen and savages see into them” (Klee cited in Macgregor 1989, 235).

It is no surprise that asylum art became visible at the same time around European artists got interested in primitive art and children art. Rhodes argues that, even though art works of insane are as old as the foundation of asylums, artistic interest in the creative production of psychiatric patients is a twentieth century phenomenon. There is not much left from the in the early years of institutionalization of mad in terms of artworks, but we know their existence from accounts given by small number of doctors and some artists who visited the asylums. Rhodes argues that, patients' art fall into the categories of grotesque or diagrammatic representation of impossible theories. Those can be found in the works of early outsider artists, such as animals of Müller, notebooks and charts of Josef Heinrich Grebing and illustrations of Jocab Mohr (Rhodes 2000, 48). Early examples of patient art dates back to early nineteenth century in the United States and Britain. However, only in the early twentieth century we see that a small number of doctors began to collect them for diagnostic purposes and scientific studies¹².

¹¹ According to Rhodes, Surrealism circles' naïve romanticism stripped by the experience of Surrealist poet Antonin Artaud. Artaud spend two years in the asylum because he had a mental collapse and was diagnosed as autistic. During that time, the 'medical treatment' he received, such as electric shock, made his friends meet with the reality of asylums and state of being insane (Rhodes, 2000).

¹² The artworks that have survived from the nineteenth century are only the ones who belong to the patients who were artists before being diagnosed as mentally ill. Two most celebrated examples are British painters Jonathan Martin and Richard Dadd. Patients with an artistic past had a different importance because their work was analyzed to understand the effects of illnesses. For example, British illustrator Louis Wain began to produce a series of cat paintings after becoming schizophrenic. Another example is Louis Soutter whose vision and style changed entirely after he was diagnosed with mental illness. There were also other artists from different fields who began to draw with the onset of psychosis. They works were used as data in psychiatric research.

2.2.5. Founding Father Dubuffet and l'Art Brut

Reservation of the art works of the insane apart from scientific purposes had been done by several artists. However, the most prominent collection of art of the insane belongs to the French painter Jean Dubuffet. He is one of the key figures of Outsider Art literature because he is the one who conceptualized art of the insane in 1940s and gave it a name: *Art Brut*. Dubuffet was highly influenced by the work of schizophrenic artists Adolf Wolfli and as well as Prinzhorn's book¹³. So, he began to gather his own collection. According to Maclagan Dubuffet's collection was modest in size and superficially resembled the heterogeneous collections of psychiatrists such as Lombroso, Ladame and Morgenthaler. However, unlike those psychiatrists, Dubuffet wanted to free these works from any association from psychopathology and to recognize them instead as examples of "uncompromisingly individual forms of creativity" (Maclagan 2009, 13). Dubuffet started his collection mainly with the works of psychiatric patients but soon focused on the work of autodidacts, eccentrics and other sorts of creators who seemed outside of the cultural norms and not necessarily labelled as 'mad' by institutions. He conducted research to collect works mainly from France and Switzerland, later included works from Germany, Italy and America.

In an interview, Dubuffet says; "At the end of the day I believe that the real discoverer of a Wölfli's or Aloise's art is none other than Mr Wölfli or Miss Aloise themselves, and that competitions between people who put themselves forward as having been the first to recognize them are tedious" (Dubuffet cited in Maclagan, 2009, 17). For Maclagan, Dubuffet saw himself as a kind of ambassador for these artists. Can we argue that Dubuffet was aware of the fact that insane artists did not have means to speak for themselves in the market and it is the actors of the art world who will shape and give a role to them? Can we interpret his statements as a way to stand for people who don't have/are not allowed to have a say about their work and prevent future actors who will eliminate the Art Brut artists? In a way Dubuffet was already one of these actors by gathering them under one name. In 1948, the Compagnie de l'Art Brut was founded and

¹³ He stated; "Prinzhorn's book struck me very strongly when I was young. It showed me the way and was a liberating influence I realized that all was permitted, all was possible. I wasn't the only one... The book had an enormous influence on modern art". (quoted in MacGregor 1989, 292).

given legal status. At that point, Art Brut was known and appreciated by only a small group of people in the art world. However, with Dubuffet's collection increased the popularity of mad art. As Maclagan points out, over the years, Art brut developed its own tradition and acquired a certain status and authority (Maclagan 2009, 29). In the early 1960s, a series of publications about Art Brut began to appear under Dubuffet's direction. He wanted to represent each artist as documentary as possible but without interpreting their art in order to eliminate the possibility of speaking for the artist. His collection was not for sale and lent in order to avoid the conventional cultural world (Maclagan 2009, 32).

Dubuffet's views on madness, similar to Surrealist, owes much to the Romantics groups. He argued that "Madness lightens the man, gives him wings and promotes clairvoyance – or so it seems" (Dubuffet cited in Rhodes 2000, p.45). For Dubuffet, mad were able to escape from the influence of culture. So, the art of mad was an evidence of an alternative life that is outside of the influence of society. He came up with the notion of Art Brut; kind of art that is direct, innocent, crude and opposite of sophistication of conventional culture. First thing attracted Dubuffet was the fact that work created by the people were so obscure and humble that they did not think themselves as artists¹⁴ (Maclagan 2009, 8). Dubuffet described his collection as; 'comprised of works created by persons foreign to the cultural milieu and protected from its influences. The authors of these works have for the most part a rudimentary education, while in some other cases – for example through loss of memory or because of a strongly discordant mental disposition – they have succeeded in freeing themselves from cultural magnetization and in rediscovering a fecund ingenuousness' (Dubuffet cited in Rhodes 2000, 45)

As Dubuffet expand his collection and continue to publish articles about Art Brut, he set his own criteria about which work can be considered as Art Brut. He was quite strict about it and require originality in form and content as well as condition of social and psychological isolation of the creator. He stated that;

¹⁴ It is perhaps an unavoidable paradox that his collection is now housed in a handsome museum in Lausanne and that what began as a challenge has now acquired its own authority in the field

“We understand by these works made by people free from all artistic culture, in whom imitation, contrary to what happens with intellectuals, plays little or no part, so that their makers draw everything from their own accounts and don’t borrow from the schemas of either classical or fashionable art. Here we witness the artistic process quite pure, raw, reinvented by its author in the entirety of its stages, starting off with only his own impulses” (Dubuffet 1973, 91-92).

However, as the art world became more and more intrigued by insane art and the exhibitions, publications and collectors increased, it became quite difficult to apply his criteria. Partly because more artists are being discovered during their lifetime and it is becoming harder to avoid some kind of self-consciousness about being labelled as ‘Outsider’ (Maclagan 2009, p.14). Moreover, his criteria were not realistic. He wanted Art Brut artists to be isolated from the society. However, that was not always the case. For example, one of the first artists Dubuffet was interested in, Adolf Wölfli was aware of his market and even took commissions.

I find it important to look at the meaning of the word *Brut*. Here we see a genre which was conceptualized and categorized for the first time. At this point, I think the word choice is quite important because it affects how insane art is constructed both in the present and in the future. Even though, the concept of Outsider Art is simply used as the English version of Art Brut, the word *outsider* gives this genre a new meaning and change the direction of discussions. I will talk about the connotations of “Outsider” in more detail when I discuss the complications of that concept. Going back to Art Brut, according to Rhodes, the term brut is difficult to translate into English. It carries the meanings of both simplicity and naturalness but also ill-breeding and clownishness. Rhodes interpreted this word as representing the natural and the raw, as opposed to “culture”. *Brut* also states being unadulterated and in the purest state of things. The word choice also shows us Dubuffet’s approach to insane art. We can see in his writings that he has an anti-bourgeois tone and is critical towards the existing art world and mainstream taste (Rhodes 2000, 23).

Maclagan demonstrates in his book the political and social environment in Europe that affected the emergence of Art Brut. He specifically talks about the experience of ‘the real devastation of Second World War’ and how Existentialism flourished out of that climate. He argues that at that time there was an interest in the artistically informal,

unspecified images in which the materials and the aesthetic were forcefully joined together. Maclagan suggests that this environment may have also influenced the emergence of Art Brut. He continues; “When Dubuffet set out in July 1945 to search for the ‘raw’ material that was the form of the basis for his collection, he was almost literally retrieving it from the ruins of civilization: certainly, in the case of psychiatric hospitals he was often rescuing work from psychical destruction” (Maclagan 2009, p.9). So, we can argue that Art Brut is a part of a trend that searches for new and original forms of creativity specially in the areas that are considered immune from conventional culture. Art of children and insane was regarded as being ‘outside’ of the established culture and was an evidence of the existence of a fundamental creative impulse.

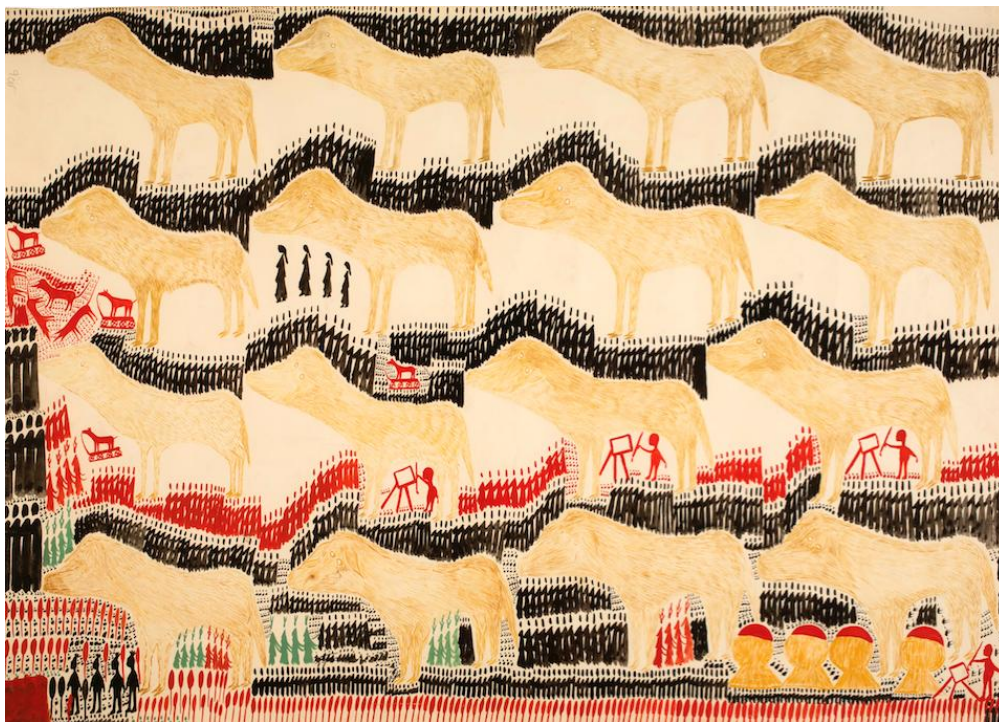
Dubuffet’s invention of the concept of Art Brut systematized mad art as a category and constructed an alternative vision of a creativity that was essentially outside official culture. So, we need to take Art Brut and later Outsider Art into account not just as a collection of bizarre art works but also as a set of ideas and theories about ‘true nature of creativity’ (Maclagan 2009, 33). Both Art Brut and Outsider Art are applied to already existing work that is usually produced without the knowledge of an art market and value of the work. However, as Maclagan puts it, these works are treated as an evidence of ‘pure creativity’ and labelled as they were being discovered. In other words, there is a circularity in the relation between the concept of Art Brut / Outsider Art and the art works. The works constitute the genre of Art Brut / Outsider Art as they are being discovered, at the same time the concept itself validates their authenticity and identifies them as ‘art’.

2.2.6. From Art Brut to Outsider Art

Colin Rhodes identifies Art Brut as the orthodoxy of Outsider Art. Dubuffet’s attempts can be seen as the first steps of constructing a new genre. He collected works that have common features, came up with a name, set criteria for what is to be considered as Art Brut. He was quite strict about three criteria; 1) the creators of art brut should be mental or social outsiders, 2) their work should be produced outside of the network of fine arts, including schools, museums and galleries, 3) techniques and subject should be different from mainstream art (Thévoz, 1976, p. 10). In outsider art literature, many scholars find

Dubuffet's criteria unrealistic, limiting and romantic. In literature, Art Brut / Outsider artworks are often regarded as timeless (or beyond their time) pieces. The reason for that is because those artworks often differ from the agenda of the art world and the official state history narrative. However, these artists are not disconnected from time and society as they are assumed. Roger Cardinal, founder of the term Outsider Art criticizes Dubuffet and argues; "the art of even the most doggedly self-reliant creator is likely to include allusions to the ambient culture, reflecting the impact of an era and an environment upon the individual consciousness" (Davies 2013, 27) In other words, every art work created by so-called isolated artists is actually a product of history. Looking at examples of Outsider art, such as Carlo Zinelli, would help us to understand and agree with Cardinal's argument.

Figure 2.2 Carlo Zinelli "Untitled"



Zinelli was born on July 2, 1916 in San Giovanni Lupatoto, near Verona, Italy. He was the sixth child of a carpenter family. As a young man, he was fond of music, dancing and animals. In 1939, he volunteered for the Spanish Civil War. However, only after two months his schizophrenia revealed itself and he was hospitalized in a psychiatry clinic

in Verona where he spent the next ten years in almost total isolation. Those ten years made him unable to communicate with the outer world. After ten years, he and 20 other patients were admitted to the painting atelier in the clinic created by sculpturer Michael Noble, which later discovered Zinelli's work, and psychiatrists Mario Marini. In that atelier, he produced more than nineteen hundred paintings until his death in 1974. His paintings were exhibited in 1964 but he was unaware that his works were regarded as art. We do not know if he would consider his works as artwork either. After his death, his paintings were exhibited in multiple exhibitions including the Venice Biennale in 2013. If we examine Zinelli's life story and work in terms of Dubuffet's criteria, he is a great example of Art Brut. He is mentally and socially out of the society; and his works are quite different from mainstream art. However, when we look at his works, I think it is quite possible to see the causes of his trauma and the traces of his military background. His stunning works are imbued with signs of militarism. Although he was not influenced by the art world of his time, he was certainly influenced by the era and the environment he lived in, as Cardinal suggests.

2.2.7. Outsider Art

Outsider Art was introduced in 1972 by Roger Cardinal as an alternative to Art Brut in English terminology. However, because of the connotations of the word "outsider", new term brought different debates to the Art Brut literature. David Maclagan explains Outsider Art as;

“The term outsider art refers, in a very open-ended way, to extraordinary works created by people who are in some way on the margins of society, and who, for whatever mixture of reasons, find themselves unable to fit into the conventional requirements – social and psychological, as well as artistic- of the culture they inhabit. What makes this work extraordinary is the fact that it is created by people who have no training and who are so far removed from ‘normal’ expectations that they may not even think of themselves as ‘artists’, let alone as ‘Outsiders’” (Maclagan 2009, p.7).

In other words, Cardinal extended the frame of Art Brut and included different groups into that category who live and create work outside of the society. So, the term outsider art became a common description for the art created by mental patients, prison inmates,

homeless people and even some minority groups. Even though this expansion is interpreted as a positive and challenging progress in terms of pushing the limits of the art world, some find bringing together so many different groups under one name quite problematic (Prinz, Fine). The only common characteristics of these groups is the fact that they are considered as ‘outside’ of society and the established art world. Even each of these categories is quite diverse in themselves and difficult to generalize. Every one of them has a different style and background. According to some scholars, this generalization can increase the visibility and acceptance of outcast groups by entering the art world under a new identity, outsider artist. However, at the same time it can increase the stigmatization because they are classified as “outsider”. I will talk about the problems of this term in more detail in the third chapter.

I find it interesting how Cardinal came up with the word outsider. In one of his interviews, Cardinal explains that his publisher wanted him to find a word that would replace *Art Brut* in the English literature and get on easily with the English ear. As he recalls, after the ideas such as “art of the artless” he ended up using the term Outsider Art. We should note that the term Outsider Art is not synonymous with the term Art Brut. The periods in which the term Art Brut and Outsider Art emerged were very different from each other. The debates and needs of these periods, the motivations and expectations of the people who come up with the terms and even the geographies are different. In Insane Art literature, Art Brut is usually mentioned as a pioneer in identifying and categorizing insane art, whereas Outsider Art is usually referred as a contemporary version of the Art Brut which flares the controversy around insane art and give it the brand value. As I mentioned above, the concept of Art Brut comes with many restrictions and rules, where Outsider Art is a more inclusive and non-restrictive concept as a result of the reasons I listed above. When we talk about the differences between Art Brut and Outsider art, we need to remember that there are 30 years between these concepts. Art world’s agenda was different in the periods when these concepts emerged. At the time of Art Brut, original mode of creativity and authenticity was in the focus of art circles. When it comes to the 1970s, I argue that, along with the source of creativity, being different, being visible with that difference, having a story were in the focus. Art brut has been stripped of its strict rules and evolved into a more inclusive concept of outsider art. I suggest that this evaluation is related to the identity

politics which were in the agenda of art world during similar times of the emergence of outsider art.

