

BY JOHN HOWELL  
WHITE AND  
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# TRAVEL, BOUNDARIES, EXPLANATIONS FOR THE



"The Peaceable Kingdom," by Malcah Zeldis. n.d.

**I**n many ways, we live in a confusing time. Boundaries that once helped us define who we are (such as Black or White, masculine or feminine, liberal or conservative) seem to be less defined. Categories we once

depended on to define our world no longer appear fixed (e.g., East and West, the Caribbean and Miami). Increasingly in our classes, we are

asked the question, "But why is that art?" as if an art object, performance, or creative process somehow falls over an easily stated boundary when something happens to be art. Often, students tell us something we introduce to them

# AND THE MOVEMENT OF CULTURE(S): FOLK / FINE ART QUANDARY

(for some unstated reason) isn't art work; rather it is social work, it is gardening, or it is a meal.

As we teach university students, we are pleased to be asked more difficult and intriguing questions. Likewise, we feel successful when students are challenged, even when they are somewhat uncomfortable. But breaking down categorical boundaries sometimes leaves students feeling painfully unsettled. Not only do our students and the general public want to know if something can be categorized as art or not, but further categorization into the kind of art a work might be is continually sought. Somehow, our students tell us, we should be able to describe easily the boundaries between folk and fine art.<sup>1</sup> They ask if folk art is ethnic, naive, primitive, lower art, traditional, or rural. Group discussions seem to reach little agreement. If this is so difficult for adults, how are we to teach children differences between folk and fine art? Furthermore, are any of the definitions reasonable or appropriate?

We tend to set these two categories up as a dichotomy in order to under-

stand them better. Here we write about the perceived categories of "fine art" and "folk art" and how their identities inform each other. We look at how one artist, thought of as traditional (read as "folk artist"), is globally informed in her work, and how another, categorized as innovative (read as "fine artist"), draws heavily from tradition and community experience. A third artist, promoted by the art world as a "folk artist," moves through the same kinds of day-to-day activities of studio work, museum talks, and interviews as any active art-school-trained artist. She is savvy, sophisticated, educated, well traveled, market-wise, and smart. We ask what might be learned about the categories of folk and fine art by studying these artists.

This article will not give the teacher easy answers to the folk/fine art definitional question. Rather it will illustrate the difficulty in trying to establish clearly defined categories. As we enter into this dialogue we ask these questions: If we engage in the process of diminishing or blurring boundaries among art categories, do we not make it more difficult for art critics to communicate easily and quickly about an image? And what about

making things difficult for children? How do we not categorize art forms for youngsters who are learning categories of color, animals, and shapes?

We recognize that we live in a complex world where we are so bombarded with information and visual stimuli that grouping or categorizing helps us deal with complexity. In fact, categorizing helps us survive. If art categorizations such as popular, folk, tourist, fine, and computer art don't hold up anymore—if they ever did—what approach should we take that will help us understand artworks in relation to the terms we apply to them? How can we facilitate dialogue if categorization doesn't hold up under scrutiny? In this article, we will suggest that the metaphor of travel grants us a flexible and historically-oriented way to speak about artworks and art categories. However, before considering travel as a metaphor, we introduce the problem related to artworks defined by folk and fine art labels by way of three artists: Mabel Burkholder, Keith Haring, and Malcah Zeldis.

### THREE ARTISTS

Down the road from the old Pennsylvania limestone farmhouse near Kutztown, Pennsylvania, where John White lives, is Mabel Burkholder's home. Burkholder (b.1941), an Old Order Mennonite, makes quilts.<sup>2</sup> The reader can no doubt romantically fill in at least a part of the picture. Burkholder is a farmer, she's hard working, traditional in her lifestyle and dress, and religious. She is also a capitalist. She actively solicits business and responds carefully and intellectually to market conditions. She attends workshops, reads quilt magazines, tracks fads in color preferences and styles, and can endlessly talk about what sells and what doesn't.

