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Minor Matters of Major Importance:¹ On the Vicissitudes of Minor Painting

by John Chilver

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Among the more pungent painting shows of the 1990s was Jim Shaw's *Thrift Store Paintings*. First aired at Metro Pictures, New York in 1991,² this project was the fruit of Shaw's compulsive hoarding. On road trips he loved to trawl thrift store detritus. In an effort to constrain his addictive purchasing tendencies, Shaw adopted a rule that limited his spending to \$25 per store.³ Following years of peripatetic collecting, Shaw had amassed a collection from which the 1991 show was cherry-picked. Embracing amateur imagery that ranged across magic realism, sci-fi, psychedelia, dream scenes, visionary symbolism, alternative religions and the traumatic or banal everyday, the *Thrift Store Paintings* imparted tremendous pictorial energy and embodied constant joy in the act of image-making. They were, for the most part, a far cry from the paintings made by art-school-trained professionals. Shaw himself was, of course, exactly such an art-school-trained professional, though one who perhaps in spite of, or maybe because of his training, appreciated the intensity of the unknown and unsung artists that he gathered.

Much of the impact of the 1991 show had to do with Shaw's curation. This provided an overview which was inevitably of a different order to the vision of any one picture. It offered comparisons, juxtapositions and contrasts which exceeded and amplified the energies of individual works. In curating the show, Shaw was claiming a position of cultural prominence that may or may not have had a relation to the aspirations and ambitions of the works' authors. These considerations point towards a disparity between minor painting as individual enactment and exhibition-making as public display, which will be further examined below. Related to this is the intriguing issue of how amateur painting can have a very different sense of seriality (or iterability) to professional painting. In interviews Shaw has raised this issue:

[t]he other thing about the thrift store painter is that those three paintings that you find, or that one painting, might be the only thing [that] that artist ever did. And I produce a hundred pieces a year. So whatever creativity I have – even if I have greater talent as far as rendering or something – it's dissipated over the hundreds of pieces that I'm going to produce. Not so much with the thrift store artist. They might put a lot of heart and soul into that one painting that might not be perfectly painted.⁴

Professionalism in painting, whatever its shifting sands, thus always projects some horizon of long-termism and serial or at least sequential production. The thrift store painter, on the contrary, is at liberty to only ever make one work, if they so choose, and in that special sense, able to present themselves as an interrupted subject, in opposing directions: with painting as an interruption of habits previously lived; and subsequent life lived as the termination of the act of painting. The relationship between minor painting and the subject (not in the sense of subject-matter, but in the sense of the individual or person or seat of subjectivity) will return as a pressing question throughout what follows.

Shaw adapted and adopted aspects of the thrift store works in his own practice in subsequent years. This was a gradual process. Wanting amateur images that would narrate

the revelatory tales of an invented alternative religion he named O-ism, he began by writing suitable stories and tried to illustrate them like an untrained artist.⁵ Finding the initial results unsatisfactory, he then asked his assistants to execute the drawings and paintings. These, he felt, fared better. Later on, Shaw evolved his current painting practice, which is in part a skilled refinement of the faux visionary, faux amateur pictures that he developed in homage to the thrift store paintings.

In this roughly sketched outline of Jim Shaw's encounter with non-professional painting, we see many of the issues and contradictions that arise in the consideration of minor painting. Without rehearsing any ethical, political or art-critical judgments of Shaw's digestion of thrift store art, we can see that his example has been echoed throughout painting's histories. This is nothing new. Painters associated with the Situationist International and the COBRA group, like Asger Jorn and Karel Appel were mining elements of outsider and children's art and thrift store painting in the 1950s. Art world habitués like Ben Nicholson could in the 1930s both champion the work of a folk artist, the Cornish fisherman Alfred Wallis, and simultaneously borrow from Wallis' style, placing it in dialogue with Nicholson's knowingly sophisticated post-cubist vocabulary. Similarly, Frida Kahlo's approach to narrative and autobiographical pictures drew upon a knowledge of avant-garde collage and surrealism, but also surely owed much to the Roman Catholic tradition of *ex-voto* painting that remained pervasive in south and central America well into the twentieth century. According to the custom of *ex-voto* painting, following a person's recovery from injury or illness, a painting was placed in a church to thank a saint or divinity for the amelioration of their suffering. The paintings, which were commissioned from local painters, would narrate the circumstance of that plight, typically using a combination of image and text. It's hard to generalize a terrain for discussion across all of these examples. What matters for the present topic, however, is the structural relation between one context of sophisticated hybridizing intent and another of restricted social utility (as in the *ex-voto*, deemed useful within a community of Catholic believers). In all these cases an educated artist selects from a minor painting field in order to re-invent a style for a specialist art audience. And to stress again, this is to describe a phenomenon without yet critiquing or appraising it. Whether we regard those deployments of the minor in terms of cynicism, exploitative cultural privilege or innocent artistic influence is of course arguable, and arguable only through patient, case-by-case scrutiny.

