

## PHOTO | BRUT

Collection Bruno Decharme & Compagnie

By Lyle Rexer



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, *Untitled*, c. 1940s. John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Photo Courtesy Lewis B. Greenblatt.

Is there such a thing as outsider photography? The term “outsider” has come to mean either self-taught, outside the art establishment or, in the more extreme version, cut off from many forms of social intercourse by mental illness or incarceration. These are all contested notions, but even if we lay the arguments aside, a label that might be applicable in painting, drawing and sculpture seems useless in photography because the majority of the medium’s output is already “outsider,” that is vernacular, untaught or semi-taught, and not directed toward an art world audience. Its parent is the snapshot and its children are social media platforms. *PHOTO | BRUT: Collection Bruno Decharme & Compagnie* at the American Folk Art Museum is the latest and by far the

most extreme expression of the internet-inspired fascination for “other pictures,” as the photography collector Thomas Walther called them. The exhibition includes some 400 pieces by a global cast of characters spanning almost a century.

It cannot be coincidental that the explosion of interest in such photographs, evidenced by dozens of books and major exhibitions at such institutions as the National Gallery and the Metropolitan Museum, have coincided with the rise of social media platforms. Now that there are avenues for widely sharing images, we have an unobstructed view of how the medium, in its maximum distribution, is used personally and individually. Only one photographer in the AFAM exhibition, Ichiwo Sugino, posts on social media. He is among the younger subjects. But if there had been such platforms back in the day, it is worth asking how much of this material, confined to metaphoric shoeboxes, would have been posted. Who knows, maybe all of it.



Henry Darger, *Untitled, after 1953*. Collaged clippings and 1953 Christmas Seal on cardboard, . American Folk Art Museum, New York, gift of Kiyoko Lerner. © 2021 Kiyoko Lerner.

In such a media environment, it makes sense that the museum soft-pedals the word “outsider” in its exhibition materials. But the collection’s title reaffirms it. “Photo brut,” a version of the French term *art brut*—raw art—coined by the artist Jean Dubuffet,

telegraphs the character of much of the work in Bruno Decharme's astonishing vernacular collection, which was first showcased two years ago at *Les Rencontres d'Arles*. It is transgressive of sexual norms, gender identities, and modes of signifying. Very little of it is good in a conventional sense, but taken as a whole, the collection offers a negative or inverse version of photography, and fine art photography in particular. It is the accursed share, the banished supplement without which various uses of the medium cannot be fully understood.

Take for example photo collage. The most common outsider use of photography is as an adjunct of drawing, a cut and paste illustrative shortcut. That is certainly true in the work of the titans in the Decharme collection, Henry Darger and Adolf Wölfli. These voluminous producers and world builders did not let the burden of hand work get in the way of communicating visions. At the same time, however, they are aware that photographs have a different status and signify in a different way. They are found objects that speak to these artists oracularly, publicly, messages about the world that they internalize and disclose by repositioning those images. In their radical psychic appropriations, Darger, Wölfli, and others in the show including Valentin Simankov and Ilmari Salminen underscore surrealism's preoccupation with photography's dark quotidian gifts.

This reference to surrealism suggests another way in which the exhibition collapses the boundaries between insider and outsider. Photographs taken by artists in the collection involve strategies that mirror those employed in the art world. The gender-bending Polaroids of the late Ulay have their counterpart in the stagings of Tomasz Machciński, a mechanic whose portrayed identities—in some 17,000 images—range from the pope to Mother Teresa. Similarly, the suite of self-mutilation photographs by Luboš Plný resemble nothing so much as the work of Rudolf Schwarzkogler and the Viennese Actionists. The snapshots taken of and by August Walla seem an uncanny shadow of Joseph Beuys. Walla was probably the most significant of the artists cared for in the Maria Gugging Psychiatric Clinic's Haus der Künstler (artist's house), and his text-based art and wall decorations at Gugging were accompanied by ritual gestures, often of sanctification. There is a photograph of Walla, alas not in the collection, washing his hands in the Donau River, dressed in a Beuys-like pork pie hat. It suggests a shamanic identity far more authentic than anything Beuys projected.

The difference from their insider counterparts, implied in the artists' biographies, is that these photographers made images for a private audience, themselves, although the performative and very public character of the works contradicts even this. Still, the idea of auto-isolation underscores a pervasive motivation in many of the works, that of pornography. Pornography has been a driver of photographic production since the earliest days, and the Decharme collection contains a male porntopia, from the stalking photographs of Miroslav Tichý, an art student who fell out and took to fabricating his own cameras, to the soft-core nudes of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein. In addition to making chicken-bone sculptures and visionary paintings, Von Bruenchenhein found time to pose his wife Marie in thousands of photographs that range from delicately pornographic to reverential. They skirt rawness, as desire staged in private is filtered through media conventions of provocative suggestion, almost but never quite sublimated.

Pornography is an objectifying mode par excellence, but it may not be the most objectifying of photography's roles. When it is merged with the archiving and classifying impulses, it becomes deeply chilling, and illuminates again the reasons for such sweeping denunciations of the medium as Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. A key piece of the Decharme collection, but one that did not make it into the AFAM presentation, is the archive of Günter K., a 1970s German everyman, whose photos and diary document in pubic hair detail his affair with his secretary. The snapshots of bouffant dos, bathroom semi-nudity, and what at first seems a kind of prurient affection accompany typewritten text whose details are both graphic and affectless. It is as if Herr K. were watching a rather un compelling film of his own life or preparing a report according to office protocol. The instrumentalizing of another human being in what is supposedly an intimate relationship implicates photography as an archival substitute, meant not to evoke memory but to render feeling inert, as in a dossier.

This extreme example taints even the most "normal" of snapshot photography, the way Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* made taking a shower in a white tiled bathroom impossible. Günter K. reveals alienation as the origin of the male photographic gaze. In this case, the outsider is inside.