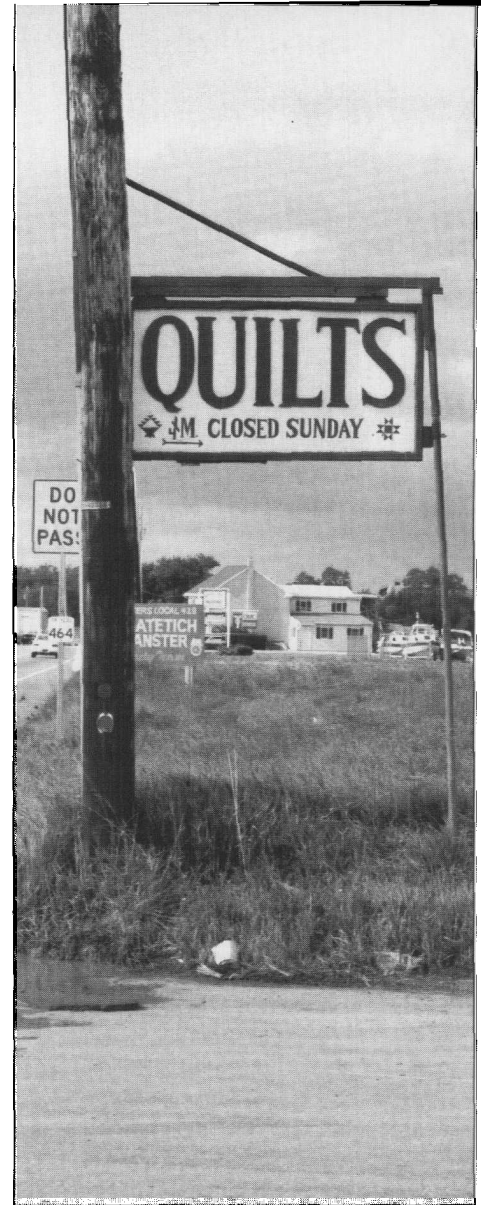
If you place any value in semiotics, you could get an inkling of the complexity of the situation by reading the sign for her shop. On first appearance, it looks like a simple roadside sign. A small rectangular piece of wood is dominated by the word "Quilts." It is nailed to the telephone pole on the corner of Richmond Road and Route 222. When you look more closely you can see that Mabel Burkholder has included a few "footnotes" to the sign to lure in passing cars. She indicates the distance down Richmond road to her shop and she often attaches a small swatch of traditional fabric, perhaps a distant cousin to the triangular flags that still flutter above car dealerships in Kutztown.

There are those purist folk-art lovers who would disqualify her work as "folk" on these grounds alone because her quilting is more of a business than a community affair. However, her work clearly has traditional aspects as well as innovative ones. Folklorists have told us for decades that folk art can be inno-

vative and dynamic in form and style. Folk art has its individualistic, dynamic and idiosyncratic characteristics, as well as its traditionalist ones (Congdon, 1986, 1996; Jones, 1987; Toelken 1979). Burkholder's quilting has strong roots in Mennonite culture; it is a family affair (other family members help sew, piece, and sell the work). Many of her quilts use traditional Amish colors (both muted and bright plain fabrics), are sewn using black thread, and often employ a nine-patch motif. However, Burkholder also makes quilts with Japanese inspired patterns (something she learned in a workshop). She usually purchases her fabrics from Jewish merchants in New York's SoHo district. Local Hmong women often do the quilting.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, her work is often shipped to Ohio to be quilted by women living there. It is fair to say that Mabel Burkholder's work is culturally complex.

Kutztown not only recognizes Burkholder as a respected artist, but residents also claim Keith Haring (1958-90) as one of their own. While Haring is generally thought of as a so-called fine artist, he too has a complex background which includes many traditional aspects.<sup>4</sup> Haring grew up in Kutztown where his Protestant family attended the local United Church of Christ. Haring's imagery is undoubtedly familiar to most readers who may know it through city streets, vodka ads, automobile ads, the popular press, or political activist organizations, as well as fine art publications. Tales of the sources for Haring's imagery speak of daring or deviant artists who risked all to make their mark on the subways of New York, whose trains, like bullets, sent their anarchist messages into the contemporary art world's center.

