

**FORMULAIC NARRATIVE IN OUTSIDER ART:  
THE CONTAINMENT OF MARTÍN RAMÍREZ AND THE  
CLASSIFICATION OF THORNTON DIAL**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History

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For Nemo, India, Madeline, Clementine, and M. Le Turt

...and their humans.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Outsider artist discovery narratives are formulaic constructions. Each recounts the life of a socially marginalized artmaker, from youthful trials and tribulations to encounters with educated discoverers and art market successes. Using art historical and sociological methods to map and examine outsider artist discovery narratives, this thesis isolates the five recurring narrative motifs of disadvantage, artmaking catalyst, discovery, promotion, and art market success, and their resulting tale type. I show that discovery narratives establish a systematic means for classification within the outsider art world, and that market-labeled “outsider” artists who do not possess this standard tale operate between outsider and insider art markets. The role of narrative is specifically considered through two very different artist discovery stories: that of quintessential outsider Martín Ramírez, a member of the outsider art canon, and that of Thornton Dial, a contemporary artmaker market-labeled as an outsider artist. Using Ramírez and Dial as examples, this thesis provides an objective and methodical approach to outsider artist categorization.

Discovery narratives are central to the label “outsider” artist and to the creation of outsider art as a genre. To wander through the annual New York City Outsider Art Fair (OAF) reveals this phenomenon, as the exhibited work is sustained by stories of poverty, salvation, and faith. Though the artmakers themselves rarely attend the fair, stories of their artistic discovery are circulated consistently alongside the art—in print or through discussion—creating a currency as valued as the objects being sold. The following essay uses these artist discovery narratives to understand the outsider art genre and to examine how individual artists fit within narrative parameters.

This essay will show that the individual artists’ tales and resulting *outsider tale type* provide the tools with which to define outsider art. To this end, I will establish motifs and themes present in outsider formulaic narrative, and then examine two very different discovery tales: that of quintessential outsider Martín Ramírez, a member of the field’s canon, and that of Thornton Dial, a contemporary artmaker market-labeled as a folk or outsider artist. Ramírez’s story of suffering and artistic discovery is often used as a point of comparison with which to judge potential outsider artists and determine their worthiness. Critics and scholars hail his work as brilliant, and none would dispute his role as a standard-bearer of outsider-ness. Dial’s work, on the other hand, exists on the periphery of the insider art market, and the ruptures in his

discovery narrative help clarify his position. Dial's narrative does not quite fit the mold formed by canonized outsiders like Ramírez, so the mold is tweaked, and subjective value judgments are added, to create a fit. Dial's precarious position between outsider and insider art reiterates the importance of narrative and tale type in the outsider art world.

\* \* \*

Discovery narratives, as a trope, have a long history independent from outsider art. They recreate the moment of encounter between narrator and *other*, and document interactions between cultures, the discovery of lands, or even moments of scientific breakthrough. The histrionic and often-exaggerated nature of these tales represents desire by narrator and reader for exoticism and mystery, as they often stem from true events manipulated to entertain and to show a narrator's skill and fearlessness.<sup>1</sup> No doubt outsider discovery narratives come out of this tradition, but outsider tales hold an expanded purpose. While most discovery narratives simply present "a point of view limited to that of an individual immediately engaged in circumstances he does not entirely understand or control," every narrative published or circulated regarding an outsider's background and discovery may be viewed as an example through which the

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<sup>1</sup> This discovery trope, long used within anthropological and historical accounts in the Americas and Europe, includes narratives such as Gallileo's discovery of the Earth's movement and Columbus' discovery of the Americas. For more information on discovery narrative, please see Bruce Robert Greenfield, *Narrating Discovery: The Romantic Explorer in American Literature*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992).

genre is established.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, narratives play a substantial role in the legacies of most artists, and mythmaking around artists' lives, from Giotto to Caravaggio, has long been integral to viewing artwork. Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* is an early instance of this mythologizing technique, and while Vasari's tome includes discussions of the state of art, his biographies have an "enduring appeal [that] lies in the colorful manner in which they portray...the life [of] so many of the greatest artists the world has ever known."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the narratives have endured far beyond his analysis. Outsider tales are worthy of extended study in this context because the outsider tale type is composed of many examples of the same narrative structure, rather than of narratives unique to each artist. This essay thus proposes that the difference between insider and outsider narrative and art lies in constructions of containment. Containment, as a societal tool, arranges ideas and things into like groupings to create order. The container of "insider art" must necessarily exclude some artists to create an elite. Likewise, "outsider art" must exclude those with tales that are not outside enough. The amorphous spaces that Dial and similar artists occupy simply highlight the limitations of containment and, by extension, subcategories within the art world.<sup>4</sup> If the

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<sup>2</sup> Greenfield, 10.

<sup>3</sup> George Bull, "Introduction" in Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists (Volume I)*, trans. George Bull (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1988), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Ranciere has further challenged the distinction of high art from visual culture by questioning the borders of categorization entirely. His concept of the

definitions and borders of art are questionable, the line between outsider and insider is theoretically permeable. What is not permeable is the outsider tale type: the narratives create a genre that functions against an undefined normative culture.

This overarching outsider tale type follows a formulaic composition. Before embarking on a full analysis of the narrative motifs, however, an understanding of outsider art is necessary.<sup>5</sup> As a category, outsider art is a relatively modern construction. The beginnings of the field may be traced to Hans Prinzhorn, a German doctor and philosopher. His 1922 publication, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, addressed the formal qualities of “asylum art” and placed this material within an artistic framework. Taking Prinzhorn’s ideas further, trained artist-cum-scholar Jean Dubuffet coined the term *art brut* in the 1940s and encouraged trained artists to strive for the immediacy and emotion attained by mentally ill artmakers. In the 1970s, British

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*distribution of the sensible* questions the role of, and need for, borders between visual and political categories. Please see Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York, NY: Continuum Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> For simplicity, the term outsider is used here to indicate work considered outside the high art canon. Working definitions also insist that outsider artmakers lack formal art training and be socially marginalized.

