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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Art Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Fall, 2006), pp. 100-111

Published by: [College Art Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20068484>

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TOURNEY PARTONES he and she she

Homer creates art in the “Mom and Pop Art” episode of *The Simpsons* on Fox. (The Simpsons™ & © 1999 TCFFC. All rights reserved. © Fox Broadcasting)

## Homer Simpson as Outsider Artist, or How I Learned to Accept Ambivalence (Maybe)

I presented an earlier version of this paper at the College Art Association Annual Conference session “Comic Art,” New York, February 20, 2003, chaired by Benjamin Binstock and Benjamin Lapp. Other versions of the paper were given at the Philosophy Club lecture series of the State University of New York, New Paltz (April 2003), and at the National Graduate Seminar of the Photography Institute, Columbia University (June 2004). Kristine Harris and Robert Polito provided numerous beneficial comments, and Eugene Heath prodded me to articulate what in an earlier draft I only hinted at. Steve Martits and Susan DeMaio generously assisted me with some unusual technological needs. Thanks to Alfred Bie and Andy Bandit for kindly offering their time and expertise in the area of reproductions and permissions. A United University Professions Professional Development Grant provided important support for this project. I received the best assistance with my research from a Web site,

Homer Simpson purchases a build-it-yourself barbecue pit and, with the help of his daughter Lisa, starts to assemble it. Not surprisingly (for anyone who knows Homer), he makes a mess of the project. Unsuccessful in his attempt to return the now-mangled item to the store, he tries to get rid of it in other ways, in vain. As he then drives down the street with the object tethered to the back fender of his car, it dislodges and crashes into a car behind him. When the driver of this car later shows up at his house, he is certain she is there to sue. Instead, she explains that she owns an art gallery where she would like to exhibit his object.

These early scenes in a spring 1999 episode of the *The Simpsons*, entitled “Mom and Pop Art,” written by Al Jean and directed by Steven Moore, introduce the twin questions that reverberate throughout the episode:

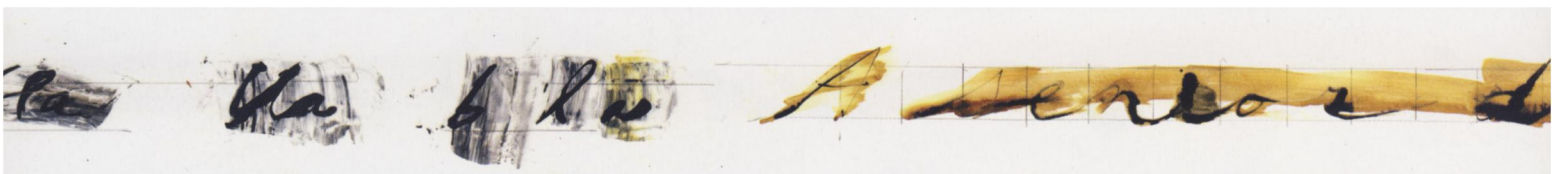
Reva Wolf

What is art? Who is an artist? These old, seemingly worn-out questions go back to Marcel Duchamp’s readymades of the 1910s but are infused with new energy and meaning on *The Simpsons*. The incisive wit we encounter here punctures our staid judgments about art and artists, thereby releasing the latent ambivalence and confusion that we ought to welcome, confront, and enjoy.

The ambivalence and confusion about the what and who of art first enter the picture when Homer responds to the gallery owner’s enthusiastic labeling of his failed barbecue pit as art. “You mean this hunk o’ junk?” he asks. “This isn’t art; it’s a barbecue pit that pushed me over the edge.” His wife, Marge, agrees: “You? An artist?” For habitual viewers of *The Simpsons*, Marge’s exclamation of disbelief is rich in association. We know Marge is perennially annoyed by Homer’s aversion to any cultural activities that might be deemed “high art.” We know, too, from the episode “Brush with Greatness” of exactly eight years earlier (to the day), that as a high school student Marge herself had aspired to be an artist, and had sent Ringo Starr a portrait she had painted of him.<sup>2</sup> Marge’s portraits stand for conventional artistic skill, while Homer’s contraption represents an unintended alternative to convention. Yet Homer as a character does not fit the alternative bill. This incongruity, by disorienting us, contributes significantly to our confusion, since we are unable to fit the idea of “Homer the artist” neatly into our existing categories and stereotypes.

Homer’s initial disagreement with the art dealer’s determination that his ruined barbecue pit is art sets the stage for a scene toward the end of the episode, in which Homer and Marge pay a visit to the local art museum. I will reveal a bit later what occasions this museum visit. For the present, I will zoom in on Homer’s discovery, at the museum, of the comic-strip characters Akbar and Jeff, drawn by none other than the creator of *The Simpsons*, Matt Groening. Homer,

Feature



**Marge and Homer in the "Mom and Pop Art" episode of *The Simpsons* on Fox. (The Simpsons™ & © 1999 TCFFC. All rights reserved. © Fox Broadcasting)**

"The Simpsons Archive" ([www.snpp.com](http://www.snpp.com))—a site that still makes me puzzle over whether a line really separates the scholar from the fan. Without the enthusiasm of a particular *Simpsons* fan, my nephew Marc Hartzman, this essay would not exist; I dedicate the essay to Marc.