Haring claimed to have painted over



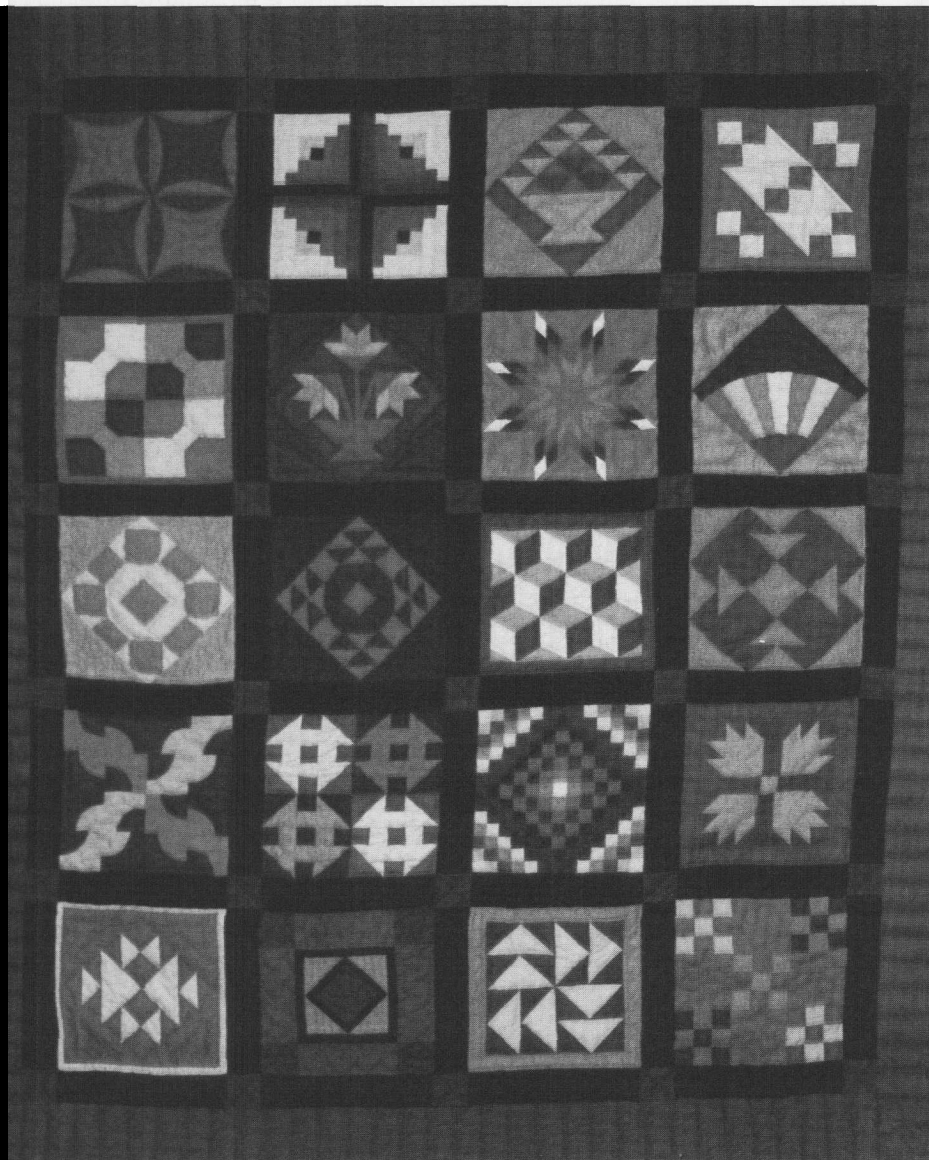
**C**learly, no one lives in isolation and everyone is affected by his or her surroundings.

5,000 works on the black panels covering posters on the walls of New York's subway platforms between 1981 and 1985. The subject matter included flying saucers with beams of energy, bark-

ing dogs, and radiant babies, small comic-like androgynous people and strange monsters that appear to be part human and part animal. Sometimes the heads of these figures were television

sets. While Haring is well-known for his artwork imposed on subway spaces, he liked to paint on any surface he could find (Fineberg, 1995).

Few people consider Haring's work the product of a small town boy who attended St. John's United Church of Christ in Kutztown. Haring donated a drawing of the nativity that now hangs in the church's lobby as testament to his association with church beliefs. It is striking to see a work filled with classic Haring and Christian iconography, such as Christ as the radiant baby, hanging in the lobby of the church. Traditional imagery informs much of Haring's work, connecting it to the past as well as to the avant-garde. One commonly held definition of folk art, that learning the craft is handed down within the family structure, is true in Haring's case. Allen Haring, Keith's father and a production manager for AT&T, had an ability and love for drawing cartoons (Gruen, 1991). As a young boy Haring developed a cartoon-like linear drawing style that he learned from his father and never discarded. Haring's work also has affinities with the hex signs and *distelfinks* of Pennsylvania German folk culture that are common throughout the region. These traditional forms are Haring-like in that they are composed of shapes whose outlines and filled-in areas are brightly colored and flat. Both are graphic icons that are relevant to the people who produce and view them. As magic-like images, they do their work through the positions they hold on the sides of buildings and other human-made structures. Connecting Haring's work to these traditional forms, familial and environmental, makes as much sense as rooting his style in the graffiti art of the New York streets or the East Village art scene of the 1980s.



