

Lonnie Holley's Moves

JUDITH MCWILLIE

As both insiders and outsiders, [diviner] consultants have greater freedom and viability in giving advice on problems in the community, but they also must walk a fine and difficult line in maintaining two conflicting identities. As both alienist and annunciator, the consultant stands at once at the center and the periphery of the society- the outsider who is the ult mate insider.

- Rudolph Blier, 1991

The culture of particular form is approaching its end. The culture of determined relations has begun.

- Piet Mondrian, 1937

The late 1980s was a period of unprecedented growth for institutions that functioned as buffers between the urban polyglot and what the sociologist Arthur Paris calls "the global countryside," that selectively invisible domain that Western historians once delegated, to the economic periphery.¹ Significantly, the representatives of these institutions- New York's Museum of American Folk Art, for example- tended to bypass what they called "the fine arts establishment" for direct contact with artists themselves. Not only were they able to create a parallel economy, purchasing vanloads of works by newly "discovered" artists at a fraction of gallery prices, but some of them also encountered the visionary imperative in its rawest states.

Lonnie Holley, a 42-year-old artist based in Birmingham, Alabama, is a definitive figure in this phenomenon. Black, Southern, and almost half the age of most of the artists appropriated under the folk/outsider rubric, Holley personifies the political and ethical complexities converging and "the once disparaged vernacular."² But in its scale, its syncretic flexibility, and its dialogic origins, his vision defies classification in Western terms, emerging instead as a bridge between worlds, rooted in the dynamics of social reciprocity that are the bedrock of AfricanAmerican philosophy and ethics. Holley exponentially enhances these perspectives, challenging fundamental critical assumptions about the social autonomy of artists, the relationship between creation and interpretation, and the psychic survival of self in community. In the context of multiculturalism, he introduces "a doubling of histories within an overarching transformation" of cultural priorities.³

Holley spent most of his youth in foster homes until he was 14, when his grandmother adopted him and taught him to pick through dumps and landfills for items to sell at flea markets. Although he cites this intervention as a turning point in his life, he nevertheless remained vulnerable to the racial and economic pressures commonly identified with the Deep South. In 1979, while recovering from a suicide attempt, he made his first artwork. "It was a baby tombstone," he says, "I didn't know it was art. My sister had lost two of her children in a house fire and it seemed that you couldn't calm her down or keep her from thinking....It was the moment that I saw a vision of myself working." Two years earlier Holley had moved to a house on the grounds of an African-American cemetery. Later he developed a one-acre site literally on the periphery of Birmingham, where he lives today with his wife and five children.

The Holley family's house is barely visible among the

mounds and bunkers of found objects and other cast-off materials that are stacked, wrapped, and moored to trees and sheds throughout the site. Holley's paintings and cutouts are juxtaposed with thrift-store tapestries and fragments of fabric signed with gestural markings and ideographic seals.

Elsewhere, blocks of industrial sandstone (waste from a nearby steel mill) are tumbled about, waiting for him to transform them into carvings that animate the cycles of time. These carvings are stylistically related to Meso-American and Egyptian sculpture, influences Holley accepts from popular texts and television-"because," he explains, "these were the civilizations that built the pyramids," which signify durational time in his mythology. The imagery of the carvings is replicated in Holley's paintings and wire sculpture and in the organization of the site itself. Recurring themes include the dreaming mother as the origin of life, the organization of knowledge in ancestral continuity, and the reciprocal exchange of matter and spirit. "The earth is made up of the dust of the ancestors," says Holley. "We are living off their bodies." Classic Afro-Atlantic idioms abound: writing in the spirit, a visual equivalent of speaking in tongues, in which a spontaneously improvised script is used as a praise form and as a focusing device in the divinatory consultations, Holley extends to those who need them; 'mojo hands-ritually configured objects and substances that initiate a spiritual change in their bearers; traditional objects too potent to squander; anthropomorphism in both natural and manufactured readymades and shrines to ancestors, including Martin Luther King, Egyptian and Ethiopian patriarchs, and media heroes such as Michael Jackson, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee. The cumulative effect is of an endogenous universe in which nature and technology perforate and tunnel into each other almost seamlessly.

