

IDENTITY ART:
THE SOCIAL AND AESTHETIC MARKET FOR CONTEMPORARY "FOLK" ART

Presented to a May 2000 folk art conference at the John Michael Kohler Art Center in Sheboygan, WI.

Gary Alan Fine
Department of Sociology
Northwestern University
Evanston, IL 60208

It is a great pleasure to be here before you today attempting to return to you some what I have learned over the course of nearly five years of research on self-taught art. In this research I have observed at shows, meetings, openings, auctions, and symposia. I have formally interviewed some sixty dealers, collectors, curators, academics and artists, and informally talked with hundreds of others. I have read books, magazines, newsletters, and many of the files at the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian. Finally I have listened in on a folk art email listserve organized by Randall Morris. I have learned a lot about this field, a field that I knew rather little about prior to this project.

Before I begin, it is probably wise for me to talk about how I see my style of sociological research. Many in the audience are no doubt aware of Julia Ardery's volume on the creation of the reputation of Edgar Tolson. I admire Ardery's work, which is richly sociologically informed. However, Julia Ardery draws on a set of skills beyond sociology. She is an art critic, an art historian, and a popular journalist. I lack these attributes. Ardery is attempting to provide a historically grounded account of a particular moment, and as a result it is important for her to get the facts right. I'll leave to you how well she succeeded at that.

My goal is different. In this project I am not interested in what happened, but what people believed happened. I am not going to present a history to you, but attempt to understand something about the structure of this art world, and how it relates to other worlds. Thus, I must admit that I trade in gossip. And what makes this frustrating for an audience is that I deny you the pleasure of gossip in that I eliminate who said what about whom. I promised those I interviewed that I will not report their names, and I shall live up to that promise.

At this point I wish to ask a question of sublime ignorance, an ignorance that hopefully will have a subversive ring: Can anyone tell me how I can become an folk artist?

The question is absurd on its face. How could I, an educated academic, become a folk artist? Yet, the question, I believe, raises some very significant

issues about the nature of self-taught art and about art worlds in general. By whatever name it goes by -- and the debate over nomenclature is a lively and vigorous debate -- self-taught art, folk art, naive art, outsider art, primitive art, untrained art, intuitive art, visionary art, the reference of this realm of art, as it is practiced, is that it is the social identity of the artist that determines the category of the art, not the content or genre of the work. Thus, I prefer to call this genre of art "identity art" in that the who of the artist is as important as the what that has been produced. This is in contrast with many classes of art in which established training mechanisms exist -- either through apprenticeships, educational institutions, or texts. However, for folk art it is precisely the absence of these venues that characterizes this aesthetic realm.

If I wished to be a contemporary artist or a portrait painter, you could easily direct me to those facilities in which I could acquire some training: perhaps becoming an expert in that arena, or perhaps learning that I have little talent. But at least there would be an established process for occupational socialization.

To understand the structure of the world of self-taught art means taking into account the considerations of the market and of the professional infrastructure that surrounds the market. In this argument, my attention will not only be focused upon the creator of folk art, but also on those who surround the artist. The standard model of an economic market focuses on minimally three social roles: the producer, distributor/seller, and purchaser/consumer. Indeed, in some worlds the producer and the distributor are the same (for instance, those who run roadside markets, in which they sell their own produce). In the art world, these roles are labeled: the artist (the producer of the object), the dealer (the distributor of the object), and the collector (the purchaser of the object). Various art fairs, such as Kentuck, are designed to collapse the first two categories. Within many art worlds the third category can be divided as to whether the purchaser is an individual or a representative of a corporate entity. In the later case we speak of "curators." Finally, in art worlds (and in other social worlds linked to expressive culture) we find a fifth category of actors, the critics -- an individual typically affiliated with a cultural institution (a journal or a university). Critics are as a formal matter outside of the art market (although they may also be artists, dealers, collectors, or curators); their job is to serve as gatekeepers for the art market either by evaluating recent creations (as in the case of reviewers) or long-term trends (as in the case of art historians). While different segments of the art world give different weight and different elaboration to these roles, they tend to characterize all art markets (In general, lower-status art world segments [decorative art, regional art, portraiture] tend to have a less well-developed curatorial or critical apparatus).

