

A European Anthology

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To collect is to evolve at levels both unconscious and conscious: intuitive certainty and the keenness of desire increase as an orientation towards a particular class of objects becomes progressively more explicit. Like a baby's first attempts at speech, a collector's early acquisitions are tentative, even clumsy; yet once a certain amount has been amassed, preference asserts itself, and choices become more articulate, purposeful and original. The practice of collecting, as Jean Baudrillard has observed, tends to be systematic and serial.

It can also be fraught with the sense of lack, with anxiety as to the insufficiency of one's coverage: and if ever a collection reaches the stage of containing everything that fits and excluding everything that doesn't, its very exhaustiveness can spell exhaustion and futility. However, unlike the collector of finite sets - things like baseball cards, books by a single author, the coins or postage stamps of a small country - the collector of artworks is engaged in the pursuit of an indefinite series, and has the advantage of being able to aspire to distinctiveness without the compulsion seek definitive closure.

It sometimes happens that an art collector is in too much of a hurry to take proper pleasure in what he has commandeered, and that he compensates by recklessly extending the horizon of his ambitions: but the mature approach is to graduate by measured stages toward more and more subtle acts of selection, which reflect the refinement (the concerted orientation) of taste. A gathering of artworks becomes truly a "collection" once the factor of *quality* takes over from that of mere quantity.

In this sense, a collection may be said to thrive like an organic being slowly awakening to a consciousness of itself. Its growth through time may be intermittent, yet at a certain point of maturation, the collection will disclose a distinctive pattern: it will become a discourse which speaks of individual taste and discernment. Indeed, once quality has become the yardstick, once articulate pleasure transcends fumbling accumulation, the collector usually abandons any idea of possessing all possible variants of a given style or school, opting instead for a thoughtful selection of

significant specimens. Some of these will have the virtue of being typical, and will “represent” the general character of the collection. Others will be exceptional aesthetic treasures, albeit integral to the spirit of the whole. Others again may be so unusual as to chafe against the boundaries of the collection, stimulating a lively uncertainty to what direction it might next take. For if collecting tends to be systematic, this does not mean that a collection is always neatly defined and unadventurous.

The Anthony Petullo Collection

These ideas may throw some light upon the collecting practice of Anthony Petullo, who some years ago began, more instinctively than intellectually, to yield to the attraction of certain types of art which had gone under such varied aliases as folk art, grass-roots art, *Laienmalerei*, naive art, primal art, inside art, modern primitive art, visionary art, outsider art, *Art brut* and so forth. So as to simplify matters, I would suggest that, thus far, Petullo’s curiosity has broadly ranged between the realms of folk art and naive art (and especially memory painting) and those of psychotic art, visionary art and other cultures of outsider art. Petullo himself is allergic to the quarrels which continue to rage about the appropriate use of labels and demarcations across these marginal territories: his priority has long been the pursuit of such objects as he intuitively feels will give him private pleasure. All the same, mindful that his collection remains a “work in progress” and could in principle alter its coloring at some future point, he has consented to the formula “self-taught and outsider art” as a rubric of convenience.

In considering the Petullo Collection, I should like to ask what its contents articulate once they begin to take shape as a set, a sequence, a purposeful statement. What is the distinctive message of this gathering of pictures? And what insights, and pleasures can other people derive from the fruits of Petullo’s careful and caring selections?

The Collection as discourse

To identify ways in which we might construe the discourse of such a collection, I think it helpful to draw an analogy with the poetry anthology. What a literary anthologist seeks to do is to construct his own global

statement (the anthology) out of a considered selection of separate minor statements made by other people (the poems). As a cultural artifact, an anthology of poems usually has a pedagogic function: it instructs the reader by conveying a narrative of literary evolution in which rest various aesthetic and cultural presuppositions. A more experimental anthologist might group poems by theme (or occasionally by formal structure), in a way which plays down individual authorship in favor of other dimensions of the literary experience, such as comparison, cross-reference or intertextuality. Such an anthology is usually prefaced or annotated by its editor, who can rightly claim the book as an original argument. In certain instances, the anthologist might not explain his choices, leaving it to the reader to guess at unspoken affinities, whereupon the anthology might seem a little like a secret confession.

Now, it seems to me that the Petullo collection partakes of all these aspects of anthologizing practice. First, the collection does have something programmatic about it, something of the character of a pedagogic anthology, in that it does, I think, tend to define a specific “genre” that of self-taught art, and to make a claim as to its value and significance. Second, it offers an informative sampling of select items, and is thus a stimulus and guide to other potential enthusiasts. Third, it generates fertile possibilities of comparative reading in that it constitutes an arena of meanings wherein individual works participate, regardless of their maker or site of origin. (Indeed, rather like an international anthology of disparate poems, such a collection exhibits a distinctive individualism, the fruit of its maker’s personality and (unspoken) emotional investment.

