

## **Introduction: Art in Everyday Life**

When asked what they hope participants will come to understand as a result of years of engagement in art experiences, art educators have a number of responses. They say that students need to understand such things as that “art is a significant part of our humanity,” that “people, around the world and over time, have always sought ways to express their ideas and beliefs through artistic practices,” or that “art can be found all around us, including in our own communities, and should therefore be acknowledged and understood.” But when these same art educators are questioned about what they include in their art programs to assist students in understanding these important ideas, many teachers talk about lessons focusing on our best-known artists, Western art history, and, sometimes, art from places far away. While most of us believe that artistic practice is essential to the human experience, we often fail to address the artistic practices engaged in by people within our own communities.

In this respect, there is what might be called a “disconnect” between our ultimate goals and the content of our art programs. This problem exists, in large part, because we teach what and how we were taught, and for a long time this has included a heavy emphasis on the so-called fine arts and a modernist approach to art history.

This book addresses the gap between what we want to accomplish and what we typically teach. Its focus is on the art and artistic practices that can be found close to home—within our local community. It also presents a fresh look at how art educators can think about the idea of community. As we expand our view of what we mean by community and focus on the various ways people engage in artistic practices, we find that our definition of art expands as well. This broader perspective acknowledges the work of folklorists who examine the everyday artistic expressions of people living in cultural groups. Folklorists recognize that many artistic expressions are grounded in community beliefs and values. By employing a folkloric approach to art curriculum, we can better address those ideas that we have routinely identified as central to the study of art.

Once we begin to seriously consider the idea of community and to note the various kinds of communities in which one shares membership, it becomes clear that all well-formed communities are grounded in identifiable beliefs and values. Participating community members often engage in artistic practices that allow them to celebrate and enhance their beliefs and values. The beliefs and values are never static but change over time. Sometimes change within communities can be jarring due to challenges members must face. Challenges may be due to environmental change, new ideas about gender roles, an expanded diverse membership, or any number of circumstances that can cause a community to develop a

new, transformed identity. Beliefs and values may need to expand or shift to accommodate new ways of thinking. Sometimes art and artistic practices, both innovative and traditional, can assist community members in thinking through issues needed to sustain a viable and healthy community. The work of artists and others involved with the arts often generates individual and collective action.

The focus on community throughout this book is consistent with calls in the art education field to embrace diversity and multiculturalism, as well as to promote a more connected relationship between the production and study of art and the daily experiences of our students. The artistic practices of community members are presented for serious study and consideration, but they are also meant to serve as models for ways in which our students can employ artistic means to address social issues and concerns in their own communities.

### **Broadening Our Perspective of Art**

For most of the twentieth century, artists were thought of as talented and unusual individuals who created in isolated studios apart from daily activities. Similarly, a visit to an art museum or gallery was an activity intended to draw you away from mundane, everyday routines. Individuals who are academically educated in the visual arts feel comfortable in a museum, but for many others a museum is a place for the elite. Formalism, the most prevalent art theory in the twentieth century, taught us to focus on the form of the artwork—the shapes, colors, and textures presented. We were taught to think of content issues as secondary, if at all. Art was made by people who were geniuses. Their works were known as masterpieces and only certain people, well trained in formalism, had the knowledge to understand them. The hope was that all students could gain from learning

these elite ideas and being exposed to works created by extraordinary individuals.

However, today's broadened theoretical perspectives, artistic practices, and artworks are changing what we value and how we think about art. Increasingly, artists, critics, and art educators are concerning themselves with issues and artistic expressions that relate to community life. While many of these creative expressions have been going on for decades, or even centuries, today there is heightened energy and interest in art that takes place in, and is meaningful to, everyday people.

These artistic efforts may be celebratory and ritualistic, associated with holidays like Thanksgiving, Day of the Dead, Carnival, or Kwanzaa. They may center on community events, such as a folk festival, a Fourth of July barbecue, or an event focused on ethnic pride such as a Saint Patrick's Day parade. People who think of themselves as artists, as well as people who create but don't label themselves by that name, can all be actively involved in these kinds of community-based arts. By their nature, many of these creations and events are family oriented and therefore involve children, adults, and the elderly. These community art productions may address aspects of local experience including issues that are religious, political, social, environmental, and economic.

Community-based art is increasingly being created and recognized in the academic art world and in the field of art education. While art education theory has not yet fully addressed community-based art education practices, there has been a great deal of theory-building leading up to it. This scholarship focuses on artwork that is cultural-based, collaborative, traditional, and ritualistic.<sup>1</sup> In other words, we are increasingly paying attention to, and valuing, work that is based in family and community practices. Wayne and Marty Scott make clown shoes for



1.1 Wayne and Marty Scott, clown shoe makers from Howey-in-the-Hills, Florida. Photo by Bud Lee.

clowns all over the United States. Being clowns themselves and members of the circus community taught them about the look, function, and wearability of clown shoes. In a similar manner, when Steve Phillip Stravrakis makes a sponge boat like those used by his ancestors in the Greek community of Tarpon Springs, Florida, he is speaking for generations of sponge divers. Their history and identity live on through his model boats. And when Carrine Porter makes her quilts, she reflects on community-based values of the hard work of her sharecropping heritage as well as on the pleasure of making beauty in response to the need to keep warm. Increasingly, art educators are looking to artistic practices in everyday life as they plan their instruction.





