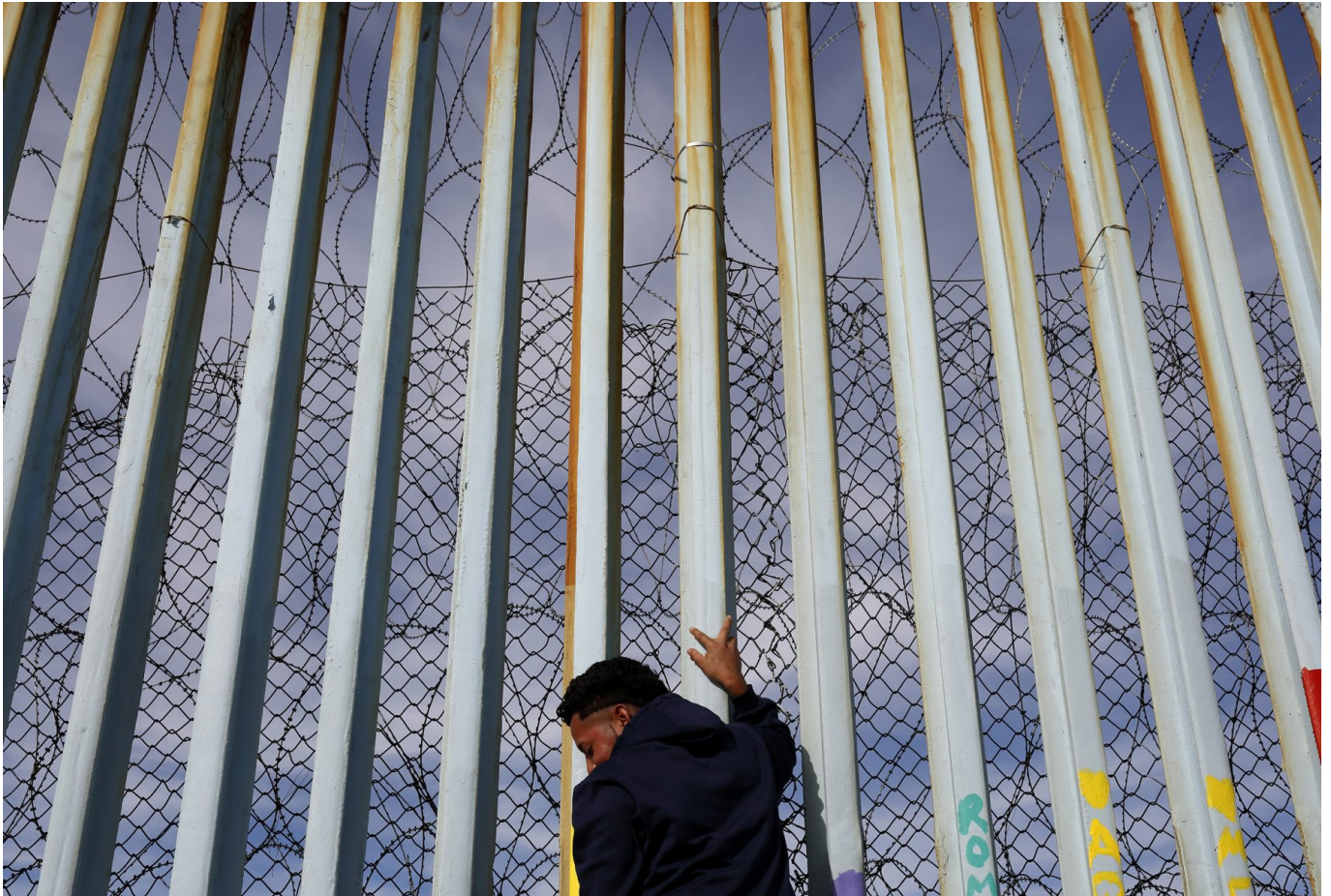


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## The Ins and Outs of Insiders and Outsiders



A man holds on to the border wall along the beach in Tijuana, Mexico. AP Photo/Gregory Bull

By Allan Schwartzman

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Cultures have, throughout history, created stability by uniting around commonalities of kinship, values or possessions. Gathering around a shared identity reinforces that which binds them and is a form of protection against outsiders, who are often cast as enemies (whether real or imagined). Walls are built to fortify unity; to safeguard and perpetuate the idea of the common good.

