The Appropriation of Marginal Art in the 1980s

Donald Kuspit

In the 1980s a certain climate of opinion facilitated the commercial appropriation and intellectual administration of marginal art. Such art was looked upon with favor by the powers-that-be because of the “horizon of expectations,” in the phrase of reception-theorist Hans Robert Jauss, that was used to justify mainstream eighties art. Before examining this conceptual horizon, however, it seems important to make a few general points, both to establish our parameters of meaning and to gain some historical perspective.

First, the concept of “marginal art” is virtually indefinable, having been given a variety of incommensurable meanings. The dialectic between marginal and mainstream art is, using an expression of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, “a language game.” If, in a true Wittgensteinian sense, every language game is a reimagining of life, then the marginal/mainstream language game is a reimagining of the life of art.

Second, at least since Gauguin, avant-garde artists have used marginal (“primitive”) art as a seemingly inexhaustible, magical means of artistic rejuvenation. Indeed, insistence on marginality is the cornerstone of their vanguardism, for the marginal is the last-ditch defense against decadence. The current appropriation of folk and graffiti art is simply another instance of this process of revitalization through incorporation of the marginal, the crucial difference being that it is as commercial as it is stylistic or iconographic. One socio-artistic group renews itself by consuming another in a conspicuously economic as well as an aesthetic way; in fact, today aesthetic interests follow the path cut by economic initiative. This fin de siècle pattern of appropriation is the reverse of the pattern dominant at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Cubism and Expressionism employed marginal artifacts before these artifacts had become economically important art. Also, the line between marginal artifact and mainstream art has become so thin today—both are readily reducible to symptoms of material culture—that the transition from one to the other occurs with less intellectual handwringing and fanfare than it once did.

Third, the distinction between mainstream and marginal is a social construction that says more about the mainstream’s creative desperation and pursuit of novelty than it does about the sociohistorical—or, for that matter, stylistic—reality of what it labels marginal. It places necessity within the mainstream rather than within the marginal culture. Also, like the sophisticated-naive, cosmopolitan-provincial, and insider-outsider polarities implicit in it, the relationship between the opposing terms is in historical flux and, more crucially, has no single logic. It is oppositional thinking structuring a relationship hierarchically for a variety of often-conflicting motivations. So unstable is the hierarchy that it tends to be perverse. The moment “mainstream” seems more intrinsic to the meaning of art than
“marginal” or vice versa, the other term asserts itself, shouting “unfair” and “fraud.”

Fourth, the appropriation of the marginal by the mainstream is dialectical, in that the marginal is legitimated by the mainstream and the mainstream acquires the aura of authenticity and integrity supposedly innate to the marginal. Once appropriated by the avant-garde, the artifacts that embody marginality slowly but surely become mainstream, eventually acquiring the status of high art even though they were initially valued because they had nothing to do with its conventions. In its turn, the avant-garde acquires the exotic look of being at the limit of civilization—of being a primordial response to life—that marginal art affords. Of course, avant-garde art domesticates this look as much as it idolizes it and begins to manipulate and even manufacture it.

For all these paradoxes, mainstream avant-garde and marginal art benefit from their association, but not mutually. It is the mainstream that initiates the process of appropriation, that seeks out and needs the marginal, not vice versa. It is the mainstream that scavenges the margins of civilization for raw artistic material. But who said the marginal is marginal? It never thinks of itself that way: It is just itself. Only to the mainstream is it the alluring “alternative,” the exciting “other,” a welcome breath of fresh air in the stale room of tradition. Unlike the mainstream, the marginal is not an institutional system that must perpetually challenge itself by importing the heterogeneous and discordant. The mainstream is neither a serious part of the consciousness of the marginal nor a clue to its raison d’être. Thus, at issue are the self-esteem and self-characterization of the mainstream, not of the marginal. The mainstream needs to appropriate the marginal to develop in order to convince itself of its own validity and legitimacy.

Appropriation is paradoxical in yet another way: it signals not only the self-doubt but also the imperialism of the avant-garde mainstream. They converge in its paranoid determination to colonize and control whatever outlandish art exists beyond its pale. This is not just blind power-hunger, a compulsive extension of the mainstream’s rule, but a necessary narcissism. Unless it is actively integrating—dominating—some kind of marginal art, the mainstream risks the ultimate entropy: loss of belief in itself. It needs to aggrandize a “lowerclass” art in order to feel “upperclass.” Moreover, it garners sociopolitical credit for its “discovery” of and “responsibility” to the “lesser” art, almost as though bringing alien art into the fold were a civic service. But behind the noblest obeisance of appropriation lurks a latent authoritarianism.