Different scholars and communities have used “outsider” with different intonations. Many scholars have maintained the direct correlation between outsider art and the French term *art brut*. While outsider was initially used as a corollary term to *art brut*, the definition maintained within this essay uses outsider as a less specific, more encompassing term. Outsider is used mostly for lack of a more satisfying term, though a reassessment of this genre’s name is a necessary question for another essay. The immediate problem with our interpretation of the term outsider is that it is defined by *insider*. The term does not reflect a type of creation, aesthetic, or material, or even broach what *outsider-ness* is.

scholar Roger Cardinal expanded the concept of *art brut* by translating the term to the English phrase outsider art. Rather than limiting outsider art to the constraints of insanity implied by *art brut*, Cardinal's term began to encompass all art and artists existing outside the academic art canon. As this expansion in framework and title occurred, public and private collections of this previously marginalized work were established in the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom. In 1989, John Maizels founded *Raw Vision*, the first internationally circulated journal devoted to outsider art. Several U.S. institutions, including Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, established 1991 in Chicago, and the American Visionary Art Museum, established 1995 in Baltimore, were founded specifically to showcase outsider and visionary material. In 1997, the American Folk Art Museum, New York, an established museum of early American folk and decorative arts, opened the Contemporary Center to exhibit and preserve this "frequently unacknowledged body of work that is essential to a full understanding of the art and culture of the world."<sup>6</sup> Despite the eruption of outsider art on the world stage, no clear description of this genre has been established. In fact, definition remains a major point of contention.

Outsider art has been defined through two (almost synonymous) points of departure: as a contrast to a stifling high art or as a reflection of the creator's authentic psyche due to a lack of formal training and social marginality. Dubuffet criticized

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<sup>6</sup> American Folk Art Museum, *The Contemporary Center and Henry Darger Study Center*, [www.folkartmuseum.org/default.asp?id=878](http://www.folkartmuseum.org/default.asp?id=878) (March 28, 2009).

academic art for masking the “depths of the individual.” His interest in *art brut* lay in the “immediate and direct projection” offered by the unwitting practitioners.<sup>7</sup> Cardinal furthers this, as “self-teaching [implicit in outsider art] involves the parallel mastering of the self and of that self’s expressive resources.”<sup>8</sup> The artmakers themselves are not exempt from these romantic conceptualizations. Colin Rhodes argues that the artists are “by definition fundamentally different to their audience, often thought of as being dysfunctional in respect of the parameters for normality set by the dominant culture.”<sup>9</sup>

To understand the outsider field, scholars must critically refine these definitions, and the study of formulaic narrative provides the tools with which to do so. Within the humanities, Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson, and Vladimir Propp have shown that tales can be neatly divided into motifs, combinations of which establish tale types and compositional substyles.<sup>10</sup> This breakdown of elements allows for more

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<sup>7</sup> Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 204.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Cardinal, “The Self in Self-Taught Art” in Charles Russell, *Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 78.

<sup>9</sup> Colin Rhodes, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives* (London, England: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Aarne (1867–1925) was a member of the Finnish school of folklore—a structurally rigorous branch of the Historic-Geographic method that sought to trace tales’ points of origin and routes of diffusion. He published an index of folk tale types in 1911. Thompson (1885–1976) was a scholar at the University of Texas, and later Indiana University. He is best known for his 1989 six-volume *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*. Propp (1895–1970) was a Russian Formalist (a movement which emphasized the formal linguistic properties of prose) at St. Petersburg University. He is best known for his 1928 study of tale components, *Morphology of the Folktale*.

stringent, scene-to-scene comparisons of narratives and more detailed and structural arguments supporting the innate connections of tale strands. I argue that outsider discovery narratives contain a standard set of motifs, which in turn create a unique tale type. Tale type analysis provides a specific point in which to enter the outsider construction, and through the examination of 150 discovery narratives collected from journals, exhibitions, and encyclopedias, a clear tale type emerges.<sup>11</sup> The defining elements may be broken down as follows:

1. Artmaker is born into often-adverse circumstances; suffers situationally and/or emotionally through childhood and early adulthood.
2. Artmaker suffers emotional, physical, or psychological unrest or change as a catalyst for creation. This unrest or change may occur at any stage of the artmaker's life, sometimes overlapping with category 1.
3. Whatever motivation within category 2, the artmaker creates without validation or outside encouragement until a "discoverer" recognizes the output as art.<sup>12</sup> Within this section:
  - Narratives imply the artmaker's *need* to create, implying obsession within the creative process.

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<sup>11</sup> I gathered and deconstructed 150 discovery narratives in preparing this argument. The narratives recorded for and used in this essay come from outsider art journals, such as *Raw Vision* and *Folk Art* magazines, exhibition wall texts and catalogs, and non-comprehensive encyclopedias of the field.

<sup>12</sup> Sometimes, as was the case with Henry Darger, this discovery is posthumous.

- The artmaker often conceals his or her work from public view prior to its discovery, establishing the discoverer as a bridge between the artist's private world and its public exhibition.<sup>13</sup>
- The artmaker never expects to enter his or her work into an art market discourse and is therefore free of the contaminating effects of the market.

The discoverer is a person who possesses psychological or financial authority over the artmaker, such as psychiatrist, doctor, or landlord. He or she has greater social and cultural capital than the artmaker and takes one (or more) of several forms: <sup>14</sup>

- Is a person significantly more educated than artmaker.
  - Is a “high” artist, therefore one who understands definition and value of art more than the artmaker; alternately, is an art dealer or collector, and therefore has this implied knowledge of the art world.
4. Discoverer promotes the work using the art market's resources in a manner unavailable to the artmaker.
  5. The work is recognized as artistic output, though is qualified in its definition.

This is where the insider/outsider dichotomy operates. The discoverer's name

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<sup>13</sup> In the instances when the works are not concealed from public view, the artmakers attempt to sell or barter works, use them for proselytizing purposes, or present them for public enjoyment. The work is not presented to the world as art objects for a gallery setting.

<sup>14</sup> For more information on social and cultural capital, please see Pierre Bourdieu, “Forms of Capital” in John G. Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1986).

remains associated with the work and its creator, as the discoverer brought the work to light and defined it through connections and knowledge.

To define outsider thus requires two separate components: The actions and background of the artist, and the actions and background of the discoverer. The artist must fit within certain motifs to be considered an outsider, but the discoverer acts as the arbiter that allows a maker to become an artist. While this essay focuses on the motifs required for the artmaker, one cannot forget the discoverer as equally important to the making of outsider artist, the artistic product, and the field.