2.2.8. Entrance to the Art Market

After a struggle for recognition during 1950s and 60s, Art Brut/Outsider Art was finally accepted as a genre in itself and attracted the art market in the second half of the 1980s. Outsider art entered the agenda of curators and dealers and exhibitions and fairs dedicated to outsider art increased. According to Zolberg; “Booming art market in the 1960s and 1980s, dealers and collectors began looking beyond established artistic institutions for promising new forms and creators. Outsider Art appealed to art world not only visually but because of its congruence with Romantic notions of the authentic, misunderstood, creative genius” (Zolberg 1997, 2). In 1992, Los Angeles County Museum held an exhibition titled *Parallel Visions: Modern Artist and Outsider Art*. Prinz argues that, even though there had been museums and galleries dedicated to this art before, there was an extraordinary growth of interest in the 1990s. Prinz links this interest with the growth of art market in the 1980s. 1980s art market is marked by the commodification of art works as well as anxiety for finding fresh products. Outsider Art was perfect for that search. Its entrance to the art world introduced new debates. I am especially interested in two debates regarding outsider art’s entrance to the art market.

The first issue I am interested in is the change of representation of mad art. As I mentioned above, the interest in mad art started as a way to criticize the bourgeoisie society and the established art world. Yet, over time the line between artists and artworks has become blurred. Outsider artists with their interesting stories, and eccentric styles entered the art market as ‘fresh air’. In other words, after 60 years, outsider art transformed from a tool of criticism into a consumption good. As I will further discuss in the following chapters, the pieces that seem quite personal, and may or may not have been produced for an audience have become commodities of the art market.

The second issue I am interested is the changing status of outsider artists as they enter the art world / market. Even though the concept of outsider art expanded the limits of

Dubuffet's term Art Brut, it still carries the "outsider" within it. Both being an "outsider" and entering the museums and galleries has led to a questioning of the 'outsiderness' of outside art. In order to explore this issue in more detail, I would like to explain what outsider artists represent for insiders and how the image of outsider artist has been constructed.

2.3. What Do Outsiders Represent for Insiders?

In their book *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*, Zolberg and Cherbo states that; "Given today's world, these outsiders came to represent our lost soul" (Zolberg & Cherbo 1993, 3). I find their statement striking because it is quite similar previous Romantic movements' approach towards mad art. I argue that they meant both the artist and the audience by "we/our". Outsider artist with her/his impulsive creativity and indifference towards a market represent what art world have lost; a direct relationship with creativity and art, a personal universe which is more important than everything and authenticity and purity as opposed to "corrupted" insider artist. Fine argues that, "Outsider art serves as a contemporary construct through which Western culture can continue to exercise its belief in the mysterious, ineffable and transcendent nature of art itself. It is the most recent imaginary device through which the Romantic idea of the artist as outsider survives" (Fine 2004, 162). So, we need to read the construction of outsider artist as a continuity. Moreover, the outsider artists phenomenon is more about established art world than the artists themselves.

2.4. Why Are Insiders Drawn to Outsiders?

Even though outsider artists are assumed to create their works without thinking about an audience, scholars and art critics emphasize the communication aspect of the outsider art works. Curator Joe Adams says "It's filled with passion! It communicates [...] you're either going to love it or hate it. But you're never going to forget it". Another collector: "Why are people drawn to this art? Because they connect with it ... I think it's something that anybody can look at this and get attached. There's an emotional level that is displayed" (Fine 2004, p.161). They also emphasize how works are

personal and offers alternative universes to the audience. A collector explains why he admires outsider art; “It’s a personal statement . . . The intuitive artists, they’re making a very individualist expression. This is like a universe which the artist has created” (Fine 2004, 162). Similarly, Director of Outsider Art Fair Andrew Edlin mentions; “Most of the art made by trained artists is informed by art historical references and outsider art is not. I think outsider art tends to be more autobiographical; there tends to be less distance between the artist and the art” (Frank 2017). Outsiders are important because they show insiders that a person can create a ‘meaningful world’ impulsively and they do not have to rely on others of that. They can create work without the benefit of others (Fine, 160). When we look at statements of curators and dealers about why they are interested in outsider art, we can see that they usually compare it with insider art. It is regarded as purer, more honest, more real. Fine¹⁵ argues that outsiders are usually ‘ostensibly ennobled’ in a form of identity politics but this approach can be read as a form of colonialism. He continues; “they are treated as noble savages, directing our sophisticated eyes to what we claim is important and real”. (Fine 2004, 155).

2.5. Features of Outsider Artist

Outsider art is an interesting concept because unlike other art forms and genres, it is not the artists, but other actors of the art world that identify these works as “art”. Maclagan argues that both the artworks and the people who created those works “have in effect been roped into a reservation that we have been constructed for them, and which serves our purposes more than theirs” (Maclagan 2009, 26). Here we are talking about a group that is assumed to not ascribe themselves as artist, and in most cases are not aware of having been identified as an artist. Throughout this thesis, I will give examples from both artists that are aware of their outsider status and the ones who are not. The artists I will mention in the following are not aware that they are identified as artists.

¹⁵ Fine points out an interesting argument; insiders search is related to the “return to nature” and “return to artisanship” trend. We do not rely on ability of machines when it comes to producing the “original” he says. So, artisanship and nature become valuable because it is original and not mass production. Originality and authenticity are attributed to the outsiders as opposed to the ‘intentional’ and ‘calculated’ mainstream art.

Figure 2.3 Agnes Richter' jacket



Agnes Richter was born in 1844 in Germany and was a seamstress. In her late 40s, she was involuntarily committed to asylum as she was being paranoid about her neighbors stealing her money. During her confinement (23 years till her death), she embroidered a jacket out of her hospital uniform and turned it into an elegant garment. Her jacket is considered as a biographical piece as she sewn texts all over it. We do not know if she created that jacket out of aesthetic concerns or if she considers herself as an artist. We also do not know if she sees her work as a political at as Rozsika Parker analyzes it as “a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity” (Parker 2015).

Figure 2.4 Emma Hauck “Herzensschatzi komm” Letter to her husband



Another example is Emma Hauck. She is one of those outsider artists who were subjected to Nazi ‘mercy killing’. She had a ‘normal’ childhood and adolescence yet after her 4 years of marriage she was diagnosed as schizophrenic because she thought her husband and children were trying to poison her. During her stay in the asylum, she wrote letters to her husband which were never sent. In the letters, she wrote ‘sweetheart come’ over and over. Personally, she is one of the artists that I find her work most striking. I do not think she intended to create a work, she was just expressing herself. Yet, her letters are considered as art now. Similar to Hauck, there are many other people who are considered as outsider artist but only create work for their personal universes and do not aware of an audience (Horsager 2017, Argyle 2014) .

The reason why I gave these examples is that we need to understand the outsider artists and outsider artworks as constructions of insiders. Many of these works were not intended as art, yet the art world became interested in them. Rexer argues that end of the nineteenth century can be charted as the rise of the modern secular art by a growing awareness of the duality between insiders and outsiders. According to him, modern artists of the 19th century needed the category of outsider art in order to label themselves (Rexer 2005). That means while insider artists construct the outsider, they at the same time construct themselves as “insiders”. Outsider art might be perceived as a ‘natural’ phenomenon, caused by certain psychiatric conditions that result in artistic creativity. However, the important thing here is to understand that different actors play a role in the emergence of this art form without falling into perception of outsider art as a natural art form. Shelly Errington argues that;

"Artifacts themselves are mute and meaningless. Discourses create objects. Objects may psychically preexist those discourses and their institutions, and they may persist beyond them; but, appropriated by new institutions, their meanings are remade, and they are transformed into new kinds of object. The notion of discourse also includes the notion of power."
-Shelly Errington (quoted in Alan, 34)

In other words, it is the actors of the art world who decide which work is considered as art. Moreover, they can only be ‘art’ in certain context with certain discourses. The same work can be considered as a therapy tool according to psychiatric discourse and at the same time can be sold in an art gallery. It is the discourse that defines the work. So, it does not matter whether Emma Hauck creates these works intentionally or not.

Based on what outsiders represent for insiders and why they attract the attention of the art world, I have gathered the important features that played a role in the establishment of the Outsider artist; biography, discovery, authenticity, lack of agency and indifference, and disconnection from culture. I will briefly talk about these features as they will be helpful to understand Darger’s outsider artist status.

2.5.1. Biography

I argue that having a story, perhaps more than ever, is as important as creating art in today's art world. In the case of outsider art, values of the works in the market are related to artists' biographies. Their life stories give meaning to their art.

In order to explain why art world is so drawn to Outsider Art, Maclagan talks about the importance of background story and the sense of familiarity. We do not always have the background information of the outsider artists. However, some of them left certain statements, messages and even autobiographies such as Henry Darger's semi-fictional autobiography. As Maclagan points out, getting access to the biography of the artist is common for other kinds of artists however there is something fascinating about the remains of the outsider artists. He gives example of one of the first Outsider Artists Adolf Wölfli's autobiography *From the Cradle to the Grave* and says that even it appears to address to an audience, it still has a secrecy. There are some parts that are difficult to grasp. According to Maclagan, the worlds of outsiders are full of recognizable references to the outside world and they indeed represent the world we know in a strange, fantastic form (Maclagan 2009, 18). For him, that is one of the reasons why we are so fascinated by outsider art. In the second chapter, I will examine Darger's works in a similar perspective.

In his book Maclagan also discusses specifically why mad art is celebrated. According to him there are three reasons for that. First, the audience appreciate the fact that a person can create something with aesthetic quality despite their mental illness. Second, the audience shows sympathy for the 'suffering artists'. Finally, audience find the unusual, frantic quality art work valuable. Maclagan argues that the mental health status of the artists can affect her/his status as an artist positively as it helps the audience to appreciate their art. Similar to Maclagan, Bowler, Parr and Wojcik also emphasize the positive affect of mental illness in the eyes of the audience as it believed to generate creative urge (Bowler 1997, Parr 2006, Wojcik 2008). Although it has positive effects, I argue that this perspective has an alienating side. The perception that "s/he can create despite of the disability" can go further to exoticism. Moreover, it can trivialize their art and their 'eccentric life' can be more important than their creations.

Another feature is also linked to biography; discovery.

2.5.2. Discovery

In the case of outsider artists, process of discovery is an important feature of construction of biography. Image of an artist, hidden from the world and waiting to be discovered makes her/his story and work more attractive and valuable. It also consolidates the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. An outsider is only visible when someone from insider ‘discovers’ it. In *Rules of Art*, Bourdieu talks about the need for a ‘creator of the creator’ (Bourdieu 1996, 188). In other words, a ‘consecrated discoverer’ who legitimates the work and the art (Fine 2004, 156). The story of discovery both gives the power to the discoverer but also validates the authenticity of the works.

2.5.3. Authenticity

“This is an amazing field we’re in ... It has more power and has more of an authentic voice than most of the art we look at today. It is that authenticity that invites us in”

- Gerard Wertkin, director of the Museum of American Folk

Authenticity is an essential concept in the Outsider Art world. Fine states that not only in art but everything from our leisure experiences to material purchases we search for the real, genuine. However, these terms are not descriptive but defined by audiences. In his article, he examines the development of self-taught¹⁶ art market where authenticity is a central defining feature. According to him, authenticity refers to the recognition of difference (Fine, 2003). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that “authenticity is linked to an absence of cognitive understanding, creating an unmediated experience – sincere, innocent, original, genuine, and unaffected, distinct from strategic and pragmatic self-presentation (Fine 2003, 155). From the very beginning, insider artists have defined the outsiders as authentic because of their distance from the society and established art world.

¹⁶ He refuses to use the term outsider art and use self taught instead of that. However, in literature they can be used for different meanings.

Yet, the attribution of authenticity comes with many problems as I will explore them in more detail in the 3rd chapter. To summarize briefly, authenticity is gained by being an outsider. If an outsider artist (especially the ones who are alive and still produce works) enters museums and galleries and her/his work begins to be sold, her/his entrance to the insiders' domain may result in losing the her/his authenticity (that is given by insiders in the first place). Authenticity requires being isolated from the established institutions and it can be taken from the artist if s/he becomes aware of the art world and starts operating within it. Howard Finster is one of these artists.

Figure 2.5 Howard Finster “The Super Powers”



Some people suggest that Finster got ‘seduced’ by the market in his late life (Fine 2004). While his early works were respected and sold for high amounts, his later works were regarded differently. It is assumed that, his family began to produce his works for him and they lost their originality. In his case, his status of being outsider is not changed when he enters the insiders' domains, rather, he was expected to create work like an ‘outsider’, preserving himself from the art world. In other words, entering an insider domain does not make an outsider an insider. The fact that Finster became aware of his market value made his work less valuable. According to Danto, art world is an institution where dominant groups identify objects as art. A work is considered as an art work only within a context, with certain settings and people. They remain as art work as

long as they fulfilled the condition that is set by the art world (Danto, 1964)¹⁷. In the case of Outsider Art, who can be an outsider artist and what can be considered as art is decided by the insiders. Just as Danto points out, when they do not fulfill the conditions, their artistic status would be taken back as we see in the Finster example. There are other cases where the status of the artist is being questioned. I will talk about them in the 3rd chapter.

2.5.4. Agency

I already mentioned that outsider artists have very little agency over their own work. Moreover, they are regarded as if they are not interested in forming their identity and indifferent to the art world. This might be the case for some outsider artists. However, there are certainly others who are interested in art market and would enjoy the status of being an artist if they were led to. I find the situation of outsider artist who were discovered after their death more controversial. For example, photographer Vivian Maier.

Figure 2.6 Vivian Maier “*Self portrait*”



¹⁷ Danto The Art World In journal of philosophy 61

Maier is often mentioned as a street photographer, yet she is categorized as an outsider because of the discovery story behind her photographs and the so-called secrecy. She was born in 1926 and worked as a nanny in Chicago. During her life time, she took more than 150.000 photographs but as far as we know she never mentioned them to any one and did not even print them. The photos were kept as negatives. Her work was discovered in an auction in 2010. Emilie Bickerton argues that; “there is something almost heroic about the idea of an artist concerned only with creating. But Maier’s seeming detachment from reception or market is also chilling. Even the most anti-commercial and avant-garde artists harbor some hope of reaching others. By choosing to work in obscurity, Maier shut down all possibility for communication. The act of taking photographs seems to have been the end point” (Bickerton 2018). Since we know so little about her life and personality, how can we be so sure that she never wanted to share her work with others? Maybe she always wanted to exhibit them but did not have means and connections? Maybe she was hoping to show her work but could not find the courage? She may not have identified herself as an artist, and may not have cared about entering the art world but if she had been given a chance to connect with the art world, would she have refused it? To challenge the indifference assumption, we can look at several other outsider artists. For example, Lee Godie and Scottie Wilson gained familiarity with the art world / market once they are discovered and they enjoyed it (Rexer 2005, Rhodes 2000). Even Adolf Wölfli, who is referred as the first outsider artist, was aware of his market and took commissions. Scottie Wilson sold one of his paintings to Picasso and exhibited among other surrealist artists (Melly 1989).

Figure 2.7 Adolf Wölfli “*Der San Salvathor*”



2.5.5. Disconnection from culture

Last and most controversial assumption about outsider artists is their disconnection from the society. The reason why I gave a historical background about how mad is perceived in art history was to understand how those perceptions affected today's outsider artists. When we look back, we can understand why being disconnected from the society is being celebrated in the art world. An artist, which is free from societal restrictions is what artists aspired to be. We can see the similar tones in Dubuffet's writings:

“I believe that the creation of art is intimately linked to the spirit of revolt. Insanity represents a refusal to adopt a view of reality that is imposed by custom. Art consists in constructing or inventing a mirror in which all of the universes is reflected. An artist is a man who creates a parallel universe, who doesn't want an imposed universe inflicted on

him. He wants to do it himself. This is a definition of insanity. The insane are people who push creativity further than professional artists, who believe in it totally” (Dubuffet cited in Rhodes 2000, 104).

I suggest that, the reflection of the issues of his time and his political views can be seen in his statement. What is interesting here is that he insists that Art Brut / Outsider Art is disconnected from time and culture, but the way he interprets this art form is all about culture and time. It is Dubuffet’s (and others) opinions that make these works art pieces in the first place. Maclagan argues that, “Dubuffet’s search for an art that lay entirely outside cultural concerns was doomed to failure from the start, for no one can create from a position obvious to the world around. However, he established the idea of this ‘non-cultural’ production not as something that he believed existed, but as an ideal aspiration” (Maclagan 2009, 14). It might be an ideal, but still it was a strict criterion that led him to expel some of the artists from his collection. Prinz finds Dubuffet’s attitude similar to the Romantic ideal of the noble savage and raises the question of; “Does ignorance of high culture makes a person more authentic?” (Prinz 2017, 265).

The idea that Outsider artists are free from cultural influence can be disproven by looking at examples of Outsider Artists. As I will talk about in the 2nd chapter, Darger chooses his subjects from American Civil War and influenced by children book and other printed medias. Lesage borrowed elements from ancient monuments, elements from Renaissance paintings can be found in Guillaume Pujolle’s paintings. Moreover, outsider artists are often known as untutored and uneducated. However, artists such as Genevieve Seille, Charles Steffen and Morton Bartlett actually studied art but their artistic production remained secret, leading to their art being classified as outsider.

All of these aspects I mention led us to a paradox; it is an art made by people who produce work outside of artistic culture, who are indifferent to the art world and create authentic work because of their distance to the art world and society. So, how can something be created outside of the art world and at the same time has to be accepted by this world to be seen as art? In other words, how can something be art and yet somehow originate from outside culture?

