

# Unicultural Ethnography: Preserving Outsider Art

## Through the Ethnography of Individual Outsider Artists

Certain aspects of the artistic experience are clearly more difficult to preserve than others. How does one catalog artistic motivation? How can the context in which a piece was conceived and constructed be preserved? Is it possible to archive the various audiences for that piece, and the effects of these audience responses to the work upon the artist during the ongoing construction of the piece? While the care of material artifacts is an obvious and essential element in preserving outsider art, the preservation of the personality of the individual artist can be pricelessly informative. Although personality and artistic motivation are admittedly composed of ephemeral substance, ethnographic observation can enable folklorists and preservationists to see beyond the symbolically composed frame of the artifact when the piece has been removed from the presence of the artist. Moving beyond the hermetic constraints of the gallery and the archive, ethnography situates preservationists in the work rooms and living rooms – as well as on the lawns! – of outsider artists, spaces where most outsider artists – and their art – breathe more naturally.

Concerned with the everyday artfulness of ordinary people, “Folklorists practice not only analysis of artifacts, but also behavioral observation and ethnoscientific questioning in order to elicit a folk aesthetic” (Curry 27), and are thus uniquely suited to performing – and training others to perform – this kind of ethnographic research. Populists at heart, folklorists are ever eager to remind us that each person shares a universal need to “create order, beauty, and meaning out of [the] chaos” that is human existence (Adler 10; Williams 158). While every human is in some sense, an artist, outsider artists are far more salient in their artistry than most others in their obsessive documentation of their inner psychological and spiritual worlds. Outsider artists, therefore, pose an inherent challenge to folklorists, who often prefer to study groups, or the individual as a representative member of a group. While many outsider artists share some commonalities in their motivations and approach to actualizing their creative needs, they are at the same time often intensely independent and highly idiosyncratic, and so these psychological commonalities become an interesting set of demographics from which to begin rather than a satisfying explanation of the artist’s psychology or work. Outsider artists demand that researchers deal with them as individuals rather than as members of a generalized group. In order to document the work, worldview, and personality of an outsider artist, the folklorist’s most reliable tool subsequently becomes an ethnography of the individual. Leonard Norman Primiano’s radical theoretical conception of uniculture, defined by Primiano “as a processual system of conscious and unconscious knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs particular to the individual to which he or she refers and which he or she employs as the basis for everyday living” (49-50), is therefore an arguably essential orientation to employ in the ethnographic study of outsider artists.

Relying upon the standard ethnographic tools of observation and personal interviews, preservationists become collectors of context and documentarians of artistic motivation. These ethnographic records of individual outsider artists will lend tremendous assistance to later researchers in their quest to accurately interpret these artists’ works. In addition, the humanistic totality of the ethnographic records will, if performed successfully, offer further examinations of “the pervasiveness of the aesthetic impulse” as well as proof of “the importance of the

individual” (Jones, Preface x) in any attempt to understand the why and wherefore of how this impulse becomes realized in outsider art.

The presenters will employ ethnographic evidence from their study of two outsider artists, Juanita Leonard and Linda Hartley, to illustrate and expand upon the arguments touched upon in this abstract.

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