

CANADIANART

TAMMY RAE CARLAND: "What is an Artist?"

Written by Sarah Thornton
February 2, 2012

*This is the first of a series of web columns by Sarah Thornton, author of *Seven Days in the Art World* and chief writer on contemporary art for the *Economist*, sharing her concerns with our readers. Her first installment looks at the fundamental question: "What is an artist?"*

The other day, I asked a smart senior curator for whom I have a lot of respect, "What is an artist?" She said that she wasn't interested in the question and implied that it was dim of me to ask. Indeed, many art-world insiders refuse to consider the issue. They assert that living artists are so unique that it is impossible to generalize about them so it would be misguided—not to mention disrespectful—to pin them down with a definition.

When art-worlders answer the question, their most common response is suspiciously closed. "An artist is someone who makes art," they say. "But what is art?" we ask. "It is made by an artist," they reply. This circular reasoning is meant to throw us off the scent. It implies a fruitless line of inquiry. Paradoxes are supposed to be sexy, but this one offers little more than a redundant loop that forecloses exploration. Other responses to the question also tend to obfuscate. For example, several curator friends have told me, "An artist is someone who has no choice but to make art." This suggests that being an artist is akin to being gay. Whether it's the result of nature or nurture or both, individual artists—or at least "real" ones—are not responsible for their path in life.

I've interviewed more than 100 artists for a book I'm researching (a kind of sequel to *Seven Days in the Art World* which focuses on artists) and none have given me the impression that their occupation was an unavoidable fate. Even crazy artists have impressed me with their determination to do what they do. I was in Yayoi Kusama's studio in Tokyo recently, doing my own research and spinning off a piece for the *Economist* (my regular journalistic gig) because the 82-year-old artist has a show opening next week at Tate Modern in London, which will later travel to the Whitney in New York. Since childhood, Kusama has been hearing pumpkins speak to her (she admires their "generous unpretentiousness"!) and experiencing hallucinations in which the boundaries of her self are obliterated by an infinite void. As a young woman artist in the 1950s, it took her many years of fierce strategizing to find a way to move to America. Her resolve included writing letters to legendary American painter Georgia O'Keefe in which she requested, "would [you] kindly show me the way to approach this life." Had Kusama not moved to New York, it is unlikely she would have found the right platform to make the historically important work that she did. Kusama was an outsider artist who worked incredibly hard to get inside. The sane part of her did it; she had a choice.

Being a full-time artist—rather than a weekend hobbyist—takes a great deal of discipline. It is hard work even when it looks like play. Artists sometimes cover up their industriousness by posing as self-indulgent wastrels but, in my experience, artists with high recognition are the kind of workaholics who revolve their holidays around work and have no plan to retire.

Why is there resistance to defining the most valorized individual within the art world, the one who gives purpose to the activities of the rest and around whom flows so much attention? The reasons are manifold. First, the question may be simple but the answers are complicated. Second, these answers are so fundamental to contemporary art professionals that they are often just beneath consciousness. Finally, dealers, curators, collectors and critics have a vested

interest in protecting the allure of their artists through a little mystification. Akin to the prohibition by some religions on depicting God in human form, there is almost a superstition against characterizing artists. Ambiguous origins appear to be conducive to generating belief. As a sociologist trained in ethnography, this kind of disavowal is like the heady smell of a giant truffle to a fungivore. It alerts me to the presence of something into which I could happily sink my teeth!

Perhaps it would help to consider what artists are not? Members of the general public often confuse artists with craftspeople. They assume that artists draw well and are gifted with their hands. Yet this definition is about 500 years out of date. During the Italian Renaissance, a clear division of labour developed between people with craft skills and those with creativity. Artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo were not revered primarily for their manual dexterity, but for their inventiveness.

Nowadays, the art world patrols the distinction between artists and artisans with a kind of vigilante elitism. Someone who makes, say, 500 seascapes to match the bedspreads at a hotel resort may call themselves an artist and be perceived by their friends as one—they apply oil to canvas, after all—but art-world insiders will see them on a continuum with a house painter who services the interior decorating industry. Why? Your average resort seascape is not trying to do anything new or make its onlookers think. What is more, its intended destination—a hotel bedroom—betrays its meek ambitions.

Contemporary artists are ideas people who aspire to originality and make works that they hope will be seen in a museum. More specifically, I argue that the people that society treats as artists are professional thought-provokers who earn the right to be taken seriously through (a) insistent artworks, (b) convincing interpersonal and mediated communication and (c) opportune art-world affiliations.

While self-portraits generally give clues to the mystery of artists' identities, Tammy Rae Carland's *I'm Dying Up Here (Strawberry Shortcake)* actually explores the question, What is an artist? With its harsh spotlight and downcast microphone, the piece (showing in a group exhibition this month at Anthony Reynolds Gallery) evokes many of the pressures under which artists currently work—the pressure to speak, to be seen, to perform, to convince, to entertain. Sometimes, the expectations facing artists are not unlike those encountered by stand-up comedians. Certainly, the image is wry. Carland is in the wrong place to hide. Her pink shroud (or perhaps it's a veil) depicts a cartoon character that is at odds with the seriousness of the stage. It undermines her authority, cuts into her coolness, acts as a damp rag to her credibility. Thankfully, it also transforms Carland's head and torso into one big phallic shape. And, by these absurd means, the artist is thrust back into the game again.

Although art-world insiders swear that the artwork takes precedence over its maker, it is really a double-act. After all, artists are the people who have the authority to deem something as "art." They have all the energy, intention, discipline and willpower that an inanimate canvas does not. Moreover, the artist is the unifying source—or the mixing channel—that pulls together disparate artworks. I find that the conversation between the works in an artist's oeuvre is one of the most intellectually stimulating and enjoyable ways to appreciate art. Given the dominance of solo retrospective surveys at major and minor museums alike, it is clear that I am not alone.