

INTERPRETING THE ASSEMBLAGES OF LONNIE HOLLEY THROUGH HIS
PERFORMATIVE EXPLANATIONS

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ABSTRACT

SARAH M. SCHULTZ: Interpreting the Assemblages of Lonnie Holley through his
Performative Explanations
(Under the direction of Dr. John P. Bowles)

For the past three decades, Lonnie Holley has collected materials alongside highways, ditches and in the landfills near his home in Birmingham, Alabama. These objects are used as the raw material for his assemblages. His artistic combinations suggest new relationships between once familiar, now obsolete technologies such as old television sets, computer screens, electrical wiring, barbed wire fencing, rebar, and molded concrete. Interpretations of his work rarely go beyond recounting his extraordinary personal narrative as the seventh of twenty-seven children. This comes at the expense of an in-depth critical analysis of his material and the new relationships he creates in his assemblages. Through a critical analysis of three of his major works, *The Inner Suffering of the Holy Cost*, *Little Top to the Big Top*, and *Cold Titty Mama I*, this study explores how his materials are re-valued, or given new meaning when they are combined.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	iv
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1. <i>Inner Suffering</i> as an Icon.....	3
II. CATEGORY CRISIS.....	8
III. LOCATING VOICE.....	15
1. Language and Meaning in <i>Little Top</i>	15
2. <i>Little Top</i> , a Material Trace of Memory.....	19
IV. <i>COLD TITTY MAMA I</i>	24
1. Demonstration: Electronicalisms.....	26
2. Recalling Local Histories through <i>Cold Titty Mama's</i> Harsh Exteriors.....	30
V. CONCLUSIONS.....	34
FIGURES.....	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	49

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Lonnie Holley, <i>The Inner Suffering of the Holy Cost</i> , 1990.....	37
2. Byzantine, folio 67r, Khludov Psalter, Moscow, Hist. Mus. Cod. 129, ninth century.	38
3. Lonnie Holley, <i>Little Top to the Big Top</i> , 1993.....	39
4. Artist unknown, HMS Bounty ship, 2000.....	40
5. Lonnie Holley, <i>Trash Boat</i> , 2005.....	41
6. Lonnie Holley, <i>Cold Titty Mama</i> , 1999.....	42
7. Lonnie Holley, <i>Cold Titty Mama</i> (detail), 1999.....	43
8. Lonnie Holley, <i>Cold Titty Mama</i> (detail), 1999.....	44
9. Lonnie Holley, <i>Cold Titty Mama</i> , (detail), 1999.....	45
10. Lonnie Holley, <i>Perspectives 8: Lonnie Holley</i> (detail), 2003.....	46
11. Lonnie Holley, <i>Perspectives 8: Lonnie Holley</i> , 2003.....	47
12. Lonnie Holley, <i>Perspectives 8: Lonnie Holley</i> (detail),2003.....	48

INTRODUCTION

A neatly bound barbed wire circle holds a collection of common objects (figure 1). A child's white shoe, bloodied dishrag, a car's reflector headlight, blue pill bottle, an antique-style lock and wrinkled yellow cloth hang from the barbed wire frame. Metal barbs puncture the soft textile and wire attaches the plastic shoes. The barbs, exposed, are sharp enough to pose a threat to anyone who approaches the assemblage. Artist Lonnie Holley collected these objects, combined them and gave them the title, *Inner Suffering of the Holy Cost* (hereafter called *Inner Suffering*).

Lonnie Holley has been making art since the 1970s.¹ Painting, assemblage, large-scale wire constructions and sandstone sculpture constitute his art. Before the city of Birmingham demolished his yard in 1999, it was here that Holley began to accumulate objects that would become a part of elaborate assemblages, many interconnected through a network of branches and roots.² The found objects that Holley uses in his assemblages are visibly worn out, charred, rusted, torn or deteriorated in some way. He finds fragments of building materials, broken telephones, computer monitors, keyboards and the occasional article of clothing in ditches, alongside railroad tracks, highways and in landfills in the surrounding areas of Birmingham, Alabama. These objects were discarded for newer models once the originals wore out their use. Holley resurrects these objects,

¹ "I'm 30 years into art..." Holley, Lonnie. Interview with author, 2009.

² Fowler, Miriam Rogers. *Outsider Artists in Alabama*. (Montgomery, AL: Alabama State Council on the Arts, 1991).

arguing that they “will destroy us [humans] if we don’t find new uses for them.”³ He is referring to the perpetually growing amount of consumer goods the United States accumulates in its landfills. The physical objects themselves can literally, with their sharp edges and poisonous residue, be hazards to the people who handle them.⁴ Therefore his assemblages often take on a multivalent meaning, acting as both a threat to one’s safety and a highly personal remnant of one’s existence. In addition to *Inner Suffering*, Holley’s other assemblages *Little Top to the Big Top* and *Cold Titty Mama I* also communicate a sense of the past through their objects’ deteriorated exteriors.

