





# The outsider artist as storyteller



*Vestiges & Verse at the  
American Folk Art Museum*

By Valérie Rousseau





In *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, philosopher and linguist Roland Barthes refers to the infinite ocean of human narratives.<sup>1</sup> Into this sea of stories, we must add those of visionary artists and art brut creators who conjured their narratives outside the more predictable circuits of communication. The current exhibition *Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic* at the American Folk Art Museum provides a close look at self-taught artists through the idiosyncratic structure of their intricate and nonlinear narratives.<sup>2</sup> The work of seminal artists—such as Henry Darger, Achilles G. Rizzoli, and Adolf Wölfli—is examined alongside that

of lesser-known artists and some still practicing today. The exhibition focuses on the artists' writing practices and the mechanisms behind their visual storytelling.

The exhibition presents manuscripts, illustrated diaries, evolving imaginary maps, drawings conceived in series, multipart collages, and journals filled with coded language. In each case, the images and the written elements become an inseparable device. Among them are three rare notebooks filled with drawings by Aloïse Corbaz, a canonical art brut figure who spent most of her life in the psychiatric hospital of La Rosière, in Gimel-sur-Morges, Switzerland.<sup>3</sup>

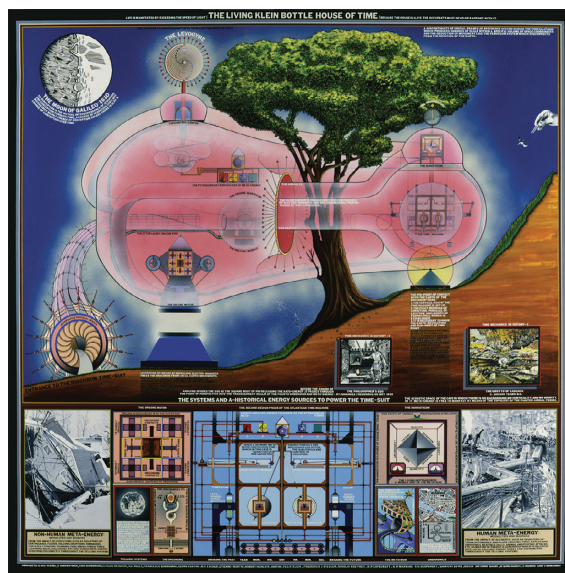


Fig. 1. *DEER. BOY* by James Edward Deeds Jr. (1908–1987), c. 1936–1969. Pencil and crayon on ledger paper, 9 ¼ by 8 ¾ inches. Collection of Frank Tosto; photograph by Adam Reich, courtesy of the American Folk Art Museum, New York.

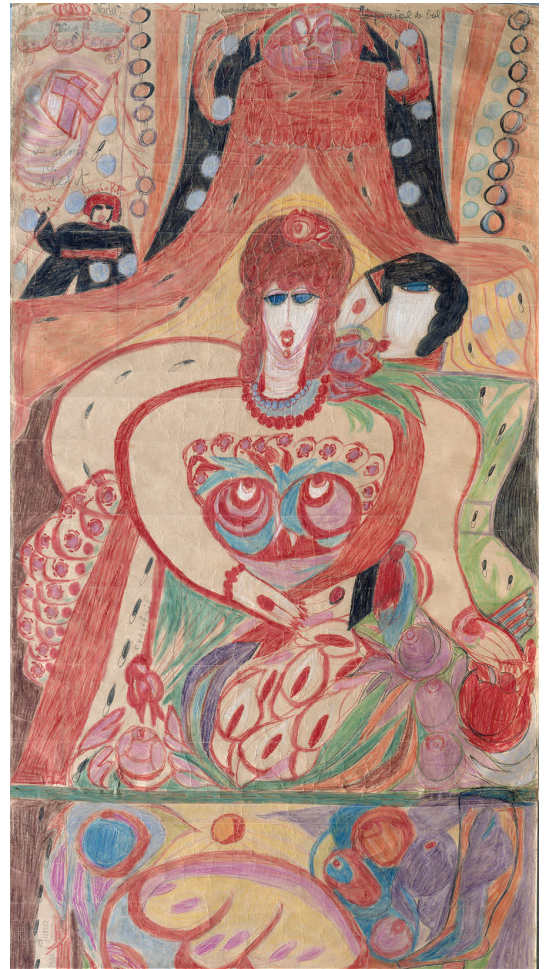
Fig. 2. Twenty panels comprising a section of *Jerry's Map* by Jerry Gretzinger (1942–), 1963–ongoing. Felt pen, colored pencil, acrylic, tape, and plastic clippings collaged on light cardboard, each panel 10

by 8 inches, totaling 40 inches square. Collection of the artist; © Jerry Gretzinger; photograph by Jerry Gretzinger.

Fig. 3. *The Living Klein Bottle House of Time* by Paul Laffoley (1935–2015), 1978. Oil, acrylic, and vinyl lettering on canvas, 73 ½ inches square. Collection of Norman and Eve Dolph, © Estate of Paul Laffoley; photograph courtesy of the Estate of Paul Laffoley and Kent Fine Art.



Created between 1938 and 1963, these *cabiers* are paired with her largest and arguably most ambitious piece, the *Cloisonné de théâtre* (Theatrical Partition) of 1950–1951. This masterpiece (Figs. 4, 4a, 4b), made on a forty-six-foot-long scroll, hand-stitched from fragments of paper, was conceived as a theatrical play depicting Corbaz's dramatic love story.<sup>4</sup> In this complex visual narrative, scenes are stacked one underneath the other and unfold vertically. The drama is divided into three acts, each framed by visual interludes and comprising two scenes. The first act, dominated by vivid colors, represents two couples. Above are depictions of Napoléon I—a recurring character throughout Corbaz's oeuvre—and his wife, Joséphine. Below them are a man and woman with red hair who appear to be dancing. Act I evokes a joyful moment in the artist's life, when she fell in love with a theology student, and when she subsequently served as a governess at the court of the German emperor Wilhelm II, for whom she



developed an amorous passion and a fictitious intimate relationship. Act II conjures up the romantic disappointments of the artist, and Act III presents the deceptions of the flesh. Partitioned from the rest of the composition by the river Styx, the conclusion, according to the artist, depicts Eros and Psyche leaving Earth to become immortal.

