Outside(r) Ornamentation: Domestic Outdoor Spaces in Outsider Art

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Abstract

This study examines outsider art environments created by George Cockayne, Fred Smith, and Reverend Howard Finster, arguing that these domestic outdoor installations function as intentional forms of vernacular public art rather than isolated "raw" expression. Through the analysis of Cockayne Farm, Wisconsin Concrete Park, and Paradise Garden, the study demonstrates how these artists merge sculpture, ornamentation, horticulture, and architecture to construct narrative spaces shaped by community relationships, local histories, and accessible visual languages. Challenging longstanding assumptions about outsider art's detachment from culture, the paper positions these environments as socially engaged, intergenerational sites of storytelling, preservation, and spiritual teaching. Ultimately, it argues that outsider art environments transform private outdoor environments into public-facing spatial experiences that reshape viewer perception and engagement.

Biography

Moira Power (she/her/elle) is an artist, curator, and art historian practicing on unceded Algonquin Territory in Ottawa. Her research and creative work examine meaning-making through both creation and curation, with particular attention to the limitations of art historical categorization. She investigates how Western artistic traditions shape the production, reception, and interpretation of contemporary art, and how lived experience informs visual culture. Through writing, curatorial projects, and artistic practice, she contributes to broader conversations about accessibility, classification, and the disciplinary boundaries that structure the study and appreciation of art.

For the innocent eye sees things much more clearly when it does not look outwards through the naïve peephole – Roger Cardinal[1]

Efforts to define outsider art have been marked by inaccuracies and inconsistencies. Jean Dubuffet's influential, yet contradictory notion of *Art brut* and Roger Cardinal's reconfiguration of this notion both emphasize outsider art as "raw" expression created in isolation, untainted by culture. While outsider artists are often described as working outside the art historical canon without formal training, art cannot truly be devoid of culture, no matter how appealing such a notion might be to someone who perceives "Our culture [as] an ill-fitting coat."[2] Despite Dubuffet's fantasy of a "raw" art form, closer examination reveals that many outsider artists create with the intention of fostering community and sharing their perceptions of the world.

This intention becomes especially evident in large-scale projects that blur the boundaries of traditional fine art categories. Outsider art environments, often constructed in domestic outdoor spaces such as yards and gardens, merge sculpture, painting, topiary, and architecture into dynamic installations. These environments, marginalized or misunderstood by art history, reflect another overlooked practice: ornamental horticulture. Like outsider art, ornamental horticulture and lawn ornamentation have arguably been excluded from serious art historical consideration, dismissed as decorative or amateur, and confined to footnotes in architectural history. When examined alongside outsider art, however, the two reveal striking parallels in their hybridity, accessibility, and resistance to rigid categorization. Both practices, particularly when paired together, challenge what we consider to be "art" by transforming vernacular spaces into sites of aesthetic and social meaning.

Building on the concept of "art environments," this paper examines the work of outsider artists George Cockayne (1906–1986), Fred Smith (1886–1976), and Reverend Howard Finster (1916–2001), whose use of sculptural ornamentation transforms domestic outdoor spaces into distinct art environments. Intentionally created to spark dialogue, each element of these outsider art environments is imbued with narrative potential that invites examination in situ as part of a unique spatial experience. By exploring the outsider art environments known as *Cockayne Farm* (c. 1940–1986), *Wisconsin Concrete Park* (1948–1964), and *Paradise Garden* (1961–2001), I argue the necessity of considering these spaces as distinct art forms created to foster intergenerational and communal connections.

[1] Roger Cardinal, "Scottie Wilson," in *Outsider Art*, (London: Studio Vista, 1972), 74.

[2] Jean Dubuffet et al., "Anticultural Positions," in *Jean Dubuffet: Towards an Alternative Reality*, ed. Marc Glimcher, 1st ed. (New York, New York: Pace Publications, Inc., 1987), 127.

