A RUSTIC ART WORLD UNDER THE SUN, MOON, AND STARS:

The Emergence and Singular Artistic Trajectory of James Harold Jennings

I. First Encounter

In the summer of 1984 I moved from Atlanta, where I'd been working as a journalist for seven years, to Winston-Salem to take a job directing an unusual three-year research project for the Jargon Society, poet Jonathan Williams' small publishing house. Jonathan was a friend and literary mentor whom I'd known for ten years, and who shared my longstanding interest in the work of self-taught, visionary, "outsider" artists. During the early '80s we'd teamed up to visit several of these artists in the American Southeast. We talked with them and made notes and photographs, and we both subsequently began writing about them and their work. Jonathan started a collection of this art under the Jargon Society's auspices, and, in the spring of '84, he and the society's board offered me the job of supervising this ambitious effort we decided to call the Southern Visionary Folk Art Project. Upon moving to Winston, I set up an office in the city's West End, where I began applying for grants to fund the project, networking with the relatively small number of other "outsider" art enthusiasts who were then active around the country, and making personal forays across the American South to seek out more of the kind of vernacular art that was our focus.

Soon after arriving in Winston, I conceived the idea of organizing a public spectacle to draw attention to our project, in the form of an exhibition of works by some of the self-taught artists we had recently met or learned about. I enlisted Roger Manley, a folklorist and photographer who lived in Durham, as my co-curator, as he shared my

interest in this kind of art and was particularly knowledgeable about self-taught artists living in North Carolina. The two of us set about contacting artists and arranging to borrow additional works to augment those in the Jargon Society's collection. After some negotiations with the Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County, we booked one of the galleries at the Sawtooth Building, in downtown Winston, for a month-long exhibition titled "Southern Visionary Folk Artists," to open in early January of 1985.

One Saturday in October of '84, while Roger and I were in the thick of the curatorial process, I received a phone call from Amanda Winecoff, a weaver in HIgh Point and a recent acquaintance who knew of my particular artistic interests. She said that on the previous day she'd been driving home from a visit with a friend in Surry County and had gotten momentarily lost on some rural roads south of Pilot Mountain. While attempting to find her way back to the main route, she'd passed what she described as a field with some painted wood sculptures installed near the roadside. She'd made a mental note of the location and offered to lead me back to it, if I was interested. Later that afternoon I met her and our mutual friend, Deborah Coffin, and we set out in my Honda Civic, heading north from Winston-Salem on U.S. Highway 52. About fifteen miles out, we got off the highway at the King-Tobaccoville exit, where, on Amanda's instructions, I turned left at the top of the exit ramp and continued to the first paved road on the right. Turning onto this two-lane blacktop, I drove north for another six to seven miles, traversing the east-west border of Surry and Stokes counties. As the car rounded a sharp bend in the road and we passed an old tobacco barn on the right, Amanda said, "There it is."

And there it was indeed--the little domain that would soon come to be known as James Harold Jennings' Art World.

Bordered by woods, a tobacco field, and the road, what then existed of Jennings' yard show measured no more than 500 square feet, but even so it was a lively, eye-catching site. In front of a cluster of playhouse-size buildings made of scrap lumber was a rough scaffolding of wooden poles and planks supporting dozens of whirligigs, windmills, miniature airplanes, and ferris wheels, all spinning and clattering and squeaking in the gusty autumn wind, as well as various painted wood cutouts and sculpural pieces representing elephants, turtles, snakes, people, and other fauna. All of these objects were made primarily of wood and painted none too meticulously in predominant shades of bright green, blue, red and yellow.

No sooner had I steered the car off the pavement in front of this rustic roadside attraction than its creator emerged from the group of small, scrap-wood outbuildings at the edge of the woods. Amanda, Deborah, and I got out of the car as he approached--a slight, rail-thin man of indeterminate age, dressed in earth-toned clothes, paint-spattered work boots , a knit toboggan cap pulled down over his eyebrows, and cheap plastic sunglasses with rose-colored lenses that clashed wildly with the orange freckles covering his sun-baked face. Strapped around his torso were several leather pouches bulging with paintbrushes, pencils, ballpoint pens, scraps of paper, and small woodworking tools. Anchored to the center of his skinny chest was a portable radio, into which was plugged a wire leading to a set of headphones he wore over his toboggan cap, which, I would later learn, concealed about three and a half feet of graying red tresses tied in a ponytail and knotted at the top of his head.

