

ARTFORUM

Stepping Out

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Left: Dealer and Outsider Art Fair director Andrew Edlin and Ruby Edlin. Right: Artist Winfred Rembert and dealer Peter Tillou. (All photos: Isabel Flower)

“IF YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE a treacherous stairway, best to fill it with Dan Flavins,” dealer Frank Maresca quipped. He didn’t seem worried about whether visitors to the Outsider Art Fair would make the trek up to his fourth-floor booth in the old Dia Art Foundation building; the crowd’s adventurous energy was palpable from the start. The event’s twenty-first edition was the brightest in recent memory, and not just because of the illuminated staircase, or the free drinks (the cash bar was always a bone of contention when the fair inhabited a stale office building on Thirty-Fourth Street). At the opening the Thursday before last, Andrew Edlin (who recently purchased the fair from its founder, Sanford Smith) made the rounds with his daughter Ruby. Edlin’s small step for man amounted to a giant leap for the self-taught kind; bringing the fair to Chelsea proved an auspicious strategy for moving the “outside” “inside.” The art world at large is waking up to the dramatic work created off its beaten path.

Part of the fair’s draw is the generous program of talks, organized for the second year by Valérie Rousseau. (She’s a new member of the American Folk Art Museum’s curatorial team, and is married to Edlin.) Sunday’s panel, “A Bridge Between Art Worlds,” brought curators Massimiliano Gioni, Daniel Baumann, and Ralph Rugoff together on the roof of the Dia building. Their priority: how to lift the veil from outsider art’s seclusion. Referencing similarities between work (created concurrently, and without cross-pollination) by Adolf Wölfli and the Dadaists, Baumann implied that similar parallels might hold keys to a more comprehensive art history. Gioni, in turn, suggested exhibiting outsider artwork “not as a new king or queen we crown in our museums,” but as a force to disrupt the status quo. (Perhaps a dethroning in favor of anarchy!)



Left: [Jerry Lauren](#) and [Carl Hammer](#). Right: [Hakan Urfalioglu](#), [Juliana Huxtable](#), and [Scott Hug](#).

It's an art-world rabbit hole, and one might start one's journey by pursuing a particular artist's work. At the fair's opening, many attendees proudly trumpeted their favorites. "There's only one outsider for me," collector [Jerry Lauren](#) proclaimed, "and that's [Bill Traylor](#)." Nothing against the rest, as he explained: "I only like the best of the best." [Peter Tillou](#), a prominent Litchfield dealer usually associated with, well, just about everything (his collection Christie's once dubbed "A Cabinet of Curiosities"), was there to cheer on his pal [Winfred Rembert](#). Meanwhile, [Dustin Yellin](#), an artist from the right side of the tracks, rolled up a sleeve to prove loyalty to the "outsider" cause: a faded tattoo of a 1949 drawing by Art Brut's "original" artist advocate, [Jean Dubuffet](#).

Thankfully, not everyone's relationship to outsider art is monogamous. Several broad-minded collectors shared news about their own exhibition spaces, [William Louis-Dreyfus](#), in Mount Kisco, and [Victor Keen](#), in Philadelphia, among them. And, in a step toward the cease-fire called for between public museums and outsiders (most recently, by [Jerry Saltz's](#) OAF-inspired write-up), [Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz's](#) "Great and Mighty" collection will be shown this spring at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Left: Artist [Dustin Yellin's](#) arm. Right: Collectors [Jill Bonovitz](#) and [Sheldon Bonovitz](#).

As artist Scott Hug explained, part of his disillusionment with the contemporary art world is “pedigreed celebrity.” Of course, the Outsider Art Fair abounds with pedigrees—just not those hyped at mother’s dining table. Martín Ramírez “studied art” at DeWitt State Hospital, Rembert on a chain gang, and Traylor on the streets of Montgomery, Alabama. Erika Wanenmacher double-majored in witchcraft, while George Widener was studied [*sic*] at Columbia University (neuroscientist Joy Hirsch, Ph.D., has been scrutinizing the savant’s brain scans for years).

The boundaries defining the genre’s small world can be both a draw and a drag, but perhaps because of the “outsider” designation, this particular art crew is usually arms open. Austria-based dealer Nina Katschnig and her colleague Sabrine Ben Mansour were both overjoyed to be at outsider art’s annual party. “It’s the one time of year when all of us get together,” Katschnig explained. The intimacy of the crowd could have come off as simply cliquish, but even those new to the fold seemed to find their place. “I’m so happy it’s pet-friendly!” one outsider-art neophyte exclaimed, giddily relating that even though the fair was not in fact outside, as she had initially supposed, it was inclusive enough for her two plus-ones: puppies in a shoulder bag. Leave your assumptions at the door.

— *Michaela Slavid*



Left: Dealers Nina Katschnig and Sabrine Ben Mansour. Right: Dealer Maxwell Graham.