**A**mong other works combining writing and imagery are the fourteen volumes (seven bound, seven unbound) of Darger's literary magnum opus, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, created between 1910 and 1939; this 15,145-page novel is displayed alongside Darger's large-scale double-sided watercolors. Presented as well is a selection of drawings taken from the twenty-five thousand pages of Adolf Wölfl's *grande oeuvre*, which is divided into forty-five large notebooks. Following the developing studies on brut literature, notably



those initiated by art historian Michel Thévoz, *Vestiges & Verse* investigates the sequential, interconnected, and developing aspects of these works as an essential step in capturing their articulation and scope.<sup>5</sup> Each of the selected sequences in the exhibition stands as a “vestige,” or remnant, embedded in a larger, more ambitious project. These constituent units map out the work more globally and shed light on connections that may be otherwise obscured.

One common motif and visual mantra in the artists’ projects is the creation of inventories—including highly descriptive recordings of factual events, the scrutinizing of recurring characters, and the extensive collection of intellectual paths leading to a particular knowledge. Art historian Jo Farb Hernandez mentions



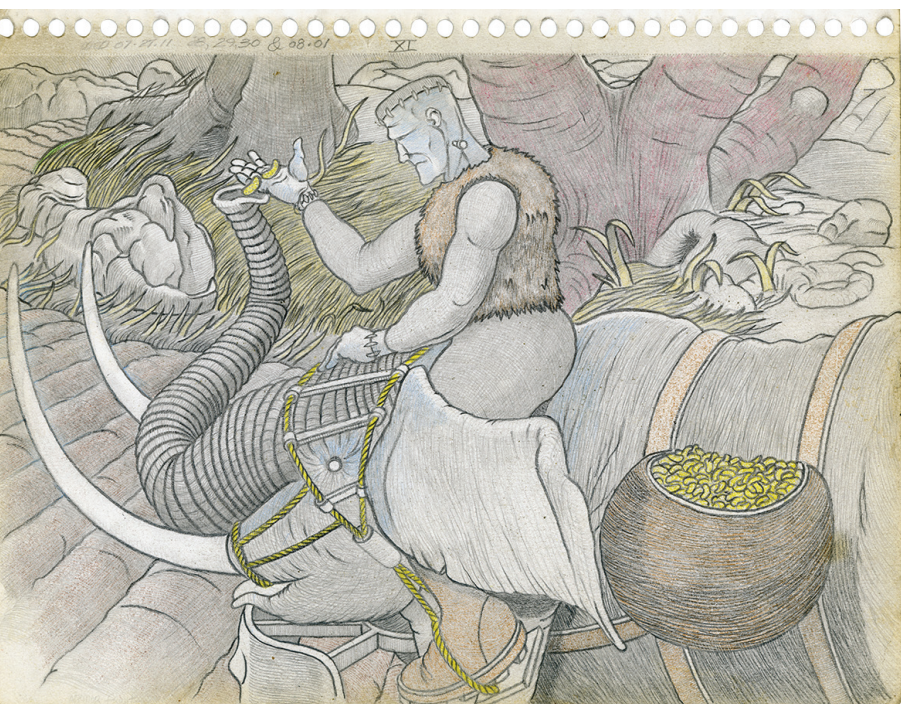
Figs. 4, 4a, 4b. *Cloisonné de théâtre* (Theatrical Partition) by Aloïse Corbaz (1886–1964), 1950–1951. Colored pencil and geranium sap on ten sheets of paper sewn together, 3 feet 3 inches by 46 feet  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch. Collection of Christine and Jean-David Mermoud, Lausanne, © Association Aloïse; photograph by Philip Bernard.

that Achilles Rizzoli “was a prodigious accumulator, with books, lists, newspapers, letters, and other documents found among his effects.”<sup>6</sup> Henry Darger lived similarly in his overcrowded one-room apartment. John MacGregor notes that Darger’s prose is made of repetitions of rhythmic words, various neologisms, overwrought descriptions, and obsessive details.<sup>7</sup> He writes that Darger’s accounts of battles can stretch over hundreds of pages, and the conflicts can be carried out simultaneously on many fronts in several countries—remarking that the artist “often betrays a loss of control, as if the writer’s approach was dominated by free associations and complex visual fantasies.” “His style,” MacGregor continues, “is sometimes similar to that of a war correspondent who broadcasts recorded bulletins at night on the

Fig. 5. *La Blanche Cavale* by Corbaz, c. 1942. Colored pencil and pencil on paper, in a blue cardboard cover notebook (20 pages, bound), 9  $\frac{5}{8}$  by 13 inches. Collection abcd / Bruno Decharme, © Association Aloïse; photograph courtesy of abcd.

Fig. 6. Two pages from *Breviario Grimani* by Corbaz, c. 1943. Colored pencil and pencil on paper, in a notebook (19 pages, bound) 9  $\frac{5}{8}$  by 13 inches. Collection abcd / Bruno Decharme, © Association Aloïse; photograph courtesy of abcd.





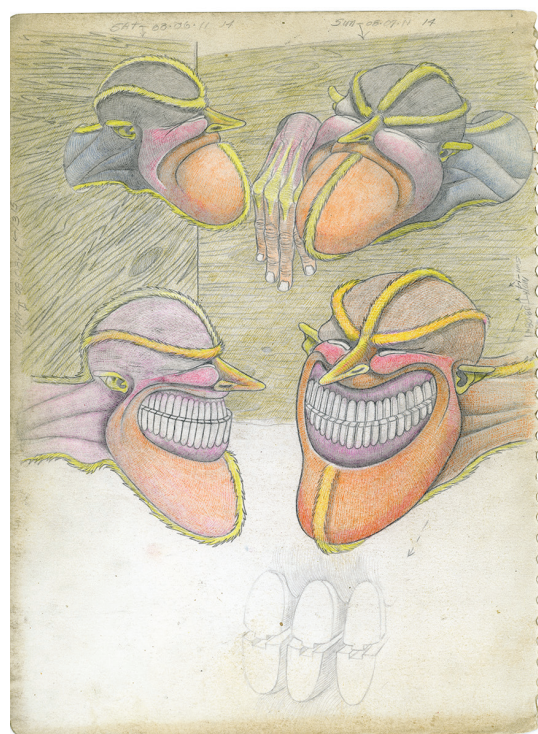
Figs. 7a, 7b. Two pages from *Frankenstein Sequel* (aka *Protège*) by William A. Hall (1943–), 2011–ongoing. Above: Dated and numbered “WED 07-27-11 28, 29, 30 & 08-01” at upper left, “XI” at upper center, inscribed “ARTHUR FRONT” at lower left. Lower right: Dated and numbered “SAT-08-06-11 14” at upper left, “SUN-08-07-11 14” at upper right, “MON-08-08-11/SUN-14” at center right, “MON-08-08-11 <—13 15” at center left. Pencil on paper, 10 by 12 ½ inches each. Collection of the artist, © William A. Hall; American Folk Art Museum photographs.

battlefield.”<sup>8</sup> The fictional world of artist Jerry Gretzinger is made up of thousands of panels; the refined “thought-forms”<sup>9</sup> written by Paul Laffoley elucidate symbols and content in his paintings; and the illustrated travel adventures exhaustingly developed by Wölfl, are examples of nonlinear projects, regularly imprinted by the artist’s repeated attempts to summarize the wanderings of his mind.