1. "Mom and Pop Art," *The Simpsons*, originally aired on Fox Network, April 11, 1999.
2. Brian K. Roberts (writer) and Jim Reardon (director), "Brush with Greatness," *The Simpsons*, originally aired on Fox Network, April 11, 1991.
3. Annemarie Wyley, "The Simpsons' Creator Groening Grows Up" (interview with Matt Groening), Reuters, September 3, 1999, available online at [www.snpp.com/other/interviews/groening99b.html](http://www.snpp.com/other/interviews/groening99b.html). The schematic M of Homer's collar and hair (as well as Bart's hairdo) resembles, in addition, the zig-zag pattern on the shirt of Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* comic-strip character Charlie Brown, and Groening has acknowledged the influence of *Peanuts* on his work; see Doug Sadownick, "Groening against the Grain: Maverick Cartoonist Matt Groening Draws in Readers with Gay Characters Akbar and Jeff" (interview with Matt Groening), *Advocate* 571 (February 26, 1991): 30–35, also available online at [www.snpp.com/other/interviews/groening91.html](http://www.snpp.com/other/interviews/groening91.html). Elsewhere, Groening has commented that the characters in *Peanuts* are based primarily on "variations on hairdos"; quoted in Erik H. Bergman, "Prime Time Is Heaven for 'Life in Hell' Artist," *TV Host*, December 16, 1989, as transcribed by Bruce Gomes and available online at [www.snpp.com/other/interviews/groening89.html](http://www.snpp.com/other/interviews/groening89.html).
4. Groening has stated, for example, "I always think it's a mistake for cartoonists to demand cartoons be treated as art. Cartoons are cartoons"; Brian Doherty, "The Mother Jones Interview: Matt Groening," *Mother Jones*, March–April 1999, available online at [www.motherjones.com/arts/9a/1999/03/groening.html](http://www.motherjones.com/arts/9a/1999/03/groening.html).
5. George Meyer (writer) and Wes Archer (director), "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington," originally aired on Fox Network, September 26, 1991.
6. Robert Pinsky, "My Favorite Show," *New York Times Magazine*, September 20, 1998, 55.
7. I credit this observation to Haynes Lee ([www.snpp.com/episodes/AABF15](http://www.snpp.com/episodes/AABF15)).

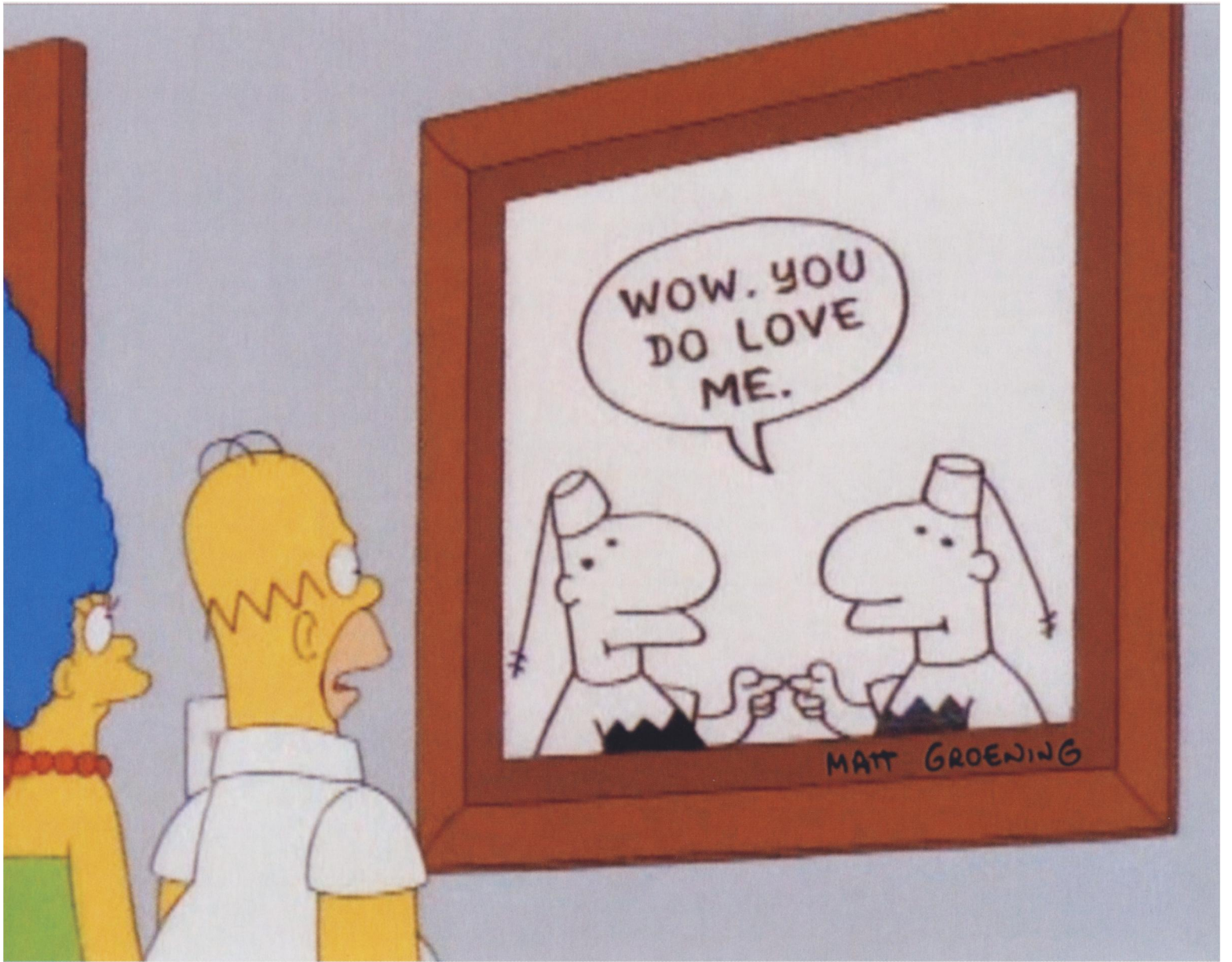
as an aficionado of popular culture, immediately recognizes the author of this drawing and is stunned. "Matt Groening!" he shouts, "What's he doing in a museum? He can barely draw!" This judgment parallels Homer's own gut response when the art dealer declares, on his doorstep, that Homer has made a work of art. An implication of this parallel is that neither Homer's nor Groening's productions qualify as art. (It is worth pointing out, at this juncture, that the M formed by Homer's hair, when viewed from the side, and the one formed by his open shirt collar are very likely synecdoches for "Matt"; Groening himself has said that he identifies with Homer.)<sup>3</sup>