Inner Suffering’s multiple meanings introduce the problem of categorizing Holley’s work within an already marginalized group of artists. *Little Top to the Big Top* and *Cold Titty Mama I* illustrate ways in which Holley’s performance-like explanations support an understanding of his assemblages.⁵ Holley’s practice of arranging objects complements his explanation of the process itself. His verbal explanations, frequently published alongside reproductions of his work or occurring by chance during one of his installations, contribute to an understanding of his work. Moreover, his self-conscious art process within museums and public institutions, distinguishes him from other artists within the same niche who do not operate as deliberately within a public arena.⁶ For

³ Holley, Lonnie, and Ken Iwamasa. Lonnie Holley. (Visiting artist lecture series, University of Colorado, Boulder. 1993).

⁴ Jim Auchmutey comments on Holley’s hazardous materials in his newspaper article, Auchmutey, Jim. “Sandman Blues,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

⁵ By calling it “performative” or “performance-like” I do not mean that his explanations are a rehearsed act in which he has written a script nor that he performs for the sole purposes of audience’s entertainment. I use “performative” to best describe the tone he uses when he speaks to groups with the intention of teaching and inciting response.

⁶ Fine, Gary Alan. “Creating Artists,” in *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 101.

instance, Thornton Dial, Holley's contemporary who also makes assemblages often exhibited alongside Holley. Known for his economy of words, his art was categorized under the labels of "outsider," vernacular, visionary, contemporary and self-taught artist. Unlike Holley, Dial does not speak publicly to groups nor does he build site-specific installation from which to project a verbal explanation. After Dial makes an object, he relinquishes interpretive control, forgoing most public demonstrations and/or artist lectures. Dial's assemblages operate very much in a visual realm whereas Holley's assemblages are only complete with their verbal components.

By juxtaposing Holley's phrases alongside descriptions of his work, I highlight the parallel between the verbal and visual and seek to provide in-depth critical analyses where they have lacked in previous scholarship of Holley's assemblages. I treat the visual as text to be read, and conversely treat Holley's words like images to consume.⁷

Inner Suffering as an icon

Inner Suffering is a three-dimensional barbed wire circle containing small everyday objects such as a lock, a handkerchief, a bottle and a mismatched pair of shoes. A reflective headlight faces front, at the center of the top of the circle.⁸ The black sole of a child's white shoe also faces the viewer as it hangs from the top of the left side of the circle.

⁷ Rather than analyzing the sociological factors surrounding Holley's breakthrough appeal in the early 1980s art market as previous scholars have, I am interested in learning more about Holley's work. In the exhibition catalogue *Do We Think Too Much, I Don't Think We Can Ever Stop* (2003) Gail Trechsel, Michael Stanley and Thomas Southall take a similar approach to analyzing Holley's assemblages. *Do We Think Too Much? I Don't Think We Can Ever Stop*. (Birmingham: Birmingham Museum of Art, 2003).

⁸ Holley's work is a constant conversation of the natural and man-made. We shall see this again in his assemblage *Cold Titty Mama*. See Michael Stanley. "Falling Out of History," *Do We Think Too Much? I Don't Think We Can Ever Stop*, 27-30.

Inner Suffering is a verbal and visual pun. The full title of the assemblage, *Inner Suffering of the Holy Cost* plays on the words and concept “holy ghost,” which refers to disembodied spirits of the dead and the last component of the Trinity in Christianity. However, Holley’s “ghost” is “cost.” “Cost” means money spent or a sacrifice made. The sound and spelling of the word is similar to the word “ghost.” Once he qualifies “cost” with “holy,” “cost” becomes “ghost” thereby connecting it to its referent “the Holy Ghost.”

The assemblage’s title, its circular shape and the personal effect of the objects essentially transform it into a modern-day icon. Viewers reinforce its power by looking. An icon stands for its prototype, or the holy original. The icon itself was believed to bear witness of the holy. During Iconoclastic debates over the veneration of word versus image, iconophiles argued that icons were the only tangible materials that retained the essence of that which it represented, more holy than biblical scripture.⁹ As material witnesses of the prototype, the pious believed icons could perform miracles.¹⁰ Indeed, *Inner Suffering* draws from the iconography of religious art. *Inner Suffering* is perceived as having similar spiritual properties than an icon is perceived to have, such as its ability to act like an animated force upon its believers. The reflector headlight affixed to the top