Vernacular Artistic Display

While George Cockayne, Fred Smith, and Rev. Howard Finster have each been categorized as folk artists, my use of the term outsider is intentional. As John Beardsley notes, folk art typically subordinates individual creativity to collective culture, whereas outsider art is characterized by intensity or obsession, and an indifference to normative artistic standards.[3] For the purposes of this paper, I find little necessity in attempting to differentiate between these two classifications, nor do I intend to strip these artists of their folk art status. Rather, I employ *outsider* as an encompassing term to refer to self-taught artists working beyond so-called "fine art" traditions, including visionary artists like Finster. Therefore, the term *outsider art environment* is used to describe works created outdoors and beyond conventional aesthetic classification. While classification of any kind can be problematic—particularly in the case of outsider art without the artist's consent—the intention here is to highlight the contributions of self-taught artists working outside fine art categorization, rather than pointing to any form of "raw" expression.

These artists' works were not created in a cultural vacuum and find themselves situated within a long history of artistic practices, which is often understood as a folk art trait. However, the practices I refer to here are less about aesthetic quality and more about vernacular display. In North America, domestic outdoor spaces like front yards and gardens are among the most common forms of public art, albeit on private property. Decorating the front yard or walkway of a home so it is visible to the street, whether intentional or not, demonstrates the owners' sentiments towards the public. Seasonal lawn ornamentation, such as sculpture or topiary, can serve as a means of communication. On Halloween, for example, if a yard is decorated with cobwebs and jack-o'-lanterns, it often signals to trick-or-treaters that the homeowner is participating in the tradition of handing out candy to the public on the 31st of October. If there are no decorations in sight and the lights are turned off in front of the home, this signals to passersby that this house should be skipped and left alone. While this example is blatant in its methods of community communication, any form of public ornamentation can tell us something about those who dwell there.

As visual culture theorist Colleen Josephine Sheehy explains,

> Yards in general serve as communal aesthetic expressions…spring[ing] from a long cultural history of the front yard as public-oriented space. As it developed in the United States, the front yard functioned as a form of public space in its orientation to outsiders, as

[3] John Beardsley, "Imagining the Outsider," in *Vernacular Visionaries: International Outsider Art*, ed. Annie Carlano, (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2003), 10.

> a site of communication and interaction, and as a public expression on the part of the owner.[4]

Through this lens, the outsider art environments of Cockayne, Smith, and Finster demonstrate their intentionality and highlight how they used their work as a conversation-starter. These spaces were not necessarily made solely for the artists themselves but rather for the communities they were part of. Everything from their spatial designs to their use of recognizable motifs and found materials indicates that these outsider art environments were intended to be experienced as a whole by the community.

Cockayne Farm

George Cockayne was an outsider artist whose domestic outdoor space was crucial to his social life. Cockayne came to Canada as an orphan, leaving England in the 1920s as part of Dr. Thomas John Barnardo's juvenile emigration program. As a Barnardo boy, he worked as a lumberer and farmhand, to pay for his passage to Canada. This work was difficult, but by working with his hands, he prepared himself to eventually tend to his own land, which he bought on the outskirts of a small village called Madoc in Ontario's Hastings County.[5] As a lifelong bachelor, Cockayne had no family and had limited help when it came to taking care of his land. He did, however, find company in his community.

Cockayne Farm is an outsider art environment created by Cockayne, who contributed to the sculptural ornamentation of the *Farm* throughout the forty-plus years he lived there. As a lumberjack, Cockayne had extensive experience working with wood and various tools such as axes, saws, chisels, and knives,[6] and so naturally, his *Farm* was covered in sculptural woodcarvings that reflected his experiences within his community and the land he lived on. As a bachelor, Cockayne relied on the allure of his art environment for many aspects of his social life. Earlier in his career, when he still had his eyesight, Cockayne carved figurative fence posts and door stops, often representing the female form. These carved fence posts lined his property, creating a unique visual experience for passersby. In a conversation I had with Dr. Stephen Inglis—an art historian who knew Cockayne personally while working at the then Canadian Museum of Man—he spoke at length about the narrative potential of Cockayne's work. Inglis said, "[Cockayne] hoped that by carving his fence posts and putting out his sculptures, they would create an interesting space that would perhaps stop people along that rural road

[4] Colleen Josephine Sheehy, "The Flamingo in the Garden: Artifice, Aesthetics, and Popular Taste in American Yard Art," (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1991), 24–25. Access via Carleton University Library.

