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One thing is certain: commentaries on Art are the result of shifts in the economy.¹

Imagine it's 1970 in Chicago, Illinois. It has been rough going lately for the city's independent record labels—what with the corporate monolith of Motown and the recent buyouts of Chess and VeeJay—but a keen ear for talent has kept Brunswick competitive. All across the country "Oh, Girl," the latest hit by their biggest stars, the Chi-Lites, is in heavy rotation. The song is a doleful ballad about a man who thought that the best way to win affection was to behave how others wanted him to behave, but by doing so loses not only his lover but himself. It could be a metaphor for any activity whose primary motivation is the approval of others, and the crises that set in when that approval invariably wanes. It is a song about the perils of peer pressure.

In an apartment on the other side of town an old man pauses, puts down his pencil, and fiddles with one of the two knobs on the little plastic radio half-buried on his kitchen table. The man, Henry Darger, smiles. Not because it's the fourth time he's heard the song today, nor because the song is about girls, a subject with which he is more than a little obsessed. He smiles because a certain section of the lyrics keeps sticking in his mind: "So I tried to be hip, and think like the crowd / but not even the crowd can help me know. Oh girl, tell me, what am I gonna do?" Having worked alone for almost 50 years on a 15,000 page novel, hand illustrated with hundreds of pencil and ink drawings, he has no idea what that dilemma would be like.

Perhaps by now you have heard about Henry Darger, the orphaned hospital janitor who died in 1973 and whose exhibition of drawings at the Museum of American Folk was the most delightful show in New York this past year. Not because the drawings are freaky, or cool, or weird, or "pure," or even topical, but because they are so sublime as to defy description. Even though it is obvious that the story has informed the making of his images, you don't really need to know what the story is, because their beauty is enough, enough.

The drawings—epic, mural-sized watercolors and collages detailing the carnage, flight, retaliation and refuge of an army of pre-pubescent women known as the Vivian Girls—are most noteworthy for their compositional grandeur and brooding color schemes. Imagine the Prussian Army and a majorette team engaged in hand-to-hand combat across a vast plain of chrysanthemums and cypress trees. In many scenes the girls, most of whom are naked and have penises, are kicking ass. This isn't so weird—certainly no more sensational than passages in the Bible or the Brothers Grimm. (In fact, my favorite drawing in the show was a rather modest depiction of the Vivian Girls trying to escape by rolling themselves up in sections of carpet.) What is impressive in Darger's work is his formal inventiveness, the extent to which he was able to turn his practical limitations into such sublime, operatic complexity, and how that accomplishment might skew our perceptions of recent art.

Unable to draw very well (or at least to his own liking), Darger traced much of his imagery from advertisements and coloring books, at first working from a kind of inventory of stenciled figures and body parts that he would mix and match according to scale. In later works, after he had discovered the process of photo-enlarging at his corner drugstore, mechanical reproduction becomes strikingly evident. Thus his images are not propped up by commentaries on authorship, nor are they defined by mere banal

repetition: rather, they are flush with the opulent free enterprise of his own ruthless economy. One is always aware of Darger's fundamental tools—a cloud shape, a certain sienna-colored pot of paint—but never so much that they get in the way. Clearly Darger contrived all the details of his images as quickly he could, not so he could rush to the corner gallery before Gary Grad School got there but so he could concentrate and languish on the pictures themselves. However lean his wallet or limited his skills, Darger spent his time and effort to the fullest.

This expenditure becomes all the more impressive when we realize that Darger was only doing it for himself. These days, economists can assess the virtues of art as aptly as historians and critics, and I suspect that the sheer sense of surplus in Darger's drawings is what makes them so welcome now. Given his obviously destitute life and his apparent disinterest in any public recognition, it seems fitting that Adam Smith, ole Free Market himself, might have best accounted for Darger's particular type of genius. 'Every individual' he wrote, 'intends only his own gain. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.' Darger provided us with a level of intensity few trained professionals can muster without ever requiring viewers to complete the meaning of his work. Insider, outsider or upside-downer, Darger's greatness was his ability to be ignored.

Note

1. Marcel Broodthaers, 'To be bien pensant . . . or not to be. To be blind,' in *Le Privilège de l'Art*, Oxford, Museum of Modern Art (April—June, 1975)