

Misunderstandings & Consequences of Labeling Artists as Self Taught

By: **Kristin G. Congdon**

I have championed artists who have been invisible and underrepresented for decades. Sometimes these artists have been labeled by race or ethnicity and many of them have fallen into the categories of folk and self-taught. When writing about artists who have fallen into one of these categories, I have often tried to avoid labeling them, hoping to have them viewed simply (and complexly) as artists worthy of (high) art consideration. However, I have found that sometimes labeling has been necessary and even useful. Labeling helps a writer, curator, scholar, educator, or arts facilitator focus on a particular cultural group, worldview, or historical era. It gives context to an artist from an unfamiliar cultural group and can help illuminate an artist's message. But it can also box an artist into a limited space. And in some cases, labeling can develop an idea about education that may be debilitating, misleading, and wrong. This article is about labeling artists (most especially artists of color or from difficult circumstances) as "self-taught," which is wrought with misunderstanding and riddled with negative consequences for the artist and for the educational process.

The term "self-taught" is often used instead of the term "folk art." It draws attention to a creative person isolated from his or her cultural context and implies that the artist is more of an individual than a group member who works in a particular cultural tradition. When writing about artists who come from specific cultural communities, I have often used the term "folk," partly because I have aligned myself with folklorists and their approach to contextualizing art and artists. I also recognized that the term "folk" can apply to all of us, and in 1985, I even wrote an article claiming that the so-called fine art world was just another folk group (Congdon, 1985). Since we in the West value individualism over community (often to our detriment), recognizing the cultural context of an artist, in my mind, helped balance and expand our understanding of art, education, and our creative expressions. It was my hope that eventually the term "folk" would become obsolete; if it were applied to everyone, then it would apply to no one specifically.¹ (My goal, obviously, hasn't caught on.) I have continued to use the term "folk artist," when a label seems necessary, usually due to the context in which I am writing or speaking, because it was far better than other labels such as "primitive," "unsophisticated," "naïve," "visionary," "vernacular," and "unsophisticated." Some of these terms are derogatory; others could describe work by disparate groups of artists. The descriptor, however, that is currently most ubiquitous and troubling to me is the term "self-taught artists," an alternative term to "folk artists." It is used in an effort to suggest that these artists' works seem not to relate to any particular cultural community.² This term is troublesome for a number of reasons.

1 My goal was to rid us of high and low art categories that reflect not only on how art is valued, but also on how artists are seen and valued.

2 The term "outsider" is also ubiquitous and troublesome. It has been debated at length and isn't often used in academic circles anymore. Most scholars recognize how problematic it is, even if they use it.

Cultural Context Exists for Everyone

All artists come from cultural contexts and their work reflects those contexts, even when it deals with a philosophical issue that can be universally applied. The term “self-taught” has been used to describe an artist as innovative and unlike anyone else, whereas the term “folk” establishes an artist within a cultural context.³ Both labels have been used to describe the same artists, such as is the case with Bessie Harvey and Purvis Young. These artists made work that is unique and readily attributed to them; their work also speaks to their heritage and is best understood in context. Harvey worked primarily with wood, tree branches, trunks, and roots, which she adorned with varying found objects including glass, marbles, jewelry shells, and human hair. Her sculptures, she explained, were “soul people;” her inspiration came from the Bible and her African heritage (Perry, 1989, p. 46). Likewise, Purvis Young’s paintings are culturally based and need to be understood as rooted in his Overtown, Florida, an African American and Afro-Caribbean neighborhood in Miami. His works are filled with energetic scenes from his neighborhood, buildings, street people, trucks, wild horses, pregnant women, and angels. Painted on reused wood he gathered from the streets, they are usually framed with various strips of old wood nailed to the board. Often referred to as self-taught, Young educated himself by reading art books from the public library and watching educational television. He also very carefully observed the people in his community (Congdon & Bucuvalas, 2006). Nicario Jiménez learned to make *retablos* from a family member in Peru. After coming to the United States to live, his work began incorporating the lives and political situations he encountered in his adopted land (Congdon & Bucuvalas 2006). Simon Rodia’s *Watt’s Towers* is another good example of work that appears unique and unlike anything anyone has seen before. But research by Daniel Franklin Ward and I. Sheldon Posen found it to be rooted in the Italian Feast of St. Paulinus, also called “The Giglio Festival.” This festival takes place in Italy as well as in the town of Nola, just outside of New York City. Rodia was no doubt influenced by the tower and ship that are paraded through the streets during this festival. Additionally, the artist claimed to have worked at one time with Father Mathias Wernerus on his mosaicked Holy Ghost Park in Dickeyville, Wisconsin (Morgan, 1984). Even the most eccentric and unusual works, if studied carefully, is culturally based.