Emphasis on these discovery narratives within journals and exhibitions shows their importance as primary definitions within the field, and significantly, the outsider tale type is able to initiate new outsider artists. When confronted with a previously unknown artmaker and his oeuvre, aesthetic properties of the art objects alone cannot provide a clear indication of outsider-ness. As Dubuffet and other trained artists adopted naïve and childlike forms and marks despite academic knowledge, the visual lines between trained and outsider artists have been blurred. For example, Jim Nutt, a trained artist and early collector of Ramírez's work, includes in his art the "outsider traits" of a dissolved foreground and background and a direct connection between marks and surface (Fig. 1). Thus, in trying to distinguish Nutt from Ramírez in outsider terms, the artist's background becomes paramount. The visual elements and themes to the art perhaps act as an audition to the genre, but the narrative ultimately proves whether the artist may become a member of this group. The outsider tale is

thus as tangible as the art, and is perhaps more important to the establishment of an artist and value. The narrative is also crucial in the creation of the symbolic status of the discoverer.

Differences in detail within individual artists' narratives, such as specific artmaking catalysts, are comfortably housed within the outsider tale type. These particulars work to create outsider art subcategories, which may be examined, for the purposes of this essay, under the headings of *art brut*, contemporary folk, visionary, and environmental.<sup>15</sup> Each outsider may be placed within one of these categories, and some artists may fit within more than one subtype.

Creators of *art brut* works (as the term was initially conceived by Dubuffet) suffer a psychological breakdown or change, such as the development of a mental illness. Following institutionalization near Bern, Switzerland, purported schizophrenic pedophile Adolf Wolfli began to draw. Psychiatrist Walter Morgenthaler noticed Wolfli's work, and Morgenthaler's 1921 book, *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wolfli*, introduced the art world to the now-famous outsider. Mexican American Martín Ramírez, to be discussed later, followed a similar trajectory of institutionalization and discovery, though Ramírez was marked by different psychological ailments.

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<sup>15</sup> Not all possible subcategories can be addressed here, as the term warfare within the field makes a stable set of finite categories impossible. The uncertainty in classification remains a major part of this field.

Contemporary folk artists suffer a familial or social change or loss, such as the death of a spouse or loss of a job. Nellie Mae Rowe began to fill her home and garden with drawings and installations following the death of her second husband in 1948, and her work was featured in a small-scale local exhibition before Judith Alexander, a gallerist in Atlanta, promoted her work in the national art scene. Edgar Tolson began woodcarving following a stroke in 1957 that left him unable to work. Collectors Michael and Julie Hall have taken credit for bringing Tolson's artwork to the New York art scene.<sup>16</sup>

Visionary artists begin to create in response to a religious or spiritual awakening. Following a message from God, Sister Gertrude Morgan left her family and opened several missionaries, where she began proselytizing through colorful scripture-based drawings. Larry Borenstein, a New Orleans art dealer, first promoted her work to the art world. Within this subcategory of outsider artists, the aesthetics act as a means to deliver very specific religious and spiritual messages. Visionary artworks are often used in conjunction with sermons and larger performative acts.

Creators of outsider environments often work following the discovery or inheritance of a space. Factory worker Nek Chand began his *Rock Garden* in secret on unused land outside of Chandigarh, India. After the nearby community discovered *Rock Garden*, local residents and politicians fought to preserve the environment from

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<sup>16</sup> Julia S. Ardery, *The Temptation: Edgar Tolson and the Genesis of Twentieth-Century Folk Art* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 3.

governmental destruction. Simon Rodia's now-famous *Watts Towers*, in Los Angeles, were similarly saved from destruction after neighbors petitioned to preserve the site, though Rodia at one point owned the land that housed his constructions.

The discovery, and discoverer, of the artist marks important hierarchical distinctions within these subcategories. The discoverer is in a position of authority over the artist, and is often significantly more educated, and therefore is presumed more able to understand and value art than the outsider. However, discoverers hold different types of cultural authority that vary depending on the outsider subcategory. For example, a psychologist or doctor often discovers an institutionalized *art brut* artist, such as Adolf Wolfli, while a gallery owner, fine artist, or collector discovers a contemporary folk artist like Edgar Tolson. That the discoverer's identity holds such a prominent role in defining these subcategories further shows the discoverer is integral to the creation of an outsider.

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The stories surrounding artist Martín Ramírez adhere perfectly to the narrative outlined above, and he fits cleanly within the *art brut* subcategory mentioned. Before delving into his story, I will examine Ramírez's work, and the outsider "traits" within his compositions. His oeuvre may be divided into representational themes that he

repeats in variations: trains and tunnels, Madonnas, horse and riders, and landscapes.<sup>17</sup>

Ramírez's works are identifiable through the artist's distinct use of line, scale, and found materials, and through their remarkable depth and sophisticated compositions. Ramírez worked in a large scale on pieces of discarded paper that he cobbled together to form surfaces. His smooth and decisive lines are made with graphite, and he sometimes added color with crayons or colored pencils. There is no sign of erasure or indecisiveness in the works, and each mark is made with a confidence of vision and an acceptance of spatial restrictions. Collaged elements, including figures of women from magazines and book covers, are integrated seamlessly but seem mundane in juxtaposition to the patterns and formats of the drawn areas around them. The geometric designs framing his figures often force areas of each page to recede or push into the viewer's space. For example, the stage settings around *Untitled (Horse and rider)* (Fig. 2) push the figures back in space and draw the proscenium towards the viewer. Similarly, the lines framing the cars in *Untitled (Three VW vans)* (Fig. 3) force the vans to recede, creating a crevice that divides the page.

According to work by gallerist Randall Morris, sociologists Victor Espinosa and Kristen Espinosa, and curator Brooke Davis Anderson (among others), Ramírez depicted subjects he had repeatedly encountered through his life or remembered from

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<sup>17</sup> Brooke Davis Anderson, *Martin Ramirez* (Seattle WA: Marquand Books in association with the American Folk Art Museum, New York, 2007), 70, 98, 134, 150.

his childhood.<sup>18</sup> His Madonnas are directly influenced by Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, who stood on the altar of his childhood church, the parish of Capilla de Milpillas, in Jalisco, Mexico. The horse and riders are not only a visual reminder of Jalisco, but represent the political and social upheaval of the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929).<sup>19</sup> This research is in keeping with a previous idea that Ramírez was influenced by his immediate environment, but it accepts that the artist drew from a wider range of influence than was previously considered.