I propose to examine each of these players within the world of self-taught art to determine the characteristics of this market. I shall not focus, as a sociologist, on the qualities of the work itself, but shall keep my attention tightly focused on social structure.

The Artist. One crucial element of the market for self-taught art tends to make it distinctive: the characteristics of artists. While, as I will argue, other components of the market differ to some degree, it is the realm of who the artist is that makes for the most significant difference. In most instances to participate in an art world requires a considerable degree of cultural capital. Most Americans decide to produce art out of their knowledge of the art world. It is certainly true that in American schools most children will have some exposure to doing art (earlier and more extensive exposure than to learning about the appreciation and history of art), yet, this training, while providing a background knowledge of the existence of art rarely produces a long-time involvement in aesthetic work. Those who select this arena often do so with some knowledge of the domain of art, as well as with institutional support.

The self-taught artist is quite different in this regard. This is evident in several of the alternative labels given to this person: the "outsider" artist, the "naive" artist, the Afolk@ artist, or the "intuitive" artist. While there are differences among these terms (differences that matter quite a bit to the critical establishment), they each have the quality that they characterize the artist, rather than the art. Folk art characterizes the producer in a way that portraiture, landscape, contemporary art, minimalism, hyperrealism, neo-geo, or still life does not. The identity of the artist is central to the art, and successful "folk" artists often "perform" their outsider identity to cultural elites: they are "doing identity work."

Their outsider character makes these artists valued by those with more cultural capital. But it must always be remembered that these artists are outsiders to something. Indeed, I suggest that it is less that these artists are outsiders to the elite world, but that they are outsiders to the mundane middle-class world -- or at least the elite's typification of that world. An alliance often develops between cultural elites and the lower classes -- a union between highbrow and lowbrow, aimed at a pernicious middlebrow enemy. Tom Wolfe writes in Radical Chic of a phenomenon that he terms "nostalgie de la boue," roughly translated as "love of the mud," referring to the desire of cultural elites for the authenticity of the social and cultural traditions of the lower classes. This "nostalgie de la boue" helps explain the centrality of the identity of the self-taught artist to that art world. Like the elite artist, folk artists break through conventional aesthetic standards. Perhaps it is that the further one is from "middle-brow" aesthetic standards, the more valued will one's work become. My suburb annually has an art fair in a local park with many artists who specialize in florals, clowns, and rustic scenes. Many of these men and women are self-taught, but few would fall into the domain of the art style that we are examining here.

In practice, the outsider character of folk artists is validated by demographic and institutional characteristics. To be poor, black, elderly, rural, institutionalized, or illiterate proves on a prima facie basis that one is an outsider. Of course, it is not simply that a person of a particular social category is painting in a particular way. There are a set of recognized styles that are seen as legitimate for folk artists, particularly a primitive, brutal style or a

detailed, romantic memory painting style, picturing rural scenes. Other styles, particularly those that are linked to other art worlds, would not be considered legitimate folk art styles. While there is no reason in principle that an elderly female black former sharecropper could not paint in the style of Mark Rothko or Ad Reinhardt, in practice this would not be considered legitimate folk art. Thus, it is the connection between the persona of the artist and the legitimate styles that this individual can work in that is considered to be self-taught art.

The Dealer. In much contemporary art the dealer and the artist are relatively equal in status, at least in principle. The artist has comparable levels of cultural capital with the dealer. Such is clearly not the case when we consider the world of self-taught art. Here the dealer becomes the gatekeeper for the artist into a world in which he or she is not truly a part. The dealer of self-taught art straddles two very different social scenes, and must be comfortable in each. Organizational theorists distinguish between the input and output boundaries of an organization. While typically the individuals with whom one comes into contact on those two boundaries are different (for instance, the difference between contemporary artists and patrons of the arts), in few instances could the difference be greater than that which is found in the world of self-taught art between outsider, untrained artists and a highly literate set of collectors. The dealer must be able to bridge these two worlds.

