DUST STORMS IN THE PARALLEL ART UNIVERSE:

Reflections on twenty-five years in the Self-taught/"Outsider" art field

by Tom Patterson

I. End of an Era

Two recent, coinciding events in Atlanta provide a convenient jumping-off point for some critical reflections on the development of the self-taught, or "outsider," art field over the last quarter of the century. One was the eighth annual Folk Fest, a gathering of art dealers, collectors, artists, and curiosity-seekers, held on a mid-August weekend at a trade-show building in the city's north suburbs. The other, timed to coincide with Folk Fest, was a day-long symposium at the High Museum of Art, titled "A Golden Era of Southern Self-Taught Art." The symposium was held in conjunction with the museum's summer exhibition, "Let it Shine: Self-Taught Art from the T. Marshall Hahn Collection," which provided additional food for thought about the current state of the field.

As its title suggested, the symposium was, to some extent, devoted to looking back on a bygone time in the field--a "golden era" at least in the view of some of its longtime participants. Folk Fest 2001, meanwhile, provided ample evidence that anything resembling a "golden era" in this field is most definitely over. After the publication of several hundred illustrated books on self-taught art, the broadcast of innumerable television news and "human-interest" segments on self-taught artists and their work, and the appearance of untold numbers of newspaper articles headlined "Outsider Art is In!," we're clearly well into the era of self-taught art's overcommercialization and attempted co-option by opportunists looking to cash in on a

hot trend. No other single event epitomizes that fact so flagrantly as does Folk Fest, the red-headed stepchild of New York's annual Outsider Art Fair.

At this year's fest, vendors offering everything from mass-produced tchotchkes to children's clothing to complimentary toilet-paper samples competed for space and attention with reputable art dealers selling the work of reputable artists, and plenty of others who traffic in what I like to call smiley-face hillbilly art--laughably bad stuff, most of which was relegated to the back half of the Wal-Mart-sized, concrete-floored trade center. One reputable dealer, who has continued to maintain a booth at the fair every year since its inception, despite the event's declining quality, said that this year's Folk Fest reminded him of a boat show.

The depressingly tacky tenor of Folk Fest is one of several strong indications that the self-taught/outsider art field is experiencing something of an identity crisis as the scholars, curators, critics, collectors, and dealers involved in this subset of the art world engage ourselves in an ongoing attempt to define, redefine, keep up with, and in some cases defend it. Other signs of this problem have included allegations of racism and lax exhibition standards at recent installments of the Outsider Art Fair, increasing numbers of academically trained artists trying to pass themselves off as outsiders, questions about exploitation of artists deemed to be mentally or developmentally disabled, and a lagging secondary market for some of the pricier work in the field. All of these developments have amounted to a series of dust storms in what I've previously referred to as "contemporary art's parallel universe," and the dust remains unsettled for now.

II. Excitement and Personal Discovery

Although my upbringing in the American South during the 1950s and '60s exposed me to the yard shows that were among the more visible examples of self-taught art at that time, it wasn't until the 1970s that I began to take an active interest in this work. During that "golden era," the relatively small number of scholars, collectors, and other enthusiasts involved with such material most often referred to it as contemporary folk art, but what Jenifer Borum has dubbed "term warfare" had already broken out in the field. (Borum, "Term Warfare," *Raw Vision* #8, Winter 1993-94, pp. 24-31) Prominent folklore and folklife scholars took strong exception to characterizing the work of these autonomously creative artists as folk art--a term some such experts preferred to apply exclusively to utilitarian craft traditions passed down from one generation to the next. Nonetheless, the terminology problem didn't seem to be much of an issue for most of those who were beginning to take an interest in this work--new collectors, for the most part, and pioneering gallery owners like Phyllis Kind, Anton Haardt, and Judith Alexander (for whom I briefly worked as an assistant in 1983).