The narrative surrounding Ramírez has evolved over time, though certain elements remain salient. Throughout exhibitions, articles, and catalogs, much is made of Ramírez's background and the same keywords are used repeatedly. Words defining his deficiencies, including "paranoid schizophrenia" appear in each text, and his "muteness" is used repeatedly to emphasize his reliance on drawing as communication, despite the fact that it is now known Ramírez was not mute. Even beyond these questionable definitions of dysfunction, verbal value judgments are repeated and Ramírez is consistently referred to as "institutionalized," marked by

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<sup>18</sup> Morris began this research in the mid-1990s; Anderson, V. Espinosa, and K. Espinosa have since proven Morris's ideas with concrete examples.

<sup>19</sup> Víctor M. Espinosa and Kristin E. Espinosa, "The Life of Martín Ramírez" in Brooke Davis Anderson, *Martín Ramírez* (Seattle WA: Marquand Books in association with the American Folk Art Museum, New York, 2007).

“psychosis,” and “dislocated.”<sup>20</sup>

In their 2007 retrospective, *Martín Ramírez*, the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) tried to remove the artist from his narrative, but by simply mentioning past assertions of dysfunction and muteness, even to discredit them, the artist remained associated with his longstanding marginalization. The story of the ‘mute’ artist’s discovery by psychologist Tarmo Pasto has played an integral role in every exhibition of Ramírez’s work, from 1951 to the 2007 AFAM retrospective.

In 1980, Thomas McGonigle published a short article on Ramírez in which “The Person” precedes “The Art” in discussion. This emphasis on the artist’s background over the work dominates McGonigle’s albeit sarcastic version of Ramírez’s story:

Ramírez has been labeled by those in the know: a paranoid schizophrenic, deteriorated. He spent over a third of his life in an institution. He had been picked up in California supposedly incapable of taking care of himself. For twenty years previous to being collared by the mental health police he had been mute, so one wonders how they were able to know that he was, in their language, a paranoid schizophrenic....After ten years in the bin he began to do his drawings, on those discarded scraps of paper. The shrink is interested in psychotic art. He has his ear to the market. He begins collecting Ramírez. I wonder if Ramírez was informed of this fact. He was, mind you, still a patient. A patient is not an artist....If I were a dirt-poor peasant from Mexico who found himself in Southern California, the bin would look pretty good: three meals, a room, maybe not as crowded as home, at least the cops won’t be beating me up; the bin begins to look damn good as long as I keep my mouth

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<sup>20</sup> These terms may be found in the McGonigle, Yood, Morris, and American Folk Art Museum texts quoted below.

shut...<sup>21</sup>

In 1986's "Martín Ramírez: Madness, Authenticity, and the Arcadian Dream," James Yood expands both the artist's background and the image of a disturbed patient:

Martín Ramírez stopped speaking in 1915, and did not utter a word for the following 45 years, silent at his death in 1960. He was institutionalized in California in 1930 and never released. Very few details of his life are known beyond that he was born in 1885 in Jalisco, Mexico. He was a vagrant, a railway hand, and a laundryman, and was picked up in a park in Los Angeles, described as "catatonic" and "schizophrenic" and eventually diagnosed as "a chronic paranoid schizophrenic, deteriorated." Ramírez was very frail, weighing only 100 pounds, and a former tuberculosis patient.<sup>22</sup>

At the time of Randall Morris's 1995 essay, "Martín Ramírez," the artist's background had been well hammered out. Morris thus used his article to question earlier statements that marginalized the artist, but he instead only reinforced the marginalization already at play by lumping all outsider artists into easily defined mindsets. He argues that "Autobiography on some level is a very strong factor in work made by self-taught artists. Often, this is because there is so little separation between art and life.... There is no reason to believe that this would be different for Martín Ramírez."<sup>23</sup> This argument for a type of collective unconscious does not provide

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas McGonigle, "Violated Privacy; Prose for Martín Ramírez," *Arts Magazine* vol. LV, no. 2 (Oct 1980), 155–157. While presenting this narrative, McGonigle also broaches the issues of power and ethics that permeate the field.

<sup>22</sup> James Yood, "Martin Ramirez: Madness, Authenticity, and the Arcadian Dream," *New Art Examiner* vol. XIV, no. 2 (Oct. 1986), 24–27.

<sup>23</sup> Randall Morris, "Martin Ramirez," *Folk Art*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Winter 1995/96), 36–45.

agency to the artist, but groups all outsider artists into a single form of creating.

As mentioned earlier, the 2007 AFAM exhibition *Martín Ramírez* attempted to break with the past descriptions of marginalization associated with the artist. However, introductory wall text alone proves the marginalizing discovery narrative is alive and well: “In the early 1950s, Tarmo Pasto, a visiting professor of psychology and art at Sacramento State University, saw some of Ramírez’s drawings in the ward at DeWitt State Hospital and recognized their singular artistic value.”<sup>24</sup> The museum’s inclusion of such statements reinforces the importance of the discoverer in the definition of outsider art, forcing the artmaker to share his artistic success with a person of greater cultural standing.

Ramírez’s narrative[s] perfectly fits the outsider tale type, thus securing his place in the outsider art canon. Conversely, his place from inside the canon allows his tale to become the gold standard against which potential outsiders are measured. Here, one may see how his story aligns with the tale type:

1. *Artmaker born into adverse circumstances; suffers through childhood and early adulthood.*

Ramírez’s youth included his share of financial hardships as he was born a poor farmer in Mexico and went to California as a migrant worker to better support his family. The Cristero Rebellion began after Ramírez had gone to the United States, and

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<sup>24</sup> American Folk Art Museum, *Martín Ramírez exhibition wall text*, [www.folkartmuseum.org/default.asp?id=1805](http://www.folkartmuseum.org/default.asp?id=1805) (March 31, 2009).

he believed his family had betrayed him by supporting the dissidents in his absence. This imagined betrayal reportedly sent Ramírez into an emotional decline.

2. *Artmaker suffers unrest or change as a catalyst for creation.*

After being picked up and hospitalized for schizophrenia, Ramírez began to draw in the confines of Stockton State Hospital, California, though his work was not noticed until he arrived at the DeWitt State Hospital, Auburn, California, in 1948. That Ramírez's artistic talent emerged while institutionalized cements the artist as an *art brut* subtype.

