Exploring Folk Art

Jones, Michael

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A Feeling for Form, as Illustrated by People at Work

Long before I completed my dissertation on one kind of work, chairmaking in southeastern Kentucky, I conducted field research in the Maritimes under contract with the Museum of Man in Canada on another occupation, that of faithhealing. Four years after I began the study (and two years after I completed my dissertation), I published a monograph entitled *Why Faithhealing?* (1972c).

One of the issues was why patients availed themselves of the services of traditional therapists. To answer the question, I asked many former patients as well as recorded stories told me by healers about who had come to them and why [on a related matter, see my article “Doing What, with Which, and to Whom? The Relationship of Case History Accounts to Curing” (1976b)]. In a moment of scientific inspiration or personal desperation, I presented myself to “Uncle” Joe Gallagher as a patient. I had been plagued by eczema on my hands for several years, and treating eczema was one of his specialities.

Another question for research was what motivated someone to become a healer. I had data about several traditional therapists. I also read widely in the psychology and sociology of work, particularly the literature concerning occupational role and identity. I returned to the subject in 1976, giving a paper at the Southern California Academy of Sciences meeting on another occupational identity. In the essay called “In the Switching Yard, with Railroad Men” (coauthored with Paul Deason, a longtime friend and the source of much of the data analyzed), I considered the matter of occupational identity.

In 1979 I examined virtually every book, article, and dissertation on occupational folklore that I could find. I read studies in the anthropology and sociology of work. Having had an article solicited for a *festschrift* for Linda Dégh (1980a), I began writing the essay that is printed below. And I designed a course on occupational folklore which I taught in winter quarter, 1980.

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As valuable as previous research on occupational folklore was, something seemed to be missing. Some of the research was informed by the earlier notion of folklore as a survival and "the folk" or "a folk" as an isolated group. Much of the literature before the 1970s concerned the tales, songs, and beliefs of miners, seafarers, loggers, and oilfield workers.

In the 1970s the range of expressive forms, occupational identities, and research questions was greatly expanded. Robert S. McCarl (1974) wrote about the art of contemporary production welders. Alan Dundes and Carl Pagter published *Work Hard and You Shall Be Rewarded: Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire* (1978), which concerned "Xeroxlore." At the Smithsonian Institution's "Working Americans" Festival in 1975 and 1976, 600 hours of stories and reminiscences were recorded from visitors representing varied industries and occupations. Michael J. Bell published "Tending Bar at Brown's: Occupational Role as Artistic Performance" (1976), Bruce Nickerson completed "Industrial Lore: A Study of an Urban Factory" (1976), and McCarl published "Smokejumper Initiation: Ritualized Communication in a Modern Occupation" (1976). In 1978 *Western Folklore* published a special issue on "Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife," edited by Robert H. Byington, and Camilla Collins completed a dissertation about "Twenty-Four to the Dozen: Occupational Folklore in a Hosiery Mill" while Jack Santino finished one on "The Outlaw Emotions: Workers' Narratives from Three Contemporary Occupations." The next year Catherine Swanson and Philip Nusbaum edited a special issue of *Folklore Forum* on "Occupational Folklore and the Folklore of Working"; Patrick B. Mullen published 'I Heard the Old Fisherman Say': *Folklore of the Texas Gulf Coast* (1979), and Beverly J. Stoeltje completed her dissertation, "Rodeo as Symbolic Performance" (1979).

The 1980s witnessed the publication of yet other books and articles on occupational folklore and folklife. Most of the research by folklorists, however, was carried out in isolation from an enormous body of literature in the fields of administration, management, and behavioral and organizational science. Folklorists' research on occupational folklife and workers' culture dwelt on lower-level employees, following an historical dichotomy between "workers" and "management," and tended to ignore the lore of managers or of the organization as a whole. More importantly, the concept "organization" escaped attention. Numerous studies by folklorists contained implications for developing the concept of organization and for understanding organizations, and they had ramifications for improving organizations. But these implications and ramifications were rarely made explicit. On the other hand, even as late as the end of the 1970s researchers in behavioral and organizational science who had begun writing about "myth," "symbols," and "ceremony" were unaware of folklorists' extensive research on occupational folklore since the turn of the century.

