

A Comment Upon the Linguistic Analysis of Folk Art

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Folk art analysis, more than in the study of other aesthetics, has resisted the interdisciplinary approach most evident in general literary criticism. It has been suggested that the field is, almost by nature, closed to comparative perspective, and as such is inherently heretic. Folk art historians appear to have been reluctant to evaluate a body of folk art in structuralist and poststructuralist terms because so many of these works articulate themselves linguistically. Most analyses transparently raise questions about the nature of significance, and subvert themselves as works of art, questioning the premises which permit us to conceive of these objects and images as art and not as an expression of craft alone. Is folk art criticism reluctant to reduce these expressions of native talent to text and timid to enter the so designated and described "paraliterary space" characteristically noted as ". . . the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation . . . ?

Does folk art history also resist becoming an "intellectual bricolage" of methods? Folk art history, especially the current "outsider or visionary" phenomenon, lags behind the study of other types of art and aesthetics. Whether this circumstance is to be attributed to the lethargy of the collectors, or to the custodians of art, is not important. Are the latter too caught up in administration and the preparation of exhibitions and catalogues to channel their residual energies into analytic writing? Are they too preoccupied with archiving the newest discovered folk art practitioner or attempting to determine what folk art actually is to really evaluate the field?

It may be that the conservatism and inertia fostered by the sociology of the profession of art history contributes to the environment of present folk art criticism. The only changes catholic enough to be effective should come within the institutions of art history, and must directly alter the way those institutions relate to the phenomenon of contemporary folk art.

General art history is still legalistically territorialized as an area of rather clearly defined boundaries, even if many works of art no longer can be given definite categories. Art history resists "de-territorialization" and is not prepared

to become an arena in which objects of art can be considered as "particles" or "sign posts." Turning visual art into linguistic art, vision into sign and writing, for many is regarded as a constant. The dynamics of contemporary folk art stand in full face of this structural.

Reductionism as applied to folk art is fraught with implications that undermine certain cherished assumptions about art in general. More implicit than explicit, these exercises are the basis for a kind of mystical belief in the ultimate irreducibility and specificity of visual art. Despite all analysis of folk art, it remains ineffably itself; an entity apart. Perhaps in the end it is the emphasis on the ineffability of folk art that argues against the reduction to highly speakable, in complexly interlocking, descriptive terms. There is a peculiarly hermetic, cult-like character to folk art appreciation and collection. These particular assumptions are responsible for its fetishization and sacralization of the visual response as applied to folk art.

Traditional art history's sense of its essential mission, the hidden agenda underneath all its examination, is the preservation of the visual best that exists. This explains art history's museum orientation or belief in the "musical" character of art, and its preoccupation with exhibitions. A museum may have the authority of a mausoleum for certain art forms, and for traditional art history it may be the best of all possible visual worlds. The museum is the repository where the best visual works are preserved, like trophies in a temple. Folk art may be best appreciated in its own environment; as it were, the natural habitat. Historically a museum is the place in which the authority of art of such, and of individual artists, is affirmed. It is the last refuge and stronghold of autonomous art and autonomous authorship. However, this exhibition space might contextualize them historically. Since the intent of the folk art is often to beautify the artists's personal environment, this may represent their temple to share their visual expression, rather than a museum. David Butler only wanted to use his tin cutouts to decorate his home, and Ralph Griffin's root sculpture certainly made his yard unique and beautiful.

An assumption of the art critic is that the visual work of folk art is inherently precious, which makes it an elite object; that is, privileges it above other objects. The elite object is inseparable from the idea of the aesthetic and to the museum attitude towards it. One should distinguish between art criticism deriving from a elitist aesthetic and the need of the folk artist to reveal what makes this special object so important. This revelation turns a craft into folk art, with all the exemptions and privileges conferred by the term "art." However, the criticism of traditional art history resists and seeks to deny the sacramental specialness of this art. Commonplace images and subjects may very well become unique of construction or material employed. The found objects of a Lonnie Holley do, indeed, substantiate this idea.

The disabusing, secularizing criticism of folk art often takes the form of a seeming antisubjectivist, scientifically objective identitarian though which can be described as reductionism. From the point of view of traditional art history, linguistic reductionism is as good as any other means of denying the specialness of an art form, and certainly of folk art. Traditional art history resists the linguistic appropriation of folk art's visual specialness.

