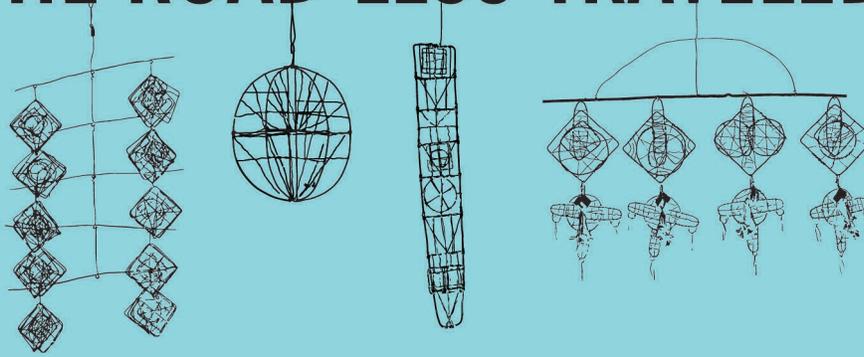


THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED



Sheboygan, WI September 27-29, 2017

Introduction: Expect the Unexpected

Karen Patterson

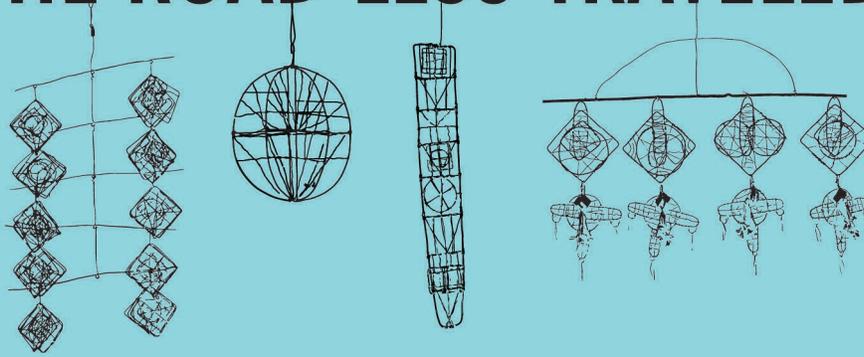
The John Michael Kohler Arts Center collection is estimated to contain over twenty thousand art objects. Most of these works fall under the domain of artist-built environments, a unique field of art making that involves individuals significantly transforming their personal surroundings into an exceptional, multifaceted work of art. Embodying the maker's life experience, these environments are often created without formal plans and are made of readily available materials. As such, every artist-built environment is different; however, they share a role as a visual record and intimate manifestation of our history.

With the largest holdings of artist-built environments in the world, the Arts Center is singular in the study, presentation, and preservation of the work. Yet despite this expertise, the museum hadn't intended to become a collecting institution. A seismic shift occurred on a fateful day in January 1983 when Barbara Brown Lee, curator of education at the Milwaukee Art Museum, described to Arts Center Director Ruth DeYoung Kohler two paintings that a gentleman named Dan Nycz had brought to the museum. This conversation would chart the direction of the Arts Center's future, and laid the foundation for its slogan, "Expect the unexpected."

On that day in 1983, the Milwaukee Art Museum hosted a program for community members to bring in artwork to have a curator or staff member identify its historic or artistic value. Nycz brought in the paintings of a friend of his who had recently passed away: Eugene Von Bruenchenhein. Nycz and Von Bruenchenhein had been friends for over twenty years. As Nycz recalled of his first encounter with the artist:

Well, back in 1959, I was on parole in the squad car. The boundary of West Allis and Milwaukee is the railroad tracks, and Gene Von Bruenchenhein lived about seven or eight houses north, on the east side of the street. And what I was going to do is just go back to Adler, Adler and Ninety-second, back to our city. When I was driving by, I saw Von Bruenchenhein standing in the driveway, and I noticed he had concrete figures—like Mayans or Aztecs—along the house. So I backed up the squad car, and I pulled into his drive, and I got out, and I wondered where he had got them. He told me he had made them, and I asked how. He said he had laid some tar paper down, mixed sand and cement, and he poured on that tar paper, and before it got hard, with his hands, he'd made these faces and elaborate headdresses—like Mayans or Aztecs. He invited me into the house, and I said I couldn't—at that time

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we didn't have walkie-talkies . . . I said I'd like to come back . . . a couple of days later. . . .