1.2 Steve Phillip Stravrakis, Greek sponge model boat maker, Tarpon Springs, Florida. Photo by Bud Lee.

### Academically Trained Artists Create Community-Based Art

Academically trained artists also have become interested in art that is grounded in community life, and, in some cases, have facilitated community-based art. For example, in 1988–89, Judy Baca, a Mexican-American muralist from Los Angeles, designed and painted *Guadalupe Mural* in the small rural town of Guadalupe, California. While she played a leadership role in the project, hundreds of the town’s residents collaborated. Placed in a park where teenagers often tagged graffiti and drank beer, this series of panels told the history of a farming community and its dreams for the future. For Baca, public art should be community-based. She views it as an educational enterprise that allows for a dialogue about issues related to race, ethnicity, class, and gender.<sup>2</sup>

In the past, academically trained artists were often designated to create what was known as “public art.” In keeping with formalist traditions, the way a work fit into the landscape in terms of line, shape, texture, size, color, and materials was of prime importance to the artist. In response to both the wishes and demands of local people, many artists soon saw that approach as shortsighted. Works became more community-based, like Baca’s murals, when the content of the work and the way it was created and displayed became more about local, collaborative artistic practices, aesthetics, and community content. For Baca, her work is not just about her specific way of seeing a community; it is also a collaborative expression of a particular community in a particular place.

An increasing number of contemporary artists agree with Baca’s focus, as they work to educate and activate a community by creating art that explores a local issue. The work may relate to the issues Baca has identified or it might be directed at more political or ecological questions. For example, Richard Boltan’s 1992 installation *Subject: Male Violence*, contained written reports, research papers, film clips, and audiotapes on domestic violence. This academically trained artist included stools, lamps, and tables in the gallery so people could study the effects of violence in this community.<sup>3</sup> While many people questioned whether Boltan’s installation should be called art, it directly and emotionally dealt with a community-based issue in an art space. Other artists whose work is more easily identifiable as art create art that intentionally encourages debate and dialogue. For instance, in 1988 Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, and David Avalos created a silkscreen photomontage, called *Welcome to America’s Finest Tourist Plantation*, to draw attention to the plight of illegal immigrants in the San Diego area. The mon-

tage, placed on the back of numerous buses, was so controversial that the image—its placement and its message—was hotly debated all over the city. Media coverage from the event was collected and turned into a gallery exhibition. Editorials, newscasts, interviews, and informal conversations became a recognized part of the artwork.<sup>4</sup>

Baca, Bolten, Sisco, Hock, and Avalos are not considered folk or traditional artists, yet they do draw their inspiration from historical events, traditional practices (both positive and negative), and everyday practices. The work of these academically trained artists is rooted in specific communities, and it addresses the concerns, heritage, and daily practices of ordinary people. While taking this connective and collaborative approach to artwork may seem relatively new, it has actually been going on for a long time. Even though art historians and other art experts have generally ignored discussions of these approaches, for centuries folklorists have studied artists whose creative expressions are community-based.

### Understanding the Folkloric Approach

Folklorists are academically trained to study traditional communities ethnographically. They identify people in specific communities who are known for carrying on traditions that are deeply rooted in cultural practices. Documentation may take the form of audiotaping, videotaping, photographing, drawing pictures, and taking notes. Folklorists often critique and interpret the traditional practices by placing them in a historical context that even the tradition-bearers may not be aware of. They are interested in all kinds of creative cultural expression including folktales, jokes, folk religion, folk healing, oral history, and ritualistic practices, as well as material culture and traditional art such as architecture,

handmade furniture, gardens, and shrines. From the folklorist's perspective, a folk artist is someone who practices an artistic expression that is part of that person's cultural tradition. For example, hippies in the 1960s wore tie-dye shirts, embroidered and patched blue jeans, and often adorned themselves with the symbol of a peace sign. Orthodox iconographers, or painters of saints, follow specific conventions in their creation of biblical scenes. While each iconographer may be identifiable by a particular style, the rules that artist must follow are rooted in practices hundreds of years old. Often a cultural group appreciates an art product and experiences its functions on the basis of a set of standards they have developed. These standards may differ from those of the academic community. These artists are frequently referred to as folk artists, and their traditional practices are featured in this book.

1.3 Carrine Porter, quilt maker, Bascom, Florida.  
Photo by Bud Lee.





## How This Book Is Organized

The artists mentioned in this book are often not specifically categorized as folk artists or academically trained artists. We are increasingly recognizing that artists learn from myriad experiences, and that defining artistic categories is more limiting than it is productive. What is most important for art educators is that students be encouraged to use a diverse group of artists as subjects for learning. In this way, students will understand that inspiration for art can come from anywhere, not just the museum or art classroom, and that artists who are academically trained often use everyday experiences as inspiration for their own creative endeavors.