Once taken into the mainstream, marginal artists may become hungry for the rewards—money and reputation—it can offer and may even fantasize that they are mainstream, or “professional,” marginalists. This is likely to lead to the loss of the innocence, directness, and immediacy of expression that led the mainstream to adopt them. They win a predictably ironical place in the mainstream but lose the significance of being “basic” that gave them mainstream value in the first place. They become minor artists rather than standing apart from the major-minor distinction in a place of emblematic uniqueness. When the artistic “fundamentalism” of marginal art is truly unforced, it seems more inherently singular than any other art.

In the 1980s the two major artistic positions were Neo-Expressionism and Neo-Conceptualism. Marginal artists are usually regarded as quasi-Expressionists. It is significant that they are never thought of as quasi-Conceptualists. Neo-Conceptualism keeps alive the idea that art is a concept up for grabs. Art is assumed to have a speculative existence.
to the extent that it tends to evaporate the moment it is concretized. Thus, art is supposedly always the triumph of mind over matter, but it is not always clear what is in mind when art is spoken of. ("Mind over Matter" is the name of a recent Whitney Museum exhibition of six young Conceptualist "sculptors," a term I put in quotation marks to suggest the nominal character of all conventional categorizations of art by the Conceptualists.) It seems that marginal art can be regarded as at least naively conceptual, for it brings the idea of art into question, however unwittingly. It would require elaborate theory to explain what one means by calling it "art," whether with a large or small a. But of course marginal art is neither philosophical in intention nor even generally intellectual, as Conceptual art imagines itself to be. Much of it is illustrative and seems to have an obviously practical intent, or else it seems naive about what it expresses and how it does so. Marginal art appears so conspicuously "real world" in purpose that it cannot help but be suspect as art.

None of this is sufficient to make marginal art quasi-Expressionist art. What does seem to justify the expressionist label is the recognition that marginal art, like Expressionism, is urgently physical (as opposed to Conceptualism, which no doubt marginalizes and despises both) and, like Neo-Expressionism, overtly subjective. Neo-Expressionism makes the subject an issue of art, particularly the subject damaged by history as well as conflicted in itself. Its sense of subjectivity is in dialectical relation with the objectively inhumane world. Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer are exemplary in this respect; they confirm Theodor W. Adorno’s conception of art as the only space in the modern world where the inward injury of a subject violated by history can be articulated without being falsified. Where eighties Neo-Expressionism restores explicit interest in subjectivity to modern art—a subjectivity to which the Pop, Minimal, and Conceptual art of the 1960s was indifferent—expression of the subject is a constant in marginal art.

In Neo-Conceptualist art, the status of the object, including the art object, is at issue. With irony that is not always clear, “commodity” conceptual art of the 1980s presents commodities as art objects. In so-called reproduction art, often famous art objects are re-presented in what Marchel Duchamp called “assisted form.” This is done to bring out their commodity identity, to undermine their aura, and to suggest that they are social constructions rather than personal creations. There is a strong element of reprise in both Neo-Expressionism and Neo-Conceptualism; in the latter it is often parodic. Both are self-consciously postmodernist, looking back to and integrating modernist styles, sometimes pulverizing them to stylish pulp in the process.

Marginal art does not truly belong to either camp. Yet it can be interpreted as having ideological elements of both: as a means of expressing a sense of injured subject and as “injured” art. That is, it conveys the problematic condition of the modern subject, always on the verge of disintegration, and the equally problematic, relativistic character of art in the modern world, a condition that precludes its conclusive conceptualization. However, insofar as the international art scene is concerned, marginal art exists in an underground limbo, for it has no stylistic credibility. Although it is obliquely Neo-Expressionist and Neo-Conceptualist in orientation, it bears little stylistic resemblance to them. It may use impulsive, distorted representation and language but not the same way they do. Marginal art in general is not deliberately concerned with style, that is, formal innovation. Nevertheless, marginal art has come to be regarded as significant during postmodernism, a time of stylistic incoherence. Indeed, postmodernist artists can be


said to have fetishized incoherence, as though that were innovative in itself and enough to generate aesthetic momentum. Even more than modernism, postmodernity is a scavenger of raw artistic material. More threatened by decadence, it is more willing to risk its all on novelty and to use whatever stylistic and ideological means it can to make itself seem alive. Marginal art fits very well into its “program.”