The historical examples imply that minor painting has long been in active dialogue with modernism and even constitutive of modernism's vocabulary. Hence to pose a gulf between, for instance, European high modernism and minor painting would be misleading. The European avant-gardes from the 1880s onwards all drew significantly on the minor. One could argue that some older European art assimilated minor modes as far back as the 1710s, when Antoine Watteau adapted figures from the popular theatre of the *commedia dell'arte* in his paintings. But in most of these instances, the minor is re-absorbed into the body of the 'major' and, as it were, translated into the terms of its masterful idiom. That is one way of understanding Braque's and Picasso's hybridization of African sculpture with late Cézanne in cubism. Today, as the variety of texts in this volume attest, the terms of the debate now shift to an assertion of the value of the minor as such, irrespective of its influence upon or inspiration for the 'major': the underlying claim throughout the texts of this volume is that the minor voice is now to be appraised and valued in its own right.

The work of Sigrid Holmwood, whose text *The Peasant Paints: Minor Painting and Peasant Cosmopolitics* appears in this volume, offers another useful perspective on these

scenarios. Rather than absorbing elements of minor painting into her own sovereign painterly synthesis, as the artists listed above mostly did, Holmwood (re-)performs them somewhat in the mode of an experimental archaeologist, though more playfully than the term might suggest. As part of her practice, this entails the re-formulation and production of ancient peasant pigments. In her writing as well as through her artwork, Holmwood indicates that the scaffold for the edifice of European bourgeois individualism that was under construction in the early modern period went hand-in-hand with a neutralisation of extant peasant cultures both domestically, and, for the colonialising powers, in their newly acquired overseas territories. Hence the Mayan peasant of sixteenth-century central America is brought into proximity with the Swedish peasant of the eighteenth-century in Holmwood's extended painting practice. In tandem with the neutralisation of peasant cultures, she argues, the early modern period saw the proliferation, in mercantile hubs like sixteenth-century Antwerp, of fine paintings of peasant figures as marketable art commodities. Holmwood allows for some complexity in the interpretation of such peasant imagery made for non-peasant clients. But its overall import was, she maintains, to present the peasant as ill-mannered and inferior when set against the measure of bourgeois comportment, and as a fleshed commodity, in other words a saleable labour resource subject to the domination of the bourgeois gaze and purse.

The term minor painting is not at all easy to define. We could choose not to define it. Sharpness of definition, after all, is not essential for the currency of a term. Exemplifying a 'radial' concept that branches out in various directions without having an exclusive core meaning, we use words like 'vegetable' and 'friend' effectively without knowing exactly where they begin and end.⁶ Hence we might wish to be patient with the elasticities, opacities and ambiguities of 'minor painting.' But given that we are dedicating an issue of this journal to the topic, the definitional challenges may prove frustrating yet instructive. Starting out modestly, we might say minor painting is painting that is not valued, or not major or not of the mainstream. That implies a possible transition to a future in which it will be valued or will have entered the mainstream. It also assumes that the notion of the mainstream for painting is still credible in 2022, which seems doubtful. But if this is a credible designation, it means that minor painting is always liable to become something other, to become not minor. Like a radioactive isotope, it would then have a kind of cultural half-life beyond which it may move into a major key. In other words, minor painting is – on this definition – a mutable designation. Importantly, this also means that minor painting is not a style or type of content in painting at all, or at least, not in the way that, say, cubist painting is a style of painting. A cubist painting stays cubist throughout time, whether valued or not, whether canonical or not, whether preserved in the museum or cast out from the cultural memory stock. But a work of minor painting – on the definition based on not being valued or being distanced from a purported mainstream – ceases to be minor if it enters the museum collection, archive or canon. The danger then would be that the definition operates as a commentary on institutional power and has nothing much to tell us about what might be distinctive in the lives, ideas and feelings from which minor painting emerges.