How to characterize that period in the field? In her comments at the High Museum symposium, longtime collector Barry Huffman of Hickory, North Carolina, spoke of it as a unique time, during which she, her husband, and the scores of other collectors who then had the field virtually to themselves were always welcome in the homes and studios of the artists whose work they collected. "Artists looked forward to visits from people who appreciated their art," she said. She also pointed out that it was a time when most self-taught artists were "driven by the need to create," rather than by market forces.

Although lacking the resources and the acquisitive nature to be much of an active collector, I, too, enjoyed frequent visits with a number of southern self-taught artists during those years. My aim was mainly just to talk with them, see what they were working on, make some photographs, and compile notes for the articles and books I began to write about these artists and their work. Huffman's recollections ring fairly true for me as well. It was a time of excitement and personal discovery. It was fun.

Ground zero for the rapid growth of public interest in self-taught art was the environment of sculptural constructions, found objects, small buildings, paintings, flowering plants, and meandering streams that Howard Finster built during the 1960s and '70s on two and a half acres of swampland behind his house in the small community of Pennville, Georgia. By the early 1980s, Finster's "Paradise Garden" was being widely publicized and attracting "folk" art collectors and other curious visitors from far and wide. Drawn to Finster's work and sensing that something important was going on, I started making frequent trips to his place from Atlanta, where I then lived, in order to follow the development of his art and hear what he had to say, which was plenty. For a while, I continued to visit him regularly after I moved to North Carolina in 1984.

The sudden exposure of the masses to Finster's work--and to the larger realm of self-taught art--resulted in large part from the commissioned portrait he painted of the rock group, Talking Heads, inhabiting one of his signature visionary landscapes. That work was reproduced on the cover of the band's million-selling 1985 record album, *Little Creatures*. Those of us who had been frequenting Finster's Paradise Garden up to that time observed how quickly his situation changed in the wake of the record's

appearance. In some ways, that sudden surge of attention marked the beginning of the golden era's end.

III. Contextual Backtrack

Many of the collectors and others who began involving themselves with self-taught art during the 1970s were initially unaware of this work's deeper cultural roots and the fact that it had enjoyed a relatively small but appreciative audience in certain corners of the world for fifty years or more. By 1930, a number of European aesthetes and avant-gardists had already developed a strong interest in the work of self-taught artists whose psychological disorders had led to their confinement in mental institutions on that side of the Atlantic. In the 1940s, French artist Jean Dubuffet emerged as the leading theorist and proponent of this latter group's work, which he rather stridently advocated as an alternative to what he called "cultural art." In an attempt to render an English equivalent of Dubuffet's "art brut," the term "outsider art" (inspired by Colin Wilson's literary and sociological study *The Outsider*)was later introduced by British art scholar Roger Cardinal in his 1972 book, *Outsider Art*. (London: Studio Vista, 1972.)

The work of self-taught American artists--none of whom were mental-institution inmates--began to register on the New York art world's radar screen in the 1930s, largely as a result of exhibitions that folk-art scholar/curator Holger Cahill and his wife Dorothy Miller organized for the Museum of Modern Art. Self-taught, African-American artists such as Horace Pippin, William Edmondson, and Bill Traylor gained limited audiences for their work in New York in the 1930s and '40s, the decade in which self-taught Caucasion artist Anna Mary Robertson "Grandma" Moses' straightforward memory paintings also became widely popular. But it wasn't until the 1960s that a new

wave of interest in self-taught art took root in an emerging, youth-driven counterculture that distrusted authority and treasured independence and authenticity. From there, this interest began to spread. College and university art departments were among this loosely defined, new movement's hotbeds, and they also served as breeding grounds for the reawakening interest in self-taught art. (Julia Ardery does a good job of analyzing the counterculture's intersection with self-taught art in her critically incisive social history of the field, *The Temptation: Edgar Tolson and the Genesis of Twentieth-Century Folk Art*.; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998, pp. 11-173) It was largely art students, their professors, and young, professional, academically trained artists--people such as Gregg Blasdel, John and Miriam Tuska, Michael and Julie Hall, Roger Brown, Jim Nutt, Gladys Nillson, Villem Volkersz, Larry Hackley, and Andy Nasisse--who, in the late 1960s and into the '70s, began building the bridge between their world and that of their self-taught counterparts. That dynamic relationship between artists on both sides of the academic divide escalated throughout the 1970s, thereby ushering in the ten- or fifteen-year "golden era." Also crucial to the field's rapid development during the 1960s and '70s were New York's Museum of American Folk Art, founded in 1961, and its first curator, Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., a mentor to many of those young art-school affiliates who later joined him as pioneers in "discovering" these self-taught artists and collecting their work.