Homer's judgment of Groening's work, however, is not merely an indirect reference to the cartoonist's identification with his character. This judgment also operates to convey the opinion that comic-strip drawings (and, by extension, cartoons) are not art (which happens to be Groening's own viewpoint).<sup>4</sup> Homer's judgment is also consistent with his character. For example, in the 1991 episode "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington," he tells Marge that "cartoons don't have any deep meaning. They're just stupid drawings that give you a cheap laugh."<sup>5</sup> As the poet Robert Pinsky and other *Simpsons* fans have observed, the program regularly makes fun of, while simultaneously praising, its own genre.<sup>6</sup> It does this with a striking economy of means—through a single sentence or a simple drawing.

The economical drawing of Akbar and Jeff intimates that the label "art" constitutes a form of acceptance. Look carefully at the text in this drawing: "Wow. You Do Love Me." While we can take the recipient of these words to be either Akbar or Jeff—the two are identical—the recipient also may be you or me, in which case these words might signify that the comic strip is loved sufficiently to hang on the museum's walls. This association of art with love and acceptance is an important theme in the "Mom and Pop Art" episode of *The Simpsons*. Homer will go to great lengths, as the narrative progresses, to gain the love and acceptance that society lavishes on the successful artist. His actions provoke our dormant ambivalence, as we ponder the implications of construing love and acceptance as criteria for defining art. We are able to experience this ambivalence because the episode itself refrains from presenting any clear judgment or argument about these criteria. This generously nondogmatic approach provides ample room for our ambivalence and confusion to roam freely.

It is the art dealer who first gives Homer a glimpse of how good it feels to have the love and acceptance of the "art world"—and how bad it feels to lose them. Who is this art dealer? Played by Isabella Rosellini, her name is Astrid Weller, which is an anagram for "sell weird art."<sup>7</sup> Such anagrams have a venerable history in *The Simpsons*. The name of Homer's son, Bart, is an anagram for "brat." But Astrid Weller's name is more complex and has a pun embedded in it, beyond and at the same time about the anagram. This pun is in the surname "Weller," which refers to the "wellerism," a figure of speech typical of the





*A former defense*

8. The best-known example of a wellerism in *The Pickwick Papers* is Sam Weller's comment, "What the devil do you want with me, as the man said wen he see the ghost?" For more on the wellerism, see *A Dictionary of Wellerisms*, ed. Wolfgang Mieder and Stewart A. Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

9. Adam Gopnik, "Comics," in *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, ed. Adam Gopnik and Kirk Varnedoe (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Abrams, 1990), 208.

10. Two insightful discussions of the use of allusion in *The Simpsons* are William Irwin and J. R. Lombardo, "The Simpsons and Allusion: 'Worst Essay Ever,'" in *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! of Homer*, ed. William Irwin, Mark T. Conard, and Aeon J. Skoble (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2001), 81–92, and Carl Matheson, "The Simpsons, Hyper-Irony, and the Meaning of Life," in *The Simpsons and Philosophy*, 112–13.

11. The term "outsider art" is considered to have originated with art critic Roger Cardinal's book *Outsider Art* (London: Studio Vista; New York: Praeger, 1972). Cardinal credits an editor at Studio Vista for coining the term; see Roger Cardinal, "Toward an Outsider Aesthetic," in *The Outsider Artist: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, ed. Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 39, n. 2.