An artwork’s cultural context can be varied. It could be a museum context, an academic or theoretical context, or a geographical, racial, recreational, religious, or political context. The fear in labeling artists as “folk” is that audiences might think their work isn’t innovative or new, a modernist concept now deconstructed as universally relevant by numerous artists and theorists.⁴ More importantly, if understood fully, artworks labeled “folk” expresses both individual and cultural contexts. Much of it is extremely innovative; the innovation can be found not only in the way an artwork appears but also in the way that it is made, appreciated, and used. The context in which the object is experienced can also lend innovation to the object (Jones, 1972; Congdon, 1986).

³ In 1998, John Howell White and I wrote about problems with labeling some artists as “fine” and others as “folk” when so many artists work from a cultural context and it is the cultural context that is most important in the work. The article is titled “Travel, boundaries, and the movement of culture(s): Explanations for the folk/fine art quandary.”

⁴ Examples include the work of Sherri Levine who photographed the work of famous photographers. Mike Bidlo creates artworks that are as close to being copies of other artists works as possible. Creating painting from Bob Ross television shows has been discussed in depth in *Happy Clouds, Happy Trees: The Bob Ross Phenomenon* by Kristin G. Congdon, Doug Blandy, and Danny Coeyman.

All Artists are Educated

All artists are educated in some way, and artists who are formally schooled don't necessarily attribute their creative inspiration to their academic learning. This could be because many schools and art education settings don't align well with artists' needs. Daniel Nettles (2001) rightly claims that artists are divergent and unorthodox thinkers. They don't easily fit into our (too often) factory-like education systems. Although a good grounding in art history may be useful, Agnes Martin, fearing that it could sway artists from their own ways of creating, once said, "If Picasso crosses your mind while you are painting, it's all over" (quoted in Landi, 2013, p. 34).

Many artists learn their creative skills from family members, but this kind of learning doesn't always translate to them being called "folk" or "self-taught." They are, more simply, artists or designers. For instance, Andrew Rosen, C. E. O. of Theory, the popular clothing line, is a third generation garment-industry entrepreneur. He dropped out of the University of Miami after a year and credits growing up in the business to providing him with the skills he needed to succeed. He explains, "I went to a different kind of school" (quoted in Mead, 2013, p. 88).

Theaster Gates, who currently works to revitalize the South Side of Chicago, learned how to work with his hands and run a business from his father who tarred roofs, operated a barbeque, and owned a four-unit rental property (Austin, 2013). (His undergraduate major was urban planning although he took some ceramic classes; his master's degree was in fine arts and religious studies.) Mike Kelley, who grew up in Detroit as the son of a school janitor, had a strong academic training in art but his inspiration came from other experiences. As a child, instead of playing sports, he learned to sew. He played in a noise band called Destroy All Monsters when he was at the University of Michigan. It was this experience that gave him performance experience. At CalArts he alarmed everyone when he presented wooden birdhouses like he made in his high school shop class for his final show. One of his last works was a public sculpture, a full-scale replica of his childhood home, placed in his destitute hometown of Detroit. His work relates more directly to the abuse he experienced as a child than his formal art education (Cotter, 2013; Schjeldahl, 2013b). He explained, "Since I am an artist, it seemed natural to look at my own aesthetic training as the root of my secret indoctrination in perversity and possibly as the site of my own abuse. My education must have been a form of mental abuse, of brainwashing" (quoted in Kennedy, 2013, p. AR24).⁵

It seems obvious to state that an art school education is only one aspect of an artists' education and some artists reject their education in art or bury in deeply in the past. Most academically trained artists meld it with other cultural experiences.