We introduced ourselves and accepted his rather limp, tentative handshake, and he told us his name. This distinctively garbed, elfin character was obviously a shy, very private man, and there was something almost otherworldly about him. His deep blue eyes initially resisted my gaze as we talked, but he seemed pleased by our interest, and he invited us to spend as much time as we liked looking at his creations. As we stood there talking with him, I noticed that passing cars would occasionally slow down, and faces would stare from behind rolled-up windows, but no one else stopped to investigate this unexpected rural curiosity while we were there. Jennings was clearly unaccustomed to the attention of strangers, but that was soon to change.

We spent about an hour with him that afternoon, and we got a good look at his entire place, including the interiors of the odd little buildings and the decrepit Victorian farmhouse on the hill across the road, where he had lived for much of his life. His only companions at that stage of his life were several near-wild cats and kittens. His studio, as it were, was one of the scrap-wood structures in his roadside environment--a building no larger than a cramped closet.

Over the next few weeks, Roger Manley and I selected about a dozen pieces of Jennings' work for the "Southern Visionary Folk Artists" exhibition, which also included works by Sam Doyle, Howard Finster, Leroy Person, Georgia Blizzard, St. EOM, Annie Hooper, Q.J. Stephenson, L-15, and fifteen others. Opening early in 1985, it marked Jennings' debut as an exhibiting artist, but he declined to attend the reception, no doubt intimidated by the idea of being in an unfamiliar setting where crowds of strangers would be looking at his art and talking to him. And besides, he invariably went to bed with the sun, whereas the reception wouldn't start until after dark. A few days later,

though, his brother, Clyde, drove him in to Winston to see the show during daylight hours, and the next time I saw him I could tell that he was very pleased to be represented in such an exhibit.

II. The Right Place at the Right Time

Nineteen eighty-five was the year that so-called "outsider art" began to register prominently on the radar screen of American popular culture, thanks in no small part to the painting by the famous self-taught artist from Georgia, Howard Finster, that was reproduced on the cover of Talking Heads' record album, "Little Creatures," released in the spring of that year. Another popular, post-punk rock group, Athens, Georgia-based R.E.M., had by that time already used Finster's artwork on several record covers and a poster. These trend-setting bands thereby introduced a wide audience of young music lovers to Finster's art and the larger, emergent field of self-taught art. After making the obligatory pilgrimage to Finster's "Paradise Garden," many of these new, young enthusiasts soon got word of Jennings and his art and sought him out as well.

Michael Stipe, R.E.M.'s lead singer and front man, came to Winston-Salem with a couple of friends in late January to see the "Southern Visionary Folk Artists" exhibition, and during their visit I took them out to meet James Harold Jennings. An art-school dropout who continued to make art even as he lived the life of an emerging rock star, Michael was obviously very moved by Jennings and his art. He bought several of the small sculptures, including a hornet whose body is formed from a twisted vine--very similar to a piece that's included in the current exhibition of Jennings' work at SECCA. Michael was in Winston again at the end of that year, when R.E.M. played a show at

R.J. Reynolds High School Auditorium on a double-bill with the Minutemen, and we returned to Jennings' place together for another typically delightful visit with him. Probably in homage, Michael walked onstage that night at the beginning of R.E.M.'s set wearing a paper bag on his head, pulled down over his eyebrows in the same way Jennings habitually wore his toboggan.

