

*Do we think too much?
I don't think we can ever stop.*

Lonnie Holley

Eloquence as action: The art of Lonnie Holley

Art is medicine. Art shows us how to fix the things that need fixing. We have lost our values, but art teaches us to seek and apply new values to everything in the world around us. And the greatest value is the hidden value of the human mind. What is within us must be allowed to come out.

Lonnie Holley

The title of this exhibition, *Do We Think Too Much? I Don't Think We Can Ever Stop*, reflects the way in which Lonnie Holley interacts with viewers. By posing a question he invites participation. By providing an answer, he serves as a guide. When he says that 'the greatest value is the hidden value of the human mind,'¹ he asserts his belief that art play a transformative role to un(b)lock the relationship between terrestrial reality and the spiritual world. In this regard one might conceive Holley's enterprise as akin to that of the alchemist, the shaman, or the medicine man.

Holley's working method is often improvisational. While speaking with you, he may hold material in his hands – some wire, a small piece of sandstone, perhaps ribbons of fabric – and within minutes have created a highly modelled form. On a larger scale, he may configure masses of salvaged material into totemic constructions, free standing sculpture, and complex assemblages. A recent example of the scale and scope of his ambition was revealed in the sculpture garden of the Birmingham Museum of Art, where for his exhibition *Perspectives 8*, Holley created a sprawling, site-specific, intensive environment that included dozens of discrete art works. Each piece is the result of a narrative that Holley conjures throughout the time of making.

His core themes include the despoiling of nature as a result of industrialisation, the inevitable interdependence of man and

1. Lonnie Holley, quoted in Mark Kelly, 'Seek and Ye Shall Find: The Life and Art of Lonnie Holley', *Black & White*, August 1995, p.18

technology, and the honoring of his family – both his own and his extended ancestral family. Holley's art is an on-going meditation, a rumination on these topics and the direct result of his continuous, indeed incessant 'thinking.' In reading his title for this exhibition one is reminded of Bruce Nauman's neon spiral, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967). If Nauman's coil of words relies upon the notion of truth twice (in order for truth to be revealed a 'true' artist must be at work), so too does Holley use the trope of thought to doubly anchor his approach to art. For him thinking is making; and creating is synonymous with mind.

There is an idealism and an honesty to his position. It is perhaps this forthright conviction around the role and necessity of art ('Art is Life: Don't Kill It' is the title he gave to a 1998 documentary film about his work and life), that sets Holley apart from the mainstream art world. Until now Holley has almost exclusively been classified as an 'outsider,' 'self-taught' or 'folk artist', and interpretation of his work has been primarily confined to those designative fields. It may now be appropriate to consider his work in relation to the mainstream artworld, and to understand Holley's art as much more meaningful than the result of dire biographical circumstance and inordinate personal challenges. Too often the telling and re-telling of Holley's story has constrained the reception of his work.²

The philosopher of art Arthur Danto has usefully noted that, 'the true outsider is someone deeply outside the institutional framework of the art world.' The opposite could not be more true of Holley, an artist who from the outset measured his efforts against institutional standards. In 1979, the year that he turned to making art, Holley sought out the director of the Birmingham Museum of Art and relied upon his advice and encouragement, which quickly led to his inclusion in an important travelling museum exhibition. By the mid-1990s Holley had accumulated an impressive array of reviews and essays in the national art press. *Artforum* ran a feature devoted to analysis of Holley's work in 1992, and his two exhibitions at the Luise Ross Gallery in New York generated reviews in major art magazines as well as in *The New York Times*.⁵ By 1997 the destruction of his total-environment near the Birmingham International Airport received

copious coverage in both the art press and the popular press throughout the nation, making this a now-fabled episode in a long list of cultural mismanagement that includes such devastating losses as the bulldozing of Tyree Guyton's houses on Heidelberg Street in Detroit.⁶