Academic Education as Unevenly Noted

Many artists (those defined as "fine artists," usually with the descriptor left off), are in fact not academically schooled, but are not labeled self-taught. Van Gogh was basically self-taught (in this context, meaning taught outside school) but he isn't labeled that way. A recent study shows that he learned from an exhaustive method of working and reworking. Although his paintings appear to be spontaneous, they weren't created in a spontaneous manner. Even when he reported to his brother Theo that he had made a painting in one day, further studies shows that it was done in several sessions (Stolz, 2013). Balthus, the Polish French painter was mostly self-taught, as he learned to paint by copying frescos and paintings by master artists, mostly Piero della Francesca and Gustave Courbet (Schjeldahl, 2013a). Nicole Holofcener, whose father was Woody Allen's producer and manager, got an early education in

⁵ Mike Kelley committed suicide on January 31, 2012.

filmmaking by being on Allen's sets (Schulman, 2013). In a similar way, John Romita, Jr.'s parents, who both worked for Marvel Comics, inspired their son to become a comic artist like them (Gustines, 2014). Richard Linklater watched six hundred films a year when he was in his early twenties to learn about filmmaking (Heller, 2014). Sculptor Alice Aycock's father, who worked in construction, inspired her to build large things (Loo, 2014). Julie Traymor was greatly influenced by her time making art in Bali in her youth (Dominus, 2013), and Steve Jobs learned good design, in part, from living in a home built by Joseph Eichler (Isaacson, 2011).⁶ Photographer Jessica Lehrman had hippies for parents who believed in self-directed education. She learned her photography through travel, having to adapt and figure out things by herself (Lehrman, 2014).

David Salle champions self-education. Talking about himself and many of his artist friends, he explains:

You mustn't underestimate the extent to which all this was a process of educating ourselves. Our generation was pathetically educated, just pathetic beyond imagination. I was better educated than many. Julian [Schnabel] was totally uneducated....We had to educate ourselves in a hundred different ways. (Quoted in Malcolm, 2013, p. 5).

Numerous other so-called fine artists (or, more simply, artists) note that they are self-taught, and yet, they are not formally labeled this way. Yayoi Kusami dismisses the influence of her four years of study at Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts, as she disliked the hierarchal approach and attention to minute precision so she frequently skipped classes. Although she was surrounded by artists in New York City and often visited museums, she claims she is a self-taught artist who developed her work entirely on her own (Kusama, 2011). Still, no one calls her a self-taught artist. Alma Allen, whose work was in the 2014 Whitney Biennial calls himself self-taught in lieu of the term "outsider," which is too often association with being insane (Tyrnauer, 2014).

The tendency is to ignore the fact that some artists learn their artistic skills in ways other than academic schooling, even when they refer to themselves as self-taught. Artists who do get labeled as self-taught are overwhelming Black⁷ and most often from the South. Art historians, curators, collectors, and others who come from outside the parameters of the creative spaces of these artists generally impose this terminology on them.

Anyone can pick up a book on self-taught art and find a disproportionate number of the artists to be Black. Eugene Metcalf, as early as 1983, saw problems with how Black artists were associated with the debilitating stereotype of being labeled as self-taught and were therefore assumed to be uneducated. The terminology associates them with being unaware of artistic constraints, and therefore somewhat freer than academically trained artists. He writes, "Before the 1920s blacks were condemned for being childlike and shiftless. After the war they were applauded for being spontaneous and free" (Metcalf, 1983, p. 277). The association continues, equating primitive or uneducated behavior to Blacks. When some artists (mostly White) are labeled as artists, even though they acknowledge learning their

⁶ Eichler homes were designed for low-income people. They were straightforward in their design with good crafting.