To modify the approach then, consider another provisional definition: minor painting is painting made by untrained or non-professional artists. This definition has the advantage of being a viably empirical description. Unlike the previous attempt, this version is non-mutable and non-relational. Non-professional art does not cease being non-professional when it enters the archive, though it does at the point when the artist – assuming they are alive – starts to sell. This second attempt at definition points towards questions about training, art education and professionalism that are taken up more fully below. All painting that accrues cultural prominence and attracts broad cultural attention is painting that both inhabits metropolitan

spaces like museums and is widely distributed in reproduction. To that extent any such painting ends up becoming ‘major’ in the sense that it must enter the museum and the archive (meaning both the museum collections and archives and the discursive narratives of art). In other words, the admission to the museum and the archive renders it discursively ‘major.’ There is not yet any evident alternative path to finding cultural prominence and wide audiences for painting.

This insinuates another possible characteristic of minor painting: it is, or is likely be, oblivious to any audience; or to shun the attention of any audience. This avoidance of an audience is often what can make minor painting powerful and might guarantee its authenticity. In her thoughtfully provocative essay *Apart from Judgment*, included in this issue, the artist Helen Johnson argues for a productive whittling away of the fences that have conventionally separated art from art therapy, where the latter has allowed for explorations of painting in the absence of an anticipated audience. Whereas the trained professional painter anticipates the gaze of the audience to a degree that can make their work feel meretricious, the minor painter neither knows nor cares what an (art) audience expects. This subtraction of the audience from the artistic equation finds its *non plus ultra* in the heart-rending (and itself now paradoxically canonical) story of Henry Darger.⁷ Darger (1892-1973) died not only unknown and unrecognised, but apparently without anyone else even knowing that he had ever painted at all. Only by a miracle did the work survive, through the efforts of Darger’s Chicago landlords, Nathan and Kiyoko Lerner. Orphaned at a relatively young age and dubiously diagnosed as ‘feeble-minded’ in the official jargon of the time, Darger grew up in the early 1900s in the bleak juvenile institutions of the state of Illinois where he was probably abused and brutalised. He spent most of his adult life working as a janitor. His immense and extraordinary body of work, combining the massive text narrative *The Realms of the Unreal* with elaborately composed illustrative images, seems neither to have been shown nor even communicated to anyone else in Darger’s lifetime.⁸ What then is truly remarkable is the fearsome intensity, ingenuity and sheer visual complexity of the work. Darger was a profoundly withdrawn man who appears to have been forced in on himself, into a private and unshared world invented by his own imaginings. He was apparently entirely oblivious to any notion of an audience.⁹ Clearly Darger was so utterly immersed and invested in the work that his own engagement in and identifications¹⁰ within a lifelong act of world-making through writing and pictures – an engagement that we can infer to have been almost solipsistic in its subjective reach¹¹ – drove the work relentlessly.

Being entirely untrained, he had no technical knowledge to draw on. His solutions to picture-making problems were brilliant and extraordinarily resourceful.¹² He created figures by collaging and tracing from illustrated books, comics and newspapers and re-scaled his elements by working from enlarged Xerox copies made at a local drug store. These techniques, improvised around cheaply available images and materials, and sustained by Darger between 1920 and 1970, lend his images the sense of hybridized period style that looks anomalous from the point of view of conventional art histories: they have something of the quality of a Victorian illustrated children’s story as well as a pronounced flavour of pop and appropriation art. The latter aspect should not be surprising, since Darger’s technique of plundering mass culture imagery was very close to pop art, though of course Darger predated the latter by decades.