The collection’s pedagogic function

As an American, Petullo was initially drawn to the folk art of his own continent, his early acquisitions being memory paintings and story pictures made by non-professionals in a naive style. With time, he shifted his focus overseas, developing a special interest in the marginal artists of Europe and extending his purview to the more extreme modalities of outsider art. Seen as an anthology, or even a manifesto, the collection exists to defend this allegiance.

The argument here - well-known both to its advocates and enemies, but worth repeating - is essentially that remarkable levels of artistic skill and imaginative invention can be achieved by certain creators who have either

had no art instruction at all, or who have abandoned whatever visual education they have received. Practically every artist chosen by Petullo is an autodidact who has worked out a convincing individual solution to the problem of visual expression.

This argument can be crystallized in the example of Alfred Wallis, who is, I believe, seen by Petullo himself as a touchstone. Wallis was a retired fisherman who became the best-known British “primitive” artist and memory painter, producing work based on scenes in and around the fishing town of St Ives in Cornwall, England. Wallis was semi-illiterate, and had no knowledge of academic styles and certainly no sympathy with fine art methods: he is known to have commented adversely on the pretensions of the professionals who came to St Ives to paint impressionistic seascapes. (A 1935 letter to his friend and patron H. S. Ede complains that “i Think it spoils the pictures Their have Been a lot of paintins spoiled By putin Collers where They do not Blong.”) Wallis’s own visualizations of the local fishing fleet, the harbor, the lighthouse, the houses in the town, reflect an unsophisticated yet muscular sense of spatial relations. Wallis’s finishes are unkempt, as if he saw virtue in “making do” with summary results. His images are done on salvaged scraps of cardboard, often irregular in shape yet left untrimmed; instead of pigment from a tube, he uses left-over cans of the same paint used for coating the woodwork of seagoing vessels (to call him a “boat painter” is thus a nice irony). Despite these almost perverse constraints, Wallis’s designs achieve a genuine aesthetic authority in their simple forms and hues, while releasing poignant eddies of nostalgia. (Another 1935 letter confides that “What i do mosley is what use To Bee out of my own memery what we may never see again as Thing are altered all Together Ther is Nothin what Ever do not look like what it was since i can Rember.”)

To foreground Wallis is of course a strategy of instruction. Wallis can be said to be both outstanding and typical, exemplifying the type of creator Petullo seems most to prize. He is independent, robust, even dogged. He makes art not just because he has time on his hands, but because he is impelled to express himself, in terms at once idiosyncratic and sociable. In finding ways to fix meanings in paint, he is not distracted by the museum or the marketplace: his art stands as testimony to the aesthetic paradox whereby distance from cultural models can give rise to an eloquence and a competence all of their own.

Of course, it has to be said that the totally impervious outsider is only a

theoretical fiction: it is by now commonplace to observe that the marginal arts never sprout up entirely *ex nihilo*, exempt from any cultural or social trace. While free of academicism, Wallis most certainly owes quite a lot to the vernacular traditions of maritime painting and ship portraiture. All the same, the point is that he does still manifest the strongest commitment to his own way of doing things. (Petullo's more recent discovery of the elderly painter Sylvia Levine might be seen to introduce a borderline case, in so far as this artist did once attend painting classes at an art school. Some might find tinges of an academic tonality in the fine nudes she has produced in recent years, though I would suggest that her landscapes have an authentic "naive" feel about them.)

The collection as European anthology

Given that Petullo has, unusually for an American, taken Europe as his main hunting ground, the collection can be said to function as an introductory anthology of work little known in North America. (In point of fact it should not be assumed that all of these artists are universally acclaimed even in their country of origin.) In reviewing the foremost Europeans in the collection, I find myself grouping them - albeit without intent to convey thereby any *a priori* implication of relative value - on a continuum stretching from naive art to outsider art.

Reminiscent of Wallis, James Dixon is an Irish memory painter whose imagery captures aspects of the rugged coastal island where he lived all his life, significantly remote from outside influence. *West End Village, Tory Island* (cat. no. 14) is a masterpiece of terse autobiography ("This is the place I was born in") and of a kind of creative fundamentalism ("This is all I need to paint from"). The French naive artist Louis Ernout similarly documents his local habitat, pointing out to us the modest gallery he ran in a nondescript corner of the city and authenticating it - making it "special" - by the visual quotation of the Sacre-Coeur cupola (cat. no. 17)).

