STREET-SAVVY: The Urban Street Art of Curtis Cuffie, Kevin Sampson, and Anthony Dominguez

"You are your environment. If you're not open to it, it's there anyway."

--Anthony Dominguez

in conversation, 25 September 2001

New York

The three artists introduced in the following pages constitute half of an unaffiliated group represented in an exhibition for which I served as guest curator at the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning in Jamaica, Queens, New York, in early 2002. Although they've often been labeled "outsiders," these artists are all in close touch with the pulse of street culture in the urban U.S.A. Their artistic expressions reflect their street-wisdom in myriad direct and indirect ways, most obviously in the materials from which their works are largely made--primarily objects salvaged from the streets of their own neighborhoods. They've all learned to make resourceful, inventive, insightful use of what the street has taught and provided them. Even when engaging issues that would seem to range well beyond the immediate concerns of street culture, their work speaks from a street stance and is thereby all the more compelling. They are among a large number of younger artists whose works combine "raw" and sophisticated traits in ways that provide a strong and welcome challenge to the artificial distinction between insider and outsider, or contemporary and folk.

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One day in 1984, in Lower Manhattan, **Curtis Cuffie** was walking along Fourth Avenue in the vicinity of Astor Place, pushing the metal shopping cart that had served

as his mobile storage unit ever since the previous year, when he'd lost his residence and moved into the urban outdoors. Happening upon an old rag mop that had been tossed out onto the sidewalk, he picked it up and placed it in his shopping cart. Suddenly, the discarded cleaning implement assumed, for him, the form of a scrawny, spunky woman with stringy gray hair--a transformation that literally inspired him. In that moment, as he recollects, "the spirit came to me." He gathered some used sponges and scraps of fabric from nearby dumpsters and trash cans, and he used them to complete his life-size figural sculpture, fashioning a torso, arms, legs, and clothing. Then he set the piece out on the edge of a nearby parking lot to admire and show to passersby. (Except where otherwise noted, information about Cuffie comes from my conversations with him in New York on August 2, September 27, and September 29, 2001.)

In the ten years that followed, Cuffie became a near-legendary figure on the streets of Lower Manhattan for his continued practice of gathering such throwaway items and finding inventive ways to combine and reconfigure them. His impromptu, streetside displays of the resultant free-form art installations were much admired by many of his academically trained counterparts at the Cooper Union, the center of his orbit in those days. The armature for his early works was a metal fence that lined a public parking lot on the west side of Fourth Avenue, across from the school. For several years, he used that metal grid as the substructure for a constantly changing, improvisational, visual symphony of color, form, detail, texture, implied narrative, and metaphorical association, rendered in scraps of fabric and a plethora of other objects he picked up on the city's sidewalks or in its alleyways, public parks, and subways.

An African-American man who began his street-art career at twenty-nine, Cuffie lacked any formal education beyond high school. Having spent his childhood and early adolescence in the small town of Hartsville, South Carolina, he had come to New York in 1970, when he was fifteen, initially to live with one of two older brothers who had previously settled in Brooklyn. Dropping out of school after he finished the eleventh grade, he had gone to work in a succession of low-paying, manual-labor jobs. Living, as he did, on the economic edge, he was ill-prepared for the serious spell of depression that overcame him in the wake of his mother's death in 1983. Psychologically debilitated, he lost his motivation for working and eventually fell into the homeless state in which he existed at the time of his spiritual and artistic awakening on the New York streets. For the record, when asked after ten years on the street if he wasn't homeless, he said, "No! I'm holy..."(Quoted from Sarah Ferguson, "Artful Dodger: Curtis Cuffie on Redemption Street," *Village Voice*, June 1, 1993, pp. 33-34.)

