

## *Almost There: A Portrait of Peter Anton*

### Cultural reproduction, attitudes, and meaning in the category of outsider art

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*Abstract:* An analysis of the debate surrounding the art exhibit *Almost There: A Portrait of Peter Anton* at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in 2010 reveals sets of actors with competing interests and claims on the term outsider art. I explore the public fascination with madness and outsider art, suggesting actors engage outsider art in three attitudes—*aesthetic, instrumental and investigative*. Aesthetic attitudes operate within an expanded definition of official ‘Art’ that allows outsider artwork, but not the outsider artist, to participate in the reproduction of fine art conventions. Instrumental attitudes engage outsider artwork and perceptions of madness as forms of cultural and social capital in the Bourdieuan sense. The curators of *Almost There* operated with an investigative attitude, seeking to understand the social conditions influencing the artist as well as the artist’s sociality and intent. Investigative fields such as documentary production and psychiatry situate outsider art historically, as art practice, and subjective expression. I argue each attitude strategically engages the label of outsider art to both negotiate and question hierarchical relationships. The imperfect fit of the *Almost There* exhibit in the category of outsider art demonstrates the limitations of current conceptions of artistic merit and mental health.

**Key words:** aesthetic, diagnostic category, documentary, identity art, madness, mental illness, outsider art, social capital, subjective experience

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As I exited the “L” train on the evening of July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010 I was looking forward to visiting Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, a non-profit organization I could count on to consistently host exhibits of non-traditional artists with style and good taste. I walked the block to the almost invisible storefront along busy North Milwaukee Avenue. As I opened the non-descript, seemingly private entrance to the gallery I was once again surprised and delighted by the soft glowing light, beautiful hardwood floors and white walls of the Intuit main space—such a contrast to the grey, gritty Chicago street outside. As was often the case, the walls were impeccably designed with drawings in soft pencil and sculptures with natural or weathered tones. The double storefront was busy with young, fashionably dressed people attending the opening of *Almost There: A Portrait of Peter Anton*, the first collaborative art exhibit between professor and screenwriter Dan Rybicky and documentarian Aaron Wickenden—a project almost five years in the making.

The small room in back was packed with people examining the hundreds of photos and paintings mounted on the wall: a combination of Peter Anton’s original artwork, the documentarian’s images of Anton at his home, and Anton’s 13 scrapbooks of his life and time as the director of an East Chicago Talent Club from 1948 to 1977 (Figure 1). Most notably the artist, Peter Anton, entertained a small crowd of hovering 20- and 30-somethings with whip-smart stories and jokes from his wheelchair in the center of the gallery. As a practicing artist and

longtime colleague of Rybicky and Wickenden, I knew how many hundreds of hours went into preparing the exhibit—years getting to know Anton at his home, weeks of sorting thousands of digital photographs, days spent cleaning dirt and grime from his paintings with q-tips and curating the exhibit, and last minute coordination to help Anton look dapper at the opening.



Figure 1. Peter Anton in the *Almost There* exhibit. Photograph courtesy of Aaron Wickenden and Dan Rybicky.

By many standards, the opening and exhibit were resounding successes in concept, execution, and attendance. The show received more press than average for an Intuit exhibit, however not all of the press was good. Monica Weston's 3000 word review in the Huffington Post articulated a position held by a number of people who were disquieted by the experimental combination of documentary and outsider art in *Almost There*. Before the exhibit opened, members of the Intuit Board also expressed concerns about the direction the curation of the exhibit had taken. Weston wrote,

There are, as I see it, two major competing fantasies of outsider art ... The first and more disturbing fantasy fetishizes the biographies of outsider artists, showcasing the life of the artist and putting it up for display: the supremely naïve, uncorrupted, the

hermits. Frankly, sometimes it can resemble a freak show when taken to the extreme: "look at these people with their bizarre subjectivities -- now look at their art!" ... One of the current shows at Intuit falls into this trap of privileging the life over the art ... *Almost There: A Portrait of Peter Anton*, gives a clue that the life of the artist is going to be highlighted. In the case of Peter Anton, this approach might make sense... But then, offputtingly, each painting is surrounded by dozens of photographs taken by the curators of the show of Anton's house that show the artist's current living conditions, along with some images from the scrapbooks—literally framing the artist's work with his life in pictures.... The curators call the stuff that's not Anton's art "ephemera," and what visitors can see is 75% ephemera... Anton's life is certainly that of an outsider. A hoarder living in a dilapidated house with a long life story of poverty and desperation, his story is important. But during the curator's talk... the conversation about the formal qualities of Anton's work is mysteriously absent from the show... *Almost There* is a double-framed documentation of a life, but is it an art exhibit? ... I'm not being given enough to understand Anton as an artist rather than just an outsider. In the end, *Almost There* is almost an art show, and it misses because it falls into the fantasy that the artist's life is what fascinates us about outsider art. (2010)

The length and veracity with which the article was written reveal the intensity of opinions on the topic. Comments posted in response to the article<sup>1</sup> and in conversations I observed in the art community expressed an equally fervent concern about Weston's desire to separate the outsider artwork from the lived experience of the outsider artist. The debate over the impropriety and/or purpose of the biography of Peter Anton in *Almost There* is a diagnostic event, a moment in time representative of larger questions about the meaning of outsider art as an idealized, abstract categorical label and the implications of that label in real, messy, practical life.