Holley has always borne the mantle of 'outsider' because of his lack of formal education and apparent training as an artist. It seems evident, however, that his hard early life was the ideal apprenticeship for his becoming an artist. Taking his maverick, divinely inspired, life-redefining turn, rising from the depths of near self-obliteration, was a pure act of consciousness. It is akin to the self-mythologizing 'becoming' of an artist such as Joseph Beuys, the great German role model for other twentieth century artists, whose origins are as much steeped in narrative as they are the real. Beuys's tale of rescue and redemption in the barrens of Siberia, his emphasis on pedagogy as crucial to his artistic process, and his manifest belief that art play a revitalizing role in society serve as a precedent and parallel to Holley's trajectory. The differences may simply be circumstantial: where Beuys was able to operate in the cultured center of Germany (ascending to professor at the prestigious Düsseldorf Academy of Art), Holley has always operated in the relative oblivion of Alabama.

Yet thinking about Holley in the framework of Beuys is liberating. It takes Holley's work out of its vernacular encumbrance and places it in relation to manifestations that reflect similar impulses. *Sweep Up* (1972), a Beuys action in Berlin which involved the cleaning of garbage-strewn streets, is eerily similar to Holley's philosophy of salvaging materials in order to reclaim significance from their spent

2. See, for example, his extensive transcribed autobiography, Lonnie Holley, 'The Best that Almost Happened', in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, Vol. 2, William Arnett and Paul Arnett (eds.), Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2001, pp.538-573

3. Arthur Danto, 'Outsider Art,' in *Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art*, Charles Russell, (ed.), Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001, pp.61

4. See Judith McWillie, 'Lonnie Holley's Moves', *Artforum* 30, April, 1992, pp.80-84

5. In 1994 and 1995 Holley received reviews in *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *The New Art Examiner* and *The New York Times*.

6. There are numerous formal and thematic parallels between Holley's work and Guyton's as well as their shared fate in destruction: 'Trees sprouted bicycles and plastic toy cars; vacant lots and sidewalks strewn with empty suitcases and assorted shoes in homage, said Guyton, to the displaced and homeless. Despite the conciliatory and reconstructive intent of Guyton's work, neighbors, community groups and city official continued to object.' See John Beardsley, 'Eyesore or Art? On Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project', *Harvard Design Magazine*, Winter/ Spring, 1999, p.7

essence. In *Who Cleans Up After You've Reached Your Goal in the Athletic Effort?* (1990), Holley takes a useless, broken chair and affixes to it wire, plastic, lace, string and bottles – rubbish found on the street – and creates a detailed narrative about excesses in the high pressure world of professional sports. Sweeping up is how Holley spends his days, stopping at the side of the road to harvest discarded materials, scouring trash yards, and picking up the garbage that capitalism leaves behind daily.

With the withering of canons and the globalizing of the contemporary art world, it seems appropriate, even tardy, not to consider Holley's work in relation to other contemporary phenomena. Indeed, his work ignites numerous connections in the mind of any well-travelled art viewer. If similarities to Robert Rauschenberg's early assemblages, especially his Combine paintings, have been observed – gritty, paint-encrusted, image-laden, encoded works like *Odalisk* (1955/1958), *The Tower* (1957) or *Three Traps for Medea* (1959) come to mind – multiple other possibilities relating to the art of assemblage have yet to be explored. Certainly the more challenging assemblage work of Bruce Connor and the sprawling tableaux of Ed and Nancy Keinholz opens an inspiring conversation with the work of Holley. The re-choreographing of found objects into assemblages or ensembles with often pointed social commentary is consistent among all of these artists. More recently, the work of Jessica Stockholder provokes a more formal comparison. Stockholder fuses the categories of painting and sculpture into hybrid visual expressions that unfold through space. Incorporating found objects – often furniture and domestic elements – into her constructed and painted works, Stockholder allows her art to exceed conventional spatial and categorical boundaries. Holley's work has similarly never been confined: his painted works hint at the aesthetic concerns expressed in his three-dimensional creations.