[5] Stephen Inglis, "'Making a Go of It': The Art of Survival," *Ethnologies* 4, no. 1–2 (1982): 68, https://doi.org/10.7202/1081133ar.

[6] Inglis, "'Making a Go of It': The Art of Survival," 69.

and…engage him in conversation."[7] With his *Farm* only about 100 feet from the rural road he lived on, the carved fence posts, cannons, and other sculptural ornamentation that formed constellations around his property would have set his property apart from his neighbours, catching peoples' eye and drawing them in to engage in conversation.

His artwork not only shaped how he engaged with his community, but the community also informed his artwork. He often drew inspiration from books and those around him, relying on his neighbours for anything from food to a muse. Cockayne's neighbours, particularly children, would find their way into his works. Cockayne became especially interested in the idea and construction of totem poles, and their potential to hold and tell stories. Presumably inspired by what he had seen in books, Cockayne's "totem poles"—his interpretations of the Pacific Northwest Indigenous art form—often included carved, painted portraits of people from his community, whether those people liked it or not. In his *Thunderbird Pole* (c. 1960), Cockayne explained that the two young girls carved into the wood were those who lived in his neighbourhood, whom he would see playing outside. Neighbourhood children also appear in other carvings on the *Farm*. In a carved fence post aptly titled *Neighbour Girl* (c. 1970), he carved the portrait of a young girl named Suzie who lived down the road. Children used to stop by and talk to Cockayne about his sculptures, and he even told Inglis that young boys would make jokes about *Neighbour Girl*, saying, "George, she's sticking her tongue out at you…"[8] *Cockayne Farm* was a dynamic space filled with art, drawing in people of all ages and creating an intergenerational, communal experience. As Inglis writes, "The objects as a whole form a record of specific encounters between the artist and his neighbours, visitors, animals and in some cases, simply with himself."[9]

Later in his life, Cockayne began to lose his eyesight, able to see only with his peripheral vision.[10] However, he refused to let his failing eyesight keep him from making meaningful connections through his art. Now unable to carve realistic interpretations or portraits, Cockayne began creating what he called *Bugs*. These fantastical creatures were small sculptures made from found materials. While most of Cockayne's painted sculptures are intentionally connected to place and carved from wood on his own property, his *Bugs* take it a step further, incorporating found, man-made materials that bring these strange creatures to life. In his bovine variety *Bug* (1981), Cockayne fashions a body of wood resembling a pinecone with a cow's udder and uses pieces of an aluminum chair to form legs, allowing the creature to stand upright. The head, which oddly resembles a giraffe in form, uses marbles for eyes, framed by small nails that form

[7] Stephen Inglis, in discussion with the author, November 25, 2025.

[8] George Cockayne quoted by Stephen Inglis in *Something Out of Nothing: The Work of George Cockayne*, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1983), 80.

[9] Stephen Inglis, *Something Out of Nothing: The Work of George Cockayne*, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1983), 11.

[10] Inglis, in discussion with the author, November 25, 2025.

eyelashes. The use of bright primary colours and the hybridity of these sculptures created a sense of whimsy on his property, which became infested with *Bugs* towards the end of his life. Not only did they serve as eye-catching lawn ornaments that sparked conversations, but their bright colours could also serve as boundary markers for the older Cockayne, with limited eyesight. Inglis told me that "the *Bugs*, for him, were like another story. And they were open because they didn't have any link to history or anything. He found a medium in the *Bugs* that was colourful, movable, and endlessly duplicable."[11] Easy and fun to create, these *Bugs* allowed Cockayne to continue his art and contribute to his environment well into his later years.