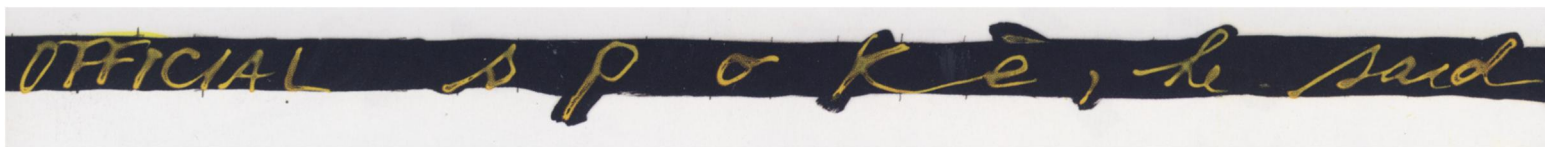
12. There is a growing literature about the "insider" dimension of "outsider" art, and the use of these two terms (or comparable ones) in essay titles to highlight the paradox of the concept of outsider art is common. A few examples are: Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., "From Domination to Desire: Insiders and Outsider Art," in *The Outsider Artist*, 213–27, and, from the pages of the present periodical, Mary-Beth Shine, "Us and Them, or, I'd Never Belong to a Club that Would Have Me as a Member" (review of the exhibition catalogue *Self-Taught Artists of the Twentieth Century*), *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 99–101.

eponymous character Sam Weller of Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (1836–37). The wellerism is distinguished by its use of irony, often in the form of a pun.<sup>8</sup> Astrid's designation of Homer's object as "outsider art" is a wellerism since her name embodies the anagram "sell weird art."

The title of the episode is a meaningful, multilayered pun as well. The "mom" and "pop" of "Mom and Pop Art" refer to Homer and Marge in their distinct artistic careers. The title also contains the label "Pop art," alluding, appropriately, to the art movement of the 1960s that took some of its imagery from the comics and, according to one critic, rescued the comics from extinction.<sup>9</sup> "Mom and pop," in addition, refers to the name of the hardware store at which Homer purchases the barbecue pit that will soon lead him to outsider-artist stardom. It's called "Mom & Pop Hardware," but the name is disingenuous, since the store is "a subsidiary of Global Dynamics" (it clearly is meant to resemble a Home Depot). Finally, "mom and pop" has a down-to-earth, folksy tenor that is contradicted by Homer and Marge's artistic ambitions. None of these allusions, puns, and paradoxes is gratuitous; each one (and there are more still to come) is a miniature of and contributes to the complexity of the overall structure and storyline of the episode.<sup>10</sup> It is a complexity that ultimately allows us to scrutinize our own judgments and distinctions, and that affords us the unusual experience of welcoming the ambivalence likely to result from such scrutiny.

This complexity is especially clear when the episode turns its focus to the concept of "outsider artist." It is hard to imagine a more ideal outsider artist than Homer Simpson. He certainly is self-taught. And everything in his demeanor and dress is antithetical to the stereotypical art-world insider. Still, the paradox of the term "outsider art"—which as a label, a commodity, and a subject of intellectual inquiry is the creation of insiders—comes into full view as the episode unfolds and Astrid Weller includes Homer's barbecue pit in an exhibition of outsider art she holds at her gallery.<sup>11</sup> There, a sign in the storefront reads, "Inside, Outsider Art" (underneath which is added, "Louvre: American Style").<sup>12</sup> Similarly, once we enter the gallery, this insider-outsider distinction seems to exist only so that we may question it. For example, at the exhibition opening, when Homer's sculpture is sold, Weller says, "Congratulations, Homer. You're now a professional artist." Being a professional, of course, is incompatible with being an outsider. To offer another example, at this same opening we find Homer—the outsider—doing what he does everywhere, namely, consuming as much food as possible, but we also spot the artist Jasper Johns filling his jacket pockets with refreshments! The dialogue plays up the comparison of Simpson to Johns. When Lisa, trying to monitor her father's behavior, tells him that by chewing with his mouth open he will lose his "mystique," Homer replies, "Lisa, all great artists love free food. Check out Jasper Johns."

In fact, Johns (the character's voice was recorded by the artist himself) is



made out to be a petty thief in other ways, too—a weakness also shared by Homer (as we know from several previous *Simpsons*' episodes).<sup>13</sup> We catch Johns stealing a light bulb from the gallery, an obvious allusion to Johns's own early sculptures, such as *Light Bulb I*, of 1958. The light bulb, like the barbecue pit, started out as an everyday object and ended up elevated to the status of art. Both the overt and the implied comparisons of the reserved, cerebral Johns to the loud, impulsive Simpson are absurd, yet the absurdity, in its hilarity, succeeds in disorienting and confusing us.

The confusions about fine art and popular culture, and about insider and outsider, that awaken our ambivalence as we watch this episode of *The Simpsons* involve artistic identity, as we have just seen in the parallels drawn between Homer Simpson and Johns, or those drawn between Simpson and Groening. Fueled by his triumph at Weller's gallery, Homer soon takes on the artistic identity closest at hand that best suits his purposes. Listen to this discussion he has with his wife, Marge:

Marge: Homie, I'm really happy you sold your sculpture, but don't you think it may have been a fluke?

Homer: Hey, I've always had an interest in art, dating back to my schoolgirl days when I painted portrait after portrait of Ringo Starr.