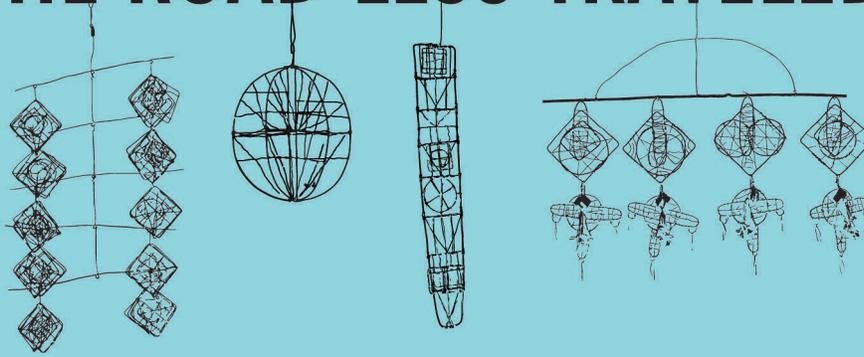
He invited me into his home, and it was just like walking into King Tut's tomb—there was art all over the place. His paintings stacked along the wall . . . and he painted on the vanity, he painted on the floor, he painted on the walls . . . and this is the way I got to know him.¹

Edward Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910–1983) was born in Marinette, Wisconsin, the second of three sons of Edward and Clara Von Bruenchenhein. Clara died when Eugene was seven years old, and his father remarried. Edward's second wife, the boys' stepmother, Bessie Mosley, was well educated, artistic, and literary, and she became a model of creativity and intellectual exploration for Eugene in his youth. After graduating from high school Eugene worked as a florist and later found employment at a commercial bakery, where he worked until the late 1950s. In 1943 he married Eveline Kalka, whom he renamed "Marie" in honor of one of his favorite aunts. Shortly after their wedding, Edward Von Bruenchenhein gave the couple the family house. This home evolved into the all-encompassing universe of Eugene and Marie. For nearly forty years Von Bruenchenhein worked in relative privacy, producing thousands of artworks, including paintings, photographs, and sculpture. Evidence of his elaborate thoughts and theories on the universe—and his place in it—can be found in sketches, poetry, and voice recordings.

There are very few people who encountered Von Bruenchenhein's work in situ, very few who experienced firsthand the incredible universe the two generated within that home. Those who did were confounded by the incongruence of the reality of the couple's living conditions and the imagined realm they produced. By all accounts, the Von Bruenchenheins lived in abject poverty, yet many of the artworks reference royalty, innovation, and passion, revealing a larger-than-life sense of self. Psychological research indicates that most people invent personal mythologies, an internal narrative that, like historic myths, explains the meaning and goals of their lives through vivid illustration. Personal mythologies represent our ideals of ourselves and of the world around us. This internal drive defines who we are, where we are in time, what role we serve, and what the nature of that role is. Von Bruenchenhein's internal self-regard was strong and transcended the reality of his circumstances. To proclaim the personal mythologies he had realized, Von Bruenchenhein itemized his various avocations on a plaque hung prominently in the house:

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein
Freelance Artist -
Poet and Sculptor -
Inovator -
Arrow maker and Plant man -

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Bone artifacts constructor -
Photographer and Architect -
Philosopher.

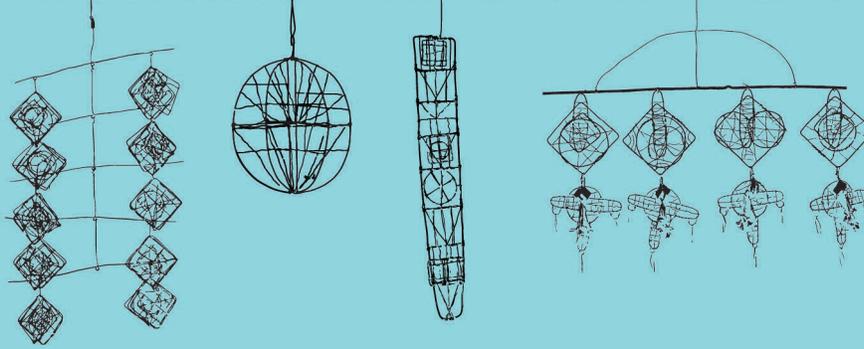
Evidence of these guiding forces is omnipresent in the work. Each piece—an elaborate tower made of poultry bones; a stunningly composed image of his muse, Marie; vibrant paintings of the cosmos; small, delicate thrones; golden crowns; intricate inventions scribbled in books—tell the story of a man who believed he was destined for greatness, who existed without confines or limits.

