Sheboygan, WI  September 27–29, 2017

At the Crossroads Session

Charles Russell: The session today is called At the Crossroads, which is intended to raise questions pertaining to art in culture. Specifically, art is constructing environments. Art is constructing environments in cultures as cultural statements. One of the essential questions is, whose culture? The announcement to the session stated our field has been too long riven by oppositions between the supposed mainstream, mainframe culture, and those cultural productions of people who create outside or independently from that framework but also speak of culture nonetheless. Again, we say, whose culture are they speaking? Who speaks for our culture?

Our approaches suggest that artists construct simultaneously from within specific cultural context and for our culture simultaneously. We take it for granted that what we're talking about is art. Art is a basic human behavior. Art manifests in many forms across many sectors, across many aspects of our culture. It's a wide open field today, a wide open field of inquiry, of research, of discovery. It's important for all of us, the three speakers and us, to recognize just where we plant our markers, where we plant our flags within this wide open field. What are the issues that we address? What are the aspects of culture as visual behavior that we seek to try to understand and illuminate?

The three of us take very different approaches to these issues. Jo Farb Hernández, who will be speaking first, is a professor of art in art history at San Jose University. She's director of that wonderful organization, Spaces Archives.
She's an authority and also has written many books and catalogs most notably and most recently the groundbreaking presentation and analysis of the artist-constructed environments across Spain, *Singular Spaces*. It is an essential book. It's a groundbreaking, breathtaking book. It's essential reading for anyone who wants to know about the breadth of creation about which very few people have known. It's also a major contribution to all studies of artist environments.

Randall Morris, our second speaker has been for decades a leading voice in broadening our knowledge of the vital culture production from Africa, from Asia, from the Caribbean, from North America. He is co-director of Cavin-Morris Gallery. I think he is probably one of the most impassioned voices in challenging writers about the historical development, historical roots, the transmission of culture, and its constant development as an art that speaks to cultural creativity. My work as a retired professor of literature is going to be about comments about environments as an art form, as a way of manipulating space as a terrain for visual action and visual meaning, as a way of becoming personal and at the same time speaking of the cultural. We'll go right on to Jo.

**Jo Farb H.:**

Thank you. My encyclopedic book on monumental art environments created by Spanish self-taught artists documented the work of 45 artists through almost 1,200 pages of texts in over 5,000 photographs. At the time I began this project in 2000, anecdotal evidence or local newspaper stories were my only sources for determining the whereabouts or even the existence of Spain's monumental site specific works of art. Well, my intent had been to produce a complete compendium based on 14 years of field work, discovery of new sites in the 3½ years since publication made me realize that further field work, analysis and writing of a second volume would be essential to realize a fully encyclopedic treatment of these amazing sites.

Taking advantage of my position as director of California State’s International Program during 2015–2016, I was able to begin preliminary field work across Spain and I'm now working on volume two. Spain is a big and diverse country and its art environments, like those the world over, display a wide range of forms, scale, and media. They include monumental architectural structures, groupings of monumental numbers of sculptures, park-like grottoes, decorated interiors or exteriors, personal shrines or museums, and assemblages of found, natural, created objects.

In thinking about how to frame this presentation, I considered options such as a concentration on new architectural construction, or female-creator builders, or a geographic slice through the country moving north to south. I decided to concentrate on Spain’s southernmost region of Andalucía as my CSU work in Granada gave me the opportunity to learn about and explore many more sites in that region. Despite great beauty and an illustrious cultural history, Andalucía is one of the poorest regions of Spain. Century after century, its citizens were innocent pawns in high level deals played out by church and state, paying no heed to the resulting long-term economic and cultural damage.
In the fifteenth century their lands were confiscated to pay off nobles who had financed the reconquest of the peninsula from its Muslim rulers. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries their men were conscripted to support Spain’s overseas mercantile adventures with all the riches later diverted to service Habsburg wars and line the pockets of the nobility. More recently, their sons were drafted into Franco’s Nationalist Army during the Spanish Civil War despite a regional sympathy for the other side. With little local industry, over 1.5 million Andaluces immigrated during the post-Civil War and World War II decades.

Even today, unemployment is still higher in this region than in any other part of Spain. It is therefore not surprising Andaluces adopted a strategy of adapting what was available to address what was needed. Sometimes materials were recycled in unusual ways, taking on new functions. Although such materials might include discards or natural materials free for the taking, the methods and manners of this usage were typically clever and even ingenious as well as often aesthetically striking. Today’s presentation, I will introduce four very different Andaluth artists who I’ve just met within the last year and a half who made perhaps seen as representative of this region and this country.

Juan Muñoz Benitez was the third child born into a baker’s large family in the small village of Dilar, physically located only five-and-a-half miles from the city of Granada, although a world away in time and amenities. After leaving school at age fourteen, Juan toiled in the fields of local landowners in order to earn a meager living. In 1954, he and his young wife moved into the simple two-story home in which they lived until their deaths. He enjoyed working around and improving the house. Around 1975, he decided to install a fountain in the open space that separated the house from the road. He couldn’t find one that he liked or could afford. He decided to make one himself.

Relying on his prior experience doing small household repairs with Portland cement, sand, and mortar and utilizing simple standard construction tools such as trowels, levels, and cords, he improvisationally outlined the shape of the fountain in the concrete with his finger. Afterward, he ornamented it with small cast figures and pebbles. He traveled to the coast to gather the pebbles and borrowed a doll from his niece to make the molds. Muñoz’s ever improving skills enabled him to become ever more daring with his designs.