Marge: That's my life you're describing.

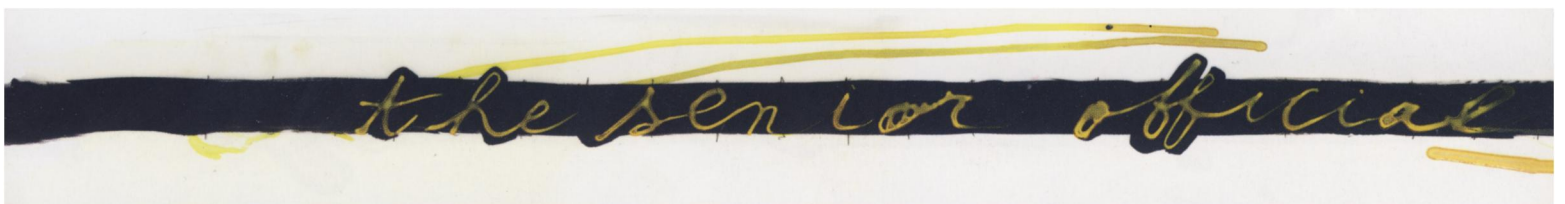
Homer: I think I remember my own life, Marge!

From this conversation, as Homer confuses himself with Marge, we realize that, in spite of the vagueness and ambiguities of art and artists, it actually is meaningful to draw distinctions. We see that the show makes fun not only of distinctions that may seem vague or arbitrary (about art and artists), but also of the inability to properly make distinctions, whether between people, as in the present case, or between types of objects. To discern differences, or not: either approach has its pitfalls and limitations. (For instance, if Homer decides Matt Groening's Akbar and Jeff drawing is not art because he thinks Groening cannot draw, then Homer is applying some criterion according to which an object may hang on the museum wall; yet the application of this criterion may limit his range of aesthetic experience.) It is with good reason that writers of divergent political stripes and wide-ranging professional backgrounds have called attention to how, on *The Simpsons*, all sides of an argument are scrutinized and laughed at. The *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott has called the show "gleeful in its assault on every imaginable piety."<sup>14</sup> The conservative syndicated columnist Jonah Goldberg, writing in the *National Review*, has stated that "its satire spares nothing and no one."<sup>15</sup> Carl Matheson, a professor of philosophy, has observed in his

13. A conspicuous example is the episode, "Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment," by Steve Pepoon (writer) and Rich Moore (director), originally aired on Fox Network, February 7, 1991.

14. A. O. Scott, "How 'The Simpsons' Survives," *New York Times Magazine*, November 4, 2001, available online at [www.nytimes.com/2001/11/04/magazine/04SIMPSONS.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/04/magazine/04SIMPSONS.html).

15. Jonah Goldberg, "Homer Never Nods: The Importance of *The Simpsons*," *National Review*, May 1, 2000, available online at [www.nationalreview.com/01may00/goldbergprint050100.html](http://www.nationalreview.com/01may00/goldbergprint050100.html).



16. Matheson, 120. Matheson argues that the undercutting of the viewpoints it puts forth is the basis for the humor of *The Simpsons*, and he calls this technique "hyper-ironism" (118). For a critical assessment of this aspect of the humor of *The Simpsons*, see James M. Wallace, "A (Karl, not Groucho) Marxist in Springfield," in *The Simpsons and Philosophy*, 235–51.

17. John Swartzwelder (writer) and Jim Reardon (director), "Itchy and Scratchy and Marge," originally aired on Fox Network, December 20, 1990.

18. For example, the biographical sketch of O'Neal on *Celebopedia* describes him as "truly a Renaissance man for the modern age" ([www.celebopedia.com/oneal/](http://www.celebopedia.com/oneal/)). Moreover, O'Neal has even referred to himself as a renaissance man; see Kevin Merida, "Shaq O'Neal, On the Ball," *Washington Post*, August 6, 1998, available online at [www.wpyellowpages.com/wp-srv/style/daily/shaq.htm](http://www.wpyellowpages.com/wp-srv/style/daily/shaq.htm). Another detail of O'Neal's life that makes him an especially suitable reference on *The Simpsons* is his strong identification with a comic-strip character (Superman); concerning this identification, see Rebecca Mead, "A Man-Child in Lotusland: Inside the Big World of Shaquille O'Neal," *New Yorker*, May 20 2002, 48.

19. Earlier in the episode, a Mondrian painting is featured on the cover of an issue of *Art in America* that contains an advertisement for Homer's one-person exhibition. Perhaps it is not a coincidence, then, that a real issue of *Art in America* includes an essay about Mondrian's interest in the Walt Disney cartoon *Snow White*. See Els Hoek, "Mondrian in Disneyland," *Art in America* 77 (February 1989): 137–43, 181.

contribution to a collection of essays entitled *The Simpsons and Philosophy* that "its humor works by putting forward positions only in order to undercut them. . . . It treats nearly everything as a target, every stereotypical character, every foible, and every institution."<sup>16</sup>

In the "Mom and Pop Art" episode, Homer eventually manages to slip back into his own identity. He is led back there by what is most familiar to him: failure. The failure comes when Astrid Weller, inspired by the sale of Homer's barbecue-pit sculpture, holds a one-person exhibition of his work at her gallery. Homer is thrilled. He has put all his energy into the production of a series of sculptures that resemble the barbecue-pit piece, thinking this is the sort of object his audience wants (it worked the first time around, after all), and he titles these sculptures accordingly (*Botched Hibachi*, *Failed Shelving Unit with Stupid Stuck Chainsaw and Applesauce*, and *Attempted Birdhouse I*). When the exhibition opens and his new objects are scorned by all present, poor Homer feels deeply dejected. He has lost the approval and love that he had gained, if only by accident, with his first sculpture. His strong desire to regain this approval and love lead him, finally, back to his own identity, which, in a new layer of confusion, is also that of a successful artist.