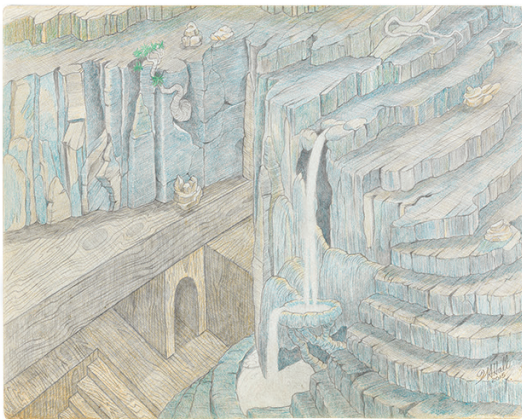
A particular capturing of data can be seen in the practice of William A. Hall, a formerly homeless visionary artist who for a time lived in his car. On the backs of his drawings he records such details of daily life as a definition that he just read in the dictionary; a short discussion that he had with a police officer; or his reaction to a sudden horn blast nearby. These notes containing precise dates and times, which are not visible if the work is traditionally framed, stand as time markers: interruptions in his intensive working flow coming from the outside, and recalling his ever-changing parking locations from one Los Angeles neighborhood to another, as well as recordings of thoughts worthy of note occurring simultaneously with his drawing activity. Aside from pursuing the writing of a novel titled *Protège* since 2011, Hall is mainly known for his highly detailed graphite and colored-pencil drawings, theaters for the sublime, with an atmosphere of hyperrealistic futuristic illustrations. Finely executed cars and trains transcend their original function,

becoming all-powerful engines, reinforced with curvilinear shockproof armatures and safety features, which he began to design in 1984, after his niece was killed in a traffic accident. His vehicles are transplanted into the hearts of post-apocalyptic, unpopulated scenes and out-of-time Lilliputian landscapes that are inhabited by giant twisted trees, waterfalls, rocks, and wood machines of his own invention.

The oeuvre of American James Edward Deeds Jr., with his gallery of characters and their enigmatic associated imagery—developed on both sides of sequentially numbered pages he bound in an album—allows us to approach the inventory in terms of cumulative memories. As Allison C. Meier observed: “The first image in the album of 283 drawings . . . is an eagle lifting a banner. The bird is strikingly similar to a sculpture over the entrance to State Hospital No. 3, in Nevada, Missouri. Deeds entered its walls in 1936, and there spent the next thirty-seven years. Aside from this page, his art rarely refers to the mental institution. Instead, fantastic visions of steamboats, horse-drawn carts, and circus trains recall an earlier era.”<sup>11</sup> Meier mentions the hypnotic rhythm of such portraits as *REBEL GIRL* or *DEER. BOY* (with foliage-formed antlers on his head), with their gaping eyes and carefully executed hairstyles and hats topped with feathers. “The broad faces,” she writes, “pass like people glimpsed in train windows, and they become otherworldly as the pages continue.” If Deeds’s pairings of people with objects or animals might seem deliberate, Meier continues, “these figures have no obvious connection to the object pages. Some sec-

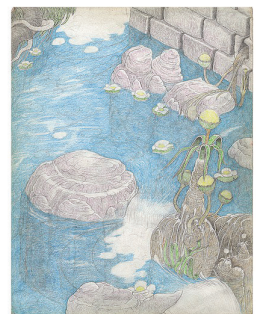
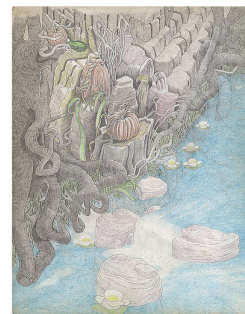
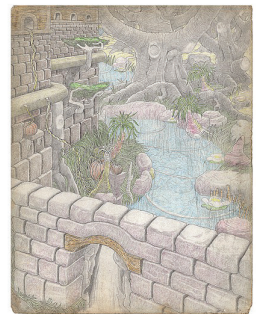
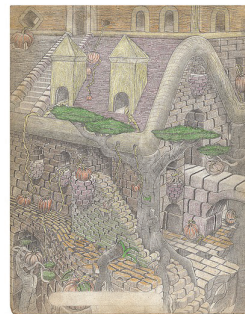
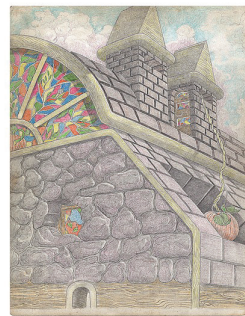
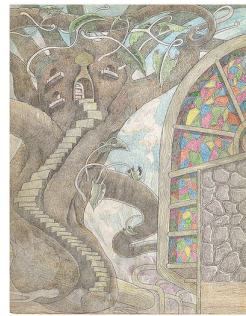






tions go back and forth between showing landscapes and animals, but overwhelmingly every non-person drawing is followed by a portrait.... Deeds must have had some books, images, or other sources for his subjects, but the consistency of idyllic style makes them now obscure. Likewise, some of the labels like 'AUSTRALIA GIRL' and a small map of 'A PORTION OF SOUTH. AMERICA' allow us to place an atlas in his hands, through which he envisioned distant places. Yet the banjos, horses, and 'BOOL FROGS' give it all an American twang."<sup>12</sup>

Reflecting on his own oeuvre, artist Achilles Rizoli admitted that “an opus of this nature has a limited following, almost nil. The terrestrial audience may venture ridicule; on the other hand, the celestial audience simply cannot feel but otherwise.”<sup>13</sup> The oeuvres selected for *Vestiges & Verse* allude to the intricate and often convoluted nature of epics,