Also on the front lawn is a circular table ornamented with a monumental butterfly with outstretched wings surrounded by five fixed concrete stools with butterfly backrests. Working without sketches or plans, his designs made clear references to the visual imagery of Granada, renowned for decorated pavements and patios in which often extravagant fluid lines and abstracted organic forms are interspersed with more geometric patterns. As the numbers and scale of his work increased, including freestanding sculptures of birds and other creatures, Muñoz installed a front fence to protect the work by sinking steel rods and pipes along the road frontage.
He covered the metal infrastructure with concrete mortar, later ornamenting the variously-shaped columns and posts with elaborate black and white pebble designs. The decoration is balanced and proportional, but each upright is not identical, enabling the artist to seek symmetry through variable elements to enhance the potency of the visual impact. These elegant columns and markers would be significant on their own, but a large portal leading to the home's front door surges beyond simple decoration. Reflecting the prevailing iconography of the flamingo culture, the left gatepost supports a monumental brimmed hat and the right supports a monumental guitar.

While these musical references are obvious, less so are the elongated necks and ferocious heads of two lion-like creatures, each bursting out of the top of the lateral gateposts. They are sophisticated and finely sculpted, their heads twisting contrapuntally away from their bodies. Once Muñoz discovered the possibilities inherent in working with the pebbles, he did little else and the initial skepticism of family and neighbors evolved into admiration. Likewise although the village authorities never supported him, neither did they impede his work.

As both his proficiency with his materials and his fame spread, he enjoyed not only the creative expression of the work but his increasing identification as an inventive and ingenious craftsman (the term “artist” was never used). While the portal of the front perimeter fence of his property is wildly showy, it was in a rear interior patio, not visible from the street, that Muñoz realized his most extravagant and ornate efforts. An arch entrance is flanked by bas-relief figures, a bearded male on one side, a female with a necklace and rather elaborate hairstyle on the other.

Every wall is completely covered with elaborate decorations, an aesthetic feat on its own, made more difficult due to the propensity of the small stones to fall when inserted vertically. One wall features imagery combining fantastic beasts with baroque-style urns, fluid lines, and floral forms. Another is entirely geometric with an almost art-deco stylization. A centrally located table surrounded by eight fixed stools, each with different vertical ornamentation as well as distinct imagery on the sitting surface, features two Greek-like figures standing on either side of a similarly scaled double-headed eagle found not only in Greek, Roman, and Byzantine periods but also in medieval Spain.

Its central post is echoed by a series of three columns that serve as a visual screen for a smaller room extending off from the open patio. This room is also completely sheathed in black and white pebble designs and includes bas-relief columns supporting arched lintel-like forms mimicking the Islamic architectural treatment so well represented in this part of Spain. An elaborate three-quarter bust of a 12-point buck graces a side wall.

The interior of Muñoz's home is also wildly and idiosyncratically ornamented. The room leading from the outdoor patio is dominated by a huge polished and
elaborately carved trunk of an olive tree that reaches from floor to ceiling. Pebble wainscoting adorns the bottom sections of all walls, while plaques, some of significant size and partially bas-relief, decorate the upper areas. Even the staircase leading to the second floor is fully ornamented, both on the stair risers and on its surrounding walls.

Muñoz continued working on both freestanding sculptures as well as integrated architectural features until shortly before he died at age 74. The site, not open to the public and largely unknown, is a stunning example of how an internalized sense of regional imagery can evolve into something unique and daring.

While the best of his work is hidden from public view—mirroring the rather introverted form of the typical Islamic-style house in southern Spain with greater concern for the creation and ornamentation of open interior spaces rather than for its public face—the perimeter fence does tease with the promise of what lies within. Juan Muñoz Benitez, whose vocation left him little room for creativity, found his own outlet by midlife to honor the architecture, ornamentation, flora, and fauna of his region as he likewise sculpted his own personal path towards distinctive artistry and original expression.

Born in northern Holland, Freddie Zuidijk moved with his family as they followed his father's service in the diplomatic corps. By age nineteen, he'd landed in London, following a girlfriend who would later become his wife. Although he had wanted to study architecture in America, he changed his focus to be with her and instead earned a degree in economics. These studies no doubt helped him to become a successful businessman and restauranteur. He ultimately cashed out of his London businesses and apartment and moved to Spain in 1990. Using the sale proceeds, he bought a small house on a two-third-acre plot in the mountains overlooking the village of Nerja on Spain's Costa del Sol.

He became involved in new businesses in the town and again, they were successful. Although his plan was to fix up the house, between his then dubious construction skills, distractions from his town businesses, and too much partying, he only worked on the house periodically, leaving it open to the elements when he was away. Much of the early work needed to be ripped out and redone. Around 2005, Zuidijk moved permanently up to the hill and began to devote all his time and energy to transforming the tiny three-room cabin. He was attracted by the rocky landscape and wanted to incorporate some of the natural elements into his work.

He knocked out walls and made the low rocks part of the interior footprint of his construction rather than leaving them outside. He added trencadís designs and also, to an ever increasing extent, carved plaster elements, changing the shape of walls, ceilings, and rooms. A friend who was a master plasterer showed him the basics, and Zuidijk has now become an unofficial master himself. He wraps an infrastructure of metal rods with chicken wire to form his desired shape, and
then piles on the plaster. These decorative elements are all solid so as to avoid interior cavities into which rodents might crawl and nest.

When he realized that the weight might tax the foundation of the house, he reinforced it rather than change the manner in which he works. The house is a work in progress, but it already shows remarkable ingenuity and an increasing refinement. While the lines of the house itself are rectilinear, his ornamentations are all organic, with undulating shapes and contoured edges. There is a constant flow between interior and exterior, with numerous welcoming areas for sitting and relaxing. He has learned to be as precise as possible in the early stages of his plaster work, and then, after letting these structures dry for two or three days, he returns to carve them, adding to their intricacy.

