

*Becker contrasts the work worlds of integrated professionals, mavericks, naive artists, and folk artists.*

## **Art Worlds and Social Types**

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**Define a world as consisting of all those people and organizations whose activity is necessary to produce the kind of events and objects which that world characteristically produces. Then an art world consists of the people and organizations who produce those events and objects that world defines as art. Let me explicate the tautology and in so doing indicate four uses it has in comparative research. The definition suggests the following propositions and questions.**

(1) Works of art can be understood by viewing them as the result of the coordinated activities of all the people whose cooperation is necessary in order that the work should occur as it does. This sets a distinctive agenda for our inquiry. We are to look, first, for the complete roster of kinds of people whose activity contributes to the result. As I have suggested elsewhere (Becker, 1974), this might include people who conceive the idea of the work (e.g., composers or playwrights); people who execute it (musicians or actors); people who provide the necessary equipment and materials (e.g., musical instrument makers); and people who make up the audience for the work

(playgoers, critics, and so on). Although we conventionally select some one or a few of these as "the artist" to whom responsibility for the work is attributed, it is sociologically more sensible and useful to see the work as the joint creation of all these people.

(2) The definition makes problematic the coordination of the activities of all these people. The solution to the problem which furnishes the best possibility of uniting the work of humanists and social scientists is that people coordinate their activities by reference to a body of conventional understandings embodied in common practice and in the artifacts of the world (Gombrich, 1960; Meyer, 1956; Smith, 1968). The notion of conventions, while intuitively understandable, needs more analysis. Here it is sufficient to say that conventions make possible the cooperative activities through which the world's products come about, and make them possible with a relatively low investment of time and energy.

(3) Common usage so strongly suggests that there will, at any time, be only one art world that it is necessary to insist on the most circular element in the definition: that a world consists of those whose activity is essential to produce whatever they produce. In other words, we do not start by defining art and then looking for the people who produce the objects we have thus isolated. Instead, we look for groups of people who cooperate to produce things that they, at least, call art; having found them, we look for all the other people who are also necessary to that production, gradually building up as complete a picture as we can of the entire cooperating network that radiates out from the works in question. Thus, it is perfectly possible, theoretically and empirically, for there to be a great many such worlds coexisting at one time. They may be unaware of each other, in conflict, or in some sort of symbiotic or cooperative relation. They may be relatively stable, the same people continuing to cooperate in much the same way over some period of time, or quite ephemeral, coming together only on the one occasion when they produce a particular work. People may participate in only one world or in a large number,

either simultaneously or serially. Only aesthetic or philosophical prejudice, not any scientific necessity, requires us to choose one of the existing worlds as authentic and dismiss the others as less important or less than the real thing.

(4) An organized world is the source of whatever social value is ascribed to a work (Danto, 1964; Dickie, 1971; Levine, 1972). The interaction of all the involved parties produces a shared sense of the worth of what they collectively produce. Their mutual appreciation of the conventions they share and the support they mutually afford one another convinces them that what they are doing is worth doing, that the products of their effort are valid works.

### TYPES OF ARTISTS

We can describe participants in worlds with reference to the degree to which they participate in or depend on the regularities of behavior of which the collective action of the world consists and on which its results depend. I will focus on those participants who are ordinarily and officially viewed as "artists" (in the ideologies of their respective worlds). In principle, the same sort of description could be given of other participants in these systems of collective action. Let us begin by considering some common-sense, empirically recognizable types of artists, seeing what understanding we can gain of their work by placing them in the context of worlds and conventions just described.

#### Integrated Professionals

Imagine, for any particular organized art world, a canonical art work, a work done exactly as the conventions current in that world dictate. A canonical art work would be one for whose doing all the materials, instruments, and facilities have been exactly prepared. It would be a work of art for whose doing every cooperating person—performers, providers of supplies, support personnel of all kinds, and especially audiences—

have been exactly trained. Such a work could be created with a minimum of difficulty, since everyone involved would know exactly what to do. People would provide the proper materials, performers would know just how to interpret the directions given them, museums would have exactly the right kind of space and lighting for the work to appear in, audiences would be able to respond with no difficulty to the emotional experiences the art work created, and so on. Such a work might, of course, be relatively dull for everyone involved, since by definition it would contain nothing novel, unique, or attention-getting. Nothing would violate expectations. Thus, no tension would be created and no emotion aroused. An extreme, a caricature, of such a work might be the background music played in restaurants or the paintings one finds on motel walls.