In modern times, where prosperity occurs through secure trade between nations, the outsider became a hero; a safe renegade rejecting conformity for the sake of the self. This outsider had a voice that might eventually lead others. In art, outsiders often conveyed marks or insights into new, brilliant and lasting form.

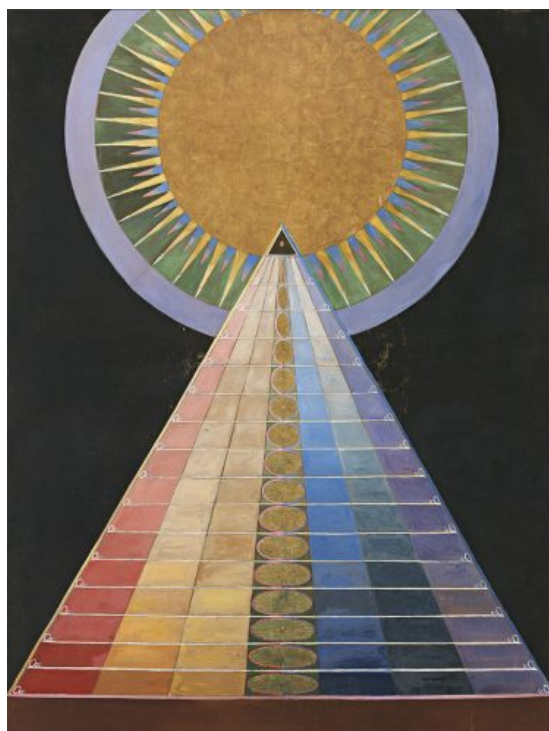
The outsider has occupied a uniquely venerated position in modern art because it embodies a kind of authenticity in which voice trumps style. The outsider keeps insiders honest. There has hardly been a 20<sup>th</sup>-century movement that did not look outside itself for content, inspiration and validation. Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism: each looked to artists and image-

makers beyond Western conventions (maybe that, simply, is what defines the outsider) for imagery, spirit and kindred souls.

Sometimes artists (like Gauguin) check out of the bourgeoisie, because outsiders tend to become absorbed once they have been inside. Often, artists of renegade spirit become revered insiders—whom each subsequent generation of alienated outsiders both emulates and tries to vanquish.

Even in popular culture, the outsider is often the greatest innovator. Could rock and roll even exist without the black “outsiders” whose music (like their lives) embodied the blues—and was emulated by alienated white youth?

Artists’ and collectors’ embrace of the art of outsiders can be seen as ennobling or racist—what once appeared inspirational can also feel cannibalistic. I guess this comes down to the difference between curiosity and grandiosity; explorers and conquerors; exotica and spoils; missions and massacres, and whether those differentiations aren’t so much lines as porous membranes.



Hilma af Klint, *Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece (Grupp X, nr 1, Altarbild)*, (1915). The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm. Photo: Albin Dahlström, the Moderna Museet, Stockholm

I don't think the outsider exists in art anymore. [The Guggenheim Museum's Hilma af Klint retrospective](#) (until 23 April) and the [National Gallery's "Outliers and American Vanguard Art"](#) exhibition make clear that the difference between outside and inside is just a matter of time. Today, art is an insider's game.

Where the margins were once the uncharted realms of visionaries, they are becoming the darkening alleys of hasty enshrinement and investment. The art market has gained so much momentum because of broad buy-in.

But art collecting is at its best when it has a hefty dose of the outsider's view. Otherwise, all you would see is the same thing everywhere; and many of us are not ready to accept the possibility that art has become so well tamed that it is little more than a parody of its own domestication.

Part of the crisis in art today, if one sees contemporary art as in crisis, is its dependability. Markets like such steadiness but art needs space to be messy and unsettling, to fail and smell.

There's not much that remains outside to refuel the engines of invention and to challenge conventions of taste. Or maybe art is ready to rest behind a wall, in a deep hibernation which might be broken only by a groundswell of indignation—which walls eventually stir in individuals, who need to be unconfined to breathe.