During my visit, he was modifying the lower level of the structure which had once been a chicken coop, adding bedrooms, bathrooms, and comfortable sitting areas. Having already paid a fine for terracing his garden areas and building without a permit, Zuidijk is fearful of again drawing the attention of the authorities. He no longer picks up stones and found objects from the beach, for example, thinking that if the police were to see him gathering the materials, they would know he was going to use them in construction. While the regional government is willing to legalize illegal structures, the costs of requesting a permit and then having all work done by a licensed professional—rather than allowing him to give free rein to his own creativity—is just too much for him to contemplate. He continues to build furtively, consumed and energized by the work he is doing, yet fearful of attracting unwanted attention.

Born into a family of farmers, Maria Asuncion Rodriguez grew up near the Mediterranean Sea in Almeria province. She had little schooling, mostly spending her youth looking after her younger sister while her parents worked in the fields. She married a local farmer, and afterward the young couple moved into a beachfront home earlier owned by her father. They worked hard to refurbish it, and appointed it in the style of the last century: dark carved wood furniture, doilies, and vintage chandeliers. Her married life followed a typical pattern; she cared for her three sons and her husband, kept the house, and did the shopping and the cooking.

She had always harbored the idea of creating something through which she could express herself, so she turned over ideas in her mind as she raised her boys and kept house. Finally, after they were grown in the mid-1980s, she began to build her garden. She never drew plans, but envisioned the completed pieces in her mind. She began assembling stones and shells and found objects that she gathered from the beach, building up a fence in front and then filling in from that border to the very steps of the front patio of her home. A narrow pathway leads from her front door through the garden directly to the beach itself.

As she remembered watching her father build when she was young, she knew that she needed to make a mortar of cement and sand with more of the former
and less of the latter. She mixed small batches in a bucket and then climbed a stepladder, her apron pockets full of stones and ornaments and her two hands cupping the mortar paste. After the first base level of stones, she would add more small ornaments and shells, enhancing the complexity and density of the site. Despite this balancing act, she never fell. She sandwiched her labors between shopping and cooking for her family. Little by little, her garden grew more and more dense as it also grew higher.

She call the more vertical components that anchor different corners of the garden her trees. On the perimeters are places to sit, something impossible in the interior of the garden areas because they are compacted so tightly it is impossible to enter them without stepping on or jumping over the sculptures—not recommended. A variety of carefully-painted signs, many with proverbs or well-known phrases, underscore her principles and her secularized spirituality. Although her work was right on the beach, people respected it and she had few problems either from passersby or from municipal or coastal regulators.

There is little tourism here, with most visitors heading east beyond Almeria or west toward Malaga and Marbella, so there has been little if any theft. Maria died two nights ago, secure in the knowledge that her garden would endure forever, although her children were never so sure. Neither they nor her five grandchildren ever helped her place any work, although if she asked, family members or friends would help her drag large stones or boulders into place, sometimes securing them with a cord or chain and dragging them with their cars. It's unclear how much effort they will expend to maintain it now that she has passed. Maria Rodriguez never considered herself to be an artist, nor did she really consider her work to be sculpture. But she was delighted when people appreciated what she did, and it is clear that their interest helped to inspire her to create until she could work no longer.

Benalmadena, on Spain's southern Costa del Sol, otherwise a typical tourist town, boasts an astounding monument: the Colomares Castle, constructed by Esteban Martin Martin and two local bricklayers to honor Christopher Columbus and the discovery of America. Almost improbably built over the short seven-year period between 1987 and 1994, this five-story castle combines elements that represent all of the architectural styles extant in Spain during the time of Columbus's life: Mudéjar, Romanesque, Gothic, and Byzantine. Martin studied medicine and then moved to the United States where he worked for many years as a gynecologist and a surgeon.

Well there, he was astounded that the annual Columbus Day activities, featuring Italian parades and festivities, never mentioned the role Spain played in providing financial and personnel resources to Columbus in support of his voyages. Having been educated during the years of Franco's dictatorship when patriotism was so highly valued, Martin felt that Spain was being unfairly left out of the narrative. In the 1970s, he purchased a plot of land in the hills above Benalmadena with the intent of one day building a simple retirement home.
However, he became obsessed with the injustice he saw in the American celebrations of Columbus's discoveries, and resolved to construct a monument that would clarify, in great detail, the story of these world-changing events. He diligently studied every book and document he could then access in order to certify the historical veracity of his work, and hoped that one day his "book in stone" would become a center for historical research on this theme. The Castillo includes many elements referential to Spain's Fernando and Isabel, the king and queen who financed Columbus's voyage and unified Spain's desperate kingdoms, as well as details pertaining to the three main religions of Spain: Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism.

Other more surprising elements include a Chinese-style pagoda tower (built on a Mudéjar-style base) symbolizing Columbus's efforts to reach Asia for its spices and riches. Particularly notable are anchors representing the port Palos de la Frontera, from which Columbus sailed, and depictions of his three boats: the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María. The latter set apart as ground, he did not complete the voyage. The castle is surrounded by gravel paths and landscaped gardens, elements added by the family after Dr. Martin's death.

With a floor plan of over 1600-square-feet and towers that rise to 100 feet, Colomares is the largest monument in the world dedicated to Christopher Columbus. Yet it also houses the smallest chapel, only around 12 square feet. Martin hoped that one day it would become the final resting place for Columbus's ashes, the whereabouts of which are unknown. Martin had great plans to add to the site, but by 1994, having run out of money and depressed that his Castillo had not received more publicity or was not included as a resource for the widespread 1992 observances of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage, he gave up. He died a few years later, disheartened and dispirited. Now operated by Martín's widow and family, they have plans of their own to enhance the site through more activities, providing much-needed funds for maintenance and conservation of the monument.