Another definitional feature of minor painting might be that it is *useful* painting. Useful in the precise sense of having a social effect *irrespective of the application of a concept of art*. *Ex-voto* painting has a use: that of a ritualised thanks-giving. Similarly, as

examined in Helen Johnson's essay in this volume, images painted in a therapeutic context are valued for their power to unblock subjective impasses. Johnson argues that this can be useful both for a patient needing to break constrictions on narratives of self, and for an artist needing to unlearn habits and dislodge internalised expectations. Sigrid Holmwood's instances of Swedish peasant painting too are examples of use: painting made useful as a means of marking and decorating a domestic hearth. As an aside, it's worth noting that here is a kind of painting parallel to the contemporary demand for useful art, which is most often answered by socially engaged and ecopolitical practices. As also in Matthew Higgs' remarks about Creative Growth art space in Oakland, California, in his interview with Andrew Hunt in this issue, we find a concerted attempt to link painting directly to social benefits in a context of care. These instances all furnish platforms at which the conventional expectations of inventive, interpretation-feeding contemporary art do not apply, and therefore other liberties and energies could emerge. However, the elephant in this seemingly unwall'd room remains the transition to the art context, where those expectations return more or less vengefully. One could refuse that transition. But without it, these painting modes remain proximate behavioural ensembles rather than transmissible enunciations, in the sense that the latter invoke an as yet unknown and, in principle, anonymous addressee (which is one way of describing what publicness in relation to an audience consists in). Much of the fascination of these painting practices has to do with how they delight the eye and mind of the art world habitué, who savours them as a fount of non-reified aesthetic innocence. We thereby stumble back towards something resembling the Jim Shaw thrift store scenario. But rather than focus on that stumbling, let's note instead that the discussion intriguingly points towards an inherent link between two key topics: on the one hand, obliviousness to the audience; on the other, the painting as a scene of use. This is logical enough. Where the value of the work lies in its use, as with the near solipsistic world-making that allowed Henry Darger to survive in a psychically hostile lifeworld, or with the painted marks and images that fuel dialogue in a therapeutic setting, there is no need for or redress to an audience. The standard contemporary art idea of the co-productive, contributive audience (AKA Duchamp's 'art coefficient') does not apply here. But then nor does the notion of the artwork, except to the degree that somebody external to the use-context introjects it.

In his wide-ranging and insightful introductory text for this volume, my co-editor Andrew Hunt describes the inclusion of minor painting practices in this year's Documenta 15 in Kassel. He also notes the "highly stylized exhibition design and installation of the majority of of Documenta 15." Though almost an aside in Hunt's discussion, this is highly significant. It testifies to the powers and styles of exhibition-making in a context of what Boris Groys called 'art power.' In other words, minor painting, as outlined in the generous breadth of voices in this volume, can work across many pictorial modes, though generally it is not something concerned with exhibition-making tactics. A key tension is then the following: the force and authenticity of minor painting lies in its obliviousness to art audiences and hierarchies of cultural capital; yet its visibility and accrual of value (in whatever terms, even in journals like this) is dependent on the embrace of art power and incorporation into institutional exhibition-making. Minor painting can open new paths for thought, feeling and empathy, but it cannot address this tension – at least, not without morphing into a different mode, becoming somehow reflexive and thereby ceasing to be minor. While we should be attuned to the liberties and energies that minor painting can evoke, embody and beget – which the current volume in large part celebrates – it is right, nonetheless, to approach it with some of the modesty that is its chief virtue. Minor painting can be many things, but an exit from institutional power is not one of them.