For years the unschooled Polish painter Nikifor drifted from village to village and from sanctuary to sanctuary, amassing a pilgrim's repertoire of sites. Caught in a bold, formulaic idiom, his churches and townscapes attain aesthetic intensity through their obsessional symmetry, and, while often reminiscent of the postcard, seem to want to sabotage documentary truth. The work of the German naive Max Raffler likewise vacillates between the options of truth-telling and mythic fabrication. Some of his images, such as *Greifenberg* (cat. no. 63) or *Jorgisnacht* (cat. no. 66),

record homely scenes in his native Bavaria, whereas others, like *Bird Tree* (cat. no. 62) or *Paradise* (cat. no. 64), point to concepts and beliefs remote from the literal. We might see the paintings of the Bangladeshi-born Shafique Uddin as participating in the same dual impulse, in as much as they appear to posit an actuality while in fact plunging towards its opposite. *New York Dream* (cat. no. 76) epitomizes this merging of a known reality and a startling unreality.

As if to renounce the world we share, many of the other Europeans in the Petullo Collection gravitate towards the implausible or the downright unthinkable. The Cypriot-born Perifimou (Alexander Georgiou) submits the protagonists of his fantasy to weird distortions, engineering unexplained conglomerations (*Psyche* (cat. no. 61) and wrestling matches (*Thatcher's Youth* (cat. no. 59)) which are true pictorial conundrums. Born of a passion for things grotesque and obscene, the images of the Berlin dropout Friedrich Schroeder-Sonnenstern delight and disgust in equal measure. By no stretch of definition could his work be deemed veristic, yet it would be wrong to suppose his distorted figures lack relevance to human experience: that uncomely incarnation the *Demoness of Urgency* (cat. no. 71) is in fact an allegorical figure of high seriousness who passes satirical judgement on the faulty morality of the age. Similarly, the paintings of Londoner Albert Loudon may be said to deform visual aspects of the contemporary city while at the same time voicing perfectly clear comments about urban angst and the quarrelsomeness of close-knit working-class life. In similar fashion, one can read the early drawings of the Glasgow-born Scottie Wilson as mythic renderings of the violence of the 1940s (*Herd of Greedies* (cat. no. 85)), although it is true that Scottie later inclines towards harmonious and decorative compositions which invoke an utopia untouched by history.

If this escape from literalism is indeed one of the themes of the Petullo Collection, we can go still further in finding departures from everyday perception and shared experience. It is at this point that we indubitably enter - if we have not unconsciously stumbled over the borderline already - the territory of outsider art, where derivative, normative styles are least in evidence. Among the more extravagant visionaries is the London housewife, Madge Gill, who imprints vast surfaces with webs of inked lines, conjuring up otherworldly textures and female faces which float on the surface as if about to drown, lacking substance yet voicing a strange appeal. The mask-like faces and dim figures shaped by the splashes and blurs of the Parisian artist Michel Nedjar are further instances of a kind of

expressionism which opens onto some sort of mythic, perhaps even mystical dimension. (Some may feel that Nedjar's art inclines to pure abstraction, but in point of fact, his expressive project does seem to be anchored in a felt human reality, in so far as the artist has consistently spoken of the deep-rooted anxieties and yearnings which color his work.)

Finally we reach that extreme register of art produced in the context of mental and emotional disorder. Psychotic artworks transmit across a great gap, messages from a realm whose lines of communication are seriously damaged. The insubstantial cut-outs adrift in the shallow spaces dreamt up by Carlo, the pithy figures sketched by Oswald Tschirtner - stylized to the point of reducing reference almost to zero - and the puzzle-pictures of Johann Garber (epitomized in *A Primeval Forest* (cat. no. 22), a drawing crammed enigmatic doodles and obscured obscenities), these are all works which resist contextualization other than in the negative terms of unfamiliarity and disorientation. Indeed, in the art of the Swiss psychotic Adolf Wolfli, we journey into chimerical geographies dislocated from European and even earthly precedent. The criteria for outsider art can be said to be truly met by a work like *Angel* (cat. no. 90), with its imperious winged figure confined within an airless space, a decor made up of stylized erotic motifs which enact an hypnotic counterpoint of color and shape relevant to no world other than that of a private delirium - although, here as elsewhere, the compulsion of these visual forms offers us aesthetic pleasure despite our intellectual bafflement.