Nycz certainly understood the rarity of his friend's work and respected his pursuit of fame and accolades. This conviction led him to the Milwaukee Art Museum. Russell Bowman, the museum's chief curator at the time, remembers the day clearly:

The Milwaukee Art Museum's curator of education, Barbara Brown Lee, called me in, as she knew I had an interest in folk and self-taught art and had just curated the museum's exhibition of Herbert Hemphill's folk art collection. I was a bit baffled by the almost psychedelic quality of the undersea or intergalactic landscapes I saw. I asked Nycz if the artist had done anything else, and he said there were six-foot chicken bone towers. I said, "Can you take me there?" and he took me that evening to the West Allis home. It was frigid out, and I remember the multicolored house with the exotic-looking concrete heads propped in the snow around it. Inside were paintings hung everywhere, with bone thrones suspended on wires and groupings of bone towers. Marie was uncommunicative and surrounded by family members. I remember Nycz taking me down the stairs into the basement, which was dripping with water from the cold outside, and the sign "I am the Prophet . . ." hung near the ceiling. Behind it were shelves of clay crowns and vessels, a veritable Aladdin's cave of treasures from a mystical world. My own theory is that he created his own imaginary world: the vast landscapes, the architectural towers, the thrones and crowns, and that he and Marie, driven by isolation and poverty, gradually retreated into that world. I never saw the photographs in that or subsequent early visits, so I never saw Marie as the crowned queen of that world.

Not knowing where this work fit into the context of other self-taught worlds, I knew it was important and deserved to be shown. I also knew that neither I nor the museum could undertake the immense task of documenting and preserving this work. We called Ruth Kohler

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because we knew of the Kohler Foundation's important work in preserving art sites in Wisconsin. Fortunately, the Kohler Foundation took on the work of preserving and presenting Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's legacy, which contributed both to the expanded John Michael Kohler Arts Center and to the reputation and currency that Von Bruenchenhein's work enjoys today.²

Indeed, by that time Ruth DeYoung Kohler and the Arts Center had gained a reputation for showcasing art found beyond the confines of the mainstream art world, and chairs made of poultry bones or elements of constructed worlds filling a modest home would not be an unusual offer. The Kohler Foundation had spearheaded conservation of Fred Smith's Concrete Park in Phillips, Wisconsin, which had been recently completed in 1978. Despite having this background, the experience Kohler had when she first encountered the Von Bruenchenhein house was awe-inspiring:

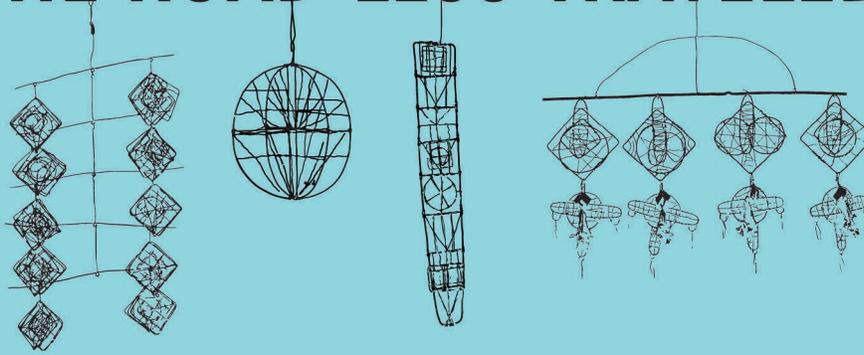
His whole house was like a piece of artwork. The outside was painted in varied colors and the paint would just stop, and then start with another color. There were a few steps up to the front door, which was painted with images of flowers, fruit in mottled colors, like spray paint. It was unlike anything I had known. We went in and Marie was there. She was elderly then, and she was quiet, and reserved. Von Bruenchenhein's prodigious body of works spilled out of every room from basement to attic. The intensity of his vision was awesome.³

Joanne Cubbs, the Arts Center's lead curator at the time, described her experience of touring the house as "dizzying":

My heart was pounding, and the only words that I could squeeze out were faint whispers of astonishment. It was 1983, and I had just stepped into the wildly imaginative universe of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein. I was the lead curator of a mission to rescue his work from its near encounter with oblivion, and standing in the center of his small, crumbling home on the far west side of Milwaukee, surrounded by the intricate wonders of his forty years of creative work, I knew that my conception of art itself was about to change.⁴

