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Santa Barbara

Unaccountable Modernisms: The Black Arts of Post-Civil Rights Alabama

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in
Art History

by

Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander

Committee in charge:
Professor Jenni Sorkin, Chair
Professor E. Bruce Robertson
Professor George Lipsitz

September 2018

The dissertation of Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander is approved.

George Lipsitz

E. Bruce Robertson

Jenni Sorkin, Chair

September 2018

Unaccountable Modernisms: The Black Arts of Post-Civil Rights Alabama

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by

Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander

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VITA OF ALEESA PITCHAMARN ALEXANDER
July 2018

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History, University of California, Santa Barbara, September 2018

Master of the Arts in Art History, University of California, Santa Barbara, September 2012

Bachelor of the Arts in Art History, Willamette University, May 2010

PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

2015-2017: Teaching Associate, Department of the History of Art and Architecture, University of California, Santa Barbara
2011-2017: Teaching Assistant, Department of the History of Art and Architecture, University of California, Santa Barbara
2013: Special Collections Assistant, Department of Special Collections, Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara
2008-2010: Museum Collections Assistant, Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Salem, OR

PUBLICATIONS

"Thornton Dial Takes Fifth Avenue," CRITICS PAGE, *The Brooklyn Rail.* July 11, 2018. https://brooklynrail.org/2018/07/criticspage/Thornton-Dial-Takes-Fifth-Ave

"Ronald Lockett's The Enemy Amongst Us and the Artistic Lineage of Bessemer, Alabama," Blog Post: Collection Insights. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. July 3, 2018. https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/collection-insights/2018/ronald-lockett-enemy-amongst-us-birmingham-bessemer-alabama

"Jug Head I," "Jug Head II," "Lovers," "Homage to Malcolm," "The Afro American Thunderbolt," "Bosom for Aunt Surlina." Catalogue Entries. *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture*. Exhibition Catalog. Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2018.

"Toys," "Glass Bowl with Fruit," "Chalkware," "Milliner's Head," "Noah Purifoy," "Baby in a Red Chair," "Index of American Design." Catalogue Entries. *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*. Exhibition Catalog. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2018.

“Hobby,” “High Trash,” “Lists,” “Classification,” “Accumulation/Collection,” “Scrapbooks.” Catalogue entries. *Henry Darger 1892-1973*. Exhibition catalog. Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2015.

“Miranda July,” and “Harrell Fletcher.” Encyclopedia entries. *Grove Art Online*. Oxford University Press. Web resource. 2016.

Book Review: “Bruce Nauman: The True Artist.” *Foreground: Fine Art for the Culturally Curious*. Los Angeles: Shelf Media Group. Web resource. January 2015.

“Art brut.” Encyclopedia entry. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*. Web resource. 2016.

SELECTED EXHIBITION EXPERIENCE

2018: Contributing Researcher, *Epic Abstraction*, The Met Breuer
2018: Contributing Researcher, *History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
2011: Research Assistant, *Timeless Renaissance: Count Alessandro Maggiori (1764-1834) as an Art Collector*, Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University
2009: Curator, *Carl Hall: From the Archives*, Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University
2008: Curator, *D.E. May: The Artist as Archivist*, Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University

FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS, AWARDS

2018: Invited Lecturer, Art Study Seminar, Harvard Art Museums, February 2018
2017-2018: Jane and Morgan Whitney Fellow, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
2016: American Craft Council Conference Scholarship
2016: Graduate Research Grant, The Center for Craft, Creativity, and Design
2014: Ailsa Mellon Bruce Predoctoral Fellowship for Historians of American Art to Travel Abroad, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts
2014: Margaret Mallory Travel Research Grant, UCSB
2013: Graduate Student Association Excellence in Teaching Award (nominee), UC Santa Barbara
2013: Graduate Committee Award, Department of the History of Art and Architecture, UC Santa Barbara
2013: Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award (nominee), Academic Senate, UC Santa Barbara
2010-2014: Doctoral Scholars Central Fellow, UCSB

ABSTRACT

Unaccountable Modernisms: The Black Arts of Post-Civil Rights Alabama

by

Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander

Within the discipline of art history, the terms "outsider," "folk," or "self-taught" have been historically applied to artists who have worked outside of prevailing institutional structures. Such classifications have often marginalized the artistic production of untrained, working-class African American artists in the twentieth century, particularly in the Southern United States. My dissertation reframes the discussion of twentieth-century Southern black art as a thoroughly modern and contemporary phenomenon, grounded in particular material and social conditions that, far from isolated, have instead engendered rich artistic communities. It does so by taking as a case study the Birmingham-Bessemer School, a group of male artists working in postindustrial Alabama in the decades following the Civil Rights movement. Though excluded from the primary narratives of American modernism, the artistic production of Lonnie Holley (b. 1950), Thornton Dial (1928-2016), and Ronald Lockett (1965- 1998) contest received histories of modern artistic production, including, but not limited to: found object assemblage, relational art and performance, site-specific installation, and nonrepresentational painting.

First, I examine how the formal and material characteristics of work produced by the Birmingham-Bessemer School—the use of discarded and recycled materials, assemblage-like structures, and the prevalence of yard installations—are tethered to the unique environmental conditions of the greater Birmingham area as it gave rise to industry at the turn of the twentieth century. Secondly, I discuss the entry of the School's artistic production into the predominantly white art world through museum exhibitions beginning in the 1990s. I argue that the curatorial struggle to showcase the complex social and cultural origins of their work has prevented this form of visual expression from being fully understood within the mainstream art world, as defined by prevailing institutional structures of the museum and the art market. In an effort to historically account for the Birmingham-Bessemer School, my study integrates formal analyses of artwork, artist interviews, exhibition catalogues, and media responses through the lens of queer and critical race theory. This dissertation removes Southern black art from mythologizing narratives of isolated genius or quaint, folk production, by situating it as a challenge to longstanding regional centers of modern and contemporary art in the United States.

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Introduction

When it comes to blockbuster exhibitions, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, which debuted at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2002, was a conceptually unlikely candidate. The show featured seventy-one quilts by forty-four black women quilters, all descendants of slaves, from the remote community of Gee's Bend, Alabama. The quilters were not well-known, and the objects featured traditionally had been considered a form of craft and not fine art. Nothing about the exhibition carried with it the kind of cultural capital that typically drives museum visitors through the doors—no recognizable major artist or celebrity was attached the show, nor were the objects presented ancient or never-before-seen masterpieces. Yet the exhibition was well-received by critics and viewers alike.[1] It traveled to more than a dozen museums all across the United States, reaching thousands of visitors.

In the *New York Times,* Michael Kimmelman reviewed the iteration of the exhibition displayed at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Remarking upon the curious success of the show, he opened with the statement, "The most ebullient exhibition of the New York art season has arrived at the Whitney Museum in the unlikely guise of a show of hand-stitched quilts from Gee's Bend."[2] A general sense of surprise runs throughout his entire review, claiming that these quilts were "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced," and that they were, notably, "so eye-poppingly gorgeous that it's hard to know how to begin to account for them. But then, good art can never be fully accounted for, just described."

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[1] See Michael J. Propokow, "Material Truths, The Quilts of Gee's Bend at the Whitney Museum of Art: An Exhibition Review," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Spring 2003), 57-66, and Brook Barnes, "Art and Collecting: Museums Cozy Up to Quilts," *Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2002. The notable exception being Thelma Golden's review for *Artforum*, in which described the show as "the most culturally repugnant, retrograde moment I have experienced, perhaps in my entire professional life." To be clear, she was referring to the organization of the exhibition itself and not the actual quilts. "The Quilts of Gee's Bend," *Artforum International* Vol. 42, no. 4 (December 2003), 126. Rennie Young Miller, a quilter featured in the show, wrote a rebuttal stating "The 'Quilts of Gee's Bend' exhibition project has transformed our community. It has brought hope and renewal to dozens of African-American women artists here. We have been treated with dignity and respect for the first time in our lives. Thanks to the exhibition, we now have a stake in our future as artists." "To the Editor," *Artforum International* 43, no. 7 (July 2004): 22-2.

What exactly did Kimmelman mean by not being able "to account for" these objects? Did he mean that all great art is, in its own way, *sui generis*, rising from inexplicable origins? To account for something is to provide a record, explanation, or reasoning for events or actions. "Accounting for" asks one to explain why and how something exists, or an event that has come to pass. "Good art can never be fully accounted for," he claims. Evoking the aura of the art object, he suggests that despite a critic or historian's best attempts, nothing can fully explain the creation of a work of art.[3] His assertion demands examination—to whom should art be accountable? What constitutes a proper account of a work of art or artistic phenomenon?

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[2] Michael Kimmelman, "ART REVIEW; Jazzy Geometry, Cool Quilters," The New York *Times,* Nov. 29, 2002. Accessed March 1, 2018. http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/29/arts/art-review-jazzy-geometry-cool-quilters.html.

[3] While modernity threatened to degrade the aura of art objects with the advent of mass image-reproducibility, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 220.

Kimmelman's inability to account for these quilts appears, in part, due to the identity of their makers:

> Imagine Matisse and Klee (if you think I'm wildly exaggerating, see the show) arising not from rarefied Europe, but from the caramel soil of the rural South in the form of women, descendants of slaves when Gee's Bend was a plantation. These women, closely bound by family and custom (many Benders bear the slaveowner's name, Pettway), spent their precious spare time—while not rearing children, chopping wood, hauling water and plowing fields—splicing scraps of old cloth to make robust objects of amazingly refined, eccentric abstract designs.

While his review was perhaps well-intentioned, embedded within his description of the quilts lies problematic implications. With their identities alone, the Gee's Bend quilters challenge accepted narratives of modern art, especially non-representational and abstract art. Historically, most canonical modern artists are not black women, but white men. The conventional narrative of non-representational art traces its origins to early twentieth France and Germany. However, as this exhibition suggested, abstraction also seemed to arise independently in the rural American South in the form of domestic objects made by black women. This was baffling to Kimmelman.

Following *The Quilts of Gee's Bend,* more exhibitions featuring the work of these quilters have been organized, and their artistic contributions have been acknowledged and analyzed by art historians and critics.[4] The quilters have arguably become the most famous Alabama-based artists of the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries, in no small part due to the 2002 exhibition. But Gee's Bend was not an artistic anomaly, in fact, many modern art forms, both abstract and representational, emerged in the American South. Specifically, they emerged in the artistic production of formally uneducated black men and women. Beyond quilts, these artists made what could be classified in art history terms as found object assemblages, built environments, large scale installations, performances, and collage-paintings. Their production developed independently of, and often concurrently with, similar visual phenomena being created by white artists working in coastal American artistic centers and European cities. In this sense only, Kimmelman is right—these Southern modern art emergences and histories have not yet been thoroughly explained or interpreted.

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[4] *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt,* The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, June 4 – September 4, 2006; *Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend Quilts, and Beyond*, Museum of International Folk Art, November 16, 2007 – May 11, 2008; *Creation Story: Gee's Bend Quilts and the Art of Thornton Dial,* Frist Center for the Visual Arts, May 25 - September 2, 2012. A lengthy catalog was published in conjunction with each exhibition.

Unaccountable Modernisms seeks to account for a history of avant-garde and modern art forms in the American South. Specifically, it focuses on a group of black male artists living in the greater Birmingham, Alabama area from the period after the Civil Rights Movement through today. While two of the artists concerning this study, Thornton Dial Sr. (1928-2016) and Lonnie Holley (b. 1950), have achieved relative institutional and academic recognition, the other two members of this group, Joe Minter (b. 1943) and Ronald Lockett (1965-1998), remain comparatively unacknowledged. These four artists lived either in Birmingham, the largest city in Alabama, or the smaller adjacent town of Bessemer. They constitute what American studies scholar Bernard L. Herman calls the "Birmingham-Bessemer School." Given these artists' collective lack of artistic training and education, Herman purposefully redefines the notion of an artistic "school" outside of institutions or insular, privileged groups of makers.[5]

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[5] "Because their conversations [Lockett and Dial's] over time embraced other artists, including Lonnie Holley and Joe Minter, they define what might be understood as the

In living between these two cities, Dial, Holley, Minter and Lockett created an informal community where ideas, techniques, and criticism were exchanged. They were most active as a group from the mid-1980s through the early 2000s. It is in this period before the deaths of Lockett and Dial, and the relocation of Holley to Atlanta, that these artists began to receive external support and acknowledgement from the larger art world. But they have yet to be fully recognized as an artistic collective in the same manner as the quilters of Gee's Bend. This dissertation argues that they constituted the post-industrial, urban, male equivalent of the Gee's Bend women quilters, and should be seen in a comparable manner. Their contributions to the history of American abstraction is as significant as that of their female peers.

Each of my three chapters focuses on one member of the Birmingham-Bessemer School and explores, in depth, their biographies and artistic practices. Chapter one addresses Lonnie Holley, the artist who introduced every other member of the School to William Arnett, the most prominent art collector and advocate of Southern black art. In it, I explore how Holley's persona, his Birmingham art environment, and social outreach complicate histories of performance art, site-specific installation, and social practice,

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Birmingham-Bessemer School. Theirs was a school defined by a context of shared knowledge and experience, creative and critical observation, and an open exchange of ideas, often through visits. There was neither institutional framework nor formal curriculum; instead there was a rich multigenerational practice of demonstration and conversation." Bernard L. Herman, "Once Something Has Lived It Can Never Really Die: Ronald Lockett's Creative Journey," *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 17. Herman also specifically addressed this topic in his presentation "Ronald Lockett and the Birmingham-Bessemer School," *Ronald Lockett: Prescient Voice*, American Folk Art Museum, June 21, 2016. Accessed Feb. 27, 2018. https://folkartmuseum.org/programs/ronald-lockett-prescient-voice-62116/.

respectively. Chapter two explores the artistic practice of the School's most well-known and lauded figure, the assemblage painter Thornton Dial Sr. I examine how his production challenges received notions of artistic invention, and pushes the limits of art historical progress and time.

The third chapter concerns the work of the group's youngest member, Ronald Lockett. The dissertation closes with him because Lockett's presence within this history, and art history in general, throws into high relief the challenges of history writing as a scholarly endeavor. The chapter also explores how we can potentially interpret his life choices—specifically, his decision to remain in Bessemer and study under his older cousin, Thornton Dial Sr.—as a form of artistic and what I am terming "queer refusal."

A Question of Labels

The Birmingham-Bessemer School's recognition as artists has come at a cost: within art history they are often relegated to the margins with problematic, general labels like "outsider," "self-taught," or "folk" artist. The term "outsider art" was first coined by English art historian Roger Cardinal in 1972.[6] Conceived of as an English-language equivalent for Jean Dubuffet's *art brut*, outsider art generally refers to work made by isolated, reclusive makers who may or may not suffer from mental illness. Dubuffet claimed that only art made by those "uncooked" by culture was truly inventive, as opposed to trained artists whose work was, at best, derivative.[7] Outsider artists were driven to make art because of an internal, unstoppable, creative urge. They are classified as such partially because of self-identification: they did not seek careers as artists professionally, and may not have even considered themselves artists. In contrast, none of the Birmingham artists were isolated from society—they were simply removed from the commercial and urban art world driven by museums, galleries and auction houses. They all considered themselves to be artists, or at the very least, makers. There was no evidence of mental illness. So when Jed Tully, writing for *ARTnews,* claimed Thornton Dial was "a talisman for the burgeoning Outsider movement," it is unclear as to what exactly about Dial he was referring.[8]

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[6] Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art* (London: Praeger, 1972).

The broader and less problematic term "self-taught" refers to artists who have received no formal artistic training, who have instead "taught themselves."[9] Arguably, however all artists, to a certain extent, are self-taught. “Self-taught” fails to acknowledge other forms of education: community training, vocational skills that may be useful in one’s artistic practice, or mentorship from one artist to another. Thornton Dial was Lockett’s older cousin and artistic mentor, and though neither of them attended art school, Lockett received an artistic education from Dial. Joe Minter learned how to work with metal through his employment at Tennessee Coal and Iron, a skill that he later put to use in the creation of his scrap-metal assemblage sculptures. “Self-taught” as a term also occludes the structural reality of these artists’ lives: with the exception of Lockett, all were born during the era of Jim Crow. As a direct result of state and local racial segregation laws and red lining, all had limited, or even in some cases, no access to formal education.

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[7] Dubuffet addressed his formulation of *art brut* in a number of texts, the most concise definition can be found in *L'Art Brut préféré aux art culturels* (Paris: René Drouin, 1949), where he defines it as: "By this we mean the works executed by people free [of] artistic culture, where mimicry, contrary to what happens among intellectuals, has little or no part, so that their authors draw all (subjects, choice of materials, means of transportation, rhythms, ways of writing, etc.) of their own heart and not clichés of classical or fashionable art. We assist them in all pure artistic operation, raw, reinvented in the whole of all its phases by its author, from only its impulses. Art so that the only function of the invention is manifested, and not those, constants in cultural art, chameleon and monkey" (translation provided by Fondation Jean Dubuffet, Paris). See also, *Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre,* (Paris: Gaillmard, 1946), *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants, tome 1, 2,* (Paris: Gaillmard, 1967), *Asphixiante culture,* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1968).

[8] Jed Tully, "Outside, Inside, or Somewhere In-Between," *ARTnews* (May 1996), 119.

[9] One of the biggest advocates of the self-taught artist was Sidney Janis, whose book, *They Taught Themselves; American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century*, provided one of the most comprehensive accounts of the phenomenon of the untrained American artist for its time (New York: The Dial Press, 1942).

Regarding the term “folk”: this grouping of artists are not necessarily untrained, rather, they learn art-making techniques from a larger, but non-professional community. However, these learned skills and art forms are sometimes considered too prescriptive, as they do not readily allow space for personal expression.[10] Historically, folk artists have largely labored anonymously, working in service of community rather than as an individual. American theorem paintings, weathervanes, and certain types of figurative wood carvings are considered forms of folk art.[11] The Birmingham-Bessemer School made work as a community, but personal innovation and expression was prized above all. Perhaps purposefully, they did not make utilitarian objects, as folk artists often did, instead favoring the creation of discrete art objects and environments. As such, they do not fit into the historic definition of the folk artist.

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[10] Holger Cahill, director of the Federal Art Project (1935-1943) and overseer of the Index of American Design, defined folk art as “the expression of the common people, made by them and intended for their use and enjoyment. It is not the expression of professional artists made for a small cultured class…It does not come out of an academic tradition passed on by schools, but out of craft tradition plus the personal quality of the rare craftsman who is an artist.” *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), 6.

While none of the Birmingham-Bessemer artists were included, as they were yet-unknown, in the groundbreaking 1982 exhibition *Black Folk Art in America: 1930-1980* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the show paved the way for the acceptance of artists like Dial and Holley in the art world. Artists such as Bill Traylor, Sister Gertrude Morgan, and Nellie Mae Rowe were featured in the exhibition. All were untrained, and more than half hailed from the American South. Both a blessing and a burden, the Corcoran exhibition primed the art world to consider Southern black art within the conceptually restrictive and inaccurate frameworks of outsider, self-taught, and folk art. To this day, nearly forty years later, these terms and designations remain difficult to dislodge from the discourse surrounding Dial, Holley, and Lockett. They prevent these artists from being fully realized as modern and contemporary, by implying that they are intellectually naïve about their own artistic production. The fact remains that the intense racism these artists faced living in the Deep South was a very real restriction to their artistic careers.[12] Terms like "outsider" and "folk" tend to gloss over the racially-charged nature of cultural access and acceptance, guiding discussions of the work toward the psychology of the creator, or the supposedly quaint and rural settings in which it the art is created.

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[11] See the *Encyclopedia of American Folk Art,* eds. Gerard C. Wertkin and Lee Kogan, (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[12] Both Lonnie Holley and Joe Minter speak frankly about their experiences with racism during those years, and how those experiences affected each of their artistic trajectories. From August 2016 through March 2018 I conducted a series of in-person

Part of the reason untrained black artists are often labeled “folk,” “self-taught,” or “outsider” is because they work outside of formal education and training. They do not go to art school, or obtain a college degree. They do not operate in social networks in which being an artist is considered a viable career, and they do not seek gallery representation, though these circumstances may change once their work receives recognition. Because they do not actively participate in what is ultimately an institutionalized capitalist system—where aspiring artists pay hefty sums to pursue advanced degrees, seek out gallery shows and professional representation, and become a part of the contemporary art market—they are ghettoized. The traditional modes in which one becomes sanctioned as a “contemporary artist” are usually not available to Southern black, working-class, and formally uneducated makers. When discussing their work, one must contend with the systemic racism and classism—however intentional or unintentional—that pervades the art world. The normalization of expensive degrees (pedigree) acts as a method of gatekeeping, denying legitimacy to those who realistically have limited access to such training.

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and telephoned interviews with Lonnie Holley, Joe Minter, and William, Paul, and Matt Arnett, members of a family whose work with Southern black artists is central to this history. The audio transcripts and notes taken from these interviews are consistently used throughout this study. Lonnie Holley and Joe Minter, interviewed by the author, transcript, Atlanta, GA, and Birmingham, AL, August 2016 – March 2018.

Labeling some like Lonnie Holley or Thornton Dial as "folk" or "outsider" is precisely how the work of untrained black artists gets commodified. The art world has not failed to capitalize on their work despite their *lack* of social capital. American Studies scholar Eugene W. Metcalf addressed this topic with regard to an earlier generation of "black folk artists," and many of his observations still apply to the Birmingham-Bessemer School.[13] The classifications of folk, self-taught, and outsider, generally speaking, do not seem to benefit the artists, but rather, a niche market of collectors, gallerists, and buyers. Emphasis on a constructed identity of otherness often requires the suppression of a contemporary identity for these artists; labeling them as outsider suggests that they exist not only outside of the contemporary art world and market, but also outside of an art historical space-time which is so dependent upon Western canons, traditions, and narratives. [14]

The construction of the "outsider" artist has created an entire niche market for work that can be classified as such. The sociologist Gary Alan Fine's *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* (2003), is a critical study of the outsider art market and the ethical, social, and cultural issues that surround it. Fine performed extensive field research by interviewing curators, collectors, artists, and dealers in order to understand how these power networks function and seek to maintain

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[13] Eugene W. Metcalf, "Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control," *Winterthur Portfolio* 18, No. 4 (1983), 271-89.

[14] Griselda Pollock examines the gendered nature of canon formation in "Differencing: Feminism's Encounter with the Canon," *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories,* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 23-61.

“outsider” art as a category. As recently as 2018, Holley’s work was represented at the annual Outsider Art Fair, shown in proximity to art made by the Chicago recluse Henry Darger and the mute Mexican immigrant Martin Ramirez, who died in 1963. Distinct in culture, chronology, and geography, what rubrics allow them to be shown as if they belong together? The simplest answer is that the broad brush of Otherness has been applied to all of them, lumped together for the sake of an art market. As Fine explains, outsider art is validated by putting on display “the power of the individual, the importance of the creative urge, and the romantic notion of the Other.”[15] Outsider art scholarship tends to singularize individual narratives in order to build mythologies. These mythologies veil, or at the very least de-emphasize, the larger institutional systems at work that create such diverse life circumstances.

William Arnett and the Creation of Souls Grown Deep

It took the intervention of white art collector William Arnett (b. 1939) to propel the work of Dial, Holley, and Lockett, into the public sphere. While he initially began his career as a dealer of African and Asian art, he turned his attention to the black South after returning to Georgia from spending time abroad, convinced that his home region must have native visual traditions. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Georgia-born art collector and amateur ethnographer has spent the greater part of the last thirty years collecting, preserving, and exhibiting work by Southern black artists in his capacity as the founder and Chairman Emeritus of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, a non-profit arts organization. While exploring Birmingham in 1986, he met the artist Lonnie Holley at his home and art environment. Arnett and his sons Paul and Matt traveled throughout the South as informal ethnographers documenting and collecting art made by formally untrained black artists. The culmination of their work was textually manifested in the form of two massive tomes, *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art Vol. 1 & 2,* collectively weighing more than ten pounds. The archival materials used to produce these texts and many other subsequent exhibition catalogs, consisting of recorded interviews, video footage, photographs, and field notes, which are now held at the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. These texts and materials remain the most valuable resources for the study of Southern black art outside of speaking with the remaining living artists directly. Many of the environments and objects documented by Arnett no longer exist, as a significant number of these artists have since passed away.[16]

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[15] Gary Alan Fine, “Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-Taught Art,” *Theory and Society,* Vol. 32 No. 2 (April 2003), 159.

Arnett helped organize the *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (2002) exhibition as well as dozens of other exhibitions featuring Southern black art. However, his efforts were not without controversy, as the optics of a white man holding power over a group of untrained black artists unfamiliar with the machinations of the art world raised eyebrows. Arnett often provided stipends to artists like Lonnie Holley and Thornton

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[16] William S. Arnett et al, *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. Vol. 1 (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2000), and William S. Arnett et al, *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. Vol. 2 (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2001).

Dial in exchange for right of first refusal. This aspect of Arnett's engagement with artists was seen as unconventional at best, and ethically reprehensible at worst. The most damning blow came from an exposé on the television program *60 Minutes* in 1993, in which Arnett was portrayed as the definitive white exploiter of black culture, with Thornton Dial playing the part of the ignorant dupe.[17] Many exhibitions were cancelled as a direct result. Arnett has also faced a series of lawsuits regarding the sale of art, most prominently from the community of Gee's Bend.[18] It is worth noting that Dial and Lockett chose to continue working closely with Arnett until their respective deaths.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the art world knows about the work of Dial, Holley, and Lockett (as well as many other artists) in large part because of Arnett's persistent and aggressive advocacy. In 2010, William Arnett founded the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which now owns a significant percentage of his original collection of Southern black art. The Foundation's primary mission is "to transfer the majority of works in its care to the permanent collections of leading American and international art museums."[19] This initiative began in earnest in 2014, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art was gifted fifty-seven Southern black art objects from the Foundation.[20] The exhibition, *History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation*, was mounted in May 2018. The presence of this exhibition within The Met, with its installation in galleries adjacent to other twentieth century masterworks by artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, demands that art historians reconcile established narratives of modern and contemporary art with the presence of figures like Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, and Ronald Lockett, all of whom were represented in the show.

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[17] William S. Arnett, interviewed by the author, Atlanta, GA, February 2016. Also see Paige Williams, "Composition in Black and White," *The New Yorker,* August 12 & 19, 2013 issue. Accessed Nov. 18, 2017. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/08/12/composition-in-black-and-white-2.

[18] For more regarding the lawsuits, see Shaila Dewan, "Handmade Alabama Quilts Find Fame and Controversy," *The New York Times,* July 29, 2007. Accessed March 1, 2018. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/us/29quilt.html. Andrew Dietz's popular and quizzically labeled "nonfiction novel," *The Last Folk Hero: A True Story of Race and Art, Power and Profit,* (Atlanta: Ellis Lane Press, 2006) focuses specifically on the accusations of exploitation directed at William Arnett, the lawsuits, and his relationship with artists. The accuracy of the novel is, at times, questionable and the plot emphasizes art world drama.

Black Modernisms

Art history has already acknowledged the impact the Great Migration had on American culture and artistic production. Studies by Richard J. Powell, David A. Bailey, and David Driskell analyze the ways in which black Americans adapted artistically to new, particularly urban environments.[21] In contrast to being seen as outsider or folk artists, urban artists like Romare Bearden and David Hammons are considered modern and contemporary, respectively—well-versed in the broader artistic discourses that surrounded them. This is in part due to the fact that both were able to receive formal artistic training and worked as professional artists. Black artists who stayed in the South were then and arguably still today, more likely to be classified within art history as outsiders or folk artists, and their categorization as such demonstrates implicit regional bias.

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[19] "Souls Grown Deep Foundation." Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Accessed March 05, 2018. http://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/.

[20] Press release, "Souls Grown Deep Foundation Donates 57 Works to Metropolitan Museum of Art," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Nov. 24, 2014. https://www.metmuseum.org/press/news/2014/souls-grown-deep.

[21] Richard J. Powell and David A. Bailey, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); David Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art,* (New York: Random House, 1976).

In his definition of "black modernism," literary scholar Houston A. Baker Jr. emphasizes the central importance of the South, both as a geographical location and intellectual concept: "Black modernism is not only framed by the American South, but also is inextricable—as a cognitive and somatic process of performing blackness out of or within tight spaces—from specific institutionalizations of human life below the Mason-Dixon."[22] In Baker's analysis of the canonical formulation of modernity, first prescribed by Walter Benjamin and embodied in Charles Baudelaire's *flaneur* figure, he notes that the spatial and intellectual freedom accessible to the *flaneur* was distinctly unavailable to black Americans. A decidedly urban character, this figure was defined by his learnedness and ability to travel through the city as an observer.[23] The *flaneur's* repeated encounters with the spectacles of modernity could only occur because he possessed time for leisure (time outside of conventional work) and was a privileged, typically bourgeois white man. Modernity, in this articulation, existed for the rarefied few whose lives were enhanced by technological advancements, urban living, and leisurely intellectual exchange. Such spatial freedom, especially with regard to black Southerners, was almost impossible.

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[22] Houston A. Baker Jr., *Turning South Again, Re-thinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 26.

[23] Baker, *Turning South,* 60. Walter Benjamin, II *The Flaneur,* "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn, (London: NLB, 1973), 35-66.

"Black modernism," according to Baker, has only appeared in a few brief windows of American history, particularly during the Black Power movements in the 1960s and 1970s. These moments of *black modernism* were produced in spaces of segregation, economic deprivation, and social oppression which nevertheless resulted in outcomes like the Civil Rights movement, codified forms of cultural expression (blues and jazz), and slow increases in black social mobility.[24] One crucial aspect of *black modernism* is the notion of "Afro-modernity," defined as "a project in style, resistance, organization, art, literacy, and spirituality…. The preeminent dynamic of Afro-modernity is the "search" for roots, an investment in Africa, and a larger query, as Baker frames it, of "what is Africa to me?"[25] The Birmingham-Bessemer School conceptually fits within these parameters and could be described as an Afro-modern project. For the elder members of the group, the idea of Africa loomed large in their practice. The Birmingham-Bessemer School, given its historical foundations, artistic contributions, and ever-increasing visibility, I will argue, should be considered a black modernist moment within the history of art.