The internal dynamic of the collection

Thus far I have presented the Petullo Collection as a systematic anthology providing a definition and an overview: yet, in keeping with what I said earlier about selectivity, it is clear that Petullo makes no attempt at encyclopedic completeness. (To list the items he has supposedly "missed" would be pointless, though it is notable that he discriminates carefully between the dozen or so major artists working at the famous Artists' House at Gugging in Austria.)

Now, while it is true that the discourse of the collection necessarily feeds into the external discourse of the marginal arts at large, it should also be recognized that its integrity as a collection rests on its internal coherence, the fact that it is structured as a mosaic of interdependent parts.

For the private collector, a new acquisition means not just the assimilation of one novelty, but the re-discovery of the whole collection which it enters. Each time a poem is added to an anthology, the message of the whole is subtly modified. Likewise, any art collection worthy of respect cannot be a mere exercise in addition (1 plus 2 plus #) along the axis of quantity, but is, rather, a dramatic multiplication of qualities. Each fresh acquisition joins the existing set and immediately refines and re-defines it. The ripples of correspondence or contrast it sends across the entirety of the discourse impel the collector to re-read his own anthology and re-think his own motives.

Seen at this point in time, the Petullo Collection remains “unfinished” yet it can be said to have achieved a provisional integrity based on the reconciliation of its surface divisions within an overall framework or aesthetic vision. Things which seem very different, things which are in a sense “worlds apart,” may suddenly strike us as of a piece. At the very least, the internal dynamic of the collection creates an independent arena which offers experimental possibilities of suggestive cross play in terms of themes and formal properties.

In the same way that one might dip into an anthology, reading “diagonally” in search of comparisons and finding unexpected conjunctures, I suggest that it is entirely defensible to compare, for instance, the topographic work of Nikifor with that of Josef Yoakum: each artist records locations which seem at the same time scrupulously “researched” and curiously arbitrary, the product of objective and subjective criteria of truth.

It is not hard to find other echoes and affinities within such a collection. One sub-genre I detect in the compendium or inventory picture in which the naive artist crams as many separate multicolored items as possible, as in Justin McCarthy’s *Assemblage of Movie Stars* (cat. no. 44) or Max Raffler’s *Bird Tree* (cat. no. 62) (itself reminiscent of, though contrasted to, Scottie Wilson’s decidedly monochrome *Yellow Birds in the Tree* (cat. no. 89)). The eerie figural proliferation characteristic of the work of Rosemarie Koczy stands comparison with the teeming style of a Shafique Uddin, and perhaps of a Michel Nedjar or a Carlo. The simplified silhouettes traced by Bill Traylor or Eddie Arning gain in resonance when juxtaposed with the fastidious stylizations of Johann Fischer.

The recurring sensation of being sent floating through a giddy space,

compelling in its refusal of a single “right way up” can be derived from pictures like Jahan Maka’s *Map of Manitoba* (cat. no. 41), James Dixon’s *West End Village, Tory Island* (cat. no. 14) or Wallis’s *Road with Houses* (cat. no. 84). Elsewhere, I find that the panache and density of Madge Gill’s designs are at once distinct from and complementary to those of Consuelo Amezcua: each artist remains unique, yet the comparison is revealing and points to a recognizable “mediumistic style”.

Some artists share the same materials or techniques. Both Wallis and Dixon favored crude ship’s paints. Eddie Arning, William Hawkins, Justin McCarthy and Jakob Greuter are all known to have started out from printed images, transliterating them in idiosyncratic ways. And, most challengingly, there is that high incidence of artists who seem unable to keep the visual apart from the verbal. I think wonderful semiotic energies are released in the cross-play of image and text in the work of artists like the poster maker August Walla, the scribbler Carlo, and the calligrapher-illustrators Johann Fischer and Jakob Greuter; or again, creators like Adolf Wolfli and Consuelo Amezcua, who build capital letters into their compositions, as well as inscribing explanations inside the pictorial fabric; not to mention all those artists for whom a picture seems incomplete without an emphatic title - Schroder-Sonnerstern, Nikifor, William Hawkins, James Dixon. Finally, there is a fascinating analogy to be drawn between Henry Darger and Adolf Wolfli: in either case, the pictorial work is supported by a colossal prose narrative, the former’s taking the shape of a fantastic novel, the latter’s that of a fantastic autobiography.

The curious thing is that the more one looks for affinities and correspondences, the more one seems to find. The fact that one can play this “intericonic” game within the Petullo Collection means that its discourse is still fluid: it articulates not a categorical “last word” on the topic of untutored art, but a ceaseless querying prompted by the fact that separate works seem to veer together, then to spring apart again - for each analogy is suggestive and provisional, each invites us to acknowledge both convergence and divergence. We see more acutely, we appreciate more deeply, the more we approach things intertextually. Not every juxtaposition will make sense, yet the bolder the comparison, the sharper the critical insight.