The infusion of the marginal into mainstream modernism had a strong utopian flavor. Whether advocating the subjective utopia of instinctive expression or the objective utopia of harmonious society, modern art pursued stylistic novelty to foster an artistic anticipation of a brave new world and to enliven the appearance of the cowardly old one. Artistic innovation represented the will to achieve revolutionary change, both individually and socially. Postmodernism is a fall from this innocence: It disbelieves in artistic, personal, and social utopias—in revolutionary possibilities—because it has seen them fail. Therefore it looks to the past rather than future, for it admits no forward psycho-social position to advance to, or even imagine. Unable to represent such a position, art becomes more dependent on the past as a source of novelty than on modernism. Post-modernism is inherently more conservative.

But this is a peculiar conservatism: Postmodernism regards the styles of the past as so many casts, like the figures of Pompeii. They are hollow novelties, of interest only for their uncanny appearance, not for what they meant when they were alive. Novelty for its own sake—the appearance rather than the substance of novelty—is important to postmodernism. While it accords the art it appropriates an abstract historical significance, this turns it into a kind of pillar of salt. Appropriated by postmodernism, marginal art becomes merely another shallow novelty, losing its import as a symbol of the subject. Marginal art serves this historical craving for dead novelties—that is, the ideologizing and objectification of novelty.2

It is no historical accident that marginal art has been assimilated as the ultimate novelty during postmodernism. In postmodernism, novelty is a sign of the implicitly futile sociohistorical dead end we find ourselves in. For postmodernism, the art historical “difference” of a particular style becomes a reified novelty. Its psychosocial significance forgotten—lost to history, as it were—it exists as an aesthetic shadow of itself. Novelty thus becomes regressive rather than progressive. Today it is a trophy of true belief reified as a decorative end in itself. The postmodernist art world’s aggrandizement of marginal art is thus an instance of its fetishization of novelty as the most essential commodity.

Unexpectedly, the appropriation of marginal art also implies nostalgia for “true” novelty—neither that of the commodity nor of modernist utopianism. Marginal art comes to stand for the novelty of “Being,” completely beyond appropriation—Being that can never be “had” simply for the asking. There is wonder at objects of marginal art today, a special respect for them, for they alone among works of art seem to embody the Being that is fundamentally incommensurate with “Having.” The distinction between these radically different orientations is a new way of making the distinction between mainstream and marginal art meaningful. The former is presumably the product of Having, the latter of Being. Marginal art restores faith in art as such, implying that it need not be a symptom of the decadence that comes from Having alone.3

Thus, the attitude about marginal art is paradoxical. In the eighties it became clear that art was less and less in an authentically marginal position—that, in Luis
Buñuel's words, of the permanent outsider. At the same time, there was great eagerness for marginality—indeed, an anxious clinging to it as an indication of authentic artistic being and Being as such. Tied up with the idea of marginality as a demonstration of authenticity is the idea of greater-than-ordinary openness to and depth of experience and, correlative, extraordinary power of Being. Presumably the lives of those on the social margin are more to the existential-artistic point than those in mainstream America or those who accept establishment values, including stylistic values. Even as the marginality of contemporary art dwindled by reason of its economic and academic assimilation and consumption—its eager socialization into the mainstream, making it the darling of the art establishment—and the very idea of marginality came to be doubted (except as a way of distinguishing the have-nots from the haves), artistic marginality came to be apotheosized as an aesthetic in its own right and as the touchstone of authenticity in art. In other words, the less artistic marginality became a reality, the more the fantasy of it had to be maintained. Indeed, the less clear its meaning, the more crucial it seemed, to the extent that artistic marginality has become the new sign of quality, as has recently been implied by *New York Times* art critic Michael Brenson.4

Essentially, what is involved in the
postmodernist celebration of the authen-
ticity of marginality (often conflating
social with artistic marginality)—exempli-
"fied by such self-taught artists as Jean-
Michel Basquiat, Thornton Dial, Sr., and
Howard Finster—is the idea that art must
be perverse and that marginal art is
particularly perverse. (Being self-taught is
an important sign of authenticity, for it
suggests that the artist is not repressed by
the art establishment and society in
general, and so is freely expressive.) Self-
taught marginal art is highly esteemed
because it seems inherently perverse,
especially in its physicality, and its much-
noted awkwardness is the sign of this
perversity. The perverse is what looks
obscene in the etymological sense of the
term: what is experienced as the obverse
of the scene. The obscene turns out to be
something quite specific: in Erling Eng’s
words, “a modified reproduction of the
past of [the] particular scene, whether the
past be a verifiable memory or a mythic
form.”

