THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

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“Phenomenal Spaces: The Artist-Constructed Environment”
by 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 lived and by which we others may benefit. While 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 ‘60s 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 exhibition of her work here at the Arts Center invokes her Chelsea Hotel environment and spurs me to do two things today in my talk. One is to speak about Stella, whom I knew for fifteen years and on whose Trust I serve, and to address the challenge of this session: to transgress the unconvincing boundaries that have been drawn between the art produced by artists participating in the so-called mainframe art world and those independent, often self-taught artists whose works emerge from many sectors of the culture ignored or rejected as not being significant to the art historical discourse.

To start, let’s consider the phenomenon of the artist-constructed environment as seen in the work of both those in the mainstream, academic art world and those outside it. I argue that on a most basic level there is no essential difference between them. I believe we can productively compare the work of academically trained artists who created their works within the traditions and markets of mainstream art, such as Christo/Jeanne-Claude, Jessica Stockholder, Stella Waitzkin, and Mary Nohl with the creations of vernacular artists such as Joe Minter, Z.B. Armstrong, Lonnie Holley, Dinah Young, and 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 and environments that reveal how individuals of both realms create meaning from their intense sense of visual experience in a manner that can communicate life truths to others who may or may not share their social or psychological place of origin.

I start at a most basic, even obvious level of aesthetic experience: art as visual intelligence.[Arnheim text] As Rudolf Arnheim has stated: “Vision is a creative activity of the human mind. Perceiving accomplishes at 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’s 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 art work—that organized, 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: shape objects and three-dimensional space into statements of visual power, resonance, and often beauty. They create visual objects that bear significant meaning to testify to both the individual's intensely felt life and cultural placement and they inform and enhance the viewer’s experience. When we encounter—and enter into—artist constructed environments, that is, when we are not just looking at but are within the work, this sense of the embodiment of visual meaning as our surround has especial power. It speaks of the intense personal drama of being in the world, of making meaning, of conceptualizing and framing a world, and of transforming a private or public space into a site dense with personal, cultural, and aesthetic meaning, the forms of which are not necessarily determined by being part of “official” or “unofficial” culture. For instance, the works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Stockholder, Guyton, and Minter in their own ways address the general public, commanding an engaged response at once aesthetic, physical, and cultural, even explicitly political; while those of Waitzkin, Armstrong, Holley, and Young bespeak an 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 life visions. [Young//Stockholder image #3] Consider the yard construction of the southern African American vernacular artist Dinah Young and this early backyard creation of 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. [2 Young shots image #4] For Dinah Young, this meant moving further into her rural yard and into the forest at its edge, “dressing” the spaces with natural materials found there, then repositioned, and re-purposed to enigmatic personal use. Note, if you can, the pile of bricks positioned under the fallen and repositioned tree. [2 Stockholder images image #5] Stockholder, embracing the formalist vocabularies of 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. Certainly, there are great differences in the personal worldviews of these artists and their viewers. Much of Young’s intentions may not seem readily accessible to the outsiders who walk her land, except, perhaps for those who share the visual language arising within rural African American yard shows. 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 design.

Given that the creative act for the artist is often one of simultaneous self-discovery and self-assertion, we often observe the steady intensification of personal expression in the increasing density and expansion of enacted space moving from an immediately personal into a larger public realm. Yet at the same time, we may speculate about the challenges—and affirmations—the artists might feel when their work meets audiences from beyond their initial homeground.

This is can be seen in artists from all quarters—within and beyond the certified art world. For instance, Lonnie Holley initially created an extremely dense environment in his immediate yard and the thick woods around it, a space into which few people would venture. And when they did, they discovered striking constructions, all of which had stories to them which Holley would then readily articulate. And when given the chance to bring his work to the larger public, indeed the art world establishment, he did so equally readily as seen in his installation at the Birmingham Museum of Art. Should we claim that one environment or creation is more meaningful or qualitatively different than the other?