Also significant is the process by which works of art are priced for a market. In all art worlds the question of pricing is problematic, but nowhere is it more problematic than in self-taught art, because of the disjunction between the labor costs of the artists and the costs that collectors are potentially able to afford. Consider the artist whose job alternative is work paying minimum wage. If that individual labored on a work of art for ten hours, the effective labor cost involved would only be \$50. Yet, high quality folk art pieces often sell in the hundreds, if not thousands of dollars. The dealer (sometimes operating in concert with other dealers) has to determine a proper price for a work of art: a price that will maximize sales, while maximizing profit - two goals that are not always compatible. It is often difficult to judge by the work itself what a proper price should be. It is not the formal qualities of the work that leads to a pricing decision. The dealer must, therefore, be sensitive to the demands of the market (the desires of collectors) and also to what critics have been saying about an artist. The publication of a major, positive piece on a folk artist in a journal such as Folk Art or Raw Vision will increase significantly the prices that dealers can ask for these works. The inclusion of the late African-American folk artist Bessie Harvey in the 1995 Whitney biennial was said to be a major factor in increasing the prices that could be asked for her works.

The dealer of course has a role in the creation of reputation. Some "dealers" are labeled as "pickers." To discover an unknown "artist" and then develop a relationship with him or her to provide works of art on an exclusive basis is desirable for a dealer. The problem, of course, is since so much of this art is based on who the artist is, hiding the artist can limit the appeal of the art works,

regardless of their quality, as perhaps the case of the mysterious Clyde Angel attests.

Self-taught art dealers are mediators. Developing meaningful relationships with folk artists, according to their own ethical standards (of which there is much controversy), while providing the social satisfactions that their collectors demand. Dealers are constrained to operate with a foot in each door, and it requires the kind of outgoing personality that finds this strategy comfortable.

The Collector. The world of folk art is one of the rare corners of the art world in which "high quality" pieces are still available at reasonable prices. If one is not independently wealthy, it is difficult to purchase major, high quality works by well-known contemporary artists. This is still not the case in the domain of self-taught art, although different individuals will have distinct notions of what reasonably priced art consists. David Halle (1994) notes in his book *Inside Culture*, that most family households, of whatever social class, are filled with artworks of various kinds and prices. People place stuff on the wall. To be sure, the content and value of these art works vary considerably, but most people feel the strong desire to fill their home with objects that they consider meaningful and emotionally satisfying.

For a certain group of citizens self-taught art effectively fills this need; yet this population is specialized. If one of the virtues of self-taught art is that the creators are untrained, it makes sense that potential audiences might legitimately feel that they, equally untrained, could produce works with an equivalent level of aesthetic sophistication. Thus, these collectors must have a view that despite the ability to create the work itself that such works are worth purchasing and displaying.

Given the existence of a self-taught art world, it becomes possible for individuals to collect these works at a cost far less than what works of equivalent quality would be in other art domains -- notably that of contemporary art. High quality works in self-taught art are available in the four-digit range, while those in contemporary art are in the six-digit range. This 100-times multiplier changes the size and characteristics of the potential market. In self-taught art one can collect high quality work within a budget that might not otherwise be possible for art domains, providing that they have the cultural capital to judge the value of what they can afford and providing that they are linked to a community that appreciates their collection. Thus, the class of collectors of self-taught art is different that the collectors of more expensive artistic domains.