The nature of the critical reaction to *Almost There* leads us to ask, Why is Anton's art, his experience, and his very person so compelling? What caused the curators to go to such great lengths to show his art? What was at stake that caused such a contentious response to an exhibit that featured a moderately talented outsider artist? In response I argue Anton's art is compelling both in its strangeness and its striking familiarity. His outsider artist status is a cue to look for this dichotomy. The modern fascination with outsider art is illuminated by a comparison with parallel discourses on the benefits and disadvantages of the diagnostic category of mental illness; the mad pique curiosity much like the outsider. This comparison is made deeper and more complex by the historical relationship between art and madness. The art of mental hospital patients precipitated the genesis of the category of outsider art, and the outsider art genre includes mentally ill artists. The exhibition of the show at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, a third space specifically designed for public education and the cultural reproduction of intuitive and outsider art, locates the exhibit in an economically neutral setting defined by the categorical label it promotes. I argue this context sets up two competing modes of understanding outsider art—which I will call the aesthetic attitude and the investigative attitude—in unusually stark relief. I suggest these attitudes, primarily engaged in negotiating and questioning hierarchical relationships, generate culturally distinct meanings. These attitudes are in play in wider contexts beyond outsider art, as examination of cultural conceptions of mental health will demonstrate.

### *The Category of Outsider Art*

“Art Brut, or outsider art, consists in the workings produced by persons who for several reasons have not been culturally educated or socially conditioned. They are citizens who live at the margins of society. Working outside the system of the fine arts (schools, galleries, museums and so on), these people have produced, from the depths of their inner life and for themselves and no others, works of exceptional originality from a conceptual, material and technical point of view. These works have nothing to owe to fashion or tradition”<sup>2</sup>

-Michel Thévoz, chief curator of the *Collection de l'Art Brut* of Lausanne, Switzerland

An investigation of the public fascination with the artwork of mad artists begins with the history of outsider art and all that term has brought to bear over the past 90 years. This study will examine the use of categorical logic as a vehicle to rigidly define social conceptions of both art and madness in contemporary Western culture. As an ethnographic example, the case of *Almost There* provides a forum for understanding the social imagination of outsider art and the outsider artist. A real-life example is necessary because in practice the populations indexed by the labels artist, outsider art, mad, and mentally ill are comprised of individual actors with diverse personal experiences that only fit imperfectly into such exclusive categories. The critique of the *Almost There* exhibit's engagement of outsider art demonstrates the limitations of current conceptions of artistic merit and mental health.

An analysis of the debate surrounding *Almost There* suggests actors engage outsider art in three attitudes—aesthetic, instrumental and investigative. When engaging outsider art with an aesthetic attitude, the products of madness are positioned within the realm of official ‘Art’, though not within fine art. In this mode the artist's position on the margins of fine art is generally not cast as a condition necessitating change or intervention, but as a social fact. By seeking to categorize art such as Peter Anton's as outsider art, the aesthetic attitude contributes to the cultural reproduction of certain artistic conventions and the artist's marginalized social position. In the instrumental attitude actors engage outsider artwork and an artist's madness as forms of cultural and social capital as described by Bourdieu in *The Forms of Capital* (1986). Cultural and social capital can be used to alter hierarchical relationships. Actors approaching from an investigative attitude rooted in fields such as documentary production conceptualize outsider artworks as historical record, as an art practice, and a subjective expression of the artist's internal state. When examining artworks and the context of their creation, investigative actors seek to understand the environmental and social conditions influencing the artist as well as the sociality of the artists themselves. The credibility and attention this knowledge gives both the artist and investigators can also be strategically used. The different perspectives of these attitudes are at the heart of the conflict between Weston's and Rybicky and Wickenden's approaches to outsider art, but before proceeding, the constructed category of outsider art merits definition.

Outsider art is an identity art (Fine 2004)—a genre wherein an artist's biographical conditions permit their artwork to be legitimized officially as ‘Art’ despite the fact their artwork is normally excluded from the category of fine art. As such the field occupies a position distinct from other established art traditions such as fine art, sometimes called high art, and the less prestigious folk art and popular art, both of which are deeply rooted in the vernacular (Johnston 2006).

Outsider art is a categorical label. Labels are signs that carry symbolic, objective and subjective meanings. Deconstructing labels can yield important clues about social structures of our society and the social strategies of actors within it. The meanings labels carry also have moral implications. Labels are often highly charged because they reflect on the actors who claim them or are categorized by them. There are many groups of relevant actors in the context of *Almost There*: the artist, the exhibit curators, the gallery board, staff, and head curator, the gallery donors, community art critics, art dealers, and the general viewing public. These actors have differing stakes in outsider art's use and categorical meaning. Conversely, examining how actors strategically and tactically employ labels, including adoption and rejection, can help us understand how they conceptualize their world.

Why is Peter Anton considered an outsider artist? The first and most important evidence in response to this question is that Anton was exhibited at Intuit, a space designed specifically for outsider artists. Therefore, Intuit's endorsement suggests he is an outsider artist. Anton and his art are immediately subject to outsider art critiques by their very physical presence in the space. However, considering the doubt cast on the validity of the show by Weston, it is necessary to provide further evidence of Anton's outsider artist status.

Anton was not originally a self-described outsider artist. Anton acknowledged limited similarities between himself and the Wikipedia definition of Brut Art<sup>3</sup> but he also cites a lifetime of teaching art lessons and one semester of art school as his credentials as a fine art artist. Conversely, Anton has lived his life on the margins of society and he generally lacks access to the fine art world. Following the qualifications suggested by Thévoz (Tansella 2007:136; originally cited in Thévoz 1976), it may be useful to ask if Anton made his art for himself. Following is an excerpt of an interview during which Ribicky asks Anton if he thinks he fits the Wikipedia definition of outsider art:

**Dan Ribicky:** Okay. So the reason that we think people really respond to your work is because there is a purity to it, there is an authenticity in terms of your impulse. Okay? ...