Michael Stipe and members of other alternative rock bands, such as Winston-Salem's dB's and Let's Active, were among the first of many collectors and curiosity seekers who flocked to see Jennings and his "Art World" in the wake of his work's public debut in the Sawtooth exhibition. Jennings became an overnight sensation in the burgeoning contemporary folk art field, and his pieces started selling as quickly as he could make them, even as--on my advice and Roger's--he raised his prices substantially beyond the three- to fifteen-dollar range in which he had been selling his work when I met him. By the end of the 1980s, examples of his art had found their way into scores of private collections and had been shown in important survey exhibitions of self-taught art at several Southern museums and university galleries.

III. The Making of an Artist

Jennings was as frugal with talk as he was with money. When pressed with specific questions that required more than a "yes" or "no" answer, he kept the words to an economical minimum. Gradually, though, with patience and some assistance from his always helpful brother, Clyde--his only sibling--I was able to get a rough picture of this artist's life in the years before I met him.

Born April 20, 1931, Jennings spent his formative years on the fifty-acre tobacco farm to which he would later return, in a community called Purch, near the very small town of Pinnacle. His father, a blacksmith and veterinarian, died when Jennings was only three, and his schoolteacher mother singlehandedly cared for her two sons and managed the farm through the depths of the Great Depression. When Jennings was ten, his mother wed a respected elder magistrate, rented out her farm and farmhouse, and moved with her boys into her new husband's house in nearby King.

Even as a child Jennings liked to absorb himself in building and making things. An avid reader of how-to information in journals such as *Popular Mechanics*, he built innumerable radios, but he said he usually gave or threw them away after completing them. He showed little interest in school, and he dropped out when he was twelve, having made it as far as the fifth grade. Thereafter, he was schooled at home by his mother, and he spent his teenage years quietly, intent on his electronics manuals and the dictionaries he had also taken to reading, along with his various mechanical projects. He had already established the pattern of research and creative activity that he was essentially still following when I met him.

Although he occasionally worked picking tobacco during his childhood and adolescence, Jennings didn't get his first taste of regular regular employment until he was in his twenties. The solitary nature of the job as nightwatchman at a local lumber company suited his reclusive tendencies, and he stayed with it for several years. Then, in 1959, his stepfather bought the drive-In theater located directly across the road from their home, and Jennings left his lumber-company job to be the projectionist--another night job that left him free to work on his various projects by day.

For the next nine years Jennings spent his evenings showing movies at the King Drive-in. The manager was a heavy drinker who regularly shared his stash of sour-mash liquor with Jennings. During the nine years he worked there, Jennings told me, he not only picked up his boss' habit of drinking too much alcohol, but he also became a prodigious consumer of coffee and caffeine-laced soft drinks. He blamed this relentless combination of depressants and stimulants for the "panic attacks" he started to experience by the late 1960s. At around the same time, the manager of the King Drive-In began programming "adult movies" three nights a week, and Jennings didn't approve. In 1968, at least in part because of his increasingly unhealthy, night-owl's lifestyle and other work-related tensions, he apparently suffered a nervous breakdown--or, as he put it, "my nerves went bust"--and he quit his job.

When his doctor was unable to assist his recovery from the collapse, he devised his own therapeutic regimen, swearing off liquor, coffee, "cola pop," and gainful employment. He never took another job. He also stopped driving and abandoned the Fiat sports car in which his neighbors were accustomed to seeing him tool around King. "I just rode my bicycle and lived very low, where it wouldn't cost me much," he told me, "and that's how I've been living ever since."

Even though he was almost forty, Jennings had continued to live with his mother and stepfather. Within a year after he quit his projectionist job, his aging stepfather died, and Jennings moved with his mother back to their family farm. In 1973, ill and unable to care for herself, she entered a rest home, where she died of cancer the following year, leaving the farm and what remained of her second husband's estate to her two sons. The inheritance provided Jennings with an income that was sufficient to support his

exceedingly modest lifestyle, leaving him free from the pressures of wage-laboring. His brother, Clyde, arranged to rent the farm's fields to tobacco-farming neighbors, and James Harold stayed on in the old farmhouse. Lacking electricity, a telephone, or running water, the house fell into increasing disrepair after his mother's death.

