Phenomenal Spaces: The Artist-Constructed Environment

“Phenomenal Spaces” will open with a brief reflection on how we might get beyond the boundaries between so-called official and unofficial culture that appear to separate artists who work independently from the academic mainframe and those who are trained within and respond to the Western art historical tradition. It will point to the range of creative behavior among a diverse group of artists who have constructed “art environments.” Some are academically trained and created their works within the context of mainstream art history, such as Christo/Jeanne-Claude, Jessica Stockholder, and Stella Waitzkin. Others are vernacular artists whose constructions reveal a complex web of personal, aesthetic, and culturally-specific expression, such as Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, Joe Minter’s African Village in America, Emery Blagdon’s “Healing Machine” shed, and the initial “yard show” of Lonnie Holley. The works of Christo/Jeanne-Claude, Stockholder, Guyton, and Minter explicitly address the general public, commanding an engaged response at once aesthetic, physical, and cultural, while those of Waitzkin, Blagdon, and Holley bespeak an essentially private, even obsessional vision and only secondarily open to the gaze of selected or accidental viewers. Together, these artists illuminate common and distinct patterns of creativity within “mainstream” and “outsider” art worlds.

To demonstrate these issues, the talk will then focus on one of these artists, Stella Waitzkin, whose work is currently on view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. Her transformation of her living space reveals much about this artist’s views of creative need and authority, the personal and social sources of visual meaning embodied in the work’s material being, and the cultural frames of reference linking the artist’s act and the audience’s reception. The artworks reveal a personal drama of being in the world, of making meaning, of conceptualizing and framing a world, and of transforming a private space into a site dense with personal, cultural, and aesthetic meaning.
Randall Morris

My talk takes two ideas and merges them; that yard shows or spirit yards are a connecting link between the U.S. and Caribbean and that we can best understand them by perceiving three generations of artists in context: nineteenth century, born between 1900 and 1950, and post 1950 and how conjure culture affected them all. I find that the yard complexes in the U.S., Haiti, and Jamaica each demonstrate a relationship with African ethos and become American reborn and reshaped out of necessity, creating a new religion on this continent. The spirit yard is the root for most African American vernacular art.

Jo Farb Hernández

*Singular Spaces South: Recent Discoveries in Andalucía*

In this presentation, Jo Farb Hernández will introduce artists from the southern Spanish region of Andalucía who will be featured in the upcoming second volume of her encyclopedic *Singular Spaces* Spanish art environment project. From a remote mountain village to the tourist meccas of the Costa del Sol, these diverse art environments—constructed by creator-builders from a variety of backgrounds, of various ages, and with widely-varying aesthetics—may serve as markers from which we can expand our critical understanding of the field as well as our responsibilities as researchers and scholars advocating for the preservation of their work.