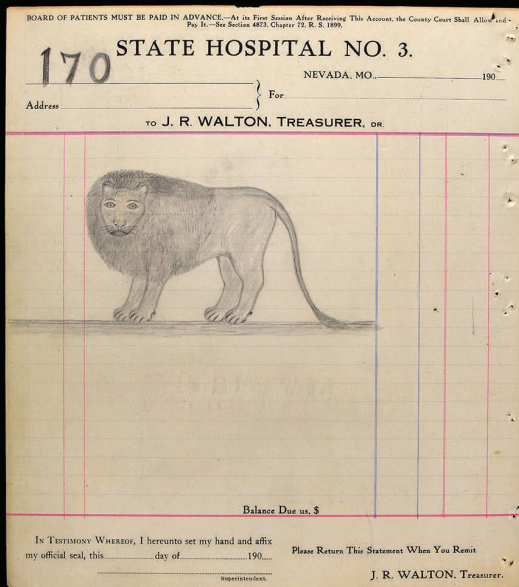
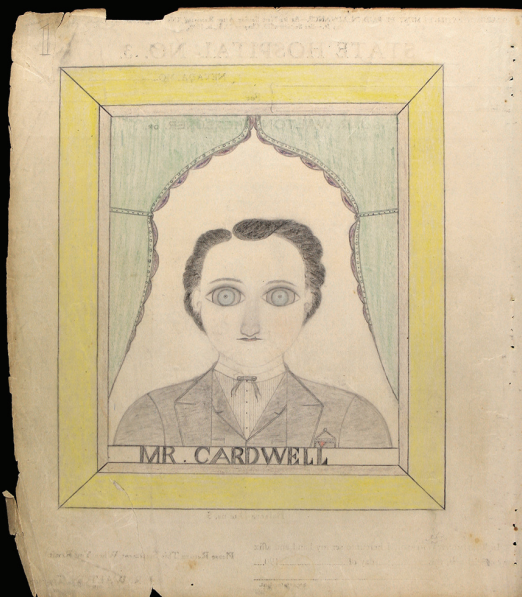
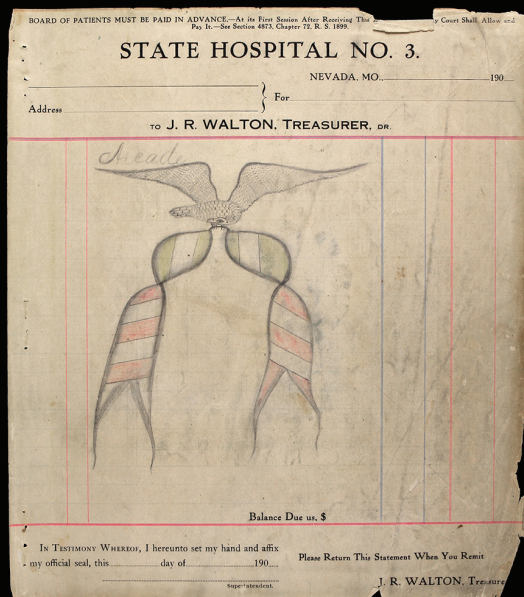
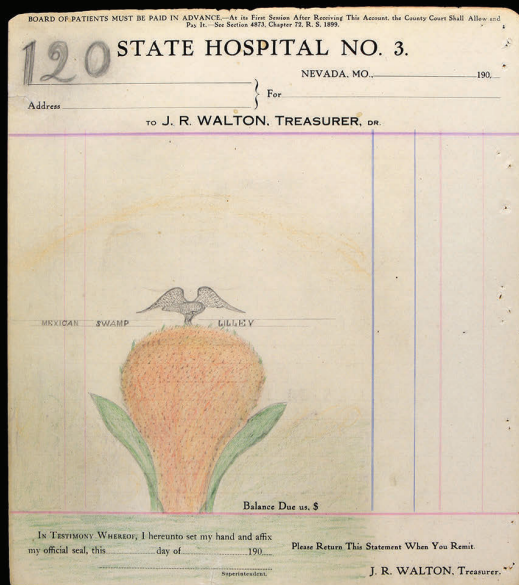
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Figs. 11a, 11b. *JAPAN / MEXICAN SWAMP LILLEY* by Deeds, recto and verso of a single sheet, c. 1936–1969. Pencil and crayon on ledger paper, each sheet  $9\frac{1}{4}$  by  $8\frac{3}{8}$  inches. Collection of Hannah Rieger; Reich photographs, courtesy of the American Folk Art Museum.

Figs. 12a, 12b. *Untitled (arcade) / MR. CARDWELL* by Deeds, recto and verso of a single sheet, c. 1936–1969. Pencil and crayon on ledger paper, each sheet  $9\frac{1}{4}$  by  $8\frac{3}{8}$  inches. Collection of Frank Tos-  
to; Reich photographs, courtesy of the American Folk Art Museum.

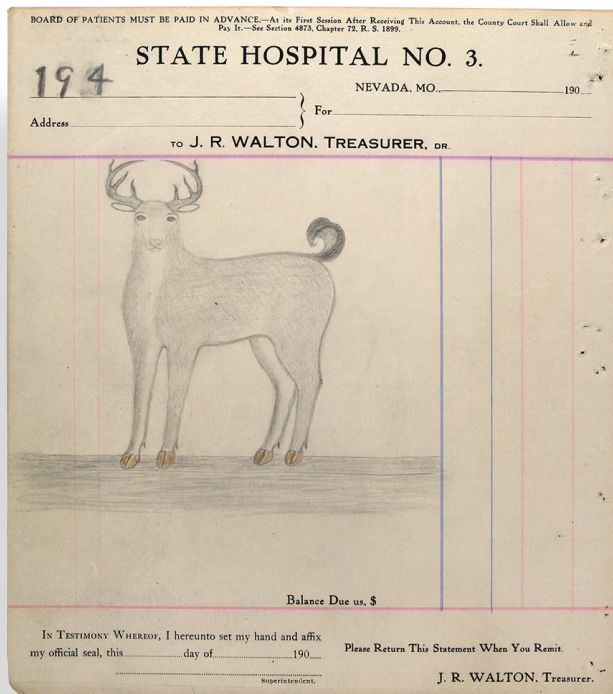
Figs. 13a, 13b. *REBEL GIRL / Untitled (lion)* by Deeds, recto and verso of a single sheet, c. 1936–1969. Pencil and crayon on ledger paper,  $9\frac{1}{4}$  by  $8\frac{3}{8}$  inches. Collection abcd / Bruno echarmes; photograph courtesy of abcd.





in which voices are bestowed upon elevated characters—notably, alter egos of the artists—implementing visionary systems filled with metaphysical questionings. An epic is, by definition, a long poem, typically derived from ancient oral tradition, unfolding the history of a nation and the adventures of heroic figures—the latter of whom are survivors, guardians of memory. In a digital age marked by decoding and encryption, when the very modes of communication engage different cognitive perceptions and sensibilities, we can imagine that these

on mediums of expression, materiality, and public orchestration.<sup>3</sup> This section on Corbaz is an excerpt from Valérie Rousseau and Aurélie Bernard Wortsman, “Aloïse Corbaz. A Visual Theater,” in *Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic*, ed. Valérie Rousseau (American Folk Art Museum, New York, 2018), n.p.<sup>4</sup> Jacqueline Porret-Forel, *Aloïse et le Théâtre de l’Univers* (Skira, Geneva, 1993), p. 131. According to the author, Corbaz mainly used colored pencils combined with watercolor, as well as unconventional materials: she obtained a unique hue by rubbing geranium flowers that she picked from the hospital garden, applied on the paper with her saliva to blend the coloration.<sup>5</sup> Michel Thévoz, the former director of the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, produced extensive studies in this domain (*Écrits bruts*, 1985). This museum was founded after the donation by French artist Jean Dubuffet of his substantial collection of art brut in 1971, which included many



distinctive bodies of work—once dismissed for their illegibility, unconventional materials, and grandiosity—might be considered as newfangled models for the present day.

*Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic* is on view through May 27 at the American Folk Art Museum in New York. The exhibition is accompanied by a scholarly catalogue of the same title, published by the museum.

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, “Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits,” *Communications*, no. 8 (1966), pp. 1–27. <sup>2</sup> This exhibition is framed as a sequel to our 2015 exhibition titled *When the Curtain Never Comes Down*, which observed the practices of self-taught artists from the viewpoint of performance art, and thus privileged a disciplinary approach centered

examples of brut literature and works in which written elements and images are intermingled (by Jeanne Tripiet, Adolf Wölfl, Carlo Zinelli, to name a few).<sup>6</sup> Jo Farb Hernandez, “Divine Design Delights,” in Jo Farb Hernandez, Joanne Hernandez, and Michael Beardsley, *A. G. Rizzoli: Architect of Magnificent Visions* (Abrams and San Diego Museum of Art, New York, 1997), p. 22. <sup>7</sup> John MacGregor, quoted *ibid.*, pp. 13–14. <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>9</sup> Paul Laffoley, Elizabeth Ferrer, Jeanne M. Wasilik, J. W. Mahoney, *Architectonic Thought Forms: A Survey of the Art of Paul Laffoley, 1968–1999* (Austin Museum of Art, Austin, TX, 1999), p. 96. <sup>10</sup> Wölfl presumably used atlases, travel books, and illustrated magazines. However, the outer world data are recycled, if not instrumentalized, as quarries for the construction of his own larger project. <sup>11</sup> Allison C. Meier, “James Edward Deeds Jr., A Sequence of Portraits and Pastoral Scenes Rescued from a Discarded Album,” in *Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic*, n.p. <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>13</sup> Hernandez, “Divine Design Delights,” p. 59.

VALÉRIE ROUSSEAU, curator of the exhibition *Vestiges & Verse*, is curator of self-taught art and art brut at the American Folk Art Museum.

**Figs. 14a, 14b.**  
**YOUNG. TUSKEY /**  
**Untitled (deer) by**  
**Deeds, recto and**  
**verso of a single**  
**sheet, c. 1936–**  
**1969. Pencil and**  
**crayon on ledger**  
**paper, 9 1/4 by 8 3/8**  
**inches. Tosto**  
**collection; Reich**  
**photograph, courtesy**  
**of the American**  
**Folk Art Museum,**  
**New York.**



# HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

## The Visible Language of Outsider Art

*Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic*, an exhibition of illustrated texts by self-taught artists, feels so intimate that it seems to enter the creative process itself.



Edward M. Gómez January 20, 2018



Jean Fick, "AMBAŖADEUR MONDIEU N.23. A+L" (circa 1941-46), journal, 90 pages, ink, pencil, and watercolor on paper, 4 3/4 x 2 3/8 inches, collection abcd/Bruno Decharme (photo courtesy of Collection abcd)

Has there ever been a time when artists from *writing* cultures have not been intrigued by the expressive character of what linguists sometimes refer to as "visible language"? Of course, in some traditions, such as that of ancient China (as well as that of Japan, whose language uses Chinese characters that are often pictographic), calligraphy — an art of brush and ink — gives form to both the literary and the artistic. In such cultures, to a remarkable degree, the acts of composing words and of drawing or painting images can become indelibly fused.

Such points of reference — along with Egyptian hieroglyphs; illuminated medieval manuscripts; decorative Islamic calligraphy; hand-written diaries and letters; hand-painted signs; advertising posters; and comic books — may come to mind while visiting *Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic*, an exhibition that opens tomorrow at the [American Folk Art Museum](#) (and will remain on view through May 27).

Organized by Valérie Rousseau, AFAM's curator of self-taught art and *art brut*, this survey calls attention to the integration of text and image in works made by a diverse group of artistic autodidacts. In them, these two elements are inseparable and, expressively speaking, equally potent.

Many of the illustrated texts — or are they annotated pictures? — on view feel so intimate in character that to see them gathered here, exposed, is to enter into a zone of heightened aesthetic awareness — of their makers' deeply personal motivations and of the creative process itself.

"Looking at the writing practices of some of the classic *art brut* artists — this was one of my starting points in assembling this exhibition," Rousseau said during an interview at the museum. She added, "Sometimes, since they invented their own writing systems or used familiar languages in unusual ways, it is impossible to translate their texts. Still, the art-and-image works they created are fascinating — as objects, as forms of communication, and, indeed, even as literature."

Rousseau explained that, in the exhibition's title, she uses the word "vestiges" to mean "fragments." She said, "By bringing these works together so that we may examine their different structures and the artists' different ways of combining images and texts, we provide an opportunity to see what such works may have in common. One could say that, structurally and perhaps in other ways, too, they all share a certain kind of logic."





Adolf Wölfl, "Geographische Karte der beiden Fürstentümer Sonoritz und Willi=Wand=West." (1911), from "From the Cradle to the Grave" (1908–1912), book four of nine, page 421, graphite and colored pencil on newsprint, 39 1/4 x 28 inches (photo courtesy of Adolf Wölfl Foundation, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland)



Charles A. A. Dellschau, "Untitled" (March 24, 1921–July 24, 1921), book twelve, 81 pages, numbers 4850 to 5235, bound, ink, watercolor, pencil, and collage on paper, 21 1/4 x 17 3/8 x 1 inches, collection abcd/Bruno Decharme (photo courtesy of Collection abcd)

Rousseau pointed out that the fragility of many of the text-filled works on view poses challenges for curators and exhibition designers, whose goal is to display such items in ways that allow visitors to personally engage with them. After all, while such objects cannot be physically manipulated, they demand a more up-close, intimate kind of viewing

experience. AFAM's exhibition-design team has found a solution in the creative use of video screens and iPads equipped with custom-designed software that allows museum-goers to turn the photographically reproduced pages of numerous book works, even as they find themselves standing right next to their handmade originals. This interactive feature manages not to overwhelm objects hanging on walls or presented in specially constructed vitrines.

