

This Section of *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* appears in each issue of the Journal and is dedicated to all forms of creative production born of an intimate and individual urge, often secretive, unbound from the conventional art system rules. Through short descriptions of the Outsider art work of prominent artists and new protagonists often hosted in community mental health services, this section intends to investigate the latest developments of the contemporary art scene, where the distances between the edge and the center are becoming more and more vague.

Carole Tansella, *Section Editor*

## Walla – artist of the Universe

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*International exhibitions, Verein der Freunde des Hauses der Künstler in Gugging, Maria Gugging, NÖ, Austria*

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Figure 1. August Walla, 1998.

August Walla was born in Klosterneuburg, Austria, in 1936. During the Nazi era his mother raised him as a girl, hoping to spare her son being drafted into war one day. Later he became aware of his male identity. Looking back on his childhood, he decided that the Russian occupants must have operated on him, turning him into a 'Russian boy'. So he used the swastika

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Figure 2. August Walla's room in Gugging.

as symbol of being female and hammer and sickle, 'communism', or 'Russian' for being male.

For many years Walla lived in a small apartment together with his mother, during summer in a cottage on the Danube's floodplain a finally, after they lost their apartment in a dilapidated casern. In 1983, Leo

Navratil and I offered him and his mother a room at the *Centre for Art-Psychotherapy*, since 1986 *House of Artists in Gugging*. Walla lived and worked there until his death in 2001.

'First there was the *written word*' would fit to his world. He did not speak much. He communicated by writing everything he wanted to tell on his objects, streets and walls. And his art works brim over with words, emblems and symbols. They are often centred on his self-made polytheist philosophy: a mysterious world populated by spirits with the prospect of a far-away Universe-End-Land, which may be either the realm of the dead, paradise, limbo or the great nothingness. The Universe-End-Land marks the transition to that successive cosmos. The gods residing there have names such as Kappar (god of ghosts), Seiril, Sararill, Satttus and are akin to the gods venerated by humans. Walla considered himself a Christian.

Wherever he went, he always had pencils and paint on him (and also salt, pepper, vinegar and oil). He created about 3000 drawings and 100 large canvases and produced etchings, which show his precise, prominent stroke most pronouncedly. The number of his graffiti on streets, walls, trees and on any standing object in his surrounding is not known. He tried to leave his traps everywhere, from the dome in Pisa to high mountain pass in Switzerland.

Walla also wrote innumerable letters. His communication with the 'outside' world was in writing as long as his mother was alive. Every single one of his letters is written in his personal 'typeface', a calligraphic work of art, a gem from Walla's Universe. Also when he was writing with his writing machine the letters had individual forms and colours, sometimes mixed with hand writings. Walla also used dictionaries innumerable languages (from Russian to Hebrew, from Indonesian to Spanish or Latin) to translate and construct words in his particular way. He invented many neologisms, which he integrated into his writing.

August Walla collected and hoarded all kinds of junk and material. He painted and inscribed objects, trees and roads. In his little allotment garden, he had a growing collection of bulky waste items. He inscribed them in words, which were difficult to understand for others, hung them from trees or simply stacked them.

In Gugging, he completely painted the walls and ceiling of his room as well as large parts of the House. But not just one time, the walls he painted over and over that many layers are hidden below the

last visible one. Gods, heroes, ghosts, politicians, kings and bishops, holy people and devils, trees and animals you can find in his paintings of the room.

Walla built objects, mostly of tin or wood, he used every material he found. Every book got a self-made box and he also did needlework, making flags and symbols, which he mounted on trees and fences.

He let himself be photographed as he was taking photographs. He carried his mysterious symbolism into the forest, hid it behind electric cabinets, and exposed it on the road – a blend of installation, Land Art and graffiti. And of all of his action he took photos. But not only as records of his other kind of art, he made photography to an independent technic for producing art.

Actually, one life was not enough for Walla. When he died in 2001, he had already become a world-renowned Art Brut artist.

Walla's work was exhibited around the globe, including the Museum of Modern Art, Vienna; Collection de l'art brut, Lausanne; Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau; Museum Bochum; Heidelberger Kunstverein; Museum Gugging; County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo; American Visionary Museum, Baltimore; Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt; The Versi Art Museum, Yongin, South Korea.

#### About the author

**Johann Feilacher** is an artistic Director of the Gugging Museum, one of the world's first and most important creative studios for artists with disabilities; curator of international art exhibitions; sculptor and psychiatrist. In 1986 when he became the Director of the Zentrum für Kunst-Psychotherapie in Gugging, he changed the name of the Centre to House of Artists, signalling the separation between the art world and the medical world. In 2006, he founded the Museum Gugging, which displays a semi-permanent collection of artworks by the Gugging artists, as well as by international Art Brut artist. The Museum today is part of the official Lower Austrian museum network, the Niederösterreichische Museumsbetriebsgesellschaft. Author of numerous books and articles about Art Brut and Outsider Art, Feilacher as sculptor is represented in sculpture parks through the USA and Europe.

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