The six months after that initial visit were spent working with the artist's family and legal representative to shape the project. In September of 1983, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center transported Von Bruenchenhein's entire oeuvre to the museum, where both staff and volunteers spent hundreds of hours carefully cataloguing and photographing each piece. Larry Donoval, who was a new registrar at the time, recalls this pivotal moment:

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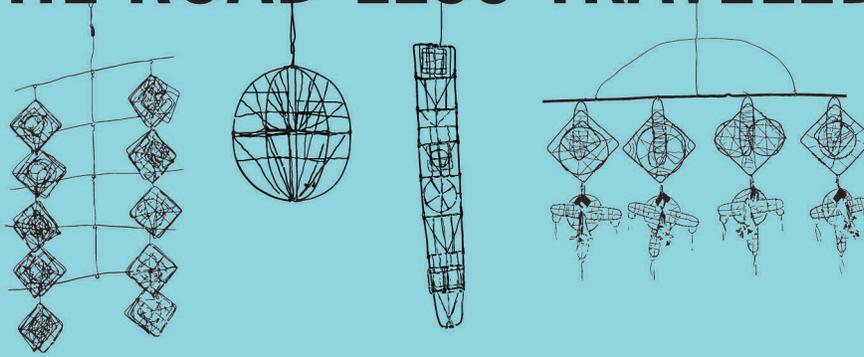
The bone towers were especially nerve-racking, it's not like there is training for this. I designed special slings, like little hammocks, for the transport of the towers. Then we got it all here and we took over the majority of the basement and got to work. So in so many ways, this project laid the groundwork for us as a museum, documentation, databases, conservation, all started in a real way for us with this project. This was first large project as a registrar. We hired a conservator who came and mentored myself and some volunteers from the community how to do some basic cleaning. One volunteer, Bonnie, stayed for almost a year, cleaning paintings and sculptures. That's how we got started, we had to clean things first and brushed off each piece to remove all the coal soot from ceramics and the bone towers. We built a photo studio specifically so we could document the works.⁵

In March 1984, the Arts Center presented over two hundred fifty objects in the first major retrospective exhibition of Von Bruenchenhein's work. Shortly afterward, the museum purchased a representative selection of works to be preserved together. Carl Hammer of the Carl Hammer Gallery in Chicago was the first dealer to commercially represent the artist's work. Hammer remembers his first experience with the work:

My personal discovery of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein was similar to the Wow! factor of my first encounter of many artists' works, including Albert Zahn, Bill Traylor, Henry Darger, and others. The monumentality of it all was (and still remains) beyond personal comprehension. It wasn't until I began reading his different treatises on the "exploration of the unknown," especially his poem *A Journey to the Edge of the Universe*, however, that the work compelled me to place him in a category of the internationally renowned masters. Our encounter with taking on representing a large portion of Von Bruenchenhein's estate was exhilarating, to say the least. The complexity and variety of expression was disarming to all but our most sophisticated collectors at first. Never had I encountered the extent of both the diversity and uniqueness of work as when we first grappled at tying it all together, in hopes of presenting it to our client base and ultimately desiring not only their acceptance but their recognition, as well, of the genius that lay at the root of it all. Needless to say, the chicken bone sculptures were most sensational when first presented to the public.⁶

The recognition of Von Bruenchenhein that came with the John Michael Kohler Arts Center's 1984 exhibition and accompanying publication came with a bittersweet sense of accomplishment, however, as the level of fame and attention was exactly what the artist had sought—and never achieved—in his lifetime.

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It is now thirty-four years since the art of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein entered the public arena. Since its introduction in 1983, his photographs, paintings, and ceramic and bone sculptures have achieved considerable acclaim; his works are represented in prominent museum and private collections and have been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions around the world. The mystery surrounding the microcosm that Eugene and Marie inhabited also remains. Biographical information has been carefully researched and accounted for. The mythology he constructed—the truths and the ideas that motivated him on a daily basis—will never be fully understood, but we look for clues in the work he left for us, and we continue to expect the unexpected.

Notes

1. Dan Nycz, interview by Diane Douglass and Joanne Cubbs, October 1983, courtesy John Michael Kohler Arts Center Archives.
2. Russell Bowman, email to the author, February 20, 2017.
3. Ruth DeYoung Kohler, preface to *Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Obsessive Visionary* (Sheboygan, WI: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 1988), 7.
4. Joanne Cubbs, preface to *Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: King of Lesser Lands* (New York: Andrew Edlin Gallery, 2016), 5.
5. Larry Donoval, email to the author, December 16, 2016.
6. Carl Hammer, email to the author, December 20, 2016.