2.6. Art World as a Discursive Field

In the beginning of the chapter, I argued that the construction of outsider art is a result of collaboration of psychiatry and the art world. When we look at the history of madness, psychiatry plays a very crucial role as a discursive field in the mad to become an identity and gain the meaning of what we understand from madness today; mentally ill. Psychiatry's role is not only limited to creating the mad identity. In different periods, new medical treatments affected outsider art world deeply. In scholarly literature, the period between 1880 and 1950 is referred to as the golden age of outsider art. Yet, after that period, with the 'developments' in the psychiatry during/after the WWII¹⁸, outsider art world undergo certain changes. Increase in the use of therapeutic drugs shortened the stay in the asylums and new medicines made patients unable to create. According to Rhodes, systematic development of art therapy is often referred to as an indicator of the demise of outsider art (Rhodes, 2000 49). So, we must not think that once the mad entered the art world, it lost its connection with psychiatry.

Especially with the development of the anti-psychiatry psychiatry came to be understood by many as an alienating and limiting institution. However, I argue that the art world is not so different from psychiatry in many aspects and I suggest that we should approach the art world as a discursive field too. The reason why I define the relationship between the art world and psychiatry when it comes to 'outside art' as one of collaboration is because the art world takes psychiatry's 'mad' and deconstructs it. However, while doing it, the art world assumes certain characteristics of the mad and uses them to constitute the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Moreover, it uses those characteristics as a marketing tool. We can read the art world's deconstruction in two ways; Taking the marginalized and 'mentally ill' and turning her/his treatment into a productive and positive process, or, turning the image of 'mad' created by psychiatry

¹⁸ Also during the WWII, Nazis killed 'incurable' insane population under the name of 'mercy killing'. The plan was moved forward based on a one-page questionnaire filled out by psychiatrists across Germany's insane asylums. Almost a quarter of the country's mental patients were enlisted for "the final solution." This was indicated by marking their names with an "†". Many of the outsider artists such as Emma Hauck and Gustav Sievers were killed in that period.

into a marketing tool and giving it a new identity that will help it to exist in the art world, yet, within the limits that are determined by the actors of that domain.

In Outsider Art literature, many scholars and cultural mediators believe that this new identity liberates mad/mentally ill from the chains of psychiatry and give them a new purpose and place in the society. However, I argue that as with every identity, art world's provision of identity and space for the mad also comes with constraints and limitations. Prinz argues that, "Practices that appear more humane and enlightened than those of their predecessors are revealed to be products of new forms of power and control. This strategy of power would be established in the present case if the concept of outsider art, which purports to exalt people on the margins, were shown to actually function as a system of marginalization; asylum is replaced by a conceptual quarantine" (Prinz 2017, 205). As he points out, we need to take these relationships as being shaped by power and even though the art world seems more liberating and civilized, it continues to keep the mad in the margins. It is all about power because if there is an outsider, then there is an insider. It is impossible to think oneself without the other (Ricoeur 1992, p. 3). Insiders construct themselves as they draw the lines between insider and outsider and as they position themselves vis-à-vis the other. According to Andrew Abbott, boundary making is essential for any group. In every occupation we differentiate ourselves from the others and inevitably create boundaries (Abbott cited in Fine, 2004, 52). However, this categorization process and boundaries can lead to discrimination. I will discuss the limitations of the art world and the problems drive from them in the 3rd chapter in greater detail. What I want to emphasize there is that the art world should be considered not only a liberating but also a shaping and restricting field. I will refer to the art world in this framework while I discuss why Henry Darger is still an outsider and why he cannot convert to an insider in the second chapter.

3. HENRY DARGER

In this chapter, my aim is to explore how Darger turns into an artist, but more specifically an outsider artist. For that, I analyze narratives of different Darger scholars. I choose three authors which I find most influential; John MacGregor, Jim Elledge and Michael Moon. While Elledge (2013) and MacGregor (1996) wrote biographies of Darger, Moon (2012) suggested a different reading of Darger and wrote about his sources and influences. Instead of doing an in-dept analysis of their books, I will analyze the backgrounds of the authors and their approach to Darger. My aim is to illustrate how Darger is portrayed by these authors and how they influenced the image of Darger in the art world. In order to understand their influence, I will examine exhibitions and news about him. I especially want to focus on how his biography is constructed because as I mentioned in the introduction, I approach outsider art as a genre in which the story behind the artist constitutes the centerpiece. I argue that the way their biography is shaped and promoted makes these people (outsider) artists. In that sense, I find Darger an important example to discuss outsider art as a ‘genre with a story’ (Frank 2017)

In my first chapter, I discussed the kind of features the art world attributed to the mad in order to turn them into an artist; e.g. authenticity, indifference and disconnection, lack of agency, discovery and biography. In this chapter, I will briefly analyze Darger in terms of these features and how they play a role in the construction of his artist status. Some scholars argue that those features instituted an established outsider artists image, specially based on Dubuffet’s arguments and first discovered artists such as Adolf Wölfli and Martin Ramirez. So, when a new potential outsider artist comes out, s/he is compared with those artists and see if s/he meets the criteria such as having a mental illness or being distance from the art world. In this chapter I argue that Darger is also

projected to those criteria. Yet, because he does not quite fit into them, he had to turn into “mad” before he could be considered an artist.

3.1. Who Is Darger?

Similar to many outsider artists, literature on Darger usually focuses on his life rather than his art. I am aware that this is also an outcome of the construction of outsider artist. It is quite difficult to come across an aesthetic discussion about Darger’s art without getting exposed to his ‘outsiderness’ or ‘sensational life’. In this thesis, I will reverse the order and talk about him as an artist before giving details about his life.

Figure 3.1 Henry Darger “Untitled”



3.2. Darger’s Art

Chicago based author and visual artist Henry Darger is mostly known for his 15,000-page epic called *The Storm of the Vivian Girls in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. He also has a semi-autobiographical book called *History of My Life* and further stories of Vivian girls *Crazy House* as well as hundreds of drawings, paintings and collages related to his writings.

In the Realms of the Unreal is a narrative story, written in fifteen volumes, alongside reference books that list the character names, battles and outlining of chapters. The story takes place in an imaginary planet and narrates a war between evil Glandelinia and Christian nation of Angelinia. Throughout the story, seven Vivian sisters of Angelinia, Violet, Joice, Jennie, Catherine, Hettie, Daisy and Evangeline, try to save the kids in Glandelinia from slavery. Story unfolds with endless bloody battles with violent descriptions and ends in the victory of the Christian nation.

He began to develop his story sometime between 1909 and 1910 and began painting in the 1960s. His paintings vary from small watercolor paintings to 4 meters wall murals. One of the first Darger scholars, John Macgregor describes his work as; "The most extensive body of secret fantasy material ever accumulated by one man" (MacGregor cited in Rhodes 2000, 109). What we understand from his notes is that he began his paintings as illustrations to support the text, but as he continued, visual materials began to constitute a separate body of work. Just like his writing, his paintings are also quite narrative based¹⁹ and follow a story line. In order to create his works, he would trace or cut images from magazines, children's books and comics. If they were not in the size he wanted, he would get them enlarged them in the local drugstore. Some argue that Darger had trouble drawing figures (Boxer 2000), I do not consider it necessary as a lack. That might be his method of teaching himself how to draw. It also shows us how creative and practical he is in order to produce images in his head.

¹⁹ "he also developed a way of representing sequential events in his narrative by describing these events simultaneously in a horizontal series from left to right. This method of storytelling was used by Hellenistic and Medieval artists as well as early Renaissance fresco painters such as Masaccio in Florence and Piero della Francesca in his Arezzo murals. It is highly unlikely that Darger ever saw reproductions of these works, although something like this device is found in some comic strips. He also used what Gombrich called a "chorus effect" where a group of figures leads you to focus elsewhere, such as in Da Vinci's "Last Supper". His color often embellishes the emotional content of the events being described in the painting." (Segedin, 3)

Figure 3.2 Henry Darger “Untitled”

Figure 3.3 American Magazine Cover



What makes Darger’s art different and controversial is his depictions of violence and the penises he drew on little naked girls. Priscilla Frank points out that Darger’s art, at first glance, seems like a “whimsical, virtuous, even sweet with cartoonish young girls sprinkled across pastel-tinted landscapes populated by butterflies, flowers and puffy clouds” (Frank 2015b). However, when we look at them closely we see horrific and twisted details of his art. It is full of torture and pain. The fact that he illustrates these horrific scenes in a playful pastoral style, makes them even more powerful and disturbing. I argue that Darger’s art is compelling both in its strangeness and its remarkable familiarity. Seeing little girl figures that we are familiar with from children’s books and popular media in the scenes of torture, makes Darger’s work more striking. As I will discuss in the following sections, this aspect leads some scholars to reflect on Darger’s inner world, while others find it as an opportunity to discuss the representation of little girls in the American culture and media (Sparapani 2016).

In addition to his style and controversial subjects, cultural/political environment and the artistic trends of the time of his discovery play a role in his fame. Moreover, his art runs parallel to the visual arts of 70s (time of his discovery), where “a turn to narrative

and illustration, preoccupation with sexual fluidity, reborn collage esthetic and affection for esoteric cosmologies” (Davis 2013, 2) became popular in the art world and media. I argue in every period, people can find traces of themselves, and project the debates of their time on to the works of Darger. In his article Steven Dubin makes a statement about folk artist Jesse Howard; “Howard’s work seems more and more contemporary as time goes on” (Dubin 1997). I think we can argue the same thing for Darger. This is because Darger’s art does not belong to the fine art tradition and the official history narrative. Yet, it is still full of social and cultural references. Since his art is not fixed in a movement or time, his art can communicate with diverse audiences across time. Biesenbach points out that Darger is very relevant today because “perhaps his focus on war and violence, belief and despair and the heaven and hell of human interaction seem all too contemporary and speak to the deepest anxieties of our media-driven society” (Biesenbach 2014, 11). When we analyze Darger in that manner, he is a contemporary artist. Yet, in the art world he is categorized as an outsider. In the following sections, I discuss why Darger is an outsider and cannot be an insider.

3.3. Darger’s Life

In this section, I try to tell Darger’s life story as much as I can without giving dramatic and sensational details. In what follows, I criticize what kind of elements authors have chosen to present about him. It is very difficult to write his biography without replicating those choices.

Henry Joseph Darger was born in April 12, 1892 in the south side of Chicago. His father, also named Henry, was a tailor, having migrated from Germany in 1874. His mother Rosa was from Wisconsin. When Darger was four years old, his mother died right after giving birth to his sister who was given up for adoption shortly. He spent the next four years with his father and attended a Catholic boys’ school until his father started living in a ‘poor house’ because of his illness. According to his own testament, Darger was exhibiting aggressive behavior and was examined by doctors several times. At the age of twelve, Darger was committed to the Lincoln Asylum for Feeble Minded

Children. His diagnosis was recorded as “his heart was not in the right place²⁰”. After he found out his father’s death, he tried to escape the asylum several times. At the age of seventeen, he succeeded to escape and made his way back to Chicago. With the help of his godmother, he started to work as a janitor at Saint Joseph’s Hospital (Bonesteel 2000).

He started to work on his manuscript *In the Realms of the Unreal* sometime between 1909 and 1910. Interestingly, even though the work was not stolen or lost, he immediately started to rewrite it after finishing (Miller 2012, 9). In 1917, he was drafted for the United States Army but as he mentioned in his autobiography, he was discharged because he exaggerated his poor vision (Bonesteel 2000). In 1922, he started to work in Grant Hospital in Chicago and ten years later he moved to a rooming house at 851 Webster Avenue where he spent most of his remaining life. In 1972, he moved to a poor house because of his health conditions and after one year on April 13, 1973 he died.

Figure 3.4 Henry Darger’s Room

²⁰ A phrase for self abusive masturbation



He produced most of his oeuvre in 851 Webster, which was later brought to light by his landlord, photographer Nathan Lerner. Miller argues that; “Darger lived a routine and somewhat mundane life, working at a series of labor-intensive low paying jobs from age of seventeen until his retirement at age of seventy-one. Darger worked full time, devoting free hours and savings to the development of his creative pursuits. He attended church regularly. He visited local amusement parks and the World’s Fair, had his typewriter repaired, purchased art supplies and books including classic literature, read newspapers and magazines and listened to music.” (Miller 2012, 9). Also, according to some biographies (Bonesteel 2000, Elledge 2013) of him, as an adult, he only had one friend, Luxembourg immigrant William Schloeder²¹. According to Bonesteel, they met during his first years in Chicago after the asylum. He was a frequent guest in Schloeder’s home. Darger even gave a role to William in his novel as if he and William had a foundation for protecting children (Moon 2012). Later in Elledge’s book their relationship is interpreted as a romantic relationship yet there is no evidence of that in Darger’s writings.

²¹ The reason why I wanted to give these details is to show how he is engaged with the outer world even though it was limited. I find this information important regarding his outsider status.

3.4. Othering Darger

In what follows, I analyze three different authors which I find the most influential among the Darger scholars. Instead of an in-depth review of their books, I focus on common themes they discuss and how they construct Darger's biography based on those themes. I also look at interviews and conference speeches to understand the framework they suggest for Darger.

The first author I will be discussing is John MacGregor. Art historian and Freudian psychoanalyst, with previous writings on Outsider Art, MacGregor was the first researcher who worked on Darger's art and biography. I argue that being the first scholar and using the discourse of psychiatry made his research very powerful in terms of creating the image of Darger in the art world. In other words, Darger's reputation was like a blank space before MacGregor and he had the privilege to shape it. Grounding his discussion in psychoanalysis, MacGregor created a convincing framework through which Darger's life and art would be perceived in the years that followed. His book *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal* (1996) mostly focuses on the themes of childhood traumas and repression. There is also another author who works on Darger's biography at the same time as MacGregor and edits the works of Darger to be published: Michael Bonesteel. I will not examine Bonesteel's work (2000) specifically but will give references to him time to time because, similar to MacGregor, he also uses the psychiatric discourse yet develops quite different interpretations than MacGregor.

MacGregor began working on Darger as a request from Darger's landlord Nathan Lerner. He conducted his research by living in the apartment of Darger and produced a 720-page study. In addition to the book he published in 1997, he also gave various lectures and conference talk on Darger and made some sensational statements such as Darger being a potential serial killer. His main argument was that through his art, Darger was representing violent urges toward children.

The second author I focus on is Jim Elledge who published a biography on Darger 16 years after MacGregor. Elledge is a scholar who mostly works on queer and gay history

and published twenty-four books including a history of gay Chicago. In 2013, he published *Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy: The Tragic Life of an Outsider Artist* which received both excitement and criticism in the media. Elledge has a very different approach to Darger and his main argument is that Darger was having a secret gay life and his art represents his abusive childhood rather than his repressive inner world. Even though I find Elledge's book quite speculative and closer to fiction than biography, I think his book influenced Darger's image in the media and art world and gave it a new framework. I argue that, in the 16 years between the two books, the agenda and dominant discourses in the art world had changed and Darger's life story had opened for new interpretations. Elledge both influenced by that changing agenda and his background while he was constructing Darger's biography.

Lastly, I will discuss Michael Moon, who has a very different approach to Darger. In his book, *Darger's Resources*, published a year before Elledge's book, instead of focusing on the sensational parts in his biography and making speculations²², Moon approaches Darger as an artist who helps us understand American culture. In his book, in order to challenge the past interpretations of Darger, such as MacGregor's claim about Darger being a potential serial killer, Moon examines the reading materials that shaped his creative life. I find Moon's approach worth mentioning both to discuss Darger's status as an outsider artist and to show how he can be studied from a different perspective. Both in terms of his method, subjects and the impact he had in the art world, Darger is not an outsider artist for Moon. He refers to Darger as a visual artist. I must say that I have observed similar approaches to Moon's in the recent dissertations and articles on Darger. I will be giving references to them below.

In order to understand how Darger's life story is constructed differently and how it affected his artistic status, I will focus on some elements in his life and show how these authors take and interpret these elements to narrate Darger's life story.

3.4.1. Lincoln Asylum

²² He talks about some of the speculations about Darger that Macgregor raises. For example, he discusses Darger's relation with William. However, he only uses these information to support his argument about Darger not being an outsider. He does not focus on this relationship like Elledge.

Lincoln Asylum, not only for the authors I mentioned above but for almost all the scholars who work on Darger, is an important reference point to understand his art and inner world (Trent, Miller, Sparapani, Frank). First of all, I argue, Lincoln Asylum reference supports the discourse of ‘mentally ill outsider artist’ and serves as an element to enable people to link Darger with mental illness. Even though, unlike many other Outsider Artists, Darger had not been institutionalized during his adulthood. According to the official records, the reason why Darger was sent to the asylum was masturbating in public. Some scholars also support this information with giving examples from his violent behaviors before he was sent to the asylum, such as setting a fire, slashing a nun with a knife, throwing ashes into the eyes of a peer (Elledge, MacGregor, Bonesteel). These behaviors and his institutionalized past are used as an evidence to support MacGregor’s thesis; he was a potential serial killer and his art represents his repressive aggression. Later, MacGregor diagnosed Darger with Asperger Syndrome, which is a type of autism. He does not link his autism with being a potential serial killer, yet the records of Lincoln asylum help him to diagnose Darger.