When I wrote the article below in 1979, I was just beginning to examine some of the management and organizational literature. I was struck by the increasing interest in the humanities and concern about a more humanistic orientation in the theory of organizations and administration. And I thought the concept
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"organization" relevant to folklore studies. Therefore, it seemed to me that the fields of folklore studies and organizational and behavioral science possessed interests and concepts that could be mutually beneficial, achieving a greater understanding than heretofore of the organizational aspects of folklore and of the folklore in organizational settings. "A Feeling for Form, as Illustrated by People at Work" is an early statement of a theme I was to continue developing for several years.

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"A well-turned investigation is something like a well-turned piece of furniture," remarked Sandra Sutherland, a private investigator in San Francisco. "There are cases where everything fits together beautifully," she said, continuing to use the analogy of art; "facts and procedures flow into logical conclusions." The result is "the elegant solution," as her husband, also a detective phrases it, "meaning a solution that cuts through chaos to utter simplicity." Such a case he calls the "perfect job," she added. For, she explained, "We're after ... not so much the truth but coherence." When asked what the perfect job would be from her point of view, Sutherland replied, "The chance to do a case where the only limitations would be the reach of your own creative abilities—no time or money considerations." Under such conditions, she implied, the ideal form of investigation—culminating in an elegant solution—might be attained more often. "The reality," however, she explained, "is you do the best you can with what you're allowed" (Lewis 1979:34).

Words and concepts essential to a study of art appear in the few statements above by Sandra Sutherland, a detective: beauty, elegance, perfection, and so on. Rarely, however are contemporary workers treated as artists or their activities examined as art by occupational researchers, including many folklorists. On the other hand, classic studies of folk and primitive art by Boas (1955), Grosse (1897), Haddon (1895), and others do in fact concern labor, or rather the physical outputs of early industry and primitive technology. While focusing on the artistic quality and aesthetic-arousing effects of these objects, however, the authors do not develop some of their inferences about the nature of human beings qua workers or the relationship of art and aesthetics to work per se; certainly few readers today make the connections.

An essay on form and its perfection and appreciation in the context of working seems appropriate in a volume honoring the endeavors of Linda Dégh. She is well known for her insightful and influential study of the art of storytelling and storytellers. She has gained prominence for her efforts to discern and characterize the form of narratives, particularly the legend. She is noted for her research on the expressive behavior of immigrant workers in the New World. And she has been outspoken in her concern for the applica-
tion of inferences from folkloristic research to practical problems in contemporary society. Workers' dissatisfaction with their jobs looms large among these social issues. While several experts on labor relations have been making a plea for "job enrichment" and a "humanization of the workplace" (see, e.g., Fairchild 1974), Linda Dégéh, as a folklorist committed to the study of expressive behavior, has recognized implicitly what many others have not: that through their folklore all workers express their humanity, and many attempt to maintain a sense of personal dignity in circumstances that often appear demeaning. What, then, is this "feeling for form" which is characteristic of human beings that Linda Dégéh has been dealing with in her research, in what ways and for what reasons is it manifested in work, and what are some implications of this "art of work," especially in regard to notions about "management" and the designing of jobs?

The Aesthetic Impulse

"All human activities may assume forms that give them aesthetic values," writes Franz Boas. While a word or a cry or unrestrained movements and many products of industry seemingly have no immediate aesthetic appeal, he observes, "nevertheless, all of them may assume aesthetic values" (1955:9-10). What is required for an activity to have aesthetic value is that an individual be aware of and manipulate qualities appealing to the senses in a rhythmical and structured way so as to create a form ultimately serving as a standard by which its perfection (or beauty) is measured. Sometimes these forms elevate the mind above the indifferent emotional states of daily life because of meanings conveyed or past experiences associated with them, but they need not do so to be appreciated. Perfection of form is enough to satisfy; if the forms convey meaning, that adds to their enjoyment but it is not essential.