The works of art that Cuffie produced during his early years with no fixed address were, by virtue of their siting, ephemeral, rarely in place for more than a day or two before city sanitation crews would dismantle them and dispose of the objects and materials he had used to construct them. After the fence on which he had made his first such temporary installations was taken down, he relocated his base of operations from the parking lot on Fourth Avenue to a series of other nearby spots, including, for a while, a concrete traffic island on the Bowery, in front of the *Village Voice* headquarters. He began salvaging tripods, floor-lamp stands, and other objects that could serve as freestanding sculptural bases, and he worked on them in much the same loosely improvisational manner he'd applied to the fence. These pieces functioned as

idiosyncratic decor for the domestic setting he constructed on the traffic island. By moving a castoff sofa and other discarded furniture onto the site, he converted it into his own open-air, urban “living room,” as it were, where he could sometimes be seen lounging on the couch and reading. In addition to its function as ad-hoc gallery and unenclosed domicile, the area served as a stage on which Cuffie enjoyed performing for and interacting with his fellow pedestrians, as well as drivers and passengers in the automobile traffic by which he was almost constantly surrounded. Throughout his years on the streets, he engaged in such interaction much of the time, meanwhile tirelessly carrying on his additively creative work. He sometimes had sculptural assemblages temporarily installed in several locations at once.

Cuffie’s artistic ingenuity and the persistence with which he pursued his creative endeavors eventually earned the respect of many who grew accustomed to seeing him on the streets, and especially those who happened to be fellow artists or otherwise specially attuned to visual art. His works began to be shown in gallery settings while he was still living on the streets, and he has enjoyed further art-world success in the six years since he managed to regain some stability in his life and moved into a small East Village apartment with art historian Carol Thompson, with whom he lived until late in 2001, when she was hired as curator of African Art at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. Now, with a full-time, permanent job--at the Cooper Union, as it turns out--Cuffie has rejoined the domestic, workaday world. Living a few blocks from his former street haunts, he continues to create his metaphorically resonant conjoinings of disparate objects and materials.

Critic and art historian Jenifer Borum has remarked, appropriately, on the congruency of Cuffie's work with longstanding African-American yard-art traditions that have been particularly prevalent in the South, where he grew up. (Jenifer Borum, "Curtis Cuffie: Heaven is Under Your Feet," review of Cuffie's exhibition at the Fourth Street Gallery, New York, August 2000, in *Raw Vision* #36, Spring 2001, pp. 65, 67.) His pieces are generally scaled to the proportions of the human body and otherwise at least vaguely anthropomorphic, as was apparently the case with his initial discarded-rag-mop piece. Any of his individual works might center on a single theme, but more often they're imbued with multiple thematic references. Playful and intuitively inspired, they nonetheless address serious contemporary issues, continuing--despite Cuffie's current domestic status--to reflect a deep familiarity with life on the socio-economic edge, in all of its implications. His work also reflects his deeply religious view of the world, his sense of social justice, and his free spirit.

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While Cuffie's approach is largely additive, **Kevin Blythe Sampson** employs both additive and subtractive processes in his sculptural work. An inveterate junk collector, Sampson uses such objects and materials as castoff furniture, costume jewelry, chicken bones, candle wax, chile peppers, twigs, and human hair to make his evocative painted assemblages, which tend to resemble altars, shrines, reliquaries, and/or architectural structures. After strategically conjoining such objects, he paints the resultant assemblages with enamel, then sands them to partially erase the paint before adding a final coat of golden oak stain. These processes give them a weathered, time-

worn appearance--a patina of experience--appropriate to their historical grounding and, in particular, their deep roots in African-American history.

Only one generation removed from the rural South, Sampson lives and works in a loft in Ironbound, a traditionally Portuguese neighborhood of inner-city Newark--a place celebrated in his sculpture of that title. He was born and raised in nearby Elizabeth, New Jersey, where his father, Steven Sampson, has long been a prominent civil-rights activist--a position that early on enabled the young Kevin to meet Malcolm X, Shirley Chisholm, Dick Gregory, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, William Kunstler, and Robert Farris Thompson, among other well-known individuals associated with progressive politics and black culture. Citing his father as the most inspirational figure in his life, Sampson says, “I spent my childhood on picket lines and in the back of a van singing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ There were always meetings and heated arguments around my kitchen table between communists and civil-rights workers. All of the demonstrations and civil unrest were planned in my kitchen, with my mother frying fish for the planners.”

The younger Sampson’s upbringing in this charged milieu has had an ongoing, invigorating influence on his life and his art, which is also informed by his experience as a black male in a racially profiled society, his interest in his African heritage, his grounding in traditional spirituality, his passion for music, and his concern for the welfare of his community, not to mention his eighteen years of experience as a police officer in Scotch Plains, New Jersey. (Information about and quotations of Sampson are drawn from my discussion with him during a visit to his studio on August 2, 2001, and from subsequent e-mail correspondence in November and December, 2001.)

