

## Outsider to Insider: The Art of the Socially Excluded

### Dışarıdan İçeriye: Sosyal Dışlanmışların Sanatı

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#### Abstract

The term outsider art was coined by the art historian Roger Cardinal in 1972. Outsider art includes the art of the 'unquiet minds,' self-taught and non-academic work. Outsider art is not a movement like Cubism or Expressionism with guidelines and traditions, rather it is a reflection of the social and mental status of the artist. The classification relies more on the artist than the art. Due to such characteristics of the term, like wide range of freedom and urge to create, social discrimination, creating without the intention of profit, people with Autism Spectrum Disorder also considered as Outsiders. However, not all people with Autism Spectrum Disorder has the skillset to be an artist. This paper focuses on the similarities of the outsider artists and savant artists while focusing on the work and life of Richard Wawro.

**Keywords:** Autism spectrum disorder, savant syndrome, outsider art, art brut, social exclusion.

**Academical disciplines/fields:** Visual Arts, psychiatry.

#### Özet

Toplum dışı sanat olarak da tanımlanan Outsider Art terimi ilk kez 1972 yılında Roger Cardinal tarafından kullanılmıştır. Toplum dışı sanat, akademik eğitim almamış, kendisini bu alanda geliştirmiş, toplumun 'normal' olarak sınıflandırdığı grubun dışında kalan bireylerin yaptığı sanattır. Toplum dışı sanatın, kübizm veya dışavurumculuk gibi belirli kuralları, çizgisi yoktur; sanatçının akli ve sosyal statüsü üzerinden sınıflandırılır. Bu nedenle toplum dışı sanat sınıflandırması sanat değil sanatçı üzerindedir. Toplum dışı sanatın ana özellikleri içerisinde önüne geçilemez yaratma isteği, sosyal dışlanma, kazanç sağlama hedefi olmadan üretme olduğu düşünüldüğünde otizmlili bireylerin de bu gruba dahil oldukları görülmektedir. Elbette her otizmlili birey sanatçı olarak adlandırılacak kriterlere sahip değildir. Bu derleme, Richard Wawro'nun çalışmaları ve hayatı üzerine odaklanırken, toplum dışı sanat ve savant sendromlu sanatçılar arasındaki benzerliği incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Otizm spektrum bozukluğu, savant sendromu, toplum dışı sanat, art brut, sosyal dışlanma.

**Akademik disiplin(ler)/alan(lar):** Görsel Sanatlar, psikiyatri.

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## The Interest in the Art of the Mentally Ill

Throughout time, people were always fascinated with the different, the unexpected, and what is outside of the norms defined by the culture and society. The interest in the art done by the mentally challenged goes back to 1912 (Bowler, 1997). Franz Marc, August Macke, Gabrielle Münter, Wassily Kandinsky, Albert Bloch, Marianne von Werefkin, Alexej von Jawlensky and Lyonel Feininger, believed in the manifestation of spiritual values through form and color (Zolberg and Cherbo, 1997). In 1912, the group published *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach* which includes artworks from outside the accepted art world; such as primitive art, children's drawings and the art of the mentally ill (Bowler, 1997). In 1921 Dr. Walter Morgenthaler published a book titled *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler (A Psychiatric Patient as Artist)* which was the showcase of the work of Adolf Wölfli. Wölfli was born in Switzerland in 1864. After assaulting young children, he was incarcerated in Wandal Mental Asylum in 1895 and remained there until his death in 1930. Wölfli, known as one of first Art Brut artist, started drawing in 1899 and completed 5 books that consist of 25000 pages of illustrations. Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer explains the interest in the art of the mentally ill as: "The Madman lives in the realm of ideas which sane artist tries to reach; for the madman it is purer, because completely separate from external reality." (as cited in MacGregor, 1989, p. 234). In 1922 German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn collected over 5000 drawings from mental institutions in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy and Netherlands, and later published his research on the art of the mental patients with the title of *The Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. In this book, Prinzhorn identifies six drives that pushes an individual to create an image: the expressive urge, the urge to play (active urge), the ornamental urge (environmental enrichment), the ordering tendency, the tendency to imitate (copying urge), and the need for symbols (significance). According to Prinzhorn;