On the other hand, Elledge²³ approaches Lincoln Asylum differently. He does not agree with MacGregor and argues that the violent scenes in his art comes from his own childhood experiences, not his repressed violence. So, for him Lincoln Asylum is the source of his violent scenes. He points out; “Based on my research, those scenes of children being tortured by adults reflect what he experienced as a child – principally at the asylum, probably, but perhaps also elsewhere” (Kevin 2013). Yet, his research is not based on Darger’s own testimony but asylum records. He examines official records of the asylum during Darger’s stay. He states; “There was an investigation by a committee formed by the legislature of the state of Illinois in the 1908, the year before Darger ran away from the asylum, and the findings were published in a 1000-page book in 1911. In that, there’s evidence that children at the asylum were psychically abused, they were beaten with boards, that sort of thing. And there’s a hint that they were sexually abused” (Kevin 2013). He gives horrific examples from the report and argues that Darger might

²³ In an interview, Elledge refuses mental illness assumptions. He states that; “People found out that he’d been locked up, but few people bothered to figure out why. In 1904, when he was 12 years old, Darger was put in the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Lincoln, he was diagnosed as a ‘self-abuser’. That was the term used at the time for masturbator. He’d been caught masturbating, and they locked him up in the asylum because of that, not for any other reason. There’s no evidence that he was schizophrenic” (Kevin 2013).

be witness to those events; "a child ravaged by rats, a doctor who died after attempting self-castration²⁴, a teacher who used inmate corpses for anatomy lessons" (Park 2002).

Throughout his book, Elledge usually makes statements based on speculation and assumption. He writes about the times Darger spent in asylum as; "despite such a lengthy stay, he never once even hinted about what happened to him behind its walls, which may suggest how traumatic it had been for him" (Worley 2013). However, in his autobiography, Darger recalls asylum as home and even calls it "heaven" (Moon 2012, 11). Elledge might be right and Darger may not prefer to recall/write those events because of their traumatic events. Yet, I am not interested in how Darger chose to represent himself. Rather, I am interested in how authors chose to represent him. I find it important how these authors chose to approach the 'sensational' Lincoln asylum different than Darger and used it as a crucial factor in constructing his biography. Although Elledge's writing style is criticized for being close to fiction than facts, I find his work important in terms of offering a new framework as oppose to MacGregor's psychiatric discourse of mental disorder.

Lastly, Moon does not find the asylum record quite satisfactory however he argues that they may offer a new context to understand Darger's art. He states; "Darger's fearful fascination in writing and painting with anatomizing and dissecting children's bodies" might be a result of the events he saw or heard in the asylum.

Figure 3.5 Henry Darger "*Vivian Girls*"

²⁴ He attempted to this act because he had an unstoppable desire for masturbation. They give this example specifically to understand how masturbation was seen in Darger's time. He was institutionalized because of masturbation as well.



3.4.2. Interest in Little Girls

Not only from his art, but also from the autobiography, *History of My Life*, we understand that Darger was very fond of little girls²⁵. In his autobiography Darger talks about how he and his friend William Schloeder wanted to adopt²⁶ a child, yet could not, and how they form a two-man club they called the Children's Protective Society²⁷.

²⁵ His tombstone: Henry Darger, 1892-1973, Artist, Protector of Children

²⁶ Rhodes suggests that Darger's desire to adopt little girls is somehow reflected into his work. He says, "Each of these girls had been removed, lifted by Darger, from another setting. Cut out or traced, she had been forcefully transferred from her to his. By a symbolic process that, for Henry, resembled adoption" (Rhodes, 110).

²⁷ According to Moon, Darger called their club "the Gemini," which was an important focus of some of his writing and collage in the early stages of his career.

“Babies were more to me than anything, more than the world” (Darger cited in Sparapani 2016, 19).

Authors who write about Darger often discuss his ‘obsession’ with children. In the biographies, that information is usually presented with contradictory examples of young Darger’s deviant behaviors towards other children and how he was mad at his landlord’s child when he found her in his room. There are different theories on this topic:

John MacGregor reads Darger’s situation as an Oedipal scenario and argues that Darger created a fictional world full of little girls because of the traumatic loss of his mother and sister. MacGregor states that his early trauma resulted in a “lifelong sadistic desire for girls that may have even led him to murder children²⁸” (Trent 2012, 80). He both experienced grief and mourning over his sister but also was angry to her for causing their mother’s death.

On the other hand, Elledge, whose main argument is based on Darger being gay, explains his devotion to girls as “a desire to be a girl”. He gives an example from Darger’s writings; Webber George - one of Darger's fictional doppelgangers and protagonist in the novel *Crazy House*, is said to be "angry to God for not having created him into a girl which he wanted to be more than anything else" (Darger cited in Lybarger 2012). After that, Darger adds this little note, addressing the reader directly in 19th-century fashion: "The reader may think this is strange, but the writer" — he means himself — "knows quite a number of boys who would give anything to have been born a girl." Elledge argues that, this statement is indicative of him being gay.

On the other hand, Moon from a totally different perspective, explores the popular media of Darger’s time and argue that Vivian Girls are similar to the girls in the Catholic Virgin Martyr plays. Without any connotation to his ‘obsession’ of little girls, he states that, "Such plays enjoyed widespread popularity in the United States up to the second Vatican

²⁸ Macgregor’s assumption is based on the case of Elsie Paroubek, who was kidnapped at age of five and murdered in the same years of Darger’s escape from the asylum. Her case was never solved and the fact that Darger kept her picture in his apartment (and later use her as an inspiration for one of the characters in the *Realms*), made Macgregor argue that he might be the killer of Paroubek. Some argued that Darger made a link between Elsie and his sister that he never had contact with after her adoption.

council in the early 1960s. Darger was a devout catholic and the lines of influence here are clear” (Moon 2012, 38).

3.4.3. William & Being Gay

Darger being gay is one of the important themes and arguments of Elledge’s book. Elledge is aware that being gay and wanting to be a girl are different things. However, he argues that there are testimonies of gay men done in the 1920s and 30s, stating that they would like to be born female in order to have a relationship with a man free from societal restrictions. So, it was a matter of legitimization for them and not about being uncomfortable about their gender. Going back to the Webber George quote, according to Elledge, it is a strong evidence that Darger was gay. As I mentioned before, Elledge’s argument style is based on speculations. He argues that; It's very unlikely that somebody like Darger, who was not part of any sort of literary or artistic community, would have known these people if he weren't gay. There was a gay bar, in fact, two blocks from where he lived at 851 W. Webster, and it's possible that he met gay men there, or at other places in Chicago. When he died, they found his paintings, of course, but they also found his library. In his library was a book called "Condemned to Devil's Island, published in 1928. It portrays, in overt ways, sexual relationships between men in a prison off the coast of South America. The book was very popular among gay men at the time, and I think there's essentially no reason he would have had the book unless he'd heard about it and went out to buy it" (Elledge cited in Kevin 2013).

As we have seen here, Elledge gives examples from Darger’s fictional piece, discourses of gay men, and the environment he lived in to support his argument and construct a new life story for Darger. Maybe Darger was not aware of the gay bar near his house or found the book accidently in the bin and never read it. None of these details matter. What is important here is the way Elledge uses these details and even the ones that are not directly linked to Darger’s own testimony.

Elledge also references William Schloeder to support his argument. While Darger’s only known friend William constitutes a great part in Elledge’s narrative, he is mentioned quite shortly in both Moon and MacGregor’s books. As far as I understand, Moon and MacGregor approach William as proof that Darger can socialize and contact

the outsider world. Moon refers to Darger and William as a couple yet does not use the word “gay” throughout his book or make assumptions about Darger’s sexual orientation.

In Elledge’s book, two themes are echoed over and over. The first one is the abusive environment he lived in. Darger spent his childhood in West Madison Street, until he was transferred to the asylum. Elledge argues that West Madison Street was in one of Chicago’s “most notorious vice zones”. It was enough for Elledge to conclude that Darger was subjected to abuse. He writes; “Although there is no direct evidence to indicate that he had been sexually victimized yet, Henry coolly recounted an experience that he had with an adult that shows the threat of sexual victimization with which he lived daily” (Elledge cited in Worley 2013). The incident he was talking about was not as Elledge proposed. Darger writes that he noticed a homeless man was following him and he threw a brick to him (Bonesteel 2000). Most of the assumptions of Elledge actually do not come from Darger’s testament but other local people who lived in West Madison in the same years. Basically, Elledge tries to understand the environment which Henry lived in and make assumptions about what kind of experiences he might have had. Worley sums Elledge’s style of argument as follows: “he makes a suggestion, finds an unrelated through perhaps parallel example, and then acts as if he’s proven a point” (Worley 2013). Elledge links his argument of Darger being gay with how his environment affected Darger’s psyche. Elledge states;

“Darger was more likely to have prostituted himself. ‘I used to go and see a night watchman in a six-story building a short distance from where we lived,’ he remembered late in life. The man was likely a father substitute for the boy, but what Henry was for the man can only be surmised. Henry couldn’t have carried on a mature conversation about anything that would interest the man nor could the seven- or eight- year-old have been able to be one of the man’s buddies and pal around with him. [He] would often buy paint sets and other art supplies as a child, luxuries neither he nor his father could have afforded. Sex was an easy way to make pocket money, and given Darger’s burgeoning sexuality, perhaps a satisfying way as well” (Elledge cited in Worley, 2013)

In his review, Worley argues that Elledge wants to queer Henry Darger and “to claim him, free of any gender confusion for the gay cause the way we like to claim historical

figures like Walt Whitman and Jane Addams. The book point in one direction, toward one story; whereas some have thought of Darger as deviant, here he's an abuse victim and a gay man in an era when being a gay man was nearly impossible" (Worley 2013= I agree with Worley that Darger gained a new framework with Elledge's book, yet I argue that it represents Elledge's interest more than Darger's life.

Figure 3.6 Henry Darger "Untitled"



3.4.4. Gender Confusion

One of the biggest debates on Darger's art is the fact that Vivian Girls have penises. Since Darger's style is mostly based on tracing, he added penises to the girls he copied from the magazines and books. So, it is a conscious decision to give them different genitals because there are also anatomically correct drawings of girl in his paintings. As far as we know, Darger never pointed out this fact in his writings, nor questions of sexual pleasure²⁹ or transgender issues. Darger's silence made it easier for the audience and scholars to interpret his work according to their own perceptions. Many people

²⁹ There are some parts in his books that can be interpreted as sexual experiences. Yet, he does not comment on them. (örnekleri ekle)

make assumptions about his mental state and personality based on ‘the mystery of penises’.

One of the first theories about girls with penises comes from Michael Bonesteel. He argues that there is a possibility that Darger had a mind of a child throughout his life and did not know the difference between female and male genitals and never saw a female one (Bonesteel 2000). Other scholars refute this thesis and argue that it is impossible for him to be unaware of female genitalia during his stay in the asylum (MacGregor³⁰, Moon). This argument often supported with a quote from Darger, expressing to stay young;

“I hated to see the day come when I will be grown up, I never wanted to. I wished to be young always” (Darger cited in Worley 2013)

In Darger’s official website it stated as; “He remained, at least psychologically, for the rest of his life. Emotionally arrested in pre-adolescence, Darger pined for the days of his early youth”. This argument also supported by a conversation in the Realms. The main boy character, Penrod asks ‘What is rape?’. One of the Vivian girls Joice responds as; ‘It means to undress a girl and cut her open to see the insides’ (Darger cited in Nance 2013). Similar to Bonesteel, MacGregor interpret his conversation and argues that Darger does not know fundamental facts about human sexuality. He might draw Vivian girls with penises simply because he himself was the only anatomical reference to him (MacGregor cited in Moon, 71).

Another theory comes from Elledge. For him Vivian Girls represents the male femininity of gay men. As I mentioned above, Elledge argues that in the times of Darger, gay men thought that in order to have a relationship with a man without the judgements of the society, they needed to be a woman. So, Vivian Girls are actually not girls but a representation of gay men. Elledge supports his argument with a letter that Darger received from a nun friend. In the letter she wrote “I am glad that you are trying to be even a better boy since I left”. Darger crossed ‘boy’ and substituted it with the word ‘girl’. Elledge also points out that Darger often refer to Vivian Girls as ‘fairies’. According to him, that is a slang used for gay men during Darger’s time (Nance 2013).

³⁰ MacGregor also raises similar arguments in his book but later in a podcast he admits that it is quite naive to think that Darger was not exposed to female genitalia.

Other suggestions about penises are as follows: he drew penises because he wanted to endow Vivian Girls with muscularity that would symbolize their warrior status (Nechvatal 2015), he drew boys look like girls because he was illustrating his own traumatic past and wanted to distance himself from the victimhood by coding them female (Bonesteel 2000), Darger was influenced by Victorian images of children which were mostly gender-neutral so his girls are not actually sexualized but neutralized by carrying both sexes features (Rundquist 2017, Trent 2012).

Moon, and later Klaus Biesenbach, different from all the other assumptions, make references to Darger's interest in the printed media in order to understand girls with penises. Unlike others, Moon does not make a link between Darger's sexual orientation or mental state and girls with penises. What he wanted to understand is the culture and print media of Darger's time. We understand from his autobiography that L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* series has a special place for him.

“I have read many of the beautiful Oz books and have read that in that kind of a country no one, whether man, woman, or children, or beasts, ever become sick or die...This is the reason Oz was a fairy land” (Darger cited in Biesenbach 2014, 13).

Moon and Biesenbach find this book important because in the first book of the series, *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, there is a boy named Tip who transforms to a girl called Ozma, the heir of the throne. Biesenbach argues that, “The seemingly bizarre sexual confusion of Darger's characters thus may not have seemed to strange to the legions of American readers who grew up with the Oz series” (Biesenbach 2014, 13). In other words, Darger might simply was influenced by Frank and add penises to Vivian girls as a part of their warrior identity. Curator Rundquit also made another assumption by linking ‘devoted Catholic’ Darger's art with a story in Christian texts about a magical gender transformation; female saint Vibia Perpetua has a vision that she metamorphoses into a male gladiator. In her story, becoming a man symbolizes gaining power. She argues that since Saint Vibia³¹'s story is interpreted according to the norms of her time, we can read Darger's work within the framework of his time instead of today's transgender issues (Gomez 2017).

³¹ Name Vibia, as Rundquist points out, also happens to be a version of “Vivan,” both meaning eternal light

Figure 3.7 Henry Darger “Untitled”



3.4.5. Violence & What his art represents

“What could have possessed Darger to create such lurid imagery? Was he a would-be child molester, maybe even a potential serial killer?”

– Kevin Nance

Assumptions about Darger’s artistic status, mental state and his life story mostly based on his visual and written depictions of violence against little girls. I argue that interpretations of these scenes help us to understand authors’ approach to Darger. Coming from a psychoanalysis tradition, MacGregor approaches violent scenes³² in Darger’s work as a means to understand his mental state and ‘repressed’ desires.

³²The entry for “sadism,” with fifty-four references listed, is one of the longest in the index to MacGregor’s study of Darger. Some of the other longest entries in MacGregor’s index are those for “murder” (also fifty-four references), “rage” (fifty-one), and “aggression” (forty-four) (Moon, 72). So, MacGregor establish Darger’s image on violence and aggression.

According to him, Darger was “posed on the edge of violent and irrational sadistic and murderous activity...Whether or not they were acted upon, these are the ongoing fantasies of a serial killer [...] We do not know

whether, at some point in his life, he acted on these impulses in reality [...] Psychologically Darger was undoubtedly a serial killer. I don’t think he acted, however, because if he’d ever started, he wouldn’t have been able to stop. Instead the sublimated it into his art.” (MacGregor cited in Segedin 2006, 2)

In other words, his art, according to MacGregor, represents directly his inner world and his repressed anger. In this approach, Darger is not regarded as an artist but as a patient whose mental state can be understood directly from his art works. He states, "I think the most important thing it did was to make me take very, very seriously Darger—to stop seeing him as a folk hero or something and realize that this was a man with pretty serious problems. No question he could have been dangerous" (Macgregor cited in Park 2002). He uses parts from Darger’s texts and art works to support his ideas;

"Little girls, from ages of nine, eight and even younger, were tied down stark naked and a spade full of red-hot live coals laid on their bellies. Scores upon scores of poor children were cut to pieces, after being strangled to death... Children were forced to swallow the sliced fragments of dead children's hearts... Their protruding tongues were extracted" (Darger cited in Frank 2015b).

“Naked opened bodies were seen lying about in the streets by the thousand. Indeed, the screams and pleads of the victims could not be described, and the thousands of mothers went insane over the scene, or even committed suicide... About nearly 56.798 children were literally cut up like a butcher does a calf, after being strangled or slain... with their intestines exposed or pushed out... Hearts of children were hung by strings to the walls of houses, so many of the bleeding bodies had been cut up that they looked as if they had gone through a machine of knives” (Darger cited in Fine 2004).

Figure 3.8 Henry Darger “*Untitled*”



MacGregor's approach is not unusual when it comes to interpretations of outsider art. As I discussed in the first chapter, outsider artist is a concept that is derived from the collaboration of psychiatry and art world. Psychiatric discourse legitimizes their outsider artist status. The most common, and maybe the most innocent looking example of psychiatric discourse is that artists' inner world can be understood directly from the artworks. I argue that, since outsider art does not have a correspondence in the art world, there has to be new ways to appreciate this type of art. If we look at outsider art as a means to enter to the closed and secret world of the isolated and 'disturbed' artist, we attribute a new meaning and value to the artwork. Then, outsider art fulfills us not only aesthetically but also in terms of providing knowledge about creative process and inner world of humankind. I suggest that these new functions and meanings are attributed to so-called outsider art in the art world both in order to accept it and differentiate from the insider art. However, the idea that art works directly reflect the inner world of the artist is a perspective that minimizes the artistic abilities of outsider artists.