Losing his mother was undoubtedly a heavy blow to Jennings' psyche, and his grief must have been immense. He never said as much, but he probably began making art to help himself recover from the loss, because he commenced his creative activities with paint and wood soon after her death. A stone's throw from the farmhouse porch he began constructing a group of small, interconnected buildings of scrap wood and metal; they were similar to the structures he would build nearly a decade later on the other side of the road. He covered this earlier group of essentially non-functional structures in metallic silver paint and, when he was finished, undertook another creative endeavor--making the first crude prototypes for what later became an ongoing, endlessly elaborated series of whirligigs or "windmills" that he contrived from wood scraps left over from his construction project. Having spontaneously adopted this regional folk-art form, he put it to his own idiosyncratic uses, mounting his distinctive wind-animated pieces on poles or atop the roofs of his little silver outbuildings.

For several years Jennings worked in obscurity. The yard of the old farmhouse, where he displayed his pieces in those days, wasn't visible from the road, so his creations went unnoticed. Then, in 1976, he was visited by a sharp-eyed passerby--artist and folk art collector Randy Sewell, who lived in Winston-Salem. Happening onto Jennings' place on one of his forays through the countryside in search of work for his collection, Sewell was immediately appreciative. Excited by the whirligigs and other

whimsical pieces Jennings had on hand, he bought several of them. That someone would actually pay money for these things he'd made was a novel concept to Jennings at the time, but he was grateful for the validation of his activities. The neighbors had long regarded him as a harmless crazy, a ne'er-do-well, a homebound hobo who wasted his time on worthless pursuits. He no doubt found it refreshing to meet a sophisticated stranger who felt otherwise.

Sewell began to make regular trips to Jennings' place, often bringing scrap lumber and cans of paint for the artist, and money to buy new pieces for his collection. Continuing to visit occasionally even after he moved to Atlanta at the end of the 1970s, Sewell always brought enthusiasm and encouragement, on which Jennings thrived.

Aside from neighbors who occasionally paid a few dollars for one of his windmills, Randy Sewell remained Jennings' only real audience until that memorable autumn afternoon in 1984, when Amanda, Deborah, and I showed up at his place. By that time, Sewell's sustained interest had encouraged Jennings' hunger for attention to the point that he had built his new and improved art environment in the clearing across the road from the old farmhouse. This much more visible collection of figural sculptures and kinetic art was its own advertisement and invitation, and we happened to be among the first to accept it and step into the amazing world of James Harold Jennings' manifest imagination.

IV. Recluse in the Spotlight

The attention that came to Jennings in the immediate wake of the "Southern Visionary Folk Artists" exhibition--the visits from rock stars, art-museum officials, and

high-rolling collectors--was only the first wave of the generally enthusiastic reception his work would receive in the art world through the remainder of the 1980s and into the '90s. Almost overnight, there had sprung up a steadily growing market for his work, and he began to sell his pieces as fast as he could make them. He had clearly "arrived," but at a destination he'd never set out to reach; nor had he imagined that it even existed. The products of his imagination had catapulted him to a place beyond his own imaginings, and he spent the rest of his life struggling to get his bearings there, even as he held his little patch of ground in western Stokes County, rarely venturing more than an hour's bicycle ride from home, and consistently resisted the worldly temptations that come with fame and fortune. His only concessions to his newfound art-star status were his cultivation of a taste for imported beer and assembling of a collection of old schoolbuses.

He bought the first bus--a ramshackle, white-painted Blue Bird--from a local church in the late winter or early spring of 1985, paying $500 in cash that he'd brought in from recent art sales. With no intention that it ever be driven again, he had it hauled to his property and parked alongside his tiny studio and other cramped little buildings. After obliterating the church signs on the bus' exterior with silver paint, Jennings took out the seats and transformed the interior into a kind of gallery-cum-library, where he began to display his smaller, freestanding works and store the collection of books and other publications that he'd previously kept in the farmhouse attic. These included dictionaries, encyclopedias, *National Geographic* magazines and other assorted publications, from Dr. Seuss to volumes on witchcraft and the occult.

