

# WEAVING CULTURAL STRANDS

*Raw Vision* editor John Maizels talks with Valérie Rousseau, the American Folk Art Museum's Curator of 20th Century and Contemporary Art, to discuss her role and the museum's future



Valérie Rousseau in New York, 2017, photo: Ted Degener

The interview took place in New York, January 21, 2017

**John Maizels: What is your background and how did you first become aware of the world of self-taught art?**

Valérie Rousseau: My long time interest in self-taught art has been nourished from childhood, where science, art and nature were deeply intertwined: my paternal grandfather Jacques Rousseau was a well-known ethnobotanist and professor who led many explorations to the far north of Québec, to study Inuit and Native American cultures. Our house was filled with artifacts and self-taught creations that he brought back from his trips. My maternal grandfather was Jean-Julien Bourgault, a celebrated, self-taught wood carver and storyteller known throughout the region – his house always welcomed collectors and passersby. My parents – lovers of fauna and flora – cultivated my interest in the arts and traditional knowledge without discrimination. This environment defined my approach to the arts and made me aware of the importance of looking at things with an open mind

and a 360-degree perspective. I eventually completed a PhD in art history and a master's degree in art theory, both from Université du Québec à Montréal, and a masters degree in Anthropology from École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris.

**How did the Société des Arts Indisciplinés (SAI) in Canada come about?**

In 1996 I became aware of two self-taught art environments in Québec, those of Léonce Durette and Richard Greaves whose work was later exhibited internationally. I then decided to change the subject of my master's degree to study the conservation of such practices within a larger art historical perspective. I visited environments in California, meeting and travelling with Seymour Rosen, the founder of SPACES in Los Angeles. This trip was game changing. Upon my return, I founded the SAI in 1998, with *art brut* veteran Eric Mattson and



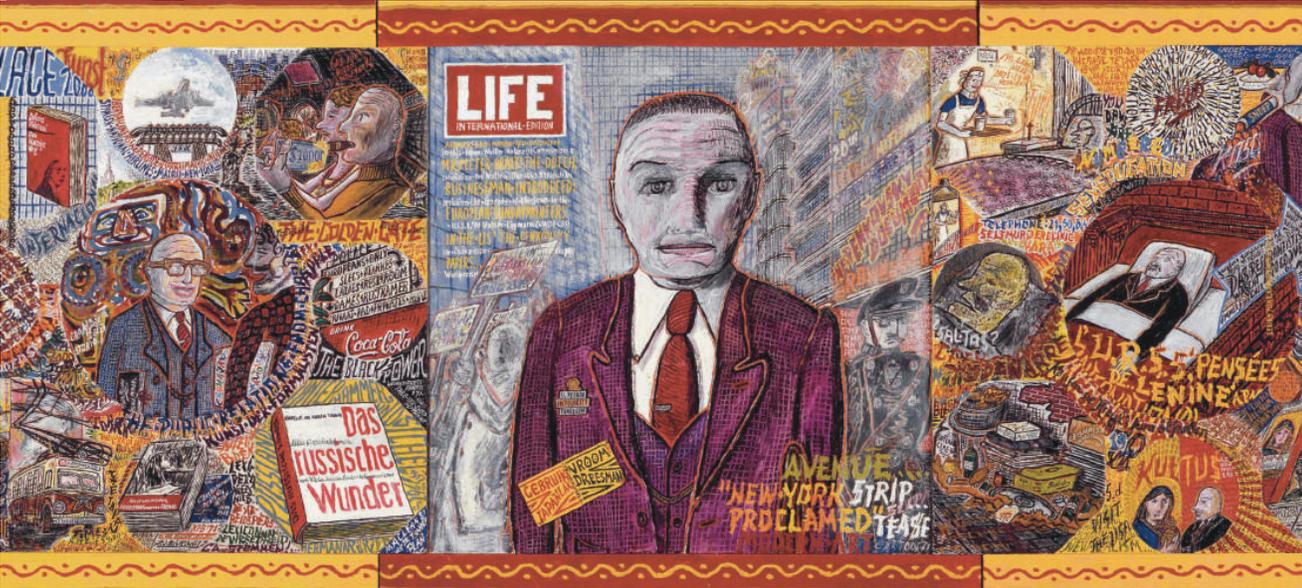
Bill Traylor (c. 1854–1949), *Untitled (Bent Man Smoking)*, 1939–42, Conté crayon and coloured pencil on cardboard, 15.5 x 12.5 ins. / 39.4 x 31.8 cm, Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection

ethnologist Pascale Galipeau, with the goals of leading projects towards the recognition for this material in Canada, initiating scholarship, discovering new artists and building an archive.