One of the reasons behind the interest in outsider art is about seeing the art works as a door, an opening to the inaccessible inner worlds of the mentally ill. Aesthetic value of the work is not enough for the viewer. There has to be something else to reveal about their secret lives, something insiders cannot achieve but long for. Outsider art needs a story, even a mystery. Psychiatry's approach to outsider art material is already about revealing and understanding the patient's inner world. In the case of the art world, there is a similar interest, but the main motivation is to understand the essence of creativity and the human psyche. I argue that both of these institutions perceive outsider artists as a closed box and read the art work as a 'clue'. Maclagan argues that there is no artwork that can give us a 'direct, unmediated access to the mental experiences' of the artists, despite its transparency. He points out that, "the assumption that 'psychotic artists' are driven by compulsion adds to the pressure to see their work as a direct transcription of their experience" (Maclagan 2009, 43). Moreover, this assumption eliminates the possibility of factors such as irony and play in the art work. I think we need to read Darger's art considering his argument. Miller argues that Darger's art reveals that he is well aware of his inspirational models, appreciative of irony and knowledgeable about contemporary and historic events (Miller 2012, 1).

Going back to Darger scholars, I argue that similar to MacGregor, Elledge also approaches his art as a means to understand his inner world and traumatic childhood. However, unlike MacGregor, he does not think that the violence comes from his suppressed desires but the experiences he had when he was a child. In an interview with *Printers Row Journal*, he states that; "Darger is painting what happened to him, and also what he witnessed, at the asylum and elsewhere. The paintings aren't a form of coded desire on his part; they're a confession of what happened to him" (Elledge cited in Nance 2013). Elledge, states that he is trying to deconstruct the image created specially by MacGregor; "I'm trying to correct the idea that the paintings depict the desire of a pedophile or serial killer or a sadist; the paintings reveal other things, and our interpretation of them needs to change. That's what I hope my book will do." (Elledge cited in Nance 2013). Even though, Elledge has a different perspective than MacGregor, I argue that he also has a discourse which has undertones of psychiatry. He does not consider the possibility of Darger's creative imagination and read his art as an outcome of his past traumas.

Moon has a different approach to violence in Darger's art. In his book he presents Darger not as an "artist consumed by his private fears and fetishes, but as an artist engaged in a public, national conversation" (Moon 2012, 20). Instead of reading them as suppressed urges or childhood traumas, he interprets them as a reflection of 'societal violence, particularly acts of violence and exploitation inflicted upon children'.

"It is my hope that this book may contribute to the consideration of Darger as someone who, by virtue of his massive and lifelong project of writing and art, took on the role of witness to the terrible ordinariness of violence in the history of the twentieth century— especially violence against children, and specifically against girls" (Moon 2012, 4)

Compared to Elledge and MacGregor, Moon does not identify and approach Darger as an outsider artist. Instead, in his book he tries to show how Darger does not fit into the traditional outsider artist image. Both Moon and later Biesenbach suggest that Darger had extensive knowledge about American Civil War based on the books and newspapers in his room and was aware of the history of slavery in the United States. Biesenbach argues that; "As an adult poring over newspapers for material, Darger read horrific accounts of World War I, the sinking of the Titanic, the Great Depression, World War II, the bombings of Dresden and Coventry and the detonation of the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. One cannot imagine that the extreme violence and national pain described in the newspapers did not find their way into Darger's imagination" (Biesenbach 2014, 18).

In his book Moon gives examples from the printed material that influenced Darger's art and shaped his worldview. Moon argues that, "despite his social isolation, Darger's work was deeply intertextual" (Moon cited in Vincent 2012, 1). His statement is quite important because it shows us that Darger does not fit into the traditional outsider image. He is not isolated or indifferent to the society. He is actually engaged with the outer world and influenced by it.

Three of these authors have different approaches and motivations towards Darger's art and his artist status. To sum up, MacGregor offers us an image of an artist that is based on violence, suppressed urges and deviance. I argue that MacGregor reads Darger more as a psychiatric case than an artist. He uses Darger's art as a means to understand the human psyche. On the other hand, Moon interprets Darger's art not only as an outcome

of his life but also a product of American popular culture and collective consciousness of Darger's time. He states that even though Darger kept his work in secret during his lifetime, "his is a truly popular art in both its formation and its effects" (Moon 2012). Lastly, Elledge believes that Darger's art both represents his secret homosexual life and Chicago gay history of that time. For him, Darger's works are a manifestation not of his repressed desires but events that happened to him during his childhood. We must not assume that MacGregor's construction of Darger loses its effect after Moon and Elledge's book. His interpretation still plays a major role in the commemoration of Darger. I argue that MacGregor's diagnosis of Darger with Asperger syndrome legitimizes his outsider artist status. In the beginning of this chapter I suggest that Darger needed to be declared mad before becoming an outsider artist. I argue that attribution of madness keeps Darger within a certain boundary in the art world and reinforces the distinction between outsider and insider. Violent scenes of Darger's work is often presented as an evidence of his mental state and how he is disconnected to reality. Emphasize on mental instability resulted as an image of Darger which is immersed in fantasy and disconnected from the outer world. In other words, he became an outsider artist.

When we compare the biographies of MacGregor and Elledge, there is a slight change in the image of Darger from potential serial killer to queer hero. I argue that this transformation is not only due to the change in the dominant discourses but also about the art world and its market's ability to accept / foster the 'pervert'. Gary Alan Fine argues that, art world has high tolerance for deviant and stigmatized art/ist but there is a limit (Fine 2004, 168). I suggest that MacGregor's construction of Darger reach that limit and turned into a problem. As I will explore more in the last part of this chapter, artists' image also affects their dealers. The way Darger is presented as a potential serial killer comes along with ethical questions such as "how can we appreciate the works of a murderer, pedophile?". So, I argue that, in order to promote Darger in the art market, his image needed to be softened. Even though outsider artist image is established on madness and marginality, 'serial killer' image makes it difficult for the audience to accept Darger's work. Seeing him as a queer hero helps the audience to appreciate his work more easily.

In his review, *The Manly Pursuit of Desire: Three Timely Awakenings at the Outsider Art Fair*, Perry Brass talks about his love and hate relationship with Darger. After years of being obsessed with his work, Brass states that he could not take anymore; “the strange, deadpan, foreboding flatness of his world, the ‘weird’ little girls with penises no one could understand, the putative sickness of his mind – who was this sicko creep with his twisted pursuit of little girls?” (Brass 2014, 1). Yet, after reading Elledge’s book, his perspective on Darger changed completely and he began to see Vivian girls differently; Elledge’s book “put everything into place finally. The one word that could not be used about Darger surfaced at last: he was gay. The girls with penises were not girls at all, but tormented boys³³ from the turn of the American twentieth century who, being vulnerable to the abuse of the world around them — the violent streets, filthy garrets, dark stairs and closets of Chicago’s slums; the asylums and orphanages into which boys like 12-year-old Henry were thrown, to be scalded, whipped, choked, and constantly sexually abused, a world of Dickensian depravity — had to become girls inside. They could not exist within the normal roles of boys. Darger was queer; a piece of that amazing river of consciousness we are finally starting to navigate openly that has been hidden for so long and which finds so many of its wellsprings in childhood itself” (Brass, 2). Brass explains this change as an awakening, Elledge helped him to see and accept the true Darger. We can understand how interpretations of Darger’s biographies are powerful. They affect not only his image but also people who promote, sell and exhibit him.

The points I have made so far are about the ways in which Darger's life story is written, which features are emphasized and what kind of role biography has. Yet, as I mentioned in Chapter one, there are other features that play a role in the construction of the outsider artist as well as the biography; namely, discovery, isolation from the society and authenticity. We can find all these elements in the narratives on Darger. For example, discovery is one of the most common narratives.

“Darger the artist was saved by one man: his landlord, Nathan Lerner, a photographer trained at the New Bauhaus in Chicago. If he had not

³³ Another review: Art critic Dennis Adrian: "What is the big mystery? Those aren't little girls with penises. They are little boys dressed up as little girls" (Review: Henry Darger, *Throwaway boy* by jim Elledge)

intervened, the paintings and manuscripts would probably have been destroyed". (Boxer 2000, 4)

"It was in Chicago that in 1973 a monumental, if eerie discovery was made" (Artspace Editors 2018).

We also see a related discourse on the discovery of Darger's inner world and how it has been made available for the audience: "John MacGregor unlocks Henry" (Village Voice 2002).

Similarly, authenticity is a crucial part of Darger's artistic status. We can trace this feature in one of the exhibitions called, *Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger* exhibition, held in The American Folk-Art Museum in 2008. The exhibition included insider artists inspired by Darger. Almost every review of the exhibition is based on the comparison between Darger and other artists and emphasize how authentic Darger is, while others are not (Johnson 2008, Bauman 2008, Davis 2008). Moreover, the authenticity of Darger is explained by his life story and his distance from the art world. In his review Davis argued that, Darger is a reference "artists are compelling to return to but can't quite integrate in a productive way. Contemporary artists cannibalizing Darger's work for themes or miming his stylistic tics cannot hope to live up to the lyrical strangeness of the original. In this show, this is most obviously true of Michael St. John, who creates a small, totem-like sculpture of a creature from Darger's unique universe, or Justin Lieberman, who collages the heads of Jon Benét Ramsey - esque prepubescent beauties onto bodies floating in Darger landscapes, a bit of throwaway irony". (Davis 2008,1) We can also see in the other reviews that contemporaries of Darger are seen as being too calculated and their meaning are too easy to resolve and straight forward (Davis). So, as opposed to others Darger is regarded as unique and authentic in terms of creating a self-contained world. Johnson argues that; "Darger's art has a breadth of technical, formal, narrative and symbolic imagination rarely encountered in today's professional art world" (Johnson 2008). All of these details are engraved in the life story of Darger.

Finally, isolation from the society and artistic culture is a highly controversial issue attributed to Darger. After reading Moon's book, this feature seems irrelevant to Darger since he is quite influenced by popular media, history and especially Civil War.

However, MacGregor and Elledge represent him as someone whose main source is his traumas and inner world. Even though, authors such as Moon, Trent and Biesenbach emphasize how Darger is engaged with social events and popular media, the general representation of Darger in the media is often associated with the isolated outsider artist. Related to this isolation, he is also represented as indifferent to the art world. Rexer states that; “Most important, Darger’s visual narrative was private; he almost certainly never intended it to be seen by anyone else – except perhaps God” (Rexer 2005, 15).

I argue that all of these features are somewhat intertwined with Darger’s biography and how he is represented. Yet, why do we need biography in the first place? I will try to discuss this question in terms of the outsider art world.

3.5. Genre with a Story

The importance of biography and the extent of its use is a frequently discussed topic in the outsider art literature. Both in their exhibiting and marketing, biography plays a crucial role. There is a tension between those who emphasize biography and those who emphasize the artwork. In this section, I will explore why actors of the art world need to reference biography and what biography corresponds to in the outsider art world. I will also briefly talk about what kind of consequences the use of biography can lead to.

As I mentioned before, outsider artists are presented as people who do not have voice over their art and identity. So, biography is crucial for these ‘silent’ artists. The reason why I give examples of different biographies of Darger is to discuss the importance of biography and also to show that they are actually constructed narratives based on different motivations. Unlike many other outsider artists, Darger has left behind an autobiography. Yet, authors re-narrate his life story adding factors outside of Darger’s text, such as asylum records, testimonies of local people and most importantly interpretation based on of today’s norms. Fine argues that, “the identity of artists is essential in Western art markets, in which the conception of genius and creativity are so essential. Influential and powerful actors create the creator through the shaping of biography” (Fine 2003, 175). I do not question the reliability of those biographies, instead I am interested in why they wanted to grant a new life and identity to him. I do

not consider Darger as a 'silent' artist. Yet, the way he did not explain the controversial parts of his work (violence, sex and gender ambiguity) reinforced his mystery and made his work more open to interpretation. Why in the first place he needed to be so mysterious? Why is his life story being constructed over and over? How do these life stories affect the identity and position of the Darger as an artist? Why is Darger's autobiography not enough for his artistic status?

Often, the lives of outsider artists and their work are inseparable in the eyes of critics and art viewers. Of course, importance of biography in the presentation of the artist is not unique to outsider artists. Identity and story play a major role in the marketing of the artists and their work. Gary Alan Fine makes a similar statement about Folk artists; "Everyone believed to be a good folk artist, you need to be poor, black, dead, disabled, uneducated" (Fine 2004, 4). In the case of Outsiders, it is believed that their art is a direct reflection of their life story and it is used as a primary reference while talking about their art. Steven Dubin gives an example from an art enthusiast saying; "In fact, it becomes difficult to separate 'what they do' from 'who they are'. Their artistic production consists of almost everything they do... In a most unconventional and literal sense, they live their art" (Steven Dubin 1997, 41).

Outsider art category is actually too heterogeneous to be referred as a 'category'. Specially after Cardinal's take on, it became an art form that contains artists from all kinds of backgrounds. Since the works and the artists do not have a close relationship with the traditional art world, each work is quite different in terms of style, subject and material. Given that, an artist from Switzerland who is diagnosed as schizophrenic after attempting to molest a girl can be in the same category with an artist based in Oakland, whose works are highly influenced by Kiss and The Adams Family (Martinique 2016). This heterogeneity leads some of the scholars to not to take outsider art as a genre. In traditional sense, genres such as Impressionism, Cubism and Surrealism, denote a set of specific aesthetic guidelines and traditions. However, outsider art focuses more on the artist than the art work. What brings this heterogeneous group together is the fact that they are presented with their life stories in the art world. That is why I will use Priscilla Frank's definition of outsider art; *genre with a story not a style* (Frank 2017). In that sense, outsider art is an umbrella term based on biography comparing to other genres which is classified based on aesthetics. Frank argues that, the label "outsider art"

reflects “more the life story and mental or emotional aptitude of the artist. Outsider art lumps together a mishmash of people from wildly disparate places and times, similar only in the fact that they seem to struggle with a vague blanket of personal trajectories and inner demons” (Frank 2017). That is why so many different artists can be categorized in the same genre, their outcast status trivialize the aesthetic features of their works.

Why are outsider artists, in the first place, presented with their life stories? I suggest that discussing this question will help us to understand insiders rather than outsiders.

I argue that, since outsider art does not have an equivalent in the traditional art world, the audience and critics do not know how to interpret, position and perhaps most importantly appreciate outsider art. If an art work does not correspond to anything in the art history, how can we appraise and classify that work within the borders of the art world? How can we market something that is presented as a work disconnected from history and culture? Answer is the *Story*. I argue that story adds value to the artist and her/his art, make it easier for the audience to be engaged with the artist. Her/his extraordinary life story, often glamourized with sensational and dramatic features, arose a feeling of appreciation/sympathy; “look at these people with their bizarre subjectivities – now look at their art!” (Andrea Fritsch 2012, 89).

I should note that biography matters but not every aspects of that biography is important for the art market. The name, year of birth, family members and region might change, and it would not affect the value of the art. Important facts are whether he was mentally ill, homeless and not trained at art school. Chicago dealer Carl Hammer argues that there is “a heavy reliance upon the extremism of the story and not consistently on the works of art”. (Hammer quoted in Fine 2004, 68). That is what I meant by stories trivialize the art works. Moreover, this situation can cause to fetishizing biographies. Weston points out that; displaying the lives of artists can resemble a freak show when it is taken to the extreme (Weston cited in Andrea Fritsch 2012, p.89). On the other hand, there are people who believe that biography is crucial in order to understand the art work. New York dealer Randall Morris states that, “no work can speak for itself ...because without knowing its original context we are listening ourselves, not the voice of the work of art” (Morris cited in Fine 2004, p.67). Similar to Morris, Prinz also

emphasize the role of biography; “I do not mean to imply that disability should be somehow bracketed off from our appraisal of an artist. Only an extreme formalist would suppose that biography and conditions under which a work is created are irrelevant to appreciation. When we assess the achievements of Frida Kahlo, it is important to know that she lived with chronic pain and limited mobility. This information helps us understand what she is expressing in the work. The work is good, not in spite of her disability, but to some extent, because of it” (Prinz, p.269). Even though I agree with Prinz, I also argue that we do not remember Kahlo with her disability. On the other hand, their psychical and mental conditions are the primary reference for outsider artists. People who are against the promotion of biography claims that it is a way to differentiate the insiders from outsiders. Fine argues that; “These circumstances (poverty, racism, religious convictions, illiteracy) should not be used as neat anecdotes to show how ‘different’ the artists are, pushing them further ‘outsider the white-walled rooms’ of art history. Imagine if every scholarly discussion of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s work focused on his heroin addiction and whether or not he was ripped off by drug-providing collectors... Consider if every lecture on the Renaissance masters was interrupted to determine if the Medicis commissioned any of the work, exercising undue influence on its style and content” (Fine 2004, 68). In other words, biography serves as a tool to support insider/outsider duality. Addition to its value determination role, biography helps us to categorize and identify outsider artists. Presenting them with their stories rather than aesthetic qualities reinforces their outsider status and put them into a box.

