

Very Like Art:
Self-Taught Art from an Ethological Perspective
Ellen Dissanayake

While writing this essay, I happened to travel to Baltimore, and decided to visit the recently-opened American Visionary Art Museum. There I was struck not only by the many intriguing works displayed in the inaugural *Tree of Life* exhibition (which included examples from some artists represented in this volume), but with their intrinsic appeal to a broad audience. In contrast to the typical art museum fare, the “visionary” artists’ works are interesting to virtually everyone, from child to octogenarian, laborer to aristocrat, philistine to aesthete. People inspect each work closely and seriously. Their mood seems to be one of admiration and wonder, both that such works could have been conceived of and that someone then could and would actually make, for example, a violin and bow from matchsticks, or a lavishly detailed miniature furnished house from bits of wood, leaf, seeds, bark, and other natural materials.

Generally, however, in modern mercantile societies like ours, solitary, painstaking, unrewarded activities like these are considered to be foolish because they are without use or profit. In other words, they are very like “art,” as we

have come to think of it. Yet I found it ironic that the strange, extravagant, and often cryptic creations of largely unlettered and untutored men and women should capture our attention and provoke our fascination in a way that works by the most highly trained and acclaimed professional artists may not.

What is it that we are appreciating? Certainly the works in the AVAM, and in this volume, are as disparate as the labels attached by the art world to their makers,¹ and their motives (and people’s responses) are no doubt just as diverse. I might suggest, however, that what appears most to characterize the *artists* as a group is a lack of self-consciousness, especially when compared to mainstream artists, and their generally humble and obscure origins: we respond in some measure, perhaps, to their very artlessness. Hence the labels frequently applied to self-taught art often reflect notions of innocence, primality, and marginality. What most characterizes the *works* is varying degrees of prodigiousness, meticulousness, and private fantasy or compulsion—hence attributions and responses that find value and authenticity in the primacy of instinct, necessity, visionary insight, or even madness.

Since these features also variously characterize works made by artists in other traditions (say in premodern and folk societies, in diverse religious or mystical contexts, and by any number of nineteenth and twentieth century artists under the cultural influence of Romanticism), I hesitate to make too much of them or even to suggest that their makers constitute a definable group. Indeed, in recent years, we in academe have been roundly castigated by our colleagues for categorizing, appropriating, commodifying, and thereby implicitly being patronizing toward such artists, just as we have been well apprised of the unsavory sources for our attraction to the lives and art of "simpler" people—like those in premodern societies (Price; Steiner; Torgovnick). Heaven forfend that we use terms like "innocence," "primalism," "marginality," and the like and inadvertently reveal our unconscious or unexamined sexist, racist, and elitist preconceptions.

I will take up these accusations at the end of my essay, and for now point out once more that the fact remains that, for well or ill, both art world sophisticates and the casual museum visitor find self-taught art and artists fascinating. For the former, participants in a complex and overly self-conscious art world, it may be all too easy to exoticize and even exalt those who make art at the margins, finding them pure and uncorrupted, in touch with virgin springs whose flavors we are too jaded to taste. But what about the viewers who, like the artists, are not particularly au courant with artworld productions, controversies, and theories?

I would like to suggest that in addition to the obvious reactions they, and we, feel (e.g., amazement that these prodigal and gratuitous objects should exist at all, fascination with another's revealed subjectivity, titillation at their very weirdness and excessiveness, wonder at

such manifestations of patience and skill), the works and lives of self-taught artists bring us face to face with the human art impulse. If capital-A Art (as we know it today, a concept delineated by Enlightenment philosophers) is socially constructed, we see in the activities of children, prehistoric and premodern people, and the men and women in the AVAM or this volume, something very like art whose existence and underlying motivation seem not to be only socially-constructed but also, ineluctably, subjectively generated.

All of us, I think, sophisticate or curious passer-by, are touched and intrigued by the fact that, without apparent reward apart from self-reward, non-artists (that is, non-Artists, non-specialists) have been moved to mark or elaborate some kinds of ordinary experience and make these *extraordinary*, to give form to and embellish their vital concerns or compelling preoccupations, to make manifest their inner visions. Faced with their creations, it is difficult to avoid originary questions: from where does the need come to do these sorts of things? Is it common or rare? Why are people moved to make the things that are like nothing else and very like art?

