

By Mark Feinberg

DR. HANZ PRINZHORN'S BOOK, *The Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, was called *The Bible* by many of the German Expressionist painters. Psychiatrist Prinzhorn's book displayed the artwork of patients he had worked with in the 1920s. Some artists followed Prinzhorn's lead; Max Ernst and Wassily Kandinsky even went into asylums to study with artistic mental patients.

While Europeans have long been interested in the creativity of artists who live outside cultural and psychological norms, such artwork has not had a large following in the U.S. But that is changing now, as the work of the mentally ill, prisoners and the homeless is finding its way into the public spotlight. Recent "outsider" or "visionary art" exhibits in Boston, Baltimore, New York and elsewhere have gained increasing attention in art circles. And a proposed national museum of visionary art in Baltimore may create a national focus for the growing public interest.

Rebecca Puharich, who is spearheading the Baltimore effort, says that a "need and compulsion to create" gives the artwork a rare degree of "honesty and power." The Baltimore museum, which would be housed in a police station built in 1896, would be modeled on the Art Brut museum in Lausanne, Switzerland, founded by artist Jean Dubuffet. Art Brut is only one of about 12 such museums in Europe that display the artwork of various "outsiders."

Outsider art discarded: Puharich's project is partly motivated by a desire to save striking pieces of art that would otherwise be discarded. Outsiders create exciting art because, as Puharich says, "they fiercely followed their own inner instincts." With the deinstitutionalization of mental patients in the '70s, she says, much of this art, stored in back wards, was thrown out.

Puharich works to find visionary



Detail from "Marilyn's Coat": intricate needlework by a schizophrenic whose keepers claimed she did "nothing useful."

Outsider art seeks shelter

art even without a museum on hand to store it. Recently she was excited when she got word of a sighting of a homeless man and his "horse." She

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had been trying to track down the man, whom she knew of only through an eight-year-old newspaper clipping. The man had built the horse on wheels, hanging all his possessions on it, so he could roll it around after him.

Nearly all visionary art falls between the cracks. But one famous

piece is displayed in the Smithsonian Institution, created by Washington janitor James Hampton. He had collected odd scraps of tinfoil for years, fashioning them into a beautiful throne awaiting Christ's Second Coming. The throne was discovered only after Hampton's death, when his landlord went into the artist's apartment to clean.

Puharich connects her artistic interest with a broad political concern. "Art in a society is a very powerful expression," she says. "When you have a right, fascist government, free expression is very threatening." Hit-

ler, like other Europeans, saw a connection between the artistry of the mentally ill and that of respected artists. But, unlike Dr. Prinzhorn, Hitler didn't like what he saw and staged the infamous "Degenerate Art Show." The exhibit juxtaposed artwork by painters such as Klimt and Kokoschka alongside artwork of the mentally ill. The subtitles by the works read: "Dangerous to Look At," and "See, You Cannot Tell the Difference."

Rehabilitating perceptions: If Baltimore gives Puharich's organization, People Encouraging People, ap-

proval to go ahead on the project—and a decision is slated for this month—they will need to raise about \$5 million. Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream has agreed to waive franchise fees and help create a dairy restaurant, with decor and a menu in keeping with the museum's creative theme.

The planners hope the museum will help rehabilitate the public's perception of outsiders like the mentally ill. But at the same time the museum's organizers hope to provide a high visibility, high quality rehabilitative program that will also offer non-artists a way to be involved with the center. Visitors will come into contact with mentally ill people who will staff the museum's cafe, gift shop and janitorial department.

Some visitors to visionary art exhibits associate the emerging genre with art therapy, but there are important distinctions. While art therapists have worked with groups in institutions for years, visionary art is often unconnected to therapeutic sessions. Polish artist Bolek Greczynski, for example, works alongside mentally ill artists in New York City on a project called "Battlefields." Greczynski calls himself a co-creator, not an art therapist.

The artists work together on the large Battlefields project in a 20,000-square-foot studio. Different rooms are devoted to different themes. Greczynski, who has been involved in other social and political projects, says he and the artists become friends while spending a lot of time on the project. "If therapy is not your goal," says the co-creator, "it's the best therapy.... I ignore that side of their life."

With luck, projects like Battlefields and Puharich's museum will help counter the stereotype of the creative artist as the genius gone mad. Such projects would accentuate outsiders' positive, creative side—aspects of their personalities that are too often ignored. ■

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U.S. foreign policy still speaking in tongues

By Tom Engelhardt

Brent Scowcroft [the new National Security Council adviser] and Lawrence S. Eagleburger, who has been chosen for the key position of Deputy Secretary of State...are so close they often communicate in garbled Serbo-Croatian.