**Peter Anton:** That part of your explanation is me then. I'm not worried about following the trends and following what you're doing in modern art. All I have been saying, I continue to say, is that I do art not because I'm following trends, I do art because that is what I love and I am part of the *old* style art more than I am of the modern art. When I think of modern art, I think of...like I said again and again and again...you know, lines and shapes or abstract things - that's modern art to me.

**DR:** Do you think as a part of this community that you are in the community? Or do you stand just outside of the community?

**PA:** Dan, I stand just outside of the community lifestyle. That's the word I'm looking for, okay? (Dan Rybicky interviewing Peter Anton, September 9, 2009)

Anton articulates that he makes art for himself, but sees himself as part of an old style of art. Anton also noted he was inspired by reading a book that suggested he draw places that other people know; the resulting landscapes are some of Anton's most formally resolved works. Is Anton's interest in evoking shared experiences and meaning motivated by fine art world trends? It is difficult to argue conclusively that Anton is or is not an outsider artist. Weston's critique of

*Almost There* also suggests it was not an outsider art show. The tacit expectations of outsider art exhibits need to be further investigated in order to evaluate this claim.

### *Turning Reality into Concept*

The label outsider art allows a viewer to situate Anton's art, as well as the show *Almost There*, in a ready-made conceptual context. For example, the title of Lyle Rexer's book, *How to Look at Outsider Art*, immediately signals that the novice lacks a body of knowledge necessary to understand outsider art. Rexer writes, "In spite of this popularity, most people interested in art and even many aficionados of outsider art cannot say precisely what outsider art is or distinguish it from its companion genres, 'self-taught' art and folk art" (2005:3). In order to appreciate outsider art cognitively, a viewer must distinguish and correctly negotiate constructed categories. This approach appeals to the Kantian dichotomy between reality and concept—the artwork may be subjectively attractive as a real object but remains conceptually unintelligible until it is evaluated and assigned social value and context. In cultural-historical science (as opposed to natural-science), concept construction deals with "the question of values in addition to logical relationships" (Kim 2007:1). The label outsider art becomes useful in assessing and ascribing the dominant or conventional value of artwork not addressed by canonical art education.

### *Historical Foundations of Outsider Art*

"In seeking to bring the primeval forest of a human life such as the one before us into connection with the highway systems of diverse disciplines, one will achieve only an illusion of the exactness if one takes as one's primary task to nail the street names of certain disciplines or even the names of certain authors onto the appropriate trees in the forest"<sup>4</sup>

-Dr. Walter Morgenthaler from the *Art and Madness: Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, 1921

Historically Jean Dubuffet's *L'art Brut* most clearly articulated its ties to the work of mentally ill patients. Dubuffet conceived the movement following exposure to research conducted by Dr. Hans Prinzhorn in his 1922 text *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (Artistry of the Mentally Ill), and subsequently to Dr. Walter Morgenthaler's 1920 psychiatric case study and art analysis *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler* (A Mental Patient as Artist) of Adolf Wölfli. Morgenthaler's landmark text was unusual in that, "he not only identified the patient by name but supplied full biographical and clinical data to the general public" (Morgenthaler 1992:viii). This action illustrates the first moments of an ongoing tension in outsider art—the combination of biographical, sometimes confidential, information in the name of "offering the world a study of an important artist, not merely a clinical psychiatric case report" (Morgenthaler 1992:viii).

Dubuffet's *L'art Brut* was renamed outsider art in 1972 by Roger Cardinal during his study of collections of art of the mentally ill collected by Prinzhorn and Morgenthaler. John Maizels' 1996 description of the politically fraught genesis of outsider art set the stage for its evolving definition and strategic repurposing: "Cardinal proposed the term 'outsider art' as the English equivalent of 'Art Brut', one that would appeal more than the original, while at the same time avoiding the complications of using Dubuffet's protected terminology" (Maizels 1996:73). This transformation followed a wave of major internal critique in the art world, only the year

before Linda Nochlin's landmark 1971 essay galvanized the feminist women's art movement. Following the introduction of outsider art Dubuffet invented another new, less restrictive category of art, now known as *Neuve Invention*, that included some artists previously categorized in *L'Art Brut* as well as artists who maintained more traditional social relationships. In turn *Neuve Invention* altered the definition of Art Brut, restricting it to those works free of cultural conditioning and distancing it from Cardinal's definition of outsider art (Maizels 1996).

### *Art and Madness*

Individuals may identify themselves as outsider artists and as mentally ill; both states are often perceived as transitory or as existing in degrees. However, equally important is the status of these individuals as perceived and described by others. In contemporary Western medicine a doctor confers the status of mentally ill onto a patient. In contrast, the status of *mad*<sup>5</sup> is a less specific label with important overlaps with the official status of mentally ill. The concept of madness is linked to fluid vernacular usage and more closely mirrors the way the status of artist is conferred by art experts and non-experts alike.