In the introduction to her book *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (2017), Kellie Jones offers a concise description of black migration, which "in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was nothing less than black people willing into existence their presence in modern American life. It represents their resolve to make a new world in the aftermath of human bondage and stake their claim in the United States."[26] Migration was not just flight from oppression, but a deliberate seizure of personal agency. The Western United States offered new opportunities and freedoms (though, as Jones explains, black Americans were greeted with different sets of restrictions and forms of racism). But what of those who never left the South, how did they "will their existence" into modernity, and what role did the visual arts play in this formation?

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[24] Baker, *Turning South,* 26, 33-34.

[25] Ibid, 34.

The South, so often considered America's backward, anti-modern, "abjected regional other," was nevertheless a site of modernity—especially the city of Birmingham.[27] However, as this project will demonstrate, modernity was built through the continued abuse and oppression of black Americans, a counter to any romantic notions of progress. It was also built through the cultural offerings of black Americans, especially their contributions to the visual arts. To fully understand the work of the Birmingham-Bessemer group, Birmingham's exceedingly violent modern history must be confronted. In this same vein, one must also confront the many unrealized promises of the Civil Rights Movement and the effects of post-industrialization, which led to the economic collapse of the area in the 1970s. It is plausible that part of the resistance to accepting these artists into the larger narrative of modern and contemporary art is due to the ugly historical circumstances that led to the group's formation. Their exclusion represents the general resistance in the United States to fully acknowledging the social and political realities that faced and continue to ensnare many black citizens. These artists created and continue to create artwork about theirs and others' histories, making it an impossible-to-ignore topic.

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[26] Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* , (Durham : Duke University Press, 2017), 3.

[27] Houston A. Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson, "Violence, the Body, and the South," *American Literature* Vol. 73 (June 2001), 23-244.

Unaccountable Modernisms seeks to apprise this black modernist moment of artistic production by a group of black male artists who remained in the South, either by choice or lack of opportunity. The use of "modernisms" rather than "modernism" is meant to acknowledge the plurality of black artistic modernist moments happening all across the South during the twentieth century—Birmingham was but one location among many. Similarly and simultaneously, the female quilters of Gee's Bend were engaged in their own production. Paul Arnett, William Arnett's son who received a degree in art history from Harvard and worked with his father for decades, describes these Southern modernist instances as "cultural singularities."[28] Given its intellectual, geographical, and chronological breadth, my project does not follow strict definitions of modernism. The goals of "black modernism" have yet to be fully realized, which are, according to Baker, "the achievement of a life-enhancing and empowering public sphere mobility and the economic solvency of the black majority".[29] This means that black modernism bleeds into what critical theory considers the postmodern—my study also spans a swath of time, the 1960s through the early 2000s, that experienced the transition from what is thought of as the late modern period to the postmodern.

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[28] Paul Arnett, "They Modernized Themselves," (presentation, Ronald Lockett: Prescient Voice, American Folk Art Museum, June 21, 2016). https://folkartmuseum.org/programs/ronald-lockett-prescient-voice-62116/.

[29] Baker, *Turning South,* 34.

The discourses concerning modernity and its aftermath privilege the urban city as the *de facto* subject, rather than the rural. As Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed observe, "Postmodern social theory's stable reference point has been the city; it unquestioningly posits an urbanized subject without considering the extent to which a subject is constructed by its conceptual opposition to the rustic. In much postmodern social theory, the country as a vital place simply does not exist."[30] While Birmingham is an urban environment, Bessemer is neither totally urban nor rural. Rather, it is a small, but important mining town. Until a neighborhood like Bessemer's Pipe Shop, where Dial and Lockett lived, worked, and received visitors like Holley, is thought of as modern or postmodern, their artistic practice cannot be considered as such, either.

In his essay for *Souls Grown Deep Vol. 1*, civil rights leader Andrew Young reminds the reader that:

> These artists affirm the basic fact that human beings are, by nature, thinking, expressing, critical, creative beings. Mainstream Western establishment has come dangerously close to saying that these qualities are exclusive to those who have been properly educated or trained, who are conversant with the establishment mainstream traditions in cultural endeavors.[31]

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[30] Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed. *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 7.

[31] Andrew Young, "More Than Previously Imagined," *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. Vol. 1 (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2000), 12.

While this statement might read as obvious or unnecessary to some, previous interpretations or accounts of Southern black art did not always ascribe these critical qualities to its homegrown artists; therefore, Young's statement bears repeating. As this study will reveal, the Birmingham-Bessemer artists made work that is self-reflexive, ironic, and intellectually rich on a number of registers. A primary issue is that even when their work is interpreted as such, credit is usually given to the interpreter—*not* understood as the artist's intention. The notion of intentionality is, perhaps, one of the biggest issues that plagues scholarship about artists like Lonnie Holley, Thornton Dial, and other untrained Southern African American artists. One of the overarching goals of this project is to re-assign artistic agency and intentionality to these artists' practices—two elements that, while they have always been present, are often ignored. This is also why *Unaccountable Modernisms* places particular emphasis on the artists' own words, drawn from a variety of oral histories, written statements, or my own interviews. Their voices need to be heard and acknowledged as a critical part of the conversation, not just the interpretations of collectors, dealers, and academics.

Junk Yards

With the exception of Ronald Lockett, all of the artists in the Birmingham-Bessemer group had art environments, or "yard shows," on their properties at some point in their artistic careers. But they were not actually unique in this regard. The Southern black yard show is an historical phenomenon that can potentially be traced back to slavery era burial practices, originally defined by Robert Farris Thompson as "The practice of adorning one's property and living space with objects of aesthetic, spiritual, and cultural significance."[32] Sprawling installations, filled with primarily found object assemblages, but also paintings and sculptures, were once commonplace in the black South. Beyond object adornment, these yards also presupposed the presence of a viewer, or a community within which such a practice could be understood.

A direct link between yard shows and slave graveyards cannot be fully substantiated due to a lack of archival evidence, only suggested. Dell Upton notes that because slaves were allowed only a few possessions, they often devoted any free time they had to maintaining their gardens and interiors.[33] Slave graveyards were also sites to which white people would not venture, giving slaves the greater opportunity for visual expression as they were less likely to be caught and subsequently punished. It seems possible, then, that this early interest in property arrangement would inform the twentieth century version of the phenomenon. In 1993 anthropologist Grey Gundaker offered a more contemporary definition:

> The makers of these special yards work to please themselves and to instruct visitors in appropriate behavior, sometimes in the broadest spiritual sense. The work takes personal inventiveness, a cultural repertoire of signs that may be widely known or accessible only through special instruction, and alertness to real-world political, historical, and economic conditions.[34]

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[32] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy,* (New York: Random House, 1983), 124.

[33] Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth Century Virginia*,*" *Places*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (1984), 63.

[34] Grey Gundaker, "Tradition and Innovation in African-American Yards," *African Arts*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Apr., 1993), 59.

Regardless of its origins, the yard show is a documented practice. The phenomenon has now, for the most part, died out due to the deaths of its makers and youth migration and flight away from the South.[35]

To the uninformed, these yards may have looked like nothing more than haphazard junk piles, or the work of a lone eccentric. Lonnie Holley's Birmingham environment was overwhelming in its scale and object density. But once an understanding of his symbols is established, the yard becomes easier to decipher. The use of coded meanings within yard shows makes them a form of "hidden transcript," to employ James Scott's term, of black life in the United States. According to Scott, these transcripts are "specific to a given social site and to a particular set of actors," and they contain "a whole range of practices" created away from the gaze of those in power.[36], Holley's yard, while located on his personal property, was easily seen from the street. But until one was invited into the environment, its enormity and meaning could not truly be grasped. It existed in a manner that was simultaneously highly visible and invisible.

Lonnie Holley's yard show (1979-1997) was recreated and exhibited in the first exhibition organized by the William Arnett, *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, in 1996. This was the first time a black yard show had been recreated in an exhibition space, in this case Atlanta City Hall East. More than thirty artists were represented with some 450 works of art on display. Holley's yard served an important curatorial function, as it made a vital point about many of the objects in the show: they were drawn from similar yard environments. His yard was meant to serve as an exceptional example of the wider phenomenon of the Southern black yard show.

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[35] Michael Tortorello, "Scrap Iron Elegy," The New York *Times,* April 24, 2013. Accessed March 4, 2018. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/25/garden/joe-minters-african-village-in-america.html.

[36] James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009), 14.

The history of site-specific art environments, or installations with performance components, are typically traced back to Hugo Ball's *Cabaret Voltaire,* Kurt Schwitter's *Merzbau,* or Allan Kaprow and his formulation of the "Happenings" he staged in the early 1960s.[37] Lonnie Holley's installation inside *Souls Grown Deep* suggests an alternative history of environmental art and performance—one that arose completely independent of European or bi-coastal American contexts. Though these yard shows were created during the last decades of the twentieth century, they were—and remain—entrenched in a larger historical visual practice. The chapter concerning Holley explores how his practice contributes to the larger history of land art and site-specific installation within the United States**.**

The Magic City

As a site of historical memory, Birmingham, Alabama is a place commonly associated with the most violent aspects of the Civil Rights Movement. It is where the Ku Klux Klan bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963, killing four black girls changing into their choir robes in the church basement. Photographs of police dogs let loose on young protesters in downtown Birmingham circulated throughout the country, igniting Northern sympathizers of the Civil Rights Movement to further action. During the 1950s and 1960s, the city was nicknamed “Bombingham” due to the frequency of bombings committed by white residents who sought to terrorize the black community and quell any form of uprising and resistance.[38]

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[37] Allan Kaprow first used the term "Happening," in 1957, and "Environment" in 1958. See Allan Kaprow, "Notes on the Creation of a Total Work of Art," (New York: Hansa Gallery, 1958), and *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings,* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966).

In addition to its violent sociopolitical past, understanding Birmingham’s industrial history is essential to comprehend fully the circumstances that led to the formation of the Birmingham-Bessemer School. Birmingham is historically referred to as the “Magic City” because its soil contained the three necessary elements to produce iron: limestone, coal, and iron ore. This metallurgical wonder allowed Birmingham to become one of the most successful industrial centers in the post-Reconstruction South. By the 1880s, Birmingham became the steel capital of the New South, and was one of the Southeast’s most urbanized areas.[39] Far from any stereotypical vision of a rural Southern hamlet, Birmingham was a city built on its adoption of technological and industrial advancements, rather than relying on agriculture. Jefferson County alone was home to nineteen blast furnaces by the late nineteenth century, with Sloss Furnaces, founded in 1881 (then City Furnaces), being arguably the most important one of all.[40] Though slavery had technically ended, at the turn of the century, Birmingham was somewhat unique in the way that the city's factory owners constructed a new form of industrial labor that was essentially slavery by another name.[41] The steel industry took advantage of the new freedmen population, most notably, black convicts, in the formation of a segregated factory system.[42] Police would arrest black men for minor or false crimes in order to take advantage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which states that slavery is illegal "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." Factory owners fashioned a caste system in which the minority white workers functioned as skilled labor, while the majority black workers were classified as unskilled labor with little to no opportunity for upward mobility. The black workers were given the most difficult and dangerous work in the foundries, exposing them to extreme heat, toxic gas, and unforgiving physical labor. Despite these horrific conditions, many African Americans outside of Alabama came to work in these foundries in an effort to escape the pittance of sharecropping.[43] By the 1920s African Americans made up roughly sixty to eighty percent of the steel industry's workers.[44]

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[38] “Although racial attacks occurred in other southern cities, the frequency and number of fire bombings in Birmingham—some fifty between 1947 and 1965—made the city unusually prominent and gave rise to the sobriquet "Bombingham." Glenn T. Eskew, “’Bombmingham”: Black Protest in Postwar Birmingham, Alabama,” *The Historian,* Vol. 59, No. 2 (Winter 1997), 371.

[39] Blaine A. Brownell, “Birmingham, Alabama: New South City in the 1920s” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Feb. 1972), 22.

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[40] David Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District,* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 39.

[41] For a critical history of this phenomenon, which occurred across the South, see Douglas Blackburn, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II,* (London: Icon, 2012).

[42] William H. Worger, "Convict Labor, Industrialists, and the State in the US South and South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Special Issue: Race and Class in South Africa and the United States (Mar. 2004), 63.

Laborers both black and white often lived in "quarters," or company-built housing. Sloss Furnaces, as well as other manufacturing companies, provided housing east of downtown Birmingham, in the form of small wooden houses. For all workers, the dwellings were minimal and shoddily constructed. For black workers, they were especially unsanitary and ill-equipped. As a *Birmingham News* reporter describes in October of 1912:

> These shacks, unpainted, rotting away with broken windows, split doors, and ashy surroundings….were all put in a heap together, without sewerage, or any sanitary provisions whatsoever, without fences—just sort of makeshift shelters. None of the shacks is plastered, few have ceilings. Very few were even provided until two or three weeks ago.[45]

In 1943 the Housing Authority of Birmingham declared that "at least forty percent of the housing in every district (except East Lake) was substandard."[46] These conditions persisted through the Jim Crow era, and to a lesser extent, the post-Civil Rights era, when artists like Holley were living in the city, as he observed similar living conditions within his own family as late as the 1970s.[47]

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[43] Henry Mckiven, *Iron and Steel: Class, Race, and Community in Birmingham, Alabama 1875-1920.* (Chapel Hill, N.C.:University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 4, 46.

[44] Worger, "Convict Labor, "66.

[45] Charles E. Connerly, *"The Most Segregated City in America:" City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980.* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 2.

[46] Duncan Nolan, *Social and Economic Survey of the Birmingham District* (Housing Authority of the Birmingham District [HABD], 1943), 18.

While Birmingham was the site of major economic growth in the early half of the twentieth century, by the 1950s, industry jobs began to decline sharply. In 1950 the number of residents employed in coal and iron mining was 16,126; by 1960 it dropped to just 5,812.[48] This deterioration was due in part to the importation of foreign coal (a general trend nationally), and by 1971 Birmingham's iron mines had all closed. In 1971, Sloss Furnaces also shuttered. These closures most sharply affect the city's black population, who held the vast majority of its industrial jobs.

By 1990, Birmingham was the tenth-poorest large city in the United States, with twenty-five percent of the population living below the poverty line. Much of this poverty was concentrated in black neighborhoods, and within these neighborhoods more than fifty percent of the population lived in poverty.[49] Each artist concerning this study has direct familial ties to the steel and iron industry of the greater Birmingham area. Dial and his male family members worked in the steel industry for most of their lives, while Holley and Lockett also had important family members who belonged to that workforce. The decline of this industry deeply impacted all of these artists' lives, and is a subject often addressed in their work.

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[47] Holley describes a remarkably similar setting to the 1912 account, stating "My mama and them were still living in the 1800s, with slop jars, and outdoor bathrooms, and no running water, and pigs in the house, and chickens and things in the backyard, and ducks and things roosting in the house…Here in 1972. I found my mother living in a kennel, 1800 setting in the 1970s." Lonnie Holley, "Biography," *Souls Grown Deep,* http://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/lonnie-holley (accessed April 27, 2017).

[48] Connerly, *"The Most Segregated City,"* 167.

[49] Ibid, 273.

The city of Birmingham set the stage for artists like Holley, Lockett, and Dial to emerge. With its origins in industrial slave labor and its location within Jefferson County—Birmingham had 29 lynchings—more recorded acts of violence than any other county in the state, its association with the most violent tragedies of the Civil Rights movement, and its continued rampant poverty, Birmingham exists as a constant reminder of the casualties of modernity and so-called racial progress.

Each artist of the Birmingham-Bessemer School uniquely addresses, through his varying media and conceptual orientations, this history. Collectively, they have turned this difficult and challenging past into difficult and challenging art; the School's story is ultimately one about black self-determination. To borrow and apply a quote by the historian Robin D.G. Kelley, perhaps the history of Birmingham can best be characterized as such: "Here you are watching Western Civilization. It emerges as Modern as can be, but is the best example of Barbarism you've ever seen." [50]

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[50] Robin D.G. Kelley, "A Conversation with Robin D.G. Kelley," *Open Space SFMOMA.* Accessed Feb. 5, 2018.
https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2017/05/a-converstion-with-robin-d-g-kelley/

Chapter One: Lonnie Holley's Trash Lessons

What is art? Art is everything that we have used, waiting to be used again. That's all art is.
-Lonnie Holley, 1992

Lonnie Holley's *Fifth Child Burning* (1994) is an assemblage sculpture arranged as a makeshift entertainment center, composed of a range of objects that sit precariously on small wooden tables. These include an old television set, multiple radios, a broken wooden chair, an empty detergent bottle, a bag of books, and a single roller skate. [Fig. 1]. Most of the objects are coated in a black, sooty dust, and the electronics have a warped, melted appearance to them. The crux of the installation is its exception: two clean, prominent articles of clothing. The white shirt in the foreground of the sculpture and the hanging red sweater are almost pristine in comparison.

These objects were collected from the remnants of a 1994 house fire that killed one of Holley's son's young classmates in Birmingham, Alabama. Arranged as such, this assemblage symbolically functions on a number of registers: first, as a memorial to the specific tragedy of this young girl's untimely death, with the wooden "T" occupying the back of the sculpture recalling a crucifix, suggesting martyrdom. The title of this piece stretches beyond the individual, however, referencing the four girls killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham in 1963. In addition to four girls, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair, his son's classmate becomes the "fifth child." Martyrdom, in this context, does become a likely allusion. One could read *Fifth Child Burning* as an attempt to fold a personal event his family experienced into the more well-known national tragedy of the Birmingham church bombing. Holly's sculpture serves as an address to violent and non-violent forms of discrimination and neglect endemic to Birmingham's black community on a micro-and macro-level. The senseless deaths of these five young girls were the result of systemic and institutional disregard for the quality and value of black life, and indicative of the varying ways in which racial hate and discrimination can become manifest.

Born in Birmingham in 1950, Lonnie Holley is an African American artist who works in practically every medium, from drawing to assemblage, music to metalwork. While currently a resident of Atlanta, Holley was once a prominent cultural figure in Birmingham, the protagonist of an urban legend known throughout the late 1980s and 1990s as "The Sand Man." For eighteen years he occupied a one-and-a-half-acre patch of land adjacent to the city's main airport [Fig. 2, 3, 4]. Prior to Holley's arrival, this land was treated by neighborhood residents and locals as a dumping ground for trash and refuse. The materials left at the site were "different things that [came] from different parts of the city."[1]

The locality of the refuse appealed to Holley. There he constructed what amounted to a massive, ever-evolving art environment comprised of discrete art objects, while the site itself functioned as a *gesamkunstwerk*, or total work of art. It was one of the premier examples of a Southern visual phenomenon called the black "yard show," or the practice of adorning one's property and living space with objects of aesthetic, spiritual, and cultural significance.[2] It was later condemned and eventually destroyed by the city of Birmingham in 1997.

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[1] Lonnie Holley, interview with Bill Arnett, videotaped recording. Date unknown. V-T 20491_2, 3, 4, 7, Souls Grown Deep Photographic Collection. Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, NC. Accessed February 2017.

Created at his Birmingham residence and environment, *Fifth Child Burning* is easily interpreted in the manner described: as a memorial to individual and collective black suffering. Undoubtedly that is, in part, the sculpture's is intent—Holley attests to this fact.[3] However, beyond this interpretation, other conceptual, contextual, and aesthetic implications have not been thoroughly explored. Besides its autobiographical and historical significance, it is a memorial to all that has and will be declared technologically obsolete, to things no longer considered useful, things tossed in landfills and set ablaze. The melted and charred objects look ghostly, post-apocalyptic, the remnants of civilization after a natural or manmade disaster.

The aim of this project is to investigate why Holley's oeuvre has historically been marginalized within the parameters of Southern, self-taught, or vernacular African American art, rather than discussed within the larger narrative of modern and contemporary American art. Though he has gained recent recognition as a contemporary, rather than "folk" or "outsider" artist, Holley still functions as an ambassador between two worlds: the larger, mainstream art world network of curators, collectors, and scholars; and his own community of classically-untrained black artists dispersed throughout the South. Recognizing this status as an ambassador, in

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[2] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984) 124.

[3] Lonnie Holley, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, August 2016.

2014 the *New York Times Magazine* featured a profile on Holley that labeled him as "the insider's outsider" [Fig. 5].[4] However contradictory this designation may be, Holley has at once achieved a certain amount of institutional recognition while also retaining the kind of cultural cachet associated with vernacular figures. The first major aspect of this chapter deals with Lonnie Holley's postmodern artistic practice, which is governed by a drive to recuperate the historical, ecological, and pedagogical potentialities of globalization's material excesses. Beyond any external label or designation placed upon his work, his primary thematic concerns as an artist—concerns which are wholly contemporary, often prescient in their urgency—lie within these three recuperative urges.

To read *Fifth Child Burning* through the thematic concerns that are historical, ecological, and pedagogical, is to disentangle Holley's work from the burden and oversimplification of being somehow wholly representative of black experience in America. Interrogating this decoupling complicates received interpretations of his work, and such interpretations, while not necessarily incorrect, flatten the complexity of his practice. Art historians Kobena Mercer and Darby English have addressed how black artists "bear the burden of representation," of *representing*, in every sense of the word, the so-called greater black community, and how the obligatory understanding of their work is so often simplified into the visual rendering of racialized metaphor.[5] This compulsory representation is further magnified by Holley's Southern-ness, as the South bears its own representative burdens: associations to the particularities of its violent history are never far behind. The artists addressed within this study, Lonnie Holley, Thornton Dial, and Ronald Lockett, were all residents of the American South, and work with and through racial metaphors in their respective artistic practices—but they are also working through much more—and it is that *more*, that elsewhere, this project also seeks to uncover.

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[4] Mark Binelli, "Lonnie Holley, the Insider's Outsider," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2014. Accessed March 15, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/magazine/lonnie-holley-the-insiders-outsider.html.This status was most recently recognized, and further complicated, in "Black Folk Redux: A Curatorial Roundtable," published in the *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* exhibition catalog. In this conversation between Lynne Cooke, John Beardsley, Katherine Jentleson, and Faheem Maheed, Holley's presence within the art world is brought up as an emblematic challenge of insider/outsider categorization (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 64-79.

To be clear, this study will contextualize Holley's artistic production within the history of the African American experience—specifically his experience—in the South when appropriate. *Fifth Child Burning*, as well as much of his work, cannot be understood without this necessary component. His art is often a response to events that occurred during his time in Birmingham and the struggles and discrimination he faced while living there. Holley's practice is a multidirectional response to the world of the South, but it cannot be completely explained away by his Southerness, his blackness or his masculinity. While Holley remains the focus of this chapter, his work will be brought into dialogue with other, often younger, contemporary African American artists, such as Theaster Gates and Sanford Biggers, in order to understand how his practice is situated as part of a larger visual continuum. Studies comparing Holley with trained black artists working outside the South are relatively minimal. Instead, for reasons that will be elucidated, discussions of his work have largely been relegated to scholarship concerning outsider, folk, and self-taught art.

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[5] Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text,* Vol. 4 No. 10 (1990), 61-78; Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

The second major subject of this chapter concerns Holley's art environment, which was reconstructed and translated into a museological context during the exhibition *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, which was held in conjunction with the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. It was the first time that a large Southern black "yard show" installation was presented within the museum space. The inclusion of Holley's yard was a key element to the exhibition receiving critical praise, and it serves as a valuable example of a conceptually immersive display strategy that could be employed in future presentations of Southern African American Art. It represents a crucial example in which the curatorial strategy of exhibiting work drawn from yard shows was addressed head-on, challenging the value of the "white-cube" exhibition strategies and the hyper-visuality of modernist display.[6] These yards, in addition to being site-specific, are often multi-sensorial, with the artist functioning as a performer and guide. In addition to "yard show," I use the term "art environment" as it is a broad term not attached to particular racial histories—though, as I will suggest, site-specific art environments *do* have specific roots in Southern black communities and histories, though this history often remains unacknowledged. Using "yard show" and "art environment" together allows this project to connect Southern African American visual practices, specifically the way they manifest in Holley's work, to the wider scope of contemporary installation and assemblage art.

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[6] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: the Ideology of the Gallery Space,* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 9.

The term assemblage was unknown to Holley when he first began making art. As a "self-taught" artist with limited formal education, French terminology like *bricolage, objets trouvé,* and *merz* were not a part of his vocabulary. A discussion of Holley's work within the framework of historically recognized visual art forms like assemblage, *gesamkunstwerk,* installation, performance, and site-specific art begs the question: to what extent does it matter if his work *looks* like, or fits the definition of, art made within these categories? Discussing his found-object sculptures within the history of modern assemblage, for example, is not meant as a justification for the importance of his work. It is not meant to "prove" his work is as good as white modern and contemporary artists, or an assimilation of his practice into a history in which it does not belong. Rather, it is a gesture that recognizes the artificiality of such classifications of art, and that the history of these classifications, like assemblage, can never be complete until the multiplicity of their manifestations is recognized.

A critical study of Holley's work demonstrates just how these classifications—whether they be genre-oriented, cultural, biographical, or art historical—are mostly ineffective in their isolated uses. We understand very little about Holley's practice if we frame him solely as a self-taught artist, or an assemblage sculptor, or an African American artist. However, to investigate *how* these terms have been historically applied does illuminate the ways in which art history, as a discipline, constructs meaning around them. Because he is such a complicated figure, whose practice stretches across almost every kind of media, Holley is an ideal artist for such investigation.

To command the full spectrum of terms used in this project: Holley is both an "insider" and "outsider" artist. His roots are deeply Southern, yet his practice is international, as he has traveled and produced artwork in many different countries, including The Netherlands, France, England, and Canada. He is sincerely invested in objects—their histories, meanings and social lives, to invoke Appadurai—but is also mistrustful of capitalism, the system that produces these objects, and its after effects.[7] He is an artist/historian but does not respond to canonical art history in his own work—though he endeavors to make sure his artistic practice, as well as the production of untrained African American artists like him, is properly documented within the history of art. He is disinterested in categories like "site-specific art," but diligently constructs his own ever-evolving personal vernacular. As an artist, he is a contradiction in terms.

The Insider's Outsider

In the 1982 photograph, *Honoring My Grandfather Willie Holley*, the viewer is presented with a small detail of Holley's extensive Birmingham art environment. The entirety of the image is filled with his early sandstone sculpture, from the foreground to the background [Figure 6]. Varying in scale, color, and degrees of finish, all of these sculptures bear Holley's signature sculptural style: stark geometry combined with organic dynamism primarily expressed through anthropomorphic forms. Sandstone was Holley's first chosen medium as an artist when he began making work in 1979, and this image demonstrates the extent to which he used this particular material within his Birmingham yard. The prominent use of sandstone in his practice, as it shall be demonstrated, was no accident.

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[7] "We have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context." Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5. Holley is particularly interested in these "thing trajectories," how objects acquire and shed value depending upon the people they encounter, and how his own reclamation of objects becomes part of their narrative.

Fifth Child Burning is not the only object in Holley's *oeuvre* born from a house fire—in fact, it was one in particular that served as the catalyst for his artistic career. When Holley's sister lost two of her children in a house fire,, he took industrial sandstone, a byproduct of Birmingham's prominent steel and iron manufacturing industry, and made tombstones for his deceased niece and nephew. Industrial sandstone was used to line steel and iron molds, and as a material is quite soft, able to be incised upon with one's fingernail, but strong enough to be used for large sculptures. As a young man, Holley's grandfather worked at Sloss-Sheffield Steel and Iron Company (now Sloss Furnaces), one of the major iron foundries in the Birmingham area from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries.[8] Discarded pieces of sandstone were commonplace in the area, and Holley's residence and yard show were located relatively near Sloss-Sheffield's grounds.

In an interesting narrative parallel, Holley's career began in a manner similar to that of William Edmondson (1874-1951), another historically significant, Southern

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[8] Lonnie Holley, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, August 2016.

African American artist. Working in Nashville, Tennessee, Edmondson started carving tombstone sculptures for members of his community out of discarded limestone in 1934 [Fig. 7]. Three years later, Edmondson became the first African American to receive a one-person exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.[9] While both Holley and Edmondson are lauded for their untrained status but decidedly modernist aesthetic, their artistic practices grew from a common necessity. Their sculptures functioned as an important revenue source while filling an important need: affordable burial memorials or tombstones made by a sensitive and empathetic member of the black community.

Further, like Edmondson, Holley's career as an artist received remarkably swift recognition. After about a year of making sandstone sculpture, he loaded up the trunk of his car and took some sculptures to the Birmingham Museum of Art, where he showed them to then-director Richard Murray. Taken with the objects, Murray sent photos of the sculptures to the Smithsonian. Four months later Holley's sculptures were selected for the exhibition *More than Land or Sky: Art from Appalachia*, which was on display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum from October 1981 to January 1982.[10] The show featured work by sixty-nine artists, trained and untrained, from the thirteen Appalachian states.

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[9] *Sculpture by William Edmondson* was on view at MoMA from October 20 to December 1, 1937. See MoMa, "Press Release, Sculpture by William Edmondson," Oct. 18 1937. Accessed Feb. 15, 2018. https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_333062.pdf.

[10] Barbara Shissler Nosanow, *More than Land or Sky: Art from Appalachia*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981).

Though working in different historical periods, the quick acceptance of Holley's and Edmondson's work demonstrates a particular racialized bias towards certain kinds of black and African American artists. In the 1930s, when trained African American artists struggled to receive significant recognition within the predominately white art world, the rapid assimilation of the work of an untrained, black Southerner, in this case, William Edmondson, was curious. In the case of Holley, though there was substantially more African American representation within the museum space come the 1980s, his admission to such a prominent American museum was predicated on similar ideological orientations: that neither of these artists represented a threat to the dominant narrative of modern art, and in fact, their presence reinforced modernism's relationship to primitivism.

In *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art* Museum, Bridget Cooks argues that Edmondson's work was used to help establish an ancestry for modern American art—despite the fact that Edmondson was still living during the time of the exhibition.[11] More insidiously, she argues, by further associating contemporary African American art with a primitive aesthetic, it reinforced notions of unevolved, African "savageness" and helped maintain social order. By using Edmondson as a representation of the larger, national "black community," MoMA implied black

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[11] Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans in the American Art Museum*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 29. Jennifer James Marshall also confronts the issue of Edmondson's perceived primitiveness in "Find-and-Seek: Discovery Narratives, Americanization, and Other Tales of Genius in Modern American Folk Art," *Outliers and American Vanguard Art,* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 52-63.