Part of what is appealing for many self-taught art collectors is that, aside from the formal aesthetic qualities of the work, they are collecting "authentic" works - that is, they take the social location of the creators into account. Part of the charm and value of owning works of self-taught art is the Otherness of the

creators. Self-taught art becomes, in part, a form of ethnographic art. This means that dealers (and critics) create life stories that capture the imagination of potential collectors. Some collectors are sufficiently enamored of the Otherness of those that they collect that they will travel to their homes -- treating these homes as a kind of shrine. That these homes are often located in deep rural areas or the run-down quarters of cities makes the pilgrimage all the more special. In reaching the artist, one does not hope for a deep critical insight into the artist's aesthetic philosophy -- a discourse that would cut against the otherness of the artist -- but one hopes for pungent observations that contributes to the classification of the artist as other: the less sophistication the better. Thus, for instance, I was told that I was extremely fortunate that when I and a few others visited the Rev. Howard Finster at Paradise Garden in Summerville, Georgia, and we heard him give us a lengthy, rambling "sermon" on good and evil. I speculate that had the Rev. Finster decided to give an academic-style lecture on the history of art, we would have been considered less fortunate, unless the content of this lecture were seen directly as revealing Finster's otherness. On other occasions visiting the African-American folk artists Lonnie Holley and Thornton Dial, the questions revolved around how they went about creating their works, not about their aesthetic theory. We would have been disappointed if the discourse had been too sophisticated. Thus, self-taught artists benefit if they are to be performers for an elite audience -- their identity work is part of their position as an identity artist. Those artists, such as Howard Finster, Lonnie Holley, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, and R. A. Miller, who seem to enjoy having collectors visit benefit from becoming "tourist attractions."

Collectors are often in the market for more than aesthetically appealing and challenging objects. Indeed, in common with much contemporary art, one cannot say that all folk art is "pretty" in the decorative sense (particularly the case with the works of African-American men) -- much of the work might in other circumstances be described as brutal, casual, sloppy, or childish.

The Curator. The curator represents a special case of the collector. The curator is a collector for an institution, the museum. The curator is not collecting for him or herself, but is collecting for employers, and ultimately for the audience of that institution. Because of self-taught art's marginal status in the art world, most prominent museums do not have folk art curators, and have little interest in this kind of art. Even museums that do have a lively interest in folk art, such as the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, which has a very fine collection of Southern contemporary folk art, does not typically have folk art shows in the main museum, but in their annex, located several miles away in an office building in downtown Atlanta. In this secondary site, the High Museum exhibits photography and folk art.

Just as it is true for collectors, so is it true for museums, Self-taught art is a market that is easy to invest in with a relatively small amount of capital. Thus, smaller museums find folk art shows appealing for their modest cost and public

interest. Even the Museum of American Folk Art is a rather small operation (certainly compared, for instance, to the nearby Museum of Modern Art), maintaining only four galleries in their small space. The High Museum has used its collection of folk art as a means of carving out a place in the art world. Like many southern museums, the High was late in getting started, compared to Northern museums. Few members of the Southern elite had substantial collections of fine art or much interest in the pictorial arts. Thus, unlike Northeastern and Midwestern museums, until fairly recently Southern museums could not count on donations from patrons of art works or cash. Southern museums were not able to establish the collections of classical works found elsewhere. Even high quality contemporary art by well-established artists is not easily affordable by many museums. Thus, many museums have chosen to specialize in those segments of the art market that are more affordable. The High Museum, in keeping with the racial diversity of Atlanta, has developed fine collections in southern folk art, African-American art, African tribal art, and photography. These are arenas that are still affordable, and which have some appeal to both their "elite" audiences and to the racial diverse population in Atlanta. For the appreciation of classical art one needs to trek to the National Gallery.

Curators have the responsibility to gather suitable works, either through an outlay of the institution's funds, or, better, through contributions from patrons. Fortunately the tax laws provide an incentive for contributions of art. By permitting deductions for contributions of art, the tax laws in effect are subsidizing museum contributions. Curators can play upon this economic incentive to persuade potential patrons, while simultaneously playing upon their status concerns and their altruism.