⁹ For further information see, Elsner, Jaś. “Iconoclasm and the Preservation of Memory,” in Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin eds., *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 209-232. and Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Iconoclasm* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ The same is true in traditional Dogon African art in which “certain forms and materials brought into conjunction and activated through appropriate procedures have the capacity to organize and concentrate energy.” The energy can be channeled toward healing, achieving wealth or social advancement. Rubin, Arnold, *African Accumulative Sculpture: Power and Display* (New York: The Pace Gallery, 1974), 10, cited in Lowery Sims, “On Notions of the Decade. African-Americans and the Art World,” *Next Generation: Southern Black Aesthetic*, (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 1990) 10-11.

of the circle, the blood stained quilt fragment on the left side of the assemblage, and knots of rope within a circular barbed wire are like consecrated agents of a spiritual world, made sacred through their placement and the cultural associations of the piece's individual components.

Inner Suffering confronts, signifies and recalls. As Holley describes it, “the definition rises up from them.”¹¹ As found objects, preserved in the state in which he found them, the mystery of their former owner(s) generates interest like the contents of a buried treasure. One assumes *Inner Suffering's* objects once belonged to either one individual or perhaps various unidentified persons; the objects were extensions of their former owner(s). In this way, the objects themselves act as proxies of their former owner(s). The objects, combined to form a complete assemblage, now share a collective identity. They are now parts of a whole.

Certain Christian symbols are embedded within *Inner Suffering* to reinforce its proximity to a religious icon (figure 2).¹² *Inner Suffering's* circular bundle of barbed wire looks like a metal replica of Christ's crown of thorns. Barbed wire, a type of fencing wire constructed with sharp edges arranged at intervals along a twisted strand, replaces thorn branches in this crown. Just as different icons serve specific religious functions, *Inner Suffering's* harsh exterior barbed wire circle serves to protect the objects within it.

¹¹ Holley, Lonnie. *Souls Grown Deep*, vol. 1, 7.

¹² This particular ninth-century Byzantine marginal psalter illustration of an icon serves as my visual comparison to *Inner Suffering* because of the illustration's recognizable icon characteristics such as its round shape adorned with items of value, gold leaf, jewels or objects that once belonged to holy persons. In *Visual Polemics in the Ninth-Century Byzantine Psalters*, Kathleen Corrigan examines this particular illustration's propagandic utility within the larger scope of Iconoclasm and its aftermath.

In addition to its broader cultural meaning as a tool for keeping others out, barbed wire in this case is an example of the types of industrial materials Holley finds in Birmingham and assembles in his work. He finds all his materials nearby Sloss Furnaces, an old iron plant that once manufactured pipes in Birmingham. The industrial dross that Sloss Furnaces produced still exists, buried underground within roots, mixed in concrete or underneath the asphalt. Further analyses of other assemblages will explore how Holley's materials recall effects of industry on his own environment.

The individual objects within the circle get meaning from their relationship to the surrounding objects. Although singular objects such as the reflector headlight, the antique lock and the shoes are easily recognizable as separate objects attached to a barbed wire bundle; all of the objects are connected to each other in some way. The flat metal tool obscures a complete view of the black shoe while the red-knotted rope is also only partially visible behind the central blue plastic bottle. There is an evident juxtaposition of the soft materials of the personal items with the hard metal surfaces of the manufactured items; these make more of a dramatic statement than an individual object's singular significance within the circle of barbed wire. It is likely that this juxtaposition speaks to the range of human experience from soft and nurturing, to hard and mechanical representations of struggle, all contained in an iconlike form.

A bloodied quilt fragment hangs on the left side of the circle. The blood or DNA literally inscribes an identity onto the assemblage. In this way, although the owner is absent, the viewer locates the owner's presence in the blood stained on the quilt fragment. The mark of DNA, more than the surrounding objects such as the reflector headlight and knotted rope, claims the existence of *Inner Suffering's* human prototype. *Inner Suffering*

then, seems to borrow the spiritual forms of the traditional icon. It does this to invoke the absent owners who used and disposed of its constituent parts, and to call to mind the problem of consumption and waste. It is this variety of meanings that makes Holley's work difficult to categorize.

CHAPTER 1: CATEGORY CRISIS

The term vernacular has evolved from being defined as, “a dialect native to a region or country rather than a literary or cultured, or foreign language,” to “associations of a practice of learning by doing, knowledge passed through generations, by word of mouth or collective making.”¹³ Labels such as vernacular, folk, “outsider,” visionary, self-taught, contemporary accompany descriptions of Holley’s work.¹⁴ These labels are imposed on the art as a way of organizing it within a common system of meaning. They originate as a result of the various ways institutions and different disciplines frame the artist’s work for audiences. Defining each term can become a thankless task as the agreed-upon meanings often change with new additions. However, I do make an important distinction between “outsider” artists whose urge to create comes from psychosis, and African American southern vernacular artists whose work depends on their surrounding environment and often responds to historical events.¹⁵

I am choosing to use the term vernacular because of the ways Holley’s practice has influenced our understanding of the vernacular, and to distinguish his work from the

¹³ Stanley, Michael. *Do We Think Too Much*, 2003.