Americans stood outside of modern life and, if left alone, their cultural contributions were inferior and examples of anti-progressive impulses.

Current curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum Leslie Umberger contends that Holley gained entry to the museum world with greater ease than what would be considered typical for any untrained white artist or trained black artist.[12] This entry, however, was predicated on similar conditions as Edmondson: he was a regional artist (Appalachia/Southern), his work seemed to fit the then-emerging category of outsider art, and his inclusion satisfied diversity measures. It was easy to include an artist like Holley because one could interpret his untrained aesthetic as raw and unsophisticated, framing him as more of a primitive, that is, a predecessor, than as a full-fledged peer or contemporary equivalent to a white artist. Umberger also notes that some trained African American artists resented the acceptance of artists like Holley, because it allowed the art world to position black artists as "primitive and guileless," non-threats to the dominant narrative of modern art.

Edmondson and Holley have been categorized within art historical literature under a number of labels: self-taught, folk, outsider, visionary, and vernacular. As discussed in the Introduction, these labels, while they refer to similar, if not the same phenomena (depending on the looseness with which they are applied), all function as somewhat delegitimizing modifiers: more value ends up placed on the circumstances of artistic production rather than the content and merit of the art work itself. In interviews and exhibition catalogs, Holley has resisted being labeled as anything other than an "American," or "African American" artist, recognizing the immediate marginalization that occurs when he is labeled as "folk," "self-taught," or "outsider." When he, and other untrained African American artists like him, are labeled as "outsiders" it primitivizes their identities and suppresses the intellectual heft of their practice. "I want to be an artist of America, not an orphan in a storm, not a passion-visioner, not a self-taught artist, not a folk artist," he states. "I just want to be an artist. We African Americans in America, we Negroes of America, we are kept in these different zones."[13] Such commentary offers proof of his self-conscious awareness, and moreover, his own ability to navigate and understand his own commodification as an artist. This should also categorically preclude him from being designated as "outsider." Outsider artists, by definition, do not consider themselves to be professional artists. They are most certainly not concerned with the implications of being classified as "outsider" by the discipline of art history.

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[12] Leslie Umberger, *Something to Take My Place: The Art of Lonnie Holley.* (Charleston, S.C.: Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, 2016), 19.

When outsider art scholarship primitivizes Holley's practice so that it may be more readily connected to an unburdened, creative urge, by extension it exoticizes the South as a region. Implicit is a kind of intellectual elitism that demonstrates bias. Writing for *New York Magazine*, Larissa MacFarquhar critiques the field of outsider art by demonstrating this dual primitivization: "the typical outsider artist either lives in a rural hamlet in the South or suffers some sort of debilitating mental disorder….outsider art is supposed to arise, twisted and singular, directly from the unconscious."[14] What MacFarquhar is ultimately arguing, is that outsider-ness can be assigned through either external or internal othering. In Holley's case, both of these conditions, living in the "rural" South and suffering from mental illness, have at times been attributed to his production despite the fact that neither are actually true.

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[13] Lonnie Holley as told to Theodore Rosengarten, "Blackbirds," *Something to Take My Place: The Art of Lonnie Holley* (Charleston, S.C.: Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, College of Charleston, School of the Arts, 2015) 204.

Eminent Domain

From 1979 to 1996 Holley lived and worked on his Birmingham property, which was adjacent to a major city landmark, the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport. A littler further away were the grounds of Sloss Furnaces, another significant city site in Holley's biography. The location of his property in proximity to these two institutions offers a poetic spatial metaphor within the narrative of Holley's own life. Holley began his artistic practice by using Sloss's industrial discards, and the encroachment of the expanding Birmingham airport marked the forced end of his artistic life in the city. Symbolically, these two institutions were also representative of the old and new Birmingham—one was an essential component of the city's industrial history, while the other was built to allow the city to join an increasingly globalized world.

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[14] Larissa MacFarquhar, "But Is It Art?" *New York Magazine* (January 29, 1996), 40.

Holley's Birmingham property was a constant, dynamic work-in-progress, though it was easy to mistake it for a junkyard. Holley lived there from the late 1970s until 1997, and during that time people would visit his art environment, sometimes to buy something, but mostly just to look [Fig. 8]. Brimming with electrical appliances, used furniture, automobile parts, decorative household items, and old clothing, it was with these items, scavenged and collected on his property, that Holley constructed assemblage sculptures. Those who were able to visit the site when it existed remarked upon its "junky" nature, and there were certainly visitors who failed to see the property as anything else *but* a junkyard.[15] For almost two decades Holley built this monument to the discarded, the cast-off, and the detritus of modern living. He lived on-site with his children, totally immersed in this space of his own creation. In this sense, he was no different than avant-garde artists who had come before: Kurt Schwitters or Bruce Conner, for instance, both of whom constructed massive art environments within their living spaces. Some assemblages had been in Holley's yard for so long that natural forces began to weave the sculptures into the landscape itself. "These were big objects," Holley stated, "There were ingrown objects because they had been there for like seventeen years."[16]

Though there were multiple examples of African American yard shows within the state of Alabama, in addition to the rest of the Southeast, Holley asserts, perhaps misleadingly, that he was not aware of the larger phenomenon. In 1979—the same year Holley began making art—fellow Birmingham resident, Joe Minter, whose yard is one of the last complete examples of its kind, began turning his property into "The African Village in America." Forty-five miles south of Birmingham sat Reverend Paul Kornegay's yard show, and even closer was the art environment of Charlie Lucas, also known as "Tin Man" (note how both Holley and Lucas have nicknames that reference the physical materials of their choice). Though Holley claims he was unaware of these other sites and similar practices, he has ascribed his own artistic inclination to the fact that his grandfather was a blacksmith: learned skills, it turns out, were central to Minter's and Lucas's practices as well. Minter's father and Lucas's great-grandfather were both blacksmiths, so both artists watched, and at times learned, how to manipulate metal from them.[17]

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[15] Babatunde Lawal, "African Roots and American Branches," *Souls Grown Deep Vol. 1: African American Vernacular Art of the* South (Atlanta: Tinwood Books), 42.

[16] Lonnie Holley, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, August 2016.

It is not surprising that Holley, Minter, and Lucas reference their paterfamilias skill-sets as motivating factors in their artistic pursuits. Passed-on technical skills certainly makes it easier to create objects, especially those composed out of materials such as steel and iron that require specialized knowledge and techniques in order to avoid injury. Additionally, both Minter and Lucas began their artistic careers after suffering on-the-job accidents and injuries during the 1970s and 1980s, which left them both unable to work. Holley too, had suffered major physical injuries, but they were not work-related. In 1978, he was in a car chase with the police that ended with him hitting a tree, totaling his car, and being beaten by policemen. Unable to find permanent work, and in an effort to reform the lifestyle that led up to this event, Holley began making art.

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[17] Robert C. Stewart, "Charlie Lucas," *The Encyclopedia of Alabama.* http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-3388 (accessed May 1, 2017).

In considering Minter, Lucas, and Holley, three distinctive yard artists within the same region, a clearer picture begins to emerge. All three artists cite divine intervention as main motivating factor, all owned large pieces of property, all cultivated technical skills, and all experienced the transition from Jim Crow to post-Civil Rights Alabama. Each of these men began making art in the late 1970s and early 1980s, after they were either unable to work or find employment. This moment coincides with the collapse of Birmingham's steel and iron industry, resulting in steep economic declines. Employment opportunities were especially scarce. Regardless of whether or not these artists knew about each other's art environments, it is entirely feasible that these yard shows were generated independently from each other, while bearing conceptual and aesthetic resemblance, because of the particularity of available materials.

Holley left Birmingham as a teenager but returned to in 1971 to care for his mother. Upon his return, he was appalled at his family's living conditions: "My mama and them were still living in the 1800s, with slop jars, and outdoor bathrooms, and no running water, and pigs in the house, and chickens and things in the backyard, and ducks and things roosting in the house…Here in 1972. I found my mother living in a kennel, 1800 setting in the 1970s."[18] This aspect of his biography—abject poverty— is sometimes used as a way of proving his outsider status, a means of demonstrating how Holley grew up outside of the dominant American culture and the conveniences of the modern world. Even though his mother lived in an urban setting, this description suggests a rural environment. His mother was not the only one who lived in such conditions, in fact, she was a part of a black community where this environment would not have been uncommon. Holley's surprise can be partially explained by the fact that he had spent several years in Florida working as a cook, allowing him a relatively decent standard-of-living and less exposure to overt racism.[19] While as a child he may have experienced or least seen similar living conditions, as an adult he had become much more removed from it.

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[18] Holley, "Biography," *Souls Grown Deep* (accessed April 27, 2017).

Holley's property was in a working-class, primarily black neighborhood called Airport Heights (sometimes called Airport Hills), due to its proximity to the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport (BAA). During the early 1990s, the Birmingham Airport Authority started buying off property in the neighborhood in order to expand the airport. Holley refused to sell his property (the Birmingham Airport Authority claimed they needed the land for the airspace above it) and vigorously fought them for four years. The idea of dismantling his entire art environment and relocating to a different property seemed almost impossible. Additionally, Holley took pride in his property, and he was considered in the Birmingham arts community as something of a local icon.[20]

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[19] Living in Florida was "[The] first time ever relating to a white or any other person and not having to say "sir" or "ma'am."' Holley, "Biography," *Souls Grown Deep* (accessed April 27, 2017).

[20] Anne Rochell, "Waiting For Takeoff," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), Oct. 24, 1997, F1.

Holley was much more privileged than his fellow Airport Heights residents: he had an attorney and cultural recognition. He subsequently became the face of this dispute between the city, the Birmingham Airport Authority (BAA), and the historically African American neighborhood of Airport Heights, full of veterans and their families. Holley's grandfather was a World War I veteran. Many former military men had purchased their properties through war bonds. A few former Tuskegee Airmen, the first African Americans to serve as pilots in the United States military during World War II, lived in the neighborhood. But during this dispute with the city and airport authority, some residents, many of whom were elderly, received jail time for failing to comply with the impending expansion. According to Holley, his fellow residents were often treated by law enforcement as willfully obstinate, but many of them simply did not understand the terms of agreement, were illiterate, or did not have financial resources to vacate.

This conflict was the subject of a feature article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* "Living" section on October 24, 1997. Journalist Anne Rochell provided a sophisticated description of Holley's property and artwork in a few pithy sentences:

> On a steep, skinny lane across from the airport, at first glance looks like a garbage-strewn, slightly menacing mess surrounded by acres of red dirt—land already bought and leveled by the airport. But look closer and it becomes clear that the debris is carefully placed and constructed….These are Holley's statements about the reusability of cast-off objects, about the past playing into the future. Through Holley's eyes, each assemblage tells a story.[21]

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[21] Rochell, F1.

Rochell acknowledges that while not all viewers may see Holley's property as a site of any artistic merit, the intentionality and conceptual weight of his project marks it as distinct from a junkyard. His art environment was a local cultural landmark that would sometimes attract visitors from outside the greater Birmingham area. Thus, to dismantle it would diminish the cultural capital of the city.

Nevertheless, in 1997, the city of Birmingham condemned Holley's property and declared Eminent Domain in an effort to force him to vacate. The airport had already leveled nearly three hundred houses in his neighborhood. During the four years Holley was in dispute with the Birmingham Airport Authority his art and well-being suffered: because his property was condemned, city employees, as well as some Birmingham residents felt that it was acceptable to both take and dispose of whatever they pleased. People would come in the night and take assemblage sculptures in order to sell them for scrap metal. As Holley was in the process of moving his family to the neighboring town of Harpersville, he was absent from his Birmingham property for long periods of time. Often, he would come back to find that sanitation workers had cleared away portions of his art environment, and the city was constantly fining him for being in violation of various building and sanitation codes.

He was the neighborhood's last resident. In 1997, Holley reached a difficult settlement with the BAA. A probate court panel of real estate professionals estimated Holley's property value to be around $14,000, which was the amount the BAA offered him. Holley refused to settle for such a low amount, asking instead for $250,000, which would allow him to relocate to a property suited to a house for himself and his family, as well serve as an art environment. Such a figure accounted for the market value of his art. By 1996, Holley's work had been exhibited at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the White House, various museums across the South, and, most ironically, the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport. With the help of his lawyer and advocate, the art collector William Arnett, a mediator was appointed to re-appraise the property and work toward a settlement. Holley and BAA finally settled for $164,000.

On a larger level, the condemnation of Holley's yard symbolized the blatant disregard for black cultural life, property, and community on the part of city officials and the BAA, who took full advantage of the fact that many African Americans lacked the resources or legal knowledge to fight back properly. Even with resources, Holley was not able to secure his property, and therefore his (and previous generations of family's) rightful place within Birmingham history. It also symbolized the apparent ease with which black history and culture was so easily negated or destroyed by white authorities, regardless of the cultural or historical significance of the artist or the artwork. Even when he had Bill Arnett, a member of the white art establishment working on his behalf, Arnett himself was not able to prevent the site's destruction. Predictably, historical preservation, in both a physical and conceptual sense, remains a constant thematic concern within Holley's artistic practice. Hundreds, potentially over a thousand, works of art were destroyed in his property's condemnation. While his art environment's historical importance has appreciated in recent years, only so much can be done to reclaim its lost history.

There were too many factors at work to declare that Holley's yard was not preserved simply because he was poor, black, and formally uneducated—and yet, denying those elements seems irresponsible. In external contexts, such as when his work was included in the Smithsonian's 1981 exhibition *More Than Land or Sky: Art From Appalachia*, these identifiers of disenfranchisement worked in his favor. The Smithsonian, at a geographical and historical remove from the context of Holley's production, could claim him as a figure whose vision triumphed over his circumstances, a primitive modernist who lived in some Southern imaginary. But at home, in Birmingham, these markers worked against him, most likely because of the racial discord embedded within the city itself.

So often, Holley's artworks stand as monuments of indictment against the city itself. One of his most haunting pieces, *Three Shovels to Bury You* (1998), references Holley's personal connection to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing that occurred in Birmingham, when he was a child. According to him, his own grandmother helped dig the graves for three of the four girls who lost their lives in that attack. Holley's Birmingham property, in all of its aggressively junky glory, was an aesthetic mirror for the city itself: and most likely, the city's bureaucratic elite did not like what was being reflected back. Birmingham's violent past, with its historical abuse of convict lease labor in the blast furnaces, and the bombings associated with the Civil Rights movement, are among the difficult subject matters that Holley tackles in his artistic practice.

Rusty Tin and Rotten Wood

In 1996 Atlanta hosted the Olympic Games, the first and only city in the American Southeast to obtain this honor. The stakes were high—Atlanta would be placed in the global spotlight, therefore all programming surrounding the Games bore the burden of cultural representation. "The Olympic Cultural Programme," now referred to as the Cultural Olympiad, was formed in 1956 in order to organize and promote arts-related events surrounding the Games. Meant to encourage harmonious relations, mutual understanding and amity among the participants and attendees of the Olympic Games, the Cultural Olympiad often provided maps and other promotional materials to visitors.[22] Alongside the Atlanta Games, two major, but ideologically opposite, art exhibitions were showcased: *Rings: Five Passions in World Art*, at the High Museum of Art; and *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South,* at Atlanta City Hall East.

Rings, organized by guest curator John Carter Brown, former director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., was on display at the High Museum from July 4 – September 29 1996, and was officially a part of the Olympic Arts Festival.[23] Referring to the five interlocking "rings" of the Olympic logo, symbolizing the five major regions of the world, this blockbuster exhibition showcased 125 art objects, spanning more than 8,000 years, from five continents. Each ring corresponded to the universal ideal of human emotion, or passion: love, anguish, awe, triumph, and joy. Works were selected in accordance to how they represented one of these emotions. The idea to bring together work from around the world served as a metaphor for the Olympic Games themselves, with Atlanta at the center.

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[22] "Olympic Charter," *International Olympic Committee* (Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, February 2010).

[23] John Carter Brown, Michael Edward. Shapiro, and Jennifer Montagu. *Rings: Five Passions in World Art*, (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1996).

Souls Grown Deep was organized by the art collector, patron, and advocate, William Arnett. The exhibition was arguably the most comprehensive show to date of Southern art made by untrained African Americans, with more than thirty artists represented and more than 450 works on display. While there had been other exhibitions of African American folk or self-taught art, *Souls Grown Deep* was unique in its orientation. The 1993 show *Passionate Visions of the American South: Self-Taught Artist from 1940 to the Present*, was a very comprehensive exhibition organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art, but did not focus on exclusively on African American art. The groundbreaking exhibition *Next Generation: Southern Black Aesthetic*, put together in 1990 by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) placed the work of untrained Southern African American artists in conversation with their trained counterparts. *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South*, organized by the University Art Museum of the University of Louisiana, Lafayette in 1988, was an exhibition of art made by both black and white formally untrained artists working in the South. Finally, the groundbreaking *Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980,* shown at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington D.C. in 1982, while the best conceptual precedent, did not focus specifically on self-taught black artists working in the South.[24]

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[24] *Passionate Visions of the American South: Self-Taught Artist from 1940 to the Present*, New Orleans Museum of Art, October 23, 1993 – January 30, 1994, traveled to University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley, March 2 – July 10, 1994, San Diego Museum of Art, December 3, 1994 – January 15, 1995, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., March 4 – May 7, 1995, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, June 10 –August 27, 1995; *Next Generation: Southern Black*

According to the exhibition program, the mission of the show was to demonstrate how Southern art was a uniquely American visual phenomenon, the product of racial integration, industrialization, and continuing traditions.[25] In addition to Holley, other now-prominent vernacular artists, Thornton Dial, Clementine Hunter, and Mose Tolliver, were represented in *Souls Grown Deep*. During the exhibition's initial planning stages, the High Museum expressed interest in working with Arnett and mounting the show, but later redacted this offer due to a previous dispute with Arnett. *Rings* replaced it.[26] *Souls Grown Deep* was instead displayed in an alternate venue, at

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Aesthetic, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem North Carolina, May 5 – July 15, 1990, traveled to Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Gainesville, Florida, February 24 – April 21, 1991, Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee, July 14 – September 22, 1991, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, November, 1991 – January, 1992, Orlando Museum of Art, Orlando, Florida, March 22 – May 3, 1992; *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South*, University Art Museum, Lafayette, Louisiana, June 13 – July 31, 1987, traveled to Meadows Museum of Art, Shreveport, Louisiana, September 1 – November 1, 1987, Alexandria Museum Visual Art Center, Alexandria, Louisiana, March 26 – April 30, 1988, Mississippi State Historical Museum, Jackson, Mississippi, July 24 – September 11, 1988, Georgia Museum of Art, September 25 – November 27, 1988; *Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980,* Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., January 15 – March 28, 1982, traveled to J.B. Speed Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, April 26 – June 13, 1982, The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York, July 4 - September 12, 1982, Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, California, November 30, 1982 – February 3, 1983, The Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, Michigan, July 12 – October 2, 1983, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama, November 6 – December 26, 1983.

[25] "Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South." Michael C. Carlos Museum at City Hall East, June 29 1996. Exhibition program. Personal Papers of William Arnett. Accessed February 25, 2017.

[26] Matthew Arnett, Paul Arnett, and Lonnie Holley, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, August 22, 2016.

Atlanta City Hall East from June 29 – November 3, 1996, a space geographically distant from downtown Atlanta and lacking the context of an art museum.

The basic facts about each of these exhibitions already demonstrate their distinctive orientations*: Rings* was meant to be collectively appealing, emphasizing the global over the local*. Souls Grown Deep* was intensely regional, not only with regard to the work and artists selected, but also to the specific and challenging history of the Southern United States. *Rings* featured art by canonical, revered masters; *Souls* featured art by makers who were not self-consciously artists. One exhibition asked viewers to contemplate the universality of human emotions, regardless of history, time, or place; the other sought to expose viewers to a type of artistic production unfamiliar to most, even art historians. They could not have been more different in their curatorial intentions. These two shows also served as real-world examples of how debates surrounding the burgeoning conversation around identity politics in the 1990s played out in within the framework of public space, located in the racially-charged political environment of the Deep South.

The specifics of how *Souls Grown Deep* was moved from the High Museum to Atlanta City Hall East are convoluted and messy.[27] Arnett had a fraught relationship with the High Museum and its trustees due an event that had occurred two decades prior, in the 1970s.[28] Personal disagreements arose, and his reputation as an aggressive character followed him. After the High reneged on its initial agreement with Arnett, what followed was a series of setbacks. At the behest of then-director Maxwell Anderson, the show was picked up by the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University.[29] However, Anderson was forced out, resigning in 1995. Subsequently, a committee was hastily arranged to oversee the exhibition. Though Anderson respected Arnett's commitment to Southern vernacular art, the assigned committee was less than enthusiastic about working with Arnett and by extension, his sons, Paul and Matt, who aided in the planning and organization of the show. At various points the exhibition was cancelled, then reinstated for display. Despite all of this internal disagreement among the Arnetts and various institutions, *Souls Grown Deep* was successfully displayed at the behest of the Carlos Museum in Atlanta City Hall East—not the main City Hall building—during the Olympic Games.

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[27] For more on the specifics of the move, see Sally Anne Duncan, "Souls Grown Deep and the Cultural Politics of the Atlanta Olympics," *Radical History Review,* Issue 98 (Spring 2007), 91-118.

The committee balked at any expense and instructed the museum staff not to assist in the installation of the exhibition in any way.[30] The show was left off all Cultural Olympiad materials including maps of the city that were circulated for tourists —

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[28] Arnett was also a collector of Asian and African art. According to him, in the 1970s, he exposed a selection of Chinese porcelain as fakes at a museum fundraising event. After that, his working relationship with the High was compromised. Bill Arnett, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, August 2016.

[29] Maxwell Anderson now serves as the President of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

[30] Paul and Matt Arnett, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, August 2017

despite the fact that it was officially a part of the Olympic Arts Festival.[31] After the show opened, the overseeing committee was particularly dismayed by Holley's installation, calling it nothing more than "rusty tin and rotten wood."[32] This insult was later reclaimed by the Arnetts, and in a tongue-in-cheek gesture, named their publishing company Tinwood Alliance.

During this debacle, Holley was simultaneously preparing to exhibit work from his Birmingham environment at *Souls Grown Deep* and fighting on behalf of his threatened yard. For nearly a decade, William Arnett had been strategically collecting and transporting sculptures from Holley's yard in an effort to help its preservation, which had already suffered significant damage during the planning phase of the exhibition. Rather than simply placing his stand-alone sculptures within the gallery space, the Arnetts and Holley constructed a site-specific, immersive installation of works at the entrance of the show, closely recreating his art environment [Figs. 9, 10]. The historical and cultural context of the Southern black yard show has been inadequately understood and addressed within the museum space, denaturing the overall impact of the objects on display and depriving the viewer of a comprehensive understanding of the work. The placement of Holley's work within the exhibition *as a yard show* was a significant and a radical curatorial gesture.

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[31] Careful study of the ephemera and press materials produced for the Olympic Arts Festival demonstrate early interest in publicizing the show, especially during the year of 1994 when Anderson was still the Director of the Carlos Museum. After that press decreases substantially, and the Cultural Olympiad map did not alert visitors to the presence of *Souls Grown Deep*, which would have been especially important given that Atlanta City Hall East was removed from the downtown area surrounding the Olympic Games. Kenan Research Library, Atlanta History Center.

[32] Matt Arnett, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, August 2017.

A dense concentration of assemblage sculptures, chain-link fencing, found objects, and a tin shed were all set atop a floor covered with dirt and native plant material. This is what viewers confronted when they entered the gallery space of *Souls Grown Deep* at City Hall East. A floor plan of the exhibition indicates that viewers would first encounter the exhibition through a long passageway within Holley's installation, and then turn the corner to find another passageway on the other side, creating a U-shaped path. This meant that viewers were not able to see any of the other galleries or objects in the show before walking through Holley's installation. Photographs, maps, and a key created specifically for Holley's environment indicate its overwhelming and immersive nature. It was difficult to discern where one object began and another one ended. Rags and other objects hung from the ceiling. The inclusion of the dirt floor literally brought the outside world inside.

Holley's entrance was meant to be deliberately jarring—it served as an immersive transitional point intended to prime the viewer for the discrete objects one would encounter in the exhibition.[33] As William's son, Paul Arnett explained,

> The original idea was to include several installations that recreated yard shows, but in the end there was only the Holley. Making the viewers enter through his installation, followed immediately by a "pristine" modernist-style display of the

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[33] Matt Arnett, Paul Arnett, and Lonnie Holley, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, August 22, 2016.

> very same types of art objects in his recreated yard show, was the ambulatory prism through which we wanted to present the genre.[34]

In one of the only available installations shots from the exhibition, one can see objects in the foreground of the environment that have subsequently been displayed independently from it, such as *Mith* [Myth] (1993) and *Early Beginner* (1994) [Figure 11, 12]. To encounter objects like *Mith* outside of this installation is a profoundly different aesthetic experience than to see it within his larger art environment. In the original context of their creation, many of his objects were not intended to be viewed as discrete entities outside of his environment. Holley's installation provided fundamentally important context not only for his own work, but as well, the work of others in *Souls Grown Deep*, such as Thornton Dial, Purvis Young, and Dilmus Hall. The decision to include his yard as an installation made an important overall point about the ethos of the works of art on display: many of them were drawn from yards like Holley's. *Souls Grown Deep* serves as an important, yet overlooked, curatorial example for future exhibitions featuring work drawn from black yard shows.

In an effort to display Southern African American art in all its material richness, the selected group of artists featured in *Souls Grown Deep* created work in the form of drawings, sculpture, painting, assemblage, woodcarving, and collage. Placing Holley's installation at the entrance introduced visitors to every kind of media represented elsewhere in the show and prominently put on display just how many of these artists worked with found or recycled materials. Holley's installation provided necessary visual context for viewers without relying on descriptive or discursive wall text. It showed viewers, rather than told them. Visitors would then be primed for the rest of the exhibition with the implicit knowledge that many of the objects on display were drawn from yard contexts.

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[34] Paul Arnett, interview with the author, San Francisco, CA. June 4, 2017.

Despite the parochial attitudes mobilized against it, *Souls Grown Deep* was an exhibition with lofty curatorial ambitions that, according to critical response, were mostly achieved. The critics and museum professionals who did find their way to exhibition recognized not only its value, but also its unfortunate placement in a location far away from downtown foot traffic and cultural activity. Writing in *Newsweek,* the critic Malcolm Jones lamented:

> The show that ought to be showcased at the High Museum, the show that best exemplifies the South's unique contribution to art, has been relegated to a lesser space in City Hall East, a venue that's harder to find but worth the trouble. *Souls Grown Deep*, an enormous collection of vernacular art—what used to be called primitive art—by Southern African-Americans is the show to see in Atlanta.[35]

This sentiment is echoed in the guestbook comments collected from the exhibition. As an employee of the Smithsonian stated, "It was a surprisingly powerful reflection of rural artwork."[36]

In a review of the Cultural Olympiad programming as a whole, *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight stated that the "visual arts venues brought decidedly mixed results," with one exception being *Souls Grown Deep*, "a terrific show of an art rarely encountered outside the South." He goes on to further praise the exhibition, as a demonstration of "the potential power in a highly personal art commonly made from castoff materials, by artists who have themselves been castoffs from American society."[37] With regard to *Rings*, Knight leveled a scathing critique, declaring it to "be an unintentionally hilarious compendium of mostly masterpieces from around the world, all held together by a kitschy thesis breathtaking in its wrongheadedness. Rarely has so much great art been put to such lame use."[38]

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[35] Malcolm Jones Jr., "The Arts Games," *Newsweek*. July 29, 1996, 64-65.

[36] Barbara Draghon, *Souls Grown Deep*: *African American Vernacular Art of the South* guestbook comment. Personal papers of Matthew Arnett, accessed August 22, 2016.

Rings may have brought a record number of visitors to the High Museum , but it was heavily criticized. Art world critics, saw it as a transparent attempt to evoke superficial, and ultimately empty, truths. Roberta Smith criticized Brown's decision to organize the show around the five "passions", stating:

> There's a feel-good redundancy to these emotions that palls by the show's end, leaving one hungry for art emphasizing less sportsmanlike but no less real passions like rage, fear, disgust, jealousy or despair….these wonderful objects are constantly degraded and limited by the show's simplistic universalizing and the inclusion of mediocre works that don't so much arouse the emotions as pander to and manipulate them. [39]

In an attempt to organize a world-class exhibition intended to establish Atlanta's place in the international, or at the very least national, art sphere, *Rings* was a critical failure. By privileging the global over the local, the High Museum failed to take advantage of the opportunity to showcase its regional visual production. Up until this point, there had been limited institutional recognition of Southern black vernacular art beyond the landmark Corcoran exhibition *Black Folk Art in America: 1930-1980*. In the years that followed its display, *Souls Grown Deep* came to be viewed as the intellectual sequel to the Corcoran exhibition, a show that expanded upon and corrected many of the original ideas initiated by curators Jane Livingston and John Beardsley.[40]

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[37] Christopher Knight, "Wins, Losses of Olympic Proportions," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1996, http://articles.latimes.com/1996-07-04/entertainment/ca-20925_1_visual-arts/2. (accessed March 28, 2017).

[38] Knight, (accessed March 28, 2017).

[39] Roberta Smith, "Esthetic Olympics, In 5 Shades For 5 Rings," *The New York Times*, July 4, 1996, http://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/04/arts/art-review-esthetic-olympics-in-5-shades-for-5-rings.html. (accessed March 28, 2017).