***Since working at the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM), you've been instrumental in mounting some historic***

***exhibitions. Do you think that your Canadian bilingual background helped you to see beyond the American folk art arena and become more able to be involved with the international roots of art brut?***

One aspect that got AFAM's director Anne-Imelda Radice specifically interested in my profile was the international perspective I was bringing to these art practices, and the





relationships I had forged in different countries, with generations of artists, scholars and collectors. Québec is a post-Christian, secular province, immersed in a North American dominant culture, deeply rooted in traditions from France and Native American communities. Canada is a bilingual country, with a federal parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy – all these circumstances opened me up pretty early to questions of identity, cultural intermingling and heritage. It's all about what is lost and gained "in translation," during the process of transmission – I still think in French. Overly analytic,

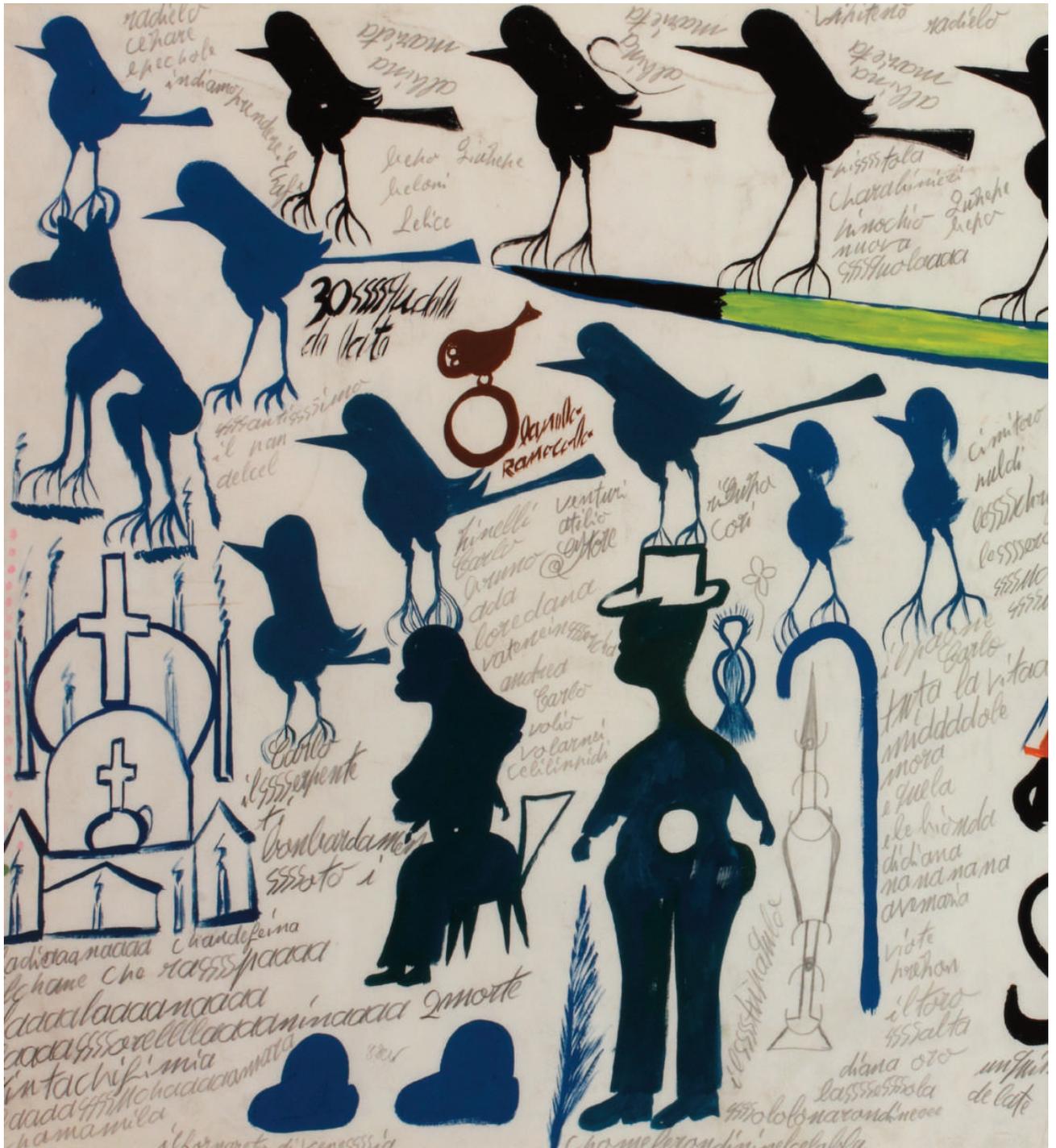
left  
Willem van Genk (1927–2005), *Untitled (New York Proclaimed N. Petrov)*,  
c. 1973, mixed media on boards, 25.5 x 63.1 ins. / 64.8 x 160/3 cm,  
collection Foundation Willem van Genk, Museum Dr. Guislain, Gent