Boas supported his thesis with references to the myths, songs, tools, and implements of the Northwest Coast Indians of the late nineteenth century. Equally illustrative are some of the activities of contemporary workers in factories, plants, and offices. The cleaning of tuna by a young woman in Astoria, Oregon, for example, reveals the artistic impulse on its most basic level—absorption with the sensory experience of handling, manipulating, and transforming materials. As Starlein observed about her work, the fish she boned has special qualities, particularly the "soft colors. The reds and whites and purples." The dark meat, used for cat food, is "crumbly and moist like earth." Sometimes, enraptured by sensations and engrossed in fantasies, she does not notice the passage of time, and she violates instructions, holding back the cat food instead of placing it immediately on a conveyor belt. "I hold it out to make as big a pile of dark meat as I can," she said. She concluded her
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remarks by admitting that she had been attracted to the plant by the pay. "I knew it would be dull and boring when I came here," she said. "But," she added, in apparent surprise at what she had discovered, "I had no idea of the sensuous things I would feel just from cleaning fish" (Garson 1975:23–24).

To quote Starlein is not to glorify her job or defend the conditions under which she works. Her comments demonstrate, though, that a feeling for form is present in, and sometimes transcends, adverse circumstances. Seemingly unexpectedly this feeling for form renders aesthetic appeal in even the most prosaic activity. Perhaps, it might be argued, this is necessarily so and in fact should be anticipated in other work situations, too, in which there are sensations that, however rudimentary the forms given them, affect people.

Like the touch, smell, and appearance of tuna, sounds and body movements are sensations; rhythmical repetition of them may be perceived as evincing form, and thus gratify for several reasons. Studies of, for instance, blacksmithing, singing sea shanties or chain gang songs, chanting cadence, and working on an assembly line suggest not only that rhythm is required to accomplish certain tasks but also that it is a fundamental feature of what is taken to be artistically pleasing (VLach 1981:35–36; Hugill 1969:67–68; Lomax; Carey 1965; Walker and Guest 1952:41). Repetition establishes a pattern of efficient movement. It results in surface regularity and evenness on objects, and smoothness in action, expression, and demeanor. Repeated sounds and movements, comprising a recognizable form which may be pleasing in its own right, are the beginnings of (and sometimes epitomize) structure and order, and they are significant for this reason. "The opposite of work is not leisure or free time," write the authors of a landmark report on labor in America; "it is being victimized by some kind of disorder which, at its extreme, is chaos" (Work in America 1978:7). Essential to both art and working is the coherence that private investigator Sandra Sutherland found more satisfying in her job than truth itself.

But rhythm can lead to monotony. So while the body toils, the mind plays. "This'll sound crazy," admitted a keypuncher, "but I like to keep a certain rhythm . . . sound going," varying it in a form of complex syncopation. "I mean I'd move forward when the woman next to me was halfway through another field and then she'd move in when I was halfway through the next," she said. "So you'd get a constant—like, bum, bum, bum zing; bum, bum, bum babum, zing." She added, "Sometimes I had it going with three people, so we'd all be doing it exactly together. I don't think the others noticed it," she said. "We never planned it. I never mentioned it to the other girls," some of whom, however, later admitted to being racers and synchronizers (Garson 1975:155–56).

Other examples could be cited (McCarl, Meissner in Dubin 1976; Jones 1967a; Roy 1959–60; Polsky 1964), but suffice it to say that play, creativity,
artistic production, and aesthetic response are inherent in the work process, even or perhaps especially in situations characterized largely by "surface mental attention" (Whyte 1961:179). Boas attributed this striving to perfect form to two factors, the first of which is a feeling for form and the second of which is a capacity to master technique (1955:58, 62). He did not elaborate on either pronouncement. Nor did he go on to suggest such other factors as an ability, and indeed a basic need, to have an aesthetic experience and the insistence of play.

A feeling for form is fundamental to human beings. Despite an adversity of circumstances, this feeling for form persists as both a source and a product of our humanity. A striving to achieve perfection of form and an appreciation of formal excellence is essential to this sensibility. Although this feeling for form admirably serves the purposes of expediency and practicality, it is not reducible to anything else, including "survival." It is a fundamental quality of the species. But recognizing its existence in themselves and others, human beings tend to rely on it as a means of functioning in day-to-day existence. They are aware that because of this feeling for form—and their ability to achieve formal excellence—they are enabled to transcend emotional indifference and both find and express meaning in their lives. Consequently, they sometimes feel remorse when their activities, or they themselves, are lacking in form, or when the formal excellence they have achieved goes unnoticed or unappreciated. The implications for understanding worker dissatisfaction with their jobs are enormous.