IV. Deep Souls and Big Bucks

An early landmark in the self-taught art field's gilded age was the exhibition, *Black Folk Art (1930-1980)*, which opened in January 1982 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington. Although problematical in some respects (the curatorial presumption,

for example, that black folk art is made only by “a relatively few, physically isolated individuals”), this important traveling show introduced a national audience to the work of Steve Ashby, David Butler, Ulysses Davis, Sam Doyle, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Nellie Mae Rowe, Son Ford Thomas, Mose Tolliver, and a dozen others, including the reintroduced William Edmondson and Bill Traylor. The exhibition and its accompanying catalog also inspired a number of other scholars, collectors, curators, and art dealers to begin taking a serious look at a previously neglected dimension of American art.

The most ambitious and influential (not to mention controversial) of the dealer/collectors whom the Corcoran show inspired to investigate the work of self-taught, African-American artists is William Arnett of Atlanta. Most widely known for introducing Thornton Dial’s art to the world, Arnett worked tirelessly to develop a base of collectors who have been willing to pay five and in some cases six figures for some of Dial’s larger pieces. By the time he set his sights on this recently spotlit zone of contemporary art and, in 1986, happened to meet Dial, Arnett had spent many years buying and selling traditional art from Asia, Africa, and the PreColombian Americas. Arnett’s broad experience of the world of art commerce, combined with his intense enthusiasm for Dial’s work and that of other artists he has championed over the last fifteen years (including Hawkins Bolden, Ralph Griffin, Bessie Harvey, Lonnie Holley, Ronald Lockett, and Charlie Lucas), have made him a highly effective advocate for these artists. His often successful efforts to market their works at prices comparable to those regularly fetched by the work of trained contemporary artists have been commendable in many ways and have helped gain respect in the contemporary art system for the work of self-taught artists. The highlights of Arnett’s efforts to date have been his 1996 exhibition,

“Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South” (my 1997 review of which is also contained in these pages) and, more recently, the ambitious and frequently insightful (if uneven), two-volume scholarly work of the same title (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000, 2001). Totaling more than 1,000 pages, these books include contributions by a wide range of art scholars and other writers.

The prices that Arnett has helped establish for Dial’s work and that of the other black vernacular artists whom he has championed have been beneficial for the artists he hasrepresented and for reputation of self-taught art withinthe larger contemporary art world. But some other dealers and collectors have complained that these prices have skewed the larger market for self-taught art. There’s some irony here, because many of the collectors that entered this alternative art arena back in the good old days did so because self-taught art was typically priced very low by comparison to the work of academically trained, gallery-connected artists. Arnett certainly doesn’t deserve all the credit--or blame--for the self-taught art market’s presently unsettled state. The Outsider Art Fair, now counting down to its tenth year, has played a large role in the rapid escalation in prices for some self-taught art, as have the growing number of major museum shows devoted to this material. And despite grousing by some dealers and collectors, it is, after all, only fair that self-taught artists be treated with the same respect--including financial respect--that’s accorded their trained counterparts.

Arnett’s endeavors constitute only one example of the jockeying for art-historical position that began intensifying in the field during the late ‘80s and has escalated throughout the ‘90s. He is only one of a number of the field’s more affluent collectors who, during the 1990s, have engineered the organization of blockbuster museum shows

and/or the publication of lavish coffee-table catalogs to showcase their collections and tout the artists in whose careers they've invested. Arrangements for such exhibitions typically involve a substantial gift of works to the host museum. (The "Souls Grown Deep" exhibition was an exception, an independent production presented at Atlanta's City Hall East, rather than in an art museum.) Such maneuvers are, of course, standard procedure in the art world, but because of the still relatively small size of the self-taught art field, they tend to have a disproportionate impact. Most of the private-collection shows of self-taught art that have taken place in this country focus on a relatively small number of already canonized self-taught artists. In that sense, they're conservative exhibits that generally avoid the risk of introducing work by emerging talents who may or may not eventually gain widespread acceptance within the field.