A Behavior of Art

Critical essays about self-taught art have tended to treat it like other cultural products—that is, discussing either its social or aesthetic meaning. Here, however, rather than considering self-taught art as an artifact of society, culture, or even individual psychology (all of which it, of course, is), I would like to approach it from a broader, more inclusive perspective than that of the current academic or critical art scene. I will consider art, including self-taught art, ethnologically—that is, as a universal biological activ-

ity of the human species, based in precultural precursors.

Derived from studies of animal behavior, an ethological approach attempts to understand why people everywhere have done and continue to do certain characteristic things—form families, give gifts, perform sacrifices, wage wars, laugh, weep, dance, sing—and make art. In this view, humans everywhere display, like other animals, an underlying species nature (“human nature”) composed of tendencies to engage in certain characteristic kinds of behavior that persist because they contributed to their survival in ancestral, Pleistocene, environments. Among these evolved, biologically-endowed, behavioral tendencies is one that can be identified as “art,” or—better—“artification” (since we have no other term for what we do when we make or do art). Unlike other approaches, art in an ethological perspective is viewed not as an object (e.g., a painting, assemblage, installation), a quality of an object (e.g., aesthetic value, beauty, skill), or a sociocultural label assigned to some objects or qualities, but as a *behavior*—a way of acting upon or treating objects and the world (Dissanayake, “Chimera”; *Homo Aestheticus; What Is Art For?*).

Thus, although *art*—the concept—may today be a contested, confused, and highly qualified term, *artmaking* or “*artifying*”—the behavior or activity, yet to be described—is observably a widespread human attribute. We see it, or its residue, in human societies from prehistory to the present and in individuals from children to elders, especially in premodern groups.

Outside ancestral environments—which, however, obtained for all but .002 percent of human evolutionary history—conditions may be less conducive or even inimical to evolved propensities. Hence, the apparent sparseness of art and artists in economically modernized soci-

eties may mean only that the tendency is suppressed, insufficiently encouraged by the particular culture. (Also, like any evolved physical or psychological trait, say motor coordination or cautiousness, individuals will vary in the degree to which it is endowed or expressed.)

Such an approach to art may strike some as both too limited and overly general—as other universalizing explanations of human endeavor (e.g., Freudian, Marxist) are now often considered to be. Certainly most ethologists have been disappointingly unhelpful about art, regarding it, if at all, as little more than competitive display. Ask a biologist why people make art, and chances are you’ll be told about peacocks, bowerbirds, and sexual selection. In other animals, beauty, strikingness, adornment, and decoration are usually if not always in the service of attracting mates. Think of the peacock’s splendid tail, outspread and quivering with ardor, or the satin bowerbird’s seductively fashioned entrance to his intended *chambre d’amour*—a platform of yellow leaves and straw placed so that it will glow brightly in the sunlight, bestrewn with blue parrot feathers, blue and yellow blossoms, and insect parts (especially cicada carapaces), with a few landsnail shells dotted fetchingly around the edges (Borgia).

Thus, the peahen, regarding a displaying cock, can judge his quality as a potential sire by the stamina with which he holds his heavy tail erect and vibrating. Its bold, glossy colors further emphasize his health and virility. Bowerbird females prefer males whose bowers have the most feathers, indicating their macho cleverness and success at stealing from other males’ bowers, which by contrast look skimpy and depleted.

It is certainly true that human males in many societies, unwittingly combining the bowerbird

and peacock strategies, adorn themselves with bright paint, shells, feathers, leaves, flowers—sometimes in heavy headdresses—and dance for hours in ceremonial display of beauty and tireless vigor. The best dancers, in the most striking costumes, are reportedly considered by the female spectators to be the most desirable mates.²

Yet despite the fact that some artists may attract mates with their art, and while the human activity of artmaking often is concerned with contriving beauty or strikingness, and with adornment or decoration of self or environment—as with self-taught artists—I will show that the motivation for engaging in it and the circumstances in which it is engaged in are generally different from showing off one's resources to prospective mates, in ancestral people as well as more recent ones.³ And it is in this larger notion of the motivation and circumstances for a behavior of art that its relevance to the activities of self-taught artists lies.