When we cover a piece of paper with doodles, when a child arranges colorful pebbles on his mud pie, or when we plant flowers in our garden, one quality is common to all of these quite different activities, namely the enrichment of the outer world by the addition of perceptual elements. Like the need for activity, it is final, irreducible psychological fact –an urge in man not to be absorbed passively into his environment, but to impress on it traces of his existence beyond those of purposeful activity. (Prinzhorn, 1972, p. 21)

The book raised interest of such artists like Paul Klee, Max Ernst, and Jean Dubuffet. Afterwards, French artist Jean Dubuffet also started collecting art from mental institutions and prisons (Bowler, 1997). It was Dubuffet who coined the term Art Brut which translates as 'raw art.' Dubuffet explains the term Art Brut as;

By this [Art Brut] we mean pieces of work executed by people untouched by artistic culture, in which therefore mimicry, contrary to what happens in intellectuals, plays little or no part, so that their authors draw everything (subject, choice of materials employed, means of transportation, rhythms, ways of writing, etc.) from their own depths and not from clichés of classical art or that is fashionable. Here we are witnessing an artistic operation that is completely pure, raw, reinvented in all its phases by its author, based solely on his own impulses. Art, therefore, in which manifested the sole function of invention, and not those, constantly seen in cultural art, of the chameleon and the monkey. (Dubuffet, 1949)

For Dubuffet, the works created purely in relation to creative urges in exile from society are more powerful and worthy than the works of professional artists (Rhodes, 2010). In 1972, art historian Roger Cardinal wrote a book titled *Outsider Art* on self-taught and mentally or physically ill artists, who are solely interested in fulfilling personal needs to create without the intention to market. He stated that these drawings of the mentally ill have an aesthetic value and they need to be treated as art. He even pointed out the similarities between these drawings and modern art which was mesmerizing people at the time. Outsider art has broader spectrum of art and society unlike Art Brut (raw art), which was labeled by Jean Dubuffet in 1940 for the art of 'insane'. According to Cardinal, "Outsider art is an art of unexpected and often bewildering distinctiveness, and its outstanding exemplars tend to conjure up imagines private worlds, completely satisfying to their creator yet so remote from our normal experience as to appear alien and rebarbative." (Cardinal, 2009, p. 1460)

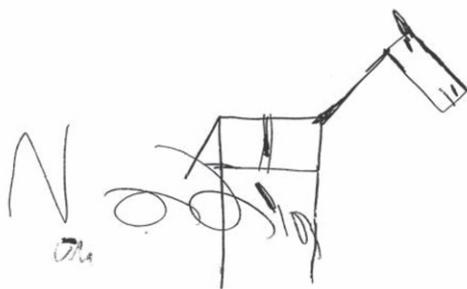
## Outsider Art and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Outsider Art disregards the academic criteria. Instead, it reflects a strong impulse and freedom, which can also be seen in the art of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Many people with Autism Spectrum Disorder have hard time speaking and reading other people's facial and body language (Frith, 2008). Some of these people draw in order to relate to world, communicate with others. Due to their overpowering desire to cut, tear, blend things together, and so on, people with Autism Spectrum Disorder have their unique way of creating art, starting from early ages (Hosseini, 2012). Many of these individuals lack a formal art training, yet they are certainly capable of creating 'insider art'.



**Figure 1.** *Horses*, Nadia, age 3 (Selfe, 1977, p. 23).

Expressiveness of the content and inability to explain the meaning behind is what intrigues the society as the forms of the outsider art. Every 1 in 10 people with Autism Spectrum Disorder has remarkable abilities linked to massive memory, which is called Savant Syndrome. Savant skills are based on right hemisphere. These skills are artistic, visual and motor; such as music, art, math, and calculation. There is a strong link between savants and geniuses. Almost all of the savant artists starts drawing at an early age as a necessity to communicate with the world due to their verbal impairment (Treffert, 2010). Lack of formal art training is what puts them under the category of Outsider artist.