If we go back to Darger, how can we appreciate his paintings? If his art is a creation of his inner world, how can we place him in the art world? When it comes to Darger, his works are very difficult to understand and at the same time quite open to interpretation. Everybody can find traces of themselves, society, culture in his work, but also feel discomfort because of that. I argue that, to place Darger in the art world, he has to be tied to a story. That is why his autobiography was not enough to present him as an artist. I argue that work of Darger is too bizarre and horrific to be classified as an insider³⁴. Yet, he does not quite fit into the traditional outsider artist image. So, I suggest that, in order to find a place for him, he had to be otherize and presented as mad

³⁴ I do not claim that I find him horrific and bizarre (i kinda do but that is not the point) I think art world sees him like that.

to fit into the outsider art category. While talking about the violence in Darger's work, MacGregor states that; "I think the most important thing it did was to make me take very, very seriously Darger – to stop seeing him as a folk hero or something and realize that this was a man with pretty serious problems. No question he could have been dangerous" (Macgregor cited in Village Voice 2002). Is Darger too absurd and dangerous to be classified as a folk artist? So, as the first book written on Darger, Macgregor introduced him to the art world with sensation, pedophilia and violence. I read his approach as one of the first steps towards Darger becoming an outsider artist. He entered the art world as a psychiatric case / artist who is isolated from the society and produce work from his inner world. However, identity of outsider artists not only affect her/himself but also her/his dealers, collectors and curators. As Fine argues, "the biography of the artist rubs off on the collector: you are the artist you display" (Fine 2003). I argue that, in order to market and exhibit him more easily, his potential serial killer image had to be changed. I think appreciation of a queer hero is easier for the audience and customers than a potential serial killer. In order to discuss this further I would like to give the example of Claude Wilkie. Wilkie is a Canadian outsider artist. He is a patient at the psychiatry hospital in Quebec City, diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenia. He lost his father and his sister when he was a child and was allegedly abused as a child. He voluntarily admission to the hospital after realizing his violent and pedophilic impulses, particularly towards blond girls (quite similar to Vivian Girls). His drawing style resembles Darger both in style of the girls and brutal scenes. He also has a secret autobiography called 'Fearless Water'. Rhodes argues that; "where Darger wrestled constantly with destructive impulses and the search for deliverance, in Wilkie's universe there are only torture. His drawings of children or of himself, armed and with murderous intent, are all the more disturbing for the awkward child-like style in which they are executed. There is nothing to celebrated in these drawings, but they are important uncovering of a most chilling potential of the human psyche" (Rhodes 2000, 110-111) I find Rhodes' statement interesting because it is quite similar to MacGregor's approach to Darger. We can argue that Darger's violent scenes are more detailed and brutal than Wilkie's. In his book, Rhodes does not talk about any of the outsider artists as a "human psyche" and does not discuss whether they can be celebrated or not. Maybe we can read Wilkie's situation with Fine's argument about the art world. As I mentioned before he states that; "art world has high tolerance for deviant and stigmatized art/ist but there is a limit" (Fine 2004, 168). Does Wilkie's art cannot

be celebrated because he is an acknowledged pedophile? In the case of Darger, we do not know if he was a pedophile and this assumption can be challenged by different authors as he does not talk about this issue. So, it is always open ended whether his art is a product of his suppressed desires or not. I argue that, if Darger's image of 'potential serial killer' had not been changed over time, his art could be appraised similar to Wilkie's. Today, Darger is mentioned as the "the quintessential outsider" (Frank 2015b) in the media. Quintessential because he is too eccentric and authentic to be an insider, yet not simply brutal like Wilkie³⁵. I suggest that change in Darger's identity with Elledge's work was necessary in order to continue to exist in the art world. We can examine how this change affected his statue in the art world by looking at the exhibitions he was part of.

3.6. Exhibitions

Darger is both exhibited in private collections and group shows. I specially find the group shows interesting because with whom he is exhibited and which narrative he is a part of help us to understand how he is represented in the art world. For example, in 2000 he has been exhibited along with Goya and Jake and Dinos Chapman in Disasters of War exhibition at Moma. After that exhibition some critics raised the question of "Can Darger be a part of a canon?". This question is quite important because it allows Darger to be perceived without the limitations of outsider art and make us question his place in the art history. Can we put Darger in a place in art world and art history? Or Why did not we put Darger into a canon before? Or we can ask, should we put Darger into a place in art history or not? However, as I said before, Darger's art is quite open to interpretation. So, there are other interpretation of that exhibitions that compares Goya and Darger and argues that while Goya is representing the violence in the world, Darger is representing his inner world, personal nightmares.

On the other hand, 11 years later his approach towards war is interpreted differently in the Henry Darger: The Certainities of War exhibition. He is presented as an artist which

³⁵ Thats not my opinion on Wilkie's work, I am just repeating how he is interpreted.

interprets what he saw in the media instead of his inner world. Moreover, the names of the exhibitions he was part of gives us an insight of how outsider art is constructed in the art world; “The Unreality of Being”, “Out of this World”, “Betwixt and Between” are only a few examples. Distance from the reality and world is emphasized a lot also in the other outsider art exhibitions.

In the Out of this World exhibition organized by Museum of Everything, Darger is presented as a star. Yet one of the reviews of the exhibition shows us how Darger is perceived:

“If Darger's perversity wasn't so eccentric, his work might attract the interest of the police. (Morton Bartlett's highly realistic dolls, mesmerizing as they are, are another matter.) And if Darger he wasn't so visibly deranged and damaged, he'd be one of the greatest Surrealists. His collage techniques make Max Ernst's *Une Semaine de Bonté* look pitifully tame and artificial. What's so strange about Darger, of course, is that he isn't trying to be. He's trying to tell his story. This is what makes Outsider artists so fascinating. They don't know what they're doing. Their work is not just strange, intense, original: it's compelled. However neat its making, it is essentially out of control” (The Independent Culture 2009).

I find this quote as a summary of how Darger is perceived in the media. He is constantly compared to insider artist and argued that his madness holds him back to be the ‘greatest’ Surrealist. On the other hand, he is glorified because he makes Surrealists look artificial because he is not trying to be an artist and create work without knowing what he is doing. This is a patronizing and minimizing perspective. What makes him an outsider artist is not his madness nor his so-called unconscious production process, he is an outsider artist because he is exhibited that way. According to Bourdieu, in the art world, everything and everybody depends on the positioning of the other. They gain meaning and identify themselves according to how others situate themselves. So, being an artist is related to the positions of other actors such as dealers, art critics and curators. The meanings and roles of these actors can only be understood in their relation to others positions in the field. In the case of outsider, who is an outsider and insider are very much depends on how the others position themselves. Moreover, discourses of actors of the art world validates the cultural products of the cultural field. Their discourse recognizes and legitimizes the objects (Bourdieu 1983, 317). So, which work is considered as an outsider art is depends on how it is represented and exhibited by the other actors of the art world. Moreover, this is an ongoing process. That is why I wanted

to discuss the changing image of Darger. Michael Mauws discusses how cultural products are neither finished products and nor fixed into a specific genre. They can be interpreted and gain meaning over time (Mauws 2000, 232). Darger's identity and art works are a great example of that. They are not finished by Darger and continue to gain new meanings.

3.7. Commodification of Outsider Art

Biographies might help us to engage with the artists and understand their art better. However, if the biography trivializes the work, then there is another discussion here. Fine argues that, "collectors of contemporary art buy for the name, but not for the story. In contrast, in self-taught art³⁶ few in either camp – the biographical or the aesthetic – would deny the value of the other" (Fine 2014, 171). According to Fine, biographic facts are important for collectors because in fact they buy stories that they can share with the visitors.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, in the 80s, outsider art entered the art market as a fresh air for being authentic and different. Since then, biography was one of the biggest tools of commercialization of outsider art. Fine claims that, it is in the biography that "the market finds the artist's intention, not in what is on canvas" (Fine 2014, 174). In other words, the misfortune of the artists turned into a marketing strategy for the dealers and collectors. One collector explained, "In many cases with this work, the story is far more important than the art is, and people are buying the story as opposed to the piece of art for art's sake ... There are artists I've supported financially just because I like them, and I like their story, but not because I believe the pieces are outstanding". I see collectors and dealers of outsider art as a type of story collectors. Along with the many reasons why outsider art is relevant today, increase of the identity politics and importance of stories plays a crucial role in why outsider art become popular. In the art market, biography becomes asset for the artist even though they are not aware of it. Chapin argues that the centrality of biography in Outsider Art genre is not simply an integral part of its categorization and valuation, but it is something chosen intentionally as a marketing device (Chapin 2009).

³⁶ He refers outsider art as self-taught art.

4. OUTSIDER BECOMING INSIDER

“When considering the canon of twentieth-century American art, one has to ask why the untrained Darger is more often than others considered an outsider”

-Biesenbach

4.1. Status of the Outsider Artist and Labelling

In this chapter, my aim is to concentrate on outsider status of the artists. In the previous chapter, I briefly discussed why Darger still an outsider even though he does not fit into the concept truly. In the literature and media Darger is represented in various ways. While ‘mind of a serial killer’, ‘solitary janitor’ and ‘eccentric hero of outsider art’ is the most common labels for Darger, in recent years he is also mentioned as “consummate outsider artist”, “the quintessential outsider”, “most elusive of culture heroes”.

Perry Brass refers Darger as; “Henry Darger, who has become not only the face and star of outsider art, but also a shamanistic ghost-figure of human society” (Brass 2014). Similarly, Park mentioned him as; “virtually anonymous in his daily life, he has become, in the years since his death in 1973, an index of our fears and ambitions, an alchemist, a litmus test, an urban legend, a cautionary tale” (Park 2002). Those narratives are interesting in terms of distancing him from the sensational serial killer image and emphasizing his relationship with the culture. Yet, they still have the romantic tone of Art Brut/Outsider Art narrative. I find the ‘consummate outsider artist’ (Halle 2008) label most interesting. First of all, it connotates a hierarchy between outsider artists and it makes the whole discussion even more complex. According to

whom and why is Darger declared consummate? Is this a comparison with other so-called outsiders? Secondly, is the label 'consummate' highest level he can achieve? Can he be a consummate outsider artist but cannot convert to an insider? In this chapter I aim to discuss the situations where outsider artists are getting closer to insider artists status and the outcomes of it. What happens when they transform into an insider? How can they exist and mobilize within the art world? I argue that in the case of Darger, even though there are times he is referred without a label, it is not quite easy for him to drop the outsider label. Even if he can get rid of the title, the way he is presented with his biography marks him different from insiders. Moreover, the outsider artists label is not about of Darger's work or style. On the contrary, if we analyze his art in terms of style and choice of subjects, he is closer to an insider. As Miller points out; his use of "historic and contemporary literary and visual material, his familiarity with fine art and art making techniques, his desire to comment of social wrongs and contribute artistically to his society confirms him to be an active participant in the culture of his time and a uniquely innovative twentieth century American artist" (Miller 2012, 81). So, his status of outsider art is debatable. Some scholars suggest calling him "self-taught" as a less discriminative alternative. However, this label also has problems which I will mention in the following sections.

I argue that the only reason why Darger and other artists are being labelled as outsider is because cultural mediators of the art world chose to cast them this way. They choose to exhibit them under that label and promote them by emphasizing their authenticity based on their eccentric life stories and mental states. In the art world, outsiders are defined by their lack (economic, social and cultural capital, mental health) instead of their style, subjects and use of materials. On the other hand, their professional colleagues with social capital are labelled as contemporary artists. Fine points out a different perspective and argues, these artists "surely are outsiders from elite art worlds, but in their communities, curators, collectors, and scholars are the outsiders" (Fine 2004, p.32). In other worlds, being outsider/insider is a construction and a relative notion. Insiders might also be considered as an outsider of some spheres. However, they have the power of naming the subordinate groups. In modern societies, where inequality between the groups prevails, some groups are more dominant and stronger than others. Those groups can stigmatize, identify and label the others. Kenan Çayır argues that the imbalance of power between the sociological groups is understood in this process of stigmatization. It

is a sign of social strength. Lower-position groups can identify themselves only when they are strengthened. Following the stigmatization process, the dominant group produces stereotypes about the subordinate. Dealing with stereotypes can be difficult because they can be accurate in some cases. However, stereotypes differentiate the group members and categorize them by ignoring their individual features. In fact, neither the dominant nor the subordinate groups are homogeneous. Yet, the dominant group defines and homogenizes the other one with the characteristics of the worst member of that group, while defining itself with the best member (Çayır 2012, 1-10)

If subordinate groups act in accordance with stereotypes about them, discrimination does not become a social issue. On the other hand, if they act differently, they would face problems about their existence and freedom in the society. Moreover, there are many legitimizing ideologies supporting dominant groups position and authority on resources of the society. For example, sexism defines woman and man in certain roles within a hierarchy and reinforces inequality between woman and man. I find his analysis useful to read the position of outsider artists within the art world. In contrast to outsiders, insiders with social and cultural capital has the power to label the outsiders. As I discussed in the first chapter, insiders build the idea of outsider based on the aspects of discovery, authenticity, story, lack of agency and disconnection from the culture. In fact, while determining these aspects, insiders draw the boundaries of the outsiders. They need to be authentic, indifferent to the art world, have an interesting biography and a discovery story. Lastly, they need to be voiceless over their art and artistic image and should need somebody else to promote and speak for them. These are the boundaries within the outsider artist can exist and move. All of these assumptions are followed by stereotypes about outsider artists; mentally ill, indifferent to society and artistic fields, voiceless, eccentric, and even sometimes dangerous. If an outsider artist does not get out of that frame, s/he can gain value and have a place in the art world. However, if an artist began to be interested in the art world and influenced by other artists, her/his outsider artists status, thus her/his authenticity began to shatter. This is not only the artist, but outsider art is presented as an art form that needs to be preserved. As if it is an endangered species. Just as it starts with a discovery story, fear of extinct is a part of the outsider art narrative. Editor of Raw Vision Magazine voice his concerns as; “nobody knew about outsider art, it was almost a secret art form. In the 1980s, art world was a ‘deadly scene’. It was cold and repetitive. Suddenly, outsider of the art

world was the art. These were people who actually got their hands dirty, with paint. This rarely happened anymore! It was what the art world / market needed. Now, the big danger is that outsider art could be consumed by contemporary art” (Maizels cited in Frank 2016a).

This narrative presents outsider art as an art form that its creator has no power over it and should be preserved by higher and ‘conscious’ actors for the sake of itself. It reinforces the boundaries that so-called outsider artists can move; they need to be away from the contemporary art, should made their work isolated from the art world.

Furthermore, as Çayır points out, there are dominant ideologies to support insider / outsider duality. Even though in Outsider Art narrative, madness is being glorified as it is believed to have a direct link to creativity, a mad artist can never be equal to a sane artist. It is often represented as if sane artists can never achieve the mad status and create those ‘pure’ images. Yet, this privilege position is only valid within the boundaries and conditions determined by insiders. So, ‘sane’ insider artists have the power to dominate and control the position and value of the ‘mad’ outsider artist. This idea can be traced back to the enlightenment ideology where reason is held above other faculties. Moreover, outsider art narrative is quite influenced by psychiatric discourse in which what is normal and abnormal are supported by scientific discourse.

In his article, Prinz read the situation of outsiders as a “incentivized exploitation” (Prinz 2017, 265). He argues that insider artists and other actors of the art world such as dealers and curators make profit from outsider artists whose value depends on their “outsiderness”. Moreover, he suggests that insiders adopt a paternalistic attitude towards outsiders and insist that outsider artists are not interested in integration into the art world. We can see that approach in Dubuffet’s discourses. Dubuffet argues that in ‘normal’ exhibitions people care about the reception and recognition and expect to earn income. However, artists in an art brut exhibition “do not care at all about considerations of this order. They have other fish to fry. Moreover, they do not even know that this exhibition is taking place³⁷” (Dubuffet cited in Prinz 2017, p.266).

³⁷ Augustin Lesage was able to make a living of his art. Scottie Wilson became a minor celebrity in the art world. A more recent case is Al Carbee, an artist who, for decades, made elaborate photographs of barbie dolls without

Figure 4.1 Friedrich Boss “Untitled”



Dubuffet’s argument can be accurate for some outsider artists. Artists such as Carlo Zinelli, Emma Hauck, Friedrich Boss³⁸ are not aware that their creations are respected as art works and exhibited. Yet, there are many other outsider artists that may have an opportunity to change their disabled situations if they become aware of the art world. However, since their value is related to their isolation from the art world, when they become aware of their artistic status, their authenticity began to be questioned. In other words, they are valuable as long as they stay “outside” and be disadvantaged. For example, Dubuffet removed Gaston Chaissac’s works from his collection because he

revealing his passion, out of respect for his wife, who found it embarrassing. At the end of his life, Carbee met a young filmmaker, Jeremy Workman, who decided to make a documentary about him. Carbee was thrilled at the opportunity to share his life’s work (Prinz, 267).