Before examining the creations of self-taught artists from an evolutionary perspective, I must make some apparent digressions into prehistory and infancy, and describe a premodern ceremonial practice, *mbari*. I will then suggest that far from being marginal or weird, self-taught artists are doing in private what their human relatives throughout millennia have evolved to do in socially-channelled ways. In an ethological view, it is non-artists and art-forsaking societies who are marginal.

Making

Hands have been crucial to the human adaptation. The earliest creatures called *Homo* or "human," *Homo habilis*, were given that designation because they were the first hominids to make tools with deliberation—some two and a

half million years ago. (Their australopithecine predecessors picked up handy stones and used them opportunistically, but do not seem to have taken much care to fashion them.)

Stone tools are the earliest cultural artifacts—implements apparently used to obtain and prepare food and eventually, with further improvement and refinement, to scrape skins for shelter and clothing, fashion utensils and vessels, and make weapons. Among the advantages of walking upright is that the already dextrous and flexible primate hand was left free and could be used for other things—to carry, to make gestures, but also to make tools and, unlike other animals, to use tools to make tools. For millennia, human lives were made by human hands: to be human was to make. One might say that until very recently, nothing recognizably human has come down from the past that was not hand-made. While these facts are hardly news, the implications of *making* are important for understanding the emergence of human art.

For example, it is no wonder that working with the hands for one's life has evolved to be an intrinsic source of pleasure and meaning. This is easy to overlook in an age where virtually everything is purchased—manufactured by others. Yet in babies (whose proclivities are ethologically relevant, because each one is born as a natural or "precultural" creature), we see an untaught and unstoppable impetus to reach out to, grasp, handle, and affect the world with their hands. Because the drive to manipulate has critical biological importance, it is something all babies everywhere *need and want* to do. Pleasure in handling, as in later walking, talking, and playing, is hardwired into human nature for very good reason: it predisposes us to be tool users and makers.

In premodern (and preindustrial) societies,

the strong pleasure of handling and then using objects, along with emotional attachment to other people and the equally strong desire to imitate and please them, lead children naturally to make what adults make: implements, vessels, houses, regalia. The universal behavior of play provides opportunities to imitate the activities of adults and thereby learn the ways of one's society. If the adults in a society make and use tools and other artifacts, children will too. If adults do not, then children will not either, and their natural drive to move seamlessly from handling to making will atrophy just as surely as the predisposition to smile or share will wither if not encouraged or mirrored by positive example.

Despite the deformations and deprivations to human nature inflicted by modern life, specialized anatomical and cognitive abilities, and their emotional-social correlates, indicate that the use and making of things manually, and expressing oneself through the hands, is something humans are born to do. Hand-workers of any category are in this respect simply doing what comes naturally.

Making the Ordinary Extraordinary

As humans evolved, it was not enough simply to make things, but in addition to make some of them, in certain circumstances, *artfully*. What this means can be understood best if we avoid using the word "art," with its underlying historical minefield of treacherous assumptions about rarity, remoteness, uselessness, beauty, specialization, hierarchy, privilege, and refinement, and choose a more neutral term. We can begin a discussion of artmaking by claiming that from very early (as long ago as 250,000 years),⁴ humans have been naturally attracted to the *extraordinary* as a dimension of

experience, and that at some point they seem also to have been moved to *make the ordinary extraordinary*—that is, to shape or elaborate everyday, mundane reality, and thereby transform it into something special, different from the everyday.

For example, although evidence can be found in the archaeological record only in remnants of shaped ochre crayons (from 100,000 years ago), the earliest visual "art" may have been body ornamentation. Everywhere humans to some degree make their bodies different from the way they come into the world. As early as seventy thousand years ago some peoples artificially elongated their skulls or filed their teeth. Although this does not sound much like art, it is early evidence of making the ordinary body extraordinary. All humans dress their hair, making it unlike the fur or hair of other animals. Skin is painted or tattooed, bodies pierced, again unlike its natural or ordinary state.⁵

It is important to note that these things are everywhere done *with care* and *from care*. When young people are tattooed or scarified as part of an initiation ceremony, they are not simply slashed or dotted haphazardly. On the contrary, symmetrical patterns and designs are carefully made, even though any old scar would theoretically indicate that one had achieved the new state of adulthood. Everywhere the transformation, which itself is considered important, is demonstrated by making ordinary flesh extraordinary or beautiful. Presumably the circumstances for which our ancestors made things special are—as for premodern people today—overwhelmingly ones that are considered to have life importance. That is, they are *cared about*.