**Figure 2.** *A Horse*, Nadia, in her early 20s (Selfe, 2011, p. 56).

Autism Spectrum Disorder is an exceptional phenomenon, because it collides with our definitions and expectations. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder takes in and heighten what is happening in their surrounding environment. They pay more attention to the details and spend most of their time staring at objects around them. When the society excludes them due to their odd behaviors, these aspects later become the core source of their strength, repetition and fixation in their art (Grandin, 2018). The interest in children's drawings began at the end of the nineteenth century. In *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach*, Kandinsky emphasized the importance of their position and influence. According to him, the children look at things from a fresh perspective, and transfer it as is into their drawings, while professional artists literally kill the drawing in order stay 'academically correct.' Some of the Outsider Artists' work resemble children drawings due to the lack of the formal training. However, in rare cases Outsider Artists, such as savant artists, sought and achieved technical mastery in their art. Nadia, born in 1967, is one of the best-known children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Nadia's drawings were documented by Lorna Selfe between the ages of 3 and 9. Her drawings reveal a great sensitivity to line, contour and proportion unexpected from her age, which cannot be judged as random or unintentional (see Fig. 1). Selfe states;

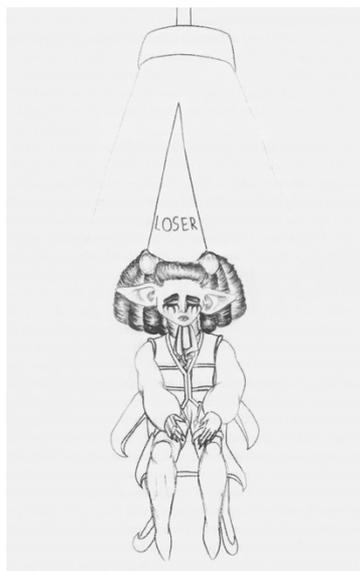
Nadia's ability, apart from its being so superior to other children, was also essentially different from the drawing of normal children. It is not that she had an accelerated development in this sphere but rather that her development was totally anomalous. Even her earlier drawings showed few of the properties associated with infant drawings... Perspective, for instance, was present from the start. (Selfe, 1977, p. 127)



**Figure 3.** *Merry-go-round*, K. Miller, age 4 (Miller, 2008a, p. 48).

By the age of 6 she was still failed to speak and socially unresponsive. Art was still her only way of communication. Unfortunately, her drawing skills rapidly deteriorated when she started school at the age of 9. Socialization and being able to communicate verbally diminished her art skill to a normal range (see Fig. 2) (Selfe, 2011).

Kim Miller is another example for how communication and socialization effects the artistic skill in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. She started drawing around the age of 3. Due to her limited verbal language and delayed echolalia, it was hard to understand her (Miller, 2008, p. 60). Drawing became the main aspect of her communication (see Fig. 3). As her mother Eileen Miller states in *Autism Through Art: The Girl Who Spoke with Pictures*, "Her drawings were exciting to see because we gained so little information from her outward demeanor. It was another way of connecting with her; it made us feel closer." (Miller, 2008, p. 66). Unlike Nadia, Kim felt like an outsider at school. Because of her unresponsive tendencies, she could never have a connection with her peers. She was teased and rejected by other students throughout her education, therefore she continued to draw expressively while improving her artistic skills (see Fig. 4).