Holley's art is a locus of "moving equilibrium"s where physical coordinates constantly shift from the effects of nature and, more recently, from the intervention of collectors who home in on paintings, carvings, and object constellations. "I constantly ask the collectors that come around, Do they understand what they are getting?" he says. The answers to that question are multifarious. Though Holley's work readily syncretizes with aspects of contemporary Western art, these consonances are only partially explained by the shuttling of museum and gallery traditions into the grab bag of popular culture. Holley himself prefers to experience them as the natural product of visionary imperatives. "I know none of the names of the workers that participated in art before, but I pay tribute to them," he says. "The way I see it, I am standing up for them." The Surrealists had their Marche aux Puces, the rambling Paris flea market where cultural "curiosities" were scrambled, rearranged, and "stripped of their functional context." Holley's attack on the domesticated entropy of urban landfills is no less about "contested realities."

He is obsessed with the inexhaustible latency of it all, with the imprint of the past, the "experienced" quality that allows an object's effects to oscillate between history, legacy, myth, and prayer. "I dig through what other people have thrown away ... to get the gold of it-to know that grandmother had that skillet and stood over that heat preparing that meal, so when I go home with that skillet, I've got grandmother. 'Grand': someone who has authority and is capable."

Whereas Robert Rauschenberg's combines seem dependent on gestures magnetized to a cryptic grid, Holley's moves tend to break loose from the ground that would support them. The state-

free status of his art, its liminality, identifies it as divinatory rather than manneristic. Closure is in the eye of the beholder-scattered, elusive, barely familiar, like listening to Gullah for the first time, or perhaps like hearing Hugo Ball in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich during World War I. A Westerner standing in this visionary landscape may recall Abstract Expressionism, one of the last Modern movements deliberately to invoke the ecstatic. The inscrutable slabs of color familiar from Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell are incarnated in the shredded curtains and banners that differentiate the zones of Holley's site, and the sublimated brush strokes of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock are returned to the earth as variegated sandstone, twisted fabric, crushed wood, and rusted metal.

The Modernist object lesson is occasionally useful, then, but one obvious correlation, Marcel Duchamp, is nowhere in this. In Duchamp's readymades, an object's utilitarian function was imported into the elite setting of the gallery. In contrast, Holley's work is an obsessive extension of the African-American tradition of ideographic found-object votives on graves and as agents of protection in dressed yards and gardens.⁹ This legacy may have had its own effect on contemporary art: I would speculate that AfroAtlantic graves and yard shows may have been conscious influences for artists such as Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, who surely encountered them during their youths in Texas and South Carolina.

The cultural synthesis that Western artists have been exploring for much of the 20th century had already been a grass-roots reality for over 300 years in creolized societies. As North American slave owners tried to eradicate the material culture of their captives, Africans were silently sheltering the old gods and medicines in ordinary objects. The duration of this strategy alone testifies brilliantly to its efficacy. In the process, an imposed culture was turned back on itself and transformed. Lying at the heart of this dynamic is a translation of spirit into matter that culturally inverts European transcendentalism's romantic attachment to the sublime. Whereas an Abstract Expressionist might cite transcendence as the goal of esthetic life, Holley identifies it as the origin, exposing art's deepest liberationist impulses. "Visions come in many forms. The forces of the Spirit itself change our ways and our actions. I'm not speaking for myself as an individual; I'm speaking for the whole of life. I like the justice scale because it allows you to balance something and ...allows you to appreciate yourself and others around you. But if we fear to the point where death takes over and life do not then we somehow lose the balance.... Life and death is a twin; they have to be." This attitude registers even in the gallery. Cultural purists who shudder at the "recontextualization" of Holley's art should be wary of aligning themselves with conditions that would bind African-Americans to the social determinism of political and economic repression. In the migrations of Holley's works from Alabama to Manhattan, a crucial synapse is opened between the conceptual veneer attached to popular ideography by Western art history and criticism and the physical evidence of an entirely different causality. "Everything is medicine!" says Holley.