Left: Sign for Mabel Burkholder's Quilt Business," 1996. Photo Credit: John Howell White.

Above: "Amish Sampler," by Mabel Burkholder, 1996. Photo Credit: John Howell White.

On June 13, 1984, Haring wrote in his journal: "If an artist is really honest to himself and his culture, he lets the culture speak through him and imposes his ego as little as possible... People always ask me: 'Where do you get these ideas?' I say, I'm not sure. I only know that I'm living now in the 20th century, and I absorb information at an increasingly rapid rate...and put it back out in the world" (Haring, 1996, p. H28).

To complicate the issue even more, we add a third artist, Malcah Zeldis (b.1931), to the discussion. Originally from Michigan, she and her husband spent time in a kibbutz in Israel where she started painting. Insecure with her work and not receiving encouragement, she stopped painting until later in her life (Rosenberg, 1988). Although Zeldis is university educated, she was not trained in art. It is partly for this reason, as well as the subject matter she selects, that she is labeled a folk artist. Her canvases are full of Jewish history, fantasy, and memories from her early childhood. She paints herself marrying men she dates (to see "if it might work out"), and parties with her heroes such as Abraham Lincoln, Marilyn Monroe, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Her works are brightly colored, often whimsical, and full of storytelling devices. Zeldis's work sells for good prices, and she had been collected by many museums in the United States, perhaps the foremost being the Museum of American Folk Art. When she is asked why she is considered a folk artist, she seems somewhat miffed. She lives in SoHo where she has a studio, gives art talks around the country, and markets her

work quite well. In a talk she gave in Boca Raton, Florida, she said that when she takes her paintings to galleries that aren't folk-art-oriented, they look at her funny and tell her to go to a folk art gallery. So she does.

### CATEGORY QUANDARY

In our discussions of these artists we have shown complexity where teachers most often ask for simplicity. There is no clearcut reason we would consider any one of these three artists a folk artist or a fine artist. We have an artist who is quickly identifiable as a traditional person (a Mennonite who quilts), yet she is savvy about marketing, attends contemporary quilting workshops, and often makes nontraditional quilts. We have an internationally known artist, educated in art schools, who can be tied to a home-town aesthetic as well as to the street communities of New York. And we have a so-called self-taught but sophisticated, well-educated, and well-traveled artist who paints her Jewish tradition and other topics in a style that, like Haring's, is flat, colorful, whimsical, and clearly recognizable as her own. In all three artists' works, tradition and innovation can be identified. Clearly, no one lives in isolation and everyone is affected by his or her surroundings. If we look for community influences, perhaps they can always be found. So we ask, is Mabel Burkholder really so different from Keith Haring or Malcah Zeldis? And if both Malcah Zeldis and Mabel Burkholder are correctly labeled folk artists, what is it they have in common that is "folk"?

### TRAVELING

Travel is an apt metaphor to associate with works of art, their imagery and

use. If culture does nothing else, it travels from person to person, from place to place.<sup>5</sup> How we think of travel and its impact on identity is relevant to our understanding of artworks and classrooms. Our three artists have done their share of traveling. Via the Bieber Bus Company, Keith Haring moved back and forth from his Kutztown hometown to his New York City international-art-capital workspace. Malcah Zeldis moved from the midwest to Israel to New York. Mabel Burkholder, while clearly a traditional Mennonite, travels to New York City fairly regularly. Each journey could be defined in terms of the interaction that occurs as cultural forms move from one location to another. Images travel in people's minds and they often manifest themselves as art objects. As images travel, meanings change.