Creating Customs

Frequent worker turnover, extensive absenteeism, threats of slow downs, and acts of sabotage have long plagued American industry, despite gains made by labor unions on behalf of workers collectively. Automobile factories, where some of the highest wages are paid, seem to suffer the most worker dissatisfaction. Perhaps it is no mere coincidence, then, that it is on the line in these plants where the possibilities for creativity and play, and the chances to extend activities into forms with aesthetic appeal, are least likely to occur. Nevertheless, some of the men at the Vega plant in Lordstown, Ohio, overcame obstacles to the expression of their humanity, although ultimately they were opposed by both union and management. The workers invented and implemented an alternative system, redesigning assembly-line methods in such a way that they were both permitted and encouraged by conditions they developed for themselves to perfect form in their assigned tasks on the line.

"Now what happens is that the guys who have their operations side by side, they're relating together," explained Dennis McGee, who works first
shift in the Vega plant. "In other words, they all worked in the same area. They started saying 'Go ahead, take off.' It started like an E break—you asked for emergency bathroom call," he noted. One worker would tell the other, "'Go ahead, man, I think I can handle it,'" said McGee. "I'd run to the front of the car and I'd stick in the ring we used to have, and I'd run to the back then. I mean, I'm not running, really running, but I'm moving," he said. "I put the gas in, I go up to the front of the car again... go back again. I'm getting it done, and I'm not having any recovery time. I'm going right back again," said McGee.

Having originated informally, the procedure became increasingly formalized until a clear pattern emerged. Relay teams evolved in which two men would do their job as well as that of two others—for half an hour, and then the other two would perform their own operations and the first team's, who, in turn, rested for 30 minutes. Although the men had been doing this for three or four years, officials of the International UAW denied its existence, apparently unable to cope with it in terms of structures already formulated; the union was quick to point out that it could lead to exploitation by the company. Company representatives opposed "doubling up," and intervened to prevent it, arguing that quality would necessarily diminish.

Joe Alfona and other workers insisted that quality improved. The two people not working the job usually were present so if a problem developed they could attend to it. The audit tickets, claimed Alfona, proved that with doubling up fewer repairs had to be made later. "You get 100% perfect," he said. "Because we don't want no problems, you know what I mean? We're doing a good job."

Public knowledge of these new procedures was slow in coming. A journalist named Bennett Kreman was on hand in the fall of 1973, investigating the threat of a strike which would dwarf the explosive conflict in March of the previous year. Five thousand grievances had been lodged in six months. Only after observing and interviewing for a week was Kreman able to clarify issues, principal among which was the unique one of doubling up, or what Robert Dickerson, committeeman for the local, called an "antide-humanization team."

Speaking for himself and other workers, Dave McGarvey said, "you have to double up and break the boredom to get an immediate feedback from your job, because the only gratification you get is a paycheck once a week, and that's too long to go." Although several men mentioned relief from boredom, the complaint seems to have been more precisely the lack of challenge to their intellect and, as McGarvey implies, not having a sense of accomplishment once the job is learned: a form, the only one permitted to be produced, is repeated over and over again. Trying to work eight hours a day at a single, routine task, without simultaneously playing—for that is essentially what creativity requires—is numbing. As Dennis Lawrence, who works in the body
shop observed, having learned a job, a man “no longer pays attention to what he’s doing because it’s automatic—bang, bang, bang.” On the other hand, when “you’re doubling up, you’ve got the responsibility for two jobs,” he said. “You’ve got to keep your mind working at all times.”

Stimulation is necessary in order to perform, yet it cannot be long sustained. Doubling up provides a solution. It offers a way, said McGee, “for me to shuck and jive—all day long, have a good time, help each other and get out the work.” Added Alfona, “You have no social life,” because of the long hours at the plant. “The only social life you have is in that plant, and if you’re stuck on that line all the time—nothing!” However, he said, “If you can get that break where you can go down and rap to your buddy or make a phone call to some chick, it’s different.”