3. *Artmaker creates without validation or outside encouragement until a "discoverer" recognizes the output as art.*

There is no question that Ramírez was "discovered" by someone with a greater cultural currency than he. The interesting aspect of his particular discovery is the multiple episodes of discovery that emerge within his narrative. Tarmo Pasto, the psychologist at the DeWitt State Hospital first introduced Ramírez to the world. However, past this initial presentation, artist Jim Nutt and dealer Phyllis Kind introduced the outsider art world to Ramírez. Thus, the credit for Ramírez's "discovery" may be divided amongst the full range of individuals who act as outsider discoverers: the doctor, the trained artist, and the art dealer.

4. *Discoverer promotes the work of artmaker using the art market's resources in a manner unavailable to the artmaker himself.*

Tarmo Pasto first exhibited Ramírez's work in a 1951 exhibition and later in the 1954 solo exhibition "The Art of a Schizophrenic." In the late 1960s, after Ramírez's death, Jim Nutt and Phyllis Kind became interested in Ramírez's work, and bought Pasto's

collection of Ramírez drawings, many of which they subsequently exhibited and sold for substantial profit.

Confined to the DeWitt hospital, and unwilling (or unable) to speak English, Ramírez was never in a position to promote his work to gallery owners or collectors. Whether Ramírez was ever fully aware of the art and gallery scene, or whether he cared about it if he knew, is questionable. Also interesting is that Nutt and Kind did not move to purchase the artist's work until after his death. As a result, the work did not emerge in the outsider scene until Ramírez was entirely unable to participate in the culture.

5. *The work is recognized as artistic output, though is qualified in its definition. The discoverer's name remains associated with the work and its creator.*

When Pasto first exhibited Ramírez's work in 1951, the drawings were not considered art, but became aesthetic objects through their placement in a gallery setting.

Following Pasto, Nutt and Kind promoted the material as outsider art, indicating a transition from object to artwork.<sup>25</sup> Ramírez himself, I would argue, became aestheticized from the first exhibition in which his name was mentioned, as his biography and background have been placed consistently on display.

After more than six decades, Pasto's name remains closely connected to Ramírez, and the most-often reproduced image of the artist features Ramírez in his pajamas, next to a well-dressed Pasto (Fig. 4). The two are intimately connected

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<sup>25</sup> The first exhibition of Ramírez's work at Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, took place in 1973 and prompted great interest from well-known art journals. Kind continued to show Ramírez's drawings through the 1970s and 80s.

through narrative. Similarly, Nutt and Kind are connected to Ramírez through their roles in promoting his artwork to a larger public.

Since Ramírez is centered in, and central to, the outsider canon, art critics and scholars do not argue that he is an insider.<sup>26</sup> Instead, they proclaim that star outsiders may exist, and hold their own, alongside insiders. As critic Peter Schjeldahl stated in a 2007 review, “Martín Ramírez, a Mexican laborer who spent the last thirty-two of his sixty-eight years, until his death, in 1963, as an inmate of California mental hospitals, is my favorite outsider artist. Come to that, he’s one of my favorite artists, period.”<sup>27</sup> Ramírez thus becomes a representative or ambassador of outsider art within the insider world, and is often cited as the quintessential outsider—as though the understanding of Martín Ramírez enables an understanding of all outsider art and artists. Critics like Schjeldahl and Roberta Smith, along with gallerist John Ollman, have interpreted Ramírez’s success at penetrating the insider art world as success for the outsider genre on a larger scale.

With this argument of art world placement in mind, I now turn to an artist less rooted in the outsider canon. In contrast to Ramírez, difficult-to-classify artist Thornton Dial exists on the periphery of the outsider canon and operates as an

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<sup>26</sup> Ramírez is central to the canon because his narrative adheres perfectly to the outsider tale type, and because his story and artwork are mainstays in outsider collections and encyclopedias.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, “Mystery Train,” *The New Yorker*, 01/29/2007, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2007/01/29/070129craw\\_artworld](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2007/01/29/070129craw_artworld).

individual artmaker, not a representative of any genre. Dial has often been labeled an outsider, and his work is entrenched firmly in the outsider market and museum scene though his discovery narrative does not quite fit the prescribed tale type. The following analysis could center on any number of artists working in this amorphous ground, and one must remember that Dial represents of a group of outliers and is not an individual anomaly.

Before addressing the narrative reasons for Dial's placement in the field, I must consider his aesthetic sensibility and technique. Dial's body of work can be divided for discussion into works on paper, mixed media constructions, and sculpture. The works on paper, created of charcoal, pencil, pastel, and/or watercolor on sheets up to 44 x 30 in., frequently depict birds, tigers, and fish alongside women. While most of Dial's works depict imaginary scenes, he occasionally draws from current events, such as Princess Diana's funeral (Fig. 5) or President Obama's inauguration (Fig. 6). He uses loose and fluid lines, capitalizing on sweeping strokes as bold indicators of legs, shoulders, and arms. The animals in the works on paper are often entwined with humans or possessing human limbs themselves, creating a continuum between species and space. Dial did not begin creating works on paper until after his "discovery" by promoter William Arnett. Prior to Arnett's provision of the more mainstream artmaking materials of archival paper and pastel, Dial worked on constructions and sculpture with found and everyday material.

Dial's mixed media constructions and sculptures consist of materials ranging

from dolls to carpet scraps, to bicycle parts, to house paint. He works in large scales, creating wall-length artworks that highlight his life and the world around him. Dial painstakingly layers disparate materials to create depth in his constructions and sculptures. He coerces objects with their own meanings into a larger form, creating a unified commentary from disconnected items. Unlike the works on paper, these pieces are rarely overtly representational, but do reflect the traditions of African American yard art and the skills of a blue-collar laborer. Dial feels that the works, and their multivalent components, embody his experience in Alabama and the United States.<sup>28</sup> Regardless, they certainly exist in conversation with other contemporary artworks beyond the folk/outsider realm.<sup>29</sup>

Thornton Dial tells his story (through the mediation of “discoverer” and art collector William Arnett’s editing) in the second volume of *Souls Grown Deep*:<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Thornton Dial Sr. “Mr. Dial is a Man Looking for Something” in William Arnett et al., *Souls Grown Deep, Vol. 2: African American Vernacular Art* (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2001), 217–221.