¹⁴ From this point on, I put quotations around the term “outsider” to caution the reader from understanding the term “outsider” in its basic definition of “a person who is isolated from society” as this does not encapsulate the range of connotations behind the term within “outsider” art literature. In fact, ‘outsider art’ is an English translation of the French concept of ‘Art Brut’ first developed in post-war France. For more information on the origins of outsider art, see David MacLagan’s essay, “From the Outside In: A Fictitious Dialogue” in *In Another World: Outsider Art from Europe and America*, (Northamptonshire: the South Bank Centre, 1987).

¹⁵ For instance, a recently published anthology title reads, *Vernacular Visionaries: International Outsider Art*. The terms seem to be used interchangeably with each other. I do not intend to imply these authors use the terms incorrectly, but that they do not follow other scholars’ delineations of the terms.

problems associated with the term “outsider.” Vernacular, in its most basic definition, refers to a regionally specific code, language or dialect. However, within the context of Holley’s work, it refers to a regionally specific *style*. His practice of combining objects in his assemblages has come about through experience, more precisely “learning by doing.”¹⁶ Holley’s art practice has nuanced the vernacular from being a dialect distinct to a region, to an act not confined to speech but materialized through the region’s objects that then become a part of his assemblages.¹⁷

Holley belongs to a community of African American vernacular artists who save personal objects, to build mazes of adorned objects in their yard, each yard with its own distinct pattern.¹⁸ William and Paul Arnett’s two volumes of *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art* recognizes and documents the many yard constructions, painting and assemblage created predominantly by African Americans in the southern United States. *Souls Grown Deep* not only documents an ever-present creative

¹⁶ With Thornton Dial’s large-scale assemblage as an example, Lucy Lippard defines vernacular art as giving “people a way to speak for themselves across the moat that protects the high-art world from knowing what ‘the people’ really think and see.” In her version, African American vernacular art has a subversive element. It is an underlying message only the artists within the community who ‘speak’ the vernacular can decode. And beyond this, the term retains its connotation of “otherness,” that is outside expected norms. Lippard, Lucy R. *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990) and for more examples of concealing social commentary in one’s artworks, see Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Robert Hobbs, Theophus Smith, Maude Southwell Wahlman. “The Hidden Charms of the Deep South,” in *Souls Grown Deep*, (Atlanta: Tinwood Books vol. I, 2000), 90.

¹⁷ By calling his work “vernacular,” I emphasize a linguistic connection to Holley’s assemblages. Recently, visual culture studies explore the distinction between the linguistic and visual. In *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Gunther Kress writes, “the distinction can be realized (that is, given concrete, material expression, hence made perceivable and communicable) in linguistic as well as in visual codings...the kinds of meaning expressed are from the same broad domain in each case; and the forms, as different as they are, were developed in the same period, in response to the same cultural changes.” Kress, Gunther R and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 1996.

¹⁸ Grey Gundaker and Robert Farris Thompson have both written about African American yard art. From the outside, yard shows seem similar to the yard art of white Americans, however, Thompson and Gundaker argue that African American yard art reflects a creolized visual language that fuses forms from European and African traditions. See Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. (New York: Random House, 1983).

phenomenon that had seldom been photographed in such capacity, but also critically analyzes the yards, uncovering surviving African traditions and further preserving this historical legacy. In *Souls Grown Deep*, Arnett uses the term “vernacular.”¹⁹ Arnett claims the this term, “puts the terms of selfhood squarely and self-consciously with the art’s creators” since the majority of artists included in *Souls Grown Deep* have written or dictated accompanying essays in both volumes.²⁰

Early exhibition catalogues cast Holley within the larger phenomenon of “outsider” art.²¹ Like visionary²² and self-taught, vernacular is often a subset of “outsider” art, a larger category that encompasses art by psychotics, eccentrics, social

¹⁹ *Outsider Artists in Alabama* (1991) and *Diving in the Spirit* (1992) are two examples where the “outsider” label applied to Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley, based on previous characterizations of Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley as isolated and marginalized from various loci of race, region and art form.

²⁰ Arnett, William. “An Introduction...” *Souls Grown Deep*.