The artwork of the mentally ill is regularly included in the canon of the fine art world on the basis of aesthetic merit, as evidenced by artists with mental disorders who operated effectively as fine artists<sup>6</sup>. Spaces such as Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art advocate a genre of artist who *do not merit aesthetic inclusion* in the fine art world but whose marginalized location of poverty, lack of social ability, and general lack of interest or awareness of the fine art world can often be traced back to their status as mentally ill. Paraphrasing a speaker at a recent Intuit lecture—when outsider artists become famous they are no longer outsider artists, but mad artists are always outsider artists—they can't become insider artists (Panel Discussion: Intuit's Founding Perspective at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago, IL, April 7, 2011). The mad artists valorized by outsider art are those that lack the ability to function and achieve status within traditional channels. Artists use curators, buyers, and critics as advocates to advance their careers, but for mentally ill outsider artists these roles become essential to their very involvement in the art world.

As far as he has been willing to share with the curators, Peter Anton has not been officially diagnosed with a mental illness. Anton's art and his scrapbooking process bear some resemblance to the works of obsessive/compulsive artists. Wickenden notes, "Anton is certainly an obsessive list-maker, keeping elaborate charts and graphs for: the weather, air plane crashes, his headaches, and the amount of time his cats spent on his lap" (personal communication, May 9, 2011). Anton's home and hoarding habits reveal a person living in a deep state of denial and escapism, and in a state that contributes to the deterioration of his own health. On the subject Wickenden states, "In so far as many outsider artists create worlds with their art as a way to cope with trauma, I believe that Peter created a body of work that is a hyper-idealized version of his own life, and in his interpretation he made extreme sacrifices all his life for others" (personal communication, March 14, 2011). Additionally, in the context of newspaper articles that came to light in late July of 2011 revealing that Anton had been "arrested, convicted and sentenced for 'distributing obscene material to children' in 1980" (Morehart 2010:1), Wickenden notes, "Peter attempts to censor stories about his life that make him look like an aggressor" (personal

communication, May 7, 2011). Anton's experience does not conform to any currently defined diagnostic category of mental illness.

Labels like outsider art, madness and mental illness are rooted in popular culture, in natural science, and in cultural-historical scholarship. Often terms have separate lives in each of these realms. Although the official definition of outsider art continues to be contested within fine art, the working definition of the term outsider art remains fairly consistent across disciplines. However, the imagination of and instrumental use of the term varies greatly between the fields of psychiatric research and practice, scholarly art history and critique, and in popular use in the contemporary fine art world.

### *The Category of Mental Illness*

Nosology<sup>7</sup> also has a history of evolving definitions. Within psychiatry the DSM, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, defines the criteria used to diagnose such familiar mental illnesses as schizophrenia and depression. These definitions use binary and categorical logic, and change from edition to edition. Scientific understanding of illness changes both temporally and geographically. David Healy, in his book *Mania, A Short History of Bipolar Disorder* (2008), describes the historical evolution of mental illness from its Greek roots in Hippocrates's description of *frenzy* to its modern incarnation. He underscores changing conceptions of the self, methodologies, permissible scientific evidence, and commercial interests as factors impacting diagnostics over time. Andrew Lakoff (2008) illustrates drastic differences in conceptions of mental illness across geographic distances in his article about a French biotechnology company that conducted research on bi-polar patients in Argentina. The company's research hinged on practical and epistemological assumptions about the "universality of genomic knowledge about mental disorder" (Lakoff 2008:278). However, the diagnostic standards of Argentinian psychiatrists proved to be so culturally different from their French counterparts that bi-polar patients were not similarly identified or diagnosed, forcing them to abandon the entire project.

In practice, psychiatrists encounter patients who exhibit a variety of symptoms and categorize them into groups that attempt to accurately describe the patient's experience. These categories are highly subjective and contingent. Diagnostic categories allow doctors to prescribe treatment based on past success and failures with other patients. In fine art, categorization operates similarly. Art professionals and the public imagine a category with certain qualities and use it to organize their understanding of the art and appropriate responses to the art. The reimagining of labels is not only top-down; patients and artists manipulate and reimagine themselves within new and changing cultural categories, employing tactics at times consciously and other times unconsciously to help them successfully negotiate their social existence. For example, although Anton refused to identify himself as an outsider artist two years before his show, he used the label more freely afterward.

The phenomenon of the "transient mental illness," the process of nosology adapting to symptoms while symptoms simultaneously adapt to nosology, is illustrated in Ian Hacking's 1998 description of the mental diagnosis fugue, a late 18<sup>th</sup> century psychiatric illness. The case

of fugue contests the very notion that illnesses exist as an unchanging abstract reality. Fugue sufferers, such as Albert Dadas, exhibited uncontrollable physical and mental symptoms that caused them to wander for great distances over periods of time that they later could not recall. These episodes were prevalent in epidemic proportions during the late 1890s. The illness was highly class-specific and gender-specific—affecting primarily middle class men who had the means to freely travel the countryside and jobs that could be abandoned temporarily for long periods of time (Hacking 1998:13). Hacking proposes that the case of the fugue suggests illnesses exist in specific cultural contexts like an ecological niche—a set of lucky conditions that make the illness viable within a certain historical and geographical space. Hacking describes four conditions, or ‘vectors’, required to create a cultural niche:

One, inevitably, is medical. The illness should fit into a larger framework of diagnosis, a taxonomy of illness. The most interesting vector is cultural polarity: the illness should be situated between two elements of contemporary culture, one romantic and virtuous, the other vicious and tending to crime...Then we need a vector of observability, that the disorder should be visible as disorder, as suffering, as something to escape. Finally something more familiar: the illness, despite the pain it produces, should also provide some release that is not available elsewhere in the culture in which it thrives. (Hacking 1998:1-2)

Although fugue is almost never diagnosed in contemporary psychiatry, Hacking (1998) argues that this does not necessarily detract from the reality of the patient’s experience. The change in frequency may not suggest that the patients were lying or somehow delusional but that the conditions that made fugue a useful and culturally successful diagnosis for patients ceased to exist.