These widely divergent artists—diverse in age, in the differences in their urban versus world milieu, in their knowledge of a wider world as well as, of course, in their aesthetic, their choice of medium and technique, and their intent—are only a microcosm of the art environments found throughout Andalusia and, indeed, around Spain as a whole. Yet, they may be seen as representative markers of the field. While all are still privately held either by the artist or his or her heirs, two of these for nevertheless face existential pressures—Freddie's from the local government, weary that his "improvements" might somehow threaten local tourism; and Maria's due to her children's ambivalence about their mother's work and their refusal to commit efforts to preserve it. Although the community of Dilar is generally supportive of Juan Muñoz's decorations, and the heirs of Colomares are careful in the attention they pay to abiding by local laws and regulations, in none of these cases does a community of activists exist who would leap to defend these sites should the need arise. What this means
for us is that our appreciation and documentation of these sites cannot stand alone without advocacy and political action, often over the long term.

In each of our regions, not only in Spain, we need to be vigilant, ready to spearhead a campaign, if necessary, so that we can ensure that future generations will have the pleasure that we have had of experiencing these sites in situ, and of learning from what these artists wanted to share with us. Each small success, one by one, indicates positive progress toward greater inclusivity in art historical definition as we break down the boundaries between art historical genres—genres that often themselves often break down in the face of creative expressions “on the ground”—as it brings us closer to a more comprehensive and authentic understanding of what making art can be.

Randall Morris:

First, thank you, Karen, and thank you, Kohler. I have to jump right in. My talk takes two ideas and merges them, one being that yard shows or spirit yards are a connected link between the U.S. and Caribbean and the other being that we can best understand them by perceiving three generations of artists and context, those born in the nineteenth century, those born between 1900 and 1950, and those born post 1950, and how an earlier African then African American religion, that later became called conjure or hoodoo, affected them all.

I find that the yard complex in the U.S., Haiti, and Jamaica all demonstrate and remember a relationship with an African morality of balance becoming 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. Not often documented in our field historically is the overwhelming evidence that our field of art brut or non-mainstream art needs to expand its language of context and intention in regards to African American vernacular art.

We need to put it back in the context that never really left, a language of change and survival by a free, then enslaved, then freed and persecuted deeply complex culture of people who struggle to this day for equality and dignity. This struggle is what the art chronicles. The problem of such a big subject in an eighteen-minute lecture is that I can't possibly give you the groundwork leading to the conclusions. I'm going to express quickly these premises and then show you some images that illustrate them. Ultimately, it's about what land and place mean to people, and that's why we're bonded to it at this conference.

When the slaves were brought here, they came from an essential religion based on balance in the world. There were moral precepts and a cycle of life they existed within for hundreds of years or longer. This essential concepts didn't die in the Middle Passage. On this continent, North, South, and Central America, it became a religion, a real religion, not a slave religion but a religion rebuilt and practiced by the slaves. It was the parent concept of conjure and hoodoo, but those are secular practices informed by spirituality. It was the matrix religion itself that disappeared shortly after slavery. I'm not sure that it was ever given a name.
You'll find that a lot of the art and a lot of the slides abstractly and conceptually come from this diagram which goes from birth, then living one's life, then dying, then going beneath the waters and meeting the ancestors. Then by meeting the ancestors, one would become reborn. It was that cycle that was interrupted by slavery. This is just a casual shot from Northern Florida where you can see those same patterns echoed. These are the African root forms. People call them Africanisms, but these were the roots the African religion was based on. The first one is still danced in the U.S. and Jamaica and is an abstract movement in Haiti.

We call it the ring shout now and it's still danced in revival ceremonies in Jamaica. The second one we see is manifested in Pentecostal and spiritual churches and, of course, in Haiti and Jamaica. The third one we see in different degrees in all the Diaspora cultures from conceptual sacrifices to actual animals. The fourth one, conjure and hoodoo, now use cards and other forms of divination. In Jamaica, it's cards. In Haiti, it's cards. In Cuba, it's shells in the Aruba fashion. The fifth one is yard shows, and artworks constantly venerate charismatic beings.

The sixth one, sickness, comes from either bad behavior, witchcraft, or moral weakness—again, an upsetting of the balance that was laid out in the previous slide. Seven, of course, all the cultures use plants to heal. The second thing that's important to this is in my research. I saw that if I divided when certain artists lived across the Americas and divided them by generation, I saw major shifts in the formal qualities and intentionality of the art over time, much of it in response to the cultural matrix of African-Atlantic existence and the western reactions to it such as Jim Crow.

The religion also changed and shifted after slavery, desacralizing, becoming more local and individualized in a new life as conjure and hoodoo. The first generation would be those born in the nineteenth century. The second generation would be those born before 1950. The third would be those born afterwards. The concerns of the first generation were mostly those found in the spirit yard and directly informed by the old religion, ancestors, remembrance, and protection. The second generation was more affected by the social movements around it, and the world wars, and how black life was affected by them with the church on one side and the blues on the other, figuratively speaking.

There was a shift from Africanism to church or hoodoo in the spirituality. The third generation reflects all of the above with the contemporary focus on survival of memory and self-empowerment, wisdom, as well as religion. The third premise, and what makes it relevant to this conference mostly, is that I see these spirit yards, as I call them, and all their many shapes and forms as the language of this religion and a continuance throughout time moving along the path of the cosmography. Big and small yards speak the same language, some are quiet and personal, some are overt. Racism drove both the spiritual and social worlds of black people throughout this hemisphere.
The yard, the home ground provided the space to talk about it and resist, not in Africanism, mind you. This was an American hybrid religion pieced together out of necessity. This shows what it became in the Americas and what's reflected in the Americas by amuletic. On the second one I mean protection, didactic, being storytelling, healing, manifestation of the self, control or manipulation of local place, and recycling the über-culture which means using materials cast off and giving one meaning and one culture and a completely different meaning in the other.