⁷ The term "Black" is capitalized in this article; it refers to people of the African diaspora. Although academics and activists have noted that it is proper to use the term as capitalized, major newspapers, books, and publication styles reject the capitalization. In an *New York Times* Op-Ed piece, Lori L. Tharp (2014) writes "Black should always be written with a capital B. We are indeed a people, a race, a tribe. It's only correct" (p. A23). In keeping with this practice, I have also capitalized the term "White" when referring to a group of people.

artistic practices outside academia, and others are labeled self-taught (disproportionately Black), one must question why this discrepancy takes place.⁸

Numerous artists could also be listed here who regard their academic education as being helpful or crucial to being artists. Artists who were schooled at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina, for example, repeatedly note how important their education was. The school was successful in producing and attracting many well known artists including Robert Rauschenberg, Anni and Joseph Albers, Buckminster Fuller, Elaine and William de Kooning, Peter Voulkos, and Ray Johnson, among others (Gefter, 2013; Katz, 2013). In most all cases, these artists and others who are academically educated will claim other influences besides their schooling. For example, Erica Baum was primed to be an artist well before she attended Yale University as she drew constantly as a child. Her interest in anthropology and literature has been key to her art making, as were her travels to Kenya and Japan. She readily credits the filing jobs she had as a teenager as being hugely influential as were London billboards, newspaper headlines, blackboards, card catalogs, and books (Stillman, 2013).

When asked what influenced them as artists, artists don't often note their art school experiences as their most relevant inspiration. Instead, they talk about their parents, hardships, community and environmental influences, museum trips, and numerous other experiences before they talk about their schooling. It is noteworthy that so many artists don't credit their formal training for their creative foundation.

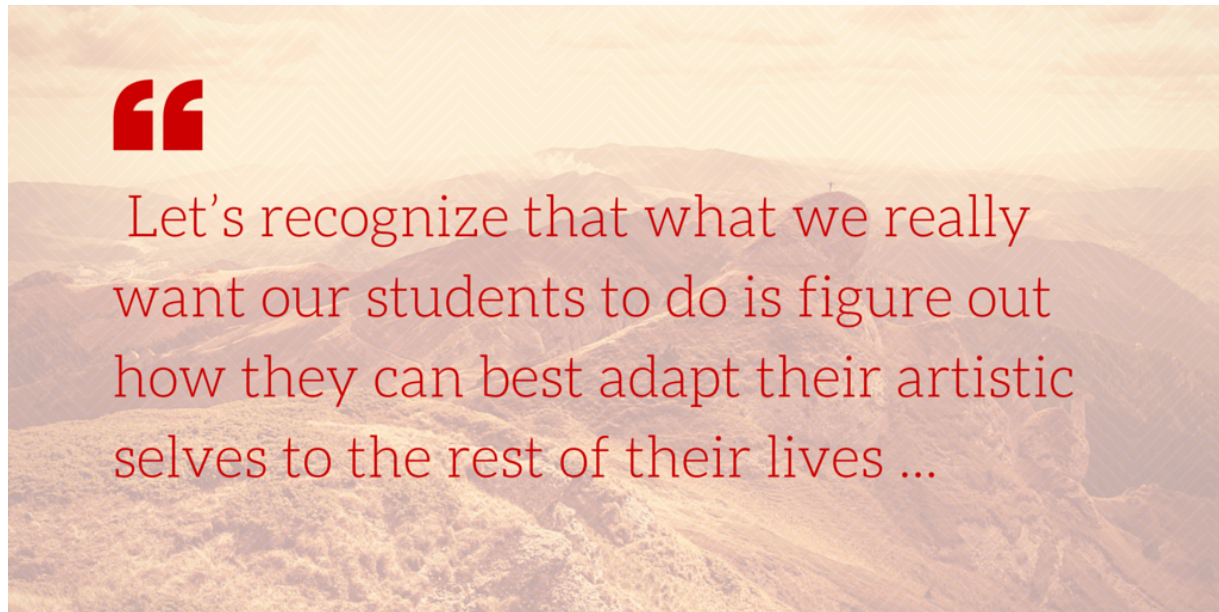
The self-taught label creates a false dichotomy that an artist is either academically schooled or not schooled. This perspective implies a simplistic notion about the education of artists. Historically, there have been numerous ways artists learn their skills. Just because someone studies in an art school does not make him or her an artist and someone can become an artist without having any academic training whatsoever. School-based educational backgrounds should not directly determine how an artist is labeled and valued; one kind of art education is not necessarily better than another. And if someone didn't go far in school, it doesn't mean that person is uneducated.