The Inner Suffering of the Holy Cost, 1988, constellates shoes, barbed wire, a headlight, a chain, rags, a bottle, and other industrial bits, rendering them transcendently instrumental rather than marooning them in estheticism. Like a Kongo nkisi, it is a focal point or container of force, only not from "the invisible land of the dead,"⁹ as in Africa, but from the compounded effects of cultural fluency and spiritual emancipation. In the syntax of Kongo religion, the probable religion of Holley's ancestors, this sculpture is a node of power that metonymically situates an allseeing eye at the apex of a cyclical cosmogram, invoking time, initiation, vision, and the experience of knowledge as both terror and compassion.¹⁰

And the work is also "out there" with Koonses, Warhols, and Basquiats, as well as with the vendors on Canal Street, the makeshift dwellings under the West Side Highway, yard shows in Brooklyn and Harlem, and the bricolaged facades of the Lower East Side.

Interacting with the so-called "mainstream," Holley's work is pushing its capacities for nurture beyond the local boundaries of either professional or vernacular culture. Regardless of the contexts it visits, it has a way of maintaining its liminality, a quality essential to the divinatory function, which, according to anthropologist Philip Peek, "never results in a simple restatement of tradition to be followed blindly. It is a dynamic reassessment of customs and values in the face of an ever-changing world."

Almost as soon as Holley began to make art, he was cast

I pay tribute with my mind and wrth my labor to the Spirit something which is grander than time. I think about the seriousness of art. I also want to speak about the spiritual part of art. I have to look at it this way: that I'm serving time. All those bodies that has passed through time (leaving them nameless, there are there!), I must keep their respect or else fear that I will lose all that I have gained.


I think respect of the elders makes commurnty. Once that respect is lost, there is no longer a commurnty, because if we lose respect from that which we came, we are somehow or another on the journey to losing our grip with realty. And art allows us to keep that grip. If I had not started looking back to appreciate I would have went on disappreciating and destroyed not only myself but the whole world around me. We don't need artists destroying themselves. The Spirit that inhabrted the great ones of the past, do you think that it would not inhabit you)

The mind is like the body: it have to put on clothes. When we find the master force of life---love being the nurturer, the pacifier-I can see the mind that lays a law, and have to think a law, and walk a law through life. Everybody is fearful that the world will come to the point of being destroyed. It's not. It's that the mind will come to a point of stopping to think in the order it is in and think in a new order. That's the whole point of the spirituality of it. I'm looking at that baby who was five thousand years in the wombs of time and saying, "It's alright your space is secure---we made sure." Hurt comes to an artist, it stays wrth his thoughts, because if you're the kind of artist that is able to think and

never cut off your thoughts and you is the type of artist that reduces things to their lowest terms, you just don't take things and say, "It's OK: rt's OK that the grass is growing; it's OK to step on it and it doesn't matter." If you have the type of knowledge that you know when you step on that grass you are putting pressure on the root and the soil around it and also mashing the moisture from it-knowing that you are causing something to happen- that's what makes a difference. We're talking about a divineness here; we're talking about a divine level. I hope that this will allow others to see all that need to be done and how much we have to do it with. Once upon a time, to come into life cost man nothing. How have we allowed the values that we have proclaimed to be in the way of continuation of life? These words are said for time and times to come.

-Lonnie Holley, December 1991

in the role of an adviser, a "spiritual doctor," by family members and neighbors. As both a contemporary artist and a diagnostician, he is a diviner in every sense of the term, a role that grounds him in what the initiates of many cultures have described as "double sight." In The anthropologist David Parkin's description of divination rituals in Kenya applies simultaneously to Holley's methodology in mak-



ing art: “The diviner starts with what I call jumbled speech ... some reversals, and an apparent lack of path control, i.e., straying from one concept to another and back divination stands between worlds,” says Peek, “so it centers itself in other symbolic ways.”¹⁶ The techniques of “imagining beyond difference” JJ employed by diviners, and by artists like Holley, engage what the literary critic Veve A. Clark calls marasa consciousness, named after the Haitian Vodoo sign for the Divine Twins: “Marasa states the oppositions and invites participation in the formulation of another principle entirely. Those of us accustomed to Hegelian dialectic would seek in comparable environments resolution of seemingly irreconcilable differences... the marasa sign, like others produced in agrarian societies, has another more ‘spiralist’ agenda in mind ... Marasa consciousness invites us to imagine beyond the binary.”¹⁸

Like the diviner consultants of Togo and other nations of the Afro-Atlantic complex, Holley believes that he must bring his ways of knowing “revealingly to bear upon troubled social situations...”¹⁹ “To deal with me as an artist,” he says, and see all of my art as art and not just garbage or junk, is to see that I went to the depths of where no one else even would go ... to speak for life....I have to educate them to know I can’t make them hear me.