It can be asked why people ever started to do these things, and even more crucially, why

the practice persisted—what real benefits did such activities provide, so that individuals who made the ordinary extraordinary survived better than those who did not bother but left the ordinary as it was.

One reason I can suggest is that if people took the trouble to make important tools special—that is, if they carefully added decorative or magical marks to their spears, shields, and other implements—this “special treatment” would extend to the care they took of these artifacts. The care or control required to fashion and embellish an important tool was an analogue of or metaphor for the care and control one wished to exercise in using it and the value one imbued it with. People who handled their tools sloppily would use them sloppily, and thus be less successful hunters, warriors, and curers. In this sense, art or craft has been an intrinsic part of human technology, not a superfluous addition.

Another evolutionary benefit of making the ordinary more than ordinary is evident in the extraordinary but universal human practice of ceremonial ritual. Though I have never seen it described this way, a ceremony—every ceremony—is a one word term for what is really a whole collection or assembly of arts: song, ordered movement and gesture or dance, poetic language, mime, and spectacle, along with considered visual display.

Why do people in every society engage in ceremonies? A large and rich literature points out how ritual is *liminal*, *limen* being the Latin word for “threshold,” that is, a time of transition between one state and another. The initiate, or ill person, or dead person, for the time of a ceremony, is between the old state and the new. Transitions are times of uncertainty and danger, where everyday rules do not apply. Things can become much better or much

worse; therefore these times are important, treated with respect and care.

Rituals are performed in order to affect an uncertain situation—to restore or assure prosperity, health, victory, successful passage to a new state of being, or to avert misfortune. Because people care about the results, rituals are not performed casually: words, voices, actions, movements, bodies, surroundings, and paraphernalia are made as impressive or sacred or beautiful or extraordinary as they can possibly be. And, as is the case with tools or weapons, this makes the ceremonies work better, though in a communal as well as individual way.

In a contemporary West African ritual, *mbari*, making and making extraordinary come together, and help us to understand the importance of artmaking, as previously described, to human life, especially when vital interests and feelings are engaged.

Mbari

Today, living in a society whose worldview values efficiency, rationality, and the bottom line, it is difficult to justify elaborated ritual behavior, unless like sports events or entertainment extravaganzas it brings in a handsome profit. It is hard to believe that by holding a lavish, expensive ritual ceremony, a small village's prosperity will be enhanced, or that it can thereby avert famine, plague, death, or debilitating warfare. *Mbari*, practiced by the Owerri, a southern Ibo group in Nigeria, uses the labor of thirty to forty of its people, who are secluded in a special enclosure and do no other work toward subsistence: they are instead provisioned and their daily tasks assumed for a two year period by their families. During this time, the designated artists construct a large two-



Figure 11. **Mbari** structure with figures, Nnamawa, Nigeria (Oweri Igbo people), opened c. 1965, photographed 1967, Photo: Herbert M. Cole.

story edifice of mud and decorate it with colored clay designs. In addition, they make from thirty-five to over a hundred large painted figures and place them all around on the "verandah" of the structure (Figure 11). These are modeled of the same clay-like anthill mud used for the walls, all collected at night and then specially pounded and puddled. After the structure with its images is completed, the villagers incur additional expenses, with new clothes, a great feast and dance for visitors, and animal sacrifices.

What seems most extravagant about this two-year endeavor is that after the concluding celebration when the *mbari* house and figures at last are viewed, they are then abandoned, unrepaired and unrestored, to crumble to dust or melt in the rain. The largest mud figure, sculpted and painted last, is Ala, the major

Owerri deity, mother of people, giver of yams, goddess of the earth (Figure 12). It is considered fitting that after the long liminal period of the ritual, the natural environment reassert itself and *mbari* be allowed again to reunite with the very earth of which it was made and which, personified as Ala, called it into being. No need or desire is felt to preserve the ultimate material product of so much expenditure of mental and physical effort, time, money, skill, and ardor.