It was in the latter capacity that Sampson began to develop his artistic skills. Having drawn and “made things” since he was a child, like most artists, he painstakingly honed his technical skills at figure-drawing by busying himself with a pencil and sketchpad during idle hours in his patrol car. After several years as a police detective, he underwent special training in the interview techniques that enabled him to work as a composite sketch artist for the police department, and he spent his last ten years on the force interviewing crime victims and eyewitnesses, using their descriptions to draw portraits of suspects. Sampson retired from police work on an early-disability pension in 1994, following the untimely deaths of his young, prematurely born son and then his wife. By the time of his wife’s death, he had begun to experiment with sculpture, trying his hand at woodcarving before making the first of his painted and stained assemblages. His sculptural work served him in part as a kind of self-administered therapy, enabling him to endure the period of intense mourning that followed in the wake of these family tragedies, and his art-making process has continued to nurture him spiritually and psychologically.

A devoted single father of four children, Sampson is also deeply committed to his community, which plays a fundamental role in his work. He says that living in Newark provides him with the “adrenaline rush” to which police work accustomed him. He draws creative inspiration from the diverse social context of his inner-city neighborhood, and in return he tries to contribute what he can to the well-being of his neighbors.

“On any given day I am out there,” Sampson says of Ironbound. “In this neighborhood I have become the lawyer for the homeboys, They come to me for advice. They look out for me and my kids....Many of these kids never get to talk to a black male

adult, and they flock to me. I have a household of kids--Puerto Rican, South American, and black--around me constantly." As for his community's relationship to his art, he says plainly, "I make this work for my community. It's about them, because of them, and inspired by them. One day I hope to be in the position to show it to them in my neighborhood. That's my dream and the only thing that will make me feel as though its message is being heard."

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Cuffie and Sampson share common cultural roots as African Americans, and neither of them had much exposure to art history or contemporary art prior to their own artistic emergence in the 1980s and '90s. **Anthony Dominguez**, on the other hand, is of mixed Mexican, Native American, and Anglo heritage, and he has had a lifetime of exposure to art and artists. His father, the late Priscillian "Pris" Dominguez, worked as a freelance commercial artist in Forth Worth, Texas. Growing up there in the 1960s and '70s, the younger Dominguez started drawing early on and soon began absorbing many types of imagery through his perusal of the art books in his father's library and his exposure to his father's work and that of other artists his father knew. After finishing high school, Dominguez spent four years at Texas Christian University, where he took courses in design, illustration, and art history, although he left the school without a degree.

During the early and mid-1980s Dominguez remained in Fort Worth, taught himself the craft of commercial signpainting, and established himself as a freelance signpainter. In 1987, on something of a whim, he moved to New York and supported himself for the next five years there by working for a graphic-design company and two

commercial-sign companies in succession. Then, early in 1993, he made a conscious, carefully considered decision to walk away from the workaday world, discard all of the artwork he had made and saved up until that time, and give up his tenant status in exchange for living out in the open, seeking free sources of food, and improvising compact, makeshift shelters for himself. Thus, at about the time Curtis Cuffie was ending his ten years of homelessness to "get his life back," Dominguez was deliberately forsaking the trappings of employment and domestic life in exchange for the streets, sidewalks, parks, derelict buildings, and tunnel hideaways of Manhattan. The only thing he didn't give up in this radical lifestyle change was his lifelong inclination to make images.

Dominguez doesn't consider himself homeless; he views himself as free. For some time before he adopted a domestically unmoored lifestyle, he says, "I felt that it was calling me, and that I had to be a part of that. There was something admirable, I felt, about experiencing hardship and doing it with a smile." After he moved outdoors, he says, "I would always meet people who would say, 'You can stay with me,' and I would say, 'That's nice of you, but that's not what I'm about.'"(Quotations are from my conversation with Dominguez in Lower Manhattan on September 25, 2001, with Jenifer Borum and Val Wagner also participating.)