The High's "Let it Shine" exhibition, organized by the museum's curator of folk art, Lynne Spriggs, was fairly typical of this phenomenon. T. Marshall Hahn, CEO of the Atlanta-based Georgia-Pacific Corporation, began collecting works by self-taught artists during the golden era, and a few years ago he donated 140 pieces to the High. The exhibition contained more than half of those included in the donation and was overwhelmingly dominated by canonized artists--Eddie Arning, Henry Darger, Ulysses Davis, Thornton Dial, Minnie Evans, Howard Finster, William Hawkins, Martin Ramirez, Nellie Mae Rowe, Mary T. Smith, Mose Tolliver, and Bill Traylor, as well as a few other usual suspects--and only a couple of lesser-known artists (Mary Shelley, Thai Varick) were represented.

V. Marginalized Artists and Bad Press

The ramifications of the field's museum politics--specifically the dependence of museums on the continued goodwill of well-financed collectors--are many. Private-collection shows such as those discussed above reflect a decided preference for the work of artists who fit one of two cultural profiles--1) rural, elderly, or, more often, dead African-Americans, and 2) individuals of various ethnic backgrounds who suffer mental or developmental disabilities. The self-taught artists who received attention sixty to seventy years ago came from these same two cultural groups. Unfairly relegated to the field's margins by this dynamic are scores of highly talented self-taught artists who fall into other social categories--Appalachian whites (with the exception of a few dead ones like Edgar Tolson and S.L. Jones), relatively young artists, and artists from urban backgrounds. A list of such unfairly marginalized figures in the field would include Charles Benefiel, Minnie Black, Georgia Blizzard, Curtis Cuffie, Anthony Dominguez, Anne Grgich, Clint Griffin, Scott Griffin, L-15, Tim Lewis, Birdie Lusch, Eddie Owens Martin (St. EOM), Ray Materson, Mark Casey Milestone, David Philpot, Melissa Polhamus, Kevin Sampson, Philip Travers, and Gregory Warmack (a.k.a. Mr. Imagination).

Compounding some of the problems outlined above has been an increasing amount of negative publicity about the field. In 1994, CBS-TV's "60 Minutes" aired a segment on the "outsider" art boom that was largely devoted to unproven allegations that William Arnett was ripping off some of the artists he was representing. "Dealers Quit Outsider Fair. Recriminations Fly," read the headline of a 1999 article in *Art & Auction*, which reported on the decisions by New York's Cavin-Morris Gallery and Philadelphia's Fleisher/Ollman Gallery to withdraw their participation in the Outsider Art Fair. (Steven

Vincent, *Art & Auction*, June 1, 1999, p. 26) The article was generated by a joint press release in which the directors of the two galleries complained that "the advertising and general tenor of the Fair runs counter to the respectful way we regard this art," and that publicity surrounding the fair "thrives on abnormality and weirdness; rather than idiosyncracy, the diversities of cultures, and the basic love of artistic quality and integrity...." (Cavin-Morris Gallery eventually reconsidered the decision and returned to participate in the fair in 2004 and 2005.)