<sup>29</sup> As for a visual comparison between Dial and trained artists: Anselm Kiefer and Harmony Hammond both create large-scale constructions as vocalizations for those who cannot speak. They highlight the silenced and downtrodden much the way Dial commemorates forgotten slaves and impoverished African Americans. Throughout her body of work, Kara Walker has addressed an altered memory of black history, which Dial does through reappropriation of discarded objects. Rachel Whiteread has monumentalized the memory of space in works like *House* (1993) in much the same way Dial pays homage to childhood homes and sacred spaces. The comparisons could easily continue.

<sup>30</sup> We must remember that this copy was cobbled together by William Arnett from conversations, so has of course been shaped by the discoverer.

I was born in Sumter County, Alabama. A midwife delivered me to my mama [Mattie Bell] in a little country house in the field, one of them kind you can lay down and look up through the ceiling and see the sunshine.

I was born on Luther Elliot's plantation. My great-granddaddy Rich Dial lived there, and his family.... They were sharecropping, picking cotton... I never owned no daddy. My mama didn't give me one. My mama told me once that my daddy was James Hutchins. My name supposed to be Bell, or Hutchins, but the Dials raised me and gave me their name...

Since I been making art, my mind got more things coming to it. The more you do, the more you see to do. The spirit works off the mind and get stronger.... I have always been trying to do something in my life...

I plan for my art to help a person think.... Art is a guide for every person who is looking for something. That's how I can describe myself: Mr. Dial is a man looking for something.<sup>31</sup>

In the histrionic biography on the website promoting *The Last Folk Hero*, a 2006 book about Arnett, Holley, and Dial, one is introduced to Thornton Dial's outsider background:

Born in 1928 in a cornfield to a thirteen year old girl in the middle of "Bloody" Sumter County, Alabama, it was unlikely that Thornton Dial would survive at all no less become a renowned folk artist. Growing up in Pipe Shop, Alabama, Dial worked myriad jobs but one constant was his role as a welder at the Pullman Standard Railroad Car factory. All along, Thornton Dial produced what he called "things" using the welding skills he had honed and his innate creative vision. Bill Arnett and Lonnie Holley discovered Thornton Dial's "things" and called them "art." Within three years of his discovery, Thornton Dial's art was selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars and on the collections lists of major museums around the world.<sup>32</sup>

While *The Last Folk Hero* website offers an extreme example of stilted and condescending biography, most gallery and museum professionals do consider Dial an

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<sup>31</sup> Dial, 194–221.

<sup>32</sup> Ellis Lane Press, *The Last Folk Hero*, <http://www.thelastfolkhero.com/?a=2&b=1> (March 31, 2009).

outsider, or contemporary folk, artist. The first major publication featuring his work, *Souls Grown Deep*, situated him within the context of other contemporary Southern African American folk artists represented by Tinwood Alliance, Arnett's Foundation.

For his most recent major exhibition, 2005's *Thornton Dial in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Dial was not billed as a folk artist, but as one "squarely within the arena of contemporary artists who are constantly forging new visual territories." The accompanying catalog plays to this, and includes essays that highlight Dial's knowledge of fine art and his concern with current affairs.<sup>33</sup> However, this is all mentioned alongside his previous label of vernacular artist: "Early in his career, he was described as a "self-taught" artist who created "vernacular" art."<sup>34</sup>

One can see that regardless of the terminology used to describe his work, Dial remains on the outside of the contemporary art scene. While his art has been shown in exhibitions ranging from AFAM's ongoing *Folk Art Revealed* to the *1998 Whitney Biennial*, I know of no major US museum that has permanently displayed his work alongside that of academically-trained artists.

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<sup>33</sup> Joanne Cubbs, Mark Lawrence McPhail, and Eugene W. Metcalf Jr., "The Aesthetics of (In)visibility: Thornton Dial and the Politics of Art," and Richard Brettell, "Thornton Dial at Ground Zero: To Build Means to Destroy," in Paul Arnett, ed., *Thornton Dial in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, *Thornton Dial in the 21st Century*, <http://www.mfah.org/exhibition.asp?par1=1&par2=1&par3=279&par4=1&par5=1&par6=1&par7=&lgc=4&eid=&currentPage=> (March 31, 2009).

Stages of the outsider tale type (specifically the contemporary folk artist subcategory) may be used to examine Dial's discovery narrative and the places where it diverges from outsider tale expectations:

1. *Artmaker born into adverse circumstances; suffers through childhood and early adulthood.*

Dial does in ways conform within this category. As mentioned, he was born to a young, uneducated mother and raised in rural, segregated Alabama by female relatives.

2. *Artmaker suffers unrest or change as a catalyst for creation.*

While Dial began to produce with more frequency following his retirement, he had created objects all his life. For many years, his wife, Clara Mae, would insist he bury or disassemble the work to save space. This ongoing artmaking through his life suggests no specific catalyst inspired Dial to create.

3. *Artmaker creates without validation or outside encouragement until a "discoverer" recognizes the output as art.*

This is where Dial departs from the standard concept of the contemporary folk artist. Dial's work was in fact "discovered" by his friend Lonnie Holley, a fellow Alabaman African American artist. Holley had been working with collector Arnett, and introduced the two. Thus, the discoverer in this particular narrative is one of the same outside group as Dial. Holley had been enabled by his discoverer, and in turn acted out the role with his friend.<sup>35</sup> Accounts frequently omit this detail of Dial's narrative in

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<sup>35</sup> While Holley *acts* the role of insider through his discovery of Dial, his lack of social and cultural capital prevents him from *becoming* an insider.

the discussion of his life and artmaking. Instead, dealers and collectors credit Arnett with being the sole discoverer, or Arnett and Holley are both given credit.<sup>36</sup> That Holley's role is redrafted or omitted from the narrative shows an attempt to squeeze the narrative into a template—forcing a square peg in a round hole.

Dial has famously said, "It's about ideas. Too many people died without ever getting their mind out to the world."<sup>37</sup> He has an active role in the distribution and purpose of his art. He creates to share his *ideas*, not to reveal his psyche or to simply proselytize, as are more common within the outsider realm.<sup>38</sup> In other words, Dial establishes an agency usually reserved for the discoverer.

4. *Discoverer promotes the work of artmaker using the art market's resources in a manner unavailable to the artmaker himself.*

While Arnett (the insider discoverer) has promoted Dial's work through exhibitions, catalogs, and even public access television, he does not act for Dial. Instead, Dial chooses to attend his openings, give quotes for articles, and speak eloquently on his work. He has learned about the art world, and chooses to participate in the scene. Again, he possesses an agency often lost within the field.