As overt affirmations of untrained and unschooled art, the phenomena of minor painting provoke fundamental questions about the role of art education. Moreover, given that this essay and its associated texts are published in the educational context of an academic journal, it would be an oversight, if not an evasion to duck those questions. According to one predictable critique, the advent of this journal issue itself might be said to promote the academic assimilation of anti-academic art. That points towards a broader question about the politics of discursive assimilation and recuperation, which I won't have time to do justice to in this text. Let's focus then on a question which is no less immense, which crudely put, amounts to this: What is the point of art education, if it turns out that unschooled artists are as good, if not better than schooled ones? To unpack some of the crudity of that question, we need to say more about what is meant by art education here. All artists are trained in some sense, even if that means self-trained. Training in its most generic and rudimentary connotation is a conscious (re-)shaping of habit in relation to an expectation of the desired consequences of that habit. In that sense an artist like Darger was indeed trained, though exclusively by himself. Likewise, in their different ways, all other 'unschooled' artists such as Francis Bacon, Jean Dubuffet, Susan Hiller, Dan Graham and so on.

No doubt the broad interest in non-professional painting today, alongside the interrogation of received canons, must and should provoke a wider re-imagining of art education. Thierry de Duve, reflecting on his failed attempt to establish a new art academy in France in the 1980s, voiced his dissatisfaction with all the received models of art education, including the ones he associated with deconstructivism, and the earlier version inherited from the Bauhaus, that kept faith in a universally distributed creativity that lay dormant up until its educational awakening. De Duve argued that the older academic notion of the *metier* aligned with talent constituted an ultimately more realistic model of art education than the Bauhaus-derived approach that came to align the notion of a material medium with universal creativity. The French term *metier* implies an assemblage of craft norms, knowledge of materials, iconographic norms and hierarchies, rules of thumb, tricks of the trade, acquisition of specialist jargon, modes of attention, norms of display and so forth. From the terrains of the current discussion, all of that might sound hideously conservative. But it bespeaks a culture in which a definable and transmissible culture of painting informed education. Contrasting the pre-modernist *metier* of painting with the modernist *medium* of painting, de Duve observed: "the *metier* gets *practised*, the *medium* gets *questioned*." ¹³ According to this condensed formulation, the core assumption of post-Bauhaus art education was that the medium was fundamental, but was studied not to be revered, but rather, to be challenged and (in a later vocabulary) deconstructed. De Duve registers his suspicion about the older, pre-modernist alignment of *metier* and talent, but he finds it ultimately less delusory than the Bauhaus approach. We may recoil at this prospect, with its stress on transmitting values rather than challenging them. But for people like me who teach painters at self-styled critical universities, there is the constant spectacle of students being taught to parse the latest despatches of hot theory while receiving little or no guidance on, say, the varieties of paint mediums. In a novel disjunction of theory and practice, these students glean theory cues from the critical institution and technical tips from YouTube tutorials. Is this a better painting education than the pre-modernist world of the *metier*? That's another essay. But the next crude and urgent question to be interjected is this: Is minor painting teachable? Or would the teaching smother its flame and render it a new kind of *metier*, which would thereby convert it into, again, a discursively major painting?

Whether de Duve's duality of medium versus *metier* is exhaustive of the educational possibilities is of course unlikely. But it is noteworthy that the modernist Bauhaus-derived

pedagogy is profoundly conflicted in relation to a minor posture. This is because in this context the post-Bauhaus stance appears torn between a commitment to universal creativity, which seeks merit in all comers regardless of talent, on the one hand (which would appear to endorse the emergence of minor figures, in a scenario where all are deemed creative); and an assertion of the priority of the medium which is to be challenged, regardless of individual investment in that medium, on the other (which would appear to mitigate against the unfettered scope of the minor).

The above discussion approaches the topic in terms of pedagogic content. There is, however, the less benign view that art academy education is essentially a networking procedure and that this – rather than any purported intellectual or artistic content – constitutes its actual social and professional role. Indeed, it is evident the world over, that this is a central function of art schools: everywhere one finds ambitious students seeking the support of well-connected professors who can serve as the sponsors of their embryonic careers.¹⁴ This has remained a historical constant, as true for many art academies today as it was for Joseph Beuys' class at Düsseldorf in the 1960s or Beaux Arts ateliers run by master professors in Paris of the 1800s. By contrast with the milieu of the unschooled artist, it's important to observe the inherent conservatism of the professional networking model. In other words, if the royal road to artistic success must pass through the valley of institutional power embodied in the professors, it is likely to eventuate in patterns that reproduce the expectations and preferences of that older generation of gatekeeper professors, notwithstanding individual cases of exceptional altruism or enlightenment. If this were the sole value of art school education, then the latter would be purely conservative and merely a reinforcer of hierarchy. Against this backdrop, minor painting arises as an authentically anti-hierarchical force of emancipation.