This list could be greatly expanded. If one focuses on Holley's paintings and drawings, it seems impossible to escape comparison to Sigmar Polke. Holley's large paintings and monumental works on paper, such as *The Cycle of Life Must Be Respected* (1991) or *Caught up in The Spirit* (1995), have a free-flowing, pullulating energy that rhymes

perfectly with Polke's very large, fluid psychedelic drawings such as *The Ride on the Eight of Infinity* from 1969–71. Holley's title *Caught Up in The Spirit* pays homage to divine inspiration as much as it refers to the feeling of making such ambitious works. If one focuses on installation, fruitful comparisons could be made to Mark Dion, in terms of reclamation and archaeological excavation; to Sarah Sze, in terms of attending to minute accretions assembled into sequences that link inanimate and living presences; and to artists like Jason Rhoades or Thomas Hirschhorn who have relied upon common materials to radically expand the parameters of installation art. That Holley himself may never have experienced the work of these artists, only serves to puncture the very idea of formal influence in contemporary practice. Instead one wants to embrace these comparative possibilities, to bring Holley's work into the orbit of the larger art world.

What none of these artists share in common with Holley is his ability, and his unfailing desire, to explain the work to the viewer. To Holley, an important aspect of his artistic undertaking is his telling, and re-telling, the terms of each work's making and meaning. He is a staggeringly eloquent artist whose words take listeners on voyages. The artwork functions as a script that can be performed by the artist. Film is unfortunately the only adequate medium through which to experience Holley's ability to use words to enhance the impact of his work. His incantatory, prolix, and spontaneous explanations are part performance, part invocation. Like a preacher, storyteller, mythmaker, and Beat generation poet, words for Holley are a vital part of his art.

The poet, essayist and activist Amiri Baraka struggled to recount his encounter with Holley. Following his visit to the encompassing, pan-media environment of art, Baraka simply concludes: 'Holley needs a tape recording of his explanations of his wire and iron and cotton and broke lamp string and paper and cloth and shoe, phone boxes and refrigerator parts.'⁷ By saying that a recording is required, Baraka isolates the performative aspect of Holley's work – the artist's word as

7. Amiri Baraka, 'Revolutionary Democratic Art from the Cultural Commonwealth of Afro America', in *Souls Grown Deep*, Vol. 1, p.507

enactment of the work. But what Holley sees, thinks and voices is only one interpretation. Even if that version may be compelling, the works are equally intriguing without the imprint of the artist's own narrative.

The Pointer Pointing the Way of Life on Earth (1997), one of the first works which Holley created after leaving his land adjacent to the Birmingham International Airport and relocating to Harpersville, Alabama, functions both on a deeply personal level and as a provocative sculpture, accessible to perceptive viewers as are all vital works of art. By painting the hands and face of the lawn jockey brown, and thus transforming a prefabricated cement figurine into an African American, Holley designates race. Although this figure must have once held a lantern, now it supports a tree root, a metal chain and a plastic bottle that bears a label proclaiming: 'Living for the Future.' As this figurine is visibly chained to its roots – roots which are inscribed by a history of servitude – so too does Holley reorient its meaning. Holley placed this work on the art-festooned front porch of his new house, conceiving the outstretched arm gesture as heraldic. The derogatory jockey has now become 'The Pointer,' indicating the way to a brighter future – not just for Holley, but for all African Americans who have endured generations of oppression and exploitation. Holley reclaims this figure, transforming it through painting and assemblage, recycling negative connotations into productive aspirations.

Such a reading is not dictated by the artist, but is plainly legible through the work alone. Indeed, as one begins to confront the twenty-five year oeuvre of Lonnie Holley in the context of a trans-Atlantic exhibition, new frameworks will expand how we understand Holley's contribution. As his work departs from the local territory where it was created, and enters the domain of art museums, linkages to broader histories and contexts begin to emerge. As Holley himself has noted, seemingly summoning the essence of interconnectedness: 'What is within us must be allowed to come out.'

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