³⁸ One of the artist of the Prinzhorn collection, Boss suddenly closed himself and instead of talking to others he began to collect lists, notes, newspaper articles. He would bundle his finds and seal them with wax. He creted more than 100 bundles. His collection remain unopened today.

began to be influenced by artists such as Picasso. Maclagan criticizes Dubuffet's attitude and calls this situation Chaisac effect, however he also makes similar claims by saying that not all the outsider artists can handle public exposure (Maclagan 2009). It is the insiders (academics, artists, curators, dealers) who decide whether that outsider artists can handle the public exposure, become interested in art world or lose its authenticity. They do not question those artists' will when it comes to exhibit their private works. Yet, they are questioned when they got interested in art market. For Prinz, 'outsider artist' is a dehumanizing concept and commodifies those people by "treating them as mere curiosities, rather than autonomous social agents" (Prinz 2017, 266).

4.2. Identity as a Marketing Strategy

If we examine the 1980s' art scene, we can understand that, entrance of outsider art to the market is not a coincidence. In fact, outsider art is one of the art forms that influenced by or an inspiration of identity politics. Boyce explains that; "identity politics emerged out of the 1960s Black Civil Rights Movement, second wave feminism and gay and lesbian liberation. It was confrontational and asked questions about the kind of art that should be made and for whom in a post-colonial world where the history of art was being re-written to encompass a broader, less western-dominated perspective" (Boyce, 1). So, the duality between insider and outsider art is not actually unique to the 'mad'. According to Saltz, until the 80s, major institutions did not include disadvantaged, underrepresented groups to the exhibitions and dominant group was privileged, heterosexual white male. However, 80s mark a shift in the art world where categorizing the movements with 'ism' and by their style, medium and geographical attributes become quite difficult. Different people entered the art scene with their stories, political and social conditions (Saltz 2016). Art become more personal, autobiographical and therefore more political. Identity becomes central in the art world and gender, ethnicity, sexuality become visible in the works. Therefore, identity art is not about aesthetics. It is about politics, power, culture and representation. It is about people's feeling about their exclusion from cultural industry (Chin 1992, 1). This shift also affected the galleries and biennales. People with interesting backgrounds and

experiences began to take part in the exhibitions due to their political representations. It also influenced other people showing that everybody can be an artist. Artist Rashid Johnson stated when he saw Fred Wilson's installation of headless museum guards; "I did not know I could be an artist before I saw that work. I did not know that people like me were making art about themselves and the complicated experiences they had. I was maybe 19 or 20 then. Before that, to me, art was Gauguin. Or maybe Pollock. It really changed my life" (Johnson cited in Te 2018, 5). As Sahar Te argues, in those years, "pain of the artist becomes a political conversation expressed through a chosen aesthetic, which in turn subjectively commodified and exoticized. Artists of color begin to have a voice, galleries begin to represent them" (Te 2018, 6). In that way, just as in the outsider art world, identity became a currency. It became collectable. As I discussed in the previous chapter, outsider art also has a very similar marketing strategy. Dealers collect stories that they can sell. Some collectors specialize in troubled domains, 'asking for work from specific pathologies, schizophrenics and autistics. Fine gives an example from a dealer; "On one occasion, a dealer reported the tragedies that had recently befallen one of his artists: her home was flooded, her adult son with a mental age of five, who had been institutionalized, fell off a ladder, splintering his leg and had to move home; and she almost died from an eye operation. I felt that the dealer was attempting to increase their biographical value. Her bad fortune was good fortune was for her dealer." (Fine 2004, 173). So, outsider art is treated as a form of identity art as the life stories of artists as important as (and sometimes even more important) their creations. Fine points out that, even though the domain of outsider art is defined by the fact that the creators are not formally trained, in reality, it is actually identified with the social position of the creators. That is why, he chose to label outsider art as 'identity art' (Fine 2004, 155). In the case of outsider art, identity refers to how the artist's image is perceived by the art world. It is not about how these artists conceive and present their own identities but more about their position they are replaced; which is outside of the art world and society.

In her article, Stephanie Bailey suggests that in the 80s there was a serious need for identity politics in the art world because it was about "challenging the supposed universality of modern or contemporary art" (Bailey 2014). However, today identity politics become more about consuming the 'different' and confine the artists within their labels and create works according to them. Question such as "do artists want to get

selected to museums for the themes of ethnicity, diaspora or sexuality? Or would they prefer getting chosen for their work instead of their political identity?” began to raise in the art world. Identity art began as a challenging and confrontational art form but later turned into a consumption good for the white consumer. It also gives pressure for people to create work according to their identity. In a TED Talk, Elif Şafak states that; “We often talk about how stories change the world, but we should also see how the world of identity politics affects the way stories are being circulated, read and reviewed. Many authors feel this pressure, but non-Western authors feel it more heavily. If you’re a woman writer from the Muslim world, like me, then you are expected to write the stories of Muslim women and, preferably, the unhappy stories of unhappy Muslim women. You’re expected to write informative, poignant and characteristic stories and leave the experimental and avant-garde to your Western colleagues... Writers are not seen as creative individuals on their own, but as the representatives of their respective cultures: a few authors from China, a few from Turkey, a few from Nigeria. When identity politics tries to put labels on us, it is our freedom of imagination that is in danger³⁹”.

Outsider artists are also in a quite similar position. The identity of outsider artist is constructed in a way that requires producing works in certain criteria just as Şafak states. They need to create works that reveal their personal worlds free from artistic and cultural influences. They need to produce only for themselves without considering audience and the market. In the first chapter, I gave the example of Howard Finster whose reputation and value fall-off due to his interest in the art world. Since the concept of Outsider art is combined with authenticity and originality, it is treated as a requirement to be exist in the art market. If an artist is not authentic and not an insider, how and with which title s/he can exist in the art world? While discussing this issue we need to remember being authentic and original are constructed notions and determined by the market. So, there is a paradoxical situation, as Outsider artists moves into the mainstream areas such as galleries and museums, what made her/him an outsider is not valid anymore. Yet, as it is the only validation measurement for the artists, s/he is continued to be referred as an outsider and expected to stay as one.

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMpKvff138M>

When we analyze the art world considering these examples, I argue that art world is not as liberating as it seems. Art world is seen as an institution which rescue the mad from the hands of the psychiatry and provide her/him a new identity and a sphere for her/his movement. This is partly true. However, we need to understand that just as psychiatry, art world also has limiting and shaping practices towards the mad and construct her/him within certain boundaries. Practices may seem more humane and enlightened comparing to their predecessors. Yet, they are just the products of new forms of power and control. Prinz argues that, “this strategy of power would be established in the present case if the concept of outsider art, which purports to exalt people on the margins, were shown to actually function as a system of marginalization; asylum is replaced by a conceptual quarantine” (Prinz 2017, 251)

Once an artist is identified as an outsider, s/he needs to continue to preserve that identity and specially does not create art for money. In *Raw Vision* magazine, John Windsor discusses the situation of Albert Loudon, who is one of the living best-known British outsider artists. Apparently, he refuses the title outsider as Windsor states it as; “he committed the ultimate indiscretion, he describes himself as an artist” (Windsor 1997).. He is one of those artists who become interested in the art world and began to sell his paintings to galleries. Later in the article Windsor discusses how Loudon is being punish for his desire to be commercial and rejected by some people because of it. In the beginning of this chapter, I asked why Darger can be a consummate outsider but not an insider. I think all of these discussions and examples helps us to understand why Darger is still an outsider. Prinz argues that, “the dualistic criterion for evaluating outsider art is patronizing and diminishes the achievement of disenfranchised artists who produce work that compares favorably with the best work of insiders. Darger, for one, deserves recognition as one of the great artists of the twentieth century, not just one of the great outsiders” (Prinz 2017, 269). So, Darger’s statue is not a natural one and can be changed. He is only perceived as an outsider in certain context with specific set of actors.

Art world welcomes and tolerates the mad as long as it preserves its poor condition and do not cross the line of insiderness. When I argued that art world is similar to psychiatry, I meant how art world only accepts the mad in one sphere of the society. I suggest that, we found their validity only in the art world. Mad cannot be an active

participant in the market. Moreover, it cannot be anything else apart from the ‘artist’. So, it is not a real liberation, it is a set of restrictions that allows the mad only a limited amount of mobility. As Hunton claims; “Madness does not walk on its own feet into permissibility in our society: it rides on the shoulders of the artist⁴⁰”. Hunton also raises the question of “have we not simply returned to the days where we parade around our insane (through their accomplishments) as a source of entertainment and spectacle?” (Hunton 2011, 3). I agree with Hunton when I think about the way Darger is represented both as a serial killer/mentally ill pedophile and a cultural hero.

4.3. Problems of the Term

The term ‘outsider’ itself reinforces the restricting side of the art world. As Prinz points out, “neither ‘outsider art’ nor ‘outsider artist’ are neutral or purely descriptive concepts. Like many concepts, these concepts both reflect and impose power relations” (Prinz 2017, 267). I argue that, concept itself may contribute to the unbalanced power distributions. We can read the concept of outsider in a similar way and argue that usage of the concept locks the artist in the statue of being marginalized. It requires those artists to remain disenfranchised. Validity and usage of this term is a continual debate in the outsider art literature. There are different opinions about dropping and reclaiming the word. As I mentioned before, subordinate groups can only reclaim their label when they get powerful. Çayır talks about reclaiming as a strategy for overcoming discrimination (Çayır 2012). In fact, in outsider art literature reclaiming the concept of outsider art is debated. In her article Kate Davey argues that if we can reclaim the term, it could turn into an effective tool for promoting the works of artists who operates outside of the mainstream art world. Then outsider art world can become a community which welcomes people from all around the world with all sorts of backgrounds and cultures. It can be beneficial for people with no contact with a wider art community and give them an ‘identification, confirmation’ (Davey 2015 ,2). The idea of reclaiming strongly linked to the notion of identity. It is about reconstructing and giving a different meaning to the concepts instead of eradicating them completely. Davey suggests that if

⁴⁰ Referans

we can reclaim the concept we can “take the power away from those who currently hold it – perhaps this is the dealers, curators, high end art world people and give it back to the artists”. Moreover, she states, in that way artists with little to no contact to the networks can have a “sense of belonging and validation, and perhaps even a sense of affirmation that they are, in fact, artists” (Davey 2015, 3).

I argue that reclaiming the outsider is more complex than it seems because it is not done by the ‘outsiders’. When it comes to outsider artists, what they want is often assumed and determined by the insiders. Here whom I mean by insiders are not only cultural mediators but also the audiences. On the one hand, there is an image of outsider artist, indifferent and unwilling towards the art world, on the other hand there are people who want to make them feel engaged with the art world and feel a sense of belonging, sense of identity. I always find reclaiming a very powerful strategy. However, I believe that in the case of outsiders their label is reclaimed by media and the audience. That is why I do not think reclaiming can eliminate the duality between insiders and outsiders. I do not think changing the name is not a solution by itself. The way they are valued and represented should change too⁴¹. I also argue that there is a positive side of using the concept of outsider art. It reinforces the power relations but also make it visible and debatable. If Cardinal would come up with a different name, duality would still continue but may not be that obvious.

There is also another group who suggest dropping the name all over. One group argues that it constrains our understanding of the artists’ work. In his book Fine gives examples from dealers and museum officials who defines the term as; “marginalizing, insulting, hierarchical, hegemonic, racist, sickening and patronizing” (Fine 2004, 32). Others argue that we should stop using the word because it is not valid anymore. They suggest that both the entrance to the insider domains such as museums and galleries and the expansion of the term (including almost everybody outside of the high art tradition) made the term invalid (Kallir, Fine). Also, the way contemporary artists are influenced by so-called outsider artists made the gap narrower.

⁴¹ “The Creative Growth Center avoids the label ‘outsider’ and gives its artists 50% on sales – the standard gallery rate. Such practices illustrate how an institution can bring disabled artists into the limelight without further marginalizing them” (prinz, p.270).

As a way to overcome the duality of insider / outsider, some suggest using the term self-taught. In outsider art literature, some scholars use the term self-taught art as oppose to the outsider art, while others use them interchangeably. According to Rainaldi, the term self-taught often used as oppose to the term outsider art specially in the United States, in order to avoid terminology that would stigmatize and place the artists on the outer limits of the society. (Rainaldi 2015, 14). However, what I understand from the literature is that there is still a difference between these terms. Self-taught artists are more aware of their artistic statue yet still produce work outside of the art world. On the other hand, outsiders are not aware of their art and art world. In his book, Fine specifically uses the term self-taught, arguing it is the most general and least political label. However, art critic Lyle Rexer argues that this term is meaningless because “on the deepest levels all artists teach themselves” (Rexer cited in Frank 2015a). As art historian Barbara Bloemink argues the term self-taught does not overcome hierarchy as it “privileges Western academic training and notions of illusionism over all other forms of learning” (Prinz 2017, 33). So, whether it is called outsider or self-taught there is still a hierarchy between insiders and the outsiders. Labelling is not the main problem. If we look at the general frame, how these artists are presented and placed in the art history is the real problematic.

The concept of Outsider Art expanded over time and began to include artists who are not necessarily socially isolated or mentally ill but produce works that are different than mainstream taste. In other words, works that cannot be recognized and categorized by the Western eye began to be identified as outsider art. There are two outcomes of the expansion of the term. One of them is the artists who uses the brand value of the term and manipulates it. Fine gives an example from a gallery owner stating, “A woman walked up to me at a show and said rather haughtily, ‘My daughter and I are Outsider Artists, but because we’re white and middle class, nobody appreciates us,’ and I said you can’t be an Outsider Artist and stand there and tell me you are” (Fine 2004, 56). His understanding of outsider art can explain what I meant for the difference between outsider artist and self-taught artist. The construction of outsider artist requires indifference to the art world and artistic status. Yet, since it has a brand value some people want to identify themselves as one.

Another outcome, again based on the expansion of the term, is about labeling the artists who produce work foreign to Western tradition. Many artists are classified as outsiders because of their style that is considered as ‘primitive’ in the Western eye (Rexer). A lot of African American artists face this problem, and this causes a great discussion in the art circles. Kevin Sampson is an example for that. Sampson is a New-Jersey based sculptor who produces his works out of found objects, wax, hair, bone etc. When I first encounter his works without knowing his background, I immediately thought it is a marvelous example of outsider art. It is quirky, naïve looking, made with materials unusual to what I am used to seeing, and seems to have a narrative that is so personal. When I read about him and understand that he is actually not an outsider, I realized that I developed an eye, which categorizes art works according to their level of similarity with mainstream art. I identified his work as quirky and naïve because I thought it is different than ‘insider art’. Pierre Bourdieu argues that art audiences think themselves as having an ‘eye’. However, this eye is “always a product of history, reproduced by education” (Bourdieu cited in Fine 2004, 34). It was a striking moment for me to realize that because throughout my research I was so confident that I have a different stand point towards so-called outsider art (because I am not from the West?) and was secretly criticizing Western culture. In reality, I was educated in a way to see and evaluate art works in a Western point of view. Similar to how psychiatry constitutes discourses around ‘mentally ill’ and establishes norms about what is normal and abnormal, art world constitutes what is considered as art. Outsider art is not only about creativity and authenticity but also about power and taste. It is a way to legitimize Western gaze.

Kevin Sampson finds the term outsider art ‘offensive’ and adds “I just don’t even understand what it means. It’s hard enough to be an African-American artists. Now we have to be outsiders? Outsider artists made art outside of the art world and outside of a community. But me, making art outside of the community? That’s nonsense” (Kevin cited in Frank 2016d). Kevin identifies himself as a community-based artist and defend himself by giving examples about how he is engaged with people in his community and everyday life. In literature, outsider art is defined as works that are not in a dialog with art history (Frank 2016d). Here, we must ask which art history? Is art history open to communication? Can it recognize and include different groups? Similar to Sampson, Yasuyuki Ueno is also subjected to similar problems. Ueno is a Japanese artist with autism, who only communicates through his paintings. This is how he is promoted in

the US media. Interestingly, he is referred as contemporary artist in Japan while exhibited under the outsider art category in the States. His dealer Yukiko Koide argues that, in Japan there is no 'inside' established so the term outsider art is not valid in Japanese art world (Frank 2016c).

I argue that, debates about outsider art often focuses on the problems and limitations of this term but not talk about the bigger picture. It is often discussed as if the term itself limit its artists as an autonomous authority form and we need to get rid of the term. For example, in an interview, collector and co-owner of Cavin-Morris Gallery, Randal Morris argues that "I cannot accept it (outsider art) as a concept until it rethinks and reworks how it will include non-Western self-taught and/or vernacular artists". Morris is specialized in self-taught/outsider art and recognize its brand value (Frank 2015e). Even though he states that he hates the term passionately and it has a colonial term, he does not question the bigger frame. I suggest that instead of focusing on the limitations and boundaries of this term, we need to discuss how we can re-write the history of art. If art history can include different artists from all kinds of backgrounds, we do not have to use terms such as 'outsider', since there would be no outsiders.