To understand his paradoxical journey back to himself, we need to examine just where Homer failed, and then, how he found a way to overcome his failure. Astrid diagnoses the problem: "Homer, I'm afraid they only love what's new and shocking. These pieces are just like your earlier work." Apparently no longer judged by outsider-art standards, Homer is now expected to be avant-garde. Marge elaborates on Astrid's diagnosis: "Homer [. . .] all of your . . . things were kind of the same. [. . .] The point is, great artists are always trying new things, like Michelangelo or Shaquille O'Neal." (Not coincidentally, Marge had admired Michelangelo's *David* when it traveled to the Springsonian Museum in an earlier episode of the *Simpsons*.)<sup>17</sup> O'Neal, an NBA star, is always trying new things: in addition to basketball, he has taken up rap music, acting, writing, the restaurant business, law enforcement, and more. Because of these varied activities, he has sometimes been called a "renaissance man."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this moniker is what Marge has in mind when she puts him in the same category as Michelangelo. Despite her own interest in "high" culture, Marge, like Homer, has a penchant for using categories in ways that mix up the accepted notions of art and popular culture.

More mix-ups of this order occur when Homer, desperate to find something new to make, allows Marge to take him to the Springsonian Museum to seek inspiration. They look at paintings by Pablo Picasso and Joseph Turner. They see an abstraction by Piet Mondrian and a Campbell's Soup can by Andy Warhol, the latter distracting Homer from the subject of art and refocusing him on a subject he thinks about more often: food. "Mmm . . . split pea . . . [gasp] with ham! [drool]."<sup>19</sup> It is on this museum trip that Homer spots Groening's drawing of





Akbar and Jeff. As we know already, Homer objects to the presence of Groening's work in the museum. This is one instance in which he does make a judgment and in the process raises a distinction between art and comics.

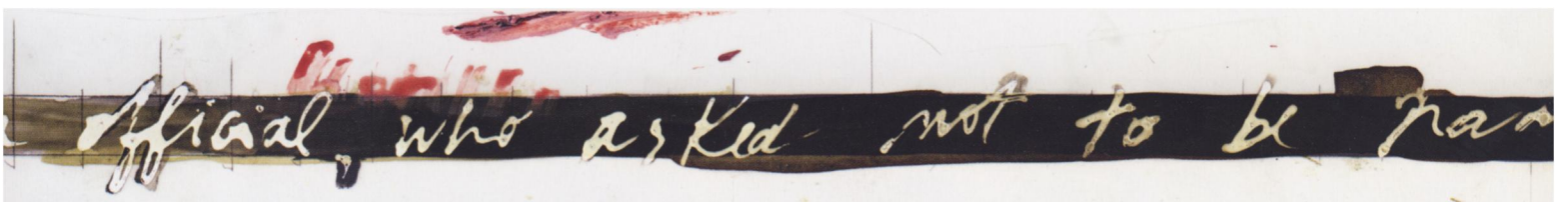
Yet as soon as Homer applies a distinction to Groening's drawing, he is unable to see one—this time between art and reality—in the next object he encounters, an enormous sculpture of a pencil by Claes Oldenburg. As the eraser end of the pencil approaches his head, Homer is convinced that he is about to be obliterated. “Oh no! I'm being erased!” he screams. Homer's fear is an allusion to Daffy Duck in the famous cartoon *Duck Amuck* (1953), in which Daffy's animator (later revealed to be Bugs Bunny) incessantly pesters him, including by erasing him.<sup>20</sup> Suddenly, as far as Homer is concerned, everything has become a cartoon.

The museum exhausts Homer, and he goes to sleep. In his dreams, he is attacked by art. Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of human proportions punches him; Picasso's three musicians shoot him with machine guns; a Salvador Dalí clock drips on him; Warhol throws soup cans at him. The dream represents for Homer the rejection he had felt after the failure of his one-person exhibition. Upon waking, he asks Marge, “Why does art hate me? I never did anything to art.” (His question might be explained as Homer's response to an elitist disdain for unrefined types such as him.) Marge's quest to inspire Homer at the museum seems to have backfired. However, Turner's painting of the canals of Venice gives him an idea.