More recently, the *Chicago Reader* published an in-depth investigative report compiling fairly persuasive evidence that the identity of one allegedly self-taught artist has been entirely fabricated, and that the work attributed to him was actually made by the academically trained artist who has purported to act as his agent. Clyde Angel, as he has come to be known in the field, is purported to be a publicity-shy, "homeless wanderer" who produces drawings, scrap-metal sculptures, rambling texts, and even video pieces. Some of these works have been shown at prominent galleries in New York and Chicago, at the Outsider Art Fair, and in major group exhibitions in Chicago and Paris, and the artist who supposedly makes them is touted in Chuck and Jan Rosenak's oft-consulted sourcebook, *Contemporary American Folk Art: A Collectors' Guide* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996, p. 201). No one who has exhibited or purchased work attributed to Angel has ever met him, and his work has only made its way into the self-taught art field due to the efforts of one Vernon Clyde Willits Jr., a sculptor who received an associates arts degree in 1976 from Mount Saint Clare College in Clinton, Iowa. Willits has been responsible for introducing and supplying the work to the dealers and curators who have shown it. It's hard to come away from the *Reader* article

unconvinced that both Angel and his work are actually Willits' creation. (Jeff Huebner, "Has Anyone Seen Clyde Angel?," *Chicago Reader*, April 14, 2000, pp. 1, 31-37.)

At this writing, the latest publication to cast aspersions on the field is *Oxford American*, whose June 2001 issue contains an article ostensibly about the resurgence of interest in William Edmondson's stone sculptures, showcased in a recent traveling exhibition circulated by New York's American Folk Art Museum. Although it praised Edmondson's work and that of several other self-taught artists, a substantial portion of the article amounted to a blanket condemnation of the "outsider" art field. Questioning the motives of the field's "predominantly white audiences," the article's author goes on to note the "embarrassing" questions that plague the field, and to castigate its proponents for "the field's brutal social logic," their own "guilty self-righteousness," and the "hype and snobbishness and greed" that she cites as the field's driving forces. Although drippingly sarcastic and generally condemnatory, it's an important article that raises valid points and offers one constructive bit of advice: "Instead of trying to pretend that the contradictions in this field don't exist, we would do better to embrace them and thereby learn something about ourselves." (Tessa DeCarlo, "'The Innocent Negro': William Edmondson and the Guilty Politics of Folk/Outsider Art," *Oxford American*, June 2001, pp. 42-52.)

VI. Conclusion?

Some predictions are easily made--that the field will continue to exist, that the terminology problem will remain a distraction to some of the field's observers and participants, that we'll keep learning about new and emerging self-taught artists, and that the artificial barrier between "outsider" and "insider" art will continue to erode--but

otherwise, it's all a matter of speculation. Among the individuals most highly qualified to speculate on the field's future is Brooke Anderson, director of the recently inaugurated Contemporary Center at the American Folk Art Museum, which on December 11 is scheduled to open its new, midtown-Manhattan headquarters at 45 West 53rd Street--significantly, on the same block as the Museum of Modern Art. Anderson was one of the featured speakers at the High Museum's August symposium, where she presented a slide lecture about quality and connoisseurship within the field--issues that have often been largely sidestepped in the discourse surrounding self-taught art. She began by responding to some of the comments that Barry Huffman had made earlier in the day. Countering Huffman's suggestion that we've seen the end of an era of creativity shared between artists and appreciators of their work, Anderson said that the field's artists and enthusiasts are "still sharing" and "making new discoveries with a different kind of depth." And in response to Huffman's plea for those within the field to settle on a single term for this art, Anderson asserted that the multitude of names given to the work of self-taught artists is not necessarily an impediment to the field's evolution, but rather "a reflection of the richness and depth of the field"--a statement in line with DeCarlo's suggestion that the field's contradictions be embraced.

There are too many recent developments in the field to comment on all of them in an essay of this length. For example, I haven't even mentioned the American Visionary Art Museum, the impressive new institution that opened in Baltimore in 1995. Although its founder, Rebecca Hoffberger, can perhaps be faulted for settling on the problematical term "visionary" as a blanket designation for the artists whose work the museum has shown, AVAM has already done a great deal to gain broader acceptance for the field.

The new American Folk Art Museum promises to accomplish even more along those lines.

As for a conclusion, there really is none. This has always been highly open-ended territory, and it remains so.

*

Originally published in slightly different form in the twenty-fifth-anniversary issue of Art Papers*, Nov.-Dec. 2001.*