In a more idealistic mood, I propose that one basic value of art education ought to be its ability to expose the artist-student to what we might call the artistic other: to invite the student to tread a path that passes outside the known demands of self. That might be psychologically taxing: it might require a resilient cache of emotional and psychic resources in the student which cannot always be assumed to hold. Yet this exposure might be as banal as the discipline of learning a craft technique, which forces an extenuation beyond self in the sense that it forces an overcoming of subjective emotional thresholds; or as ordinary as entering prolonged discussions of another artist's preoccupations. The fruits of that exposure would be that the student thereby scouts out a broader palette of vocabularies, attitudes, postures and modes of subjectivity than would be available to the autodidact. Indeed, one frequent limitation among autodidact artists is their inability to develop over a lifetime: and whatever one thinks of the very different oeuvres of, for instance, Henry Darger and Francis Bacon, it's clear that neither was capable of artistic flexibility or reinvention. No doubt they did not value such qualities. That is both their artistic virtue and their loss. The operative assumptions here about the relationship between art and self remain undeveloped in these observations and I'll revisit them in moving the essay towards its ending.

As a theoretical touchstone, Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of minor literature may be a critical cliché but it is still illuminating at this point. Their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*¹⁵ has as a constant thread the theme of evading major styles. Minor literature here is not yet proposed as a general field of literary production. Instead, it is the result of a close and revelatory reading of Kafka. The Irishman Beckett, already estranged from his ancient tongue by the colonialist English language, elected to write in an unelaborated and levelled French prose register. Earlier and in a comparable move, Kafka, born as a Czech Jewish

citizen of a decaying Austro-Hungarian empire, elected to write not in Czech or Yiddish or Hebrew (contrary to the hopes of his Jewish intellectual friends), but in an affectively stunted German. For Deleuze and Guattari, these linguistic choices are strategies for disavowing major literary ambition or stylistic mastery. Their chapter titled ‘What is a minor literature?’ is highly instructive. If one imagines substituting the name of Darger for Kafka here, and minor painting for minor literature, the results are compelling. “[In] minor literature” Deleuze and Guattari write,

everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that “master” and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters.... It is literature that produces an active solidarity, in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. ¹⁶

It would be hard to assemble a more convincing and moving series of descriptors of Henry Darger’s art and its topologies. It’s worth working through these affinities. Darger’s techniques of image-recycling – as outlined above – do not endorse any sense of an individual statement “that could be separated from a collective enunciation” since the constant throng of recycled faces, bodies and registers always confronts us with the churn of demotic source material and communal experience. Darger’s “scarcity of talent” is liberating in exactly the way that Deleuze and Guattari describe. Moreover, in Darger’s book-cum-imaginary *The Realms of the Unreal*, the reign of the oppressive Glandelinian masters (militarized adult males) is explicitly battled against by the combatant Vivian Girls (ambiguously gendered children). As for the “writer [for which read ‘painter’]... in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community”, the phrasing is tailored for Darger. The writer (painter) thereby is enabled “to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness”: Darger specifically imagined a community of resurgent children fighting against the odds for their life and liberty against the violence of adults, depicted with their smart uniforms and powerful cavalry. It’s also worth developing the question of ambiguous gendering in the Vivian Girls. They are named as Vivian *Girls* and are generally depicted more or less naked but usually with penises. Interpretations vary on this point. Taking a cue from the Deleuze and Guattari citation here, what if we consider the Vivian Girls as a community who have not (yet) been instructed to classify sex differences? (As an aside, the summary catchphrase of Deleuzian doctrine that arguably remains its most profound – ‘difference precedes identity’ – is particularly telling here.) Isn’t that precisely an imagining of “another possible community” for Darger’s world, in which all liberation is viscerally grasped as a revolutionary struggle against sadistic child-enslavers?