Souls Grown Deep also addressed the contemporary issues that faced these artists. Given that many of the artists in the exhibition—Sam Doyle, Joe Minter, and Ronald Locket, for example—made work about current affairs and the pressing social issues around them, acknowledging this aspect of their collective practice was curatorially responsive. Even so, the Arnetts emphasized this point in the written material, stating that this "art has been created in areas where the greatest inequities have occurred," places "where deep-rooted traditions have come into collision with industrialization, mass-media, racial integration, and increased social and demographic mobility."[41] Later, in the two-volume text initially meant to accompany the exhibition, Paul Arnett furthered this argument:

> Most of the artists in *Souls Grown Deep* have lived through, and been influenced by, the civil rights movement and the aftermath of its revolution," but furthermore, "they have interacted with other manifestations of postmodernity only indirectly related to expanded civil liberties of black Americans: the advent of an age of information and information technologies, the expansion of

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[40] Both John Beardsley and Jane Livingston contributed to the *Souls Grown Deep* books that were intended to serve as exhibition catalogs for the show, but for various reasons were published five years after the exhibition closed in 2001.

[41] "Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South," exhibition program. Personal Papers of William Arnett. Accessed February 25, 2017.

> consumer economics into every recess of our planet, and the imperative to forge identities in a mobile and rapidly pluralizing society."[42]

Rather than positioning them as rural and folksy makers with little concern for the world outside their insular communities, the show addressed head-on the difficult conditions from which these works took root. Entrenched in Southern culture, the visual traditions of black artists were borne initially of slavery and a culture of isolation, segregation, and racism. But more than that, these artists were also members of the postmodern world, grappling with—not living outside of—the technological and cultural advancements of the last decades of the twentieth century.

Souls Grown Deep was at once regional and specific, but it also made a larger contribution and argument about Southern vernacular art's challenge to canonical histories of modern art. Tracing visual inheritance, the precise dating of the objects, and substantiating archival evidence are all challenges that present themselves when dealing with Southern black art. The exhibition showcased important examples of assemblage and found object sculpture, non-representational, abstract painting, and in Holley's case, site-specific installation. While many of the objects were created in the 1980s and 1990s, it is important to remember that William Arnett selected work based on what was available to him. Some artists would also destroy or disassemble objects, or, with regard to Thornton Dial's practice, bury them throughout his yard. According to artist interviews conducted by William Arnett, these visual art practices had been occurring throughout the entirety of the twentieth century even if the works on the display did not reflect that in full.[43]

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[42] Paul Arnett, "An Introduction to Other Rivers," *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Vol. 1.* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000), xix.

Contemporary Articulations

In “The Emancipatory Pedagogy of Performance Art,” (1999) the artist and educator Charles R. Garoian outlines the benefits of inflecting performance art strategies into pedagogical practice: “[it] represents the praxis of the post-modern ideals of progressive education, a process through which spectators/students learn to challenge the ideologies of institutionalized learning (schooled culture) in order to facilitate political agency and to develop critical citizenship.”[44] This framework describes two central, and intersectional, aspects of Holley’s artistic practice: performance, particularly language-oriented performance, and pedagogy. Another defining aspect of Holley’s approach to performance is its relationship to material objects, especially discrete works of art of his own making.

As American studies and folk art scholar Bernard L. Herman describes, Holley “speaks from the made thing as if it were a vessel from which he decants the words it contains. And, as the words flow forth, he replenishes the reservoir that is the object.”[45]

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[43] William and Paul Arnett, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, August 2017.

[44] Charles R. Garoian, *Performing Pedagogy: Toward an Art of Politics.* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 39.

[45] Bernard L. Herman, "On Performance," *Something to Take My Place: The Art of Lonnie Holley* (Charleston, S.C.: Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, College of Charleston, School of the Arts, 2015), 35.

In an exchange with Herman, Holley describes his piece, *Mule Trying to Feed Myself* (2008) [Figure 13]. The transcription of Holley's description is an example of how his verbal analysis adds an additional layer of meaning to the object:

> In a wonderful city like Birmingham, Alabama, as much as it had going for it, as much iron ore that came up out of that ground—the mule still had to try to feed himself…The saddle of this right here is an old lady's handiwork, trying to keep the house clean. The head of the mule itself is a many-head. Look at the many-head. If I did say 888 zillion times, 888 zillion steps, and on each step an angel got eight heads. Look at all these different heads this mule got going on. To speak about what? The struggle. The chains [Grasps and rattles the chains.] Being treated like a dog and not having enough to eat. Look at this here, it was an old horse [sawhorse]. You look at that thing! Somebody worked on that thing, man. Somebody worked this horse to build their house. You know what I'm saying? I love gathering stuff that belonged to and has been used by somebody. That's the most wonderful thing to be able to gather. Everybody says 'It has spirit.' No! It has information! Let's not put everything and call it spirit. Let's call it information. That's what we try to gather.[46]

This account is characteristic of Holley's interactions between himself, the viewer/participant, and art object. It begins with iconographic unpacking—Holley wants the viewer to learn, to be able to *see*—the symbolic meanings behind each part of the assemblage. Each part has its own history (often related to labor), each part contains *information*. Rather than divining only spiritual meaning out of the object, Holley is more interested in the archival, historical, and individual possibilities. Additionally, he utilizes the call-and-response format, punctuated by imperatives, in this case the word "look."

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[46] Lonnie Holley as quoted through Bernard L. Herman, "On Performance," *Something to Take My Place: The Art of Lonnie Holley* (Charleston, S.C.: Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, College of Charleston, School of the Arts, 2015), 38.

The performative aspect of Holley's creative practice was addressed in the 2015 exhibition, *When the Curtain Never Comes Down: Performance Art and the Alter Ego,* held at the American Folk Art Museum in New York. The exhibition, curated by Valerie Rousseau in 2015, explored the under-studied genre of outsider performance art, featuring artists primarily from Europe and the Americas, many of whom were institutionalized at some point in their lives.[47] The exhibition covered significant and unexplored art historical territory. The idea of an "outsider performance artist" had never been addressed in a scholarly or museological manner until this exhibition. It was not without some problematic inclusions, however, especially the inclusion of Holley. His inclusion in this context, as Leisa Rundquist noted in her critique of the exhibition, was conceptually inappropriate and positioned him as an outsider, even though that designation was no longer applicable.[48]

The exhibition featured work, as Rousseau explained, that had "seldom been documented, recorded, or preserved….[and indicated] no dependence on the Western art canon."[49] Furthermore, she positioned Holley as an artist "historically associated to archetypes of the messenger, healer, or shaman because of the 'revelatory experience' manifested" in the "unexpected and dissonant encounters" he has with viewers/participants.[50] Emphasizing the spiritual aspect of Holley's performance—and while there is certainly evidence for this interpretation—overlooks the more socially and culturally engaged aspects of his practice. It aligns him with figures of historical isolation: healers, shamans, or religious messengers who often live separate from their respective communities. Other artists featured in the exhibition include Swiss mental patient Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930) and Heinrich Anton Müller (1869-1930), relatively well-known artists in the realm of *art brut*, a historical category created by French artist and writer Jean Dubuffet. A more rigid category than outsider art, *Art Brut* demands that its artists be completely untouched or "uncooked" by culture and the world around them.[51] By being placed in context and direct association with these institutionalized, often reclusive artists, Holley was, curatorially speaking, "othered."

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[47] Valérie Rousseau, Anne-Imelda Radice, and Mario Del Curto. *When the Curtain Never Comes Down: Performance Art and the Alter Ego*, (New York: American Folk Art Museum, 2015).

[48] Leisa Rundqusit, *When the Curtain Never Comes Down: Performance Art and the Alter Ego* by Valerie Rousseau. *caa.reviews* (July 21, 2016) doi: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2016.94, http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/2678#.WUwedXXyvVo

[49] Valerie Rousseau, *When the Curtain Never Comes Down: Performance Art and the Alter Ego.* (New York: American Folk Art Museum, 2015), 7.

This interpretation of Holley's performance ignores his radical pedagogical philosophy and possible relationship to other black socially engaged artists such as Theaster Gates (b. 1973), whose 2012 performance *See, Sit, Sup, Sing: Holding Court,* used salvaged classroom materials to create an unexpected learning environment within the Studio Museum; or the Detroit artist Tyree Guyton, five years Holley's junior (b. 1955), whose *Heidelberg Project* (1986-present) turned a dilapidated neighborhood in that city into an indoor/outdoor art installation. Contextualizing Holley within the broader realm of black performance and community-oriented practices does a number of things: it places him within a tradition of black artists who have utilized art to confront and combat poverty; it also positions the black male body as a site of knowledge and education and understands his linguistic expression—his black speech—as an essential component of his artistic practice [Fig. 14, 15].

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[50] Ibid, 21.

[51] Dubuffet addressed his formulation of *art brut* in a number of texts. See: *Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre,* (Paris: Gaillmard, 1946), *L'Art Brut préféré aux art culturels* (Paris: René Drouin, 1949), *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants, tome 1, 2,* (Paris: Gaillmard, 1967), *Asphixiante culture,* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1968).

In her exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art,* Curator Valerie Cassel Oliver argues that black performance has always existed in America, it emerged as "a dysfunctional inheritance born from mastering both personal and communal survival."[52] Though various manifestations of black performance are everyday occurrences, such as black speech, mannerisms, style, and movement, Oliver contends that these forms expression have not been historically codified as performance art. Through his material choices, Holley is first and foremost a visual artist. But he is also a performer. To gesture towards a psychoanalytic interpretation, Holley's performative nature could be seen as a method of coping with personal trauma. His performative manner is at once a way to allow viewers into his world—but also to keep them out. Holley's actions and speech are intentional, even if they are at times opaque. This is done most prominently through his calculated use of language.

As Bernard Herman further describes in his essay on Holley, written in 2015 for the exhibition *Something to Take My Place*, Holley's performances occupy the intersection between premeditation and improvisation: “The action reveals that, no matter how ad hoc the performance of his work may seem, it is, in fact, invariably responsive to a rhetorical moment…his performances are strategic—they have a destination, even though that destination may not be readily apparent to the viewer-listener or the artist.”[53] Holley’s penchant for stream-of-consciousness thought and use of a distinctive personal vocabulary can be difficult to follow. Holley’s vernacular, with regard to both his use of language and artistic practice, are emblematic of the concept known as “signifyin,’” a language of blackness theorized by Henry Louis Gates Jr., who contends that racial difference is encoded through the particularities of a rhetorical and linguistic process.[54] In speech and music, the formal aspects most commonly associated with it are rhyme, rhythm, and incremental repetition, interlaced with improvisation and phonetic manipulation for emphasis and syncopation.[55] Wordplay, metaphor, and the use of homophones are common signifyin’ devices within Holley’s work. They are used most often in crafting titles of artworks, song lyrics, and inserted within everyday conversation.

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[52] Valerie Cassel Oliver, *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2013), 14.

The most illustrative example of his linguistic signifyin’ is his use of the term “blacksmithing,” or more generally, “’smithing,” which is perhaps the cornerstone of his personal vernacular.[56] Holley describes his practice as various forms of "'smithing" in order to emphasize the physical and intellectual *labor* that the creative process entails, that is, it is a conceptual construct used to create a nimble linguistic space for artistic creation. He uses "blacksmithing" flexibly because the term can function in a number of ways: first, in reference to the skills he learned from his grandfather, who was a blacksmith. "Blacksmithing" is also a direct reference to his blackness and status as an African American artist. Additionally, Holley uses "'smithing" as a suffix to a number of words: "wordsmithing," "brainsmithing," "digitalsmithing," and "humanitiesmithing" are just a few of the most common examples.

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[53] Bernard Herman, "On Performance," *Something to Take My Place: The Art of Lonnie Holley* (Charleston, S.C.: Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, College of Charleston, School of the Arts, 2015) 37.

[54] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 66.

[55] Scott Ruff, “Signifyin’: African-American language to landscape,” Thresholds, No. 35, difference (2009), 66.

Holley describes the origins of 'smithing and the importance of inheritance:

> Art is the talents and the skills that is passed on from our mothers and our fathers and our parents, all the things that they have learned. We inherit them some kinda way. A lot of people think that you gotta go to school to learn something—you don't. It's already in you. All you had to do was watch somebody and then you learn.[57]

Holley's radical ideology comes from a decidedly traditional, even primary place: the family. 'Smithing is what is passed down from one generation to another, via observation and practice, rather than learned in an institutional setting. It is actually a return to the first form of education to which one is exposed. Rather than view this informal, or familial, education as secondary, Holley reconfigures educational agency as belonging to both the family and the student—the knowledge is "already in you," ready to be given to another.

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[56] His resignification of the word "art" is worth mentioning, where similarly to "Cold Titty Mama," {not introduced until page 90} "art" becomes an acronym. ART stands for "All Rendered Truth" in Holley's vernacular. Lonnie Holley, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, February 2017.

[57] Lonnie Holley, as quoted in my short film "Lonnie Holley: All Rendered Truth," Filmed [February 2017]. Vimeo video, 15:03. Posted [February 2017]. https://vimeo.com/205828681

'Smithing in all its forms is an essential component of his pedagogical philosophy, and it is here that his use of and interest in performance and pedagogy intersect most crucially. In his Birmingham environment, and even through the present, Holley often enthusiastically engages in impromptu art lessons—his method of passing on the 'smithing skills that were passed down to him. In anticipation of random teaching opportunities, Holley has a tendency to carry a bag of materials with him at all times, not only to use during a lesson but to collect any materials of interest he may encounter through the course of any given day. This pedagogical aspect of his practice is not often emphasized in discussions of his work, but even his day-to-day habits are governed in part by his desire to teach. Many central aspects of his artistic philosophy—emphasis on the local, relational, and environmental—have been subjects of great discussion within the discipline of art education in recent years. Articles touting the importance of understanding teaching as "an embodied and relational way of knowing," locating art education "within a critical pedagogy of place," and conceiving of art as "an intersubjective process in which meaning is derived collectively."[58] Holley's pedagogical approach incorporates all of the aforementioned tactics, in spite of—or, more interestingly, perhaps due to—his own lack of formal education.

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[58] Kimberly Powell and Lisa Lajevic, "Emergent Places in Preservice Art Teaching: Lived Curriculum, Relationality, and Embodied Knowledge" *Studies in Art Education,* Vol. 53, No.1 (Fall 2011), 35-52; Mark A. Graham, "Art, Ecology, and Art Education: Locating Art Education in Critical Place-Based Pedagogy," *Studies in Art Education,* Vol. 48, No. 4, Special Issue in Eco-Responsibility in Art Education (Summer 2007), 375-391; Margaret Meban, "The Aesthetic as a Process of Dialogical Interaction: A Case of Collective Art Praxis," *Art Education,* Vol. 62, No.6 (November 2009), 33-38.

This research within the field of art education champions the value of methods Holley inherited and developed on his own, that he put into place without traditional resources. While Holley is portrayed as a self-taught artist, however, little is made of the skills and methods he gleaned from his family and community. Holley's practice is deeply invested in the power of pedagogy. One can teach, and most significantly, learn how to teach, outside of a formal, academic setting—and for many generations of African Americans, this was a necessity. Formal, institutionalized education was never a given in Holley's life nor in his family's. His desire to teach others is borne from both a personal and historical deprivation, and more subversively, serves as a rebuke against the very institutions he was denied access to as child and young adult.

Holley's investment in ecology is extremely timely, in that his work often demonstrates an anxiety about impending natural disasters, in addition to ones that have already occurred. In his most recent art environment, which was located across the street from his Atlanta residence, Holley created his *Disaster Tree* (ca. 2015-17) in honor of all of the lives lost in recent natural disasters, like Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Sandy. In *Disaster Tree*, Holley arranged used clothing and draped various objects on the branches of one the taller trees on the property. The environment was destroyed by a vandal in March 2017, and as a result Holley lost many works of art. His desire to collect and preserve all the material excesses that threaten to pollute the world by creating an art environment out of them is also a desire to establish historical memory. Natural disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, leveled whole communities, destroyed homes, property, and took human life. Once the physical “stuff” of a place is gone, so often that means the history disappears, too. His reclamation of junk, waste, and destroyed objects is an attempt to hold on to threatened histories.

At the same time, Holley has an ambivalent relationship with technology. He acknowledges its power, pervasive presence, and necessity, but resents how technological obsolescence creates so much waste—such as all the telephones, television sets, and computers that are discarded each year because they no longer possess use-value. Holley’s Birmingham property contained many television sets, kitchen appliances, and other electronics. After the collapse of steel manufacturing, telecommunications became the leading industry in Birmingham, which made discarded computers and cellular phones more readily available.[59] As he explained in video footage that appears to date from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, "I think for me to use store-bought things it wouldn't have the same amount of impact as it do to the art collectors or to that child….the best things are freely given…..eventually shiny and new things are gonna be thrown away too."[60] One can classify his orientation as broadly anti-capitalist, he sees capitalism as inherently wasteful and reckless, and an ideology that operates without concern for the individual or the environment.

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[59] Sarah M. Scultz, “Interpreting the Assemblages of Lonnie Holley Through His Performative Explanations,” (Master’s Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010), 30-32.

[60] Lonnie Holley, interview with Bill Arnett, videotaped recording. Date unknown. V-T 20491_2, 3, 4, 7, Souls Grown Deep Photographic Collection. Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, NC. Accessed February 2017.

Holley has a name for his technological ambivalence, CTM: which stands for both "Cold Titty Mama" and "Computer Technology Management." *Cold Titty Mama* is also a reference to series of art works began in 1999 under this title [Figure 16]. Though this series post-dates the existence of his art environment, it is an extension of concerns that have plagued him since the early period of his artistic practice. *Cold Titty Mama I* is a four-and-a-half feet tall freestanding assemblage that combines computer-age technological devices and industrial materials into an anthropomorphized form. A computer monitor functions as the head of the female figure, while two cylindrical cans jut out from her air conditioner torso as an indicator of breasts. An oil drum functions as her legs, and the whole sculpture sits on two car batteries that serve as her feet. The entire sculpture is a commentary on our increasing attachment to technology, so much so that we are willing to "suckle at her teat," though she is unable to provide any actual nourishment—and also a rather misogynistic metaphor of technology as a withholding mother.[61]

Technology also can invite physical disengagement, and social removal. Holley seeks to pass down the technical, practical skills he has acquired in the same way such skills were passed down to him. This requires direct, one-on-one personal interaction, which can be antithetical to the kinds of engagement new technologies and platforms promote, such as social media. It is always possible to "make something from nothing" if one possesses the creative and technical skills necessary to transform waste into art. His pedagogical philosophy is not geared towards teaching children how to make objects of utility (though this does happen at times) but instructing them on how to unlock the creative potential that sits inside of every person.

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[61] Holley's anxiety about technology has only increased over time. Katie Geha, writing for *ArtForum* about his 2017 mini-retrospective at the Atlanta Contemporary Arts Center, observes how "Holley often remarks on the dangers of information and technology, and the way they can foster an almost paranoid need to remember the past." Katie Geha, "Lonnie Holley," *Artforum,* January 12, 2017. https://www.artforum.com/index.php?pn=picks&id=66564&view=print (accessed October 13, 2017).

Should everyone tap into this radical creative potential, Holley argues, we could collectively absorb and transform all the waste that threatens humanity's existence on Earth.[62] To do so would be the ultimate act of preservation—in the same way that even the smallest of his objects is an attempt to recuperate the value of the discarded detritus from which it is composed and to preserve individual history. Taking his very first art objects, his sandstone tombstones, as the ultimate example, Holley demonstrates just how an industrial cast-off can be transformed into a deeply affective memorial. His Birmingham environment was nothing short of a micro-version of something he envisions being enacted on a global scale. The radicality of his work lies in his anti-capitalist and ecologically-minded orientation, which was manifested on the largest scale in his Birmingham art environment.

Furthermore, his "junky" aesthetic demands that viewers question embedded, elitist values that privilege only certain kinds of beauty and dictate what can and cannot be classified as aesthetically pleasing art. The formal challenge of his art comes from his deliberate selection of junk materials. As Gillian Whiteley writes in her book, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash*, "Waste is, of course, an adjunct of luxury. Junk, trash, garbage, rubbish, refuse—whatever we call it—is dependent on wealth and excess production."[63] Holley's assertion that "even shiny and new things are gonna be thrown away too" is an inherently political statement. It exposes the artifice of luxury, and rooted within that declaration is a moral critique of capitalism's fetish for unnecessary physical production. The fact that junk is often considered to be aesthetically displeasing is undoubtedly connected to its origins and senescence within a capitalist system of value.

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[62] One of the most prominent exhibitions to address the intersection between waste, globalization, and art was *Recycled and Reseen: Folk Art From the Global Scrap Heap,* organized by the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1996. The show featured more than seven hundred objects from fifty countries.

Holley's affinity for junk is more often connected to his black identity, or personal biography, than it is to his critique of capitalism. Curator Leslie Umberger asserts this common connection, as every piece of junk or discard was, "for Holley, an ongoing self-affirmation and incessant ritual of a person who, himself, had been "thrown away" too many times."[64] This biographical metaphor fails to acknowledge the larger connection between capitalism's discards and the black body. Black bodies, in the form of slavery, were the first and foundational product of capitalism in the United States, emphasized by the ease with which black bodies were discarded when no longer useful. Holley's critical position towards capitalism is also informed by its racial history and relationship to the American economy.

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[63] Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash,* (London: I.B. Taurus and Co., 2011), 4.

[64] Umberger, *Something to Take My Place,* 17.

Holley's use of junk should not necessarily be separated from his black identity, rather, this relationship needs to be properly understood within Holley's own radical epistemology and the larger history of other African American artists who worked with material discards, not just cursorily attached to his biography. "What I'm doing here, I think Malcolm said it best: by any means necessary," Holley states, "We can make art where we have to. Dr. King, if you remember, wrote a sermon on a piece of toilet paper."[65] These statements are examples of how Holley connects black history to trash: not by lowering this history to the status of garbage, but rather, unlocking the subversive potential of junk through this association. When Holley states that he makes art "by any means necessary," he is also alluding to his use of lost or discarded materials. Using junk is a "necessary means" for Holley as an artist, a practice that grew not only out of a lack of traditional art materials, but also out of a recuperative desire to unlock the historical and aesthetic possibilities embedded in every object.

His epistemological orientation towards junk is further emphasized in his statement about Martin Luther King Jr., as it appeals to both the ability (can) and necessity (have to) of art-making for the collective (we), while demonstrating the capacity for an object so closely associated with being discarded (toilet paper) to be charged with historical meaning, especially for black communities (Dr. King functioning metonymically here).The idea that Dr. King was not above using toilet paper in his own work, that in times of need even the lowliest of household objects was a worthy vessel for a sermon, clearly appealed to Holley. If toilet paper can contain a sermon, then anything can be used to create a work of art.

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[65] Lonnie Holley as quoted through Mark Binelli, "Lonnie Holley, the Insider's Outsider," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2014, (Accessed March 15, 2017). https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/magazine/lonnie-holley-the-insiders-outsider.html. Holley's reference to Dr. King's toilet paper sermon is particularly poignant, given that the Civil Rights leader was assassinated after supporting the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, Tennessee (the "I AM A MAN" protest).

Perhaps the most compelling artistic comparison to draw is one between Holley and Sanford Biggers (b. 1970), a Los Angeles-born multidisciplinary artist trained at Morehouse College and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Their artistic practices share many conceptual and material cornerstones: they both work in a wide range of media including music and performance, cite pedagogy as a foundational aspect of their work, and have a vested interest in the power of cultural symbols. In one of Biggers' most recent projects, he engages with the American quilt and its history—a visual tradition all of the Birmingham-Bessemer artists reference in their work. Biggers took quilts received as donations (deliberately not purchased by the artist, as in his mind, the donated quilts held more historical and affective power) and modified, painted, and added to them.[66]

Inspired by the possible use of quilts during the Underground Railroad (an apocryphal, often repeated mythology of African American history) as well as African textiles, Biggers responds to the layers of forgotten history already embedded within each quilt. He does so through the application of painted imagery, embroidery (*Shifter*, 2014), and even the dismantling of the quilt and reconstructing it into a three-dimensional object (*Jonquil*, 2017) [Fig. 17, 18]. As Biggers explains: "So the idea is that, if these quilts indeed have a coded language, that I come in as an intervener hundreds of years after the quilts have been made as the next part of the collaboration and fabrication of the quilt, and I am adding another layer of coded meaning."[67] Neither Holley nor Biggers views objects as static vessels. Objects are activated, added to, reinterpreted, and transformed by them. That process is part of these objects' lives, and by consciously inserting themselves into the objects' material character, Holley and Biggers are staking a claim in history.

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[66] Carly Olson, "Sanford Biggers Make Art Out of Antique Quilts," *Architectural Digest,* August 31, 2017. https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/sanford-biggers-antique-quilts-marianne-boesky (accessed October 12, 2017).

"Two of my favorite materials are history and dialogue."[68] Such a statement could have been made by either Biggers or Holley, but it was made by Biggers during his 2016 TED Talk, a popular program run by a nonprofit in which artists, thinkers, scholars, and celebrities give short invited talks that are widely viewed, and accessible online. Biggers is particularly adept at explaining the genesis, creation, and processes behind his work. His manner of speaking is straightforward, accessible (he avoids jargon), and measured. As discussed earlier, Holley is also a gifted orator and interpreter of his art, albeit in a very different fashion: his vernacular and manner of speaking are improvisatory, nonlinear, and poetic. Biggers's work, while often containing found objects, is decidedly more minimal in its aesthetic than Holley's saturated visual universe.

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[67] Sanford Biggers and Laura Huston, "Coded Quilt Drawings: Notes From Sanford Biggers' Art Talk," *Nashville Scene,* November 25, 2013. http://www.nashvillescene.com/arts-culture/article/13051554/coded-quilt-drawings-notes-from-sanford-biggers-art-talk (accessed October 12, 2017).

[68] Sanford Biggers, "An artist's unflinching look at racial violence." https://www.ted.com/talks/sanford_biggers_an_artist_s_unflinching_look_at_racial_violence#t-18351

Sanford Biggers could never be labeled an outsider artist. Of course, this is due to the fact that Biggers is formally trained and holds a teaching position at Columbia University. He is firmly entrenched in the world of art institutions and the dialogue that surrounds them. Such institutionalized status infers a self-conscious intentionality: it can be assumed, by extension, that every aspect of Biggers' practice is deliberate and carefully conceptualized. A defining factor of difference is that this assumption has not historically been extended to Holley's practice. Instead, Holley has been seen as shamanic figure, a conduit for raw, unfettered visual expression that indiscriminately pours out of him.[69] These interpretations of Holley's practice disavow his own artistic agency: that his work is intentional, and derives from a complex conceptual orientation as well.

Lonnie Holley's multidisciplinary artistic practice has explored and continues to explore almost every dominant form of media prevalent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: assemblage, installation art, site-specific work, performance—not to mention drawings, paintings, and more recently, digital work (the latter three not discussed here). In his object-based work, Holley simultaneously re-encodes and excavates meaning from objects, like an archaeologist of historical amnesia. He also encodes garbage and junked objects with a sense of historical gravitas they may have never even possessed in the first place, and in doing so, creates a reservoir for a narrative strain that may otherwise be lost.

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[69] Mark Binelli's *Times* profile on Holley is peppered with statements that could easily be interpreted along these lines: "Holley's need to create borders on the compulsive. He sketches faces on napkins in restaurants, pastes together collages in notebooks while riding from one show to the next….Like the "mental flights" his lyrics take, Holley's monologues can be fascinating, but also, without musical accompaniment, exhausting in a way that will make your head hurt if you try too hard to follow his line of thought….the state of Holley's living space, the obsessive and all-encompassing nature of his art-making, his scattered manner of speaking, all raised uncomfortable questions for me about the line between an eccentric creative person and a more genuinely troubled one…. In Holley's case, the sheer quantity of his output guarantees artistic highs and lows, which are unavoidable when a lack of editing is such an integral part of his creative method." "Lonnie Holley, the Insider's Outsider," *The New York Times*.

In his essay for the landmark exhibition that he also curated at the Studio Museum in 2014, *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South,* Thomas Lax uses the term "disidentification" with regard to the categories of outsider or folk art. Outsider and folk art narratives, as Lax notes, are rife with "easy sentimentality and racial uplift."[70] The term disidentification refers to the process of separating and reinscribing encoded meaning. In a similar vein, this project also desires to dis-identify Holley from outsider or folk narratives. Holley is no outsider: his practice is utterly embedded within contemporary concerns—it is impossible to understand his work without referencing Hurricane Katrina, global waste management, and Black Lives Matter.

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[70] Thomas Lax, *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2014), 15. Lax is drawing from José Estaban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

Chapter Two: How Thornton Dial (Re)invented the Idea of Modern Art

Sometime in early 1990, Thornton Dial (1928-2016) began experimenting intensely with drawing as an artistic medium. Up until that point, he primarily made mixed media assemblages in two and three dimensions. He took up drawing, which he considered a "fine art" medium (something taught in art schools), after a critic reviewed his first one-man show, *Thornton Dial: Ladies in the United States,* and declared, "Mr. Dial's drawing is crude."[1] In response to that review, he retreated to his studio and immersed himself in the practice of drawing, incorporating watercolor painting along the way. Proving his command over this form of art making, one typically associated with formal training and artistic "sophistication," Dial went on to create around two thousand dynamic and idiosyncratic drawings.[2] While he is still best known for his assemblages and paintings, drawing remained an important medium for the entirety of his artistic career. They represent his largest body of work.

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[1] Catherine Fox, "Self-Taught Artist Makes Compelling Case for Human Rights," *Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution*, March 13, 1990. *Thornton Dial: Ladies of the United States*, Library Art Gallery, Kennesaw State College, Marietta, Georgia Gallery, 1990 (exact dates cannot be confirmed).

[2] The exact number of Dial drawings is unknown. Joanne Cubbs, curator of *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial*, at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, states there are "innumerable drawings." Paige Williams, in her long-form essay about the relationship between Bill Arnett and Thornton Dial written for the *New Yorker*, writes that there are more than two thousand. *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial*, (Indianapolis: The Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2011), 191. "Composition in Black and White," *The New Yorker,* August 13 & 19, 2013. Accessed June 1, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/08/12/composition-in-black-and-white-2.