Before seeing what Homer's idea entails, let's pause to look at the sign posted outside the museum. There, we read that the Springsonian Museum is “Where the Elite Meet Magritte.” These words express bluntly what Homer's question (“Why does art hate me?”) suggests: that there is a vexed connection between social class and art. This connection, a source of professional ambivalence for many artists, critics, and art historians, is a fascinating subtext of “Mom and Pop Art.” Visual props, as well as narrative, are used to elaborate this subtext. Take, for example, the cars driven by Astrid Weller, by the so-called Euro-trash who frequent her gallery, and by Homer Simpson. Weller and the Euro-trash drive fancy, expensive European cars (a black BMW and a green Jaguar, respectively), while Simpson drives a pink, but otherwise generic, Detroit-made vehicle that's been around for some years (the bumper sticker on it reads, “Single 'n' Sassy,” indicating he has owned the car since before he was married). The symbolism of these cars is obvious. No confusion exists about the particular socioeconomic position of each character, as it does with the categories insider-outsider or art-popular culture. Aesthetic distinctions are befuddling and difficult to get a handle on, whereas class distinctions are not. But how we interpret class distinctions is another matter, as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observes in his study of the intricate connections between taste and class; in fact, “Mom and Pop Art” is in many ways analogous to Bourdieu's analysis.<sup>21</sup>

20. Michael Maltese (writer) and Chuck Jones (director), *Duck Amuck*, Warner Brothers, 1953.

21. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). Worth highlighting here, for its fascinating connections to Homer's food consumption at the art gallery and his drooling before Warhol's Campbell's Soup can painting, is Bourdieu's discussion of the ramifications of the fact that the word “taste” applies to food as well as to culture (99–225). Bourdieu's exposure of how intellectuals are implicated in the creation of taste and therefore of class equates with the ambivalence I wish to articulate in the present essay. The *Simpsons* takes up the issue of social class directly in the episode entitled “Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield,” written by Jennifer Crittenden, directed by Susie Dietter, and first aired on Fox Network, February 4, 1996.



Elzie Segar, *Thimble Theatre*, 1930 (© King Features Syndicate)

The association of social class with artistic judgment has a long history in the comics and even in the past had been used by comic-strip creators to set their work against “fine art” while at the same time leaving the distinction open to question. An especially appealing example is an early *Popeye* strip, of 1930, in which Olive Oyl and her brother Castor, in an attempt to refine and polish the rough Popeye (not unlike Marge’s attempts to refine Homer), take him to the home of a socialite, one Mrs. DeHotsy. When DeHotsy proudly shows them her new acquisition, a painting of a female nude, Popeye is dumbfounded, and informs DeHotsy that the figure is so bad that “they wouldn’t print that in a funny paper.” He then takes it upon himself to show her “a real piece of art”: the tattoo of a woman emblazoned on his back. He explains that “it only cost five sinkers to get ’er stuck on there, too—an’ mine’s got a bathin’ suit on which makes it more fitten to look at.” Popeye responds to the painting in terms of the subject matter only, just as Homer does, initially, when looking at the Warhol soup can. But in the end Homer does recognize the originality of Warhol’s picture; in the museum, he moans to Marge (in a brilliant ironical snippet) that Warhol was a “genius,” and that he—Homer—could never come up with something like a soup can.<sup>22</sup> We can attribute this difference between Homer and Popeye to the increasing popularization of fine art in the decades since the Popeye cartoon was written. To put it simply, since Popeye’s day, art has gained a widespread appreciation (although its growing popularity has eliminated neither its elitist patina nor debates about what it is).

Homer even dabbles in conceptual art, a contrivance to win back the love and affection of his audience, and the route that leads him back to his own identity. When he returns home from the museum more depressed than before, the precocious Lisa comes to his aid. She proposes that, since the museum didn’t inspire him, he might “do something really radical, like Christo.” She instructs her father on Christo’s wrapped Reichstag and Umbrellas project, even noting the accidental deaths caused by *The Umbrellas*. This unfortunate detail gets Homer’s creative juices flowing, as he concocts a work of art that weds Christo’s environmental projects with Turner’s portrayal of the Venetian canals. Enlisting the help of Bart (and now behaving like the Homer Simpson we all know and . . . love?), he steals all the doormats in town, uses them to cover up the street drains, and then opens all the fire hydrants. Soon the entire town of Springfield is flooded. All this makes even Bart a little nervous; he asks his dad, “Are you sure this is art and not vandalism?” A new spin on artistic judgment is introduced at this point, as Homer replies, “That’s for the courts to decide, son.” Homer’s destructive impulse has kicked in as his best bet for reacquiring the attention he so craves, and in this he seems to be even more of a brat than Bart.

If cartoons in some sense never grow up, as has sometimes been proposed (Homer may be an adult, but he is not grown up), neither do artists, at least in

22. Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup can paintings, like several other details in this episode of *The Simpsons*, also had made an appearance in “Brush with Greatness”; here, one of the paintings on display at a school art fair is of a Campbell’s Soup can. More extraordinary, though, is the existence of a collage-drawing of a Campbell’s Tomato Soup can in an illustrated book of 1929 by the outsider artist Adolf Wölfli; see John Maizels, *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond*, intro. Roger Cardinal (London: Phaidon, 1996), 23.