This partly explains the obsessive
historicism of eighties art. The past is
inherently obscene, for it is perversely
behind the scene of the present and it
perversely undermines the possibilities of
the future scene. The eternal return of the
past intimates the spuriousness of present
and future novelty—that present and
future novelty cannot help but be a
disguised repetition of the already secretly
familiar. Thus, the obscenity of novelty is
that it makes no difference, changes
nothing. Nonetheless, the perversity of
the marginal use of material is that it is
made to suggest an obscene, forgotten
sense of Being. Our sensitive respect for
the awkwardness or stylelessness of
marginal art suggests that we uncon-
sciously regard it as Being made manifest.
It is an emblem whose awkwardness
indicates that it has become what it
signifies. Unfortunately, the awkwardness
of marginal art is later institutionalized as
the ultimate novelty.

Another understanding of the perverse
is perhaps more directly to the point
regarding the taste for self-taught mar-
ginal art: the perverse embodies the
specifically infantile—the past all adults
share. The taste for self-taught marginal
art has to do with the implicit belief that
it returns us to the level of inchoate,
inarticulate, emotionally archaic experi-
ence. Adorno thinks that one of art’s tasks
is to signal such experience without
rationalizing and socializing it.6

From this point of view, the Neo-
Expressionism of the eighties reempha-
sizes what is most fundamental to and
inescapable in experience. The difference
between Neo-Expressionism and self-
taught marginal art (which is often
regarded as a provincial variant of it) is
that the former does this in and through a
sophisticated articulation of a complex
awareness of objective history, often
national history, as in the case of German
Neo-Expressionism. Folk art, which is
perhaps the quintessence of self-taught
marginal art, lacks such a sophisticated
awareness, even if it sometimes alludes to
historical events. Instead, it returns us to a
kind of prehistorical awareness, reinstat-
ing with special purity what has been
called the child’s vision of the world—a
vision regarded as fundamental to much
modern art. Neo-Expressionism and self-
taught marginal art share an assertiveness,
a physicality, and an awkwardness that
accord well with this calculated “infanti-
lism,” except in the latter it is not so
calculated. The conspicuous physicality of
self-taught marginal art conveys a sense of
inchoate, inarticulate experience in a
much less pretentious way than in
postmodernist Neo-Expressionism.

Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel defines the
perverse as a “reconstitution of Chaos, out
of which there arises a new kind of reality,
that of the anal universe.” This involves
turning the “psycho-sexual genital
dimension . . . upside down,” sometimes
by parodying it.7 The marginality

Haim Steinbach, Untitled (Igorot
backpack, rice container), 1989.
Plastic laminated wood shelf with
objects. 49 1/2 x 48 x 23 in. Private
collection, New York

Unidentified artist, Standing
Articulated Figure, ca. 1920.
Carved and painted sequoia and black
ash, painted metal, wire, and metal
hardware. 32 3/4 x 13 3/8 x 9 in.
National Museum of American Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Gift of
Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., and
museum purchase made possible by
Ralph Cross Johnson
achieved by such parody—involving, as Chassagne-Smirgel argues, the fantasy of eliminating the difference between the generations (so that eternal infancy seems to reign) and the sexes (the homogenization of sexuality)—keeps art eternally on the margin—indeed, makes it that of Bufuel’s permanent outsider. It can never be completely assimilated by mainstream, establishment culture—what we might call genital culture—which believes that there is a right side up and that differences must be maintained. Establishment culture prefers differentiated order to undifferentiated chaos, and its interest in chaotic self-taught marginal art is an effort to place it in the order. So, it declares such art emblematic of another “order” of things, thereby legitimizing—and neutralizing—expressive chaos.

The inherent marginality of the artistically perverse is sometimes described by critics as radically subjective and “personal,” sometimes as intransigent or irreducibly “idiosyncratic.” That is, the artistically perverse is what does not and never can fit in properly, for it lacks propriety; it is intrinsically indecorous, which is why it terrorizes. Indeed, much eighties art aims to terrorize, as Lucy Lippard suggested in her long review of the 1980 Times Square show, with its “shock and schlock.” Shock and schlock are, to use another slogan, a kind of “generosity of expression.”8 And a pointless generosity it is, this expressivity that exists as an end in itself, ostensibly with no rhetorical purpose, although no doubt subliminally oratorical.