Carving eye-catching sculptures grounded in both imaginary and real-world experiences, Cockayne created an art environment that brought his community to him. Often lonesome, community was very important to Cockayne, and his *Farm* reflects how he used domestic outdoor spaces as a form of roadside attraction, drawing people in for conversations. Cockayne's work was never intended to be completed or to stand on its own. Rather, each piece, from the fence posts to *Bugs*, was intended to ignite discussion. Like a tour guide in a museum, Cockayne used his works as a basis for discussion, each intertwined with the others, the land they sat on, and the community they were part of. *Cockayne Farm* would be nothing without the stories that accompanied each piece—every part of the environment was, as Inglis explained, a "verbal experience encased in a physical form."[12]

Wisconsin Concrete Park

Fred Smith's *Wisconsin Concrete Park* employs similar strategies of community engagement when considered alongside *Cockayne Farm*. An emphasis on storytelling is central to both artists' work; however, legacy and historical preservation play a more prominent role in the outsider art environment of Fred Smith.

Fred Smith was born to German immigrants who had settled in Price County, Wisconsin. Illiterate and without formal schooling, Smith was a man who learned through experience.[13] To provide for his wife and six children, Smith was a Christmas tree farmer, growing trees and ginseng on his 120-acre homestead in Phillips, Wisconsin, along Wisconsin Highway 13. Smith was a family man with many creative outlets. He was a self-taught fiddler, and in 1936, Smith enlisted the help of a local stonemason to build a tavern on his property, the Rock Garden Tavern, which would later be known as the Stoney Pub.[14] Intended as a community space where

[11] Inglis, in discussion with the author, November 25, 2025.

[12] Ibid.

[13] "Wisconsin Concrete Park & Rock Garden Tavern," Kohler Foundation Inc., 2011, https://www.kohlerfoundation.org/preservation/preserved-sites/wisconsin-concrete-park/.

[14] Ibid.

Smith could play his fiddle, the Rock Garden Tavern soon became a local hot spot, a place of stories and artistic inspiration.

Along with the Rock Garden Tavern, the Smith's homestead also housed what is known as *Wisconsin Concrete Park*. Created by Smith between 1948 and 1964, the *Park* comprises over 200 concrete sculptures, densely adorned with found materials including shards of broken beer bottles from his Rock Garden Tavern.[15] Covered in mosaiced reflective, coloured glass, these sculptures catch the light differently depending on the weather and time of day, creating dynamic visual displays. By hand-mixing the cement and layering it onto wooden armatures wrapped in wire, Smith—who was entirely self-taught in his methods—created sculptures inspired by his own experiences and the history of the land he lived on. Described by the Kohler Foundation as a "14-year obsession by one of America's unique grassroots artists,"[16] *Concrete Park* was made as part of a larger community engagement project undertaken by Smith to preserve Northwoods history for his family and future generations. Aesthetically inspired by public monuments, Smith's sculptures often depicted important historical figures that were monumental in scale, drawing on a long history of commemorative display. His sculptures, which were scattered throughout the trees on his homestead, typically included animals, like those in his mixed media sculpture, *Muskie Pulled by Horses* (c. 1949–1964). Every sculpture in the *Park* drew from stories that were either told to Smith or that Smith wanted to tell. Wanting to preserve the history and local culture of his community, he solidified stories into sculptural forms, not unlike public monuments.

However, the stories told by his art environment were not only about public history; they often depicted more personal experiences. *Muskie Pulled by Horses*, a large sculptural installation found in the forested *Park*, tells a story that would have been told many times in Stoney Pub. In classic pub-storytelling fashion, Smith outdid his friends by telling an overexaggeration of a fishing story through cement and reflective glass, portraying the time it allegedly took a team of horses to pull his catch out of the water. Like a visual aid, one can imagine how this story was told in the pub, just for Smith to take the patron outside, point at his sculptural representation, and exclaim: *it was THIS big!* While the story itself may present some inaccuracies, the sense of community found within this work is crucial. When experienced in situ, as the *Park* was intended to be, its relationship to place is even stronger. Not only does it use found materials from the pub where the story would have been told, but it is also geographically positioned, as the fish was towed out of Soo Lake, just west of Phillips—or so the story goes. Bringing the community together for stories of triumph, whether real or imagined, breathes life into the cement sculptures. While this is just one example of how storytelling finds

[15] Leslie Umberger, *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (New York, Sheboygan, Wis: Princeton Architectural Press; John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2007), 174.