Envision, too, a canonical artist, an artist fully prepared to produce, and fully capable of producing, the canonical art work. Such an artist would be fully integrated into the art world as it is. He would cause no trouble for anyone who had to cooperate with him, and all his works would find a large and responsive audience. We might call him an "integrated professional" (Blizek, 1974).

In any organized art world, of necessity, most of the artists will be integrated professionals. Because they know, understand, and habitually use the conventions on which their world runs, they fit easily into all the standard activities that world carries on. If they are composers, they write music performers can read and play on available instruments; if they are painters, they use available materials to produce works which, in size, form, design, color, and content, "fit" into the available spaces and into people's ability to respond appropriately. They stay within the bounds of what potential audiences and the state consider respectable. Such regular ways of doing things cover every aspect of the production of art works: materials, forms, contents, modes of presentation, sizes, shapes, durations, and modes of financing. In using and conforming to the conventions in these matters, integrated professionals make it possible for art works to be made relatively efficiently and easily. Coordina-

tion of the activities of large numbers of people can occur with a minimum investment of time and energy, simply by identifying the conventions everyone should follow.

Everyone in an art world would, all other things equal, prefer to deal with integrated professionals. It makes life much easier. But everyone connected with an art world also expects that world not to produce exactly the same work over and over, but to produce at least variations and innovations, even though the differences may actually be quite small between successive works. A fully professionalized art world may become enslaved by the conventions through which it exists, producing what we would call (if we take the results seriously) hack work. Most members of any art world are probably considered, and consider themselves, hacks, though they might prefer to use terms like "competent professional," "journeyman," and the like. The academic painter, at the height of his academy's ascendancy, exemplified the type, as did the successful playwright in Broadway's heyday during the 1930s. White and White (1965) discuss just such people in their analysis of French painting, reminding us that the bulk of professional painters in the nineteenth century were completely oriented to what they nicely term the "art machine" of the time.

Those artists who are seen by members of the world as more creative, those who produce the marginal variations and innovations which do not violate convention sufficiently to disrupt coordinated actions, are, of course, not called hacks. Whatever the positive term used in their world, we might perhaps best think of them as contemporary stars. This suggests the general point that each of the types we will discuss contains examples both of artists and work regarded as unoriginal and worthless and of artists and work regarded as first-rate.

In emphasizing the relative ease with which integrated professionals get work done, I do not mean to suggest that they never have any trouble. Though the participants in an art world have a common interest in getting things done, they also have private interests which often conflict. Many conflicts arise between different categories of participants and are, in fact,

chronic and traditional. Playwrights and composers want their works performed as they envision them. But actors and musicians like to perform those works so that they show themselves off to best advantage. Authors would like to revise their novels right through the stage of page proofs, but that costs more money than publishers like to invest. The diaries and letters of artists are filled with complaints over the intransigence of those they work with and with accounts of bitter struggles over such points.

### **Mavericks**

Every organized art world produces mavericks. Mavericks are artists who have been part of the conventional art world of their time, place, and medium, but who found it unacceptably constraining, to the point where they were no longer willing to conform to its conventions. Where the integrated professional accepts almost completely the conventions of his world, the maverick retains some loose connection to that world but refuses to conform, thus making it impossible for himself to participate in the world's organized activities.

Not surprisingly, mavericks experience grave difficulties in getting their work done. Sometimes the difficulties are so great that the work cannot be realized, only planned. For example, much of Charles Ives' work received no real performances during his working lifetime (Cowell and Cowell, 1954; Perlis, 1974). If the works are realized, the maverick accomplishes this only by ignoring the established institutions of the art—the museums, concert halls, publishers, theaters—and establishing his own. Writers print and distribute their own work. Visual artists devise works which cannot be exhibited in museums—earth works, conceptual art—thus escaping what they feel to be the tyranny of museum directors and financial supporters. Actors, playwrights, and directors develop street theater forms. Artists in general recruit followers, disciples, and helpers, often from the ranks of the untrained and the unprofessional, and

create their own network of cooperating personnel, even to the point of recruiting new audiences.