We often read that the yard show is a carryover of the Congo cemetery complex. Scholars like Wayne McAfee, Grey Gundaker, Judy McWillie, and Robert Farris Thompson have spent decades filling in the gaps in yard show language. Africanist and hard historian Dana Rush has put forth two ideas that dovetail right into this discussion. One is a theory which she calls an unfinished aesthetic. Another is a transatlantic shrine, a conceptual African influence shrine which has come across the waters in the form of altars throughout the Americas that piece together local materials alluding to African spiritual forces—these range from indoor installations to the use of landscape.

The embellished and the highly metaphoric front yard and backyard seen all through the south and the Caribbean, a perfect example of these transatlantic shrines, they revere the ancestors, protect the house and family. Rush refers to unfinished aesthetic as a way to describe the idea that a shrine or a sculpture is constantly renewed with other accumulative offerings. It's not about the finished piece, but instead about the process of its life added to and changed over time, constantly changing the work as it moves through space. An African, and by extension, a Diaspora work of art is never finished but is always in process.

I apply this directly in suggesting the yard show, throughout the hemisphere, as a form of both transatlantic shrine and an example of the aesthetic of the unfinished. It is a language we must learn to speak in order to translate the art so we can understand why it was made and, most importantly, who it was made for. Before I show more images, I just want to say that I believe that all black Atlantic art from this continent rings from not only this old religion but from what it became and still is in hoodoo and conjure in the U.S. voodoo and Haiti; Santeria and Palo Mayombe in Cuba; Obeah, Kumina and revival in Jamaica; and on and on.

The protestant ethic of the U.S. was the most restrictive, so its old religion manifestations are the most abstracted. Jamaica is somewhere in the middle. Haiti and Cuba have Catholicism rather than Protestantism. We've kept not African but most of the slaves and their descendant's religion and its original forms. It's time for our field to tie the art to the culture again in order to understand the work we're continuing to cherish so greatly. This is a cross that was actually in a cemetery in Debauchette in Haiti by George Liautaud, and they're all gone now. They were all ripped off and are in private collections around the world because there was no additional protection for them in Haiti.
In it, you can see the arms of the cosmogram, and people would think these are just catholic crosses but here's bunch of them that he made. He's a very smart man, either playing on the French forms or French architectural forms. They also have all these different meanings, each one relating to a different Haitian Loa spirit. Each of them, it's like he took those Haitian drawings up off the floor and raised them up into the form of crosses and “three dimensionalized” them. I have this slide in here to show an example of a quiet or a personal yard show, and in it you can see that a lot of things that I talked about before are there.

Remembrance, relative of his, his father I think it was, was John his father had given him some of the objects, so it's a remembrance of ancestors. It's didacticism because he liked to sit there and tell you about what was going on in the yard, manifestation of self in the way that they're arranged and put out, control and manipulation of local place, and recycling a culture because these are all objects that have one meaning and one culture and then are given a new meaning in the next. These American yards you mostly know, so I'm going to dance through them. I will always see Edmondson in his yard as a yard show and I don't know that I've ever seen it spoken of such.

It's always been the place where people said he sold his pieces. I think there's a lot more going on. I think it's pretty significant that he's leaning against Noah's Ark, and all the books you see that it is written as Noah's Ark and I don't think it's that at all. I think it's the Ark of the Covenant and it's sitting on this unfinished foundation, just like in the Bible. He obviously felt it was an important place to pose for the photograph. This is another view of his yard. I don't think any of that is random. Sam Doyle, again, you see all those things going on history storytelling, manifestation of self, ancestors. I think this is the Lewis Incarnation, the slide we've seen earlier today.

You can have indoor yard shows. There are some places where, to me, there's very much this was straddling of old and new religion, recycling materials of the über-culture in order to make a point for a different culture. JB Murray, his yard actually was small and he did have some accumulations of materials. What he did was indoors, protecting himself and building amuletic arrangements around where he worked and made his drawings which were in a language from God. This is his outdoor one. Mary T. Smith, we all know, David Butler, Joe Minter. Haiti has a different look, and I said in there the sort of the religion manifest differently at the same.

There was a lot more ... you're so used to seeing because of flags and commercial stuff, Haitian iconography, but we have to remember that it was made up. There was no way that these Loa, these Haitian gods, were supposed to look. This is a painting from the '30s. These two paintings almost affected our field very directly. There are two of the paintings that Andre Breton bought from Hyppolite in Haiti in the 1940s, and he brought them back and they became part of Dubuffet's collection. Breton took them back and they would have been the first and maybe the beginning of other African American entries into the collection.
Breton didn't want them to go back to the U.S. with the rest of the collection and have it be stored in someone's house. He took them back and sorted the African American relationship to the art brut collection. You can see that they have a wall style because Hyppolite used to paint the walls of Haitian voodoo temples. This is a voodoo temple. There, you have an abstraction of that cosmogram again. You have the center pole or the ‘poto mitan’ as it's called. It connects the underworld, there's that hole in the base of it, where Dhaman is a snake, is usually kept, then the tree of life, which is shamanic throughout the world, going up and connecting the bottom worlds to the top world.

Another Haitian temple. Again, to me, these are indoor yard shows that sometimes manifest outdoors like this one. How does that refer now, because the Haiti that a lot of those earlier ones reference are disappearing? In the poorest part of Port-au-Prince after the earthquake, this group rose up. All these guys were probably under thirty years old and they took all the stuff from the wreckage of the storms and the earthquake and began to make these environments and these outside sculptures that related to their anger and frustration at what Haiti had become. Puerto Rico is in that role right now as is Saint Martin and a couple of the other islands when you rebuild.

All these things were very spiritual in nature, but all made from detritus and leftovers. It's weird, you won't see it so I don't know that ... Yeah, I do have it in this one. There's a lot of real skulls because all the cemeteries blew up in Haiti basically, and they use a lot of bones and skulls which means absolutely like this is going to be part of a commercial renaissance. This is Andre Eugene who is one of the first people to really begin doing it, and then all these younger guys saw what he was doing and each began to develop their own styles until there's a whole neighborhood in Port-au-Prince now that's filled with this work.