Over a period of many years, Wölfl produced a 45-volume, 25,000-page magnum opus whose various sections have different titles. Here, several of its richly illustrated pages are on view; they come from *From the Cradle to the Grave*, a section of the large work in which the artist, serving as both the narrator and protagonist of his tale (through his alter ego, "Doufi"), recalls his childhood. Wölfl, who regarded himself as a composer as well as a storyteller and artist, often included musical notation of his own invention within his drawn compositions.



Henry Darger, "106. AT SUNBEAM CREEK. Are with little girl refugees again in peril from forest fires..." (circa 1950–60), one side of double-sided artwork, watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced-together paper, 19 x 70 1/2 inches, collection of American Folk Art Museum, © Kiyoko Lerner (photo by James Prinz, courtesy of AFAM)

Although his drawings often serve to illustrate passages of his grand, unfurling narrative (in which his other alter ego, "Saint Adolf," later exuberantly creates the universe), the texts that appear within his pictures are not merely descriptive captions: sometimes they also help propel the storytelling and incorporate an element that is present throughout much of Wölfl's grand oeuvre — a distinct musicality that becomes very evident when his texts, which he wrote in his native Swiss-German dialect, are read aloud. Buried in one drawing on view, for example, is a rhythmic sequence of nonsense syllables: "Pimm = Bemm = Bamm = Bomm = / Bumm:

Pimm = Bemm = / Bamm, = Bomm = / Bumm: Pimm = Bemm = Bamm, = / Bamm = / Bumm."

*Vestiges & Verse* also offers several large, double-sided, mixed-media drawings from Darger's epic tale, *The Story of the Vivian Girls in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, which



the Chicago recluse began writing sometime between 1910 and 1912, and finished in the late 1930s.

A good-versus-evil story influenced by Victorian children's literature and accounts of the US Civil War and World War I, as well as by Roman Catholic liturgy (Darger was devoutly religious), *In the Realms of the Unreal*, as the big work is commonly known, pits the intrepid Vivian Girls — seven honorable little sisters — against monsters and legions of menacing soldiers.



Aloise Corbaz, image from "Brevario Grimaldi" (circa 1943), 19 pages, bound, in a notebook, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 9 5/8 x 13 inches, collection abcd/Bruno Decharme (photo courtesy of Collection abcd)

The exhibition presents the spine of one of Darger's scrapbooks, which originally contained numerous drawings, along with the first volume of *In the Realms...* With its tattered, cardboard cover, it is a veritable Shroud of Turin in the *art brut*/outsider art field. (It is now in AFAM's permanent collection. The museum also houses an extensive archive of Darger's source materials.)

On view, too, and rarely shown publicly, is Corbaz's *Cloisonné de théâtre* ("Theatrical Partition," early 1950s), a 46-foot-long scroll upon which the artist— using colored pencils, the sap of crushed geraniums, and watercolor — visually recounts a romantic tale, partly inspired by her own youthful, amorous adventures. These included an actual affair with a theology student and an imaginary fling with Germany's Emperor Wilhelm II, in whose court she had once served as a governess.

Dellschau was known for his collage-filled drawings of flying machines. On view in *Vestiges & Verse* are several of these works from the early 20th century, removed from an original bound volume and displayed in sequence so that visitors may get a sense of their intended narrative context. Some of Dellschau's illustrated notebooks are here, too.

Among the more unfamiliar works in the exhibition are the ink-on-paper drawings of the Spanish artist Josep Baqué (1895-1967), who worked as a policeman in his native Barcelona and devoted his free time to art-making. After he died, his niece inherited his life's work, an illustrated manuscript of more than 450 pages filled with images of some 1500 imaginary creatures, which Baqué had classified according to his own taxonomy.



Ariane Bergrichter, "Untitled (Le ballon [The Ball])" (no date), ballpoint pen, felt pen, and colored pencils on glued, assembled paper sheets, 18 1/8 x 26 3/8 inches, private collection, © Ariane Bergrichter Estate (photo by Adam Reich, courtesy of American Folk Art Museum)

Psychologically and emotionally intense are the works of the Belgian Ariane Bergrichter (1937-1996), a former fashion model who began making art when she was in her early 50s. Her notebooks contain anguished transcriptions, in upper-case letters, of the hallucinatory voices she heard, which harassed and threatened her ("OH, SHE IS SO STUPID [...] ONE OF THESE EVENINGS, I WILL ATTACK"). In lowercase script, she wrote her reactions to such statements. Along with her texts, Bergrichter produced collages, whose dense compositions are packed with ballpoint-pen or felt-tip-pen scenes of daily life. After she died, her children found her artworks neatly folded up and packed away in a suitcase.

Several of Malcolm McKesson's wiry-scribbly, ink-on-paper images are on view, too; the scion of a family-run chemical company, for which he worked after studying at Harvard University, McKesson (1909-1999) began making his erotically charged pictures in the early 1960s. He also wrote a novella, *Matriarchy: Freedom in Bondage*, and while the images he created are neither pornographic nor especially erotic, they do relate to the sadomasochistic themes found in his writings. For the studios, samples of those texts are on display. McKesson once described *Matriarchy*, whose protagonist



is a Harvard undergraduate, as a “semi-fantasy of a lost opportunity for true expression of servitude at early maturity.” Clearly placing himself within the book’s narrative, he added, “I fall under the spell of a beautiful woman who subjects me to her will with love and domesticates me in a feminine environment.”



Malcolm McKesson, “Stockings” (no date), 56 pages, notes and drawings related to “Matriarchy: Freedom in Bondage,” ink on paper (photo courtesy of American Folk Art Museum)

Visionaries aplenty are represented in *Vestiges & Verse*: The enchanting and quietly surreal drawings in mineral pigments and watercolor on paper of [Melvin Edward Nelson](#) (1908-1992), who lived on a hilltop farm in Oregon, reflect his fascination with electromagnetic fields. He believed that the marks he made on paper were “caused by the tremendous force of the speed of the planetary atom burning its imprint into the surface of the Earth.”

Filling a wall of the exhibition’s largest gallery and looming over other works, the diagrammatic paintings of the late [Paul Laffoley](#) (1935-2015) explore alchemy, utopia, and a sense of universal oneness in and through time. A one-time apprentice of the innovative modernist designer Frederick Kiesler, the young Laffoley later befriended Andy Warhol, who allowed him to stay at his home in exchange for watching late-night television test patterns.

*Vestiges & Verse* offers much more to discover and savor, such as the curious little notebook of the Frenchman Jean Fick (1876 – ?), about whom little is known, except that he called himself “Ambassador My God.” Filled with indecipherable symbols, his tiny volume, which fits in one hand, is that most satisfying kind of artifact: an aesthetic jewel whose mystery is its power and allure.