above  
"Willem Van Genk: Mind Traffic", showing paintings and part of Van  
Genk's raincoat collection (American Folk Art Museum, New York,  
2014, in collaboration with the Museum Dr. Guislain),  
photo: Olya Vysotskaya

and attracted by detail, I always liked to be put outside of my comfort zone. *Art brut* and self-taught art offer an extremely rich laboratory. I can't curate an exhibition without providing a comprehensive understanding that will sum up my views about the complexity, transformative power, and emotional intelligence lying in the practices elaborated by self-taught artists.

***How have the exhibitions you have curated been relevant to the greater world of art brut or outsider art ?***

Even though I have been trained as an art historian and written essays for art historical and museum studies publications, I believe my contribution to the field of *art brut* and self-taught art lies in the "exhibition making", under the polyvalent nature of the curator where I have found myself, which more closely aligns with what I believe are my strengths and interests. I conceive an exhibition as an immersive and transformative space, where you initiate a privileged connection with an artwork that can ultimately transform and inform your perceptions on different levels. I find inspiration in the



works of curators like George-Henri Rivière, Harald Szeemann and Jean-Hubert Martin, and art historians like Aby Warburg and Georges Didi-Huberman who have studied the mnemonic power of visual expressions. The writings of Jean Dubuffet, Daniel Fabre and Michel Thévoz have also been illuminating.

Since I began at AFAM in 2013, I have organised exhibitions featuring seminal *art brut* artists who had little exposure in the United States, like Willem Van Genk,

Carlo Zinelli and Eugen Gabritschewsky, but also on American self-taught artists like Ronald Lockett and Melvin Way. An exhibition like "Traylor in Motion", co-curated with my colleague Stacy C. Hollander, revealed new perspectives about Bill Traylor's creative system, by situating his oeuvre in a more cinematic, sequential experience that captured movements and condensed time frames. AFAM hosted a major symposium gathering important voices on Traylor (proceedings to be



Carlo Zinelli (1916–1974), *Untitled* (double-sided), San Giacomo Hospital, Verona, Italy, 1970, gouache on paper, 19 x 27.5 ins. / 48.3 x 69.9 cm, collection of Robert A. Roth

**The Carlo Zinelli retrospective opens at the museum, the first in the country. What is the scope of the exhibition?**

Indeed, this survey, the first museum exhibition on Carlo Zinelli in the United States, coincides with his 100th birthday. The 55 paintings on view – half of them double-sided – are enriched with photographs, an audio interview, a film, and hospital scenes captured by *Life* magazine photographer John Phillips in 1959. Zinelli’s grandnephew shared with me a precious document that will go public for the first time: a one-hour audio interview of Zinelli with psychiatrist Vittorino Andreoli, recorded around 1964. I had it transcribed from Zinelli’s original Veronese dialect, and then translated into English. A portion of this text will be displayed in the show, along with headphones for us to listen to his voice simultaneously. We observed that the graphic writing he started to add to his artworks in the last months of 1964, clearly echos – in its form and sonority – the artist’s own fragmented speech. While Zinelli’s calligraphic system made of letters, numbers, words, and undecipherable sentences become ornamental, his elocution is broken down into individual words and letters, recalling the musicality of Kurt Schwitters’ spoken poem, *Ursonate* (1922–32).