Material culture and artworks can be read like maps that show the form of the exchanges made when people travel.<sup>6</sup> We attempt to develop terminology to explain these everyday exchanges. Terminology such as "art," "artifact," "folk art," and "fine art" point to conceptual neighborhoods within a culture that have been established over time and that hold the potential to de-evolve, deconstruct, or be deemed useless as time passes. As with geographic locations such as New York and Kutztown, these conceptual neighborhoods are not mutually exclusive but rather are deeply interdependent. Like travel between geographical locations, travel between conceptual sites also requires an understanding of the rules that take place between the locations.

*(Continued on page 41)*

(Continued from page 24)

The labels “fine art” and “folk art” are used to draw distinctions between different conceptual locations within the greater domain of the art world. Using our travel metaphor, we might conclude that these locations are infinitely dispersed, cordoned off by a Berlin Wall, a great physical or economic distance. A more useful approach however would be to look at possible relationships, such as space, ideas, and culture between these locations. Recognizing that there is tradition in innovation (fine art) and innovation in tradition (folk art), we might ask how these characterizations of art processes and procedures are related. Perhaps the connections have become so interchangeable in some instances that we can no longer define the territory as tradition or innovation. Perhaps most artists employ both, to varying degrees. Perhaps the labels “folk” and “fine” train us to focus on one aspect more than another.

Strategies for understanding how images travel between different conceptual labels can in turn be used to develop students’ understandings of their own movements between locations and social and cultural groups. Students, like artists, migrate among symbolic domains, bringing their home knowledge, street knowledge, and classroom knowledge together (McLaren, 1986). While Haring borrows nativity figures from a variety of folk art traditions, including greeting cards and urban graffiti, graffiti in turn borrows from Catholic paintings, commercial images, and pop art. Each migration of an image from site to site is a form of cultural diffusion. Zeldis remakes the traditional theme of the peaceable kingdom while inviting

her friends and relatives to attend. Time and space diffuse to the point of disappearing. As images travel, they adapt, propagate, recede, and many disappear leaving only a trace or resonance of their original form. Students learn as they bring their own traditional (folk) inquiry together with the academic (fine) inquiry that exists

reconstruction. If we use the framework she has outlined, we can think about our students not only successfully negotiating between communities such as New York and Kutztown but also between concepts such as folk art and fine art.

Attention to the travel that takes place between cultural forms might



“For St. John’s UCC-Kutztown,” by Keith Haring, 1984. Courtesy of St. John’s United Church of Christ.

in the schools. Learning may be defined by the success that students develop in negotiating the relationships between these realms.

Hicks (1994) has written about utilizing a traveling metaphor in art education settings. Reflecting on the work of Maria Lugones (1987), she maintains that we are continually negotiating our identities between spaces and boundaries. In order to do world-traveling well, one must learn the skills that facilitate transitions between cultures. Hicks writes that the continual defining and redefining we do, in relation to our own identities and to art works, constitutes a state of social

bring us all to a more useful understanding of artworks, culture, and ourselves. In addition, focusing on this kind of movement can be used metaphorically to develop conversations about our students’ own familial, peer, commercial, and academic aesthetic identities. While such conversations won’t give teachers and students clearcut definitions of folk and fine art, they can be useful as we coordinate an emergent vision of how the world can be perceived.

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## AUTHORS' NOTE

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## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>For a discussion of folk art, see Congdon (1986).
- <sup>2</sup>The Old Order Mennonites are the most traditional group of the Mennonites. As with other Mennonites they differ from Old Order Amish in that they worship in churches rather than in their homes. However, unlike other Mennonite orders,

their services are held in German, a practice that reaffirms their ancestry (Redekop, 1989).

<sup>3</sup>The Hmong people are from Laos. After the Vietnam War they spent time in refugee camps in Thailand before much of their population came to the United States. Hmong women have a strong needlework tradition of their own that has been adapted into quilt making in the United States (Henry, 1995).

<sup>4</sup>Note that the examples of artists that we use are both male and female. Some people tend to think of folk artists as female, using materials and art forms associated with the home, whereas fine artists are generally thought of as male (usually White) who use materials and art forms associated with the public domain. We also recognize that many so-called folk artists are of African-American descent and/or individuals from economically poor backgrounds making gender, race, and class issues related to categorization strong.

<sup>5</sup>For a critique of the use of travel as a metaphor, see hooks (1992).

<sup>6</sup>While we are focusing on travel here, we recognize that travel takes place in other ways, such as through the media and in the mind.

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