5. *The work is recognized as artistic output, though is qualified in its definition. The discoverer's name remains associated with the work and its creator.*

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<sup>36</sup> This denial of Holley's role is exacerbated through the consistent association between Arnett and Dial, often with little mention of Holley's role in the equation.

<sup>37</sup> Carol Crown and Charles Russell, *Sacred and Profane: Voice and Vision in Southern Self-Taught Art* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 178.

<sup>38</sup> As seen through creators of *art brut* and visionary art discussed earlier.

Another issue is raised in the credit given Arnett for Dial's success. Arnett's name is continually associated with Dial, and he is given "credit" for Dial's rise in the art world. Holley is usually omitted from the equation. Thus, there is an attempt to force the story to highlight the white art world insider over the African American outsider.

As seen with Ramírez and Dial, the discoverer's identity and authority becomes attached to the discovered outsider work and the artist, and there is a level of intimacy between advancement in the art world and the discoverer—the famous photograph of Ramírez and Pasto exemplifies this. In contrast, the contemporary high art community dissolves the artist/promoter connection, where patron narratives are distinctly less relevant than the presence of an MFA, friendships with other artists, or analysis of the artwork. Ramírez had no choice, or possibly understanding, of his position in the art market. Dial, on the other hand, is well aware of that world. Does Dial remain in the outsider realm because those with cultural capital who champion his work keep him there, or because of his voluntary continued connection with his discoverer? Though William Arnett has consistently argued for Dial's place in the mainstream contemporary art scene, their continued friendship implies an ongoing uneven power dynamic between educated discoverer and discoveree.<sup>39</sup> Their close association evokes a patronage setup, but Dial's marginalized social position and lack of formal education prevents his collaboration with Arnett from appearing as a formal artist/patron working relationship, and instead is often construed as an exploitative

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<sup>39</sup> To "discover" in this context is to provide promotion within the art world, and in that sense William Arnett, not Lonnie Holley, acts as discoverer.

situation.<sup>40</sup>

Dial's story does not sit easily within the outsider rubric because his narrative does not adhere to the classic tale-type structure exemplified by Ramírez, and because he has the ability to create his own narrative. How then, is Dial labeled an outsider? He is judged by individual motifs that may imply his outsider-ness, including his relationship with Arnett and his poor childhood, and there rests the difficulty of this genre: Who has the cultural capital to define Dial as an outsider? For that matter, who would have the ability to name Dial an insider?

The same figures that enact and implement the formulaic discovery narratives choose to place Dial within the outsider circuit. These include scholars, dealers, curators, and collectors, all of whom possess the privileged knowledge of *high* art and connoisseurship. Many, especially dealers, stand to gain from the labeling of an artist, as they are then able to market work within the niche outsider market. I would also argue that not all work sold under the outsider umbrella is aesthetically or conceptually strong enough to survive without a supporting tale, strengthening the importance of a narrative framework.

Within the gallery system, narrative is primarily used to indicate *authenticity*—as proof that the work is by an outsider and not a trained imposter. Certain artists

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<sup>40</sup> The 1993 *60 Minutes* segment “Tin Man” reveals this perceived exploitation. In this “exposé,” Morley Safer decried Arnett’s relationship with Dial as manipulative and unfair, despite arguments by Dial to the contrary.

challenge this use for narrative by providing stories without factual backing. Judy Saslow Gallery, Chicago, represents artist Clyde Angel, described in literature as a “highway wander[ing]...paranoid schizophrenic” who was “fearful of meeting people.”<sup>41</sup> After multiple attempts to find Angel turned up empty, the moniker is now thought to be an invented identity of a trained artist. The lack of confirmed veracity to this narrative has damaged Angel’s reputation in the marketplace, and questions surrounding his identity reduce the art objects’ value.<sup>42</sup> However, as is seen in Dial’s case, artists who do not adhere to the tale type but are untrained are more welcomed in the outsider market.

And so, those who proclaim artists like Dial to be outsiders without the complete corresponding tale type create new symbols to define the outsider field and what it means to be an outsider artist. What happens when an artist enters the outsider art market without a personal narrative adherent to the tale type? Some artists/artworks are able to thrive despite a lack of any personal narrative, but these cases rely heavily on the reputation of a dealer and a strong narrative surrounding the art objects’ discovery. For example, dealer John Ollman has successfully marketed and sold the

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<sup>41</sup> Gary Allan Fine, *Everyday Genius: Self Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 65; Betty-Carol Sellen, *Self Taught, Outsider and Folk Art: A Guide to American Artists, Locations, and Resources* (McFarland & Co, 1999), 121–2.

<sup>42</sup> For more information on the reception and values of Angel’s work from 1999 to the present, please see the *Outsider Art Yahoo Group*, [www.groups.yahoo.com/group/outsiderart](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/outsiderart) (March 30, 2009).

work of the Philadelphia Wireman despite the continued anonymity of the artmaker. According to the widely disseminated narrative, in 1982 a curator traveling through Philadelphia late at night discovered the Wireman's work discarded on the side of the road. The curator recognized the work's artistic merit, loaded the objects into his car, and brought them to Ollman's attention. While the Wireman's unknown identity has aroused some suspicions within the field, the works have sold quite successfully for more than twenty years.<sup>43</sup>

Organizations such as the House of Artists, Gugging, Austria, and the Creative Growth Art Center, Oakland, California, have marketed the work created in situ as outsider art, though many of the resident artists lack personal narratives. The life stories of these artists are instead superseded by their presence at these institutions. For example, Creative Growth carries elements of the outsider tale type in its name and reputation, and becomes shorthand for the personal narratives. When one hears an artist works at the Creative Growth Art Center, he or she is automatically assumed to be developmentally disabled, is thus assigned the outsider label and the untold back-story. One may almost argue the same thing has happened to Dial and the other artists Arnett represents: as Tinwood Alliance artists, they are often superseded by the Southern African American contemporary folk art moniker. While some artists many not have individual narratives, their affiliated institutions provide a symbolic

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<sup>43</sup> Conversations about the authenticity of the Philadelphia Wireman can be found at the *Outsider Art Yahoo Group*.

qualification that refers back to the tale type.