Recognizing the significance of this medium within Dial's oeuvre, American Studies scholar Bernard L. Herman organized the exhibition, *Thornton Dial: Thoughts on Paper,* at the Ackland Art Museum in 2012.[3] In the accompanying catalog, Herman recounts a pivotal event from 1990 involving Dial and his benefactor, the art collector William (Bill) Arnett. One day, Dial's wife, Clara Mae, telephoned Arnett because her husband had not slept in many days, refusing to leave his "junk house" studio. Dial had been drawing for three weeks nonstop. She said he was up all night making pictures. Arnett subsequently called Dial and asked him what he was doing, and Dial responded: "Mr. Arnett, I think I've done something that I don't know if anyone's done before….I don't know how to explain it. You have to come over here and I'll show it to you."[4] Upon his visit with Dial, Arnett observed that the artist had made around thirty-five watercolor drawings, primarily of human faces.

What Herman's account leaves out is another exchange that apparently occurred between Dial and Arnett in this pivotal moment—that being what Dial meant by "I've done something that I don't know if anyone's done before." In a series of interviews I conducted with Bill Arnett, he explains that, with regard to that particular statement, Dial was specifically referring to *how* he drew the faces. [5] In these thirty-five Dial drawings, the faces become increasingly abstract and less representational with each iteration. By the end of this experimental series, Dial concluded that even the last drawings, while borderline completely non-representational, were nevertheless still depictions of faces. He had deliberately taken these drawings to the limits of representation. In essence, Dial believed he had invented abstraction.

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[3] *Thornton Dial: Thoughts on Paper* was mounted at the Ackland Art Museum at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and ran from March 30- July 1, 2012. Bernard L. Herman, ed., *Thornton Dial: Thoughts on Paper,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1-47.

[4] As recounted by Bernard L. Herman in "Thornton Dial, Thoughts on Paper," Thornton Dial: Thoughts on Paper, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 11.

[5] In February 2018, I conducted a series of interviews with Bill and Paul Arnett, and Laura Bickford in Atlanta, GA, specifically regarding these drawings.

Those closely acquainted with Dial's life and work are familiar with the narrative recounted in Herman's text. Laura Bickford, Curator of the William S. Arnett Collection within the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, indicated that these drawings may in fact exist. There are drawings located in the room containing works on paper within the Atlanta warehouse that houses Arnett's collection of art made by Southern black artists. A flat file cabinet with a drawer labeled "1990" contained this set of works. Indeed, within that cabinet is a suite of Dial drawings, although only twenty-two were found upon my inspection [Figs. 1-4]. While these drawings are all of abstracted human faces, some frontal, some profile, it is difficult to say definitively—without Dial's affirmation—that they are the product of the artistic episode in question.

Regardless of whether or not those particular drawings within Arnett's collection belong to that moment in Dial's career, the narrative attached to them is illuminating. It refutes any lingering notion that Dial was not a self-reflective, critical artist, attuned to formal and conceptual concerns and his own artistic development. Additionally, this narrative raises the topic of progressive chronology within the discipline of art history. By progressive chronology, I am referencing the dominant narrative of (primarily) modern art, where art movements build upon and respond to previous ones—Fauvism leads to Cubism, Cubism leads to Surrealism, and so on. What does it mean for Dial to believe he invented abstraction, one of the most important representational innovations in twentieth century art? How does a continued emphasis on the significance of art historical chronology and progression ultimately privilege and reproduce white intellectual supremacy? These questions serve as the prompts of my investigation. This potentially apocryphal tale from Dial's biography reveals how the internal mechanisms of the discipline of art history, and the art world at large, are often built to exclude him, and his peers, from critical examination.

Thornton Dial was not familiar with the traditional, received history of modern art (at least in the beginning of his career), wherein abstraction was developed in early twentieth century Europe by the likes of Picasso, Braque, and Kandinsky. Dial came to similar formal and conceptual conclusions about representation as his earlier European peers, only he managed to do so almost entirely on his own, many decades later. He did so without looking at art made by so-called "primitive" peoples (as they were thought of by Western intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) like Africans, Pacific Islanders, and institutionalized mental patients.[6] Outside of the colonialist model of Western art history, Dial arrived at a mode of representation revolutionary to *his* practice. By upending this model, Dial presents another path to modern abstraction, one not dependent upon cultural imperialism and appropriation.

I begin this chapter by discussing how Dial's artistic practice challenges art historical classifications, particularly within the museum space. Since the beginning of his reception in the mainstream art world, Dial has been, and continues to be, classified under ideologically conflicting labels. To be an outsider or folk artist means that one cannot be a contemporary artist, yet Dial manages to embody both.[7] How he is classified by museums, critics, and scholars reveals less about the nature of his work, I argue, and more about intellectual biases and systems of value. The other half of this chapter concerns the Dial's relationship to received art history, and the phases of his artistic development. I argue that Dial's version of abstraction is grounded, physically and metaphorically, in the material conditions of lived existence. Dial's consistent use of particular materials, such as steel and other industrial supplies, is an artistic commentary on the idea of historical materialism and its connection to black struggle. By grounding his version of abstraction in the materiality of objects, Dial illuminates the political potential of nonrepresentational art.

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[6] A very useful anthology of primary and secondary sources on the topic of primitivism and modern art is Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch's, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

How to Frame a Life

In October 1991, *People* published the special issue, "Amazing Americans!" which profiled an extraordinary person from each of the fifty states. Thornton Dial was Alabama's representative.[8] This brief, two-sentence profile serves as one of the earliest

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[7] I discuss the historical definitions of "outsider" and "folk" at length in the Introduction, and how these terms are in conflict with the idea of contemporary art.

[8] "Retiring after 33 years of building railroad boxcars, Thornton Dial of Bessemer decided in 1987 to "make art." The self-taught painter and sculptor, 63, has since placed two works in the permanent collection of New York City's Museum of American Folk Art and recently sold a canvas for a personal best $90,000." Tony Chiu, "Amazing Americans!" *People Weekly*, October 24, 1991.

instances that Dial's artistic career received national attention. Two years later, Dial's work made its grand New York City premiere in the dual-debut exhibition, *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger*, mounted at both the American Folk Art Museum and the New Museum of Contemporary Art.[9] While his work had been featured in gallery shows and group exhibitions in New York and elsewhere, *Image of the Tiger* was meant to be his crucial moment of presentation to the mainstream art world. That moment, however, was dampened by the broadcast of the *60 Minutes* segment, "Tin Man," which aired just five days after the opening of *Image of the Tiger.*[10]

"Tin Man" investigated the world of "outsider art," with special attention paid to the relationship between white art dealers and black artists. The latter half the segment focused on Bill Arnett and his dealings with two artists, Bessie Harvey and Thornton Dial. In it, host Morley Safer confronts Arnett with charges of apparent exploitation, calling Dial Arnett's "current favorite," and misleadingly suggesting that Dial was unaware of the fact that his house was Arnett's name. In reality, Dial was a fully aware and willing participant in house negotiations.[11] "Tin Man" portrays Arnett as evasive, a disreputable exploiter of Southern black artists, using their ignorance about the art world for his own profit. The effect this nationally broadcast episode had on the careers of both Dial and Arnett was disastrous, in both the short and long term. Institutional willingness to work with Arnett was withdrawn. A number of exhibitions in the making were shelved, including those featuring Dial.[12] It would take years, even decades, for the mainstream art world to open its doors again to the likes of Dial and his peers.

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[9] *Thornton Dial: Image of Tiger*, was mounted at the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the American Folk Art Museum, both in New York City, from November 17, 1993 through January 2 (New Museum) and January 30 (American Folk Art), 1994.

[10] "Tin Man," *60 Minutes,* Season 26, Episode 21. Aired November 21, 1993. Produced by Jeff Fager, hosted by Morley Safer.

[11] Dial had trouble securing the loan he needed to move a larger house outside Bessemer. Arnett placed it in his name to assist Dial. Eventually the title of the house was transferred over to Dial. Thornton Dial as interviewed in *Mr Dial Has Something to Say*, directed by Celia Carey (2007). https://www.pbs.org/video/alabama-public-television-documentaries-mr-dial-has-something-to-say/.

The most immediate effect of the episode was that the scandal overshadowed Dial's important museum debut, and critical discussions about his artistic production. It certainly did not help that Arnett was a key figure in the organization of *Image of the Tiger*, further supporting the notion that he wielded too much power over Dial's career. *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger* was a significant exhibition for reasons unrelated to the *60 Minutes* controversy. Not only because it was Dial's introduction to the mainstream art world, but also because the curious dual placement of his debut show, at two ideologically distinct institutions, was a physical manifestation of contemporary art world debates surrounding terms like outsider, folk, and self-taught art.[13]

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[12] Bill Arnett, interviewed by the author, Atlanta, GA, February 2018. Also see Bill Arnett's interviews in in *Mr Dial Has Something to Say*, directed by Celia Carey (2007). https://www.pbs.org/video/alabama-public-television-documentaries-mr-dial-has-something-to-say/.

[13] See, Joan M. Bendetti's "Who are the Folk in Folk Art: Inside and Outside the Cultural Context," *Art Documentation* 6, no. 1, (Spring 1987), 3-8, for a concise summary on the debates. She later revisits the topic in "Words, Words, Words: Folk Art Terminology—Why It (Still) Matters," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America,* Vol. 19, no. 1, (Spring 2000), 14-21. Eugene W. Metcalf discusses this topic, specifically in reference to African American artists, in "Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (Winter 1983), 271-289.

The American Folk Art Museum (or as it was known in 1993, the Museum of American Folk Art) collects and displays a range of object types, from colonial American arts and crafts, to work made by self-taught artists working outside of the mainstream. The New Museum of Contemporary Art focuses on the display of international contemporary art (which they define as work made within the last decade). Typically, artists who had received major solo exhibitions at the New Museum, like Bruce Nauman (1987), Mary Kelly (1990), and Alfredo Jaar (1992), were formally educated, and already entrenched in the mainstream art world. Up until that point, the presentation of an artist like Dial, an uneducated, purportedly illiterate, older Southern black artist, was somewhat of an anomaly. Self-taught artists, particularly those living outside of coastal cultural centers, have historically been thought of as unselfconscious makers working without regard for contemporary, mainstream trends.[14] Staging *Image of the Tiger* at the American Folk Art Museum was, therefore, a more expected curatorial gesture.

Which is why the curator of the exhibition, art historian Thomas McEvilley, initially argued against the engagement of Dial's work at the American Folk Art Museum, for fear that it would perpetuate certain falsehoods. It was at the behest of Bill Arnett that the show be exhibited at both locations, for greater impact. "By scheduling Dial's show at the Museum of American Folk Art," McEvilley claimed, Bill "was gonna reinforce the idea that these [artists like Dial] were folk artists."[15] Eventually, McEvilley went along with the placement, although his catalog essay remains a forceful argument for Dial's inclusion into the contemporary, rather than folk art, world.[16]

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[14] Charles Russell discusses the historical relationship between self-taught artists and mainstream artists in "Finding a Place for the Self-Taught in the Art World(s)," *Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art,* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2001), 3-33.

Image of the Tiger was named after the most frequently represented animal in Dial's early work. In his symbolic universe, the tiger served as avatar for himself, and this history of black struggle in the United States, more generally. To the uninformed, the use of the tiger could seem like nothing more than a folksy preference, or even more problematically, an indicator of a primitive connection to nature. In actuality, the tiger served as Dial's avatar and as a symbol for black struggle, allowing him to speak about personal and social inequity in a veiled and hyper-critical fashion. For example, in the early work, *Monkeys And People Love The Tiger Cat* (1988), a blue tiger rendered out of rope is surrounded by abstracted human and monkey figures, which are painted in bold strokes of black and white [Fig. 5]. Across the top of the piece stretches a snake, Dial's symbol for danger (and a biblical allusion, as well). Even at this beginning phase of this career, Dial was skeptical of the approval he was beginning to receive in the art world.

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[15] Thomas McEvilley interview as represented in the film, *Mr Dial Has Something to Say,* directed by Celia Carey (2007). https://www.pbs.org/video/alabama-public-television-documentaries-mr-dial-has-something-to-say/. McEvilley would later say that this dual-placement was intentionally contradictory, so that Dial's work could be seen "both as outside and mainstream." "Afterword," *Thornton Dial in the Twenty-First Century,* (Atlanta: Tinwood Media, 2005), 315.

[16] Thomas McEvilley, "Proud-Stepping Tiger: History as Struggle in the Work of Thornton Dial," *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 8-31.

This scene is a symbolic expression of Dial's early apprehension, represented in his personal, coded visual language.

The question of whether or not Dial was a contemporary artist, or a folk artist whose work simply bore visual affinity to contemporary art, was the subject of debate. In 1993, Thomas McEvilley was well versed in "affinity" assessments by the time he was selected to curate *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger*. Arnett's appointment of Thomas McEvilley as curator was a powerful statement on its own. McEvilley is perhaps best known for his fierce critique of the otherwise praised 1984 exhibition, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art.[17] In his famous *Artforum* review, "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief," McEvilley delivers this piercing assessment: "*Primitivism* lays bare the way our cultural institutions relate to foreign cultures, revealing it as an ethnocentric subjectivity inflated to coopt such cultures into itself….this exhibition shows Western egotism still as unbridled as in the centuries of colonialism and souvenirism."[18] *Primitivism's* argument was, according to McEvilley, that art of "primitive" cultures was only valuable because it served as source material for canonical modern artists, and therefore bore visual affinity to modern art. McEvilley was asked to curate *Image of the Tiger* by Arnett partly because of his stern criticism of the *Primitivism* show. Arnett believed McEvilley would be able to effectively navigate the challenging racial and cultural dynamics that would inevitably emerge throughout the course of the exhibition's planning and reception.[19]

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[17] Thomas McEvilley, "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief: Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art," *Artforum* 23 (3), (November 1984), 54-6.

[18] Ibid, 60.

Almost ten years after this review, McEvilley (who had never curated a show prior to this) was sensitive to the way that Dial, an art world "outsider," would be contextualized within art historical discourse. Dial's artistic production was significant on its own terms, and not simply because it looked familiar to the modern eye. More importantly, Dial's work challenged the exclusionary preexisting structures of the art world, too often taken for granted as the norm. In his exhibition catalog essay, "Proud-Stepping Tiger: History as Struggle in the Work of Thornton Dial," McEvilley writes: "The Western art discourse has assumed implicitly for several generations that, in order to be contemporary an artwork must self-consciously historicized in terms of the Western tradition." He continues: "it must arise from the conscious contemplation of the pictorial strategies employed by the last generation of **exhibiting** artists [emphasis mine]."[20] This criterion inherently privileges art produced in art schools and universities, made by students well-versed in art theory and criticism. If the Western artistic tradition is partially defined by the creation of art within institutional frameworks, and a continued dialogue between contemporary artists and preceding generations of their institutionally-vetted peers, then it is unlikely Thornton Dial can be included in that model.

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[19] Thomas McEvilley, Afterword," *Thornton Dial in the 21st Century*, (Atlanta: Tinwood Media, 2005), 312-313.

[20] McEvilley, "Proud-Stepping Tiger," 10.

Dial's textured and painterly aesthetic may have appeared familiar to the New York art world by 1993, but the context of his work's production—created in a small town in the Deep South, surrounded by a community of working-class African Americans—was foreign. In her review of the exhibition, *New York Times* art critic, Roberta Smith, asserted that Dial "has a genuine talent he brandishes fearlessly," and compares his work to the likes of Jackson Pollock, Julian Schnabel, and Anselm Kiefer. She goes on to say, however, that the "quality of Dial's art is not easy to judge."[21]

Image of the Tiger offered Dial as a singular talent—part of what made his work "not easy to judge." The monographic show within these two museums failed to demonstrate that Dial's artistic production was not a case of isolated expression, as he was engaged in his own form of inter-institutional dialogue with the other members of the Birmingham-Bessemer School. Therefore, his work is more readily understood within the framework of his peers. Of course, this could be said of almost any artist who consistently operates within a group, but the stakes and implications are different when introducing an artist like Dial. Without context, his practice was more readily seen as anomalous, not necessarily an indicator of a larger visual phenomenon.[22]

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[21] Roberta Smith, "ART REVIEW: A Young Style for an Old Story," *The New York Times*, December 19, 1993. Accessed June 25, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/1993/12/19/arts/art-view-a-young-style-for-an-old-story.html.

[22] The exhibition catalog did not comprehensively address the fact that Dial was part of a group of artistic peers in the Birmingham-Bessemer area. McEvilley does discuss, at length, the relationship between Dial and Bill Arnett.

While double-placement of *Image of the Tiger* was indicative of contemporary term warfare, was it also a form of appropriation by the dominant art world? Relegating an artist to the realm of folk art is a method of discursive marginalization. Similar to the appropriation of so-called primitive art by canonical modernists in the mid-twentieth century, folk art was appropriated by mainstream art institutions in various ways in the 1980s.[23] Art historian Donald Kuspit examines the popularity of folk and self-taught art in his article, "The Appropriation of Marginal Art in the 1980s." Perhaps Dial's solo show satisfied the taste for "postmodernist celebration[s] of the authenticity of marginality," as self-taught art was seen as a "provincial variant" of Neo-Expressionism (a central artistic movement of the period).[24] While the article predates *Image of the Tiger*, Kuspit lists Thornton Dial as one self-taught artist whose ascending popularity was representative of the contemporary taste for marginal figures.

However, it can also be argued that positioning Dial as a singular virtuoso was an attempt to appeal to preexisting art historical preferences. The discipline of art history, since its foundation—arguably with a figure like Giorgio Vasari and his *Lives*—tends to favor single-author, typically male, narratives.[25] In fact, Bill Arnett often speaks of Dial's importance in Western canonical terms: "Somebody says, well, you could go back a hundred years and be living in Paris, you could, from time to time, check in on Matisse, you know, Picasso, and I feel the same way. I was just blessed that I had the background at that point to recognize it."[26] Furthermore, Arnett often leans on "genius" assessments, "Here was a man with a great genius. He had never gone to school at all….But I'd never met anybody any more brilliant….This is truly one of the great artists that exists in the world, which he was and is, until his death."[27] But in 1993, the idea that Dial's work should be placed on equal footing with revered modernists—especially when his work was not responding to the art historical canon—proved challenging. Perhaps McEvilley said it most succinctly: years later, upon reflection of the events surrounding *Image of the Tiger,* he asked, "What happens when the end result—the art itself—becomes substantially indistinguishable from important contemporary art *except by invocation of the maker's biography*?"'[28]

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[23] Donald Kuspit, "The Appropriation of Marginal Art in the 1980s," *American Art* Vol. 5, No. 1/2 (Winter - Spring, 1991), 132-141. Most recently, the exhibition *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* examined key historical moments of intersection between the avant-garde and self-taught artists in the United States. Dial was not included in the show, but Lonnie Holley and other self-taught Southern black artists, such as William Edmondson and Sister Gertrude Morgan, were featured. Curated by Lynne Cooke, the National Gallery of Art, January 23 – May 13, 2018; High Museum of Art, June 24 – September 30, 2018; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, November 18, 2018 – March 18, 2019.

[24] Kuspit, "The Appropriation of Marginal Art in the 1980s," 138.

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[25] Griselda Pollock examines the gendered nature of canon formation in "Differencing: Feminism's Encounter with the Canon," *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories,* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 23-61.

[26] Bill Arnett, interviewed in *Mr Dial Has Something to Say,* directed by Celia Carey (2007). https://www.pbs.org/video/alabama-public-television-documentaries-mr-dial-has-something-to-say/

[27] Bill Arnett audio file, "Bill Arnett won't shut up. His stunning African American art collection is why," *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2017. Accessed June 22, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/bill-arnett-african-american-art-collection/. While these statements are made later they are indicative of the types of claims Arnett has been making about Dial for the entirety of his career.

[28] Thomas McEvilley, "Afterword," *Thornton Dial in the 21st Century*, 313.

Dial's apparent "genius" was difficult to accept at the time. By singling-out Dial's talent, an insidious implication arose from Arnett's detractors: that Dial was Arnett's "invention," someone Arnett could coach into making art to his liking, and for his benefit. For example, former director of the San Jose Museum of Art, Susan Krane, was suspicious of Dial's foray into drawing: "There was a question when Bill provided Dial with paper. Would works on paper be eminently more salable than a large construction? Is that a medium that Dial naturally would've wanted to work in? Or did it have a market-driven suggestion behind it? And whose suggestion was it, the artist's or Bill's?"[29] To recall the event relayed at the beginning of this chapter, Dial's interest in drawing was, in part, a response to critiques leveled at him from an art world insider. It seems that Dial was often cornered into catch-22 dilemmas: his work was difficult to assess because he did not respond to the art historical canon, and yet, when he did respond to other aspects of the mainstream art world, the authenticity of his production was questioned.

In later interviews, Dial expressed continued feelings of anger and displeasure surrounding the entire *60 Minutes* event. He resented the fact that he was edited to fit the stereotype of an ignorant, Sambo-like character, and, perhaps most damagingly, that the program suggested he was an insignificant artist whose work did not deserve its recent acclaim. As Dial recalls in a 2010 interview:

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[29] Susan Krane, "Composition in Black and White," *The New Yorker,* August 13 & 19, 2013. Accessed June 1, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/08/12/composition-in-black-and-white-2

> These folks come here from *60 Minutes* and saying they want to give respect for the black peoples making art. But after a while, that TV man start talking the art down, and ask Bill how something made by a man like Dial—he be meaning a little colored boy without no education—how it be worth one hundred thousand dollars. And Bill say if stuff be selling for a million that a white man make and ain't no better, he guess Dial look pretty good for the money…..The television person talk about me in my face like white folks used to talk about their servants in the same room…like they ain't there….it seem to me this man [Morley Safer] talking the price of a Dial don't be no different than the slave seller talking the price of a African, like a bull or cow.[30]

Dial understood that in addition to racial discrimination, his work faced prejudice because he was formally uneducated. By ironically referring to himself as "a little colored boy without no education," Dial states in frank terms how believed he was perceived in the art world. In an effort to expose Arnett's apparent exploitation, *60 Minutes* actually exposed their own racist and condescending views toward Dial.

Even if he was intermittently denied entry—or, more likely, because of this denial—Dial consistently responded to art world critiques leveled against him. The first work of art he made after the *60 Minutes* scandal, *Looking Good for the Price* (1993), depicts a slave auction, with a contorted figure writhing up the left side of the painting, and a gnarled metal tiger, his avatar, in the corner [Fig. 6]. A bicycle chain wraps around the perimeter of the painting, a symbol for "the same stuff just keep going around."[31] Dial likens the machinations of the art world to the slave trade, as he stated in plain terms—"Mr. Dial might be looking good for the price, but he just as soon still be a slave."[32] Not only was his work being evaluated in economic terms, its worth was directly connected to his social capital as a human being.

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[30] Thornton Dial as quoted in Philip March Jones's "Thornton Dial Sr.," *Whitehot Magazine* (February 2010). Accessed June 1, 2018. https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/2010-thornton-dial-sr-/2023.

[31] Thornton Dial as quoted in "The Aesthetics of (In)Visibility: Thornton Dial and the Politics of Art," *Thornton Dial in the 21st Century*, (Atlanta: Tinwood Media, 2005), 68.

For a number of reasons, the close relationship between Arnett and Dial at once benefited and hindered Dial's career and reception within the mainstream art world. Though there was near-constant controversy surrounding Arnett's practices (some controversies persisting through present day), Dial chose to work with him for the entirety of his artistic career. The *60 Minutes* event, as well as the various other struggles Dial and Arnett faced throughout their intertwined careers, have been outlined in a number of prominent publications and media outlets (as referenced throughout my brief discussion here).[33] They are mentioned here for two significant reasons: first, Dial addresses these events within his art, so knowledge about this aspect of his life is necessary for comprehensive interpretations of certain objects. Second, his critical commentary on these art world controversies contradict the idea that he was a naïve artist, unaware of the challenges his work presented. It is far easier to ignore the pointed critiques present with Dial's works if he can be dismissed as a folk artist, as folk art has long been associated with conceptual simplicity.[34] In his coded representational language, Dial was always critical of the art establishment. Those critiques, as expressed visually in his art objects, are discussed in the last section of this chapter.

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[32] Thornton Dial as quoted in Philip March Jones's "Thornton Dial Sr.," 2010.

[33] The sensationalized nonfiction book by Andrew Dietz, *The Last Folk Hero a True Story of Race and Art, Power and Profit*, (Atlanta: Ellis Lane Press, 2006), explicitly concerns the relationship Bill Arnett, Lonnie Holley, Thornton Dial, and the mainstream art world.

[34] Kuspit, "The Appropriation of Marginal Art in the 1980s," 138.

The Artistic Phases of Thornton Dial

A general understanding of Dial's biography—both before and after the start of his artistic career—provides a useful ground to apprehend his use of materials, and the recurring subject matter of his work. His adeptness with the wide range of elements that appear in his work —carpet, welded metal, wood, fabric—is due, in part, to the skills he learned at his various occupations, and through personal cottage industries and hobbies. As an artist, he was both "self-taught" and trained, though his training occurred outside of art schools. While Dial started making art later in life, he consistently produced work up until his death at age eighty-six, giving him an almost thirty-year span of artistic production. Within that span, Dial's work changes significantly, resulting in three distinct stylistic periods: his early period (mid-1980s – 1993), his monumental, primarily abstract assemblage period (1993-2008), and his late, more elegiac period (2008-2016).[35]

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[35] The importance of defining Dial's stylistic periods was recently acknowledged with regard to his place within the contemporary art market. Eileen Kinsella, "Does Being Labeled an 'Outsider Artist' Stall a Market? Thornton Dial, Now a Museum Sensation, Is Poised to Break Out," *Artnet news.* June 29, 2018. Accessed June 30, 2018. https://news.artnet.com/market/outsider-artist-thornton-dial-officially-arrived-will-market-follow-1309595?utm_content=from_artnetnews&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=US%20newsletter%20for%206/29/18&utm_term=New%20US%20Newsletter%20List

Dial was born in 1928 in the small town of Emelle, Alabama. The town is likely named after the granddaughter of Joseph Dial, who settled this farming community in the 1830s.[36] While Dial was born to a family of sharecroppers on Luther Elliot's plantation, his surname demonstrates an obvious connection between his family and the founding family of slave owners in Emelle. At the age of thirteen, Dial relocated with his family to Bessemer, Alabama, a satellite town of Birmingham. Dial received little in the way of formal education, sporadically attending school until about the second grade, when he stopped altogether. Throughout his adult life he performed a number of occupations, at various points working as a bricklayer, carpenter, housepainter, and pipe fitter. His longest-held job was at the Pullman Standard Plant, where he was a metalworker and boxcar assembler for more than thirty years. He supplemented his family's income through growing and selling vegetables, raising livestock, and fishing. Additionally, Dial built his family's home on Fifteenth Street, made his own fishing traps and lures, and, in the 1980s, began making metal furniture with two of his sons as a cottage industry.[37]

It was only after Dial was permanently laid off from Pullman Standard, at age fifty-eight, that he decided to devote most of his time to art making. Shortly after, in 1987, Dial was introduced to Bill Arnett through the artist Lonnie Holley, who was dating a member of the Dial family. Though his earliest work is the least-exhibited part of his oeuvre, it represents a transformative moment in Dial's life. Completed in the mid- to- late 1980s, work produced in this period is characterized by its representational (primarily animal) imagery, and the use of simplistic titles. Working in his junk house studio on Fifteenth Street, in the Pipe Shop neighborhood of Bessemer, Alabama, Dial began to experiment with making "things" that had no explicit utilitarian value, though, at that stage he did not call these objects "art."[38] Objects like his *Deer* sculptures, made from tree roots and old tin, started to appear in Dial's backyard [Fig. 7].[39] The scale of his work grew quickly, resulting in an object like his *Turkey Tower* (mid-1980s) [Fig. 8]. Composed primarily of scrap metal gathered from the family business, Dial Metal Patterns, the seven-foot-tall *Turkey Tower* features a simple metal turkey atop a structure of old chair legs. The bold and graphic *Turkey Tower* was one of the very first Dial objects Bill Arnett purchased for his growing collection of Southern African American art.

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[36] James P. Kaetz, "Emelle," *The Encyclopedia of Alabama*. Accessed June 28, 2018. http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-3614.

[37] Thornton Dial recounts a more complete biography in "Mr. Dial is a Man Looking for Something," *Souls Grown Deep: African American Art Vernacular Art of the South,* Vol. 2, (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2002), 192-221.

Dial's assemblages begin to increase in complexity, and his use of materials becomes more varied in the late 1980s and early 1990s. His proclivity for assemblage work can partially be attributed to his yard environment. Dial, like Lonnie Holley and Joe Minter, maintained an art environment on both his Bessemer and McCalla (where he moved in 1990) properties. Freestanding sculptures composed of sturdier materials, like metal and concrete, suited their outdoor settings.[40] Objects like *Slave Ship* (1987) and *Freedom Marchers* (1987) are both freestanding assemblages made of found materials such wire, steel, and concrete [Figs. 9, 10]. They feature human figures, formed from a combination of painted wire, tape, and Splash Zone compound.[41] Importantly, these works are examples of his early tendency for more literals forms of representation. While there are abstract elements—the figures themselves are also abstracted to a certain degree—these assemblages have a discernable subject. Other representative works from this period include *The Tiger Cat* (1987) and *The Town*, (1987) [Figs. 11, 12].

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[38] David Driskell, "Giving Into the Visionary Dream: A Visit with Thornton Dial," *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial,* (New York: Prestel, 2011), 13.

[39] Dial's early artistic production is discussed at length in William Arnett's essay, "The Root Sculptures of Thornton Dial: A Network of Ideas," *Souls Grown Deep: African American Art Vernacular Art of the South*, Vol. 1, (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000), 172-189.

Dial also created two-dimensional paintings during this time, and, like his assemblages, these tend to skew towards more literal representations of subject matter. These early paintings, such as *Ladies at the Circus Like to Look at the Bear* (1988) and *The Factory (The United States Provide Work for All the Races)* (1988), both depict flat, frontal faces rendered with bold lines and color [Figs. 13, 14]. His paintings, while two-dimensional, almost always feature the inclusion of other materials, giving them varying levels of relief and texture, as well as material continuity with his assemblages. Importantly, the titles of his work become noticeably more descriptive and lyrical as he advances in his career.

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[40] I discuss the historical origins of the yard show, as well as its particular importance for the Birmingham-Bessemer School, in the Introduction and Chapter One.