[Yet] they all come running and they ask on their own individual terms. God said, “I made enough in your yard that I could show my people how to change.” And I have to work it all right back out of me so I can come back and handle another one. And that’s what keeps me from going insane. And I think that’s the way it is with every artist.

The extacies and anxieties of visionary experience are thus understood not as ends in themselves but as only the first stirrings of a more extended identity in which the roles of creator and interpreter and are consolidated at the level of community. Knowledge is reciprocal, aimed at rectifying social oppositions and exclusions. As Rudolph Blier writes, “It is in part by virtue of their distinct position as outsiders or alienists that these persons are able both to observe the community and to serve as its annunciators. It is through the balancing of these two dimensions that their roles as consultants are made possible. Furthermore, it is frequently said that once one has become a consultant one must continually consult (i.e. serve as an annunciator) or else... (the alienist identity) will become too dominant...”²⁰

In the Western tradition, the initiation into “double sight” has parallels in 20th-century artists’ fascination with the “fourth dimension.” Early in the century, Duchamp, Kasimir Malevich, and others turned to Gaston de Pawlowski’s *Voyage to the Land of the Fourth Dimension*, 1912, and other works, for a glimpse into what it was like to rise “above the world of the usual sensations.” “The vision of the fourth dimension opens up horizons absolutely new,” said Pawlowski. “It completes our understanding of the world; it enables us to carry out the definitive synthesis of everything we know; it justifies that knowledge, even when it seems contradictory, and we then realize that synthesis is a total idea which partial expressions cannot contain.”²¹ Although the impulses behind this statement were in accord with the aspirations of some of the most influential artists of the century, one recognizes embedded in it the familiar parochializing tenets of Western transcendentalism: cultural universalism, renunciation of social reciprocity in the name of privileged knowledge, a view of time as linear and unidirectional, and a binary opposition between the spiritual and the material worlds. As the critic Max Kozloff has written, this century’s obsession with the notion of “high art,” an art that must “levitate above its time” in order to be “admitted into the peerage of revelation,” is a corollary of these beliefs. In such a scenario, time is “the enemy of beauty,” and would “cast us off from ‘everything we loved and by which we lived.’”²² In comparison, Holley’s devotion to an unnamed grandmother’s skillet is of another order indeed. On the other hand, puzzling over the estrangement of Western artists from society at large, Kozloff

proposes that art’s gradual ascension into the realms of unknowing, shuffling off the mortal coil of the vernacular and of the past, “accords very well with our doubts and guilts in belonging to a repressive world order.”²³ This was a bold idea in its time (1974), though Kozloff has a tendency to blame artists, rather than the economic system that appropriates them, for what is now virtually a maxim in art criticism. Yet throughout this embattled century there have been signs of poignant longing among artists in the West, a longing so deep that nothing less than a radical redefinition of community would treat it. The promise of a new community was stirring in Tristan Tzara when he delivered Aranda, Kinga, Loritja, and Bakongo chants (“negro poems,” he called them) at Dada soirées in Berlin in 1917. An intuitive affinity with divinatory healing in community surfaced in the 1970s among Western artists experimenting with aleatory techniques of construction, and later among post-Modernists scrambling the Old World’s hierarchies and signifiers to introduce their brooding postcolonial swan songs. The revisioning of community has been the urgent priority of multiculturalism. And the same impulse is evident in today’s probing confrontations between artists and dominant cultural institutions as they struggle to free the divining chain²⁴ from the airless stasis of estheticism.

Artists such as Holley tell us that these forces are omnidirectional, and that the longings of Western artists too may one day be seen in a more generous light. When shown a photograph of Rauschenberg’s *Charlene*, 1954, a work that syncretizes with aspects of his own art, Holley commented, “He began to feel another level of himself. He is saying, ‘I want to give you the best of being-the wind that turns and turns in life.’ There is a door that we can go out and come back in, that we can renew ourselves. It’s better that an artist take something from a dying something and replant it, that it may come into the world and still be seen. I’m cultivating the roots of a new seed from an old source.”