[16] "Wisconsin Concrete Park & Rock Garden Tavern," Kohler Foundation Inc., 2011, https://www.kohlerfoundation.org/preservation/preserved-sites/wisconsin-concrete-park/.

its way into Smith's work, each section of this outsider art environment holds a piece of northern Wisconsin history, told through cement representations.

Another animal representation in Smith's *Concrete Park* is his *Tiger*. What is noteworthy about this *Tiger*, particularly in terms of the classification of outsider art, is that it was inspired by—or made in competition with—another self-taught artist. Smith referenced the work of Morris Hirshfield (1872–1946), a Polish-American outsider artist whose work Smith encountered in a book. Claiming that he could "do better," Smith created his own interpretations of Hirshfield's *Tiger* (1940) in the round.[17] This engagement with other artists is worth noting, as it complicates Smith's status as an outsider artist. Cardinal writes, "we can safely say that the genuine outsider will never show the slightest interest in what other outsiders might be doing."[18] Cardinal's terminology, specifically his use of "genuine," is problematic, but Smith's engagement with another well-known outsider artist challenges the foundation of Cardinal's claims. This engagement demonstrates that Smith, like Cockayne—through his interpretation of totem poles—is far from working in isolation.

Smith wanted his work to engage with the community, just as he engaged with them and the work of other outsider artists. Smith intended his work to be experienced by the public, stating that they were gifts "for all American people."[19] Outsider art environments are "part architecture, part sculpture, and part landscape,"[20] and, as Erika Doss notes, "have always been destinations, places and spaces to be seen and explored, to be experienced."[21] Intended to bring the community together, Smith's *Wisconsin Concrete Park* shared stories about both the artist and the landscape, creating a site of shared memory and multi-temporal experience. One of the conservators of the *Concrete Park*, Ben Caguioa, explained how "art environments such as this are often entwined in the community's identity and are experienced by multiple generations."[22] Cementing the legacy of Northwoods and the important figures and stories that shaped its culture, *Wisconsin Concrete Park* stands as a testament to how meaningful outsider art environments can be. Like Cockayne, what may be initially dismissed as lawn decorations, actually finds itself positioned somewhere between ornamental horticulture and fine art

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[17] "Wisconsin Concrete Park & Rock Garden Tavern," Kohler Foundation Inc., 2011, https://www.kohlerfoundation.org/preservation/preserved-sites/wisconsin-concrete-park/.

[18] Roger Cardinal, "The Vulnerability of Outsider Architecture," *Southern Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (Fall 2000): 179. Access via Carleton University Library.

[19] "Wisconsin Concrete Park & Rock Garden Tavern," Kohler Foundation Inc., 2011, 15:14, https://www.kohlerfoundation.org/preservation/preserved-sites/wisconsin-concrete-park/.

[20] John Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 7.

[21] Umberger, *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists*, 26.

[22] Paul Nicolaus, "When a Lumberjack's Imagination Ran Wild, He Created More Than 200 Sculptures in Wisconsin's Northwoods," *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 26, 2025, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/when-a-lumberjacks-imagination-ran-wild-he-created-more-than-200-sculptures-in-wisconsins-northwoods-180986840/.

installation. Interwoven throughout the landscape and using the natural environment as an art gallery for their pieces, both Cockayne and Smith create thought- and conversation-provoking works imbued with narrative potential, created as a means of reaching out.[23]

Paradise Garden

While Cockayne and Smith grounded their environments in local community and regional history, Rev. Howard Finster's *Paradise Garden* expands this impulse into a visionary project shaped by religious conviction and popular culture, such as Elvis Presley. His work demonstrates how outsider art environments can move beyond storytelling and preservation to become sites of spiritual teaching and connection. Finster, a visionary American artist, created his *Paradise Garden* as the final iteration in a series of community-driven projects. Producing over 46,991 works before his death in 2001, Finster was a self-proclaimed "Man of Visions," who drew on his religion for artistic inspiration.[24] Born in Valley Head, Alabama, in 1916, Finster received his first vision at the age of three—one of many that led to the creation of his outsider art environment, *Paradise Garden*.