Even so, mavericks have come from an art world, were trained in it, and remain to some important degree oriented to it. That is evident in the selectivity with which they deal with existing conventions. It seems that the maverick's intention is to force recognition from that world, requiring it to adapt to the conventions the maverick has established as the basis of his work rather than him adapting to theirs. For mavericks do not renounce all, or even very many, of the conventions of their art. If James Joyce was iconoclastic with respect to literary and even linguistic forms of his day, he still wrote a finished book. He did not, for instance, write a work like Joe Gould's *History of the World*, which among other things would never be finished and not all of which may have been written down (Mitchell, 1965); nor did he devise a literary form that would be chanted instead of being printed or one in which his own personal calligraphy would be an important element of his composition. He wrote a perfectly recognizable European book. Similarly, creators of earth works are, after all, creating sculpture; the materials, the scale, and the setting of their works are unconventional, but the concerns with form and volume are shared with more canonical sculptors.

Ives had such innovative notions of melody, tonality, and performance standards that contemporary musicians could not or would not play his work, and audiences did not like the little of it they heard. Yet Ives wrote for conventional instruments; he used normal forms of instrumentation and normal musical forms (the sonata, symphony, and artsong). John Cage and Harry Partsch went much farther than Ives in challenging conventional musical organization.<sup>1</sup> Cage used specially prepared instruments, while Partsch (1949) required that special instruments be built to play his music. They both (and, of course, they are not alone in this) require that performers learn to interpret a new musical notation in order to play what they have written. Cage goes even further than Partsch in requiring that the performer contribute much more to the determination

of what notes will be played and what sounds will be made. While conventional composed music leaves little leeway for the performer in this respect, Cage's instructions are often mere sketches, and the performer must fill out the specific notes and rhythms. For all of these innovations, however, both Cage and Partsch still rely on the notion of the concert as the chief way to present their works to a public. People still buy tickets, file into a hall at an appointed time, and sit quietly while a performance is put on for them.

In short, the maverick orients himself to the world of canonical and conventional art. He puts his mind to changing some of the conventions of its operation and more or less unwittingly accepts all the rest. The work of these innovators often ends up being totally incorporated into the historical corpus of the production of that established art world. People in that world find the innovations useful in producing the variation required to rescue art from ritual. Innovations become more acceptable through familiarity and association. Their essential fit with all the other conventions makes it relatively easy to assimilate them. Mavericks deal with the same people who manufacture the material used by more conventional artists, but demand new things of them, as they do of the support personnel others rely on. They look to be supported and appreciated by the same audiences more conventional artists work for, although they demand more work from audiences by virtue of the increased difficulty of responding to the new and unfamiliar works.

Because maverick work shares so much with conventional work, we can see the more general point that maverickness is not an inherent characteristic of a work, but rather is to be found in the relation between the work and the conventional art world to which it is related. Maverick work chooses to be difficult for that world to assimilate, a difficulty that world refuses to take on, at least for a while. If the contemporary art world does adapt, then the artist and the work lose their maverick quality, since the conventions of the world encompass what was once foreign. Because the maverick becomes the conventional, and not just because life offers us many inter-



mediate cases, it is hard to draw a line between the innovating integrated professional and the maverick.

Just as not all the work of integrated professionals is thought to be of high quality, so very few mavericks gain the respect of the art world they are quarrelling with. In fact, most participants in that world probably never hear of the vast majority of mavericks, and very few of those who are heard of end up being thought well of. Instead, they remain curiosities whose work may be revived from time to time by interested antiquarians or stimulate the imagination of newcomers. An interesting musical example is the work of Conlon Nancarrow, who creates music for player piano by the unconventional method of punching holes directly into the piano roll.<sup>2</sup> He can thus produce effects such as the chromatic glissando, otherwise unobtainable on the piano and has used these possibilities to create some enormously interesting and moving music. But the innovation has never caught on, and those musicians aware of his work regard it as little more than an interesting curiosity.

### Naive Artists

A third kind of artist, one receiving considerable attention in the visual arts now, is alternately called "primitive," "naive," or "grass-roots." Grandma Moses is the prototype, although she eventually was discovered by the art world and enjoyed quite a vogue (not an uncommon experience for such people). These artists will very likely have had no connection with any art world at all. They do not know the members of the ordinary art world in which works like theirs are produced. They have not had the training that people who ordinarily produce such works have had; and they know very little about the nature of the medium they are working in, its history, conventions, or the kind of work ordinarily produced in that medium. Unable to explain what they do in conventional terms, naive artists typically work alone, for no one else knows how to do what they need done by way of assistance or cooperation, and no language exists in which to explain it. Insofar as they do have help, they must create their own network of cooperation—

recruiting, training, and maintaining a group of people who gradually learn what is needed and how to do it. Most frequently, they succeed at best in recruiting some few people to play the role of appreciators of the work.