Minor literature, as Deleuze and Guattari find that Kafka’s work demonstrates, is an attempt to evade hegemonic languages and styles, and their expectations, measures and norms. “How many people”, they ask,

today live in a language that is not their own. Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor

literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? ¹⁷

In connection to this, Josephine Berry's account of the American abstract painter Norman Lewis is especially evocative. Lewis emerged in the first cohort of Abstract Expressionists in New York, exhibiting frequently from the 1940s onwards, and appearing in some of the iconic group portrait photographs of the era, such as Max Yavno's portrait of painters in *Art Sessions at Studio 35, New York, April 1950*, which shows Lewis alongside the likes of Hans Hofmann, Alfred Barr, Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell. In Berry's narrative, which leans towards Harold Rosenberg's understanding of that movement, Abstract Expressionist painting of the early 1950s tried to confabulate painting as an activity that was stylized gesturally within a continuum of lived experience. Her claim is that Lewis, as the sole prominent black contributor to the movement at that time, could not engage with that (ecstatic or tragic) affirmation of lived experience in the same way that his white colleagues could. Berry gives particular attention to Lewis's black and white paintings of the later 1960s. In these paintings Lewis responded to the turmoil surrounding the ongoing civil rights movement. In his remarkable painting *Untitled (Alabama)*, 1967, Lewis wedges a triangle of white into a long, stretched horizontal black field. He crowds the triangle with calligraphic linear brush strokes that linger on the cusp of resolving into a melee of heads, figures and even Klansmen. Though this is not exactly Berry's argument, it seems that Lewis was unable to conform to Abstract Expressionist business-as-usual. Aligned to a style that was supposed to suture itself to individual life as expressive liberation via the gesture, Lewis instead found himself confronting the molten imagery of collective trauma that his gestures retrieved. As Berry rightly observes:

Lewis's painterly acts highlight their continuum with collective social being – there is no life of the artist to act through without the life of the collective. ¹⁸

Note again here, as with the earlier discussion in response to the Kafka book, the emphasis on the collective experience which dissolves the priority of the individual enunciation. In other words, the artist's performance of an individualized style of subjective mastery ceases to carry force in the face of an asserted collective. Rather than regard Norman Lewis's work as a fully voiced iteration of the Abstract Expressionist idiom, which then happened to be relatively neglected in its day, due to institutional (and no doubt also non-institutional) racism; it is perhaps more accurate and fertile (without underplaying the role of racism in the work's contexts of reception) to view his work as a minor re-rendering (in Deleuze and Guattari's sense) of the major style of Abstract Expressionism. If this reading of Lewis is plausible, it indicates that minor painting emerges not only from among the unschooled and untrained but also as a tactic of artists who have already arrived at a mastery of a major style, only to then reject and reorientate it in the guise of the minor.

Keeping in mind Lewis's pictorial commitment to the collective, as well as all the discussions that went before, it is helpful to consider Réda Bensmaïa's reflections on minor literature. "According to Deleuze and Guattari", Bensmaïa writes:

[another] principal characteristic of minor literature is that it is always political, not only in the sense in which one speaks of politics, but specifically in the sense in which further activity is no longer related to a unified instance, to an autonomous subjective substance that would be the origin of the choices we make, of the tastes we have, and of the life we lead. ¹⁹

What needs emphasising here is the sense of minor painting/literature creating a political articulation that exceeds subjectivity and exceeds the self: it is, to reiterate Bensmaïa, “no longer related... to an autonomous substance that would be the origin of the choices we make.” Darger’s case is complex in this regard. It seems that he birthed and inhabited his artistic world with a solipsistic fervour. Yet his imaginary realm stages his personal drama as a trauma of collective struggle. Thus, although initial impressions might suggest otherwise, the power of minor painting, as a version of the strength of the weak, lies not in being anchored to a notional self or subject, but rather in its movement beyond the subject and beyond the self.

NOTES

¹ The title is adapted from a phrase cited by Seamus Heaney: “I am reminded of a remark once made by an Irish diplomat with regard to the wording of a certain document: ‘This,’ he said, ‘is a minor point of major importance.’” Seamus Heaney *The Redress of Poetry*, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p66.