It is much easier to imagine the non-scientific field of outsider art as a culturally specific social phenomenon, particularly now that modernist projects of aesthetic perfection are highly contested if not widely debunked. Nonetheless, it is extremely useful to keep Hacking’s vectors in mind while exploring the conditions that have influenced the evolution of outsider art over the past ninety years. For example, the ecological niche that produced outsider art exhibited:

**Taxonomy:** New notions of subfields in art with radically different aesthetic traditions were pioneered by groups such as the Impressionists in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

**Cultural Polarity:** Art of the mentally ill was promoted in the public imagination as a dramatic counterpoint to the refinement of fine art.

**Observability:** Publication of the art of the mentally ill brought it to attention.

**Social Release:** The term outsider art legitimized a large number of artists, giving them a measure of social status and financial compensation. Outsider art also offered an escape valve for the extreme exclusivity of fine art, producing a kind of artistic charity on the one hand and a radical statement of human equality on the other.

Although outsider art still exists nearly one hundred years later, it has not developed in the way some founding members of the Intuit hoped it would (Panel Discussion: Intuit's Founding Perspective at Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago, IL, April 7, 2011). In a public discussion panelists expressed some confusion and concern that the field of outsider art had not assimilated into the mainstream as quickly or thoroughly as expected. Other identity art movements that began similarly with an emphasis on the exclusion of the artist based on their life history, such as women's art and African American art, have been more fully incorporated into the canon of fine art than outsider art (Fine 2004). Today outsider art does appear in some major museum collections, but is often still exhibited as a separate exhibit. Does this reveal important distinctions between the conditions of outsider art's niche and that of other identity arts? Will the outsider art niche remain perpetually apart, or eventually fade away like fugue instead of being incorporated into the canon of fine art genres? To answer these questions it is useful to explore three attitudes at play in outsider art—the aesthetic, instrumental, and investigative.

### *Aesthetic Attitudes*

The aesthetic attitude deals primarily with outsider artwork as objects. Many fields of identity art are temporary institutions; a necessary phase that exists to allow the fine art world to assign value to new styles or disassemble structural barriers that prevent fully competent artists from participating. The difficulty with assimilating outsider art lies primarily in the limited social competency of the artist. However, this is not an issue for actors with an aesthetic attitude, because they conceptually separate artwork from the artist. The social conditions of the artist are not the issue at hand—they are a biographical fact, like the artist's height or birthday. Outsider art is situated within an expanded version of fine art or official art, and from the aesthetic perspective this makes outsider artwork an orthodox cultural convention, even though the artist's life is still cast as heterodox.

The aesthetic attitude romanticizes the outsider artist because it is the least threatening to the reproduction of the fine art industry's processes of regularization<sup>8</sup>. Non-normative outliers to creative impulse have been discarded openly by fine art for centuries through claims to expert authority known as taste. Fine art's power resides in its ability to dictate culturally accepted definitions of quality and value—characteristics imagined by some as fixed, but which are actually fluid. Patricia Johnston discusses the concept of quality, "Many people believe that they know high and low quality when they see it, but such judgments may be too simple. Perceptions of quality are affected by contexts. It is now acknowledged that perceptions of quality have been socially constructed and used to reinforce hierarchies" (2006:8). However social structures, particularly powerful institutional forms of structure like fine art, constrain actors' options but also are gradually transformed *by* individual actors (Giddens 1984). The aesthetic attitude offers an opportunity to appreciate outsider art with the blessing of fine art without breaching normative tastes or notions of quality. Though it does so at the cost of ignoring or excluding the biographical dimension of outsider artist.

### *Instrumental Attitudes*

Art, like medicine, is not reducible to a commodity-driven equation. The exhibit *Almost There* cannot be understood simply as an interaction of market forces, particularly considering the Intuit gallery does not sell work in their space. However, there are undeniably economic motivations for the actors involved with the show. These motivations engage outsider artwork and the artist's madness as forms of cultural and social capital in the Bourdieuan sense.

In *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu (1986) offers a framework that allows the economic value of activity outside the realm of normal market transactions to be discussed in economic terms, including credentials, social relationships, social status, and products with extra dimensions such as the shared meanings in outsider art. The instrumental stakes of actors involved in *Almost There* can be more fully understood through an application of his theory. Outsider artworks function as objects invested with cultural capital (such as shared meaning) in an objectified state. This objectified cultural capital can first profit the artist and later the exhibitors or owners as a form of distinction. An artist's physical traits of madness, such as altered brain chemistry or a disheveled appearance, operate as cultural capital in an embodied state. This cultural capital can be used to legitimize claims that the artist is, in fact, an outsider artist. When invoked, an artist's ascribed status as a member of the category outsider artists functions as a credential (like the credential of president or teacher) that can be wielded as cultural capital in an institutionalized form. Additionally, relationships forged within the context of an artist's status as an outsider artist can act as a channel for the flow of social capital. For example, acts of reciprocity between the documentarians and Anton are active social capital as long as the status of obligation, a debt that has yet to be repaid in either direction, still exists. Relationships between the *Almost There* documentarians and other art world professionals or between Anton, the documentarians, and the audience are potential sites for social capital exchange.