It's tough stuff. This is Everald Brown in Jamaica who lived on top of a limestone mountain and basically painted all the stones in that mountain with codes and with depictions of the cosmogram. This is Leonard Dale who painted his home indoors and out as a Dale ‘journal’ of the things that he was going through. This is the outside of his house. This man has a ... this is a portrait of his father, he's a ceramist. He can't understand why the middle and upper class Jamaicans don't buy his work for their homes. He owns a garden in the center where he sells his things, but none of the white Jamaicans ever buy them.

As he went on, he learned pottery from a woman named Malou who had learned it from an ex-slave, and it just goes back and back. This has a real Ghana influence to it. This is how his yard began to develop. He began to put them on posts with biblical quotes and Rastafarian, although he's not a Rasta. It's right outside the airport when you come in from Montego Bay and your car just goes right by it. The classic, one eye open, one eye closed, one eye sees within, one eye sees the cosmos without. This is Lloyd Atherton whose father was a bush priest, a bush doctor. He decided to follow in his father's path.
His yard, when you walk in, this was a hanging tree. I said, "What is that?" He called it a scarecrow. I said, "Yeah, no kidding." In Jamaica, altars are called seals, and these seals are all over the yard and each one is dedicated to a different healing power—essentially its herbalism. After his father died, he began to ... one of the slides that you see with pink in them are homage to his father that he had just painted it a couple of days. When I got there, I got there just in time for his father, who was being buried in this purple candy chrome coffin. There was a copy of the essay I'd written on him on top of the coffin which just blew me away. This was another portrait of his father.

This was his father. His father was also a great carver who carved amulets. I'm almost done here. This was a piece by his father that became an ancestral shrine within the yard. This is his Van Gogh table, the religion that's called Van Gogh. This is his healing potions and herbs and amulets that he gives people that we're on this table. The wildlife does come in and take over after a while and he just works and in among it. I put this in as a sideline to show universality. Here is this fan that again is that cycle of life that I showed you before. This was in his yard and that's his tiny place he lived in. This is one in northern Florida in a random yard.

This is one by Kevin Sampson and his sculpture. Kevin's sculptures I see as indoor shrines, indoor yard shows. We're back to Lloyd Atherton again here. Constantly changing, constantly being repainted. Now that, can anyone can tell me what that is? It's this little thing where he stores his sculptures that he carves. He basically carves and throws them in there. If someone shows up, he'll pull them out of there. They're not what the art is about. To me, this is the most complex yard show in Jamaica right now. This is Errol McKenzie. He calls his yard black moon island. Here, it's dedicated to the black moon goddess. This has nothing to do with Jamaican religion. This is not Rasta.

This is not revival. This is not spiritualist church. It's not Pentecost. That's the eye of the goddess in the ground there. This is the house that he built when I first saw it. Then I came back a couple of years later and he had torn most of it up and out and he was completely reforming it again. This is the brain of the environment, the brain of the moon goddess. That's where it connects to the house. That's her brain but that for some reason to the left, that's her knee. You can see this is abstracted, that's part of the head of the moon goddess. Then all these wooden sculptures inside the house are part of the actual cement structure of the house as well.

This is the control room as he calls it inside her brain where he sits and basically move styles. He's had people shooting at him. People do not like ... these paintings are hanging all over the environment to catch bad spirits, digest them, and spit them out again as good energy. This is the entire yard to the left of the house and I don't have a pointer but at the very top is the eye that we saw in the beginning. Then her body comes down. This thing is huge. This thing is maybe one-and-a-half times the size of this auditorium. The walls are built up about six feet off the ground. We had to climb up a hill across to try and get it.
Her body smoothes down, that's her knee. You can see the point of her knee that hits the building there on the right. This environment is still there. People buy the paintings and people pick up some of the sculptures. His environment until recently has never been written about, never been noticed. Thank you.

Charles Russell:

When we consider the variety of art environments preserved, supported, and restored by the Kohler Foundation and collected and exhibited by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, we recognize that the guiding principle has always been to focus on artists of intense personal vision who create realms of meaning within which they ... excuse me, create realms of meaning within which they lived and by which others may benefit. Well, the great majority of these artists are self-taught vernacular creators, some such as Mary Nohl and Stella Waitzkin were trained artists, well aware of and participating in the dominant art world of their time.

Waitzkin, in particular, was active in the downtown New York art scene of the 1960s as an artist involved in feminist performance and film as well as developing her primary medium, sculpture, which she exhibited internationally over the course of her career. The exhibit of her work here at the Arts Center invokes her Chelsea Hotel environment and inspires me to do two things today in my talk—one is to speak about Stella whom I knew for 15 years and on whose I trust I serve. I also want to address the challenge of this session to transgress the unconvincing boundaries that have been drawn between art produced by artists participating in the so-called mainframe art world and those independent often self-taught artists whose works emerge from the many sectors of the culture ignored or rejected as not being significant to art historical discourse.

Now, to start, let's consider the phenomenon of the artist-constructed environment as seen in the work of both those of the mainstream academic art world and those outside it. I argue that on the most basic level, there is no essential difference between them. I believe that we can productively compare the work of academically trained artists who created the works within the tradition and markets with [inaudible 00:50:34] art such as Christo and Jeanne Claude, Jessica Stockholder, Stella Waitzkin, Mary Nohl. We can compare them with the creations of vernacular artists such as Joe Minter, Z.B. Armstrong, Lonnie Holley, Donny Young, even Tyree Guyton, who did seek out training.