Throughout human history and prehistory, human societies have engaged in undertakings like this, some more and others less labor-intensive and spectacular. It is difficult to imagine that they would have had adaptive value, or to believe that such herculean efforts had the effects that individuals believed they did. The coming of rain, appearance of game, curing of

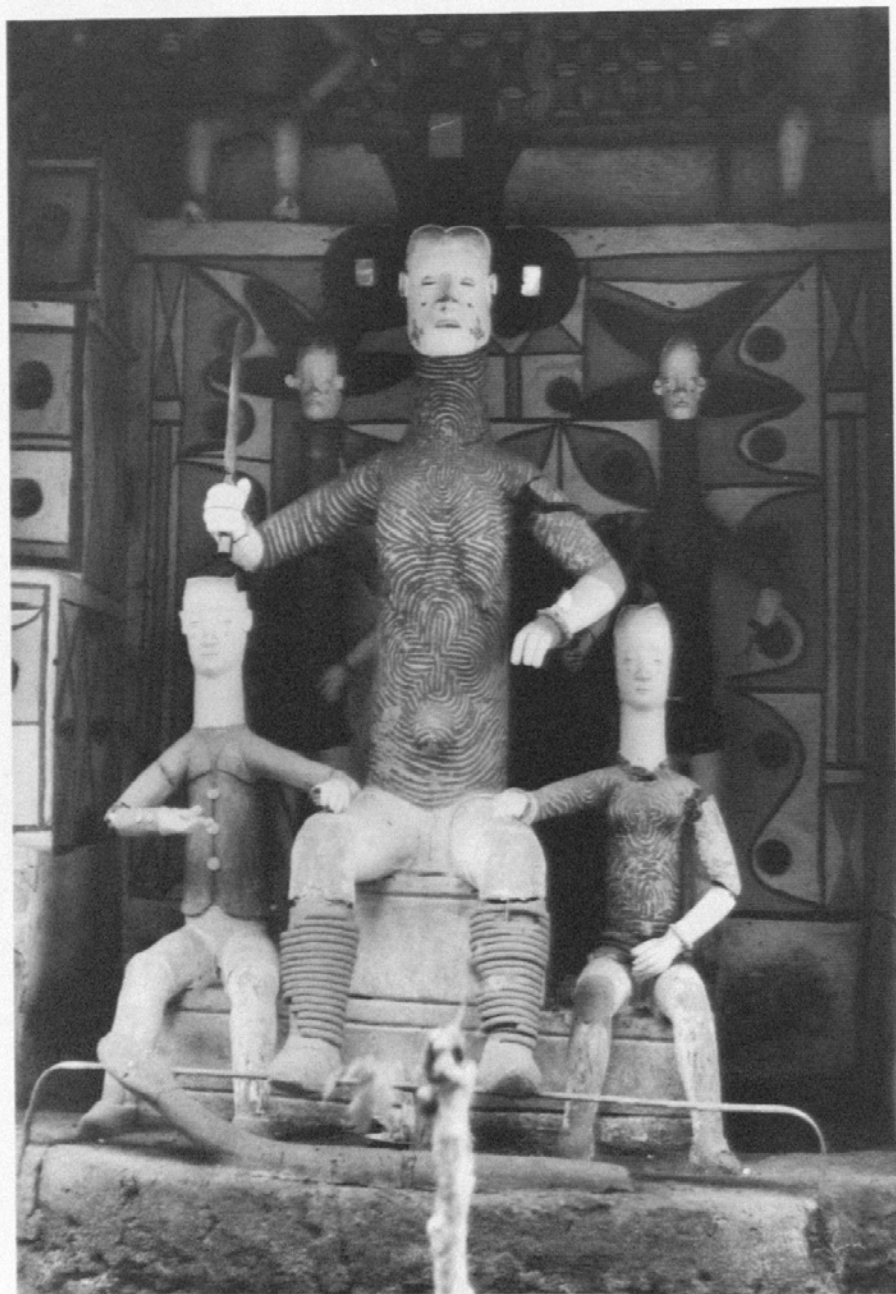


Figure 12. **Mbari** figure, Ala, Goddess of Earth. 1967.
Photo: Herbert M. Cole.

infectious disease, and protection from floods or famine would almost certainly have occurred, or not, with or without these activities.