Actors with instrumental attitudes but neither aesthetic nor investigative attitudes can exhibit unexpected behaviors. David Healy (2011) notes a doctor's experience of the negotiation of the patient/doctor relationship can be overshadowed by the need to manage their image of competence and maintain volume and efficiency. These practical constraints become ethical grey areas in the medical profession, and so too can become ethical dilemmas for art professionals concerned with publicity, sales, publishing, critical acclaim, or any number of other demonstrations of competencies routinely sought in the art world. This is of concern particularly because the tangible products of the outsider art industry—art as market commodity, art as sensation, art as cultural currency—are in some ways even more difficult to articulate and less likely to be monitored than their counterparts in the medical industry. It is also necessary to consider that all actors are not critically engaged. As Thomas Kuhn (1962) suggested, not all participants engage in revolutionary processes of manipulating underlying structures, either consciously or unconsciously. Some participants primarily propagate the dominant paradigm.

Actors with attitudes primarily concerned with the instrumental mode are also at particular risk of violating the limited agency of outsider artists through exploitation and voyeurism. I argue this is the way Weston perceived the effect of the *Almost There* show, as an unfortunate attempt to invest value in the work of Peter Anton by exploiting his biographical

history and exhibiting it as a voyeuristic display. These kinds of concerns are in line with those who advocate equal treatment for marginalized artists within the economic context of fine arts. However, it is possible to perceive the biographical content of *Almost There* in another light—as *an educational tool to advocate for the equality of the outsider artist in broader social terms*. Herein lies the fundamental disconnect between actors with predominantly aesthetic attitudes and those with investigative attitudes. In the case of *Almost There* the documentarians, operating with an investigative attitude, hoped to promote social equality not just within the context of gallery but in the wider world.

### *Investigative Attitudes*

“Artifacts themselves are mute and meaningless...Discourses create objects...Objects may physically preexist those discourses and their institutions, and they may persist beyond them; but, appropriated by new intuitions, their meanings are remade and they are transformed into new kinds of objects. The notion of ‘discourse’ also includes the notion of power.”<sup>9</sup>

-Shelly Errington

A vision of documentary and art as tools to achieve social justice and equality through education is idealistic and problematic. However, even if one believes universal justice and equality are impractical or impossible, I argue that using documentary and art as a means of communication and education are both feasible and effective on a person-to-person, or intersubjective, level. Aesthetic attitudes disregard biographical and social conditions of the artist. Instrumental attitudes engage outsider art only as a means to an end. An investigative attitude imagines outsider art as both a cultural object and as a cultural representation symbolic of the artist and includes: the social context in which it was created, the subsequent social life of the object, and the greater shared meanings the object embodies.

I call this attitude *investigative* because it is interested in seeking meaning outside of instrumental and aesthetic conventions. In the case of *Almost There*, documentary serves as the formal tool of investigation. I argue the exhibition of *Almost There* is a unique subjective expression and also a site of shared meaning. Meaning in art can seem mysterious, but it is less elusive than one may think. I propose viewers of *Almost There* found value in that which inspires, evokes emotions, memories, and recalls our deepest fears. One person commenting on Weston’s article wrote,

Perhaps it comes down to whether one thinks art/exhibits can/should be a unifying tool of the human experience, or an escape that provides distance from life’s messy intricacies to focus instead on formal appreciation. I am of the former camp, as seem to be the curators of the show, who have lovingly crafted hundreds of invitations in the form of photos to enter and appreciate Peter’s art, life and spirit. Westin’s comment on Peter being a “photo op” is cringe inducing. Wouldn’t it be bizarre had the living Peter NOT attended, and invited far stickier ethical quandaries like: is Peter aware that his art is being shown in this context? And is he OK with it? To which the answers are “no” / “we can’t know” to usual outsider art exhibits featuring work of the dead. Westin's argument assumes the highest compliment “outsider art” can achieve is to only be formally appreciated in the same way that art that exists for the market is.

These curators don't take that stale bait. They acknowledge art and the people who create it should be taken seriously and appreciated on multiple levels: artist AND human. This isn't the usual story of art being discovered after death, nor the usual arms-distance curatorial show, nor the usual presentation of biography with work. And that makes this show far more thrilling than threatening. (Weston 2010)

The attempt at shared meaning and communication shed light for this viewer in a bold, unironic way that suggests education and reflection, not exploitation. The transformative power of shared meaning must be remembered when one is tempted to think of outsider art and madness in romanticized terms. As Kalman Applbaum observed, "We are interested in art made in our time and place. This art becomes a kind of vernacular—not esoteric or highly intellectualized. There is a perception that it is a real story to tell and the realness makes it good art. People are starved for authentic representation in this age of managed representation, and in that context the voice of the outsider becomes important" (2011). The story of the art itself becomes important.

In a structural, organizational capacity Intuit and the category of outsider art itself also invested the show *Almost There* with meaning. Exhibits in non-profit spaces like Intuit help create coveted objects, but Wickenden suggests the documentary aspect of the work gives it legs (personal communication, May 14, 2011).

### *Investigative Documentary*

"If it is an expression of human desires and imaginings, art can manifest itself just as potently in the most obscure and remote regions of the world as it can amid the supportive amenities of our urban centers; and it can appeal, moreover, to a far wider audience than would seem the case in the context of our official culture of ordained commentators and selection committees."<sup>10</sup>

-John Maizels, in *Raw Creation*

Meaning can only be quantified through human reaction, and is difficult to track except through the swell of emotions left in its wake. For this reason the case of Peter Anton is unique because in addition to the decades of art created by Anton, the patient and persistent documentarians Wickenden and Ribicky have captured portions of the past 5 years on film. As students of sociality themselves, the documentarians continued to observe and record when others would have left the camera behind, both with Anton in his condemned home and at Intuit where a debate over the validity of their exhibit was raging.

