



### CREATIVITY AND ART: NEUROSCIENTIFIC AND PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES

by Andreas Steck and Barbara Steck  
EPFL Press, 2021  
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Andreas Steck is a Swiss professor of neurology, and his co-author and partner, Barbara Steck, a psychoanalyst and lecturer in child and adolescent psychiatry, yet this book is that rare thing – a scientifically grounded study that does not seek to explain art. It might be situated in a lineage deriving from Hans Prinzhorn – who combined art history and psychiatry and become a psychotherapist – but even more relevant is Andreas Steck's father, Hans Steck, professor of psychiatry at the University of Lausanne, who played a major role in discovering the work of **Aloïse Corbaz** at the psychiatric hospital in Cery. It was Hans Steck who encouraged his supervisee, Jacqueline Porret-Forel, to devote her medical thesis to Corbaz's work and, as a result, Andreas Steck was exposed to *art brut* early on.

In the book, neuroscience and the psychoanalysis are included sensitively as part of a complex panorama of brain processes, life histories and emotional worlds. The volume's 20 chapters range from "Hierarchies of Consciousness" and "The Visual Brain" to "Music," "Grief" and "Artists' Expressions of their Childhood Experiences" – but ultimately the discussion focuses on artists' testimonies about their creative experiences. The sections of particular interest to readers of *Raw Vision* will be those on "Creativity and Psychopathology" and "Psychopathological Art and Modern Art". The latter contains lengthy descriptions of **Adolf Wölfli** and Corbaz, taking off from the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke's judgment that "The Wölfli case will help us some day to gain



photo: Horace Perry

new insights about the origins of creativity."

If any general idea emerges in the book, it concerns the role of loss in galvanising artistic responses. Thus, in Wölfli's case they note how early in his hospitalisation at Waldau he would cry for hours in a corner thinking about his dead mother, while at times Corbaz was agitated, "seized by states of erotic excitement involving obscene speech, aggressiveness and physical violence." However, Wölfli became calmer when drawing, composing and writing poems, and Corbaz appeared less anxious when working quickly on her art, "often mixing the colour of her crayon with saliva".

These portraits sit alongside numerous other vignettes of artists, composers and writers – including **Vincent Van Gogh**, **Camille Claudel** and **Edvard Munch** – struggling to cope with illness, grief or trauma, and responding creatively. On this front, they draw on psychoanalyst Hannah Segal's insight that, "It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments... it is then that we must recreate our world anew".

**MATT FFYTCHÉ**

### BILL TRAYLOR: CHASING GHOSTS

Directed by Jeffrey Wolf  
Breakaway Films, 2021

Like so many others, filmmaker Jeffrey Wolf first encountered the work of Bill Traylor (1853–1949) in the iconic 1982 exhibition, "Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980". Since that time Traylor's work has become increasingly well known and celebrated as a key oeuvre in twentieth-century American art. His imagery stands witness to African-American experience through slavery and Jim Crow, in a visual language that is both formally direct and conceptually sophisticated and multilayered. Yet Traylor came to art late, after a lifetime of physically

demanding work, mostly on farms in the rural south. He became, for a while, a feature on Monroe Street, the prosperous busy thoroughfare in the traditionally Black neighbourhood of Montgomery, Alabama, where he could be found perched in front of a store drawing assiduously. During his lifetime, his art was neither well known nor widely valued, although a large collection was purchased over the course of a few years by Charles and Blanche Shannon which now constitutes the largest part of Traylor's surviving output.

In 75 minutes, *Bill Traylor: Chasing Ghosts* brilliantly evokes an individual life lived meaningfully, and the times and culture that Traylor and his family inhabited and negotiated. It is a story of the mundane and also the transformative possibilities of creativity. At the film's core is a notion that Traylor's art collectively represents a visual history of period and place; at once personal, objective, incisive and witty. Wolf's task, then, was to help these artworks to reveal their content through the documentary medium without losing sight of their centrality, or that of their creator. Around the ever-present fulcrum of Traylor's artworks, Wolf therefore sets in motion a carefully chosen comparative collage of historical photographic stills, stock moving image footage and even jazz dance, overlaid with an almost omnipresent soundtrack of jazz, blues and southern folk music. The inevitable talking heads sequences (including Traylor descendants, artists, scholars, and actors speaking the written words of past figures) are refreshingly short on the didactic and mostly richly conversational, so that they rarely jar. Everything spins around and back to Traylor and his art in a way that feels completely real and natural. This is a must-see film for anyone interested in art and the African-American culture and history since the mid nineteenth century.

**COLIN RHODES**