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intelligence, said

23. See, for example, Yasco Horsman, "Will Comics Ever Grow Up?" paper in the session "Comic Art" of the 2003 College Art Association Annual Conference, New York, February 20, 2003. Even though Groening does not write the individual episodes of *The Simpsons*, which are collaborations involving many individuals, he oversees the program, and it is fully in his spirit.

24. "Annoying Performance Artist" is reproduced in Matt Groening, *The Huge Book of Hell* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 15.

25. For an attempt to tackle the difficult topic of realism on *The Simpsons*, see Jason Mittell, "Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of *The Simpsons*," *The Velvet Light Trap* 47 (Spring 2001): 15–28.

26. Quoted in Sadownick interview.

27. For example, Gilbert Adair proposes that we view Homer as "gross" but we nonetheless identify with him, in "Ecce Homer," *The Independent* (UK), June 21, 2000, as transcribed by Richard Copping and available online at [www.snpp.com/other/articles/eccehomer.html](http://www.snpp.com/other/articles/eccehomer.html). The comic artist Scott McCloud offers an interesting "explanation" of why we identify with comic-strip and cartoon characters in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 30–32. For a different perspective on audience identification with television characters, see David Joselit, "The Video Public Sphere," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 451–57.

Matt Groening's view, as we see not only on *The Simpsons* but also in his comic strip *Life in Hell*.<sup>23</sup> In a 1990 drawing from *Life in Hell*, he has portrayed the cover of a fictitious magazine called *Annoying Performance Artist*.<sup>24</sup> The cover shows Binky, one of Groening's stock comic-strip characters, covering his body with red ants, while surrounding him are titles of the stories within the magazine, such as "How to Form Dramatic Flecks of Spittle in the Corners of Your Mouth" and "How to Get Back at Your Parents for the Rest of Your Life." In both *Life in Hell* and *The Simpsons*, the motivation to create as well as the form the creation takes have more than a little of the childish in them. Groening exposes us for who we are. Once exposed, we are left wondering how to judge what appears in front of us. If immaturity is a source of both big trouble and great creativity, do we give up creativity in order to eliminate immaturity? Once again, we are provided with ambivalent feelings rather than with an answer to the question.

When Marge discovers the flooded Springfield and is mortified, Homer explains, "It's conceptual art. 'The Grand Canals of Springfield,' just like Venice." Marge remains unconvinced. Even when the art-world luminaries Astrid Weller and Jasper Johns love Homer's creation, Marge still hesitates and cautions Homer that "they're in the business. Real people might not be so understanding." The "real people," of course, are all the characters of Springfield that regular viewers know well, such as Bart's teacher, Edna Krabappel, and his school principal, Seymour Skinner. As it turns out, Edna, Seymour, and all the other "real people" rejoice at Homer's masterpiece.

Where does this leave us? On the surface, it would seem that we are not the "real people," since we, like Weller and Johns, are "in the business," and after all, the "real people," in this case, are cartoon characters.<sup>25</sup> However, another answer can be found, I believe, in Groening's Akbar and Jeff drawing that hangs in the Springsonian Museum. I pointed out earlier that Akbar and Jeff are identical. Groening has stated that what appeals to him about these two is that "when they criticize each other, it's like when somebody exactly the same as you criticizes you. It's hilarious, like you don't see the mirror."<sup>26</sup>

In effect, Akbar and Jeff function in the same way as the opening sequence to each episode of *The Simpsons*, in which the family members, arriving home at the end of the day, make a beeline to the sofa to watch television. We watch this sequence from our sofas and on our TVs. The Simpsons are reflections of us. Our identification with them, as has been noted often, is central to our ability to enjoy this program.<sup>27</sup> They are like us, but different. The difference assists us to reflect more clearly on ourselves in ways we otherwise might not. When we can't help but worry about all the water damage Homer has inflicted on his town (a problem the citizens of Springfield do not seem the least bit concerned about), suddenly a door opens that allows us to understand, or at least appreciate, why some people resist art such as Christo's. If we can ask whether it is worth the



expense and destruction to create a flood, we also can ask whether it is worth the expense and destruction to install giant umbrellas in the landscape.

Through this and many other implied and seemingly absurd comparisons, *The Simpsons* gives us the liberty to laugh at ourselves. The laughter, in turn, opens us to receive perspectives other than the ones we might think we should have or were trained to embrace.<sup>28</sup> It can expand us in this way and, in the process, allow us to accept our ambivalence about who we are, precisely because it is a cartoon and we are not (just as Homer's life isn't Marge's). Each pun, contradiction, and paradox in *The Simpsons* stands on its own as a funny detail, and all, taken together in their totality, give us a complexity that approximates—but is not equal to—life. This cartoon complexity reminds us that we need our distinctions, but that we must recognize their limitations and dangers, too. The muddling of distinctions in “Mom and Pop Art” has the potential to create a mental environment where our own confusion and ambivalence can wander with some degree of comfort—even if it is easier, and seems entirely more acceptable, to be crystal clear about our judgments.

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28. As philosophy professor Jennifer L. McMahon observes, “By displacing certain anxieties and disabling habitual resistances, comedy can bring to light things that might otherwise be too comfortable to acknowledge.” “The Function of Fiction: The Heuristic Value of Homer,” in *The Simpsons and Philosophy*, 230.