The collection as historical document and as secret diary

If it is true that the message of a collection is conditioned by the wider intertext of culture, it is equally the case that its physical growth is governed by more banal and practical constraints. As a Wisconsin-based businessman, Anthony Petullo finds that his collection is subject to the imperatives of the art market and the limitations of his own finances; his network of links to artists, dealers, other collectors, galleries, auction houses and museums, ties his activities in with a complex yet specific set of social and economic circumstances. In this regard, the present exhibition can be seen as documenting a specific moment in the history of cultural values, a snapshot of the progress of a particular aesthetic debate in the late twentieth century.

However, as I have also indicated, collecting would be no fun if the collector did not also experience it as a private adventure in which the rules of the game are in large part of his own devising. It is true that a collector of limited initiative can consult the *World Encyclopedia of Naive Art*, which names over eight hundred artists (so far there is not one of outsider art!). But although the critical consensus may be a factor in certain decisions, and although cynical investment has begun to distort the economics of the thing, the collector of self-taught art in the 1990s can still look forward to making the occasional discovery of his own, and can thus enjoy the sense that, rather like the artists themselves, he is still improvising as he goes along.

In short, despite its validity as an instructive anthology and public document, we should remember that the Petullo Collection is also the fruit of a passionate activity centered on the collector as determining subject. I think it would mean little to Petullo to acquire work he did not personally care for, work he could not intuitively identify as *for himself* - to the extent that, for him, the collection may finally be less like an anthology than a kind of secret diary, a narrative of encounters and acquisitions which constitutes an intimate discourse of possession and ultimately of self-possession, arguably in keeping with Jean Baudrillard's quip that "it is invariably *oneself* that one collects".

Now, it is worth emphasizing that Petullo himself is prepared to admit the "the collection reflects my personality and taste;" and though I must avoid a clumsy verbal paraphrase of his involuntary "self-portrait," I should at least place on record my sense that this collection speaks of a temperament not indifferent to the values of introspection, self-reliance and sheer hard work, as well having a soft spot for fantasy, creative

improvisation and fun. For however serious the collector in his public persona, he can hardly be always solemn when he is on his own, when he looks through his collection and savors the interplay of fascination, pleasure, curiosity, caprice. We should respect this dialogue of self with object of desire, this secret communion. Some will agree with Susan Stewart that what she calls “an aura of transcendence and independence” can only be a fiction. Yet it is, I believe, a useful and defensible one, and to the extent that a collector claims to enjoy his collection in private, I see no reason to chide him as a victim of his subjectivity. Now that Anthony Petullo has elected to put his tastes on public display, he turns a significant page in his collector’s narrative. Had he hoarded his collection in a locked attic, he would have run the risk of being thought a miser or a narcissist. In ceding to the impulse to confess his preferences, he is suddenly exposed to critical comment. That he takes this step is an index of a generosity from which we can also learn, as we turn our gaze to the pictures.

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1. This discussion of collecting is indebted to Jean Baudrillard’s “The System of Collecting,” in *Cultures of Collecting*, Roger Cardinal & John Elsner, eds., London, 1993; Krysztof Pomian’s “The Collection: Between the Visible and the Invisible,” in his *Collectors and Curiosities*, Oxford, 1990; and Susan Stewart’s “Objects of Desire” in her *On Longing*, Baltimore/London, 1984.
 2. Despite its negative connotations, the term “naive art” has long been internationally consecrated as a technical term designating the work of artists who lack the accredited skills of academically trained professionals. Jenifer P. Borum’s recent article “Will the Real Outsiders Please Stand Up?” (in *New Art Examiner*, Summer 1993) deplures, as do I, the misconceptions that the term “outsider art” continues to attract. Nevertheless I shall, by analogy with “naive art,” persist in using it as a precise technical term, equivalent to Jean Dubuffet’s *Art brut*. As an extreme case of marginal creativity, outsider art is best appreciated not as a symptom of sociological or emotional imbalance, but as an aesthetic category, embracing works which seem to fly in the face of all conventional criteria of beauty and meaningfulness. (The day will perhaps come when these conditions will have altered sufficiently for outsider art to become indistinguishable from art *tout court*, so that it could be seen as a tool of provisional usefulness in the ongoing quest for critical definition and insight.)
 3. Quoted from a leaflet about his collection which Petullo drew up in December 1991.