²¹ “Outsider” art has been called a phenomenon because of its lack of community, for its artists are not confined to a geographical area nor time period as is typical in artistic movements. Overall its membership relies mostly on the “look” of the work in question, with a greater interest in those artists who do not have formal training because of a perceived purity in the work itself. “Outsider” art’s conception can be cited roughly in the 1920s and 30s, when the United States sought “pure” areas of creative expression in the rural areas of the South as part of the country’s search for its identity, art authorities such as collectors, artists, art historians and curators started “discovering” the art of many disenfranchised or unschooled persons making art, including former slave Bill Traylor. Art authorities from the “inside” – collectors and persons within institutions with perceived social capital - patronized the artist and his work, controlling all aspects of the artist’s introduction to the mainstream art world. It is through these avenues that artists like Bill Traylor and Horace Pippin gained national attention. Recent scholarship contends that this was a reprise of the “master” and “slave” relationship in which a slave is beholden to his master. As the benign discoverers, the institutions benefit more from heralding in a new avant-garde while self-taught and folk artists continued to be primitivized. This case does not serve as exact model of Holley’s position, however this history has shaped the way we understand and label his work. Note that analyses of the artist-collector relationships within “outsider” and vernacular art continue today with Holley as a subject of many such studies. Gary Alan Fine’s *Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* explains the intricate web of art institutions, curators, art historians, scholars, collectors and others that influence the way folk art was received early on and its subsequent evolutions within the art market.

²² The term “visionary” aims to be more specific than “self-taught,” and less offensive than “outsider.” In scholarship on Holley, visionaries are those artists who transform their visions into art. Visionaries are seen as modern-day prophets, whose actions are controlled by a higher power. Judith McWillie claims Holley is an African diviner and spiritual doctor, stating that, “as soon as Holley began to make art, he was cast in a role of adviser, a ‘spiritual doctor’ by family members and neighbors.” McWillie, Judith. “Lonnie Holley’s Moves,” *ArtForum International* 30, no. 8 (April 1992): 80-84.

recluses without schooling, untrained artists, and, contentiously, the vernacular South.²³ Art critic Peter Schjeldahl cites the absurdity of grouping all marginalized art under one umbrella category of “outsider.” He writes, “pointing to a collective tradition of Southern Black culture that may be too well developed and densely populated to be termed *outsider* while too individualistic to qualify as *folk*.”²⁴ Schjeldahl recognizes the innovation within the vernacular tradition; “Outsider” art lacks the very thing that defines the vernacular, community presence. Holley and other artists who construct assemblages within a yard are not isolated; on the contrary, Dial and Holley (families included) communicate with each other on a regular basis.²⁵ Holley knew Dial personally before Dial was introduced to the public through William Arnett. Although Other artists like Charlie Lucas, James “Son” Thomas, and Mr. Imagination who also make assemblages from found objects may not convene as part of an institutionalized group, they share of common goal of preserving an African traditions in the art they make to teach future generations.

The degree to which Holley passes down his practice to his children that continue making assemblage and the ways in which his art practice has developed as a result of

²³ DeCarlo, Tessa. “In Defense of ‘Outsider’: A Question of Labels,” *New York Times*, (January 13, 2002, section 2), 35.

²⁴ Peter Schjeldahl’s “folk” refers to folk art, conjuring images of duck decoys, quilts and banjos in readers’ minds. Folk art is characterized as a handmade object originally made to serve a utilitarian purpose. In this case, “folk” is set up as the opposite of “outsider” which is considered the paragon of originality (a modernist construction). Schejldahl, Peter. “On the Wild Side.” *The Village Voice* 625, no. 6 (February 11, 1997): 1. Cited in McWillie, Judith M. “African-American Vernacular Art and Contemporary Critical Practice.” *Testimony: Vernacular Art of the African-American South: The Ronald and June Shelp Collection*. (New York: H.N. Abrams in association with Exhibitions International and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 2001).

²⁵ DeCarlo, “In Defense of Outsider,” 35.

earlier ancestors' practice of collecting, complicates "outsider" labels assigned to him.²⁶ This traditional influence on any subset of "outsider" art practice destabilizes the artist's "claim" to the outside.²⁷ As "outsider" scholar Charles Russell has defined it, "outsider" artists "do not participate in or respond to that principle of historical continuity. Rather than a continuation of art history, theirs is a statement."²⁸ Russell establishes that the work of "outsider" artists does not continue a historical tradition. Further explanation of Holley's assemblage *Little Top to the Big Top* shows that his work comments on historical events.