While some critics and scholars argue that outsider art will eventually exist beside insider material, many factors beyond the art objects suggest otherwise.<sup>44</sup> The discovery narratives addressed in this essay are not simply part of outsider art, but serve to define the genre and prevent academically trained artists from infiltrating the field and threatening its raw authenticity. The dependence on these narratives by the museum and gallery worlds indicates that scholars and collectors are far from accepting the work without qualification, and that the narratives are necessary to the work's life in the world.

The motives for the use of narrative in outsider categorization may stem from market needs and deficiencies in certain works, but the narratives play a more complicated role: they allow the educated arts community to embrace the marginalized *other*. As with traditional discovery narratives addressed earlier, Outsider discovery tales represent desire and fear and unknown for the audience. The viewer channels the discoverer/narrator, and is transferred to the moment of initial encounter between artist, artwork, and discoverer. With the stories disseminated alongside the art objects, each viewer experiences this encounter firsthand.

Likely, the criteria for outsider artists will change over time and the outsider

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<sup>44</sup> Randall Morris, Roberta Smith, and critic Arthur C. Danto have each argued for the integration of outsider art within the high art world.

label will be applied more subjectively, as has happened with Dial, or will be applied to institutional grouping of artists, as has happened with the Creative Growth Art Center. However, outsider art proponents are far from allowing the integration of insider and outsider, since outsider creates a market and a culture. Narratives form the packaging that contains outsider art, and collectors and dealers stand to lose this art world niche without the colorful, defining tales.

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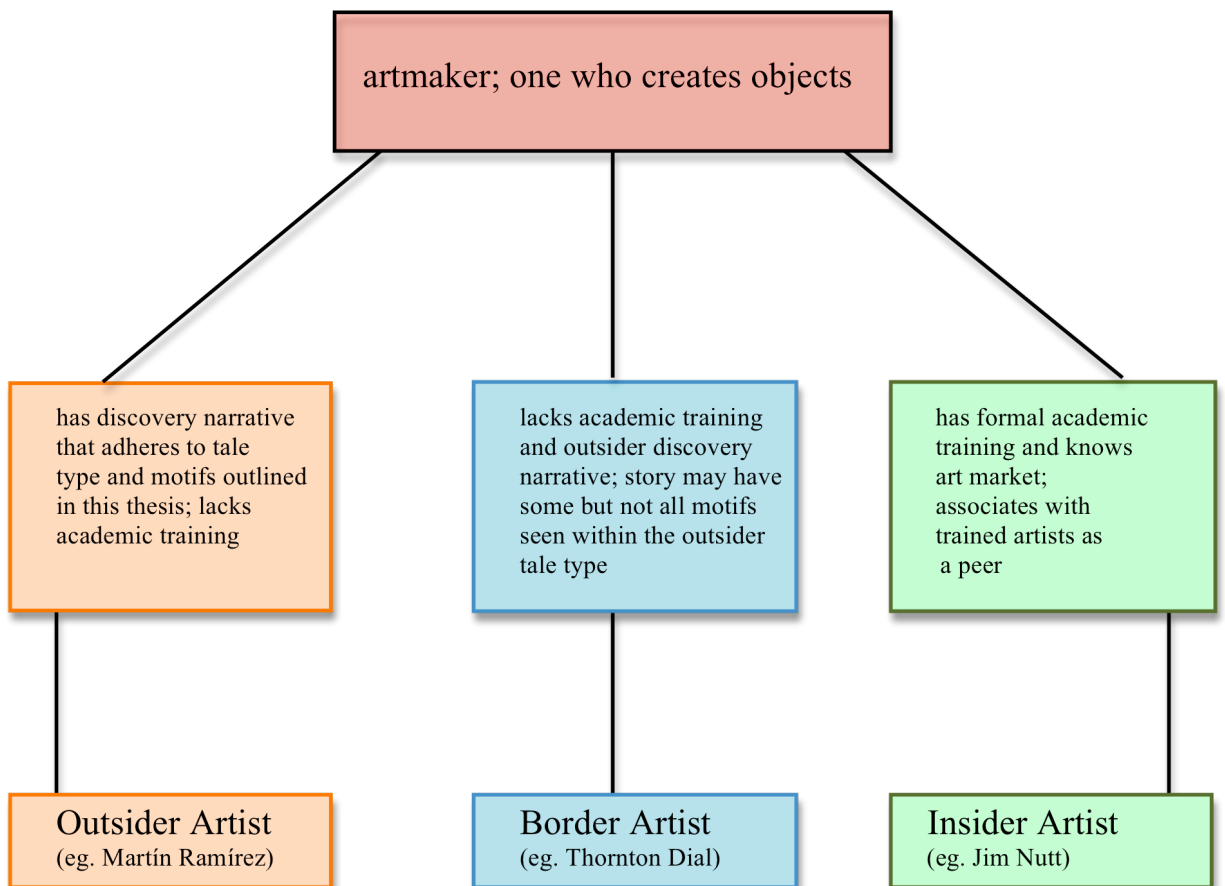
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Table 1. Distinctions of Artist Types Discussed in Thesis



----image removed due to copyright restrictions----

Figure 1

Jim Nutt

*You Hoo-Little Boy*

1977

Hard ground etching, brown ink

Edition 14/50

13 3/4 x 12 3/8 inches

© Jim Nutt

----image removed due to copyright restrictions----

Figure 2

Martín Ramírez

*Untitled (Horse and rider)*

1954

Crayon and pencil on pieced paper

49 x 44.5 inches

Collection of L. & L. Feiwel

© Estate Martín Ramírez

----image removed due to copyright restrictions----

Figure 3

Martín Ramírez

*Untitled (Three VW Vans)*

c. 1948–1963

Crayon and pencil on pieced paper

Blanchard-Hill Collection

© Estate Martín Ramírez

----image removed due to copyright restrictions----

Figure 4

Photograph of Martin Ramirez (right) and Tarmo Pasto at DeWitt State Hospital

c. 1950

Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery

© Estate Martín Ramírez

----image removed due to copyright restrictions----

Figure 5

Thornton Dial

*Last Trip Home (Diana's Funeral)*

1997

Charcoal, pencil, and pastel on paper

44 x 30 inches

© Thornton Dial

----image removed due to copyright restrictions----

Figure 6

Thornton Dial

*January 20, 2009*

2009

Charcoal, pencil, and pastel on paper

44 x 30 inches

© Thornton Dial