[41] Splash Zone compound is an epoxy compound used to patch metal and is extremely durable. An expensive product, it was one of the only materials Dial purchased during this early phase of his career. Its malleability allowed him to use it in a variety of ways.

Dial also begins to create works on paper with particular enthusiasm around the year 1990. Though an art critic's "crude" comment motivated Dial to explore drawing as an explicitly artistic medium, as discussed in the introduction of this chapter, he makes it clear that the practice has always been a part of his life. He recalls being interested in this practice since he was a young child. In addition to making small "toys" for himself, like dolls out of corn shucks, he used to "draw pictures in the dirt," and later "pictures of Tarzan and cowboys and stuff like that I learned from the boys who went to the picture shows."[42] Additionally, he cites learning about the possibilities of drawing during his years working at the Pullman Standard Plant, where complex designs for train cars were first sketched out on paper.[43] Dial's drawings feature a pictorial language somewhat unique to this medium, at least in terms of consistency. The majority of these works feature depictions of one, if not all, of the following: human faces, female figures, birds, and tigers.[44]

Partially through Arnett's aggressive advocacy, Dial's work quickly entered the mainstream art world in the early 1990s, most prominently with the aforementioned exhibition *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger*. After the 1993 controversy surrounding the *60 Minutes* segment and *Image of the Tiger,* Dial's output slowly shifts. By that point, he had experienced both the positive and negative sides of the art world. As quickly as his work was accepted, that acceptance was withdrawn. His allegorical tiger imagery recedes (though it never totally disappears), and the emphasis of artistic production moves toward the creation of a type of hybrid object that unites his early assemblages and paintings. They can best be described as assemblage-paintings, as they are usually mounted on wood panel or canvas (a flat surface), and feature generous inclusions of found materials. He treated these heavily built-up surfaces with different painting techniques, sometimes using both enamel and spray paint in order to achieve varying visual effects. Dial's assemblage-paintings are typically very large, some reaching more than ten feet in length and weighing more than two hundred pounds. Given that Dial worked in a boxcar manufacturing plant for most of his life, he was deeply experienced with the creation of monumental, complex objects. As his artistic peer Lonnie Holley described, "Mr. Dial had pretty much been working in an attitude of hugeness all his life."[45] The grand scale of these objects also match their often epic subject matter.

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[42] Thornton Dial, "Mr. Dial is a Man Looking for Something," *Souls Grown Deep Vol. 2,* 199.

[43] Thornton Dial, "Mr. Dial," 211.

[44] The essays in *Thornton Dial, Thoughts on Paper,* explore the specific iconography of Dial's drawings.

Dial's assemblage-paintings mark a shift in medium and the formal rendering of his subject matter. While he includes objects that represent or index the outside world, like dolls, plastic toys, and clothing, from a distance these works read as predominantly non-representational objects. Dial's ability to blur the boundary between representation and non-representation in material terms is a defining characteristic of his mid-career style. This is apparent in *Victory in Iraq (V for Victory)* (2004), a visually and materially dense piece that comments on the devastation and destruction of war

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[45] Lonnie Holley as quoted by Alvia J. Wardlaw, "An Attitude of Hugeness: Thornton Dial and His Circle," *Thornton Dial in the Twenty-First Century,* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2005), 295.

[Fig. 15]. Two painted wooden planks that stretch from the upper corners of the work create a large “V” that grounds the entirety of the composition, which is comprised of, among many things, barbed wire, metal grating, a mannequin head, toys, old oil cans, and clothing. Through layering, weaving, and painting these materials, Dial coheres this detritus into an imposing whole. By embracing both abstraction and representation in his assemblage-paintings, Dial harnesses the allusive and metaphorical power of these two representational modes. Instead of depicting a specific moment from the Iraq War, Dial uses the conceptual power of everyday objects to evoke, rather than overdetermine, his subject matter.

By the early 2000s, Dial was well-acquainted with the mainstream art world. His work had been featured in a number of group and solo exhibitions at both museums and galleries. With Bill Arnett and Lonnie Holley (as well as others), he made trips throughout the United States, especially to New York City, to visit exhibitions presenting his work and that of his peers.[46] Significantly, he begins to respond to works of art he sees hanging on the walls of art museums. While this fact has been addressed elsewhere, with particular astuteness by Joanne Cubbs in her essay, “Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial,” the degree to which Dial was aware of art history is still rather under-acknowledged outside of the small group of scholars invested in his work.[47]

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[46] Dial commemorates his first trip to New York City in the work, *The Tiger That Flew Over New York City*, 1990, Collection of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

[47] Joanne Cubbs, “Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial,” *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial,* (New York: Prestel, 2011) 37-85.

For example, after visiting the Museum of Modern Art in 1997, Dial created two notable works: *Flowers of the Little Blue Things* (1997), and *Museum* (1998) [Fig. 16, 17].[48] *Flowers* was created in direct response to Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* (1920), while *Museum* is a complex reaction the institution as a whole, rather than a single object. A brightly-colored assemblage of found objects, textiles, and old carpet, this bold, freewheeling sculpture looks something akin to the moment of the Big Bang, but for the history of modern art. Dial's museum encounters served as a catalyst for transhistorical discourse, a way for him to address pivotal moments and objects of the history of Western art.

In 2003, Dial made two objects after visiting the Birmingham Museum of Art. *Setting the Table* is his response to the William Merritt Chase painting, *Still Life with Watermelon* (1869), and *Choices/Sunrise* a reply to William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *L'Aurore* (1881) [Figs. 18, 19, 20, 21]. Dial updates these nineteenth century paintings and, in an art historical power reversal, injects them with allusions to Southern black culture. A typical middle-period Dial, *Still Life with Watermelon* is an assemblage-painting done on canvas stretched over a wooden frame. Over time, with the help of his sons Richard and Dan, Dial shifts to making work on the more traditional format of stretched canvas—perhaps a response itself to what he observes in museums.

In a clever twist on *trompe l'oeil* painting, *Still Life* features both painted representations of things and found objects. In the top-left register of the work, painted eggs sit inside an actual frying pan. The watermelon, which dominates the composition of Chase's painting, appears again in Dial's work as a smaller, painted slice. The transference of watermelon imagery takes on a charged meaning in Dial's work, as watermelons have long been used as a racist stereotype in African American history. During Emancipation, freed blacks grew and sold watermelons as a means of subsistence, turning the fruit into a symbol of freedom.[49] Southern whites twisted this association into a negative icon, a representation of black people's supposed laziness. This stereotype was visually illustrated, perhaps for the first time, in a cartoon printed in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. This cartoon, and Chase's painting, were both created in the same year—1869. While Dial likely did not know about this particular cartoon, he was certainly aware of the watermelon as a bigoted trope. In choosing to respond to Chase's work, Dial asks the viewer to confront the relationship between American history, representation, and racism within the genre of still life painting.

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[48] Joanne Cubbs, Mark Lawrence McPhall, Eugene Metcalf Jr., "The Aesthetics of (In)Visibility: Thornton Dial and the Politics of Art," *Thornton Dial in the Twenty-First Century,* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2005), 58-71.

The history of modern art becomes its own kind of material referent for Dial's artistic production. Throughout his career, his repeated encounters with mainstream, canonical art make a significant impact on his output. In particular, the works of art he makes in direct response to what he sees in museums, such as *Setting the Table* and *Flowers of the Little Blue Things,* were ways for him to inject himself, and consequently his own artistic inheritance, into the art historical canon. Moreover, to invoke the term introduced and theorized by W.E.B. Dubois, a foundational figure in African American intellectual history, Dial's works are expressions of his "double-consciousness."[50] He understood that while the mainstream art world may view him as a perennial outsider, he was able to see *his* place in the narrative of modern art. These works are Dial's attempts to reconcile "his twoness," to assert to himself and others that there was a "missing tradition" not adequately represented within the museum space.[51]

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[49] For more on the history of racist African American stereotypes, see J. Stanley Lemons, "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920," *American Quarterly,* Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring 1977), 102-116; Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race & Visual Representation,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), William R. Black, "How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope," *The Atlantic*, December 8, 2014. Accessed July 1, 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/how-watermelons-became-a-racist-trope/383529/

Dial's late period is defined by its (relatively) small scale, muted color palette, and retreat towards two-dimensionality. While his earlier assemblage-paintings are in such high relief they border on three-dimensionality, his late work is flatter, more contained. These characteristics can partially be attributed to his age—by this time Dial had entered his eighties, and his physical strength had significantly declined. He was no longer able to do the heavy lifting his earlier output required. His late works possess an elegiac, plaintively poetic quality. With their ashen, almost monochromatic color scheme and somber titles, works such as *Old Monuments* (2013) and *In Honor of the Last Flower* (2014) appear almost post-apocalyptic—art objects seemingly in the process of decay [Fig. 22, 23]. Dial obliquely confronted his own mortality in many of his last works, resulting in his most intimate and personal period of art making.

Of all of the Birmingham-Bessemer School artists, Thornton Dial is the most institutionally recognized, and the artist who most often acknowledged the institutional structures of the art world. He has received four solo exhibitions at major art institutions: the previously discussed *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger, Thornton Dial: Thornton Dial in the 21st Century* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2005), *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art (2011), and *Thornton Dial: Thoughts on Paper,* with a lengthy catalog published in conjunction with each exhibition.[52] In addition, his work has been featured in a number of major group exhibitions, and the 2000 Whitney Biennial.[53] As his stature in the art world continues to grow, and more attention paid to the self-critical nature of this work, perhaps it is time to reassess the terms under which his practice is discussed.

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[50] W.E.B Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* (New York: Dover Publications, 1903), 2-3.

[51] Thomas McEvilley, "The Missing Tradition," *Art in America*, 85, no. 5, (May 1997), 78-85.

The Materials of History

Historical materialism, a central concept of Western Marxist thought, is based on the idea that the production and reproduction of the material requirements of human existence is the fundamental driving force of society. This force leads to division of labor amongst groups, resulting in the stratification of classes.[54] In Igor Kopytoff's pivotal 1986 essay, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," the author opens his discussion of commoditization by contextualizing it within the history of slavery. Contemporary Western intellectual thought tended to isolate commodities as physical things separate from human beings, as individualized persons occupied a different realm of existence, and could not be commodities. Kopytoff effectively acknowledges that the entire notion of a commodity has a long historical linkage to slavery—and, that in certain respects; human beings can be the ultimate commodities.[55]

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[52] *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger*, American Folk Art Museum, November 16, 1993–January 30, 1994, New Museum of Contemporary Art, November 17, 1993 – January 2, 1994; *Thornton Dial in the 21st Century*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, September 25, 2005-January 8, 2006; *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial*, Indianapolis Museum of Art, February 25 - May 15, 2011 (which traveled to New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA; Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC; and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA).

[53] Some major group exhibitions include: *Creation Story: Gee's Bend Quilts and the Art of Thornton Dial*, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, May 25-September 2, 2012; *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, March 27-June 29, 2014; *Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art*, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, September 1, 2016-January 8, 2017; *Revelations: Art from the African American South*, de Young Museum, June 3, 2017-April 1, 2018.

The racial capitalism that led to the United States becoming an economic world power meant slavery was imposed upon black peoples, turning black bodies into material commodities themselves. In his seminal book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, political theorist Cedric Robinson argues that Western Marxism does not thoroughly factor in the racial character of capitalism within its framework. It also ignores the forms of black resistance that arose in Africa and the Global South in response to the development of capitalist economies in the West.[56] Dial's artistic practice responds to both of Robinson's central points: it is an address to the historical importance of black labor and black resistance, particularly in the United States. His work powerfully addresses the materiality of history, particularly in racial and social terms, through its relationship to commodities. Things, and production of them through the physical labor of commodified human beings, occupy a central theme throughout the entirety of his practice. Dial is interested in historical materialism both as a concept (an intangible idea), and as expressed through the materials used in his artistic production (a physical manifestation).

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[54] Karl Marx most clearly articulates the idea of historical materialism in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy: With an Appendix Containing Marxs Introduction to the Critique Recently Published among His Posthumous Papers*, (New York: International Library Publishing, 1904).

[55] Igor Kopytoff, ed. by Arjun Appadurai, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-65.

[56] Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Dial's assemblage-paintings are imbued with political and historical content through the very materials with which they are constructed. Industrial building materials such as steel and concrete, as well as cotton textiles, are consistently employed in his artistic production, functioning both structurally and metaphorically. In his assemblage *Monument to the Minds of the Little Negro Steelworkers* (2001- 2003), Dial crafts a memorial to the contributions of black laborers—a lineage to which he also belongs—out of spirals of welded metal and other found materials, such as artificial flowers, animal bones, and glass bottles [Fig. 24]. Built through Dial's own physical labor, exertion, and technical knowledge as a steelworker, *Monument* functions not only as a memorial for others, but as a statement of the intellectual—as well as physical—prowess of his fellow laborers. *Monument* is not just the description of a certain type of labor, but also the very product of that labor. The conceptual tension between description and material representation, is a defining difference of Dial's practice from that of other African American artists of the twentieth century.

While Dial is not the only black artist to consistently address the subject of African American labor in his work, the manner of his approach differs greatly from his historical and contemporary peers. Artists such as Jacob Lawrence (1917 – 2000) and Charles White (1918 – 1979) were also deeply invested in the representation such subject matter, however, their styles were decidedly more illustrative, rather than allusive or metaphorical. Eleven years Dial's senior, Jacob Lawrence explored the subject of black labor, particularly in his *Builders* series, which he began in the mid-1940s. Lawrence made works addressing the topic of black labor up until his death in 2000, making it a central theme of the latter half of his oeuvre. As Lawrence stated, "I like the symbolism [of the builder]…I think of it as man's aspiration, as a constructive tool."[57] In the early tempera painting, *The Builders* (1947), Lawrence depicts a dynamic scene of white and black laborers working together in the midst of building construction [Fig. 25]. Rendered in Lawrence's signature graphic and flat style, *The Builders*, while abstracted, is still a rather literal representation of its subject matter. Keeping his subject at arm's length, Lawrence foregrounds the symbolism—the abstract idea of the builder—more so than social reality of these workers.

Artist Charles White also elevated the subject of the black worker through his art, particularly in his bold, monochromatic graphite drawings. *Harvest Talk* (1953), like *The Builders*, depicts laborers in their occupational setting [Fig. 26]. Working in a

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[57] Jacob Lawrence as quoted in Lowery Stokes Sims' essay, "The Structure of Narrative, Form and Content in Jacob Lawrence's Builders Paintings, 1946-1998," Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle Dubois, eds., *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 209.

Social Realist style, White sought to humanize his subjects by portraying them as noble contributors to the American economy and cultural landscape. While *Harvest Talk* and *The Builders* were created decades before Dial's *Monuments to the Mind of the Little Negro Steelworkers,* Dial is of the same generation as White and Lawrence. His artistic practice simply started much later than his peers, in part because Dial *was* one of those laborers for most of his adult life. Formally educated and working in the urban cultural centers of Chicago and New York City, White and Lawrence also belonged to a higher social class than Dial.[58] Their observations and representations of the black working class were executed from an outsider's perspective, allowing their works to serve an anthropological function as well as an artistic one.

Art historians Kobena Mercer and Bridget R. Cooks have both examined how black artists and exhibitions of black art often bear the impossible burden of representing the totality of black experience, with the art objects also serving as illustrative social documents of the so-called black community.[59] What black artists depicted was often considered more important than how it was depicted—the art works functioning more as cultural artifacts than aesthetic objects worthy of formal investigation. White and Lawrence were, arguably, making art about black life in a manner that would be palatable and accessible for a white audience. Both artists, while not totally removed from issues that plagued the working class, were not as deeply entrenched in the world of industrial and agricultural labor as Dial. This is in part the result of region: by remaining in the South, Dial's opportunities for employment outside of industrial work were rather limited. While Dial's artistic practice expands and responds to Western art history in the latter half of his career, first and foremost, he made work for and about his own community of working-class people in Bessemer, Alabama.

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[58] Charles White won a Rosenwald Foundation fellowship to conduct research on black life in the American South. White was almost totally removed from the realities of the black Southern working class; his time spent in the South was almost ethnographic in its orientation. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, "Charles White," *A History of African-American Artists,* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 407.

[59] Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text,* Vol. 4, Issue 10 (1990), 61-78, and Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum,* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

Rather than serving as illustrations, Dial's assemblage-paintings are visually-coded objects, with the materials and titles serving as keys for decoding encrypted information. A 2004 piece, composed of ripped sheet metal and chains set onto a painted red ground, does not immediately coalesce into an identifiable scene [Fig. 27]. When read in conjunction with the title, *The Blood of Hard Times*, the object reveals its content. The muted red paint becomes a symbol of blood, while the sheet metal and corrugated tin evoke the ramshackle dwellings often associated with poverty. Chains, which frame the bottom half of the piece, become a metaphor for bondage and forced labor. Dial's characteristically evocative use of carefully chosen materials to speak about—and represent—the subject at hand, in this case, the difficult and violent labor of steel manufacturing, allow his work to move beyond both the realms of abstraction and literal representation. With the material cast-offs of modernity, he is able to address the social ramifications of industrial capitalism.

On an individual level, Dial spent most of his life as a working-class laborer. In that sense, he was an artist of his people—not one observing from the comfort of the outside. Moreover, his awareness of the historical importance of black people in the production of material goods, like cotton and steel (the material he helped produce), and the treatment of black people as disposable materials, is reflected in his work in a number of ways. By using materials associated with, and often created by, black laborers, Dial instills his monumental abstract works with physical (his objects can weigh many hundreds of pounds) and metaphorical weight. In a profound manner, the physical heft of his work alludes to the historical weight and psychological burden African Americans are forced to carry throughout their lives.

Dial's intervention into abstraction is not only a commentary on art history, but the relationship between history and black life in America. His large abstract assemblages resist being reduced to purely formalist objects, as his shrewd selection of artistic materials serve as repeated indexes to the world outside the frame. As abstracted as these materials—steel armatures, cotton batting, quilts, carpet, used car parts—are from their original use, they are forever attached to their previous use value. In a metaphorical parallel, black people share the physical marker that has partially defined their collective history: their skin color. Within Dial's worldview, materiality and physicality can never be entirely separated from history. In that sense, he responds to both the racial nature of capitalism and the social life of commodities.

Dial's long artistic career is a form of institutional critique, executed over three decades under his attentive gaze. He understood how the art world perceived him, and addressed these often inaccurate perceptions through his art. In a power reversal, he turns the colonialist model of Western art history on its head by mining the work of canonical masters, such as Claude Monet or Jackson Pollock, for his own aesthetic purposes. While it is not possible to address the entirety of Dial's oeuvre here, this chapter aimed to explore two distinct aspects of his career: how he has historically been perceived and categorized by institutions, and how he responded to art world institutions through his artistic practice.

In the beginning of his career, Dial believed he had invented abstraction. As his art making gained greater and greater recognition outside of his hometown of Bessemer, Alabama, Dial was afforded the chance to respond to the mainstream art world, primarily through his exposure to art museums. There he observed other artists' experimentations with abstraction and representation. Though he was often responding to work many decades old, the objects were, nevertheless, new to him. Dial consciously injected himself into these aesthetic conversations he saw taking place on gallery walls, without regard for art historical chronology or hierarchy. Dial arrived at abstraction from a different visual tradition than his earlier European counterparts, demonstrating that this type of formal innovation has another set of roots deep in the American South.

Chapter Three: Ronald Lockett: Queer Refusal

Who am I? Not your father, not your brother
Not your reason, not your future
Not your comfort, not your reverence, not your glory
Not your heaven, not your angel, not your spirit
Not your message, not your freedom
Not your people, not your neighbor
Not your baby, not your equal
Not the title y'all want me under

-Kendrick Lamar, "King's Dead," 2018

In 2016, Ronald Lockett's first major solo exhibition *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett*, was mounted at the American Folk Art Museum in New York. Art critic Ken Johnson opens his *New York Times* review of the show with this negative assertion: "Ronald Lockett, whose emotionally raw and politically trenchant paintings and assemblages are featured at the American Folk Art Museum, did not have a lot going for him."[1] Paul Arnett, an art historian and close friend of Lockett's, had this to say about the artist's life: "To outside appearances—always deceiving—his life was uneventful, almost unlived. Most of his hours will remain forever unaccounted."[2] These two statements make strong judgments about place: Johnson's remarks seem to comment upon Lockett's poverty, race, and entrapment. Given that he spent all of his life in Bessemer, Alabama, his statement suggests disenfranchisement. In the case of Arnett, Lockett's hours remain unaccounted for, in part because the art world would never have considered Bessemer, an economically depressed former steel town, as a cultural center. These statements demonstrate that there are not only racial and historical biases, but just as importantly, a regional one, working against an artist like Lockett on an institutional and scholarly level.

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[1] Ken Johnson, "In Sheet Metal and Scraps, Ronald Lockett Evokes Struggle and Survival," The New York *Times*, August 11, 2016. Accessed March 08, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/12/arts/design/in-sheet-metal-and-scraps-ronald-lockett-evokes-struggle-and survival.html?mtrref=undefined&gwh=4D3C2D70A73350DF47D9184C3215C3B6&gwt=pay.The show was curated by Bernard L. Herman, George B. Tindall Professor of Southern Studies at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. It debuted at the American Folk Art Museum, and was on view from June 21 – September 18, 2016. The show then traveled to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, (Oct.9, 2016 –Jan. 8, 2017), where it was accompanied by the exhibition *Forging Connections: Ronald Lockett's Alabama Contemporaries*, curated by Katherine Jentleson. *Forging Connections* importantly contextualized Lockett's practice among his Birmingham-Bessemer peers. The show concluded its run at the Ackland Art Museum (Jan. 27 –Apr. 9, 2017).

The implications of these two remarks serve as points of inquiry for this chapter. Rather than thinking of a life spent entirely in Bessemer, Alabama, as an existence of missed opportunity, unfulfilled promise, and/or pessimistic resignation, what if Ronald Lockett's refusal to leave the area was instead a radical artistic gesture? What if his decision to remain, rather than leave the South, was instead grounded in a profound sense of place, history, and artistic possibility? What if Lockett's refusal was essential in the historical validation of the greater Birmingham area as an active site of cultural production?

If Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, and Joe Minter represent the culmination of a modernist artistic moment in Alabama, then Ronald Lockett (1965-1998) guided the transition to a post-modern, contemporary approach to art making. As I will argue, it is clear that Lockett's more self-conscious orientation towards the creative process, art history, and his own identity separated him from his artistic peers. His youth, coupled with the particular circumstances of living in Bessemer in the 1980s and 1990s, pushed Lockett to forge a distinctive artistic path, one that was both aware of his cultural inheritance, but simultaneously a departure from his forbearers.

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[2] Paul Arnett, "Ronald Lockett: Improvising in a New Key," *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art*, Vol. 2, (Atlanta: Tinwood, 2001), 516.

One of the most radical aspects of Lockett's career was not just what he did, but what he chose *not* to do over the course of his life. He refused to leave Bessemer to attend art school, choosing instead to shadow the then-unknown artist Thornton Dial Sr., who was also his relative, an older cousin on his maternal side of the family. In so doing, Lockett rejected the companionship of his own generation, preferring instead to absorb the influence of artists thirty years his senior. Rather than interpret these aforementioned decisions as forms of nihilistic resignation—what amounts to an acceptance of what he "did not have going for him"—this chapter argues that his decisions should instead be considered careful acts of what I am terming "queer refusal." Choosing not to do something can be, especially in Lockett's case, can be considered a form of direct action.

This chapter is two-pronged in its focus: first, it explores Lockett's life choices as direct and indirect forms of "queer refusal," as in, they are part of his general refusal to conform, obey, and submit to institutionalized forms of power. These refusals indicate Lockett's awareness of larger, hegemonic systems of power within his own social circumstances and personal life, and also within the art world. His own quiet rejection of such hegemonic power—that this project sees as a form of artistic performance and embodiment—allowed him to insert his practice into the history of art on his own terms. His actions anticipated the prominent place his community of artists, the Birmingham-Bessemer School, would eventually hold within the narrative of modern and contemporary American art.

My construction of "queer refusal" as a theoretical framework is indebted to both Paul Arnett and Thomas Lax in significant ways, as their analyses provided the groundwork. Thomas J. Lax first proposed queerness as an interpretive lens in his discussion of Lockett's life and work, stating: "Queerness is about a *refusal* to fully identify in a way that's made *legible*, knowable, or representable [emphasis mine]."[3] Lax is clearly drawing from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's foundational conception of the term, posited in 1993, where she argues that queer can refer to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning."[4] At the beginning of this chapter, Paul Arnett states—in a self-conscious and misleading manner—that most of Lockett's hours "will remain forever unaccounted." Arnett's essay, "Passing the Buck: The Educations of Ronald Lockett," refutes his earlier statement as it describes Lockett's radical, Bessemer-based artistic education, which Arnett was able to witness firsthand. In an effort to more thoroughly understand how Lockett constructed his artistic persona, queerness is applied to a critical reading of his biography and artistic output. By examining these queer refusals, these illegibilities, I suggest that we can, in fact, begin to account for not only his hours, but the whole of his artistic career.

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[3] Thomas J. Lax, "Elective Affinities," *Ronald Lockett: Prescient Voice*, presentation at the American Folk Art Museum, June 21, 2016. Accessed Feb. 27, 2018. https://folkartmuseum.org/programs/ronald-lockett-prescient-voice-62116/, and "Curating Lockett: An Exhibition History in Two Acts," Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 45-59.

[4] Eve Kosofky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," Mark Edmundson, ed., *Wild Orchids and Trotsky: Messages from American Universities* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 237-266.

Secondly, this chapter analyzes his material practice as an entirely self-conscious form of history painting, using curator Helen Molesworth's concept of "belatedness" as a point of interpretive departure.[5] This section also investigates the concept of a "history painter" in relation to Lockett's artistic identity formation. By approaching Lockett's practice from these two distinct sides, one grounded in the refused, eschewed, and rejected, and the other in the material, physical, and historical, I aim to think through his artistic career in a comprehensive manner.

Due to the relative lack of archival evidence surrounding Ronald Lockett's short life, this chapter draws from interviews with those who knew him personally: the artist Lonnie Holley, who was a part of Lockett's artistic circle; William Arnett, the collector and advocate of the Birmingham-Bessemer group; and Paul Arnett, William's son, art historian, and collaborator.[6] Other primary sources are two video recordings of Lockett, made by David Seehausen in 1997 at Lockett's studio in Bessemer. In this footage, approximately forty minutes long in total, Lockett discusses a range of topics such as his biography, artistic influences, process, and describes of a selection of his works.[7] This conglomeration of primary sources, the essays in the accompanying exhibition catalog to Lockett's first retrospective, *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett* (2016), and of course, the objects themselves, serve as the foundation of my investigation.[8]

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[5] Helen Anne Molesworth, "Thinking of a Mastr Plan: Kerry James Marshall and the Museum," *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*, (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2016), 38-42.

[6] William Arnett, Paul Arnett, and Lonnie Holley, interviewed by the author, Atlanta, GA, and Birmingham, AL, August 2016 – March 2018. I also draw from interviews conducted by other scholars. Most biographical information referenced throughout this chapter, outside of what Lockett stated himself, is drawn from sustained conversations with Paul Arnett.

Queer Refusals

One way to understand Lockett's biography is to consider his life choices as small acts of artistic identity formation, deeply grounded in a sense of place and historical possibility. The idea of "queer refusal" serves as an appropriate interpretive method for the study of his artistic career, not only because of his decision to stay in Bessemer, but the manner in which Lockett presented himself to the world. The use of "queer" is meant to refer to both definitions of the word: its historical meaning as "strange" or "odd," and its current use as sociopolitical term that refers to those who act outside of heteronormative, fixed identities, preferring ambiguity to proscriptive specificity, transgression to assimilation.[9]

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[7] Videotape 15: Ronald Lockett interview raw footage, 1997, and Videotape 8: Ron Lockett and Lonnie environment, by David Seehausen. Series 2. Video Recordings, circa 1982-2001, in the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Collection #20491, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/20491/id/10497/rec/692.

[8] Bernard L. Herman, ed., *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

[9] Eve Kosofky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now,"Mark Edmundson, ed., *Wild Orchids and Trotsky: Messages from American Universities* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 237-266.

Ronald Lockett differed from his fellow Birmingham-Bessemer artists in a number of significant ways: he was too young to have personally experienced the Civil Rights Movement, he graduated from high school but never held steady employment, and, most notably, he always considered himself an artist. He lived all of his life in the Pipe Shop neighborhood of Bessemer, Alabama, among his extended family who owned homes on Fifteenth Street [Fig. 1]. Though his career as an artist was short, he managed to produce around four hundred works of art, primarily painting and sculpture.[10] He served as a creative bridge between two generations of black men: those artists whose practices were significantly impacted by their experiences living through segregation, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement; and that of his own generation, whose lives were informed by the aforementioned historical specters and events but were not experienced personally. Lockett was the youngest member of the Birmingham-Bessemer School, and, with regard to the nature of his work and practice, he stood alone. In a larger art historical sense, there were few other Southern black male artists like him of his generation working through the same artistic and professional quandaries.[11]

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[10] Most of his objects remain in the collection of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation or the Collection of William Arnett.

[11] When asked whether or not he had artistic peers of his own age to work with, Lockett replied that "he was on his own." Videotape 8: Ron Lockett and Lonnie Environment, 1997, by David Seehausen. Series 2. Video Recordings, circa 1982-2001, in the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Collection #20491, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

He was primarily raised by his great-aunt, Sarah Dial Lockett. Thirty-seven years his senior, Ronald Lockett's cousin, Thornton Dial Sr.—or "Uncle Buck," as he was also known, served as a surrogate father, and, most importantly as an artistic mentor, for most of Lockett's life.[12] Until 1990, Thornton Dial lived two doors down from Ronald and Sarah Lockett on Fifteenth Street. It was on this street, buttressed by the support of these two elder family members, where Ronald Lockett created hundreds of works of art.