The visual image of folk art is closer to the madness of inner life; has more of sacred madness than the exposition of art. It has been said that worthy critics are ashamed or afraid of the momentary and passing madness which is found in all real creators. The visual impact of folk art, rather than literary commentary about its images, is closer to this madness.

Freud noted, that seeing is an activity that is ultimately derived from touching, that "visual impressions" remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused. Some folk art works can indeed be regarded as careful orchestrations of libidinal excitations. Although an Archie Byron or a Charlie Lucan will deny the anatomical implications of their more provocative images, the shapes and spatial relationships have only thinly veiled messages. The visual experience provides us with a greater opportunity for the expression or repressed libidinal impulse than does the verbal. This suggests that the visual experience is closer to the structure of human needs. The visual representation can be regarded as a primary, and the verbal a secondary, means of articulating human needs through these forms of communication. Impulse seems to run from image to word with decreasing momentum.

In folk art interpretation, the transgressive image is converted to the social word. The visual image is closer to the primal, and as such more fundamental than a literal interpretation. The deprivileging of the visual that occurs by regarding it linguistically may amount to a repression of its libidinous character, of its so-called sensuality. To see a Leroy Allmon relief panel is a much evocative experience than is reading a description thereof, however creative. The visual is, in general, closer to the primitive root of the subjective than is the verbal, and as such more able to be utilized to articulate the anguish repressed by political forces, for example. Some of the images of a Lonnie Holley have just this klimpact.

Art may also be verbal, and a verbal work may indeed be compared with a visual expression of creativity. A visual work of folk art has inherently more to do with bodiliness than the literary work of art. One could even argue that the determination to read the work of art as a structure of signs is part of the progressive concealment of the work of art which goes along with civilization. It is part of a general concealment of many subject, including the human body, that supposedly assists us to become civilized. Sexual curiosity about the libidinal surface of a work of folk art can be repressed by reading it as a costume party of signs.

A visual work of art metaphorically stands for the body, and as such can be said to "have more body" than the literary or purely verbal translation of a work of art. Visual folk has a more profound emotional effect on the viewer than does the literary conceptualization. The folk art object is more likely to generate gut feelings" spontaneously or to restore temporarily a prototaxic mode of being. The prototaxic mode involves the experience of momentary states with no before and after, and no awareness of serial connection between them. Such states are more likely to be induced by the instantaneousness of the folk work of art than by the successiveness characteristic to the literary work. The folk art's instantaneousness is seductive because of the immediate gratification it affords. The work is conducive to prototaxical experience of oneself.

Another assumption of traditional art history is that the critic/scholar/exegete's activity is secondary to the artist's primary activity. Traditional art history disputes the primacy of any type of criticism and denies that it is an imaginative act of the same order as the work of art. It is profane in comparison to the sacred work of art, and in a sense profanes it through unloving analysis. The traditional art historian would say that the "new" folk art may have already happened. This may be the level on which criticism is equivalent to it, but only the folk artist can make it happen again, which is why the artists and their presence are necessary. Artists repeatedly free the visual from the imprisonment in the "already happened" linguistic which has already occurred.

The paradox of art history in relation to folk art is that it needs to resist methods, such as the psychoanalytic, which might assist in articulating the implications of many of these underlying assumptions. Traditional analysis seems to feel that such methods would disintegrate the object they are meant to expose - that exposure is inherently destructive, and beside the point of intuitive/contemplative and ultimately empathetic demystification and tearing down any notion of elite, even in the realm of the man-made objects. Traditional art history often postures itself as a shelf between the philistine and unbelieving world, including the world in which it spiritually cheapens folk art by commodifying it. Traditional art history in its protective mode, especially through enlightened understanding, seems often to devalue a folk art object. Linguistic analysis of folk art often amounts to a reductionistic attack from a traditional art-historical point of view. Folk art critics seem interested in this art form only for its exchange value; that is, the linguistic value it can be exchanged for. From the traditional art-historical point of view, the new interdisciplinarianism, with its intellectual universalism, is a repression of folk art and of the import of the specifically visual, whose sacredness only sensibility can recover.

Contemporary folk art is given the mantle of a phenomenon and as such is vulnerable to a transitory life. Many regard it as a phase akin to childhood or adolescence. This fails to recognize its primal etiology, as well as its variety.

of expression. To view this important movement in only those traditional descriptions and categories of standard art history may indeed undervalue its message, and certainly fails to recognize its inherent importance. The message may indeed be more fundamental than our current nomenclature can fully recognize.

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