New York Times, Jan. 17, 1989

RUMORS OF A "LANGUAGE PANIC" at the State Department and the National Security Council by desperate jobholders and prospective appointees to the Bush foreign policy team led me to track down a teacher of the

rare language in question. Serban Dubrovnik, a lanky, mustachioed man in his early 60s, had something of a dazed look as he opened the door of his apartment in northwest Washington, D.C. "Oh, I thought you were another one of them," he said quietly in his heavily accented English.

I inquired curiously who they might be, and he admitted a bit hesitantly that for almost a week he had been under siege from members of Foggy Bottom desperate to pick up the basics of the language.

"You know," he said, seating me on his sofa and offering me bitter tea

in a handleless glass cup, "for years I barely made a living. Other than the odd professor curious to master Cyrillic documents or the liturgies of the church, why would anyone come to me? And, of course, what work there was was always in the written, never the spoken, language."

"You mean," I asked, a bit startled, "that the spoken language is not normally taught?"

He laughed a deep, throaty, remarkably melodic laugh. "It's almost a miracle to have two such speakers in your government! In my whole country you can go miles at a time without finding a single person who can speak the old language."

As we talked, I heard the constant ringing of his phone in the background and the whisper of voices recording onto his answering machine, begging, pleading, offering

perks for a brief half-hour of his time.

"Eight tones!" he said suddenly. "Imagine eight intonations! And modern Serbo-Croatian is difficult enough with only four. It takes months and months just to master

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the tones! And then the declensions, you can't begin to believe..." At this point he stopped himself. "You know, teachers of Garbled English are a dime a dozen, but other than Mr. Scowcroft and Mr. Eagleburger, I may be the only person in America to speak, no less teach, Garbled Serbo-Croatian!" He sighed. "What I would give for just half an hour of their time! Sometimes, living here, I grow so lonely to hear another voice speaking my language."

A quiet knock on the door caused

him to jump to his feet. "Quickly," he said and shooed me down the long corridor of his railroad apartment. "This," he added, opening a door, "is the service exit. I am so sorry, but the one knocking, he is important. No one must know he is here." And suddenly the door closed behind me with a sigh of its own.

A call later in the day to the Yugoslav embassy elicited only a terse "no comment," but an ambassador from a non-slavic country was willing to say, under a cloak of anonymity, "As far as we're concerned, America's foreign policy has long been conducted in Garbled Serbo-Croatian, so we can't believe this will be perceived as much of a breakthrough on a global scale." ■

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IN THE ARTS

By Pat Aufderheide

IT'S PRETTY CHEAP TO MAKE A VIDEO-cassette copy. But it's still expensive to produce what's on the videocassette, even if you're working in video instead of film. And right there is the rub for any consumers who may still be waiting for diversity to come to them through the wonders-of-technology pipeline.

But as *In These Times* has showcased (see *In These Times*, Dec. 14, 1988), it's possible to turn your home VCR into a window to alternatives, particularly if you can interest your school, university, community group or church in purchasing or renting tapes. Subsidy for production, through such agencies as the national endowments for the arts and humanities, helps lower the cost to some producers, who may pass on their breaks to buyers, and sometimes firms producing social-issue material are willing to discuss rental and even a break on the price for special needs. Check out each of the videos reviewed below, and grouped by issue, for individual prices.

Regional culture: Appalshop, a media center located in the small town of Whitesburg, Ky., has been defying the law of cultural homogenization for years. Of course, it's located in Appalachia, which has been defying that law for centuries now. Appalshop, which depends for a third of its funding on grants, has recently adopted a home-video pricing policy for some of its more popular films and videos. Appalshop started as a film workshop, but has branched out into, among other things, a regular TV show, *Headwaters*. The new releases reviewed below are only a sampling of Appalshop's offerings. Others of interest may be *Red Fox Second Hangin'*, a storytelling performance in which three storytellers recount the history of late 19th-century Appalachia through the remarkable adventures of a local healer; and *Lord and Father*, a documentary made by the son of a tobacco farmer about his conflicts with his father over inheriting a business and a way of life the son finds unjust. Write Appalshop, 306 Madison St., Whitesburg, KY 41858 for the catalogue.

Long Journey Home, an hour-long film documentary by Elizabeth Barrett, is the second (after *Strangers and Kin*) of an Appalachian history series, told from a sometimes acerbic grass-roots perspective that counters *Beverly Hillbillies* and "Li'l Abner" stereotypes. The film introduces us to Anndrena Belcher, one of the 3 million emigrants from Appalachia over the recent decades of joblessness. Anndrena, who left as a child, moves back and becomes a community organizer for others who want to return. Through Anndrena's story, the film flashes back to a history of Appalachia. It also tracks the Hardin family's return from Baltimore to a rural life that teeters on



Inside *Life Outside* has the bite of a Fassbinder film, the punch of an Almodóvar comedy, and the grit of video verité.

