Crafting authenticity: The validation of identity in self-taught art

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Abstract. The desire for authenticity now occupies a central position in contemporary culture. Whether in our search for selfhood, leisure experience, or in our material purchases, we search for the real, the genuine. These terms are not, however, descriptive, but must be situated and defined by audiences. In this analysis, I examine the development of the market for self-taught art, an artistic domain in which the authentic is a central defining feature, conferring value on objects and creators. Self-taught art is a form of identity art in which the characteristics of the artists and their life stories are as important as the formal features of the created objects. The article examines the justifications for this emphasis and the battles over the construction of biography. My examination of self-taught art is grounded in five years of ethnographic observation, interviews, and analyses of texts.

Professor Willem Volkersz: When did you put your name on the side of the house?
Folk Artist Hans Jorgensen: Huh?
Professor: I notice you put your name on the side of the house there.
Artist: Yeah.
Professor: When did you do that?
Artist: Oh, about three or four years ago.
Professor: It's like signing a work of art.
Artist: Hah! Would you call that art?
Professor: I do.
Artist: Do you? It's not fancy.
Professor: Plain. Plain art.
Artist: Yeah.
Professor: Well, there's some people that we call folk artists. People who didn't go to school to learn to be artists.
Artist: Yeah. Well, if went to school I wouldn't a done this, would I?
Professor: I think you're right.
Artist: I wouldn't a done it. No. This is oddball stuff. They ain't nobody else

that'd build anything like this. You don’t do what majority does, then you’re wrong.

Professor: I think that’s true. How far did you go in school?

Artist: Hah. Hah.

Professor: Don’t want to talk about that, huh?¹

During the 1970s and 1980s University of Montana art professor Willem Volkersz traveled the American backroads, talking with “folk” artists. In his transcripts, he earnestly tries to persuade elderly men and women that they have produced objects that they – and we – should take seriously. We hear him strive to find common ground with members of dramatically different social worlds from his own. In his struggles, Volkersz raises important questions about the establishment of legitimacy and status for those who lack formal credentials. On what basis does the process that Tom Wolfe² pungently refers to as “nostalgie de la boue” become institutionalized by elites? How are the untrained valorized? In a society that valorizes authenticity of expression, the production of this authenticity by elites and their institutions reveals the process by which moral evaluations are created. Following Volkersz, I ask how the identity of the self-taught artist affects the appreciation of their creative expressions. How is authenticity given value?

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Gerald Pocius³ argues that “perhaps of all the words that surround us in our daily life, art is one of the most contentious, most controversial.” What is art? Aesthetic institutionalists, throwing up their hands, suggest art is simply what “artists” do or what museum curators hang on their walls.⁴ Others suggest that the existence of an aesthetic theory justifies particular types of artistic products.⁵ Still others, such as Howard Becker, suggest that communal conventions – shared ways of doing things – produce the basis through which objects are defined as art. For Becker,⁶ art depends upon collective activity. Underlying these beliefs is the recognition of the social or institutional construction of the boundaries of art worlds.⁷

I examine the establishment of symbolic boundaries through the attempts of members of a cultural elite to create a legitimate artistic sub-field through the validation of artists and their creations as reflective of