Alfona summarized his feelings and articulated them to others in the form of an analogy. He asked people to imagine that one of them and a friend have a job paying four dollars an hour. “I bring it down to very easy words so the average man can understand,” he said. “So anyway,” he continued, “You’re going to get paid four dollars an hour to each carry a package up the steps and down. Well, isn’t it a little easier for you to break your back and carry two packages up and down for half an hour and your buddy resting,” he asked, “and then let him take over and you rest your back? If you want to go get your drink of water or go call your chick, you got the simple freedom to go, see?” (Kreman 1973).

It should come as no surprise, then, given the opposition to team relays, that tensions smoldered at the Vega plant. From his point of view, the man on the line—“the working man himself, the assembler himself,” repeated McGee proudly—had devised a system constituting an elegant solution to the much-publicized but unsatisfactorily resolved problem of dehumanizing assembly-line work. Doubling up seemed to make everything fit together beautifully: the assembler was challenged in his work, he generated his own rhythm, he was encouraged to perfect form in his assigned task, he had the time after doing so to relish the achievement, and he could socialize as well. The form ultimately created was a sense of personal wholeness, the feeling of being fully human with the rights and privileges along with the responsibilities of other human beings. Even when prohibited from doubling up, the men refused to abandon the method, continuing by subterfuge to carry it out in modified form. “Even if they say don’t double up, what you do—it’s not as good as doubling up the way we normally do it—but we’ll hang on the car and we’ll stand there while the other guy does it,” admitted McGarvey. “And the minute somebody comes round, we’ll just put our hand in the car,” giving the impression that they are performing according to company dictates.
These examples of a feeling for form in the work situation insinuate that many longstanding assumptions must be reassessed. Principal among these is the notion of work. The head of a prestigious group of management consulting companies, who achieved fame for developing a system to monitor the productivity of workers, recently bemoaned the fact that 45% of the working day is spent “doing nothing” (Pope 1979). Much of this time obviously is devoted to gossiping at the water cooler, betting on sports events, fantasizing and engaging in mental exercises, joking, and so on—what one student of labor passingly refers to as the “seemingly trivial events” in a “humdrum context” from which individuals apparently are capable of extracting “surprisingly rich meanings” (Strauss in Fairfield 1974:35), and what folklorists should recognize immediately as play and creativity which are crucial to day-to-day existence. Unfortunately, however, the words “work” and “play” are usually conceived of as antonyms; job and recreation are segregated; laborers and players operate in different domains. “Creativity” is vaguely distinguished from and also related to both work and play: to create is a serious endeavor, demanding purposive effort; it is likewise somehow often amusing, seemingly separated from reality, and nonproductive. Yet some people work at playing and others play at working, and still more create work as some work to create. In fact, then, the three phenomena are not isolated from the continuum of human experience or from one another. For creativity insists on exertion and the expenditure of energy to accomplish something, as well as an intellectual distancing to transform drudgery into pleasure. Play is never truly formless, an achievement requiring some degree of purposive effort in the name, ostensibly, of diversion. And although work demands purposive effort, it is also creative in that something is brought into being and invested with a new form.

The interrelationships of work, play, and artistic creativity were known to early investigators, among them Ernst Grosse, who, like Boas, viewed much of primitive industry as the production of works deserving the name art. But Grosse went further in his book The Beginnings of Art, equating art and play, for he writes that the artistic tendency of primitive people “is substantially identical with the play impulse” (1897:308). By extension, then, it might be suggested that working for most people is an artistically creative endeavor—there is rhythm and skill and structure or order and the perfection of form—which also partakes of and demands play when rhythm becomes monotonous, structure routine, and form repetitive, so as to create new forms.
Humanistic Management

