

**Gary Alan Fine****Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity**

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Among the pantheon of influential and prolific contemporary sociologists, American ethnographer and symbolic interactionist theorist Gary Alan Fine is the anti-Tony Giddens. I am sure Fine would not define himself that way, and there are obvious similarities between the thinkers that throws a wrench into my polarized invidious comparison. Both Fine and Giddens have published an almost unbelievable number of books and articles over the last 30 years or so, leaving people to speculate whether they are really existing individuals as opposed to some kind of secret cell of writers and scholars publishing books under a trademark name. Both Giddens and Fine have a distinctive theoretical style, tend to take on a diplomatic synthesizing approach to scholarly debates and have had an enormous influence in a variety of sub-fields within sociology and beyond. Both Giddens and Fine, moreover, do their best works in sociology's book culture as opposed in the *ASR/AJS* article-oriented wing of the discipline.

The similarities end here. While Giddens seems to write the same book or two over and over again, Fine's scholarly monographs are all different and original, from his analysis of mushroom collectors, his account of high school debaters, his ethnography of little league baseball, his examination of fantasy games, his journey into the world of restaurant workers to his recently published *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* (2004). While both Giddens and Fine have contributed much to sociological theory, Giddens has never really come to grips with sociology's commitment to evidence and the engagement of research findings. Fine, in contrast, is deeply engaged in the gathering and interpreting of data in all the complexity that involves. Finally, although the issue of writing is too seldom stressed in our academic discussions, Giddens is a master of coining phrases and sentences that no human being should write, while Fine is one of the best social science writers working today. Fine has a unique and clear writing style and an eye for just the right word and evocative description. For these reasons, among others, Fine's newest book exemplifies some of the best that sociology has to offer.

Fine's five year ethnography of self-taught art communities in the United States is an excellent contribution to the sociology of boundaries, art worlds, markets and reputations, as well as a terrific general introduction to what is sometimes called "outsider," "folk," or "self-taught" art. Unlike earlier ethnographies that led Fine to study activities rooted in one place, this topic took him to art shows and festivals throughout the United States, in Alabama, New York, Michigan, Georgia, Columbus and Gainesville. It also involved interviews with scores of dealers, artists, collectors, curators, critics and academics throughout the country. The stories he outlines are interesting and theoretically useful, and they paint an evocative picture of a world of artistic production that is generally ignored by mainstream art critics, media, museums and university art departments. The resulting book is another classic example of the ethnographic sociological imagination.

Symbolic Interactionists, of course, stress the socially constructed nature of social worlds, and working within that tradition Fine gives us an excellent analysis of the boundary-setting struggles involved in the very act of labelling and talking about a "field" of art. The art world Fine studied and lived with for many years once was called "primitive" or "naïve" art, terms that are clearly no longer

appropriate as they betray class and racial bias. The term “folk” or “outsider” art, while capturing some of the sociological dynamics at play, generally are seen as “unseemly” as Fine puts it, when used to describe an art world made up mostly of “poor, black, uneducated, or elderly persons.” The term “vernacular” art captures, for Fine, the opposition to the official language and culture of elites that the artwork embodies, as well as focusing our attention on the selfhood and creativity of the everyday geniuses who create the work itself. This term, however, has not caught on among academic and art critics.

Fine ultimately settles for the label “self-taught” art since it emphasizes the creation of artistic work outside the boundaries of formal schooling, training, and museum and critic certification. His extended discussion of all these labels, however, is an extremely valuable contribution to our understanding of the stakes in setting the boundaries of anything we seek to study or understand. Fine makes a compelling case that “self-taught” art is different from other art worlds because the poor and/or socially marginal artists engaged in the practise are generally not “directly involved in the art market” through gallery openings, pricing the work or shaping their “careers.” In addition, the “self-taught” art world is typically held in low esteem by the established art world constituted by high prestige artists, museums, universities and elite critics.