Ribicky and Wickenden bridge the alienation of the outsider artist in a literal way when they enter the dangerous space of Anton's home to see him and learn about his life through the accumulated documents and detritus, then bridge another gap between curator, artist, and viewer by displaying their photographs in *Almost There*. Wickenden said, "Peter lives on the outskirts, in an extreme situation...Working with Peter was overwhelming. He's a hoarder and you need a gas mask to enter the house" (personal communication, March 14, 2011). The documentarians offered to help Anton move to senior housing on several occasions and even offered to investigate the possibility of moving a trailer into the yard. Ultimately Anton's house was condemned in the winter of 2010. Anton has several advocates working to secure him a place in senior housing in Hammond. Wickenden describes Anton's home, "His documents and current

life interacts with his memory. He has taken moments from his life (particularly the 50s) and decorated his home with them. His home is a visual landscape that could be documented. Peter is living in memory” (personal communication, March 14, 2011). Anton also works as a ‘folk historian’ using scrapbooking as a medium to write and illustrate his auto-biography. Many documents first preserved by Anton were later rescued by the documentarians:

The photos from the scrapbooks are incredible, beautiful and soul filled, but now they are rotten and damaged. Peter wrote about the high points and the negative very candidly. During 2005 he was forcibly removed from his home and put into a shelter. He fought to get back to his home. One important aspect of Peter is that Peter is an old person who was willing to talk openly, so free with information. He was meticulous with details and his chronicle was exhaustive, exhausting—Peter is a chatter box. (personal communication, March 14, 2011)

With backgrounds in film and documentary, not in outsider art curation, Wickenden and Ribicky were interested in much more than Anton’s art. Sorting through Anton’s personal history and his art was a complicated process. The documentarians were most visually captivated by 1950’s era work. They described it as an incredible collection of vernacular photography and a personal archive of East Chicago. Wickenden said, “Peter had a relatively fixed position – he was able to observe change over time. Peter is the storyteller, the author of that tale. Where is our voice? Where do we come into his story?” (personal communication, March 14, 2011). Wickenden and Ribicky wondered if they were “passive transmitters” or “editors” and struggled to understand how their photographs fit into Anton’s art (personal communication, March 14, 2011). In conversation Wickenden discussed the questions they struggled with such as, is *Almost There* biography or autobiography? Wickenden responded to this difficult question by explaining how they conceptualized their project as an exploration of the space of Anton’s home and his memory. The process was always collaborative with Anton, but curatorial decisions were less so. Wickenden explained reproducing Anton’s book was not the goal. The documentarian’s conceptual goal was to make a photo project about the idea of exhibiting Anton’s art as Anton’s memory. The documentarians continued to show Anton their photographs of him throughout their years of interaction with him and described this as keeping him informed and involved. Wickenden also noted that allowing Peter to write the text for the show was an unusual move, particularly within the context of outsider art where the artist is often deceased or not the curator of the show. Wickenden and Ribicky argued that through the statements Peter was able to offer his point of view about what the art objects meant to him. Wickenden noted that ultimately, “Story always kind of bonds us” (personal communication, March 14, 2011) which is why Anton’s narrative contribution was critical to the exhibition. However, the documentarians violated several outsider art conventions by allowing Anton to participate so actively in the show at Intuit. In the end, they were primarily accused of curating a show that failed to meet with Weston’s expectations and those of some members of the gallery and audience.

Documentary runs the risk of undermining the artist’s agency by characterizing them in a way inconsistent with their self-imagination, by reducing the complexity of the situation, or by emphasizing only one dimension of the artist’s personality. I argue Wickenden and Ribicky remained true to their vision of a reflexive photo documentary project in the exhibit *Almost*

*There*, but were criticized primarily because their work failed to meet traditional expectations about outsider art consistent with an aesthetic attitude. Comments offered at the various events I attended in the space suggested that *Almost There* was well received by viewers with an interest in the educational and social justice issues addressed in Anton's story and the *Almost There* exhibit. Experimental art, photography and documentary enthusiasts either not aware of or not concerned with outsider art protocols also appreciated the exhibit. Ribicky and Wickenden still have much work with Anton planned and it is difficult to maintain perspective over such a long project. The danger of becoming prescriptive instead of reflexive in documentary, ethnography, and science is always present.

### *Investigative Psychiatry*

The discussion of outsider art can also be informed by current debates within biomedical scholarship on the conception of mental illness in the Western collective consciousness. Psychiatric research presents evidence that the mentally ill differ biologically from the well, and attempts to link those differences to creativity (Frantom & Sherman 1999; Neihart 1998; Richards 1993; Rothenberg 1993). Just as unreflexive documentary oversimplifies complex subjects, Kathrine Barnes notes the danger in psychiatric research to overemphasize biomedical materialism and disregard the patient's subjective experience:

Human beings are more than a conglomeration of cells...Our suffering is characterized by a complex set of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors which cannot be isolated and tested in the same ways... we talk about serotonin as a neurochemical causing depression, but in fact serotonin is only one of many neurochemicals and these neurochemicals are found throughout the body. Furthermore, our hormones can have grand effects on mood. (personal communication, May 7, 2011)

The psychiatric research that avoids the trap of materialism helps to answer the question, why are we so fascinated by the art of the mad?