On the other hand, Joe Minter began with a public mission, deciding to erect visual testaments to his people’s—and his nation’s—cultural and political history in his Birmingham, Alabama, yard. And then asserting his role as artist as griot, he steadily expanded the range and frequency of his statements beyond his yard into the neighborhood, reclaiming abandoned lots and buildings, creating African Village in America. Here, personal environment assumes public meaning, while concurrently in Detroit, a collapsing neighborhood of abandoned lots and derelict homes was appropriated by personal act when Tyree Guyton and his family began cleaning the area, turning its refuse into an “art” environment of hanging and bunched sculpture, much like an extensive yard show, and painting several of the abandoned buildings in what appear to be art school-inspired polka dot patterns and numerical abstractions. Guyton’s transformations made a deteriorating environment dramatically visible and in the process helped drive out ensconced drug dealers from the area, enraged city bureaucrats who had ignored the area’s plight and blight, and made public art serve a distressed community.

For Guyton, who as a youth wanted to be an artist and received college art 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 socialist realist aesthetic of the Communist-era Bulgaria from which he fled, art could be both the expression of an intensely personal vision and yet embrace an
extremely large and culturally diverse populace, 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 us with something we have never experienced before.

[Valley Curtain image #10] Draw a curtain and close up/continue the lines of a mountain range and allow people to drive through its base; [The Gates image #11] construct hundreds of brightly flowing curtained gateways in the center of Central Park for thousands of people to walk through; [The Floating Piers image #12] or create pathways across an Italian lake to let people—many people—walk o’er water.

Let’s go inside now. [Armstrong Waitzkin images image #13] Not all art environments are constructed in the outside world (no pun intended). Many—more than we’ll ever know—are built within, behind closed doors. They are private, sometimes open only to invited or unexpected viewers. Yet they can be every bit aesthetically shaped, symbolically resonant, and as existentially significant as any externally created art environment. Admittedly, these interior spaces are especially resonant of the animating 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 Zebedee Armstrong’s modest Alabama home were covered by his many hand-drawn and handmade calendars. They have been identified by some as his “doomsday clocks,” expressions of his fixation on the passing of time and the impending end that awaited him and us all. The calendars and clocks, once created, accumulated and accumulated...and they were used. Holes punched in the cardboard faces allowed inserted nails to be moved day by day...no winding necessary. The place was extremely quiet. But time moved on.

The Chelsea Hotel environment that Stella Waitzkin created around her during her thirty-year residence also had many clocks. [clock and clock cabinet image #14] These cast polyester resin sculptures were emblems of mortality, having emerged in the early 1980s after the untimely death of her youngest son, and the artist grew increasingly reclusive within her densely filled apartment. Indeed, in her later years fewer and fewer people would be invited into this space.

When we explore Waitzkin’s environment, I believe we can observe signs of a creative passion, even necessity, that led to the development of such a dense enwrapping space, a pattern of creation common, I suggest, to other environment creators. An idea, a theme, an 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 and indeed nourishing the artist’s creative self and extension into the world around her. [Wedding Book and installation image #15]

For Stella Waitzkin this expansion was directly connected to her artistic process as a sculptor. She would find an object, very frequently an old leather-bound book, and make a mold from it and then would mix polyester resin in the mold. And working rather quickly before the resin completely set up, she’d float pigments, sometimes objects, in the resin, creating the multihued works. Although each work began from a particular mold and can be viewed as a discrete piece, Stella would rarely be content to leave it at that. She’s use the mold again and again creating series of works, each one different with respect to particular hue and the degree of translucence or opacity she sought. These works might be presented alone or in a group. But then she might also stack book on top of book or conjoin them horizontally to create compact sculptures, often quite formally composed. [Akron Art Museum Stack; Colored books image #16] At still other times, book would be abutted to book and soon a shelf would be created. [7 Books, Everson Museum Work image #17] Then shelf would be added to shelf, and soon a Library would be created. [4,000 Images Brooklyn Museum image #18] Then, shelf upon shelf took over a wall to create formidable work such as [Details of a Lost Library image #19]. And ultimately, wall would join wall and an art environment would be constructed. [Chelsea Library Western View image #20]