Scholars Robert Farris Thompson, Regenia Perry and Judith McWillie argue that Holley's work draws on African traditions.²⁹ When Holley draws on African traditions, it does not mean that Holley's practice relies on tradition alone without making a new statement. Rather, Thompson, Perry and McWillie argue that African American vernacular art is "a continuation of an aesthetic continuum rooted in the African past while still evolving in new ways."³⁰ Holley's inclusion into "contemporary" art exhibitions suggests that he has now gained access to the "inside." That is, within the

²⁶ Ultimately, all three terms self-taught, visionary and outsider, describe the artist more than his work. The terms depend on difference or a perceived abnormality of its subject.

²⁷ Some "outsider" artists benefit from the label, "outsider." Formerly secluded, once the artist's work is associated with a group, it gains the cultural capital from established artists in the category with greater critical acclaim.

²⁸ Russell, Charles. "Simply Art." *Raw Vision* 39, 37-49.

²⁹ In Holley's case, his yard has been compared to traditional Kongo ritual objects called *minkisi*. *Minkisi* consists of natural materials including grave dirt and other substances associated with the dead. For more information, see Beardsley, John. "The Forest of Spirits, the Ark of Dreams." *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 178-181.

³⁰ Patterson, Tom. "Spiritual Command and African Roots," *Ashé: Improvisation & Recycling in African-American Visionary Art*, (Winston-Salem, NC: Winston-Salem State University/Diggs Gallery, 1993) and Gundaker, Grey. "Tradition and Innovation in African-American Yards," *African Arts* 26 (April 1993), 58-71 + 94-96.

established art institution.³¹ Typically, contemporary artists make art that responds to art historical precedents. The contemporary and vernacular categories converge in the exhibition “Next Generation: Southern Black Aesthetic.” In 1990, “Next Generation” broke ground by exhibiting Holley’s assemblages alongside academically trained artists Beverly Buchanan and Joyce Scott’s sculptures.³² As illustrated in the tagline of the exhibition title “Southern Black Aesthetic,” the curators organize the art by region.³³ “Next Generation” exhibited art that drew from themes originally born in the American south. In the exhibition catalogue, curator Lowery Sims, cites the found object assemblage approach as a shared practice among artists in the exhibition. She compares the assemblages of Holley, Hawkins Bolden and Greg Henry, in particular, because of the similar improvisational processes that led to their creation. She calls the assemblages “energetic convergences” with a poetic bent. While Sims presents the art practices of Holley and Hawkins Bolden as “*private* obsessions,” she poses contemporary artist Greg Henry’s practice as different because he acknowledges his improvisational impulse. Holley’s active involvement with the public exhibition of his work since 1979 challenges Sims’ characterization.³⁴ While Holley was included within a sort of mainstream in

³¹ The African American contemporary and African American vernacular relationship is complicated because that which we consider the “inside” or contemporary art here has not always and still is considered at the margins, moreover, if African American contemporary art is in the margins, then African American vernacular art would be in the “margins of the margins” of art history.

³² Wilson, Judith. *Next Generation: Southern Black Aesthetic*, (Winston-Salem: Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 1990).

³³ In David Consentino’s interview with Robert Farris Thompson, Thompson calls Holley a “spiritual custodian.” He does not draw a strong distinction between the art of contemporary African American artists David Hammons and Betye Saar (both of which he mentions) and Lonnie Holley. For the full-length interview, see Consentino, Donald J. and Robert Farris Thompson. “Interview with Robert Farris Thompson,” *African Arts* 25, no. 4 (October 1992): 52-63.

³⁴ Cite show that came before “More than Land or Sky.”

“Next Generation,” Sims still qualifies Holley’s work as part of a niche, distinct from other contemporary African American artists who make work about the past. In turn, Holley’s assemblages seem to remain on the fringe of contemporary African American art, already marginalized within art history, yet not quite as obscure as “outsider.”

While I label Holley a “vernacular artist,” such frames or labels remain open to manipulation. As arbitrary as labels can be – determined by factors external to the art object, labels ultimately ground an object in a conventional system of meaning. Without a particular niche or label to occupy, Holley’s work risks marginalization or worse, indifference. The attention to regional and community influence in vernacular as a descriptor makes it the most worthy label to apply to Holley’s work. This is due to the fact that, Holley’s source materials literally are unearthed from Birmingham soil – objects that once belonged to the people who live in this area and thus communicate their past.

CHAPTER 2: LOCATING VOICE

Little Top to the Big Top (hereafter *Little Top*) is a combination of seven found objects (figure 3). It reaches more than three feet wide, two feet high and five and a half inches in depth. The attached objects are oriented as to lay flat against a white background. A shiny rectangular black pocketbook hangs on a lattice-like oven rack. The metal grate or oven rack serves as a skeleton, from which the largest objects hang: a pocketbook and a wooden beam. The pocketbook's synthetic plastic exterior has melted, exposing its yellow-colored foam interior. Smaller objects such as a corroded silver spoon and fork, and a rust-colored vertically hanging chain extend from the pocketbook. Thin wire attaches a charred garden hose spigot to the highest point on the metal grate. The wooden beam acts as the assemblage's base. The objects are oriented along different axes, so that all the objects, small and large, are askew.