The signature style of imagery that Dominguez has developed and refined during the years he has lived on the streets is dominated by figures--people, animals, insects, birds, and the grinning, animated skeletons that are the principal players in his one-scene visual tragicomedies--delineated in white and sometimes accompanied by brief, cryptic texts, on black fabric. He finds virtually all of the materials he uses to make his

art during his ongoing pedestrian explorations of the city. His first such pieces to draw public attention were small, circular, text-agumented images he made and marketed at very low cost to young people who frequented Tompkins Square Park. He designed these as patches to be sewn onto articles of clothing, applying stencils he cut out of bookbinder covers and other thin plastic items to black fabric, then bleaching the exposed areas using bleach and hypodermic syringes he obtained through a clean-needle program aimed at reducing the spread of disease among intravenous drug users. Some of the resultant images were stylized depictions of scorpions and other insects. Others combined concise emblems with similarly brief texts in order to critique aspects of capitalist society--a profile skull wearing an American Indian war bonnet and accompanied by the legend, “HOME OF THE DESTROYED,” for example, and a hybrid symbol incorporating a dollar-sign and a Christian cross trailing chains, illustrating the motto, “SELL YOURSELF.” Another of his images from those days was then his signature emblem--a grinning human skull wearing a baseball cap emblazoned with the word, “ALIVE.” In addition to making the bleached fabric patches, he sometimes used the stencils in conjunction with spray paint to create graffiti versions of the same images.

Dominguez’ work has undergone considerable stylistic evolution over the last eight years, even as it has retained the invariable white-on-black contrast that characterizes his pieces from the early 1990s. Working on black fabric that typically ranges in size from twelve to forty-eight inches in either dimension, Dominguez now creates what are essentially white-painted line drawings. These works have grown increasingly precise and refined as he has experimented with various tools, including

plastic ketchup dispensers and Wite-Out applicator pens. He now uses a ruling pen, a specialized drawing instrument that he found a couple of years ago, and it has lent an unprecedented degree of refinement to the works he has made in the interim.

In addition to scavenging his materials on the streets of New York, Dominguez finds much of his subject matter there, too. His daily experiences roaming the city and observing the life around him serve as his primary inspiration. “Mostly I base it on what’s happened to me,” he says of his work. “If it’s something terrible, I look at it in a funny way. I look at it in ways that aren’t favorable, and I have fun with it.”

The pervasive themes in Dominguez’ work are the inevitability of death, the constant presence of death in daily life, and the yin-yang relationship between the two. My initial meeting and interview with Dominguez took place on September 25, 2001, two weeks after hijackers piloting commercial jetliners destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center, killing some 3,000 people. As he and I sat with two other admirers of his work in a Tribeca loft, seven blocks north of the vast pile of gaseously smoking debris where the buildings had stood, Dominguez spoke softly about the thematically central role that mortality occupies in his art.

“In our culture, you don’t want to befriend your death;” he said, “You want to be with things that offer comfort, to be away from that. But that’s the inevitability. Everything is transitory and is leading up to that. We hope to find ourselves on the up-side of that, rather than on the down-side, because all this is going to be taken away....It’s like the (World) Trade Center: You put all your hopes in things that are offering security when, in fact, there is no security.”

About his experience of living on the street, Dominguez said, “I’m exposed to the environment, as opposed to someone living indoors. I have an opportunity to encounter what is disfavorable and what is favorable. They both are there, but it’s a matter of balance. It’s important to be a non-identity. If there’s too much identity, there’s too much attention. If there’s too much attention, there’s less coming and going. If you’re free from identity, you’re free from the constraints that society brings to bear on you. That way, you open yourself to how you see things. That’s why I use the door.”

He was referring to the tiny sketch he uses in lieu of signing his name--a stick-figure opening a door with a Valentine heart on it--usually placed in the lower right corner of his images. “You open yourself anyway,” he added, “so that’s just the way it is.”

Commenting on how he manages to meet the material needs of his art activities and his survival, this street-savvy artist, deeply committed to living as an urban outsider, gave away one of his trade secrets::

“Often I make a suggestion, and it will appear. It happens all the time in New York, especially if you’re looking for something to eat. If you want to get something, you’ve got to let go; you’ve got to give something in return. If you leave three pennies in a telephone coin return slot--preferably heads up--you’ll find a quarter. Try it. It works.”

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