At about the time that Boas commenced his observations of primitive artists, and that Grosse was examining museum specimens of early industry, Frederick W. Taylor began to lecture, read papers, and publish essays on the nature of work in what was then modern industrial settings. Like Boas and Grosse, he was familiar with the craft tradition. For Taylor had rebelled against his wealthy family in Philadelphia, rejecting his father's plans for him to study law at Harvard, and had begun instead an apprenticeship as both patternmaker and machinist to become a common laborer. Within a few years he had been promoted to management status, after which he turned on his former colleagues, as if they were adversaries, in his zeal to extract the greatest amount of productivity for the company, being more committed than his own employers to the goal of increased production. (An obsessive-compulsive individual, Taylor is reputed to have timed his various activities, counted his steps, and analyzed his motions—from his childhood on—in an effort to increase efficiency.) But it was “Taylorism,” as set forth in The Principles of Scientific Management (1911) and other publications, that had a tremendous impact on American business and industry and that continues to be, according to management consultant Peter F. Drucker (1954:280), industrial sociologist William Foote Whyte (1961:7), and others (e.g., Braverman 1974:87–89), a vital force in modern corporations and other institutions.

Although the workers-artists studied by Boas and Grosse both conceptualized and constructed a whole object, and many of Taylor's fellows were master craftsmen knowledgeable about the complete process of production, Taylor sought to segment the process of labor. He dissociated that process of work from the skills of workers, separated conception of the product from its execution and concentrated a monopoly of knowledge in those who were construed to be representatives of the company. Taylor's purpose was to wrest control of the labor process from the men in the shop—the “laborers” who were, in Taylor's view, highly individualistic without ties to others, motivated largely by self-interest and money—and to place it in the hands of another group of people—“management”—who presumably would have in mind the company's best interest, that is, the greatest productivity and therefore wealth of the organization. One of the methods that Taylor stressed was that of piece rate payments, basing a worker's pay on the amount produced. Another was specialization. Being confined to one task or to a few simple tasks, the laborer would develop much greater speed than if the tasks were many and varied. A third was standardization. Since, in Taylor's view, there was only one correct or best way to do something, then an industrial engineer should design this operation, the laborer should be instructed in it,
and someone else should supervise the job to ensure that it was done in the prescribed way and that variations were not introduced. Managerial control and discipline required placing jobs within a structure of authority, hence the hierarchical form of organization so common today.

While Taylor did not invent any of these methods and principles or singlehandedly revolutionize the organization of industry, he did, it is widely recognized, assemble and give coherence to ideas prevalent during his day. By articulating a philosophy and giving it a name—"scientific management"—Taylor seemingly created a whole form that was pleasing in its utter simplicity. But a history of factory slow downs, walk outs, shut downs, and sabotage, and the continued complaints about "dehumanization" of the workplace, reveals that there were major flaws in the conceptual foundations of Taylorism. Various attempts to shore up the structure—made by the several schools of industrial psychology and human relations—have not gotten at the fundamental problem. It is now time to suggest a serious reexamination and reassessment of the philosophy, principles, and methods inspiring the organization and functioning of modern corporations, drawing on the studies of early industry by such investigators as Boas and Grosse. For it is the inferences and hypotheses of these researchers that could add the missing human element, and provide the basis for developing a perspective and set of principles involving humanism, which seems to be so greatly needed today.

Recent years have witnessed a growing "social consciousness" in industry and the extension of corporate responsibility to consumer and environmental protection, an insistence on the redesign of work, and a challenge to the philosophy and practice of management (Braverman 1974:85–121; Whyte 1961:6–7). Significantly, one of the critics of management is not only a consultant to industry but also a humanist with a background in religious studies. Philip W. Shay has called into question the mechanistic view of management pervasive in modern corporations, contending that a new discipline of management should be established, "as a practical art with scientific overtones," growing out of a reexamination of basic management concepts using behavioral research as a guide. "Management can cull new ideas from many fields of knowledge, disciplines, and tools and techniques to help focus on a broad horizon," writes Shay. Though he did not do so, Shay could have mentioned studies of folklore and of traditional art and industry as sources of new ideas. Achieving his goal of having organizations "designed for people as they really are, not as classic theorists would have them" requires such sources of information and insight, for it is in their folklore that human beings express, reveal, and maintain their humanity (Shay 1977:19). Exactly what this new discipline of management should be is not quite clear in the writings of Shay and others, but given the increased concern with corporate responsi-
bility in the social sphere, it seems reasonable to suppose that the tools and techniques for running an enterprise will have to be governed by humanistic principles.