Now such generosity of expression, inwardly and often openly occupied with sex and death (to allude again to the title of Lippard’s article), involves an attempt to be private. “It is private,” as Edit de Ak eloquently put it in her article on Francesco Clemente, because “it can be measured by its idiosyncrasies.” The artist regresses to the idiosyncratic private—that is, the perverse personal—and expresses himself with no audience necessarily in mind because he feels he “has no chance” in life and art and wants to use his sense of futility in art—an allusion to Wolfgang Max Faust’s conception of the psychosocial basis of German Neo-Expressionism.9

This notion is the last piece to be put in place to arrive at the conception of the marginality of eighties Neo-Expressionism—a conception much more directly to the point of self-taught marginal art, which is much less “learned” than Neo-Expressionism. This suggests that self-taught marginal art came to be acclaimed in the eighties because it was recognized as an even more important justification for art—proof of its human necessity—than Neo-Expressionism. Indeed, it seems to be a more authentic realization of the generically expressionistic ideal of perverse and perversely private art. It is more inherently marginal, as it were.

The interesting question, of course, is what social success will do to self-taught marginal art. Has the success of making record album covers killed the Reverend Finster’s art, as some think? Certainly his recent production does not have the same unaffected look as his early work. Did success kill John-Michel Basquiat, or was it in the cards of his personality that he


would overdose on drugs? The answers are unclear, but the questions are real and suggest the destructive intention—envy?—lurking in the postmodernist welcome given self-taught marginal art. It is a perverse welcome, indicative of postmodernism’s decadent belief that only a perverse attitude can save art from its own success and that in general such an attitude is the last stand possible against society. But what happens when a perverse aesthetic becomes the only way to success, the only way to become an establishment artist? However, self-taught marginal art has not been quite as successful as postmodernist Neo-Expressionist art, with its stylized marginality, partly because self-taught marginal art exists not only on the margin of art but also on the margin of life. In contrast, postmodernist art exists on the margin of past modern art—its prey. For self-taught marginal art, the margin is not an official position that is a matter of aesthetic choice, but a state of emotional life.

For all its ambiguities, the establishment success of self-taught marginal art hints that the official art world is uncertain about its own values. Endorsement of self-taught marginal art is not simply another phase in what has been called the democratization of culture, but an indication of official culture’s unconscious uncertainty that its values are lasting or even truly significant. That self-taught marginal art is perverse in yet another way supports this idea. If, as Arnold Hauser has written, the "genuinely artistic presents the picture of an existence which makes sense and which has reached its goal and its end, an existence which has been mastered and controlled," while at the same time not "remain[ing] close to life," then the awkwardness of self-taught marginal art, the sense of something out of control in it, is not genuinely artistic. If it suggests an existence—not only art—that is unmastered rather than
mastered, that makes no sense rather than makes sense, as well as an art that is all too close to life rather than at a discrete aesthetic distance from it—an art under the illusion of being in control of life.

Self-taught marginal art is thus inherently beyond the control of socio-artistic authority. In endorsing and embracing it, such authority, however unwittingly, implies its own groundlessness, inner awkwardness, and lack of mastery—its unconscious recognition that its authority is dubious, even as it uses that authority to legitimate and give authority to self-taught marginal art. But then, in paradoxically moving it from the margin toward the center, thus suggesting that self-taught marginal art articulates the perversity that is implicitly regarded as central in art today better than the postmodernist art that is officially regarded as central, socio-artistic authority shows its own perversity.

Notes


2. So-called folk art ("so-called" because the Nazi conception of "folk" has made clear how much of a sociopolitical construction it is), in particular, satisfies postmodernism's fascination with dead novelties.

3. I am alluding to Erich Fromm's distinction between the Having and Being modes of existence, fundamentally different ways of defining it. In To Have or to Be? (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 76–77, Fromm writes that in the former mode "all that matters is my acquisition of property and my unlimited right to keep what I have acquired." Collecting, for example, is motivated by the desire to own and have total power and superiority over something. In contrast, in the latter mode, to exist means "to love, to transcend the prison of one's isolated ego, to be interested, to incline, to give" (p. 88), ultimately involving being actively present in a shared relationship (p. 81).


7. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, Creativity and Perversion (London: Free Association, 1985), p. 17. Parody in part explains such appropriationists as Mike Bidlo, et al., making these Neo-Conceptualists unconscious marginalists. Indeed, they reduce what they quote to cheap anal material. This contrasts with the Neo-Expressionists, who can be regarded as self-conscious marginalists, for they assume that chaos is an "elevating" state.