In many of the works, the form of the book established itself as the primary statement or served as the foundation onto or into which other cast resin images (a face, birds, fruit) would be placed. The book, as object and concept, was especially important for Waitzkin and proved an extremely resonant form and theme. It is the transmitter of human thought and feeling across time and among peoples. Waitzkin found in it a direct personal link to her great-grandfather, a Jewish scholar from Eastern Europe, and she encouraged her own son Fred in his life as a writer of books. Yet when I pick up a book of hers, I may sense its individual wisdom and cultural spirit, but I cannot “read” the book. It doesn’t open; it doesn’t have words! Of course, all visual works of art are silent. But 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 of being within and beyond us. [Truman Library + Queens of New York image #21]

If the books are closed and silent, nonetheless they, like her other artworks, are powerfully communicative artworks, both spiritually and emotionally affecting. There is an overarching aura of mystery about them; yet they assert an intense, immediate physicality. Her use of leather-bound books for her molds calls up a distant past, just as her cast female faces resemble cameos of another era. But we feel most immediately the embodied passion
of the artist’s life, her deep understanding of human longing and loss, of personal desire and achievement.

Even if most of the books are silent and closed, it is remarkable how frequently something quite different, quite human emerges from others: the human face. [Face from Book & Filmmaker image #22] Contemporaneous with her taking up the book as image in the early 1970s, Stella began making molds of faces (almost entirely molds from other sculptural objects). ["Metamorphosis" Smithsonian and Book with Face image #23] These books seem to speak, or rather the books seem ready to speak, but they remain as silent as the others in Stella’s Libraries. The faces almost never have opened eyes and only rarely face directly at us. The figures are as closed, as interior-looking as are the books (even the open books within whose pages the faces emerge). Nonetheless, a human presence is affirmed in these works, haunted and haunting, even more so in her Holocaust works. [“Little” Shoah and Yom Ha Shoah image #24] Note the faces entombed within these black-blackened works. They are not that distant in mood from the faces entrapped within the numerous clocks that Stella created following the death of her son Billy in 1983. Here time has stopped, the face of the clock replaced by a human presence within. [Clock and Christ and Bird image #25] And for sheer poignancy, Stella would call upon an icon of suffering. ["Who Dies" image #26] There are depths of emotion in Stella Waitzkin’s art that are rarely made evident in the mainstream art of our time, though she always saw herself as a participant in the mainstream art world. Nonetheless, she would rarely reveal those depths directly to others and often adopted a theatrical and even fictive persona instead, finding a space apart within her constructed environment and drawing upon powerful inner resources to create works of immense beauty and emotional resonance that we might recognize what may well lie within our own souls. [Stella Waitzkin image #27]
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Rudolf Arnheim
Jessica Stockholder (above)  

Dinah Young (below)
Dinah Young: yard and forest installation
Jessica Stockholder
Lonnie Holley

Original yard environment :: Birmingham Museum Installation
Joe Minter
African Village in America, Birmingham, AL
Tyree Guyton
Heidelberg Project, Detroit
Christo & Jeanne-Claude
Christo & Jeanne-Claude
Valley Curtain
Christo & Jeanne-Claude
The Gates
Christo & Jeanne-Claude
The Floating Piers
Stella Waitzkin Chelsea Hotel Room  ZB Armstrong Home
Stella Waitzkin, Clock Cabinet; Clock

Untitled (Clock Cabinet)
resin & found furniture, 70.5" x 39.5" x 16"
Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art
Stella Waitzkin, *Wedding Books; Pre-Nuptial Agreements*
Stella Waitzkin, *Books*

*Untitled*
resin, approx. 8.5” x 11” x 8”
Akron Art Museum

*Untitled*
resin, 10” x 9.5” x 7”
Tucson Museum of Art
Stella Waitzkin
Stella Waitzkin, *4,000 Images*
Stella Waitzkin, *Details of a Lost Library*
Stella Waitzkin, Chelsea Hotel, Western Wall
Stella Waitzkin
Stella Waitzkin
Stella Waitzkin

Yom Ha Shoah

“Little” Shoah
Stella Waitzkin
Stella Waitzkin, Who Dies