For among them, these artists illuminate shared as well as distinctive patterns of visual configurations of objects in environments that reveal how individuals of both realms create meaning from their intent sense of visual experience in a manner that could communicate life truths to others who may or may not share the social and psychological place of origin. I start at the most basic even though its obvious level of aesthetic experience, art as visual intelligence. As Rudolf Arnheim had stated, "Vision is a creative activity of the human mind. Perceiving accomplishes on the sensory level what in the realm of reasoning is known as understanding ... eyesight is insight."
Visual intelligence apprehends significant structural patterns and dynamic forces in the surrounding world, and from them constructs a conception of reality that reveals the individual psychological and cognitive responses to them. In the process, aesthetic intelligence readily draws as well from a wide range of life experiences, cultural concepts and collective imagery to elaborate upon them metaphorically in the artwork, the artwork that organize perceptual object by which the creator and viewer experience an enactment of heightened perception, cognition, and emotional fullness.

Artist-constructed environments are the creations of individual artists trained or self-taught who do what all artists do. They shape objects in three-dimensional space into statements of visual power, resonance, and often beauty. They create visual objects that bear a significant meaning to testify to both the individual’s intensely filled life and cultural placement and they inform and enhance the viewers’ experience. Now, here at the Kohler Arts Center, the artist and constructed environment usually emphasize the lived within space. What I'd like to touch upon, or at least address, is a larger artist shape space as well.

When we encounter or enter into artist-constructed environments, that is when we're not just looking at but are within the world, this sense of embodiment of visual meaning as our surround has a special power. It speaks of the intense personal drama of being in the world, of making meaning, of conceptualizing and framing a world, of transforming private or public space into a site dense with personal cultural and aesthetic meaning, the forms which are not necessarily determined by being part of official or unofficial culture.

For instance, the works of Christo and Jeanne Claude, Stockholder, Tyree Guyton, and Joe Minter in their own ways address the general public, commanding an engage response that sets one's aesthetic physically and culturally and explicitly political. While those of Waitzkin, Armstrong, Holley, and Donny Young are speaking essentially private, even obsessional, vision and only secondarily were open to the gaze of selected or accidental viewers, yet their works can resonate with deeply felt personal and collective awareness. Common aesthetic impulses may reflect distinctive lifestyles, life visions.

Consider the yard construction of the Southern, African American, vernacular artist Dinah Young in her early backyard creation, like Jessica Stockholder who would go on to significant academic art world success. Here, both artists draw upon immediately available materials to structure and bring color to an outbuilding in their private backyards to highlight and transform their immediate previously mundane environment. Both artists continued by further commanding greater space, enlarging their personal presence in the world around them.

Dinah Young, for example, for her, this meant moving further and further into her rural yard and ultimately into the forest at the edge dressing the spaces with natural materials found there then repositioned, and then repurposed to enigmatic personal use. Note, if you can, the pile of bricks positioned under the
fallen and repositioned tree. This is a fallen tree when you go into the woods, and somehow she's lifted the tree off the ground. She's placed a structure of bricks under it, sustaining the position of the tree. All the branches and trees shapes so that she's taking on the left on the thing to create this structure around a tree. These are perhaps [inaudible 00:56:04] uses.

Now, let me turn to this. Stockholder embracing the formalist vocabulary as a modern art took the aesthetic first into large spaces to challenge public spatial vision and movement and then into the urban environment creating art environments out of cityscapes. Now, certainly there's a great difference between the personal world views of these artists and the viewers, much of Young's intention may not seem readily accessible to the outsiders who walk her land except perhaps for those who share the visual language arising from the rural African American yard show.

Yet we might also wonder about the varying responses of Stockholder's unwitting audience, not attuned to the premises of site-specific installations even if they've been long immersed in the patterns of commercial graphic designs. Given that the creative act for the artist is often one of simultaneous self-discovery and self-assertion, we often observe that the steady intensification of personal expression in the increasing density of public mission, increasing density and expansion of an active space moving from an immediately personal into a larger public frame.

Yet, at the same time, we may speculate upon challenges and affirmations the artist might feel when the work meets audiences from beyond their initial home ground, taking Lonnie Holley, have signs of two environments that Lonnie Holley created. This can be seen in the artist from all quarters within and beyond a certified art world. For instance, Lonnie Holley initially created an immensely dense environment in his immediate backyard and the thick woods around it, a space into which few people would venture. When they did, they discovered striking constructions, all of which had stories to tell which Holley would then readily articulate.

When given the chance to bring his work to the larger public, indeed to the art world establishment, he did so equally readily as seen in, if you could, his installation in the Birmingham Museum of Art. He was asked by the Birmingham Museum of Art to construct an environment in their open concrete yard for a space of some eight months and he did this with many, many pieces of found materials and objects that created a space speaking of technological communication forms and the problems they created. I ask, Could we claim that one environment or creation was more meaningful and qualitatively different from the other?

Both of his works were intended to speak and to tell a story and to mean something. First, in an environment that very few people would see if you would be lucky to walk through or understand and others were made for the public. His mission didn't change. Joe Minter, on the other hand, began with a
public mission deciding to erect visual testaments to his people and his nation's cultural and political history in his Birmingham, Alabama, yard. Then, asserting his role as artist as real, he steadily extends the range and frequency of the statements, beyond his yard, into the neighborhood, reclaiming abandoned lots and buildings, creating his African village in America.

Here, personal environment assumes from the start public meaning. While concurrently in Detroit, Tyree Guyton took a collecting neighborhood of abandoned lots and derelict homes, appropriating them by personal act when he and his family began cleaning the area, turning its refute into an art environment by hanging bunches of sculpture much like an expensive show and then painting several abandoned buildings in what appear to be art-school-inspired polka-dot patterns in numerical abstractions. Guyton's transformations made a deteriorating environment dramatically visible and, in the process, helped drive out drug dealers and enrage the bureaucrats who ignored the city's plight and blight areas, and made public art serve a distressed community.