The problem for folk art curators is their relatively low status within the art world. They have to fight for recognition against those who represent fine art. Indeed, the relatively modest price of the works that they deal with only confirms their low status within this world. Within the boundaries of their occupation, they must establish status. This is no easy task within a competitive occupation.

The Critic. Criticism is presented in a variety of venues: books, academic journals, art world periodicals, and daily newspapers. While these venues differ in many ways, in each the author has the role of explaining and depicting the world of self-taught art in ways that will be meaningful to others. These are the brokers or gatekeepers who create the world of folk art as it is known by dealers, collectors, and curators. Of course, it goes without saying that the single individual can serve in several positions: some dealers, collectors, and curators also write about folk art. By virtue of the fact that some entrepreneur (an editor or publisher) has chosen to share their thoughts, these writers influence the way that others will understand the market. While one should not deny that judgement derives in part from the viewer's evaluation of the artwork, much aesthetic judgement is mediated. Works of art are created in particular contexts, but when brought into the art market this context is to a greater or

lesser extent discarded, with the works being removed from their context; it is the task of the critic to recontextualize these works, so that they "make sense" to their audience. In addition to creating a hierarchy of aesthetic work (the good-bad dimension), these critics provide a meaningful context by which their audiences can make sense out of folk art, transforming what might otherwise be seen as childish or incompetent to be understood as part of a legitimate aesthetic domain.

While a matter of degree, the aesthetics of self-taught art is not as well-developed as that found elsewhere, in part because of the relatively low-status that the work has been held among art historians. When I began this research, I assumed that I would find a group of scholars who routinely discussed this work. What I discovered was something else entirely. Many of the best known scholars in this area, such as Eugene Metcalf and Roger Cardinal, do not have art history backgrounds and are not in art departments. Many of the most knowledgeable members of art departments were hired as artists, not art historians, such as Judith McWillie, Andy Nacisse, or Michael Hall. While this does not apply to everyone, it can hardly be denied that there is relatively little scholarly attention given to self-taught artists.

Only recently are there periodicals devoted to self-taught art, most particularly the American magazine Folk Art and the European journal Raw Vision. The Folk Art Society of America holds an annual meeting at which papers are presented, although the audience is largely collectors, rather than academics. A few symposia are held each year, such as this one. Of course, some attention is paid to folk art in general art periodicals and conferences, but folk art critics are, in the main, outsiders themselves to the critical infrastructure of art. Until self-taught art is seen as an aesthetic realm in its own right, as opposed to being notable because of the nature of its practitioners, it is probable that folk art critics will be marginal.

CONCLUSIONS

In this talk I argue that self-taught art is a form of identity art. That is, the nature of the artist constitutes the boundaries and value of the works of art. Self-taught art is art of the other, and thus the alternative labels such as Outsider Art, Naive Art, Untrained Art and so forth. Who the artist is, is as important as what he or she creates. This social placement contributes to the low status of this segment of the art world, and this status placement affects the relationships among dealers, collectors, curators, and critics.

Further, I have argued that self-taught art involves the combination of a market and a social world in which identity is crucial. Collectors care not only about what the artwork looks like, but the placement of the artist. In this it differs from most other domains of art. This dual-faced market with the drive for collectors to meet, befriend, and transact business with the artist creates significant problems for the operation of an efficient economic market.

We are beginning to see changes in this market, with the higher end of the market beginning to look like markets in other domains of the art world with aesthetic discourse more common. Whether this stability will be sufficient to develop a curatorial, academic, and critical base remains to be seen, and, should this occur will it diminish the interest of those at the lower-end of the market? One possibility that self-taught can continue to thrive as a dual-market with a top tier of stars (many inaccessible or deceased) with art market prices and limited production, and others who serve as friends and whose works provide souvenirs for those who have been out on the back roads and in the inner cities: Those who have been there and have done that.

[HOME](#) | [CONTACT](#) | [STEERING COMMITTEE](#) | [ADVISORY BOARD](#) | [SITEMAP](#) | [CREDITS](#)