Mental illness is a category like outsider art, but the lines between well and ill tend to be thought of as rigid and distinct.<sup>11</sup> Harry Stack Sullivan advocates not pathologizing the everyday experience of the mentally ill, but instead imagining even severe conditions such as schizophrenia as a continuum between “the ordinary and the pathological in contrast to a too-rigid, categorical distinction between them” (Jenkins and Barrett 2004:32). Janis Hunter Jenkins argues against equating biological difference and subjective difference, “The subjective experience of persons with schizophrenia is forged at the nexus of culture and agency, desire and attachment, none of which are annulled by disease process... In certain ways that can be specified, people afflicted with schizophrenia are just like everyone else, only more so” (Jenkins and Barrett 2004:30). Jenkins suggests mental illness is not an abnormality; it exists on a continuum of subjective experience. Studying the madness in all of us can teach us about the human condition. Jenkins explains, “the construction of shared meaning, usually taken for granted, can become fraught in schizophrenia” (Jenkins and Barrett 2004:31) and I suggest in many forms of madness. In fact, “their attempts to create shared meanings often entail a

tremendous struggle” (Jenkins and Barrett 2004:31), whereas those without mental illness often take this vital ability for granted. Perhaps we are attracted to the struggle to communicate. This could explain why curators like Ribicky and Wickenden go to such lengths to investigate outsider artists like Peter Anton—if the mad can take the trouble to make meaning by themselves, for themselves alone on the edge, some of us will take the time and make the effort needed to see and hear what they have to say.

An old adage says hold your friends close and your enemies closer. Nietzsche, Freud and Bataille suggest our fascination with madness stems from our awareness of the borders between familiar and incomprehensible (Fine 2004): “It has always been necessary to bind these confrontations with absolute otherness by erecting taboos around them, so that they can be accommodated into social life without utterly disrupting it and breaking apart its forms” (Fine 2004:44). I suggest one actor may engage multiple attitudes. Some actors are even aware of layered meanings their actions convey, but this does not negate the importance of recognizing the independent meanings established through cultural reproduction within each attitude. I concede each attitude can use outsider art and the other as a tool to exploit, to confound, or to reassert the dominance of hierarchical conventions. However, I have also argued that it is possible to approach outsider art without an agenda of fear, in a search of shared meanings and subjective experiences willingly and powerfully expressed. Outsider art maintains an unusual position as a category that straddles many divides and is strategically engaged in altering hierarchical relationships between its participants. It is a highly contested realm, made all the more intense at times by deeply invested actors competing for meager gains at great personal cost and effort.

Evidence suggests Peter Anton’s artwork can qualify as outsider art, but Weston is correct that the show *Almost There* is almost certainly not an outsider art show in the traditional aesthetic sense. However, when *Almost There* is considered in an investigative attitude it remains true to the spirit of the category of outsider art. *Almost There* takes the opportunity to thumb its nose at aesthetic elitism by simultaneously functioning competently within the fine art realm and offering a dead-serious visual critique of social inequity. This intense combination is only possible because of the unique convergence of dogged documentarians and curators Ribicky and Wickenden, the existence of Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art as a forum for outsider art, and the pure courage, talent, and unflagging humor of Anton himself. What more, I wonder, could we ask of any artist or of any art?

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Comments in response to Weston's article touched on many subjects, but the very first comment articulated the general position directly opposed to Weston, "I agree with Weston's take on *Almost There*: that the show is important - but not on why it is, perhaps it comes down to whether one thinks art/exhibits can/should be a unifying tool of the human experience, or an escape that provides distance from life's messy intricacies to focus instead on formal appreciation" (Weston 2010). Quotation continued in full in the Investigative Attitudes section on page 12.

<sup>2</sup> (Tansella 2007:136; originally cited in Thévoz 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Ribicky read aloud, "[Dubuffet] characterized art brut as 'those works created from solitude and from pure and authentic creative impulses - where the worries of competition, acclaim and social promotion do not interfere'" (Dan Rybicky interviewing Peter Anton, September 9, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> (Morganthaler 1992:1).

<sup>5</sup> The word mad has three relevant definitions in this context. The meaning of mad with the strongest connection to mental illness is: "Insanity; mental illness or impairment" while meanings of mad implicated in the context of outsider art are "Wild excitement or enthusiasm; exuberance or lack of restraint" and "Imprudence, delusion or (wild) foolishness resembling insanity" ("madness, n.". OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/112066?redirectedFrom=madness>).

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Van Gogh exhibited traits consistent with reactive depression and bi-polar disorder and was diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy in the last two years of his life (Blumer 2002:519). Georgia O'Keeffe's family had a history of mental illness and she suffered from bouts of depression. "Patterns of depression accompanied by physical illness in her life developed early and dogged her periodically through many decades... To a sick friend, she disclosed her growing realization that mind and body functioned together in health and in disease. And she seemed to advocate something of a therapeutic role for art itself" (Udall 2006:17).

<sup>7</sup> Nosology is the branch of science responsible for the categorization of diseases.

<sup>8</sup> Sally Falk Moore coined processes of regularization to describe laws, principles, rigid procedures, symbols, rituals, rules and categories used by a social institution to regulate, govern and value social behavior (2000).

<sup>9</sup> (Fine 2004:34).

<sup>10</sup> (Maizels 1996:8).

<sup>11</sup> Precedent and expert opinion are often held in even higher esteem in science than art. Jenkins states biomedical scholarship should be investigated, "without the presumption of fixity, necessity, universality and abstract formalism" (Jenkins and Barrett 2004:30).