**Figure 4.** *Loser*, K. Miller, age 14 (Miller, 2008b, p. 116).

One of the characteristic aspects of the Outsider Art is the creation of imaginative, fantasy world of the artist. But people still need to feel the resemblance to the reality in order to connect to these worlds. In this context, not all the savant artists can be specified as outsiders. Stephen Wiltshire is another savant artist who was born in 1974. Wiltshire, begun drawing at the age of 6 and specialized in architectural drawings. With the help of his massive memory, after even a brief helicopter ride, he could draw the whole cityscape by heart (Frith, 2008, p. 85-87). However, the distinctive, as well as fascinating quality of these drawings is the realism. The excretion of Wiltshire from the term outsider lies behind being original and unpredicted. This sameness might be the result of the pressure to fulfill the expectations of the audience, or the urge to copy the world exactly as seen, like a machine (see Fig.5). On the other hand, another architectural savant artist Gilles Tréhin drew his fantasy island metropolis called Urville for nearly 20 years (Tréhin, 2006a). Unlike Wiltshire, Tréhin's drawings give insight to a coherent and secluded world of the artist (see Fig.6).



**Figure 5.** *Singapore*, S. Wiltshire, 2014.



**Figure 6.** *Canal du Focusaque*, G. Tréhin, n.d. (Tréhin, 2006b, p. 29).

The art of the people with Autism Spectrum Disorder, mentally ill people, and social isolates may resemble the work of folk artists. But it is essential to distinguish the art made by outsiders from folk artist. First, outsider art cannot be referred as primitive art or craft; these artists considered to be innately authentic. According to Becker, folk artists learn their crafts within their community, from their parents and apprentices. On the other hand, outsiders are spontaneous, free from desire to be accepted by the certain art world. Outsider artists are also believed to be unaware of their talent, artistry, and looking for an art career; they are simply fulfilling their urge to create (Becker, 1982). In this context, savant artists needed to be given more credit, and reserve a rightful place in society.

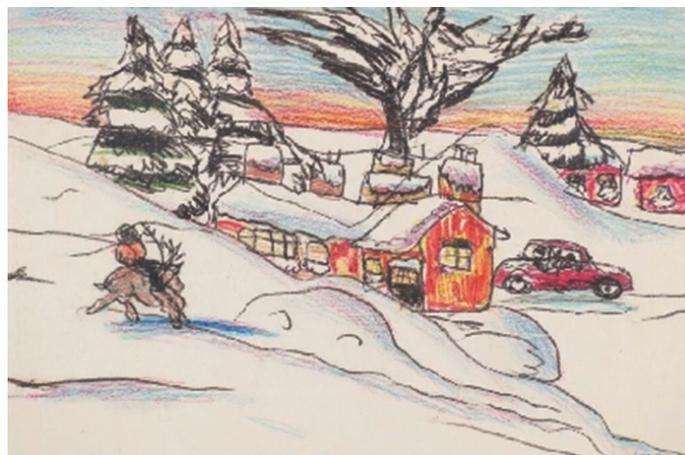
## Richard Wawro as an Outsider Artist

Richard Wawro, a Scottish savant artist known with his seascapes and landscapes, was born with cataracts in both eyes. At birth, he was technically blind and had to go through several surgeries in order to help the light reach his retina. While growing up, he showed characteristic signs of autism including walking in circles, spinning objects, desire for routine, striking a piano key for hours, unable to communicate verbally and so on (see Fig.7). However, in 1950s Autism Spectrum Disorder was not defined as a condition yet which resulted in him being misdiagnosed as a mentally handicapped with an IQ of 30 (*With Eyes Wide Open*, 1983).



**Figure 7.** Richard Wawro's drawing process and hand tapping.

Desire to communicate through images is instinctive to everyone. Richard Wawro started to draw on chalkboard at age 3 but did not speak in a meaningful way until he was 11. Around age 6 his parents tried to enroll him to a school, but he was rejected due to his uncontrollable behavior. Finally, a special education teacher Molly Leishman at an Occupational Center agreed to give him a chance, which literally changed his life. One day, his teacher gave him a red crayon to scribble on paper and an unexpected happened; he started to draw compositions with perspective while other children of his age were drawing flat stick figures (see Fig. 8). Due to his poor eyesight he drew only a few inches above the paper but fully in control of the whole composition (*With Eyes Wide Open*, 1983).