Language and Meaning in *Little Top*

The everyday objects taken out of their everyday context are ingredients for imaginative narratives. For instance, were the pocketbook, spigot, and wooden beam burned in the same fire or did the oven in which the oven rack once belonged burn the charred items? And how would a personal accessory such as a pocketbook ever come into contact with a charred piece of wood or industrial material like a rusted chain link? Are these objects the surviving remains of a greater catastrophe/traumatic event? The meaning of Holley's found objects are embedded both in the context in which he found

them and the language that resides in this particular cultural, societal and historical context.³⁵ These contexts create systems of meaning that inform our everyday experiences, which we may take for granted or neglect to acknowledge.³⁶ Holley believes that art and life are dependent on renewal so he takes objects that appear worn and “replants” them, allowing them to “come into the world and be seen.”³⁷ He presents concepts poetically, utilizing memory and storytelling to give objects power. Or, rather he inspires the view to notice these objects; thereby giving them greater significance once framed by Holley in this way.

Holley’s assemblages best represent his life philosophies when combined with his words. It is as if his explanations, like his objects are a half text, insufficient without their complementary companion.³⁸ Long before art institutions described Holley’s explanations as “performance,” Holley fashioned himself as an artist-educator with the intention of engaging audiences with his words and assemblages.³⁹ In addition, outside the museum settings, folklorists and journalists who visit Holley in the privacy of his own

³⁵ Saussure, Ferdinand. Cited in John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: Penguin, 1972).

³⁶ Catalano, Dominic. “The Roles of the Visual in Picturebooks: Beyond the Conventions of Current Discourse” Ph.D. dissertation (Ohio State University, 2005).

³⁷ Holley, Lonnie cited in Judith McWillie, “Lonnie Holley’s Moves”

³⁸ Again, I stress the importance of combining the verbal with the visual because of the still frequent instances in which reproductions of Holley’s assemblages appear without its verbal referent. Whether it is a museum, newspaper or exhibition catalogue, once his assemblages are exhibited for a public viewing, the tendency is often to isolate the visual from the verbal or the physical from the literal.

³⁹ As with all visual analysis, it is necessary to remain cognizant of the extent to which the museum setting influences his performative explanations, in its enactment and audience reception. Inevitably, the institutional setting for which he speaks for an audience, by virtue of its cultural associations as “keeper of knowledge,” lends authority to his speech. Art reviewer Philip Ratliff first used the term performance when explaining Holley’s encounter with a family while he installed his work in the sculpture garden of the Birmingham Museum of Art, Ratliff writes, “Is the BMA’s exhibit as much a performance piece as it is a glimpse into the work habits of a highly-acclaimed sculptor.” in “The Trashman Cometh,” *Birmingham Weekly*, 2003.

home often reflect on the meandering or poetic style of Holley's explanations.⁴⁰ When folklorist Everette James visited Holley in his original Harpersville yard art environment, James recounts, "the range of his verbal imagery seemed at times to lead the representation we were viewing."⁴¹ I apply Holley's quotations compiled from a personal interview, multiple interview transcriptions, and transcribed conversations, essentially fragments of his broader exhortations, to *Little Top*.

Since Holley's grandmother was a gravedigger, he learned the practice from her at an early age.⁴² He has always been digging in art and in daily life, literally and metaphorically. The two seem inseparable for Holley. Holley declares himself as preserver, self-taught archaeologist, historian and retriever of the past.⁴³ He repeatedly represents his return to our origins through representing the universal symbol of 'mother.' 'Mother' brings us into the world and mother earth receives us as we depart. In 1992, Holley explained his role as artist-diviner-shaman to scholar Judith McWillie, as he sees it:

"I'm just a manager on earth - not that I'm going to be here forever. When I create, I want to go back to the beginning and just look at the beginning as an art object, create around the pyramid, try to put the flowers back...take things and

⁴⁰ Judith McWillie singles out Holley among other African American vernacular artists for his ability to communicate the role of art in the world. McWillie, Judith. *Testimony*, 2001.

⁴¹ James, A. Everette. "A Visit with the Sandman," in *Essays in Folk Art*, Chapel Hill: Professional Press, 2000.