To be instituted, this “Management by Humanism,” as I think it should be called, requires two significant changes, one in attitude and the other in the data base on which concepts and assumptions are founded. While the complexity of modern business demands some division of labor and a degree of specialization and standardization, it does not compel assembly-line procedures with a nonhuman tempo, a pyramidal structure of authority, or an adversary relationship between “labor” and “management.” Innovative and far-reaching experiments at Volvo plants in Sweden have demonstrated this. “We started with the idea that perhaps people could do a better job if the product stood still and they could work on it, concentrating on their work, rather than running after it and worrying that it would get beyond them,” writes Pehr Gyllenhammar, president of Volvo. “We decided . . . to bring people together by replacing the mechanical line with human work groups,” he adds. “In this pattern, employees can act in cooperation, discussing more, deciding among themselves how to organize the work—and, as a result, doing much more” (Gyllenhammar 1977:13, 14). The change in attitude would incorporate what Barbara Garson discovered in her interviews with and observations of a large number of individuals: “People passionately want to work” (author’s emphasis), she writes, and further, “I realize now . . . that work is a human need following right after the need for food and the need for love” (Garson 1975:xi, xiii). It would recognize the art of work, acknowledging that working is a creative endeavor involving a degree of play. This change in attitude might be facilitated—and would certainly be reinforced—by an expanded data base, one that includes folklore and folk technology in the workplace, past and present. For what the president of Volvo came to realize was already being demonstrated on the line in the Vega plant in Lordstown—laborers themselves had evolved a technique, as folklore, seemingly more in keeping with human needs and capabilities than that which had been engineered and thrust upon them. (How easily it is forgotten that workers also manage, just as managers work. And how often it is ignored that there are useful antecedents for management in early industry and important analogues in everyday life.)

Conclusions

Just as Boas had to defend the proposition that primitive industry resulted in products worthy of the name art, so too does it seem necessary to demonstrate that contemporary industry has its art and artists. For it is usually supposed (sometimes with good reason) that the present workplace is
barren of the conditions necessary for art to flourish. It must be stressed that individuals should be recognized and treated as such, and not submerged in the undifferentiated mass of the "labor force" or conceived of as merely a "factor in production." They need a degree of control over the product and some responsibility for its design; instead, many merely carry out others' instructions for reassembling a small part of the whole product. They must have freedom from constraints, but in fact even physical movement as well as communication and interaction—like imagination—are often curtailed. For an individual to be creative, it is generally assumed, the work should be challenging, not routine and stultifying. Little wonder, then, that few students of work employ the framework of art and aesthetics in their research or notice the more subtle attempts of workers to develop and elaborate their tasks into forms having aesthetic value.

It is precisely this perspective emphasizing the art of work that is needed both to understand the nature of homo faber and to improve the very conditions as well as goods and services whose quality is so often deplored. At present, most people whose labor is simplified, specialized, and standardized must content themselves with subtle (some might be tempted to say "pathetic") attempts to develop and elaborate tasks into forms having aesthetic value crucial to their sense of self-worth and well-being. Some of them, of course, dream of independence, usually epitomized by being self-employed like private investigator Sandra Sutherland. Less than 10% of the American population is self-employed, however, and as Sutherland pointed out there are constraints on her creativity, too. The reality for most people, as Sutherland noted in regard to herself, is that they must do the best they can with what they are allowed. But it seems reasonable to assume that if we are allowed to do more, we will accomplish more. For all of us are human beings having a feeling for form, as a condition of our being human, which is insistent and compelling, often having its fullest and finest expression as art and play in situations not of labor and toil but working in a broader sense—one in which we find some degree of personal fulfillment rather than drudgery.

Notes

1. While folklorists have always been attracted to the artistic dimension of much of folklore, and while much of the folklore collected has been from workers and in some way related to work, few of them have examined the nature of workers as artists or considered the art of work. Two exceptions are Robert S. McCarl, Jr., (1974) and Michael J. Bell (1976). For someone who is truly conscious of, and seeks to exploit, herself as artist in an occupational role, see the comments of Dolores Dante quoted by Louis [Studs] Terkel in Working (1975:389–95).