



## Poem, The Paradox of The Poet

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*Translated from the original Turkish.*

I have a friend named Özgür, which means "Free" in Turkish. He spent nearly all of his twenties behind bars for theft and assault. His father is a retired policeman, and his mother is a lunatic who beckons people to her religion of fraternity! In the initial months of his incarceration, "Free" joined a group of religious prisoners and learned to recite the Quran in Arabic. Though he didn't speak Arabic, like many in Turkey, he became engrossed, reciting it deeply into the night. Carried away by the profound meanings he projected onto the unfamiliar sounds, he sought out a Turkish translation of the Quran in the prison library to delve deeper into his delirium. Accessing the true meanings of the words broke the spell, leaving him uninspired by the empty words that were far from what he had imagined. Disappointed and angry with himself, he thought, "Was this the nonsense I was caught up in?" He abandoned the Quran but remained in the library, spending all his "free" time in the prison among the books. He read as he had never done before, having never encountered books in the criminal slums of his upbringing. As he read, it seemed a new world was opening before him, as if the world he thought he knew was ending. The more he read, the more he wrote—poetry, in particular. Yes, he entered prison as a thief and left as a poet. Our guy "Free", whose father is a retired police officer and whose mother is a fraternity lunatic, himself now a convicted former thief and a new poet. I called him a few days ago and asked if he would be interested in co-writing this essay with me on art and the mafia. He responded, "I don't understand art. I know nothing about the mafia. I'm working on a poem that I believe could save my life. If I fail, I'll continue to struggle, working in heavy jobs without insurance for the rest of my life."

In 2007, universities in France were boycotting classes to protest the education reforms. I was studying philosophy at a political university, co-founded by Foucault, in a suburb of Paris. I participated in protests during the day and visited art exhibitions in the afternoon. One day, I stumbled upon a strange exhibition that might even change my relationship with art, perhaps even with life. A young man, Jeannot, after his abusive father's suicide, joined the Algerian War as a paratrooper, and when the war shattered his mental health, he

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returned home and, along with his mother and sister, shut themselves away from the world in their family home until the end of their lives. Years later, Jeannot buried his deceased mother under the internal stairs of their two-story house. A few months later, he died at the age of 33 from malnutrition. After his sister's death, a psychiatrist discovered that Jeannot had carved a text of 15 square meters and 80 lines into the wooden floor of their house with a nail. The exhibition I encountered under the bright spotlights in a commercial gallery on the bustling, lit streets of Paris consisted of wall-sized, framed photographs of these wooden planks onto which Jeannot had carved his oscillating thoughts between war, religion criticism, and paranoia. The exhibition captivated and disturbed me for a long time. It was not Jeannot's life story that occupied my mind or the overwhelming presence of the planks that embodied his bizarre thoughts, but the contrast created by the place and manner in which they were displayed. They had dragged back the body of a person who had escaped and hidden, and sold tickets to display it. For weeks, I wrote dark and unrequited letters about the art market to my friends. Some friends remember receiving a strange letter from me, but they either could not understand what I wrote or forgot about it. Years later, I learned that Jeannot's Planks had been recognized as an example of a kind of artistic creation known as Art Brut (Raw Art). Raw Art typically represents artistic works produced by others who are generally left out of the art world and even pushed to the margins of social life. These works express unusual subjects through unusual perspectives and entirely original methods due to their creator's otherness. From my first encounter with

such creations, the striking presence of the works and the incongruity of their display methods disturbed me, so over time I became more interested in these types of creations and their presentations, learning that there is a niche art market called Outsider Art, but the operational logic of this market is not much different from the mainstream art market. That is, a relatively smaller market where the leading actors of the market incessantly argue over what is valuable, how, and why, where things are bought and sold, change hands.

Among the most famous names in such creations, Henry Darger, a half-sane hospital janitor who lived alone in a small room in California for 40 years, left behind thousands of pages of a fantasy novel and hundreds of massive drawings. Darger's works are unique and startling both in content and technique because his relationship with not only the art world but also the world at large was limited. After Darger's death, the landlord who found

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his works in his single-room home sold them at auction for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Today, it is possible to find books on Darger's life and art worth several hundred or even thousands of dollars. Like the books and articles written on Raw Art works, the majority of these, even those that critique their relationship with the market, are for sale; they are commercial, meaning even academic references to them cost money. What to do, market pressure!

Recently, advancing digital technologies have paved the way for more democratic artistic production, a diverse appreciation of art, and a new world. It's a new world similar to the old one, where stars who shine on the red carpet, well-sold, successful projects sponsored by global brands make millions of dollars, while the majority scrape by uninsured, struggling just to be a part of it as long as they can claw their way through. In this world, where money and prestige talk, under the bright lights, including the people within it, let's not say everything, but many things are for sale, where securing one's place costs somehow selling oneself, an entertainment industry that creates something from nothing, now defines art.

Raw art and digital art, both now under the control of the art mafia, who dictate to people what to like and what not to like, just as in the conventional art industry. This art mafia has even more corpses than the original Sicilian mafia or derivatives like the Japanese and Russian mafias. Beyond physically driving artists to suicide, it leads them to professional suicide, making artists abandon art or killing the audience alone and hopeless with market logic by overshadowing the art's ability to provide a meaningful world. In this mafia regime that Darger and Jeannot, like "Free", were enslaved to, how can a poem save a poet's life? It cannot. A poem creates a new world, opens up another world before a person, but it cannot save a poet's life. Today, an artist, namely a poet, must live to create and expected to die in order to live.