What appears to be the evolutionary reason for the persistence of lavish ceremonies—which are, in essence, as I said earlier, collections or assemblages of arts, monuments to human making of the extraordinary—is that they mobilized and coordinated and unified the members of a social group, ensuring that they worked together in a common cause, believing in the

validity of their worldview and the efficacy of their action. Individuals in groups who collaborated in confidence and harmony would have prospered more than in those whose members acted individually, selfishly, haphazardly, without reference to communal purpose. And, it should be clear, the arts (again: the products of the human activity of making the ordinary extraordinary) were vehicles for this kind of unification. They riveted joint attention, synchronized bodily rhythms and activities, conveyed messages with conviction and memora-

bility, indoctrinated right attitudes and behavior. The amount of time and effort, the grandeur of outlay and adornment were correlates of a ritual occasion's felt importance, as the *mbari* house and figures, when finally unveiled, became a magnificent emblem of or material testimony to its makers' efforts, and being so splendidly extraordinary was ritually effective.

Self-Taught Art in Ethological Perspective

The foregoing specialized discussions are meant to help us understand the activities of self-taught artists from a broader, ethological perspective. Like prehistoric humans and Owerri villagers, they have not been to art school and may not even call what they do art.⁶ Yet their motivations and activities seem to arise from the same sources—making the ordinary extraordinary, especially with regard to subjects or objects of vital concern. They are manifested similarly, although (because they live in a modern, not premodern or traditional, society) in a predominantly individual rather than communal context.

To begin with, we gain some insight into what they do from appreciating the powerful in-built drive, like that of the infant and young child, to handle materials and see one's efforts have an effect on the world. Today, in the self-taught artist as in all of us, this biological impulse is usually severed from its ancestral context where we were all tool makers and users.⁷ Yet it remains latent, to be called forth by some unforeseen external necessity, or from an inner call. Even in contemporary America, many non-artists know or remember the feeling that builds up and emerges as the desire or need to make something. Most people have experienced the pleasure and satisfaction of making something that did not exist before, of

using their own agency, dexterity, feelings, and judgment to handle and shape physical materials, as well as anticipating its eventual reception by others. (The communicative gestural aspect of hand use is also part of its innate appeal: whatever we make mirrors us back—to others as well as ourselves.)

Although a large part of any artist's motivation is intrinsic enjoyment in handling and making, this only partly accounts for what they do and why. For children, sheer making may be sufficient justification for their efforts.⁸ Adult artists, however, usually have in mind a larger or more important ultimate context for their efforts—to add to a body of work, or a tradition, to bring forth a personal important concern in a significantly arresting manner. We have seen that the purpose and intention—the motivation—of the makers of *mbari* was nothing less than by means of their efforts to ensure prosperity and well-being to themselves and their community. Individual makers of art-like objects today may not have such assurance of their personal effectiveness, but nevertheless begin with that prospect or hope.

If one looks at general and specific characteristics of self-taught art, we see a number of similarities or precedents in the arts of premodern people.

Use of Natural and Simple Materials

Like the *mbari* mud modelers, the self-taught artist frequently uses natural or humble materials that are close to hand, transforming something as ordinary as mud, sticks, scraps of cloth, hubcaps, or empty bottles into an extraordinary object or environment. The mud paintings of Jimmy Lee Sudduth, the souls or figures discerned in branches, roots, and tree stumps by Bessie Harvey and Jesse Aaron, or in stone

by Raymond Coins and William Edmondson, have counterparts in premodern artists all over the world who have found and made manifest divine, human, and animal “presences” in these materials.

The Need to Elaborate, Beautify, Make Extraordinary

A number of self-taught artists—among them, Simon Rodia, Howard Finster, Tressa Prsbrey, Samuel Dinsmoor, David Butler, Mary T. Smith—show what seems an inordinate, even compulsive need to elaborate their immediate or nearby surroundings. They transform ordinary buildings or compounds by means of shiny and glinting materials—glass, metal, stones, paint—carefully placed and patterned. Painted messages on signs emphatically admonish and instruct.