Outsider art is an interesting term because while it stigmatizes the artists, it also gives it a place and grant brand value to them. However, as I mentioned before we need to remember that giving a place is not as liberating as it seems. Flexibility of the term can cause ghettoizing people and limiting their mobility and representability within the art world. I argue that flexibility and relativity of the term also show us that outsider art is indeed a construction. In order to make my argument better I will give the example of Joseph Cornell. Cornell is one of the artists that cannot be identified and constantly being discussed which category he should be in. In *Outsider Art in the Art Market Provocations in the Art* panel held in 2015, speakers discussed whether Cornell can be identified as an outsider or not. I think besides the insistence about putting him into a category, the way everybody but Cornell can speak about his status gives us the clues about the dynamics of the art world. As far as we know Cornell actually does not identify himself as an artist but uses the word 'maker'. Contrary to many outsiders, he has a network in the art world and friends with his dealer. Known for his 'Shadow Boxes' created with various objects by assemblage method, Cornell exhibited with Surrealist artists of his time. The discussion of the panel shows us that the reason why

Cornell is unclassifiable is because he has a different attitude from insider artists. They emphasize that in addition to the fact that his art has no equivalent in traditional art, his artistic attitude is also different from other artists. Curator of *Joseph Cornell: Wanderlust* exhibition Sarah Lea states that; “I think his attitude was profoundly non-elitist. HE wanted to make work that was accessible to anyone, whether they were versed in the language of the professional art world, as he so clearly was not, or not⁴²” Lea argues that Cornell’s art was unclassifiable and beyond his time. None of the speakers in the panel think that Cornell fits the Outsider artist label. However, they do not classify him as an insider either. In fact, they emphasize how different he is from the so-called insiders (Bluett 2015). So, the term outsider is actually constructed according to insiders. His amateurism, his different style and his relationship with the art brings the discussion whether he should be classified as an outsider. Can we argue that Cornell’s artistic statue is in question because of the boundaries of the art world? The way the term outsider art expanded enables it to welcome anyone who cannot be classified by the authorities of the art world. Does outsider art turn into a gathering place for not only mentally ill and poor but also artists who are in limbo? Do insiders create their own marginals and ghettos?

4.4. Personal Histories

Figure 4.2 John Serl “*Untitled*”

⁴² <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/was-joseph-cornell-an-outsider>



Lastly, I want to talk about John Serl. Jon Serl is another artist that made me realize what outsider art actually is about. In the media, Serl has a typical outsider artist story, he is discovered by gallery owner Randal Morris in his late 80s. He has a quite dramatic life, spending his childhood working in his father's circus as a drag. His father wanted him to stay in his feminine shape, so he starved and tortured him. After working in handful of odd jobs, during WWII he became a painter. He began to document his life with his paintings. His dealer Morris explains that before WWII, LGBT individuals would get married ostensibly, in order to live and express themselves without fear. Serl got married in the same way and began to live with in a community in Texas. Most of his paintings are about that period of his life and Morris argues that "he was nostalgic for the period. He felt life changed permanently after WWII. He felt his sexuality had to be a lot more hidden" (Frank 2016b). He created approximately 1,200 work in his life time and after his death, his paintings have been exhibited in museums such as American Visionary Art Museum and Philadelphia Museum of Art as a part of an outsider art exhibition. Serl is identified as an outsider artist because of his traumatic life and distance to the art world. However, Morris states that Serl hated the term outsider art and do not want people to use it in his presence. In argue that, Serl is an outsider not because of his art but because he is classified and exhibited under that name. This is accurate for all the other outsiders as well. They are defined as isolated and disconnected from the society and art history. That is partly true; they are disconnected from the official history narrative. Yet that is because there is no place for their lives and stories in that narrative. When we look at Serl's paintings we see the history of a gay community in WWII. There is no record for that in the official history.

Outsider art allows us to discover personal narrative that fall outside of the official history. In other words, outsider art is an art form that shows us other histories are possible.

Despite its controversial nature, outsider art can be a positive and a challenging art form in the art world as well. Although, it can legitimize and reinforces the hierarchy, it can also challenge the sane, educated, straight, white male artist image. Yet, I should note that most of the outsider artists are male. When we googled ‘famous outsider artists’ only 2 of them are female in alongside of 17 male artists. Still, outsider art pushes the limits of the art world by showing that everybody can be an artist. Maizels argues that, “despite its current status on the fringe of the art world, outsider art is in a sense the most mainstream art genre of all. It requires no prior knowledge of art theory, art history or anything else” (Maizels cited in Frank 2015a). In other words, outsider art as a genre can stigmatize but also welcomes different people and support them to be visible in the art world. Some people argue that outsider art is a great opportunity for people who cannot find themselves in the society. I still agree with Hunton’s argument and criticize how society accept mentally ill / disabled people only in the art domain (Hunton 2011). However, I find it important to mention how outsider art is perceived as a positive genre. Liana Toscanini, marketing director of Inner Space Gallery, states that there are not a lot of creative work options for people with disabilities. “It is a win-win because retailers love partnering with this community, and for artists, seeing things they made in stores gives them a great sense of purpose”. The ways outsider art (or in that case whatever term you want to call it) opens spaces and create opportunities for people who are marginalized is important. Yet, another thing got my attention in her statement; seeing their work sold gives them a sense of purpose. Well, it is something we did not hear in discourses of ‘insiders’. Since the beginning of the construction of this term, outsider artists are represented as indifferent towards art world and market. I find Toscanini’s statement very important because it shows us that indifferent outsider artists image is a construction and quite generalizing. Prinz also talks about how outsider artist image can help people to overcome prejudices. He argues that creating art is an ability, thus can help us to combat bigotry about disabled people. Moreover, he states; “It is an admirable achievement that establishes enduring cultural value. When this achievement is given second-tier status, praise becomes an unintentional instrument of oppression”

(Prinz 2017, 269). Thus, we need to be sensitive about how this achievement is presented because it is quite open to fetishizing.

5. CONCLUSION

In this last chapter, I want to talk about what Outsider Art means to me and the further discussions can be done about this subject. Writing this thesis was a real self-journey for me because it allowed me to reflect on the dynamics of the art world as well as my own creative process. It helped me to think about identities, labels, production processes and power relations. When I think of my relationship with my own creation process and artistic activity, I realized that there are some similarities between me and the motivations of so-called outsider artists. I always thought drawing/creating was a natural part of me ever since I can hold a pen. In fact, I often consider it as a need; a strong urge to create something with my hands, express the ideas in my head. There are

times, I felt uneasy if I didn't have a pencil on my side. Yet, since I was a child, my first motivation was always to create something for myself, without thinking an audience. Since it was a natural process for me, I did not necessarily call myself an artist. I still do not. In fact, I feel closer to *zanaatkar*/ craftsman than an artist. I always felt the artist label should be given by a higher authority and I need to get myself accepted to somewhere/one as a self-taught *alayli*. Yet, through this journey I understand that the label 'artist' is not about creating. It has a meaning only in certain contexts with certain group of people. So, I can understand why the label artist/outsider artist may not have importance for some people who produce artistic forms outside of the art world. Reflecting on my own creative process helped me to understand that the label outsider art is a creation of the actors in the art world. The way creative process is constructed with labels, meanings and boundaries only legitimizes the art world as a discursive and authoritarian domain.

Although the concept of insane art/outsider art has a hundred years old history, the way it can be reshaped and interpreted by modern-day norms and perspectives, transforms it into a timeless art form which everyone can find parts of themselves and differentiate it from other art movements. That is why I stated in the introduction section that Darger fits into the contemporary artist category. Kallir also makes a similar argument; "Darger was an unwitting postmodernist, though he couldn't have conceived what that was. He saw behind the façade of mid-century prosperity and propriety. He deconstructed those cutesy images and saw the sexuality and truth behind them" (Kallir cited in Boxer 2000, 5). I argue that outsider artists might be represented as silent, subordinated and indifferent, yet, the works they offer us can communicate and show different lives and stories. By saying that, I do not want to romanticize this art form. I only want to show that we can approach these art works from a different perspective. Although I do not want to give a bigger mission to the works, for me, the fact that the works show us different lives is one of the most exciting things about this subject. As I talked about John Serl example in the previous chapter, Henry Darger also shows us that there are other narratives outside of official history narrative. Colin Rhodes makes a similar argument by saying that outsider artists creates "alternative universes" (Rhodes 2000). However, I think the word universe alienates both artists and their works from this world. So-called outsider art works are indeed related this world, but different than what we are familiar in the mainstream art world and official history. This point of view in

fact similar to the perspective of the historians who study outsider art. There are historians who approach at the artifacts as a document outside the official record and raise questions such as what this art form can tell us about asylum. In other words, outsider art is an important source for us to criticize the official narrative of history, to discover voices and testimonies outside of this narrative. I think people who have interpreted Darger's work in the recent years has a similar point of view. For example, Nechvatal states for Darger; "usually we struggle to encounter something genuinely different and to think beyond ourselves and own experiences. But Darger's drawings of girls endowed with male genitalia ask us to do just that. We are no longer trapped inside our own perspectives. Darger's imaginary girl-boys take us to the realm of unreal, to a place of contradiction and excess that encourages active, critical thought. With his work, the human norm is not the measure of all things – one must escape from one's anthropocentrism to seriously consider his fundamentally unfamiliar world" (Nechvatal 2015, 1). Unlike my argument, Nechvatal's statement includes offering a universe different from our own perspectives and our vision of life. Yet, I think our perspective is also constructed by the official history narrative and the norms of society, so our arguments are similar in that manner. In recent years, there are scholars and critics who interpret Darger's work from a queer perspective and especially link his work to the transgender issue (Leisa Rundquist, Adam J. Greteman, Rev. M Barclay). We can also consider the argument of Nechvatal as a queer perspective. There are also other arguments about how Darger has a different narrative of war and slavery. At this point, I find the dialog mentioned in his autobiography very striking;

"I once told my teacher, but the one, Mrs. Dewey at the Skinner school, that I believed no one truthfully knew the losses in the battles of wars (including our Civil War), because each history told different losses, and I had the histories and other stories to prove it and let her see and go over them."
(Biesenbach 2014, 12)

I think this sentence is very important to understand Darger both as a human and an artist. It is quite contradictory to the outsider artist image that I tried to explain throughout this thesis; indifferent to the world and isolated from the culture. Here we see (young) Darger as a person who is critical to the war and history narrative. I argue that even only this statement is enough to take Darger as an artist who has intentions and motivations rather than a so-called outsider artist who only reflect his suppressed

desires and inner life. In art world, outsider art is discussed as a biography-based art form rather than focusing on the art work. In other words, aesthetics of the work, its technique and context are trivialized while the misfortune life of the artist is glorified. In this thesis, instead of analyzing Darger's art works, I looked at how his artist image is created. However, as someone who has been studying Darger for about 2 years, I think that Darger's works should be focused in terms of form, context and technique in another discussion. I find it important to approach Darger as an artist (not an outsider one) and read his work in that manner. I argue that reading Darger as a contemporary artist would help us to understand how invalid the outsider artist label and give us a new perspective on his art. would be different to read Darger as a contemporary artist.

5.1. Further Discussions

Further discussions can be done about Henry Darger and Outsider Art. Both of these topics are quite suitable for different debates as they say so much about the art world and society. Prinz argues that art world is like a microcosm of the broader society "in which discriminatory divisions are the norm" (Prinz 2017, 271). Examining outsider art outside of Western societies could be an interesting study. For example, when I look at my own geography, the term outsider art is not as valid in Turkish art world as in West, and only known studies about insane art is made by psychiatry. In 2003, art works of the patients that were hospitalized between 1957-1992 in Faculty of Medicine Psychiatry Clinic of Istanbul University, brought to light by psychiatrist Olcay Yazıcı. One year later, almost 500 of them was shown in the exhibition called "*Scream Meeting the Light*⁴³". As far as I researched, none of these patients began to be represented in the Turkish art world as artists. Moreover, there is no equivalent of the term outsider art in Turkish literature. Absence of this concept in the Turkish art world and the way it only studied by psychiatrists could be a study case for its own. It could tell so much about Turkish modernity, society's approach to art and madness as well as psychiatric studies in Turkey. By looking at geographies other than North America and Europe can raise questions such as; does outsider art is valid in other societies? If it is not, why? As I discussed in the third chapter, there are instances where outsider art label is be given to

⁴³ Çılgılığın Işıklı Buluşması

artists who produce work outside the Western tradition. I think even this situation gives us important clues about the relationship of the concept outsider art with the Western culture. Lanoux states that “the meaning falters in the face of outsider art, saying that this art challenges the regular way of looking at art” (Lanoux cited in Van Heddegem 2016, p.15). So, outsider art can be discussed as a tool to criticize ways of looking at art and Western gaze.

Another discussion can be done around the question of what happens to the insiders and dynamics of the art world when outsider artists enter the insider domains. In this thesis, I discussed the situations that the outsider artist encountered when s/he entered the insider domain. I decided to limit my thesis in this way. Yet, what does the entrance of the outsider mean for the boundaries of the art world, what kind of affect does it evoke could be a study on its own. Moreover, its effects on the audience can be studied too. Does the us viewers’ relationship with the outsider art work lead to a change in our approach to the insider art? Does it change the way we view or appreciate art works? We can also ask, in which situations we appreciate art? To put it differently, if Darger was a proven serial killer / pedophile, how would it affect our appreciation to his art? I actually try to address these questions briefly, by giving the example of Claude Wilkie and talk about the art world’s tolerance to the ‘deviant’. This discussion can be taken even further and can turned into a discussion that involves so-called insider artists too. For example, Priscilla Frank stated for Darger;

"Like many outsider artists, Darger's life was plagued with darkness, obsession and chaos. However, due to his ability to function relatively 'properly' in society, some argue that Darger falls more into the category of self-taught artist than outsider. The ambiguity is not surprising given the anomalous spirit of Darger's oeuvre. Perhaps the tension relates to the viewer's assessment of the work: Is it the aberrant expression of an outsider's perverse desires or an obsessive illustration of the turmoil within us all? Is Darger one of us or not?" (Frank 2015 b)

Frank’s statement is quite interesting because even if Darger is one of us, he represents something that is within us, yet something that must be restrained and hidden. Leaving aside the fact that how absurd and alienating her question is, according to Frank, Darger has two options. He is either has perverse desires or one of us yet still an outsider by representing our hidden desires. So, what does it mean if Darger is not one of us? How

does it affect the audience's perspective? Can we still appreciate his art? Is it possible to appreciate his art without fetishizing it? Moral and ethical discussions also can be done about this issue? What does it mean if we appreciate his work knowing that they reflect the inner world and impulses of a serial killer? This issue also brings the question of "Can we separate artist from her/his art?" Similar discussions are made about insider artists that are accused with pedophilia such as Roman Polanski, Lewis Carroll, Graham Ovenden⁴⁴. How does this situation affect the status of the works and the people?

Issue of reclaiming also can be analyzed further and even be discussed in the light of Spivak's "Can Subaltern Speak?" question. We can ask the same question as "Can Outsider Speak?". I believe dynamics of the art world and power relations can be understood through this discussion. As I discussed earlier, Kate Davey argues that outside artists can gain a sense of belonging by reclaiming the concept of outsider art. Why the sense of belonging is important? How this concept can be reclaimed without losing the statue of the artist and how it can change the dynamics of the art world? All these questions can be brought up with an ethnographic research done with artists from different backgrounds.

Finally, I suggest that, fake outsider artists can be studied in order to carry the importance of biography discussion further. Since I wanted to limit my thesis to Darger, I left this issue outside of my discussion, but there are examples where various insider artists have created their own fake outsider artists. These examples are very rich to explore the subject of identity art and importance of biography. One of the most famous fake outsider artists is Clyde Angel. When we look at his life story, Angel is a perfect example of an outsider artist, except he is not real. He is a creation of Vernon Clyde Willits. Willits not only created the works of Angel but also give him a narrative and life story that even includes institutionalization from mental illness (Huebner 2009). Some critics tracked down Angel and found out that he is actually not real, yet Angel already established his reputation in the outsider art world. There are others like Angel, such as E.B. Hazzard who is known with his sci-fi paintings and Joseph Wagenbach who had a very isolated and secret life. His art works and installations are discovered when authorities bust his house. His house opened for visitors and even organized tours. The house included ephemera of Wagenbach such as an old map where you can see his

⁴⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/17/from-caravaggio-to-graham-ovenden-do-artists-crimes-taint-their-art>

birthplace, a village close to Bergen Belsen concentration camp during WWII. So, his life story and his art works are also linked with Nazi Germany and WWII. However, Wagenbach was actually a project of German born, Toronto based artist Iris Haussler (Kjellman-Chapin 2009). She developed a character and thousands of art work for his character and created a house for her fictional artist. A few years after his discovery Haussler tell the truth to the media and explained that her project was about the importance of biography. Fake outsider artists could be a great topic to continue genre with a story discussion and how biography affects the art works and artists.

Writing on outsider art taught me art is a constructed what is considered as art can be change over time with dynamics and power relations of the period. When I looked at my own creative process and the way I define myself as a self-taught ceramicist, I realized that identifying something as art requires power and authority. What is considered as art and who is considered as an artist are up to a small but a powerful group. It is also about having the cultural and social capitals and means. Vivan Maier example I gave earlier is an great way to discuss this issue because the way she was put into an outsider artist category was not her choice, she was simply did not have the means and right contacts to become an artist. Outsider art both challenges and reinforces the art world. It is a concept that expands the rules and boundaries of the art world and blurs the what is art and not by being an inspiration for the artists all around the world. However, on the other hand, it is a product of the art world that arises out of a quest in the art world for boundaries and it strengthens the unbalanced power relations. Even though it reinforces the power relations, I find this concept valuable in order to question the boundaries and rules of the art world. I believe outsider art shows us that everyone who creates things should be called artists regardless of their statue and background.

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