**Figure 8.** *Winter*, R. Wawro, 1966.

Wawro could never read or write well and his speech was limited and hard to comprehend, but his drawings did speak out for him. It was then realized that he was aware of his surroundings, carefully observing every single detail, and most importantly, he wasn't mentally retarded. Every stroke, every line of color had a purpose and point. When Wawro was 12, his talent was described as "incredible phenomenon rendered with precision of a mechanic and the vision of a poet" (Treffert, 2010, p. 177) by professor Marian Bohusz-Szysko of The Polish School of Art in London. Wawro opened his first exhibition in Edinburg when he was discovered by the gallery owner Richard Demarco. Since then, he had over 100 exhibitions in Europe and North America and sold over 1000 drawings. The late Pope John Paul II and Margaret Thatcher are amongst the notable owners of his artwork. Wawro completed around 2450 drawings until he died in 2006. The documentary produced by filmmaker Ron Zimmerman and special education expert Dr. Laurence A. Becker in 1983 *With Eyes Wide Open: The Life and Art of Richard Wawro* and follow-up documentary *A Real Rainman: Portrait of an Autistic Savant* in 1989 also helped the social media celebrate his gift and be aware of savant syndrome.



**Figure 9.** # 2244, R. Wawro, n.d.a.



**Figure 10.** #2153, R. Wawro, n.d.b.

Richard Wawro was fascinated by the light since he was a baby. He was staring at the sun and was attracted to moving lights, which later became the aspect element of his drawings. After laying out the basic structure, Wawro, determines and places the source of the light (Treffert, 2010, p. 176-178). Wawro made an effort to understand the nature of colors and capture the effects of light, since light is color. He uses several layers of colors in order to achieve the atmospheric effects and depth in his landscapes and seascapes (*With Eyes Wide Open*, 1983). He puts in uncanny detail in shadows, lights, and reflections of the surfaces. Sometimes, he even covers up the structures drawn on the previous layers for a precise effect, and totally aware of shadows are not black (see Fig. 9 and Fig. 10). In *Theory of Colours*, von Goethe (1810/1970) links blue with darkness. When darkness is viewed through a semitransparent medium, in the case atmosphere, the white light mixes with the darkness and creates the blue color. When the atmosphere is thinned, more darkness mixes with the white light and results in deeper blue. This goes on till black is created. The same fundamental applies to the yellow, the closest color to the white. When there is a cloud, atmosphere gets thickened and more darkness mixes into the yellow, results in orange and red color. Wawro achieved light and shadow with the help of layering multiple colors and let them reflect light and depth.

Wawro's image references come from his National Geographic magazine collection, cd covers, books he has seen once in a bookstore, places he has visited or seen on television. He also carries his binoculars around all the time, searching for details and records them. When it is time to draw, he recalls these images, but never copy them exactly (*With Eyes Wide Open*, 1983). Wawro always improvises; he changes perspectives, adds and subtracts elements, or combines different images (see Fig. 11 and Fig.12). Like all the savants he has an incredible memory of places and dates. He can recall date, place and time of complication of every single drawing of himself. Art is in the center of Wawro's life, pillar of his survival in the dismissive society.



Figure 11. *Benidorm, Spain*, R. Wawro, 1979.



Figure 12. Photograph of Benidorm, Spain.

## Conclusion

The chaos in the unquiet minds will always attract the society. The art, which relates to our social and personal interpretations, is the gateway to one's inner and outer worlds. Falling under Outsider category, Richard Wawro never had a proper art training. Drawing became the central interest of his life because of the necessity within. Even though he was social, he grew up facing countless difficulties, rejection from schools, rejection from society. First, lacking speech until 11, then having poor speech for the rest of his life, stopped the society from listening to him. He was only one of few lucky savants that were 'discovered' and given the credit they deserved. Every savant has a unique story, every savant has a mind in war and these savant artists are the ones who try to speak up with their art, hoping the society will hear their insider voice.

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