Lockett was more formally educated than any other member of the Birmingham-Bessemer group. He received his high school diploma, having attended a public high school, and was known to frequent the local library. One of the key differences between him and his elders was literacy—Dial was apparently illiterate. Lockett was already hanging around Dial's studio, or the "junk house," as it was known, in 1987 when he met William (Bill) Arnett, his wife Judy, and their son Paul [Fig. 2]. As he did for every member of the Birmingham-Bessemer School, Lonnie Holley provided the introduction to the Arnetts, first creating an opportunity for Dial, and subsequently Lockett. An educated white man, William Arnett became the institutional interlocutor the group, and it was through his advocacy and sheer will that their collective practice would eventually enter the mainstream art world.[13]

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[12] "I was his father, but he was actually more closer to Mr. Dial. I'm just being honest. He loved to stay up under him." Ronald Lockett's father, Short Lockett, as quoted in Bernard L. Herman's "Once Something Has Lived It Can Never Really Die," *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 3.

[13] Lockett actually first told William's wife, Judy, about his art making, and invited her to view his work. Only later did he show his work to Bill and Paul. Paul Arnett, interview with the author, January 2018, Atlanta GA.

Paul Arnett was born a few months after Lockett in 1965. When Paul and Lockett met in 1987, Paul had just graduated from Harvard with an undergraduate degree in art history. According to Paul, this early encounter, coupled with their remarkable closeness in age, led to a unique bond between himself and Lockett. For a short period, they grew up together.[14] How Lockett may have felt about their relationship is unknowable, a limitation that demands acknowledgment. Nevertheless, Paul Arnett is among a very small group of living people within this discussion who knew Lockett for nearly the entirety of his artistic career, marking his observations and memories as especially valuable.

While the exact nature of the following story is still up for debate, its prominent presence within Lockett's biography is telling. Lockett describes this event in one of the only extant videos of the artist. In 1987 he introduced the idea of attending art school, broaching the idea with Dial. The exchange went as follows:

> I always wanted to do artwork or whatever, but [Thornton Dial] was a big inspiration to me because you know my mother wasn't very supportive of my artwork and neither was my father….[Dial] was kind of, like, a driving force of my artwork. Because I told him I wanted to go to art school and he told me I had the best school of all just making artwork or whatever. He was a big influence on my artwork.[15]

In this version of the narrative, we learn that the best artistic education one can receive is through the making of art itself—classrooms, degrees, and anything else outside of simply creating work was unnecessary. Dial had implicitly stated that Lockett was

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[14] Paul Arnett, interviewed by the author, Atlanta, GA, January 2018.

[15] Ronald Lockett, Videotape 15, 1997.

already in a school of sorts, indeed, "the best school of all." The Birmingham-Bessemer School, perhaps?

No, of course not. Dial, Lockett, and Holley never self-consciously referred to themselves as such, and thus to think so would be both inaccurate and anachronistic. While useful, the label was created much later, by American studies scholar and curator of *Fever Within*, Bernard L. Herman.[16] Paul actually disputes Lockett's account referenced above, and, citing a litany of logistics, states, "there's almost no chance it happened like that."[17] That is because in 1987, Dial had only begun to refer to himself as an artist and show his work to people outside of his own family, he was not really selling his art, and was basically unknown. Dial was not the type of person to tell anyone, explicitly, what to do with his or her life. At this point, exactly what happened between Lockett and Dial regarding the former's interest in attending art school is a matter of historical "he-said-she-said."

What is more interesting in the context of this project, is the idea that Lockett's narrative—where he rejects art school and chooses Dial—is, if not invented, then perhaps embellished, by the artist himself. Whether or not Lockett's account of this event accurately reflects what really happened is irrelevant. Rather, what does this fabulated or apocryphal narrative tell us, first, about Lockett's understanding of the importance of establishing an artistic history, and, secondly, about how he understood the stakes of his constructing own biography within this larger group of peer artists, and art history in general?

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[16] Bernard L. Herman, "Once Something Has Lived It Can Never Really Die: Ronald Lockett's Creative Journey," *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 17.

[17] Paul Arnett, "Passing the Buck: The Educations of Ronald Lockett," *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 63.

The historical hinge of higher education that, in one sense, defines Lockett's life, throws into high relief the issue of training with regard to Southern black artists. Born in 1965, Lockett was a generation younger than Lonnie Holley, and two generations removed from Thornton Dial and Joe Minter. The shadow of racial terror in the form of Jim Crow segregation had moved on elsewhere—arguably in the form of the school-to-prison pipeline, which Lockett had also avoided. While the Birmingham-Bessemer School artists are sometimes described as self-taught, it is important to remember that receiving a formal education—especially as a black person under Jim Crow—was not a given. In fact, it was often discouraged or made impossible. For Lockett, the prospect of receiving a formal artistic education was theoretically more accessible, notwithstanding the practical and individual impediments he might have faced on that journey. Nevertheless, on a conceptual level, and in a gesture of artistic identity formation, Lockett's decision to choose Dial and the junk house studio, Pipe Shop, and family, was a radical one. The effect that Lockett's decision to remain had on the larger history of the Birmingham-Bessemer School was profound. His choice to stay in the area served as one of the earliest forms of its artistic validation, as his decision was based on a deep awareness, rather than ignorance, of the possibilities that existed both inside and outside of Bessemer.

While Paul Arnett may not agree with Lockett's account, he understood the radicality of the artist's career choice. As he explains:

> [I]n deciding to remain a "vernacular" artist, in opting for the "studio" education of the "junk house"… at the elbow of a then unheralded emerging "folk artist"… Ronald followed his own vatic intuitions in a direction no one before him had chosen. When offered a chance out, everyone had always taken it. His decision to stay put, on Fifteenth Street, constituted a moment of cultural recognition and self-recognition that placed him ahead of nearly all academics, curators, dealers, and collectors.[18]

Lockett was able to recognize, in an almost prophetic manner, the cultural significance of this small group of fellow artists. This choice to remain in Bessemer was the first among many supported by his "vatic intuitions." On some fundamental level, it is likely that Lockett realized Thornton Dial was a unique figure, an accomplished artist, but because of his race, class, and lack of formal schooling, not the kind of person one would encounter at an institution of higher education [Fig. 3].

The same year that Lockett made the crucial decision to remain in Bessemer, he created one of his most powerful images, *Rebirth* (1987). It is a small work, and embedded within it is the first instance of the artist's signature image, and arguably, his earliest statement of purpose. In the painting, a skeletal deer "baby," as he called it, moves from the world of the living, symbolized by the green and blue, into a black void [Fig 4]. As the title states, this creature, rendered with paint, wire, and nails, moves along this path, not just to die—but also to also be reborn. At once living and dead, the deer baby chooses unknown, uncharted territory. With the exception of one stripe of horizontal white paint, the void is rendered in black. A liminal figure, it walks steadily towards absolute blackness. Lockett, in the construction of his artistic identity, also performed his own kind of radical blackness.[19]

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[18] Paul Arnett, "Passing the Buck," *Fever Within,* 63.

Lockett made at least ten *Rebirth* paintings over the course of his short life, not including other works in which the deer baby makes an appearance, but is not the central subject. The frequent recurrence of this figure indicates its important place within his symbolic universe. In this *Rebirth* image from 1990, the entire composition from the 1987 work is inset into a white space punctuated by slender tree branches [Fig. 5]. Here, Lockett expands outward from the initial frame, as if to expose the artifice of painting as a medium. The tree branches are rendered in a more naturalistic manner than the deer "baby" (to use Lockett's term), or fawn and its setting, which have been reduced even further, to simple blocks of color. These elements stand in stark contrast to the overall whiteness of the painting. As a whole, the image is a painting-within-a-painting, amplifying its conceptual resonance: this picture is a representation of an idea.

Another work, also from 1990, features the original *Rebirth* composition, only this time rendered in pools of spilled paint, a reflection of Lockett's interest in the work of Jackson Pollock [Fig. 6]. Lockett pursued his own self-guided artistic education in a number of ways. Besides shadowing Dial, Lockett frequented the Bessemer Public Library in order to consult art books. This *Rebirth* painting is part of a significant body of work that demonstrate Lockett's deeper interest in exploring gestural painting and

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[19] To be clear, both Bernard L. Herman and Paul Arnett understand this piece as autobiographical. However, in my study, this interpretation is pushed further and used as material evidence of artistic queer refusal. Paul Arnett, "Passing the Buck," *Fever Within*, 65; Bernard L. Herman, "Once Something Has Lived," *Fever Within*, 4-5.

Abstract Expressionism. Works like *Poison River* and *Civil Rights Marchers* (both 1988) similarly display his application of drip and splatter painting techniques [Fig. 7, 8]. At home, Lockett watched the popular PBS series, *The Joy of Painting*, hosted by the landscape painter Bob Ross.[20] Between Dial's tutelage, self-directed reading, and consuming Ross's virtual painting lessons, Lockett cobbled together an eclectic and postmodern set of artistic influences. The 1990 spilled-paint *Rebirth* exhibits these sources: the use of an autobiographical avatar (a concept drawn from Dial), set into a cloudy landscape (Ross), depicted in an abstract and gestural manner (Pollock).

Lockett's biography indicates that he seemed to lack, or refused to accept, the traditional American life goals of gainful employment, marriage, property ownership, and children—goals that his mentor achieved and embodied. The nuclear family, entrenched within, and economically supported by, its engagement with capitalism—in essence, a form of the American dream—did not seem to appeal to him.[21] To those who knew him, Lockett never indicated interest in pursuing any kind of career path outside of being an artist. This pursuit, while already an unorthodox career concept for the Bessemer community, was an even more perplexing decision given Lockett's disinterest in moving to a more urbane cultural center.

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[20] Paul Arnett, interviewed by the author, Atlanta, GA, January 2018.

[21] While Lockett may have "felt a quasi-political duty in the conservative black South to be a patriarch with a litter of little ones," according to Paul Arnett, duty does not equal desire. And ultimately, Lockett never fulfilled this duty. "Ronald Lockett: Improvising in a New Key," *Souls Grown Deep*, 523.

This chapter interprets Lockett's many unorthodox, or 'queer' life choices, as deliberate gestures of identity formation. The queer theorist Jack Halberstam proposes another useful conceptualization of queerness, which the author states is based on failure, "alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends," and that, importantly, "Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world."[22] Lockett's decision to stay in Bessemer was a choice made from a place that was, using Halberstam's own terminology, "not unduly optimistic" or "nihilistic." While he rejected more socially accepted and conventional life goals, Lockett did so because he understood that Bessemer was a viable choice for him as it provided an alternative way of knowing and understanding art making.

Lockett's so-called lost opportunity for departure instead enmeshed him in spaces few others were allowed to access, such as Dial's, or Uncle Buck's junk house, a tin shed-like structure on the back of Dial's Fifteenth Street property.[23] Lockett was one of the few people allowed to watch Dial make art. In fact, from 1987 to 1990, Lockett was the only person permitted to observe Dial in the junk house studio.[24] Paul described the junk house as Lockett's "CalArts and his Met," an interesting choice of locations given their relationship to two other black artists of Dial's generation who were also Alabama-born. Noah Purifoy (1917-2004), who was born in Snow Hill, left Alabama and was the first full-time African American student at Chouinard Art Institute, now CalArts. Jack Whitten (1939-2018) was born in Bessemer but spent most of his life in the New York City area, and frequented The Met for inspiration. In this statement, Dial's junk house becomes as worthy of a classroom as these respected institutions. The relationship between Dial and Lockett—a paternalistic mentorship that would eventually graduate to an artistic exchange between peers—was, to use Halberstam's words, a "more creative, more cooperative, more surprising way[s] of being in the world" than what Lockett could have encountered in a more formal, academic setting. This is not to say that their relationship progression was unique in its structure, but rather, it was remarkable given the circumstance, time, and identities of those involved. They were two working-class black men in Bessemer, Alabama, establishing what was, at least in surface-level appearances, an artist apprenticeship distantly reminiscent of the relationships formed in artists' workshops in the early modern Europe.

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[22] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2, 24.

[23] "Passing the Buck," *Fever Within,* 64.

[24] Paul Arnett, interviewed by the author, Atlanta, GA, January 2018.

Still, to recall Lockett's earlier statement where he claims that Dial told him "he had the best school of all just making artwork or whatever," the relationship between the two was not the typical one between master and apprentice. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Jacques Ranciére recounts the story of eighteenth-century teacher Joseph Jacocot, whose primary pedagogical principal was "I must teach you that I have nothing to teach you."[25] The job of the master, according to Jacocot, was to lead students to that emancipatory field of emptiness and the unknown, wherein the student discovers, for his or herself, that no external authority is necessary in the pursuit of knowledge. Dial was an autodidact, and what he did was help guide Lockett towards the path of artistic liberation, the path Dial had initially blazed for himself. Dial was not simply interested in teaching Lockett the more technical aspects of art making, though that type of exchange did occur. Rather, Dial sought to instill the idea within Lockett that, paradoxically, there was nothing someone else could teach him that he could not figure out for himself. If there was one important concept that Dial passed on to Lockett in a mentor-like capacity, it was that artistic authority already existed within him. It did not need to be bestowed upon him by someone else, not even by Dial.

While Dial had his junk house studio, Lockett had a garage and concrete pad where he worked [Fig. 9]. Just a of couple houses separated these men, making discussion and exchange constant. They shared materials, Dial often supplying Lockett with paint when his own funds were limited.[26] Their artistic processes were different, however, as Dial was incredibly prolific but also decisive: if an object he was working on proved to be unsuccessful, he had no problem dismantling the work and starting again. Lockett was more hesitant, but also more meditative. He would often sit and stare at a work-in-progress for hours. He made one work at a time, whereas Dial usually had many projects going on at once.[27]Arguably, the most significant concept Lockett appropriated from Dial was the use of an animal avatar as an encoded autobiographical figure. Dial's consistent use of tiger imagery—his first major solo show was titled *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger*—likely influenced Lockett to find an animal of his own.[28] For Dial, the tiger stood either for himself, black people, the history of black struggle— or all of the above [Fig. 10]. The tiger as an animal is fierce, stealthy, and cunning. Its close relation to the panther, specifically in this context, the black panther, is significant. The Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) was formed in 1965, in Lowndes County, Alabama, under the umbrella of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and helmed by Stokely Carmichael, a prominent civil rights organizer who became the fourth chairman of SNCC in 1966. As a party, the LCFO's mission was to register the majority-black citizens of Lowndes County to vote. They chose the black panther as their symbol, and a year later Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale adapted the symbol for the newly formed Black Panther Party.[29] Whether or not Dial knew about the black panther's specific connection to Alabama, he knew of the Black Panther Party as a political entity.[30] Dial's selection of the tiger, rather than the black panther, allowed him to personalize it as an avatar without having an overdetermined attachment to black history. Additionally, the tiger's patterning contains both black and white, providing Dial greater opportunity to play with the metaphorical possibilities of his creature.

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[25] Jacques Rancière and Kristin Ross, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) 15.

[26] Ronald Lockett, Videotape 15, 1997.

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[27] Paul Arnett, "Passing the Buck," *Fever Within,* 66.

[28] Thornton Dial, Amiri Baraka, Thomas McEvilley, Paul Arnett, and William Arnett. *Thornton Dial: Image of the Tiger*, (New York: H.N. Abrams, in association with the Museum of American Folk Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the American Center, 1993).

[29] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[30] Paul Arnett, interviewed with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 2018.

As his avatar, Lockett selected not a predator, but a prey animal: a deer. The whitetail deer that appear often in Lockett's paintings are commonly found throughout Alabama, in both rural and urban areas. In the mid-twentieth century, the Alabama Department of Conservation began cultivating a stock of deer throughout the state.[31] Hunting whitetail deer was and continues to be a popular pastime in Alabama, and the majority of hunters are white men who live in rural areas.[32] Lockett was not a hunter. In choosing the deer as his avatar, specifically, the common Alabama whitetail deer, he was, in effect, positioning himself as the locally hunted animal. His deep sensitivity towards human and animal life is consistently reflected in his work. As he stated, "When [white] people came [to America], they saw buffalo, and they exploited them, and they just destroyed them, because they could. They had guns; they just shot them down because they just could. They didn't really shoot them down because they had to feed theyselves; they shot them down just because they could. It's wrong to destroy anything." Hunting was an activity linked to white domination and power, a hypermasculine, non-utilitarian endeavor connected to demonstrating control over the lives of other creatures.[33]

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[31] Ralph H. Allen, *History and Results of Deer Restocking in Alabama*, Bulletin No. 6, (Alabama Department of Conservation: Division of Game and Fish, State Management Section, 1965).

[32] Robert Dewitt, "Hunting in Alabama," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, last updated January 25, 2016. Accessed April 15, 2018. http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1893.

Lockett's allegorical animals function as particularly charged metaphorical characters. Rather than paint or construct more literal compositions that feature black figures, Lockett builds his own ambiguous world populated primarily by animals. Perhaps Lockett, for a variety of reasons, saw himself as trapped in crosshairs; a target. Of what, more specifically, can only be suggested. What is clear is that with regard to Lockett's work, biographical knowledge of his life seems almost required. All of Lockett's objects, even those that feature more explicitly historical subject matter (the Holocaust, Hiroshima), are imbued with a deep sense of intimacy. The personal is always deeply political.

A nearly all-black painting, *Instinct for Survival* (1990) depicts a lone buck standing in a dark landscape [Fig. 11]. The title of the work and the central male creature explicitly suggest that his life is at risk, and he is being hunted. The work was created after one of Lockett's brothers, David, was taken as prisoner in the Persian Gulf War.[34] During this same period, Lockett's other brother, Junior, was in and out of prison. Because Lockett's deer figure is at simultaneously a prescribed yet open-ended metaphor, one could interpret this painting as a meditation on the difficulty of young black survival, and its reverberating effects. Despite finding a way out of Bessemer,

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Ronald Lockett, as quoted by Paul Arnett, "Ronald Lockett: Improvising in a New Key," *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art*, Vol. 2, (Atlanta: Tinwood, 2001), 521.

[34] Ronald Lockett, Videotape 15, 1997.

David is captured, though later freed. Junior, who remained in Bessemer, ends up being trapped in another way.

From 1989-1992, Lockett completed his *Traps* series, all of which feature deer. [Figs. 12, 13, 14, 15].[35] Deer, both male and female, are trapped primarily by chain link fences—boundaries that create barriers and borders—imposed upon them by an unnatural, outside force. These works can be read as an expression of the personal entrapment Lockett may have felt about Bessemer. But if deer also represent black people in addition to himself, (like Dial's tiger) then in Lockett's universe, these deer are in constant threat of extinction. While Dial's exotic tigers cannot be found in Alabama, Lockett's deer are everywhere—even in his own backyard. In Lockett's paintings, black history and black life are always at risk, impeded by artificial barriers in a location close to home. Lockett's *Traps* series complicate, but do not contradict, this chapter's overall argument that his deliberate choice to remain in Bessemer was an artistic gesture. Rather, Lockett's paintings demonstrate his complex understanding of place and historical determinacy within his own life and beyond, and remaining allowed him a deep dive into to the land of his birthright.

In *Traps*, Lockett's "deer baby" has now, despite being skeletal, grown up into an adult animal, take the form of a buck, a lone male figure. The buck, besides serving as an allegorical black man, also is a direct homage to Dial, known to Lockett as "Uncle Buck." While bucks often travel alone, deer are herd animals. Their instinct is to stay within the same geographical area for most of their life, called home ranges. Leaving the home range exposes pack animals to greater unknown threats. Lockett, like his avatar, was a figure deeply connected—and perhaps, whose survival was dependent upon—place. Despite achieving significant, (though belated) recognition in the mainstream art world, Dial never left Alabama, either.

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[35] These illustrations are only a selection of his *Traps* series, as there are more than a dozen paintings within this cycle. Most are still in the collection of William Arnett.

During later years, the nature of the working relationship between Dial and Lockett shifted from mentor and student to a more collegial exchange between peers. Sometimes Dial would come over and observe Lockett working, and he was particularly impressed by Lockett's skills as a draftsman. As Lockett recalled: "[Dial] was looking surprised at what I was doing, but then I was just amazed what he was doing as well, I was kinda proud of myself that he had some kind of mutual respect of my artwork, just like I had for his."[36] Within Bernard L. Herman's formulation of the Birmingham-Bessemer School, which he describes as a school "defined by a context of shared knowledge and experience, creative and critical observation, and an open exchange of ideas, often through visits," no other relationship embodied this set of parameters more than the one between Dial and Lockett.[37]

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[36] Ronald Lockett, Videotape 15, 1997.

[37] Bernard L. Herman, "Once Something Has Lived It Can Never Really Die: Ronald Lockett's Creative Journey," *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 17. Herman also specifically addressed this topic in his presentation "Ronald Lockett and the Birmingham-Bessemer School," *Ronald Lockett: Prescient Voice*, American Folk Art Museum, June 21, 2016. Accessed Feb. 27, 2018. https://folkartmuseum.org/programs/ronald-lockett-prescient-voice-62116/.

Thornton Dial and his wife moved to a house in the neighboring town of McCalla in 1990, which marked the end of his junk house years and, more consequentially, one artistic phase of Lockett's life. Their relationship was forever altered by this move out of town, as there was no longer opportunity for daily meetings at the junk house. Until Lockett's untimely death in 1998, Dial would still visit Lockett, but the years under his direct tutelage were, largely over.[38] Yet Lockett would go on to make his most mature work in the years following Dial's move, so perhaps this departure was auspiciously timed. It allowed Lockett to struggle and work on his own, without the watchful eye of the resident master artist.

There is one other area of Lockett's biography that needs to be addressed, if only because it is often mentioned in other accounts of his life. This being the question of Lockett's sexuality, which was, according to those who knew him, ambiguous. For example, gallerist Barbara Archer articulated her impression of Lockett as follows:

> I often wondered if he was heterosexual, or homosexual, not that it matters except to wonder more about what he was thinking, what was going on in his head. I know he said that he had HIV because he was in a relationship with a woman and I guess she accused him of giving it to her and vice versa, and maybe that is so. But if I hadn't heard that I would have assumed that he was homosexual, so I don't know.[39]

Apparently, even throughout Pipe Shop—his own community—there were quiet questions about his sexuality. To be clear, Lockett's sexuality does not have anything to do with the conception of queerness put forth in this analysis. Queerness is not about sexual preference in my use of the term, rather, it is about a refusal to be legible within a conventional, heteronormative, patriarchal, hierarchical, and capitalist world. The only potential connection within this framework is with regard to his refusal to perform, or conform to, gendered norms of black masculinity. This refusal to perform masculinity, for some who knew him, like Archer, bore an innate, but perhaps false connection to Lockett's sexual preference.

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[38] Ronald Lockett, Videotape 8, 1997.

[39] Barbara Archer, as interviewed by Bernard Herman, 2014. This quote is referenced throughout the *Fever Within* catalog.

Rather than be concerned with Lockett's choice of sexual partners, what is more compelling is that Lockett expressed ambivalence about conforming to conventional black male gender roles, which he saw as overly connected to physical strength, and, therefore, the historical commodification of black bodies.[40] His refusal to perform masculinity was an attempt to reimagine his relationship to black male selfhood, one independent of associations with violent forced labor (slavery) or physical talent (such as professional athleticism). In doing so, he also separated himself from his artistic peers, who all worked in manual labor occupations at some point in their lives. Physical toughness, embodied by the men around him, including Dial, was not something Lockett cultivated himself. At the same time, these artistic peers and community elders were Lockett's primary relationships. He was, according to his family, "a young old man," seemingly disinterested in developing friendships with those in his age group.[41] He refused to conform to norms of his young peers, who were entrenched in the display of a certain youthful male bravado.

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[40] Paul Arnett, "Ronald Lockett: Improvising in a New Key," *Souls Grown Deep*, 523.

[41] Short Lockett and Richard Dial, as interviewed by Bernard L. Herman, Bessemer, Alabama, May 2014, "Once Something Has Lived," *Fever Within*, 15.

Lockett never embodied the conventional role of a strong, self-sufficient black man, or that of a marginalized artist who rose above his circumstances and achieved success and recognition during his lifetime. This is in stark contrast, for example, to his mentor Thornton Dial. While Dial served as an artistic mentor, Lockett appeared to reject much of what Dial embodied as a personal role model. This argument goes against Bill Arnett's estimation of their relationship, as he believed "it was Dial's personality and his work ethic that influenced Ronald," rather than his artistic style.[42] Though Lockett may have admired Dial's work ethic, their artistic processes were dramatically different. They were both known to be reserved when it came to verbal expression, and that was their greatest common personality trait. The way Lockett chose to perform his masculinity, in contrast to those who surrounded him, demonstrates a clear generational divide within the Birmingham-Bessemer School.

As discussed in Chapter One, Lonnie Holley's critique of capitalism is manifested primarily through his continued use of cast-off detritus in his artistic practice. In contrast, Lockett's method of capitalist critique was arguably through his own body and lived experience. While Lockett did use found objects, particularly found metal, in the creation of his work, this use seems primarily biographical in its orientation, rather than as a critique of capitalism. Lockett's most powerful form of critique was through a life of queer refusal and illegibility. His refusal to inscribe his body into systems of power—institutional, cultural, and political—was his own way of forging a surprising, radical way of being.

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[42] Bill Arnett, as quoted by Bernard L. Herman, "Once Something Has Lived," *Fever Within*, 17.

In writing about Lockett, history writing versus critical fabulation becomes a central issue.[43] Drawing on the work of Hayden White, art historians David Green and Peter Seddon state that "history writing, like fiction, has to persuade its reader that the narrative being told is plausible and coherent." Furthermore, they understand that the narrative is constructed from "fragmentary and incomplete facts," which "draw[s] attention to the fact that this process can only ever be relational and provisional."[44] One could argue that interpreting Lockett's life choices as forms of artistic refusal is a critical fabulation of his biography. What we know about Lockett's life, a biography composed of very fragmentary and incomplete facts, is primarily through the accounts of others, rather than the artist himself. The greatest resource we have are the art objects Lockett left behind, most of which remain unpublished and unexhibited.

Perhaps a more productive use of the term "fabulation" is to investigate, as this chapter does, the manner in which Lockett critically fabulated *his* biography in the service of an artistic history. David Seehausen's video footage of Ronald Lockett was shot approximately one year before the artist's death, when his health was beginning to fail. In some way Lockett might have known that he did not have long to live (this is

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[43] Here I am borrowing the term "critical fabulation" from Saidiya Hartman's text, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 26 (2008).

[44] David, Green and Peter Seddon, "Introduction: Art, Historiographical Practice and the Ends of History," *History Painting Reassessed: The Representation of History in Contemporary Art*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 2.

Paul's contention as well).[45] Aware that this footage would serve as a historical record, Lockett laid out a narrative of his life and artistic career. He thought about leaving Bessemer and going to art school. Uncle Buck told him that was not necessary, and since Buck was his biggest supporter; he was inclined to take his advice. He stayed and made more art. He worked under and alongside this older artist, with varying degrees of intensity, for almost a decade. His process evolved; his work changed. He laid claim to the artistic value of Bessemer, Alabama. That is the story as Lockett chose to tell it. Regardless of whether or not his narrative accurately aligns with what happened in reality is irrelevant. In the construction of his artistic biography, this is the truth he wanted others to know.

History Painting

Place plays a central role in the formation of Lockett's artistic identity, not only with regard to his biography but also as a topic addressed within the art objects themselves. The other major concept consistently explored throughout Lockett's work, which is connected to place, is history. This section investigates how history, as lived experience, a set of circumstances, a conceptual device, and as artistic subject matter—framed Lockett's career.

Let's consider Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988), the New York City-based black artist five years Lockett's senior. Like Lockett, Basquiat did not receive a college degree (though he did attend a private arts school as a child), but had an artistic mentor. Unlike

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[45] Paul Arnett, interviewed by the author, January 2018, Atlanta, GA.

Lockett, Basquiat's mentor, Andy Warhol, was already firmly established in the art world by the time they began to work together. Basquiat was championed by one of the most canonical figures in the history of modern American art, and his work came into being during a period in which painting was making a comeback, vis-à-vis Neo-Expressionist painters in Europe and the United States. His ascent to fame was assisted—but not solely determined by—the historical circumstances into which he was born. Living and working in Manhattan during the latter half of the twentieth century, he came into contact with the New York art elite, i.e., a nexus of the international art world. His untimely death necessarily limited his oeuvre, which, in part, lead to the artist's posthumous mythologization (not to mention the effect it had on his work's market value). The timing, setting, and circumstances of his life were undeniably major factors of Basquiat's success.[46]

Ronald Lockett did not come of age as an artist on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, but in the Deep South, under the mentorship of an at-the-time almost unrecognized artist. He spent his entire life in a place not considered an art world hub, but rather, one associated with social conservatism, racial tension, and poverty. His lack of formal education, coupled with this regional association, has led to Lockett being excluded from mainstream discussions of modern and contemporary art. Besides serving as a comparative peer, Basquiat is brought into conversation with Lockett because, despite their differences, they were both interested in the stakes of history painting as black male artists, and what their hard-won presence in this genre might mean for the history of art.

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[46] For more on Basquiat's life and career, see Jean-Michel Basquiat, Dieter Buchhart, Eleanor Nairne, and Lotte Johnson. *Basquiat: Boom for Real*, (Munich: Prestel Publishing in Association with Barbican Art Gallery, 2017).

In *Redefining American History Painting*, art historians Patricia M. Burnham and Lucretia Hoover Giese state that the three defining components of the genre are "historicity, narrativity, and didactic intent."[47] They can be broadly defined as follows: historicity is the pursuit—however problematic or challenging—of depicting an event with some semblance of "truth;" narrativity refers to the temporal sequence of events, the telling of *what* happened *when*; and didactic intent denotes the moral center and potential ideological implications of a work. One other component of the genre offered by the authors that is of particular interest to this discussion is the "social transaction" of history painting, or the nature of the exchange between artist and viewer. [48] What does it mean for Lockett to visualize historical narratives—of his own selection—to an ever-changing group of viewers? What were the stakes of his visualization of history?

In terms of what he *did* do over the course of his life (rather than his refusals), Lockett's approach to the creation of art objects was arguably the most conventional, or legible, of the Birmingham-Bessemer group. By conventional I mean that most of his work and practice fall within certain parameters of art making: his artworks are primarily two-dimensional; he did not create complex yard environments, as Dial and Holley did; and his painting-assemblages are mostly representational, as they have discernable subject matter, often with direct references to historical or current events. Sometimes his work contains direct references to the work of other artists—including work by mainstream, canonical painters. For these reasons, Lockett's practice falls into an understandable and familiar range for the art world apparatus of historians, critics, and curators.