I have made the work seem more conventional than it is by suggesting that it fits into such standard categories as painting or musical composition. Often enough it does; Grandma Moses is only one of a large number of primitive painters, whose most famous exemplar is Henri Rousseau. These people know and abide by the conventions of easel painting, painting on conventional-sized canvasses or boards with more or less conventional materials (Bihalji-Merin, 1971).

Many naive artists go far beyond that. Think of Simon Rodia, the man who built the Watts Towers in Los Angeles (Trillin, 1965). The Towers are certainly too enormous a project to be called sculpture yet one would not exactly think of them as architecture either. They consist of several open-work towers, made of reinforced concrete, the tallest over 100 feet. Rodia decorated the towers with a variety of easily available materials: pop bottles, dime store crockery, and so on. He made impressions in the cement with all kinds of kitchen utensils, craftsmen's tools, and so on. He relied on the skills he learned as a tile setter, and his imagery is quite idiosyncratic, although probably more religious than anything else. In any event, the Watts Towers stand as the sole member of their class; there is no other work like them. And that uniqueness suggests what is true—that Rodia, like other naive artists, operated totally outside the conventional cooperative networks which characterize the arts.

Naive artists achieve their idiosyncratic style and create forms and genres which are unique and peculiar because they have never acquired and internalized the habits of vision and thought the professional artist necessarily acquires in the course of training. A maverick has to fight clear of the habits left by professional training, but the naive artist has never had them. Many of the artists who make constructions requiring the kinds

of skills the Watts Towers demanded got their skills as Rodia did, as members of one or another of the building trades. Others have been farmers or general handymen. To put it more generally, societies teach many people numerous skills which can be put to artistic use, but teach them in nonartistic settings and for utilitarian purposes. People who have acquired these skills can then set out on idiosyncratic art enterprises without ever having come in contact with the conventional art world. This may explain why it is hard to find musical examples to parallel the visual ones; it is relatively unusual for people to acquire musical skills in that casual and unprofessional way, because musical skills are so specialized that they are not useful in nonartistic enterprises.

Having had no professional training, and having no contact with the conventional art world, naive artists likewise have not learned the conventional vocabulary of motives and explanations of their work. Since they cannot explain what they are doing in conventional art terminology, and since it can seldom be explained as anything other than art, naive artists frequently have trouble with people who demand an explanation. Not fitting into any conventional category, not legitimated by any authentic connection to an established art world, constructions like the Watts Towers, Clarence Schmitt's sculpture garden, Cheval's Palais Ideal, and the hundreds of similar works now being turned up by interested critics do require explanation (Cardinal, 1972). Since the makers provide none, they appear as the visible signs of eccentricity or madness. The maker easily becomes the object of ridicule, abuse, and even violence. Rodia was tormented by neighborhood kids and his Towers vandalized. Cheval (1968: 11), describing how he began to collect stones for the Palais, says: "Before long, local tongues began to wag . . . People actually thought I was mentally ill. Some laughed at me; some reproached or criticized me." When these artists do try to explain themselves and their work (and many do not), the explanations, having no conventional basis in some widely shared vocabulary of motive, may give substance to the suspicions of eccentricity. Here are some examples (Blasdel, 1968):

Mr. Tracy, of Wellington, Kansas, built a house out of bottles. His explanation of it was: "I saw a bottle house in California and they used only one kind of bottle, so I did them one better and used all kinds."

Herman Rousch, a farmer in Cochrane, Wisconsin, has made a work of art out of his house and grounds and explains what he has done thus: "Like it says, Mister, a mon should leave a few tracks and not just cancelled welfare checks."

S.P.D. Dinsmoor of Lucas, Kansas, says, "If the Garden of Eden (his name for the work of art he has constructed) is not right, Moses is to blame. He wrote it up and I built it."

Fred Smith said, "I'm 166 years old and I'll be better when I'm 175. It has to be in the man. You have to be almost gifted to do what I have done."

Just as the maverick quality of art lies in its relation to the conventional art world, so does the primitive quality of naive art. It is not the character of the work itself, but rather that it has been made without reference to the constraints of contemporary convention, that distinguishes naive art. This also makes understandable an otherwise knotty problem: does Grandma Moses' work remain naive once she has been discovered and the work exhibited in museums and galleries to critical acclaim? To the degree that she, or any "discovered" primitive, continues to ignore the constraints of the world into which she has now been incorporated, it remains what it was. To the degree that the artist begins to take account of what her new colleagues expect of her and are prepared to cooperate with, she has become an integrated professional, even though she has been integrated into a world which has somewhat changed itself to accommodate the variations she has created.