Within a few months he had completely filled the schoolbus with art, books and other assorted stuff, so he bought another bus and subjected it to similar modifications. Eventually he completely abandoned the old farmhouse, set up a permanent encampment across the road, dismantled the little buildings that had been the beginnings of his roadside environment, and surrounded his compound on three sides with old, stationary schoolbuses--seven of them by the time he ran out of room for more--like covered wagons around a frontier campsite. The installation of painted wood cutouts and sculptures that enlivened the compound and gave it its special character was in constant flux during these years, as parts were sold off piecemeal and Jennings added more in their place, struggling to keep pace with the eager collectors who regularly arrived to write their checks and carry off his work.

With his improved economic circumstances, Jennings no longer had to purchase cans of on-sale paint with the labels missing, and his palette expanded and brightened dramatically, his color schemes growing increasingly lively and sophisticated. He began making more complex, formally ambitious installations that incorporated cutout symbols, carefully chosen words, numbers, and images of exotic, stylized characters that he identified as Indians, Mexicans, or Chinamen. Several such components were incorporated in the first large-scale installation in his “Art World” series, measuring roughly eight by eight by three feet, and first publicly shown in SECCA’s “Contemporary Southeastern Folk Artists” exhibition in 1986.

Although he didn’t sign his name on his early pieces, by the time Jennings’ works were being regularly snapped up by collectors, he’d taken to signing them on the unpainted reverse or bottom sides and adding a trio of stylized cosmic emblems--a

radiant sun, a crescent moon and a five-pointed star--which for him signified the endurance and relative stability of the larger universe, as constrasted with the fragility and impermanence of individual human lives and our increasingly vulnerable planet. Jennings' brand of homegrown pagan spirituality was far more in tune with ancient shamanic, astrological, and goddess-cult traditions than it was with the fundamentalist Christianity to which most of his neighbors adhered. A spiritual "outsider," in that sense--living a marginal life not unlike that of a shaman in a traditional culture--he was acutely aware of and fascinated by his dreams, the concept of out-of-body travel, and experiences of heightened perception. Living outside, as he did, kept him keenly attuned to nature and its more subtle forces.

Among the important developments in Jennings' work on the heels of his art-world debut was his introduction of the "Amazons" or "Tough Girls" series in 1986. These cutout-text-augmented images of sturdy, voluptuous, miniskirted women in knee socks roughing up hapless red devils, motorcycle gangsters, and other unfortunate male adversaries immediately caught on with Jennings' new fans. They occasioned countless commissions from collectors who wanted special versions that incorporated their own names and those of their spouses or romantic partners.

The "Amazons" series--whose popularity stemmed from its unabashed treatment of the artist's own sexual fantasies, nourished by B-movies he'd projected at the King Drive-In and a later tabloid article about female Celtic Amazon warriors--was followed by others that proved to be similarly popular. Included among the latter were his kinetic "Circus World" series, featuring lots of cutout animals and acrobats that move when you turn an attached crank, and his his painted plastic cutout "celestial crowns," which he

took to wearing when he posed for photographs. With a series of generally small, cutout self-portraits that he began making around 1990, he became his own icon, depicted in stiffly stylized form, wearing one of his crowns and a leather pouch slung over his shoulder, and standing in front of a yellow schoolbus. At around the same time, he began assembling some of the wood scraps left over from his figural and geometrical cutouts into complex, abstract compositions on which he painted intricate patterns of multicolored dots, dashes, and other tiny markings. These were inspired in part by his fascination with the kaleidoscopic visual patterns that can be generated by closing one's eyes and applying pressure to the eyelids--a favorite children's technique for inducing visions.