The urge to elaborate easily bodies forth in virtuoso treatment, not merely to show off but as a correlative of the importance with which one invests the subject or occasion. An excessive expenditure of time, labor, forethought, skill, and material resources—the extravagant effort to make things extraordinary—recalls that of *mbari*, where a sizable number of able-bodied people are removed for two years from their farming: extravagance means seriousness, and is an indication of the extent of one’s caring about a matter of utmost importance or significance.

Humanly-Compelling Subject Matter

The apparently gratuitous or unsanctioned art of the self-taught artist strikes us as amazing, yet very few of these artists are simply passing the time. Their achievements of effort, beauty,



Figure 13. William Edmondson, **Horse**, c. 1933/1940, carved limestone, 27 1/4" x 31 1/2" x 6 3/4", Collection of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz, Photo Courtesy of Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia, PA.

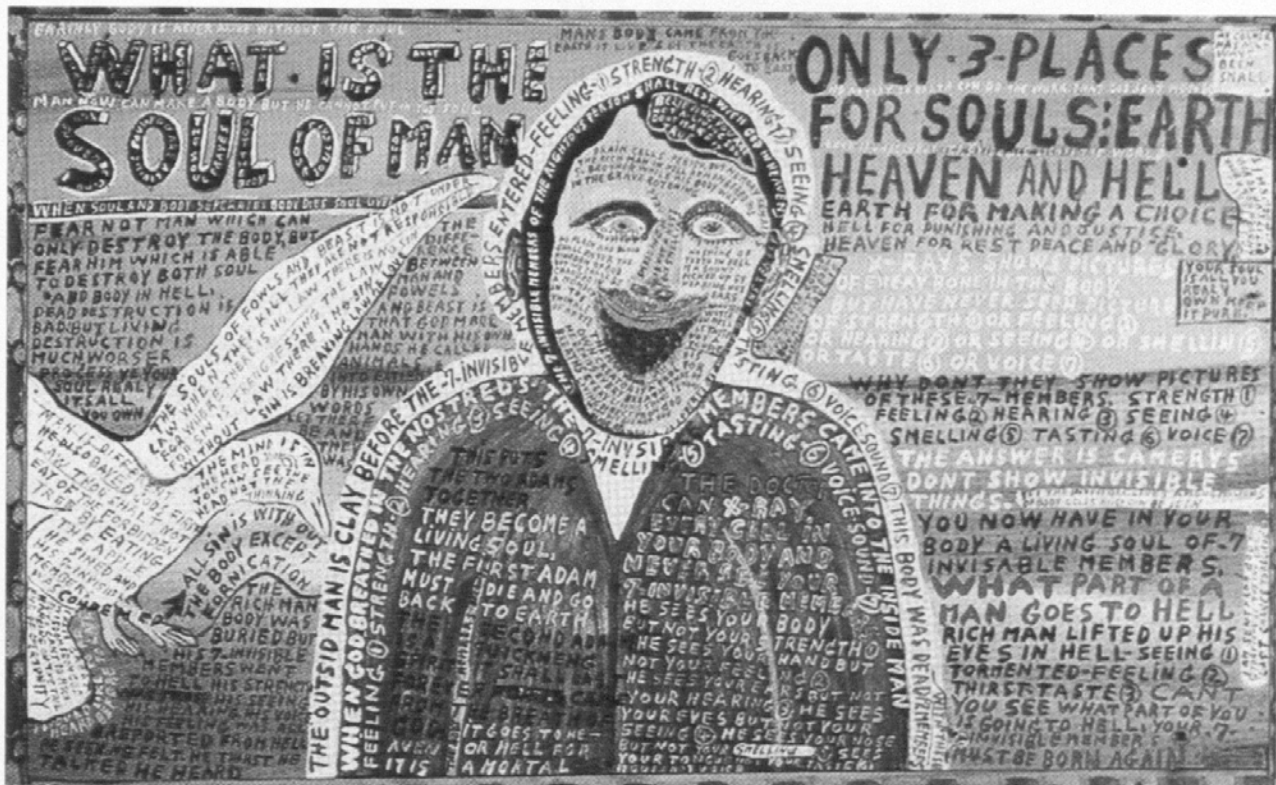


Figure 14. Howard Finster, *What Is the Soul of Man*, c. 1976, enamel on plywood, 17 1/2" x 28 1/2", High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, Purchased with funds from the Mattie Lou O'Kelley Endowment and Norfolk Southern Collection of Self-Taught Art.