As a Baptist, Finster dedicated himself to his faith, working odd jobs, such as fixing bicycles for neighbourhood children, to sustain his real passion for preaching. In 1941, Finster built a structure in Trion, Georgia, that served as a grocery store and a home for his family. Behind this store was the predecessor of *Paradise Garden*, which was begun years later in 1970. Finster explained,

> In the forties I built a little garden museum out of wood behind the grocery store in Trion. It has several buildings, including a copy of the church at Silver Hill. People would stop by and enjoy themselves. It was for everyone.[25]

Focused on creating a community space that also upheld his religious morals, Finster created art environments that drew people in, allowing him to teach them the word of God. Filled with unique curiosities and antiques, the garden museum in Trion was highly popular. As Minar writes, "The success of the garden, its ability to draw attention, served as the impetus for *Paradise Garden* in Pennville, built some twenty-five years later."[26]

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[23] Inglis, in discussion with the author, November 25, 2025.

[24] Glen C. Davies, "The Garden," Paradise Garden Foundation, The Garden Comments, 2011, https://paradisegardenfoundation.org/history/the-garden/.

[25] Rev. Howard Finster quoted in Rena Virginia Minar's "Case Studies of Folk Art Environments: Simon Rodia's 'Watts Towers' and Reverend Howard Finster's 'Paradise Garden,'" (Master's thesis, Rice University, 1994), 65. Access via Carleton University Library.

[26] Minar, "Case Studies of Folk Art Environments," 65.

While this may have allowed Finster to lay the foundation, *Paradise Garden* differed from his previous art environments. Finster said, "I built the park because I was commissioned by God,"[27] and this religious patronage is evident throughout the space. Similar to the museum in Trion, the *Garden* utilized the written word in the form of biblical verses, but novelly, it incorporated Finster's paintings on objects placed throughout the environment. As Minar explains, after a revelation in which God instructed him to paint despite his lack of formal training, "Finster began to paint on wood panels and cloth, always intending these objects to be placed in the garden and remain there."[28] Reminiscent of his earlier chalk drawings used to teach children in Sunday School, Finster's painted garden ornamentation offers a level of accessibility to his art environment, catering to those who do not read. In discussing this revelation, Finster stated, "Some kids were around watching me work and that was the first time I felt I was an artist."[29]

Inspired by the Garden of Eden, Finster's *Paradise Garden* included a variety of plant life, bringing topiary into the space. Tended to by his wife while Finster continued adding to his art environment when prompted by visions, the plant life juxtaposed the rigidity of his structures fabricated with found, man-made materials like metal. The metal that makes up Finster's *Bicycle Tower* (c. 1980), created in remembrance of his time as a bicycle repairman, stands in stark contrast to the natural elements of the garden.[30] Using parts of bicycles and other man-made machines, this sculpture is a testament to humanity's inventions. There is, however, one structure in his *Garden* that complements the intentionally organized plant life, referencing the organic nature of God's creations. This hand-molded cement wall in the *Garden* reflects the horticulture, seeming to grow out of the earth.[31] Directly connected to the communal nature of this space, the wall is inlaid with items left behind—accidental or otherwise—by visitors of Finster's outsider art environment. Amidst the other intentionally curated objects, mostly depicting motifs from both Christianity and popular culture, these smaller, intimate items demonstrate how Finster's community personally contributed to the work. Whether they knew it or not, each visitor became part of his *Garden*.

Intended for community enjoyment, this outsider art environment sought to create an accessible, engaging space for visitors. The *Paradise Garden*, made up of found and organic materials, was intended for public use so much that Finster constructed a pathway that guided visitors through his environment, allowing them to experience the *Garden* as Finster intended. Filled to the brim with objects, this pathway was necessary to help visitors experience the space

[27] Finster quoted in Davies' "The Garden," Paradise Garden Foundation, 2011.

[28] Minar, "Case Studies of Folk Art Environments," 70.

[29] Finster quoted in Minar's "Case Studies of Folk Art Environments," 69–70.

[30] Minar, "Case Studies of Folk Art Environments," 76–78.