Home rules and the video alternatives

the edge of paralyzing poverty and balances itself with pride. Without undue romanticism, *Long Journey Home's* personal stories dramatize the contradictions of Appalachia today.

Harriette Simpson Arnow 1908-1986, a 35-minute homage by Herb E. Smith, introduces readers of *The Dollmaker* to its author, a funny, stubborn, loving and fiercely professional woman. The core of the film is a series of interviews with Arnow, whose tales of writing, both while running a family in wartime Detroit and in Appalachia on a farm that refused to yield a living, are both poignant and inspiring. Much of Arnow's own life went into her books, but she also emphasizes the imaginative side of her creative work.

On Our Own Land, the newest *Headwaters* documentary, is a half-hour program by Anne Johnson. It dramatizes an enduring conflict between the people who live on the land and strip miners who remove it. Strip miners have claimed the right to seize land in order to harvest the coal below it, through the once-widely-signed broadform deed—a legal document that ceded mineral rights. The program is both topical and enduring. It was shown weeks before Kentucky voters last November overwhelmingly passed a constitutional amendment revoking the validity of the deed. At the same time, it illustrates a conflict that won't go away, in which the texture of community is pitted against the drive toward profit at any cost. Scrupulously balanced, it lets coal

operators damn themselves with their own words.

The homeless: Homelessness in America (see *In These Times*, Sept. 28, 1988) exposes much more than those who huddle over grates. Two recent works use personal dramas to illuminate social questions.

The hour-long documentary *Promises to Keep* (Durrin Productions, 1748 Kalorama Rd. NW, Washington, DC 20009) profiles the

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problem of homelessness through the attempt by the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV) in Washington, D.C., to establish a shelter in an abandoned building. CCNV leader Mitch Snyder eventually went on a hunger strike to secure the shelter, pushing an unwilling Reagan administration to acknowledge the problem and confront it, at least in one building. Snyder is a spiky personality, and his sharp edges are not ignored in this understated but effective work by veteran documentarist Ginny Durrin (*The Aids Movie*, *Kevin's Story*, *Worker to Worker*). In counterpoint to Snyder's personalist attack on the problem is the federal government's behind-the-scenes bureaucratic manipulation to impede the effort. One Mitch Snyder can't change the housing crisis, the video implies, but inhumane policies create such confrontations.

Inside Life Outside, an hour-long video produced by Sachiko Hamada and Scott Sinkler (New Day Films, 853 Broadway, Suite 1210, New York, NY 10003), is a commandingly fas-

cinating record of the producers' two-and-a-half year acquaintance with a homeless group on New York's Lower East Side. It has the bite of a Fassbinder film, the punch of an Almodóvar comedy, and the grit of video verité. Delia and Mike, a homeless couple who lost custody of their five children as they scabbled for survival, constructed shantytown housing on a series of vacant lots. With help from the Center for Constitutional Rights, they sued the mayor and the city, claiming their makeshift housing as a protest against the city's housing policies.

The video plunges the viewer into the improvisational daily life of ingenious, temperamental and compassionate people, living under plastic and surrounded by junk. They work, fight with each other, illegally wire the shacks and open fire hyd-

rants to bathe in full view of the camera. They also watch TV. *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, seen by Delia and Mike as they sip wine from a bottle and worry about their court case, delivers all the audiovisual irony you need (there is no narration).

The camera work is competent, but the editing is superb, allowing a story without easy moral lessons to emerge. The ad-hoc family that grows up within this shantytown is no collection of saints. But you can't help being outraged that such wit, will and intelligence is being poured into bare survival at the bottom of the social heap.

Criminal justice: Facets Video (1517 W. Fullerton Ave., Chicago, IL 60614) has recovered and released on video a classic in persuasive documentary made in 1962 by William Friedkin (*The Exorcist*, *To Live and Die in L.A.*). *The People vs. Paul Crump* won Friedkin several awards and launched his career, but has not been seen for a generation. The film chronicles, by re-enactment, a payroll robbery and murder that resulted in the arrest of Paul Crump and four others, and delivers a sympathetic portrait of Paul Crump as he faced a sentence of death, then commuted to life imprisonment. (After long maintaining his innocence, he later confessed to the crime; he is still in prison). The film challenges easy assumptions about the death penalty, and raises chilling questions still relevant today about due process and the quality of the penal system. ■

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Mitch Snyder with Granny in *Promises to Keep*.