strikingness, adornment, and decoration are in the service of subjects and themes that they care passionately about and that are vital to human existence. Fantastic animal and human figures by artists like Mose Tolliver, William Edmondson, David Butler, Thornton Dial, and Samuel Dinsmoor are companions or depictions of desirable or feared entities, as with the *mbari* images which represented especially good or beautiful values and virtues (embodiments of hard work, wealth, productivity, or fertility) as well as terrifying or forbidden things (underworld spirits, forces of nature, openly sexual and even indecent imagery) or wildly entertaining things which provoke laughter.

For Edmondson, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Jesse Aaron, and Howard Finster, religion and the directive of God are the origin and motivating power for their endeavors, while Tolliver,

Steve Ashby, Minnie Evans, Joseph Yoakum, Andrea Badami, and Henry Darger created fantasy worlds that are more or less decodable to us, but to them give embodiment and elaboration to their inner life. Other artists have been concerned to depict such vital themes as the human condition (Jon Serl), political beliefs (Samuel Dinsmoor), current events (Jesse Howard and Justin McCarthy), and documentation of a life (Savitsky and coalmining, Hunter and the plantation).

The concern with important subjects may seem self-evident and unexceptionable in premodern ceremonies where significant and liminal times, places, and events are always marked, and where subsistence (prosperity, health), sex and fertility, the divine order, the moral order, the unknown, feared, or forbidden, and the forces of nature are given focussed and

elaborated attention, thereby expressing and dealing with anxiety. When the same subjects occupy present-day artists, it reminds us that despite the veneer of modern life we are still affected by the same perennial concerns that people have been moved to make extraordinary for hundreds of thousands of years.

Relation of Process to Product

In both self-taught art and *mbari*, the process becomes inseparable from the product,⁹ as is the part from the whole. If the whole (the completed *mbari* structure with its figures, or the self-taught artist's *oeuvre*—whether garden, compound, tower, or stack of pages) is regarded at any time, the years of effort and sheer expenditure of labor are part of its meaning or total effect.

What appears in a modern mercantile society to be an uncalled-for amount of time and effort spent in what otherwise appears to be unproductive activity—using impermanent or worthless materials for an ultimately futile end—in ethological perspective is not at all irrational. Rather, it indicates commitment of one's ordinary individual life to a larger and more significant whole.

The Question of Primal Appeal

The appeal of the works of self-taught artists is manifold and mixed. Responses of both naive and sophisticated viewers will be affected by their own projections and fantasies, and by culturally constructed presuppositions about art, creativity, genius, acceptable behavior, social hierarchy, and the like. The artists too are of course affected by their individual and cultural time, place, and experience. All this goes without saying.

The implication that it is somehow erroneous or inauthentic for us to value apparently "innocent" or "marginal" art, however, should in my view be re-examined in light of the ethological perspective described above. If humans have evolved to engage in activities that if not Art are very like art, we should not be surprised if people find their more extravagant, irresistible, and unexpected manifestations fascinating.

As members of modern society, most of us are deprived of first-hand participation in the arts, although we have evolved as creatures who easily would find them to be a normal, natural, even necessary part of communal existence. Most of us grow up believing, however, that art is a private, rare, elite activity, confined to specialists (if not fakes, flakes, and perverts), and without social relevance. No wonder we are fascinated when we see it manifested in ordinary or humble people.

Those of us who are in varying degrees members of the art world, in which art is a problem, a commodity, an idea, or entity in constant need of definition and justification, are amazed when something very like art emerges profusely and unapologetically. The existence of self-taught artists and their creations, like the ceremonies and other arts in premodern societies, is testament to the inexorable human need to specially mark and elaborate our most important events and objects. To call this activity art, or not, is culturally-influenced, as is whether or not we ourselves feel endorsement to practice it. The impulse is there, a "primal," necessary part of human nature. Like other primal behavioral tendencies (say, aggression, sex, conciliation, and sympathy), activities very like art will express themselves as an interplay between individual endowment and cultural valuation.