As art, art history, aesthetics, and art education become more interdisciplinary and inclusive, a folklorist's contextual approach becomes more relevant. So too does the folklorist's content, which focuses on the creative expressions of everyday people in everyday life. Because the goal of art education is to teach art to everyone, a folkloric approach to art easily fits the art educator's mission.

Although this book focuses on community-based art and community-based practices, some "popular" or "fine art" practices will also be addressed. While many people have tried to draw boundaries among fine art, folk art, and popular art, these restrictions will not be stressed here. This noncategorical approach is used in order to allow for a full and uninterrupted appreciation of a wide range of artistic practices that take place in our communities on a regular basis.

In addition to expanding our notion of art and getting rid of rigid categorical boundaries, we need to identify what we mean by community. While people interpret this term in many ways, three of the most common are addressed in chapter 2: community as a location or site, community as shared personal or

group identification, and community as common purpose or set of beliefs. An awareness of these multiple definitions can help educators to define what community means no matter where they teach.

Every art educator lives in a community rich in local history, natural resources, and folklife. For example, Northwest Ohio happens to have an abundant fishing culture, replete with tall tales of the fish that got away, lore about the best place (and way) to catch a walleye, as well as specialized fly ties, wrapped rods, and fishing boats. Local fishers are full of aesthetic advice, critical expertise on how to dress for a fishing trip, what to pack in a cooler, and what kinds of lures will attract the biggest fish. Art educators have developed art curriculum around these local traditions and daily life experiences as a way to broaden what can be seen as aesthetic, while celebrating a sense of place and connections to the local culture and environment.<sup>5</sup>

Educational theorists tell teachers what they need in order to prepare students to become involved citizens and contributing community members. We ask our students to become individuals who can deal effectively with the many challenges facing our society today, as well as people who can recognize and build on the positive characteristics of a given community.<sup>6</sup> This book aims to assist art educators in schools, museums, and other community organizations who wish to impart a message of careful, considered artistic involvement in local day-to-day activities that relate to traditional activities and environmental spaces. Folklore methodology is employed as a relevant way of achieving this goal. By practicing a folkloric approach, we ask questions about our common belief systems. We come to an understanding of why and how we differ from our neighbors. We develop approaches to appreciating diverse ways of thinking, and we learn how to integrate new ideas

and expressive practices into our lives. We learn to be critical about our identities and evaluate our own traditions based on new contexts and future goals.

While chapter 2 looks at defining community, chapter 3 explores the many ways that folklife helps form communities. Chapter 4 focuses on ways in which current art education theory relates to community-based art programming.

The second half of the book explores artistic expressions as they relate to specific communities. Chapter 5 focuses on the natural and built environment where communities share a common location or site. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 focus on the second definition of community: the sharing of a personal or group identification. As we will see, occupation and recreational activities bond groups of people together. They share similar kinds of activities, knowledge, and ways of exploring the world. In a similar manner, ethnic identity often functions to bind groups of people together because they have similar histories, migration patterns, religious practices, and celebratory activities.

Much of the artwork in this book is intended to be used and understood outside a museum or gallery frame of reference. This newfound interest in community-based art presents art educators with many new challenges and opportunities besides merely changing the place where one goes to study and appreciate art. It gives them the opportunity to discuss a community's problems and possible solutions, local rituals and their artistic expressions, and the ways in which our material culture both separates us and binds us to one another.

## Notes

- 1 See Doug Blandy and Kristin G. Congdon, eds. *Art in a Democracy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987); F. Graeme Chalmers, "Art Education as Ethnology," *Studies in Art Education* 22, no. 3 (1981): 6–14; Paul Duncum, "Clearing the Decks for Dominant Culture: Toward a Contemporary Art Education," *Studies in Art Education* 31, no. 9 (1997): 207–15; Elizabeth Garber, "Teaching Art in the Context of Culture: A Study on the Borderlands," *Studies in Art Education* 36, no. 4 (1995): 218–32; and June McFee and Rogena M. Degge, *Art, Culture, and Environment: A Catalyst for Teaching* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1980).
- 2 Erika Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 157–96.
- 3 Gay Morris, "Richard Bolten at Capp Street Project," *Art in America* (October 1992): 158–59.
- 4 Lucy R. Lippard, "Moving Targets/Moving Out." In Arlene Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 209–28.
- 5 Doug Blandy and Kristin G. Congdon, "Community-Based Aesthetics as an Exhibition Catalyst and a Foundation for Community Involvement," *Studies in Art Education* 29, no. 4 (1998): 6–14.
- 6 See James A. Banks, "Multicultural Education: Approaches, Developments and Dimensions." In *Cultural Diversity and the Schools*, edited by J. Lynch, C. Modgil, and S. Modgil. Vol. 1, *Education for Cultural Diversity* (London: The Falmer Press, 1992), 83–94; Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education and the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).