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[47] Patricia Mullan Burnham, and Lucretia H. Giese, *Redefining American History Painting*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 6.

[48] Burnham and Giese, *Redefining,* 7-13.

Lockett tended to create work in series, or cycles, rather than as stand-alone objects (although he did also create those). This propensity is in part due to the aforementioned topics of interest, like historical events, the environment, or his own biography, all of which reward repeated investigation. His engagement with serial works and cycles also recalls the use of this format within the genre of history painting, such as Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* paintings (1833-1836). Even when Lockett's paintings do not fall into a specifically planned series, they reflect his consistent experimentation with different painting styles. Previously mentioned works *Poison River* and *Civil Rights Marchers* belong to a suite of paintings from 1988-1989 that are the result of Lockett's exploration of drip and splatter techniques, but are not united by any consistent theme.[49] The selection of work put forth is meant to demonstrate Lockett's critical orientation toward history, as manifested through objects that syncretically unify a plethora of influences and concerns.

Christianity has long had a cultural stronghold throughout the Deep South (indigenous pre-history excepted). Both Thornton Dial and Sarah Dial Lockett were

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[49] Paintings in this style include *Out of Ashes* (1988), *Drought* (1987-1997), *Echo Heard Cross the Ocean* (1987-1997), *Driven From My Homeland* (1988), and many other untitled works.

Southern Baptists, while Lockett's personal relationship to the Christian faith was more ambiguous.[50] Nevertheless, a number of Lockett's paintings feature biblically allusive and mythological imagery. One series, completed mostly in 1989, includes paintings such as *A Little Piece of Heaven* and *Never Look Back*, both of which exude a proto-Renaissance quality with the use of stylized trees, (sometimes) human and animal figures, in a pastoral setting (Fig. 16, 17). *Never Look Back* and *Life and Death* both feature circular, orb-like structures set into the composition that depict a natural setting outside of the primary image (Fig. 18). They bear strong visual affinity to Giovanni di Paolo's *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise* from 1445, in which God the Father holds celestial globe that depicts the universe (Fig. 19). The title of Lockett's painting, *Never Look Back,* suggests that this work is also about expulsion. It is unknown if Lockett knew of this specific Sienese painting, but he did pursue independent art historical research, as other works support this possibility. For example, an earlier painting, *The Last Supper* (1987), is based on a photographic reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's fresco; while his later work, *Leda and the Swan* (1992) is evidence of his interest in mythology as well as religion (Figs. 20, 21).[51]

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[50] Glenn Hinson's essay, "Every Drawing That I Do, I Think About the Lord: Thornton Dial's Journey of Faith," specifically details the relationship between Dial's personal faith and his artistic practice. *Thornton Dial: Thoughts on Paper,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011) 91-138.

[51] In some of these orbs, Lockett's *Rebirth* skeleton makes an appearance, rather than a landscape. This is just one instance where Lockett self-references his own work within a painting, further establishing his own visual lexicon and history.

What these paintings also communicate is Lockett's apparent longing, or appreciation for, Edenic imaginings of the natural world, one only sparsely occupied by human beings. A prelapsarian world untouched by human intervention—no pollution, violent terrorist attack, or nuclear disaster in sight. Again, animals (mostly birds) become the central figures in these works. One can easily draw a conceptual thread through Lockett's oeuvre, as they often demonstrate his long and imagined view of history: from the beginning of time right up until the end of his own life, his scope was monumental and vast.

Though he never totally abandoned painting, six years before his death, Lockett shifted almost all of his attention to a medium that allowed him to produce his most profound and elegiac body of work: cut and found scrap metal. Lockett could still exercise his skills as a draftsman and painter, but the addition of this industrial material permitted another level of metaphoric resonance that did not exist in his previous work. As discussed in the Introduction, iron and steel were the metals that built Birmingham and Bessemer. Dial had spent thirty years working at the Pullman Standard plant, and scrap metal was prevalent in the Dial household. Their neighborhood, Pipe Shop, is named for its proximity to U.S. Pipe, a major employer of the area. But in Lockett's lifetime, Bessemer and the greater Birmingham became a post-industrial wasteland, the landscape littered with abandoned mines, shuttered factories, and silent blast furnaces.[52] Metal was Lockett's inheritance: an archaeological relic that recounted an earlier era of production. Through working with scrap metal, Lockett could also engage with the concept of masculinity—particularly masculine labor—on his own terms.

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[52] The industrial history of the Birmingham-Bessemer area is addressed in the Introduction.

Using this metal, over a period of approximately five years, Lockett produced a number of distinct series. *Oklahoma*, completed between 1995 and 1996, includes the individual works *Oklahoma*, *Timothy*, *April Nineteenth (the Number)*, *The Enemy Amongst Us*, *Conspiracy,* and *Awakening* (Figs. 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27). Made in response to the Oklahoma City bombing perpetrated by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, Lockett took on a contemporary, rather than a distant, historical tragedy. In these works he chose not to represent any figures, human or animal, but to evoke the façades of blasted, bombed buildings through metal collage. The order of the grid becomes an indicator of violence in these works, the pieced metal squares, with their ragged edges, ask the viewer to imagine a blast powerful enough to rip through a building. The abstract geometry visually recalls work by Color Field painters Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, only here the shapes become solid and dimensional.

In one of the few recordings of Lockett explaining his work, he speaks at length about his *Oklahoma* series:

> This is the idea I came up with to express my idea about the Oklahoma bombing. It's sort of abstract, with cut-out different shapes and stuff, with wire and old tin, and barbed wire. The iron has different shapes, sort of like the other buildings in the background. When the building was first destroyed, with the wire hanging down and it was all caved in, I tried to come up with the best idea I could to show that, to show the destruction. When I first got the idea to do it, I didn't really want to offend anybody so I really wanted to come up with an idea that wouldn't offend anybody, I wanted to come up with the best idea I could without

> offending any of those people that had families that got killed in this federal building.[53]

Lockett expressed belief in abstraction, rather than figuration, showcases his aesthetic strategy for such sensitive, tragic subject matter. He describes how he grappled with the conceptual conundrum of depicting a massive historical tragedy in a way that recalls the similar quandary that Abstract Expressionist artists faced in the wake of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. How to depict horror, the epic loss of human life, the mutilation of the human body on a grand scale, without re-visualizing or recreating that violence? How to capture the history of humanity without the human figure? Through metallic abstraction, Lockett was able to grant his subject the respect and sensitivity it demanded.

Lockett sought to provoke an emotional response through these works. As he explained:

> It expressed something, you know, the tragedy [of the bombing]….I hope that when some people see it someday, you know, that they'll feel the same way about it that I do, and they can kinda like see something into it, that I was expressing honest emotion about it…not trying to offend anybody just trying to express what happened on April nineteenth.[54]

Not only did Lockett want viewers to feel something, he wanted them to feel *the same way* that he did when he created these works. His orientation was distinctly phenomenological: in collapsing the critical distance between the artist and the viewer, Lockett aimed to commune in the (apparent) universality of human emotion.

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[53] Ronald Lockett, Videotape 15, 1997.

[54] Ibid.

Lockett's remarks recall earlier statements by Mark Rothko, who similarly used abstraction to express "basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on." In a more self-aggrandizing manner than Lockett, Rothko goes on the say that viewers who are moved to tears by his paintings are having "the same religious experience I had when I painted them."[55] However, there is a discrete difference between these two artists' approaches: Lockett grounds his emotions within a particular historical tragedy, whereas Rothko does not. Lockett's metal assemblages are a conceptual index to the material world, rather than the strictly metaphysical. Through this particular tragedy, Lockett was able to address the ephemeral and fragile nature of human existence—life can be arbitrarily robbed from us, in ways we cannot anticipate. His abstract grids manage to express both violence and precarity in equal measure. The weathered tin skins are haunted with tragedy.

In her seminal 1979 essay, "Grids," Rosalind Krauss argues that no other aesthetic structure is more "emblematic of the modernist ambition" than the grid.[56] Its mythic power lies in the fact that it invites, in a contradictory juxtaposition, both logic-based and spiritually- grounded interpretations. Lockett's repeated use of the grid form his *Oklahoma* series maintains this multivalent representational power. His grids evoke the ordered rationale of architecture, which he interrupts with its implied destruction, and consequently, the loss of human life.

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[55] Mark Rothko, quoted in Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: David-Adair, 1957) 92–94.

[56] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979), 50.

The grids also reference quilts, a visual phenomenon with which Lockett was personally familiar. Sarah Dial Lockett, like many Southern black women of her generation, was an avid quilter. Throughout his life, Lockett observed Sarah take old textiles and, through the repeated action of hand-stitching, transform these fabrics into something with both aesthetic and use value.[57] The quilt is a covering made expressly to be intimate with the human body. It provides warmth and envelopes us when we are at our most vulnerable, and, importantly, is often made as a form of memorial for the dead, as in the AIDS quilt, for example. In *Oklahoma*, Lockett transforms the patchwork squares of the quilt into a postindustrial, architectural homage to the fallen.

There is a genre of quilts, the "work clothes quilt," most notably from Gee's Bend, Alabama, that are constructed from the old clothing of deceased family members. Among Lockett's last works are a number of cut metal collages that explicitly reference the quilting tradition as a form of memorial. *England's Rose* (1997) was made in response to Princess Diana's abrupt and tragic death (Fig. 28). That same year, his beloved great-aunt Sarah Dial Lockett passed away at the age of 105 (Fig. 29). In her honor, Lockett created *Sarah Lockett's Roses* (1997), perhaps the most conceptually succinct metalwork of his entire career. It is an object that is both profoundly personal and broadly historical in its reach, intimate yet also epic.

In appropriating the quilting tradition, Lockett transmuted a traditionally feminine visual practice into a more masculine form with his use of metal. Through this queering of artistic genres, he found a visual language to memorialize two powerful women. With these works, he pays honor to the power of matriarchy and historical importance of women in both subject matter and form. What is more, the snipped tin roses that punctuate each quilt block in *Sarah Lockett's Roses* are a profound dual-homage to the two most important artistic mentors of his life. Not only do they allude to Sarah Dial Lockett's rose garden, which existed in the front of her residence for a number of years, but the large rose Dial spray-painted on the door to his junk house studio in 1987 [Fig. 3]. Lockett's flowers allude to the idea of entry: one needed to walk up to Sarah's house through a path lined by roses, and in order to enter Dial's private artistic space, one had to pass through this rose-adorned metal door. Physically and conceptually, both of those spaces were thresholds for Lockett. If *Rebirth* is his earliest statement of purpose, *Sarah Lockett's Roses* is the poignant summation of his entire artistic career.

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[57] Short Lockett as quoted Bernard L. Herman, "Once Something Has Lived," *Fever Within,* 15.

In 1997, Lockett's own health was beginning to fail. Perhaps in a subconscious way, he was anticipating his own death through these works. This proposition is especially affecting given the connection between quilts and the AIDS epidemic in the United States. When the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was placed on display at the National Mall in 1987, the event made headlines and generated an outpouring of public response. Lockett, ever the consumer of mass media, likely saw coverage of this historic event. Years later, Lockett would construct his own quilts in memorial to those he loved, and, ultimately, his own short life. A powerful generation of artists was lost to the AIDS epidemic: Keith Haring, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Robert Mapplethorpe, among others. While he is not usually known within this grouping, Lockett, too, was among them.

Conclusion: History Painters

So what does it mean for artists like Dial and Lockett to be considered history painters, or grand manner painters, when these classifications were never meant to include them—African American, untrained, anti-institutional makers? Curator of *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett,* Bernard L. Herman, has referred to both Ronald Lockett and Thornton Dial as "grand manner painters of the late twentieth century," given their conceptual interest in rendering big historical narratives.[58] Curator Helen Molesworth has addressed this predicament of history painting within the work of contemporary black artists, specifically Kerry James Marshall. At various points throughout the twentieth century, history painting, and painting more generally, was declared irrelevant as an artistic medium. Marshall's resolutely painterly practice served as a challenge to that notion specifically along racial lines. In his words:

> The problem that African American artists in particular were having is that by the 1950s people were saying that the game [painting] was essentially over while we were just getting started….All my life I've been expected to acknowledge the beauty of pictures made by white artists that only have white people in them; I think it's only reasonable to ask other people to do the same vis-à-vis paintings that only have black people in them.[59]

Molesworth understands Marshall's dedication to painting, especially painting in the context of the museum, not as retrograde, but rather emblematic of generative

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[58] Bernard Herman, "Ronald Lockett and the Birmingham-Bessemer School," presentation at *Ronald Lockett: Prescient Voice*, American Folk Art Museum, June 21, 2016. Accessed Feb. 27, 2018. https://folkartmuseum.org/programs/ronald-lockett-prescient-voice-62116/.

[59] Kerry James Marshall, as quoted by Helen Molesworth, "Thinking," *Mastry*, 38.

"belatedness," a strategy that "allows us to recognize that no matter how chronologically a museum is installed, it is still offering all time, all ages, all places at once." But it also suggests "that not everything [in this instance, fine art and painting] is available to everyone at the same time."[60] To be a history painter, or a "fine art" painter, as a black American, was practically impossible for the greater part of this nation's existence. It was only recently that such a pursuit was even a viable option for most artists of color. Therefore, to declare one type of art making as regressive is to deny the inclusion of new voices to historically important artistic practices.

Marshall's work is more figurative and representational than either Lockett's or Dial's. Additionally, Marshall's project is specifically one of populating Western painting with the presence of black bodies, imagining pictorial spaces where they can finally be represented. Like Marshall, Lockett was invested in addressing black absence in the history of art, but in a different way. Lockett's paintings are not full of black figures, in fact, most of the human figures in his work are white—and most of the figures in his work are not even human at all, but members of the animal kingdom. In his case, black absence does not refer to what is being represented, but who is doing the interpreting and representing. Thornton Dial and Ronald Lockett's paintings are a challenge to history in both subject matter and style. Both men had something to say about what happened in the distant and recent past, *as artists*, even if no one had asked them.

Ronald Lockett's "belated" entrance into the realm of history painting throws into high relief the discriminatory nature of art historical classification. History painting, the most revered category in the hierarchy of genres, was once the sole purview of educated, white male artists. Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock has pointedly addressed the historical structuring of the canon as "politically 'in the masculine' as well as culturally 'of the masculine.'"[61] The masculine, in this instance, referring to Western, white male authority and the continued exclusion of women artists from the canon. While Lockett was a male artist, he otherwise does not fit within the conventional image of a canonical artist. However, it is not surprising that out of all of the artists concerning this study, the artist who could most closely be described as a painter for the greater part of his career was also the one who considered himself an artist earliest in life. In the Western tradition, to be an artist meant (most often) one was a painter—especially a painter of historical or religious images. On some level, Lockett probably understood this. It is possible that in the formation of his artistic identity, Lockett deliberately chose to make primarily two-dimensional, often painterly work of historical and religious subject matter, as a way of inserting himself into a larger historical tradition.

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[60] Molesworth, "Thinking," *Mastry,* 40-41.

In the few years leading up to his death, Lockett's cut metal collages, most of which served as forms of memorial—to himself, Princess Diana, Sarah Dial Lockett, or the Oklahoma City Bombing—best express what he valued most: the history that is contained in people and places; and the way the time and tragedy can be compressed, materially and metaphorically, into a work of art. Regarding Lockett's material choices, art historian Colin Rhodes asserts:

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[61] Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Writing of Arts Histories*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 24.

> It is not, then, so much in seeing importance and use in the things people throw away as seeing things that people have used as imbued with their own experiences and desires, as well as those of their particular social and cultural contexts….Lockett's use of what might be called "poor" (that is, *not-art-type*) materials is driven by a belief that they already have an affective force.[62]

Contemporary events seemed to suit Lockett's work better than those historical tragedies from which he was more removed, either chronologically or geographically, because this subject matter retained a timely urgency. There were already paintings done by other artists that addressed World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, and western mythology and religion. By choosing a tragedy like the Oklahoma City Bombing, Lockett could make something historical, tragic, *and* new. He could more easily stake a claim in current history, as he had access to it through television and media.

Lockett's last works were responses made in the moment, of the moment, constructed from the materials that surrounded him, which were highly personal and spoke of his own genealogy and history. By using discarded metal—especially metal that was once used, owned, or painted on by Thornton Dial Sr.—Lockett was literally and figuratively building his own history of art. Ronald Lockett's paintings and cut-metal assemblage paintings exhibit a visual language that demonstrate his awareness of canonical art history and its objects. They also reveal his desire to paint himself into another history: the art historical inheritance of his region, and importantly, the legacy of his mentor Thornton Dial.

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[62] Colin Rhodes, "Cross-Cultural Tendencies, Intellectual Echoes, and the Intersections of Practice," *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 27.

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In the few photographs we have of Lockett, his captured facial expressions can be described as serious, direct and thoughtful. In most of these images, he is either standing next to, touching, or in the process of creating a work of art (Figs. 30, 31). These photographs suggest Lockett's deep investment in presenting himself as what he most identified himself as—an artist. In one of the last photographs taken of him from 1997, he is seen pictured with the work *Sarah Lockett's Roses* (Fig. 32). Unlike these earlier images, Lockett is smiling in the photograph. It is only after one registers the colorful work of art and his expression, does one notice how much slighter Lockett has become, his hair now gone. He appears much older than his thirty-two years. He died on from AIDS-related pneumonia on August 23, 1998, a few months after this photograph was taken.

Ronald Lockett was neither a folk artist nor conventional contemporary artist. He was aware of the mainstream art world, but did not fully engage with it, choosing instead to remain in his small hometown of Bessemer, Alabama, and work alongside fellow untrained artists of an older generation. In doing so, he helped solidly establish the importance of this region as a site of cultural production, one where creative growth was fostered, not impeded.

Conclusion: History Refuses to Die

Recently, the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted the exhibition *History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift*, named after Thornton Dial's large 2004 assemblage [Fig. 1].[1] The show features work exclusively by Southern black artists, drawn from a 2014 gift of fifty-seven objects to The Met from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Out of the twenty-nine works on display, nine are Dial assemblages-paintings or drawings, making him the most represented artist in the exhibition. Notably, one gallery features Dial's monumental *Victory in Iraq (V for Victory)* alongside Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm (No. 30)* (1950), and works by other prominent American abstract painters Clyfford Still, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko.

History Refused to Die was co-curated by Randall Griffey, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Amelia Peck, Curator of American Decorative Arts, at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition included ten quilts from Gee's Bend, drawings by Nellie Mae Rowe, a painting by Purvis Young, and assemblages by Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Ronald Lockett, and Joe Minter. Both curators sought to distance the work presented in the exhibition from "outsider" and "folk" art classifications, and recontextualize it as a part of the larger field of modern and contemporary American art. As stated in the primary descriptive wall text for the show, they write that while "the label "outsider" has been applied to self-taught artists like these ….this exhibition aspires to challenge that inadequate description and to encourage an expanded understanding of their legacies within the broader canon of contemporary American art."[2] This point is further emphasized by the exhibition's placement in the galleries of Modern and Contemporary Art alongside The Met's permanent collection, and the accompanying essays in the exhibition catalog *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South*.[3]

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[1] Co-curated by Randall R. Griffey and Amelia Peck, *History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, May 22-September 23, 2018. From September 2017-August 2018, I served as a Jane and Morgan Whitney Fellow at The Met, working closely with both curators on many aspects of the exhibition.

Despite this curatorial goal, some reviews of the exhibition contextualized the work on display within the frameworks of outsider and folk art.[4] Edward M. Gomez titled his review for *Hyperallergic* "Outsider Art Comes to the Metropolitan Museum," affirming the very classification the curators were aiming to avoid.[5] In her review, "The Met Finally Welcomes Folk Art to the Premises," for New York Public Radio, critic and writer Deborah Solomon laments, “most of the pieces in the folk-art show are fairly recent, which has the unfortunate effect of making them seem derivative of Ab Ex, Pop art and other mainstream art movements.”[6] Nowhere in the accompanying text of the exhibition are Dial and his peers labeled as “folk” artists. Solomon’s superimposition of that term, like Edward Gomez’s application of “outsider” in his review, demonstrates just how sticky these designations remain.[7] While there are museological and scholarly efforts to disavow the use value of terms such as folk or outsider in reference to work of the Birmingham-Bessemer School, these modifiers are difficult to shake. For some, their work can only be fully understood—or considered valuable—under the umbrella of those categories.

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[2] Gallery wall text, *History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, May 22-September 23, 2018.

[3] In order to avoid confusion with the catalog for the 2015 exhibition *History Refused to Die: The Enduring Legacy of the African American Art of Alabama*, (Atlanta: Tinwood, 2015), this title for The Met's catalog was chosen.

[4] In her review for *The New Yorker*, "An Invaluable, Incomplete Show of Black Southern Art at the Met," Andrea K. Scott avoids terms like "outsider" and "folk" art. However, she objected to the placement of the work in the modern and contemporary galleries, viewing it as an unnecessary form of legitimation. June 18, 2018. Accessed July 1, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/an-invaluable-incomplete-show-of-black-southern-art-at-the-met

[5] Edward Gomez, "Outsider Art Comes to the Metropolitan Museum," *Hyperallergic,* May 26, 2018. Accessed May 27, 2018. https://hyperallergic.com/444221/history-refused-to-die-highlights-from-the-souls-grown-deep-foundation-gift-metropolitan-museum-of-art-2018/

What is of specific concern is the latter part of Solomon’s critique of *History Refused to Die*, where she claims that because most of the works in the exhibition are fairly recent, they “seem derivative of Ab Ex, Pop art and other mainstream art movements.” For example, in her discussion of Joe Minter’s metal assemblage *Four Hundred Years of Free Labor* [Fig. 2], she states that while it “has an impressive classicism about it…when you see the date on the wall label —1995 — you inevitably think that Jim Dine got there first in his tool-based works from the 1960s.”[8] In

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[6] Deborah Solomon, “The Met Finally Welcomes Folk Art to the Premises,” *WNYC,* New York Public Radio, May 25, 2018. Accessed May 26, 2018. https://www.wnyc.org/story/review-met-welcomes-folk-art/

[7] In 2011, *WNYC* produced the piece “Thornton Dial Is Not an Outsider Artist,” and sent a journalist down to interview him in Bessemer. March 4, 2011. Accessed June 1, 2018. https://www.wnyc.org/story/116943-thornton-dial-not-outsider-artist/

[8] Solomon, “The Met,” *WNYC.*

Solomon's eyes, because there is a visual affinity between these later "folk art" works and earlier objects by mainstream artists, the power of the art objects in The Met's exhibition is diminished. Dial and his peers did not invent these modern art forms first, so conventional art historical chronology prevails.

The relationship between visual affinity and art historical chronology, particularly with regard to modern art, has always been fraught. One characteristic of the history of twentieth century art is the recurring appropriation and absorption, by mainstream, primarily white, modern artists, of work made by non-Western and marginalized peoples. Whether it be Picasso looking at African sculpture, the Surrealists "discovering" art of the mentally ill, or Pollock being inspired by Native American sand painting, there are many instances of canonical modern artists looking to marginalized art for their own benefit. Even though the African masks Picasso looked to, for example, predated his own paintings, the African version of abstraction was not revolutionary until it was filtered and historicized through Picasso's Western lens.[9] Solomon essentially repeats this conceptual framing in her review, as evidenced by the offering, "if the show had been larger, and gone back in a meaningful way to the 1940s, it might have demonstrated…how folk artists influenced the New York avant-garde."[10] The implication of such a statement is that the work featured in *History Refused to Die* would be more significant if one could show how it influenced the New York avant-garde—the real artists. Ironically, at the end of her review, Solomon arrives at the same conclusion collector and founder of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Bill Arnett, has been advocating for years—that certain modern art forms, like assemblage, originated independently in the black South. However, because the exhibition did not feature works that chronologically came *before* work by the mainstream avant-garde, this possibility cannot be substantiated.

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[9] A very useful anthology of primary and secondary sources on the topic of primitivism and modern art is Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch's, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003). Bridget R. Cooks explores how a similarly primitivizing perspective was applied (by both the curators and critics) to the Gee's Bend quilters on the occasion of the 2002 exhibition, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend. Exhibiting Blackness African Americans and the American Art Museum*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 137.

[10] Solomon, "The Met," *WNYC*.

Deborah Solomon's critique of *History Refused to Die* highlights key issues that arise when trying to understand the place of the Birmingham-Bessemer School within the history of (Western) art. Though the School created objects that bear a visual relationship to mainstream art, their works were not produced in response to work made by previous artistic movements. This visual affinity appears derivative (in Solomon's view) because Dial and his peers made art decades *after* their mainstream peers. In one sense, this presents a paradox: the work of the Birmingham-Bessemer School may look like mainstream modern and contemporary art, but these artists were not responding to the mainstream—yet their work appears unoriginal, and arrives too late on the scene to be considered revolutionary.

Would the work of the Birmingham-Bessemer School contain more conceptual and aesthetic impact if it were made in the 1940s and 1950s, rather than the 1990s and 2000s? If it could be proven that the production of these "folk" artists influenced the assemblages of Jim Dine, and the paintings of Jackson Pollock? These are central questions concerning the study of Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, and Ronald Lockett.

How one chooses to answer these questions depends upon the extent to which one desires to uphold the traditional timeline of Western art history. In an effort to abandon tired and outmoded art historical chronology, this project examined the artistic production of the Birmingham-Bessemer School on its own terms and timeline.

As stated earlier, The Met exhibition's title is drawn from the 2004 Dial assemblage *History Refused to Die*, a foundational work in the artist's oeuvre. A large, in the round, found object sculpture, it features a male and female figure encased in a metal cage. Behind them, quilts, textiles, and Dial's own drawings are pieced together and woven through the armature of the piece. The backside is composed of a dense latticework made from okra roots—an African vegetable and, in this case, a symbol of the Middle Passage—with a white metal dove perched on the middle right-hand side of the object [Fig. 3]. In true Dial fashion, the title has many possible meanings. One could interpret the title as a triumphant testimony to the cultural strength of the black diaspora. Despite the endless attempts to quiet, disregard, or devalue the contributions of black Americans, their history, especially in the form of their collective artistic production, persists. Another, more cynical possibility, is that title is a statement about the legacy of black oppression and persistence of white supremacy into the present day. Perhaps the title is a reference to both histories, interwoven as they are, into the fabric of the United States.

History Refused to Die takes on another meaning upon reflection of the Birmingham-Bessemer School's reception within the art world. The history of these artists being labeled folk and outsiders within popular discourse continues, despite attempts to reframe their artistic production. While labels are sometimes assigned capriciously, more often they are deliberate statements that define where intellectual parameters are drawn, and how value is assessed. What an artist is called shapes how he or she is understood within the discipline of art history. Investigating the implications behind particular labels—such as outsider, folk, or contemporary—can expose how, even when not immediately apparent, they contain racist and classist assessments. In looking beyond these classifications, more nuanced and complex art historical interpretations have the opportunity to emerge.

While the aforementioned reviews of *History Refused to Die* still consider Dial, and his peers, outsiders, not all evaluations of the exhibition cling to marginalizing labels. Importantly, Roberta Smith (who reviewed Dial's first New York City exhibition, *Image of the Tiger*) rejects such labels in her review, "At the Met, a Riveting Testament to Those Once Neglected." The presence of Southern black art within The Met, she claimed, "is suffused by an electrifying sense of change," and "validates the art's stature." She concludes her critique with a powerful statement about the significance of this work for the history of modern American art: "Every thinking American understands the suffering these artists and their ancestors have endured and should grasp the meaning of Dial's poem of a title. History has indeed refused to die, and some of its greatest art is also very much alive."[11] In the end, perhaps it is more productive to focus on the writers and thinkers who understand and value the contemporary urgency of this form of artistic production—not those who cling to obsolete art historical classifications. Following Smith's proclamation, perhaps we can finally "just call all of it art and proceed."

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[11] Roberta Smith, "ART REVIEW: At the Met, a Riveting Testament to Those Once Neglected," *The New York Times,* May 24, 2018. Accessed July 1, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/arts/design/history-refused-to-die-review-outsider-art-met-museum.html

Moreover, we should return to how these artists imagine their own place within the history of American art. Thornton Dial passed away in 2016, and therefore was not able to attend the exhibition opening of *History Refused to Die*. However, many Dial family members (as well as Lonnie Holley and the Gee's Bend quilter Lucy Mingo) were present for the occasion. Dial's son, Richard Dial, remarked upon the placement of *Victory in Iraq* in the same gallery that features work by Pollock, de Kooning, and Styll. According to him, his father was an admirer of Pollock's paintings, and had seen *Autumn Rhythm* on a trip to New York City. In his own artistic practice, Dial was in conversation with well-known artistic figures like Jackson Pollock (as well as Willem de Kooning and Joan Mitchell).[12] To the mainstream art world, placing Dial's work in the same room as canonical American modernists might seem like a provocative and revolutionary gesture. However, that placement had already occurred decades before, in Dial's own imagination. The Met's installation simply made materialized something that should have been in place long ago.

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What the Birmingham-Bessemer School managed to accomplish challenges conventional understandings of artistic legacy and practice in the last two decades of the twentieth century. This highly charged moment of artistic production between peers that, while it occurred outside of the mainstream art world, did not, and does not, make these artists “outsiders.” My study confronts the racial, regional, and cultural biases working against this black modernist moment within the discipline of art history, by providing critical frameworks and contexts to more thoroughly understand its significance. In doing so, this project seeks to expand and enrich the field of twentieth century American art, and complicate received histories of modern art forms like assemblage, site-specific installation, and performance.

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[12] Richard Dial and Paul Arnett, in conversation with the author, New York, New York, May 21, 2018.

Unaccountable Modernisms hones in on a late twentieth century moment of artistic activity, when the Birmingham-Bessemer area was alive with the production of Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, and Ronald Lockett. Within my study, the artists’ statements hold central importance. In the spirit of that methodological ethos, I would like to close with the words of the School’s youngest member, Ronald Lockett. While this artistic moment—and two of its members—has passed, “once something has lived, it can never really die” (Fig. 4). As a tribute to artistic production of the Birmingham-Bessemer School, this project is an effort to make Lockett’s words ring true.