Unintended Consequences of the Label "Self-Taught Artist"

The term "self-taught" has created a class of artists who are overly associated with being poor and educationally unknowing. Being self-taught is also disproportionately associated with being Black. It further assumes that being non-academically educated allows for a worldview that is less "true" to a mainstream (read as elite White) way of seeing. The so-called self-taught artist can easily become quaint, charming, or at least from the mainstream art world perspective, the "other." It therefore perpetuates racist connotations and ideas about education that are detrimental to educational diversity, how we see and value knowledge, and how an artist can and should be educated. Labels communicate ideas that aren't always analyzed. While individuals who use the term "self-taught" to describe a certain category of artists, they do so partly in ignorance as to what the term connotes, and partly to the detriment in acknowledging and valuing the multiple ways that artists can be educated. Artists can be, and are, educated in numerous ways. Art educators need to recognize this fact and develop curriculum accordingly.

⁸ A quick look at the racial breakdown of Black and non-Blacks in *Passionate Visions of the American South: Self-Taught Artists from 1940 to the Present*, the well regarded book by Alice Rae Yelen (1993) includes 50 artists who are African American and 34 who are seemingly all or mostly White.

Schooling in the visual arts is being questioned, at all levels, but especially in higher education. Contemporary art critic Dave Hickey has repeatedly said that you can't teach someone to make art. "There is no knowledge there," he claims. "It's a proposition about how things should look, and it doesn't contain any truth" (quote is from Fendrich, 2013, p. B10). Hickey knows that art comes from culture and he enjoys it when an object is honest in its representation or interpretation of one's experience in the world. For the record, I believe that Hickey is incorrect in his assessment; there are some things about art that can be taught. However, an academic art education is but one aspect of some artists' cultural experience and art learning.



Just as no one is solely self-taught, no one becomes an artist simply because he or she gets an academic art education. Still, we can't deny the importance of a good art education or the vast and relevant experiences we all have outside school. We must recognize the myriad ways we all learn. Everyone participates in folk groups and everyone is self-taught in that they reflect on their daily experiences, interpret and act on varying encounters, and build on and change their values, beliefs structures, and personalities. Learning takes place sometimes without us knowing it. It's part of our everyday experiences, like figuring out what's hot and cold or how to be safe when crossing a street. Other kinds of learning, such as drawing with perspective or successfully performing an artwork, takes effort and we don't learn these kinds of lessons if we don't want to. Academic experiences in art can be life changing, but they can also be debilitating or inconsequential to an artist's primary influences. But even when school-based experiences are excellent, they are not the sum total of what goes into an artist's work. Both the artist and the educational process are filled with complexity. Let's get rid of the "self-taught" label. It doesn't really describe anything well and it sends the wrong messages.

And while we are disposing of that label, we as art educators must do better at recognizing and incorporating our student's life experiences into our lessons. We should celebrate their varied cultural contexts and diverse ways of learning. By incorporating more varied artists into our presentations, we can open up the ways in which students have permission to explore their own ways of interacting in the world. Let's recognize that what we really want our students to do is figure out how they can best adapt their artistic selves to the rest of their lives and how they can teach themselves to reflect, learn, and explore in ways that better themselves in our increasingly complex world.

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