Zinelli’s oeuvre, created over a 16-year period, from 1957 to 1973, displays a consistent aesthetic composed of repetitions in iconography, vocabulary, and format. However, it was possible, retroactively, to identify successive phases in which distinct groups could be identified, modulated by elements of composition, the predominance of certain colours, and a particular treatment of the pictorial surface. For instance, the coloured backgrounds, the schematisation of the human figure, and the ordering of his subjects into clusters of four are characteristic of the period 1960–1965. Thus, it made sense for me to divide the exhibition to highlight four distinct phases in his oeuvre.

published). Other shows favoured historical approaches and meant to connect outsider art to the greater art world, like “Art Brut in America: The IncurSION of Jean Dubuffet”; or exhibitions like “When the Curtain Never Comes Down”, which offered an in-depth reflection on lifelong artistic practices – often ephemeral and pluridisciplinary – associated with *art brut* through the angle of performance art; this show had a fantastic public and critical response.



***The forthcoming Gabritschevsky exhibition is a direct link to its showing at the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne and La Maison Rouge in Paris, and it is great to see this link. How important are international relationships between museums?***

I have always been partial to collaborative projects, from the moment I started curating exhibitions. Every single time I have found the results to be exponentially better and more valuable. International collaborations are unique occasions to share scholarship, challenge historical assumptions, open up our collections to new interpretations, and share the astronomical costs that would have made a show otherwise impossible. Our collaborations with the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne since 2015 have been extremely precious.

***Do you think you have moved AFAM to a more international stance?***

I hope so. I have recently enjoyed working with Sarah Lombardi and her team at the Collection de l'Art Brut as well as with Antoine de Galbert at La Maison Rouge. I have had the chance to collaborate with many private collectors and public institutions, like Collection abcd in Paris, LaM-Lille, Museum Dr. Guislain in Gent, and others in Brazil, Germany, Switzerland, England and Italy. I pay close attention to exhibitions in all kinds of museums – art, science, history – and personal museums in Europe, England, and other countries like Brazil, Mexico, Japan, and India for instance, who show self-taught art, but from a unique perspective. Of course we were proud to have the 2013 Venice Biennale's "Encyclopedic Palace"



Eugen Gabritschevsky (1893–1979), *Untitled*, n.d., gouache on paper, 9.6 x 15.2 ins. / 24.4 x 38.6 cm, collection abcd/Bruno Decharme, Paris

exhibition named after an artwork by Marino Auriti from our collection – that was also exhibited at the Arsenale. Massimiliano Gioni, artistic director of the New Museum in New York, has been a leading advocate for the field on both the local and international stage and it's been great collaborating with him on several occasions.

***As outsider art becomes more widespread there is always a need for scholarship. How important is AFAM's role and how should that role develop?***

At the root of every exhibition there is a need to develop new scholarship, get more specialised knowledge on specific artists, reveal new facets of the artworks we are displaying. We are constantly revisiting collections, exploring the world to find new artists, connecting

different generations of scholars, creating innovative partnerships, and creating new occasions for lively interactions between self-taught artists, professional artists, international scholars, and other art professionals.

***What are the recent and upcoming exhibitions and programmes at AFAM?***

In April, our symposium "Post-Dubuffet: Self-Taught Art in the Twenty-First Century" looked at the way self-taught art is being revised in the twenty-first century and at the possible emergence of the *art brut* artists of tomorrow. We recently launched the book *The Hidden Art: 20th- & 21st-Century Self-Taught Artists from the Audrey B. Heckler Collection*, co-published with Skira Rizzoli, which showed the diversity of this important collection.

AFAM has recently opened its Collection and Educational Center in Long Island City, where many of our offices are, along with our entire collection (which grew by over 600 new acquisitions over the last three years), a new Archive Center, a library and a climate-controlled, multipurpose space. We have received a major grant from the Leir Charitable Foundations to digitise AFAM's entire collection over the next few years. Ongoing programmes include the Annual Visionary Award, special events for the members of our Council for the Study of Art Brut and Self-Taught Art, The Anne Hill Blanchard Uncommon Artists Lecture, publications and exhibition-related discussions.

The Susan Te Kahurangi King Fellowship has been awarded to Rae Pleasant, to work closely with the museum's curator to study King's artworks and documents that are on loan from the family to the museum. In January 2018 I am curating a second part to the exhibition *When the Curtain Never Comes Down*, with a catalogue and this time with a focus on the structure of narratives. For this occasion, AFAM will explore further its Henry Darger holdings, by studying the relationship between his writing and his iconography.