[31] Minar, "Case Studies of Folk Art Environments," 77.

without getting overwhelmed. Lined with pieces of broken mirrors, this pathway was easy to locate, while also prompting self-reflection for those who walked on it. Compared to Cockayne, who drew people in to talk to them, Finster's form of engagement more closely aligned with teaching rather than talking. Nevertheless, *Paradise Garden* was created with the community in mind, aiming to bring people and the next generation together, shifting perceptions of what we consider art.

Public Art on Private Property

Each of the outsider art environments discussed here—all created in the artists' domestic outdoor spaces—acts as a form of vernacular public art, intended to attract, please, and engage their community. Designing their yards and gardens with audiences in mind, these artists use sculptural and structural ornamentation to foster community in unique ways, ranging from preservation to education.

Front yards and gardens have long been spaces for public art. As Sheely writes, "Gardens, after all, [have] served as outdoor galleries since classical times."[32] Taking it one step further, outsider artists like Cockayne, Smith, and Finster shift the landscape from gallery to installation, using the land and its materials to construct experiences. These artists viewed their work "as a conduit, not as a finished product…Just as if they were moments in a longer-term discourse."[33] Front yards in North America have a history of being publicly oriented spaces, and these art environments seem to blend this history with twentieth-century marketing techniques used by roadside attractions and businesses, which would have been familiar and easily replicable.

Figures such as Andrew Jackson Downing were instrumental in shaping the uniformly landscaped yards of North America, promoting Victorian Picturesque ideals as a form of civic responsibility. Outsider art environments build on this notion of public art on private property, echoing Downing's aesthetics for the domestic landscape by employing ornament—such as statuary and plants—to render the exterior of the home as an appealing scene for visitors.[34] By incorporating advertising techniques, including colourful imagery and signage, as seen in *Paradise Garden*, and blending them with the idea of the domestic outdoor space as a "frame" for the home, outsider artists create environments that are simultaneously familiar and alluring.[35]

These sites, designed to be experienced in relation to place and narrative, invite visitors into spaces that are both ordinary and strange. The vernacular setting, intensified by sculptural

[32] Sheehy, "The Flamingo in the Garden," 42.

[33] Inglis, in discussion with the author, November 25, 2025.

[34] Sheehy, "The Flamingo in the Garden," 28.

[35] Sheehy, "The Flamingo in the Garden," 29.

ornamentation, shifts perception—momentarily removing the visitor from the everyday world as they enter the new environment—and fosters opportunities for community members to share lived experiences, often across generations. As Sheehy writes,

> While not negating all private aspects of the home, yard art does help to create an intermediate zone where individuals, families, neighbors, and strangers can interact. Thus, yard art overcomes some of the divisions enforced by a built environment constructed primarily of single family homes. By bringing people together to ooh and awe, to exclaim and to laugh, yard art makes cities and suburbs, towns and countrysides friendlier places to live. Through visual affinities with public landscapes, yard art demonstrates homeowners' efforts to bridge public and private worlds through artifacts.[36]

The outsider art environment is inherently hybrid. Blurring the boundaries between art, architecture, landscape, and the museum, these spaces reveal the complex relationship between the individual and their community.[37] Situated within a long history of vernacular display and domestic design, outsider art environments are not devoid of culture; they are themselves a form of culture. These domestic outdoor environments communicate with the public, often signalling that interaction is not only welcome but encouraged.

The intentionality of such communal spaces speaks to the artist's resistance toward isolation, creating in collaboration with neighbours, nature, and future generations. As unfinished products, these art environments may be physically impermanent, but are never ephemeral, transforming private property into a shared cultural experience. By examining *Cockayne Farm*, *Wisconsin Concrete Park*, and *Paradise Garden*, it becomes clear that these works cannot be reduced to mere decoration or dismissed as eccentricity. These artists did not simply peer through the naïve peephole as Cardinal suggests[38]—they broke down the door to create intentional, deeply social creations that require recognition as a distinct art form. In this recognition lies the possibility of expanding our understanding of art itself: not only as object or image, but as environment, encounter, and community.

[36] Sheehy, "The Flamingo in the Garden," 62–63.

[37] Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*, 189.

[38] Cardinal, "Scottie Wilson," 74.

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