Charles A. A. Dellschau, “Recollections. Part two” (1899), green cover ‘Scrapbook,’ bound, ink on paper, private collection (photo courtesy of Stephen Romano Gallery)

Rousseau is not deterred by what is most challenging or impenetrable about the works she and her collaborators have brought together. In her notes in the exhibition’s accompanying booklet, she observes, “In a digital age marked by decoding and encryption, when the very modes of communication engage different cognitive perceptions and sensibilities, we can imagine that these distinctive bodies of work — once dismissed for their illegibility, unconventional materials, and grandiosity — might be considered as newfangled models for the present day.”

*Vestiges & Verse* is the kind of richly rewarding exhibition that makes a visitor want to rush back home and write and draw, and write and draw, and write and draw some more.

*Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic continues at the American Folk Art Museum (2 Lincoln Place, Upper West Side, Manhattan) through May 27.*



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above: Henry Darger, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion (Vol. I of the Story of "The Relams of the Unreal"*, bound), 1910–12, American Folk Art Museum

left: Paul Laffoley (1935–2015), *The Living Klein Bottle House of Time*, 1978, oil, acrylic, and vinyl lettering on canvas, collection of Norman and Eve Dolph

top left: Josep Baqué, *1500 Animals, Wild Beasts, Monsters, and Primitive Men, Year XV* (selection from a 454-page manuscript), 1930–60, ink on paper, various sizes, private collection, Paris

## VESTIGES & VERSE: NOTES FROM THE NEWFANGLED EPIC

American Folk Art Museum  
New York  
January 21 – May 27, 2018

"Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic" offers a sharply focused examination of a range of technically inventive methods that 21 different self-taught artists have employed to conjoin images and texts for their varied communicative purposes. The exhibition was organised by Valérie Rousseau, the American Folk Art Museum's curator of self-taught art and *art brut*. A number of collaborating researchers contributed to its accompanying publications.

Works by definitive representatives of the related *art brut* and outsider art categories, such as the Swiss artist Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930), the American Henry Darger (1892–1973) and the German-born American Charles A. A. Dellschau (1830–1923), help set the historical scene. On the backs of the illustrated pages of his 45-volume magnum opus, in which he mythologised his own childhood and his alter ego's creation of the universe, Wölfli wrote detailed passages of a vast narrative. He also wrote on the back sides of his stand-alone drawings and within his

images themselves, making both words and pictures function to propel his big, unfolding tale. Darger's brief jottings on his drawings serve more as conventional captions, but also as prominent graphic elements within his compositions. Dellschau produced text-bearing collage works and notebooks in whose texts and images he explored his fascination with flying machines.

With "Vestiges & Verse", Rousseau proposes that, even by examining extracts from the larger bodies of work of such artists, a viewer may begin to comprehend the overall character and structure of each one's broader, deeply personal oeuvre. She has pointed out that perhaps all of the bodies of work on display here "share a certain kind of logic." Is there something inherently common among them? Viewers are invited to look for evidence that there is.

Some of the less familiar art-makers whose works are on view include the Belgian Ariane Bergrichter (1937–1996), a one-time fashion model who made psychologically and emotionally intense collages capturing everyday-life scenes,

even as she recorded in writing the degrading declarations against her of hallucinatory voices. Josep Baqué (1895–1967) created a 450-page manuscript filled with images of some 1,500 imaginary creatures, which this former Spanish policeman taxonomically classified. Tunisian-born Jean-Daniel Allanche (1940–2015) moved to France and became a theoretical physicist. Among other subjects, he was intrigued by gambling and produced colourfully illustrated casino cards and notebooks documenting his study of the roulette wheel. "Life is a game only if the stakes are high", he wrote, adding, "It is our work (action) that makes the stakes important."

As this exhibition demonstrates, it was the imaginative work of its various subjects that gave each of their lives a sense of meaning and purpose. Revelling in the aesthetic richness of their creations, viewers may also savour the ways in which they fully integrated writing with images to conjure up distinctive works of art.

**Edward M. Gómez**



## American Folk Art Museum's "Newfangled Epic"

*Added by paul on March 1, 2018.*

*Saved under Gallery*

*Tags:* American Folk Art Museum, Henry Darger, Vestiges and Verses: Notes from the Newfangled Epic", Valérie Rousseau, "The Realms of the Unreal", Malcolm McKesson, "Matriarchy: Freedom in Bondage", Paul Laffoley, "The Living Klein Bottle House of Time"



A close up of Henry Darger's "Untitled / Untitled" (double-sided), c. 1950–1960; watercolor, pencil, carbon tracing, and collage on pieced paper. | AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM, NEW YORK

**BY PERRY BRASS |**

Alot of people have a hard time with the American Folk Art Museum at 2 Lincoln Square near the Mormon Temple and a short walk from the glories of Lincoln Center. When they see the word "folk art," they think quilts, decoys, weather vanes, and other bits of Americana they can live without. This is not your grandma's folk art museum — although it does have quilts, decoys, and weather vanes in its collection of 7,000 items.



In truth, the American Folk Art Museum is a repository of brilliant, gorgeous, almost blinding stuff ranging far beyond the usual folk canon into what is referred to as “outsider” or “self-taught” art. The only limit it has is the sheer talent — even genius — of this work. Its great glory is its huge Henry Darger (1892-1973) holding of about 160 separate works by this reclusive Chicago janitor sometimes referred to as the “American Van Gogh,” but there is an array of other important work, too. Intensely visionary art, the art of crazy geniuses and queer seers, and science fiction imaginings the way they used to be, filled with hand-painted dreams and hallucinations, not computer-driven images, although some of the work in the museum foresaw computers by half a century, converted by these very spun-out minds into their own unique visual languages.

*“Vestiges and Verses” celebrates art’s narrative meanings*

The name of the current big show at the Museum is “Vestiges and Verses: Notes from the Newfangled Epic.” I asked Valérie Rousseau, curator of the show and of Self-Taught and Art Brut at the museum, what “Newfangled Epic” meant.