V. The Last Years and Legacy of an "Artist's Artist"

In the last half of the 1980s, the world that Jennings had resisted meeting on its terms for so many years came to him on *his* terms, suddenly requiring him to clarify for himself just what those terms were. His gratitude for the respect and attention his art commanded was offset by feelings of vulnerability and pressure to produce for his new market. Suddenly he had people who were depending on him to create--collectors and an increasing number of art dealers who gave him "orders" to make new variations on earlier works or other special pieces they wanted made to their specifications. To encourage speedy production, one of his collectors--according to Jennings' own account--went so far as to trace figures and geometric shapes from some of his earlier pieces, then cut them out of wood using machine tools and give them to Jennings with the request that he paint, sign, and return them. Demand for his works was such that

the elaborate displays of his art that had enlivened his environment in the mid- to late 1980s were depleted of their components, and subsequent works sold so quickly that he rarely had time to assemble groups of them in the kinds of profuse configurations he'd once created.

At some point in the early 1990s, Jennings' feelings of pressured vulnerability began to overcome his gratitude, and he began to experience paranoid fears of predatory exploitation and violation, which complicated his relationship with his audience. He posted prominent warning signs along the front of his compound and was increasingly concerned with keeping his firearms close at hand. He began wearing a holstered revolver on his belt, and he let it be known that visitors weren't welcome after sunset, when he customarily turned in for the night. If disturbed after dark, he warned, he would "shoot first and ask questions later."

After about seven years of transacting business with collectors and dealers in person and on-site at his roadside compound, Jennings turned over his business dealings to his sister-in-law, Normie Jennings--a development that relieved him of some of the pressure he'd been feeling. But there were evidently other, more deep-seated problems that confronted him in what proved to be his final years, including a condition that was diagnosed as clinical depression--a diagnosis shared with large numbers of other people, if recent statistics are to be believed. His paranoid inclinations were apparently given extra fuel during those years by the radio broadcasts to which he frequently listened, in which fire-and-brimstone preachers warned of the approaching Millennium and predicted a coinciding Apocalypse. Despite his consistent disavowal of Judeo-Christian cosmology, such doomsday predictions unfortunately resonated with

Jennings' tendency to worry about the ever-present potential for impending calamity. I can recall that in the first couple of years I knew him, when I visited him after more than a few weeks' absence, he would invariably say, "I've been wondering where you were. I was starting to worry that something had happened." No matter how accustomed he grew to meeting strangers from distant places, he always retained something of a deer-in-the-headlights quality.

The steady stream of visitors descending on Jennings by 1987 provided him with plenty of company, and eventually he seemed to have become so fully engaged with his work and his other visitors that he no longer missed seeing me so often. I stopped by to visit him less frequently as the Jargon Society's folk art project wound up its three-year run, and I went on to other pursuits that were related but necessarily required my attention to be spread more thinly across broader cultural territory. During most of the '90s I visited him only once or twice a year, and more than a year had passed since I'd last seen him when I received the shocking news of his apparent suicide on the eve of his sixty-eighth birthday.

Jennings' place in the late-20th-century history of American self-taught art remains uncertain at this point. His work has been conspicuously absent from several recent exhibitions that have purported to survey the field of contemporary American self-taught art, and he's rarely included in the list of "master outsiders" that have come to preoccupy certain heavily invested collectors and museum officials in the field. I'm aware of at least one major private collector who, several years ago, divested himself of the numerous Jennings pieces he had bought after another collector convinced him that Jennings was a lightweight whose art wasn't to be taken seriously.

That viewpoint is strongly countered by those of the many academically trained artists I know who cultivated friendships with Jennings and collected his work as the last century came to a close. I talked with more of them than I can count, and I heard the same observation from one of them after another, in exactly the same words--that James Harold Jennings was “an artist’s artist.”

He was indeed.

“Simple” is the word that has most often been used to dismiss Jennings’ art. Well, sure, some of his individual pieces are quite “simple.” But a consideration of the vast body of work he produced over twenty-five years reveals a remarkably rich thematic range, a deft ability to improvise, a seemingly limitless capacity for formal innovation, and a deeply mystical sense of the world.

James Harold Jennings was a uniquely extraordinary artist and human being, and we won’t see the likes of him again. It’s fortunate that he left so much of himself behind to dazzle, entertain, and enlighten viewers who will never have the opportunity to experience his rare presence.