² First shown as Jim Shaw, ‘Thrift Store Paintings’, Metro Pictures, New York, 12 September – 12 October 1991; later at ICA London, 28 September – 5 November 2000.

³ Jim Shaw in conversation with Massimiliano Gioni, New Museum, New York, 10th October 2015:
<https://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/574/jim-shaw-in-conversation-with-massimiliano-gioni>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwR4RBko8U4>

⁴ Jim Shaw interviewed by Darsie Alexander, Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, 13th March 2011:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9RybP-s9fw>
<https://walkerart.org/calendar/2011/jim-shaw-with-darsie-alexander>
<https://walkerart.org/magazine/jim-shaw-with-darsie-alexander>

⁵ Jim Shaw, *O-ist Thrift Store Paintings*, Metro Pictures, New York, 2002.

⁶ Patricia S Churchland *Conscience: The Origins of Moral Intuition*, New York, Norton, 2019, p.17.

⁷ See *Henry Darger 1892-1973*, Paris, Editions Paris Musees, 2015.

⁸ Some commentators believe it is likely that Darger shared some of his early work with his friend – and possibly lover – William Schloeder, prior to 1930. But there is no evidence that the majority of the painted works – most of which were done after the writing of *In the Realms of the Unreal*, for which they served as illustrations – were ever shown to another human in Darger’s lifetime.

⁹ Michael Moon has tried to challenge the presumption of Darger’s artistic and psychological withdrawal or obliviousness to an imagined audience or readership. To this end, he emphasizes that there are significant moments in Darger’s text in which something near to rhetorical distance arises, when Darger names himself in his story and/or the is the object of discussion by characters, thereby introducing a gap between the narrative voice and his own persona as a participant in the events of the tale. Moon is convincing about the sophistication of Darger’s cultural and intellectual diet, and therefore in defeating the assumption that Darger was a folkish naif. But he does not undermine the assertion that Darger was oblivious to any notion of an audience – at least in any practical sense. Michael Moon *Darger’s Resources*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2012, p35-40.

¹⁰ Aside from the internal evidence of his writing and pictures, there is little to go on for an assessment of Darger's modes of imaginative engagement with his own work. Michael Moon compares Darger's writing with the juvenilia of the Brontës (including the sisters Charlotte, Emily, and Anne and especially the brother Branwell), for which role-playing enactment was an essential continuation of the writing process. Moon, *ibid.*, p43-70.

¹¹ Michael Moon emphasizes that Darger's practice was promiscuous, appropriationist and almost what would now be called fan fiction, with Darger cast as the delighted fan of the newly popular comic strips of the 1910s and 1920s, from which he endlessly borrowed and re-told. Moon thus argues that Darger's art should be understood as a participation in the popular culture of his day, rather than the isolation of a disconnected and self-sequestered hermit. Be that as it may – and following on from Moon's other point above about the probable role-playing participation in the illustrated narratives – it seems likely that Darger on his own did inhabit a multi-character performance world which the paintings fleshed out. According to Kiyoko Lerner, visitors to their building often remarked that Darger must be hosting many visitors, as they could hear so many voices in conversation coming from Darger's apartment: to which Lerner had to reply, that no, there were never any visitors to Darger's apartment and that the varied voices they were hearing were all his own ventriloquisms.

¹² See Michael Moon *Darger's Resources*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2012.

¹³ Thierry de Duve *When Form Has Become Attitude – and Beyond*, in Nicholas de Ville and Stephen Foster (eds.) *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context*, Southampton, John Hansard Gallery, 1994, p29, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Susan Hiller *An Artist Looks at Art Education*, in Nicholas de Ville and Stephen Foster (eds.) *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context*, Southampton, John Hansard Gallery, 1994, p105-114.

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

¹⁶ *Ibid* p17.

¹⁷ *Ibid* p19.

¹⁸ Josephine Berry *Art and (Bare) Life: A Biopolitical Inquiry*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2018, p206.

¹⁹ Réda Bensmaïa *Foreword*, translated by Terry Cochran, in Deleuze and Guattari *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p xviii.