“It’s a life-long narrative, with egos and alter-egos; they have the styles and profiles of epics. We have a sensibility today that can relate to this art, with symbols, emojis, and a depth of content linking images—”

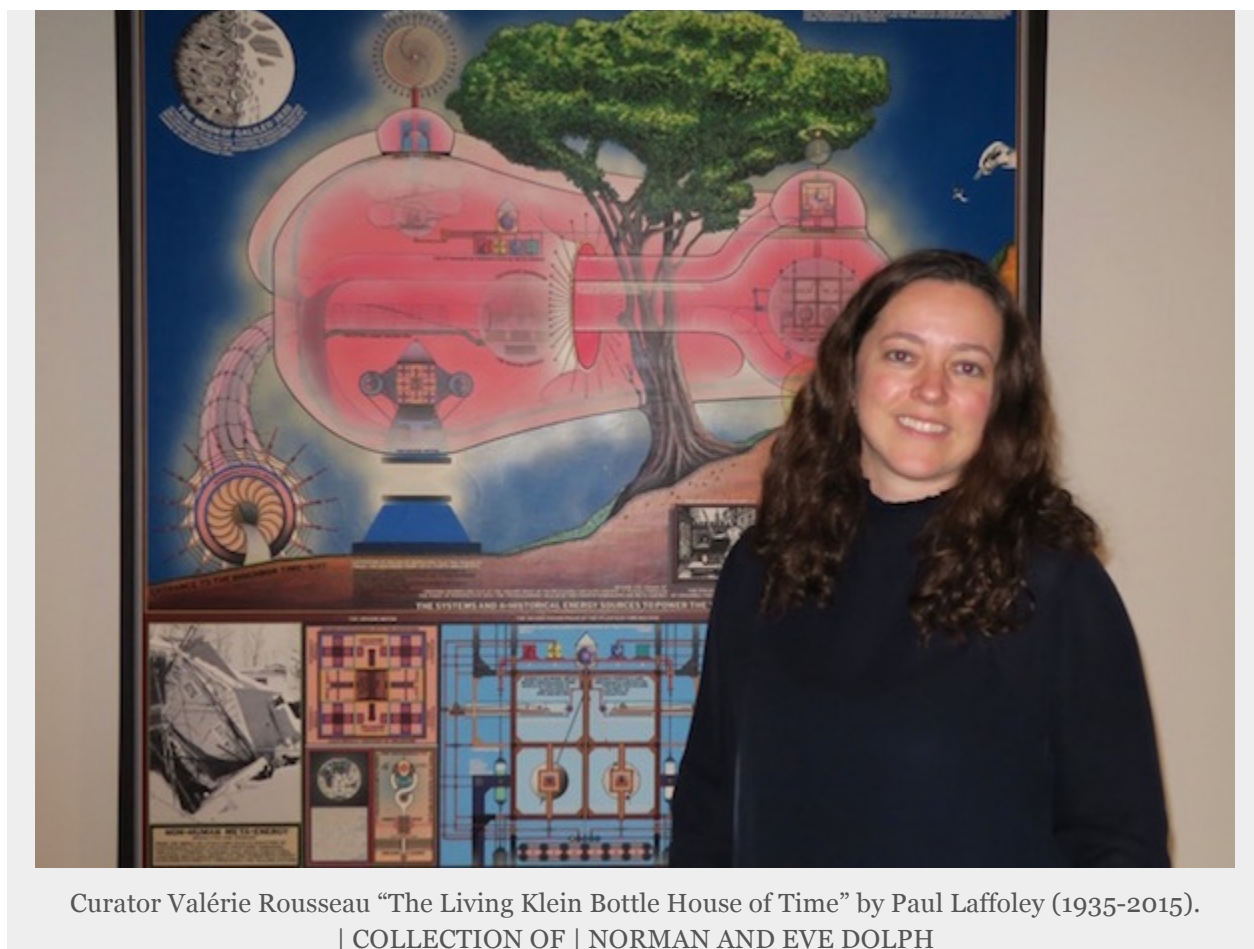
“Like hieroglyphics?” I suggested.

She agreed: “Yes, like hieroglyphics. You see patterns in these works, you see narrative structures in them.”

As a writer, I wanted to dive right in, since the narrative aspect of art, rejected for decades in favor of pure formal or structural aspects, is important to me. For many critics in the past, formality was everything because if you actually looked at what the artist was saying, it was too “queer,” too threatening, to be acknowledged. Instead you avoided it, and just went “Oooh!” and “Ahhh!” over the arrangements of colors or lines.

You don’t do that in this show. You want to know what these artists are saying: What do all these strange but wondrous images mean?





For many people, Darger, whose work has become extremely popular, almost obsessional, will be a point of entrance into this kind of art. I myself went through a Darger obsession when I was almost in love with his work. Like many fans, I wanted to be suffused with his colors, patterns, and images, his extreme naiveté verging on a queer saintliness, all those little girls with penises and horns, the radiantly innocent boys out of your deepest childhood dreams, and those menacing adults out of nightmares.

"The Newfangled Epic" presents 22 Darger objects and paintings, including one of those rare showings of his great epic (full title) "The Story of the Vivian Girls in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion," usually shortened to "The Realms of the Unreal." At close to 2,000 typed pages, it may be the world's longest piece of fiction, with an ending that says, "to be continued." It is pure, direct-from-the-brain stream-of-consciousness with no real plot or character development. Darger's paintings are often seen as illustrations of "The Realms," but in truth they are not. They are more like condensed stories on one page; they came later than the novel that he began in 1910, and Darger, who was very influenced by movies and print comics, used his intense, often disturbing paintings more as cinematic narratives frozen in place.

In Darger's work, as in the work of almost all outsider artists, there is no sense of hierarchy, of focal point or narrative climax. Instead, things are seen as a vast plain of information that can be entered from any direction. What is important is to understand, or accept, a series of clues, codes, and



languages, which become a condensation of the past and the future together. So time, in a very druggy way, becomes flattened. In “The Newfangled Epic,” art and reality expand infinitely, so that what you are seeing on the walls, and in the work of the 21 artists presented here, is merely a “crop” or cropping of this far-extending reality, an immediate slice of it. Each cropping, or piece of art, encompasses a field of experiences, ideas, and beliefs.

The artists represent a range of periods and origins. Some are Spanish, German, Canadian, French, and American. Some were born in the late 19th century, others in the mid-20th century and are alive today. Some, like Malcolm McKesson (1909-1999) whose work both visually and in his own epic — a novella called “Matriarchy: Freedom in Bondage” — centers on children, female dominance, and male cross-dressing, are transgressive and reside easily within the often secretive shadow of the queer umbrella. As they used to say back in the 1960s and ‘70s, this is a place to get your mind blown, and you can do it for free: there is no admission charge at the American Museum of Folk Art, only a short block or two from Lincoln Center.

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**VESTIGES AND VERSES: NOTES FROM THE NEWFANGLED EPIC** | American Folk Art Museum, 2 Lincoln Square, 66th St. at Columbus Ave. | Through May 27: Tue-Thu. & Sat., 11:30-7 p.m.; Fri., noon-7:30 p.m.; Sun., noon- 6 p.m. | Free admission | [folkartmuseum.org](http://folkartmuseum.org) or 212-595-9533