### Folk Art

In the final case I want to consider, that of folk art, no professional art community exists. Indeed, what is done is not really thought of as art at all, at least not by any of the people involved in its production, although people from outside the community or culture may find artistic merit in the work.

Within the community, most people, or most people of a particular age and sex group, do that kind of work. They recognize that some do better at it than others, but that is a minor consideration; the main thing is that it be done to some minimum standard which is good enough for the purpose at hand. An excellent example in our culture is the singing of "Happy Birthday" at birthday parties. It matters very little if some of the singers are out of tune or tempo, as long as it gets sung; any competent participant in the culture can manage an acceptable version.

Folk artists (if we can speak of the community members who engage in these activities as artists at all) resemble canonical artists in being well integrated into a world in which the conventions of their art are well known and easily made the basis of collective action. No one finds it surprising that mountain women make patchwork quilts, and the kind they make and the standards by which they are judged are reasonably well expressed among all the members of their community. Peggy Goldie, an anthropologist who studied the aesthetic values of the inhabitants of Oaxaca, a village, tells of learning very quickly to distinguish which of the women potters in the village had made any particular pot, thinking by this means to demonstrate to these women that she understood the character of their artistic activity. Wishing to show off her skill, she one day remarked, "Oh, you made that pot, didn't you, Maria?" Maria first said she did not know whether she had made the pot and, on being prodded about it, said in effect that she could not understand why anybody would want to know a thing like that. In short, these women produced beautiful pottery, but were not oriented to our conventional notion that a person who makes a beautiful thing would be glad to be praised for it and would take the responsibility for having made it. The notion of a unique and artistic connection between artist and art work simply did not exist.

Because the artist constructs his art work with the help of other people who know just as much about it as he does, everyone being capable of playing any of the parts involved,

cooperation comes about easily and with almost no friction, other than the ordinary friction of human intercourse. Bruce Jackson (1972) describes the way black convicts in Texas prisons coordinate their effort through the use of work songs, the songs providing the rhythm by which such activities as cutting down a tree can be safely carried out. Some men, he says, are better leaders of the singing than others, and everybody prefers it when they do the leading. Nevertheless, even a person who is not a good leader will serve the purpose as long as he can keep time. Anyone can lead, because everyone knows the song already. The leader's main function is simply to sing out the verses that they should use in singing the chorus. The leader takes the verses from a large pool of verses known to be parts of that song; everyone knows all the parts, and they need not be done in any particular order, nor need any particular number or combination of them be done on any particular occasion.

Of course, despite the similarity of all this to a conventional art world, in which everyone similarly knows his place and how to carry on the activity to be done, these folk communities are not artistic communities. They differ precisely in that the activity itself has some other purpose than an aesthetic one, and none of the people involved are "professional" artists. The good performers are not considered to be anyone special, but rather just ordinary community members who happen to be a little better at what is being done than the other members of the community.

### CONCLUSION

The four modes of being oriented to an art world—as integrated professional, maverick, grassroots artist, or folk artist—suggest a general scheme for interpreting the way people can be oriented to any kind of social world, no matter what its focus or its conventional round of collective activities. Insofar as the world has built up routine and conventional ways of

carrying on those activities its members usually engage in, people can participate in it as fully competent members who know how to do easily and well whatever needs to be done. Most of what is done in that world will be done by people like that—the generalized analogue of integrated professionals. If the activity is one that every member of the society, or every member of some large subcategory engages in, the folk artist may provide a closer analogue. Some people, knowing what is conventional, will nevertheless choose to behave differently, with predictable ensuing difficulties in involvement in the world's collective activities. Some few of the innovations such people propose may be taken up by the larger world from which they have differed, making them into honored innovators (at least in retrospect) rather than cranks. Some will not know of the world's existence, or care much about it, and invent the whole thing for themselves—the generalized version of the naive artist.

In this way, we might say (with rather more warrant than it is usually said) that the world of art mirrors society at large.

## NOTES

1. Cage's music requiring performers to improvise their parts is heard, for example, in "Atlas Eclipticalis," Deutsche Grammophon 137009. One of Partsch's largest works is "Delusion of the Fury," Columbia M2 30576; this album includes a lecture by Partsch, explaining and demonstrating his instruments.

2. Nancarrow's "Studies for Player Piano" are available on Columbia MS 7222.

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