For Guyton, who as a youth wanted to be an artist and received college training, the aesthetic almost immediately became political, his personal vision proclaiming public attention. For the young artist Christo, trained in and rebelling against the art school's socialist realist aesthetic of the communist year of Bulgaria from which he had fled, art could be both an expression of an intensely personal vision and yet embrace an extremely large and culturally diverse populous. Most of whom had no expectations of becoming a participant audience. Christo's aesthetic is self-consciously modern, a combination of minimalist abstraction and new realism commercial materiality.

His passion for art speaks directly to the most basic of aesthetic impulses to enable us to experience the known world differently and more intensely than we normally do, and to expand our sense of being by presenting use with something we've never experienced before. For instance, he drew a curtain in close-up or continued the lines of the mountain range and allowed people to drive through them, constructed hundreds of brightly flowing curtain gateways in a central park for thousands of people to walk through or created pathways across an Italian lake to let many people walk or water.

Let's go inside. Let's go inside now. Not all art environments are constructed in the outside world, no pun intended. Many more than we will ever know are built within/behind closed doors, they are private, sometimes open only to the invited or unexpected viewer. Yet, they can be every bit as aesthetically shaped, symbolically resonant, and existentially significant as any externally created art environment. Mentally these interior spaces are especially resonant of the emanating spirit, the struggles and the visionary qualities of the artist, because they are lived within as much as they become an externalization of that which is within the artist.

Here are glimpses of two, the walls of Z.B. Armstrong's modest Alabama home recovered by as many hand-drawn and handmade calendars. They've been
identified by some as his doomsday clocks. Expressions of this fixation on the passing of time and the impending end that waited him and that's all. The calendars and clocks once created and accumulated, and they were used. Holes punched in the cardboard faces allowed insurgent nails removed day by day, no winding necessary. The clock, the place was extremely quiet, but time did move on. The Chelsea environment that Stella Waitzkin created during her 30-year residence also had many clocks.

These cast polyester resin sculptures were emblems of mortality, having emerged in the early 1980s after the untimely death of her youngest son. The artist grew increasingly reclusive within her densely-filled environment, her apartment. Indeed, in her later years, fewer and fewer people would be invited into the space. When we explore Waitzkin's environment, I believe we can observe signs of the creative passion, even necessity, that led to the development of such a dense and wrapping space. A pattern of creation common, I suggest, to other environment creators.

An idea, a theme, and image most certainly announces itself, is established, and then explored again and again. The image laden with personal meaning multiplies and provokes other thoughts, themes, and visual statements giving voice to nourishing the artist’s creative self and the extension into the world around her. For Stella Waitzkin, this expansion was directly connected to her artistic process as a sculpture. She would find an object, very frequently an all leather-bound book, and make a mold from it. Then she would mix polyester resin in the mold and, working rather quickly before the resin set completely, float pigments, sometimes objects in the resin creating multihued works.

Although each work began from a particular mold and could be viewed as a discrete place, Stella would really be content to let it be that. She'd use the mold again and again creating serious of works, each one different with respect to the particular hue with a density, the degree of translucence or a passé she saw. These works might be presented alone or in a group. Then she might also stack book upon book and conjoin them horizontally to create compact sculptures often quite formally constructed. Still other times, a book would be abutted to a book and soon a shelf would be created.

Then shelf would be added to shelf, and soon a library would be created. Then shelf upon shelf will take over a wall and create a formidable work such as details of a lost library. Ultimately, wall would join wall and then an art environment would be constructed. In many of her works, the form of the book established itself as a primary statement and served as a foundation into or onto which other cast risen images such as a face, birds, fruit, would be placed. The book is object and its concept was especially important to Waitzkin, improved and extremely resonant form and theme. It's a transmitter of human thought and feeling across time and among peoples.

Waitzkin founded a direct personal link to her great grandfather, a Jewish scholar from Eastern Europe. She encouraged her own son Fred in his life as a
writer of books. When I pick up a book of hers, I may sense its individual wisdom and cultural spirit but I cannot read it, the book, it doesn't open. It doesn't have words. Of course, all visual works of art are silent. Art as a visual experience does not need words. Stella Waitzkin's impenetrable books impose a heavy silence upon us even as they are resonant with feeling and, I believe, life wisdom that evokes the greater silences being within and beyond us.

If the books were silent and closed, nonetheless they are like her other artworks, powerfully communicative, both spiritually and emotionally affecting. There's an overwhelming aura of mystery about them, yet they assert an intense and then immediate physicality. Her use of leather bound books for her molds cause up a distant past just as her cast female faces resembles cameos of another era. We feel most immediately the embodied passion of the artist life that her deep understanding of human longing and loss are present desire and achievement.

Even if most of the books are silent and closed, it's remarkable how frequently something quite different, quite human emerges from them, the human face. Contemporaneous with her taking up with the book as the image in the early 1970s, Stella began making molds of faces almost entirely from other sculpted objects, sometimes real people. These books seem to speak, or rather the books seemed ready to speak, but they remain as silent as others in Stella's libraries. The faces almost never have opened eyes and only rarely look directly at us. The figures as close as interior looking as are the books, even the open books from whom faces emerge.

Nonetheless, the human presence is afferent in these works, haunted and haunting, even more so, in her holocaust works. Note, the faces entombed within these black and blackened works, they're not that distant in mood from the faces trapped inside the numerous clocks that Stella created following the death of her son Billy in 1983. Here, time has stopped. The face of the clock replaces the human face, human presence within. If it's your poignancy, Stella would call upon another icon of suffering. There were depths of emotion in Stella Waitzkin's art that are really made in the evident and mainstream art of our time.

She always considers herself a participant in the mainstream art world. Nonetheless, she would rarely reveal those depths directly to others and often adapted a theatrical, even fictive persona, instead finding space apart within her constructive environment, and drew upon powerfully inner resources to create works of man's beauty and emotional resonance that we might recognize what might lie well within our own souls. Thank you.