With this conceptual work addressed, *Everyday Genius* is then organized around a fascinating series of chapters that deal with key themes in the “self-taught” art world. While symbolic interactionists too often preach about process and the creative aspects of human activity, Fine’s thematic chapter organization actually shows how boundaries are created in the ‘self-taught’ art world, how biographies of artists are constructed, and how collections, communities, markets and art institutions emerge from the self-conscious and negotiated activity of individuals and networks. The final chapter, “Creating Art Worlds” sums up the analysis and sets the theoretical stage for future comparative analysis of other art worlds and types of markets, communities and institutions. There are insights, laughs and fascinating stories on just about every page.

Ever the student of Erving Goffman, Fine engages in constant analogies as well as thick description, drawing on his extensive field research and literary flair. His discussion of the conflicted debates on the labelling of the field of the “self-taught” art world, for example, ends with the claim that “boundary making is essential for any group; we are all cartographers and customs officials.” One art dealer told Fine that he sizes up all potential buyers according to how serious they seem to be, an activity the dealer shares, Fine suggests, with “maitre d’s, police officers and prostitutes.” Fine points out, furthermore, that, “buying art, like having sex, is an intimate transaction – personal preferences and private acts.” Fine also includes a long discussion of theft, fraud and legal battles within this sometimes lucrative art world, a place where fantasies of shoplifting by the collectors are not uncommon, something Fine labels “pieces envy.” And Fine talks about the triviality barrier that helps keep “self-taught” art out of the sight of established art historians and critics, just as among academics it is deemed better to study “mathematics than marbles” and “murder than mushrooming.” These kinds of insights and analogies run all the way throughout the book, making for an entertaining scholarly treat.

Fine, of course, does not always hit the right notes. Like Giddens in a different way, Fine has positioned himself as a diplomatic figure within the sociological world. A representative of Symbolic Interactionism to the “outside world” of mainstream sociology, Fine has succeeded in bringing the tradition into the 21st century by taking it beyond the dogmatism and insularity of

Blumer's most dedicated followers. Given his obvious and well earned ties to scores of Symbolic Interactionist ethnographic researchers, however, Fine too often pulls his punches or does not address some important issues as directly as he might. To his credit, he does say here that a "radical constructionism" that denies "reality and accepted morality" is an "intellectual virus sapping the strength of those hoping for social betterment." This is an important point to make for those who rightly endeavour to make the case for a "contextual" constructionism that does not fall off the "post-modern" or "literary theory" edge. Seriously folks, as Joel Best once famously put it.

At the same time, Fine's identification with the tradition of "grounded theory" in this book strains credibility. There is something valuable, I think, in a tradition that, as Fine puts it, attempts to "avoid preconceptions," while trying to "inductively" "develop a theoretical understanding from the actions and collective meanings of participants." It is Fine's very dialogue with the "grounded theory" tradition, one could argue, that distinguishes him from a "grand theorist" like Giddens. Fine actually studies the empirical world with eyes open beyond his theoretical models, and "grounded theory" clearly helps here. Nonetheless, is it really credible to suggest that Fine undertook grounded theory in this book, as well as in his other classic ethnographies? It is just a coincidence that Fine discovered interesting things about the construction of the reputations of some of the controversial artists he studied and wrote about (in particular, the European outsider artist and pedophile Adolf Wölfli), insights that allegedly emerged, as "grounded theorists" would tell us, uncontaminated by Fine's many rich and theoretically driven writings on "difficult reputations?" Fine's invoking of "grounded theory" seems ritualistic to me, and I would like to hear his straight-forward assessment of a research tradition that, in my view, often leaves graduate students "out to sea" as they search for the "holy grail" of inductively arrived insights without the benefit of the theoretical entry points that Fine clearly brings to his studies.

One can't do everything, of course, in one book, and despite this quibble Gary's Alan Fine's *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* is perhaps the best of Fine's many classic ethnographies. The book would work well in qualitative methods or sociology of culture graduate level classes. And the analysis is so entertaining and insightful that a paperback version would keep undergraduate students' attention and interest, while teaching them much about social life and the sociology of culture. And it is a book that one could give as a gift to friends. In the versatility of the audiences he writes to, as well as in the other ways we have discussed, Gary Alan Fine is clearly no Anthony Giddens. And for this fact, those of us who would like to see a theoretically driven and empirically grounded public sociological imagination thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, can only offer our thanks and appreciation to a master of our craft.

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