⁴² McWillie, Judith. "Lonnie Holley's Moves"

⁴³ Holley says, "I'm more of a historian. I look at how humans' habits are global. I look at African American production even back to Africa. There were things...gestures that we brought back to us here. Not just getting together and dancing spiritually for some ceremony." Holley, Lonnie. Interview with author.

return them, put them in their natural form. The artist tries to show the world, through his different mediums, what time is all about.”⁴⁴

By “putting the flowers back” or returning them to their “natural form,” it is as if, as artist-educator he strives to “heal” society by returning things to their appropriate places. Through his assemblages, Holley is interested in restoring order to the Earth so that its inhabitants can understand what came before.⁴⁵ *Little Top* is an assemblage that symbolizes a maternal origin, one that bears witness to earlier history that has shaped who we are today.

The piece’s full title, *Little Top to the Big Top* refers to its metal lids of varying size, beginning with a “big top,” the lids of paint cans that are nailed to the horizontal wooden beam and successively get smaller towards the right end of the piece, with the smallest “tops.” Figuratively, the title speaks to mother and child relationship. The little top grows under the guidance of the big top.

Holley describes *Little Top* as “a mother’s labor to grow you up, giving you all that she can gather. It is her sacrifice.”⁴⁶ Holley draws from his own upbringing to communicate a broader idea or symbolic value of “mother.”⁴⁷ Holley’s explanation for *Little Top to the Big Top* provides a context for understanding the assemblage. Viewers

⁴⁴ Holley, Lonnie. Cited in Judith McWillie, “African-American Vernacular Art and Contemporary Critical Practice,” *Testimony: Vernacular Art of the African-American South, the Ronald and June Shelp Collection*. New York: H.N. Abrams in association with Exhibitions International and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 2001.

⁴⁵ “I’m thinking 25,000 years of preservation. Devising other possibilities for other humans to come on earth.” Holley, Lonnie. Interview with author.

⁴⁶ Arnett, Bill and Paul Arnett. “Lonnie Holley” in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000), 567.

⁴⁷ “When I speak of grandmother I speak of everybody’s grandmother – it is a state of status.” Arnett, Bill and Paul Arnett. “Lonnie Holley” in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000), 567.

connect the pocketbook and other domestic items such as the oven rack, spoon, and fork to “mother” as a symbol.

Metaphorically, the visual of *Little Top* suggests that the mother holds the “purse strings” and carries the weight of thirteen lids (children), as if she has sacrificed all that she can.⁴⁸ Holley’s explanation also includes what the “mother could gather,” suggesting that the mother searched and foraged in order to provide for her children represented by *Little Top*’s found objects. For Holley, brand-new store bought commodities would have no personal imprint or sense of the past.⁴⁹ He finds objects that are visibly “used.” Through their rough exterior, the objects communicate the harshness of the incidents they illustrate.

Little Top, a Material Trace of Memory

Compositionally, *Little Top*’s diagonal movement and dominant triangular form resemble an image of an old bounty ship (figure 4).⁵⁰ In two-dimensional reproductions of *Little Top*, the outer edges form a triangle. The wooden beam serves as the triangle’s hypotenuse. From the metal spigot, an imaginary diagonal line slopes across the oven rack through the angled spoon and ends at the sharp right edge of the wooden beam. To complete the implied triangular shape, a line connects the lower left end of the wooden

⁴⁸ Similarly, in a caption for Holley’s wooden cutout *The Gold at Grandmother’s Post*, he describes: “The ancestors had to be strong, the woman was the post of strength, supporting.”

⁴⁹ McEvelley. “A New Face for History?” 40.

⁵⁰ I chose a reproduction of the famous nineteenth-century slave ship *Amistad* to compare to *Little Top*. Illustrations of *Amistad* emphasize its narrow horizontal hull with sharp-looking masts supporting its many sails. Reproductions of the *Amistad* ship have been circulated and continue to circulate, since Steven Spielberg directed the movie *Amistad*. The image of *Amistad* has become a part of our nation’s collective memory.

beam to the upper left hand corner of the oven rack. Within the outer triangle is a smaller triangle in the empty space inside the pocketbook's handle. The base not only points toward the right, its left end hangs closer to the ground, as if weighed down by the larger lids. It is oriented like a road sign or weathervane.

Beyond formal qualities, *Little Top* and the bounty ship share a symbolic relationship. The ship that *Little Top* reflects has a narrow wooden hull with several intricately connected masts that support a main sail, fore sail, jibs, and a topsail.⁵¹ The masts pierce the sky with sharp points. The bowsprit, the spar that extends at the front (the bow) of a ship, points to the left. This is a view from port (when the bowsprit is on the left side). When the ship's sails are lowered, only the intersecting vertical and horizontal masts are visible, creating a uniform grid or lattice design. The ship has a sturdy base; its hull supports the weight of mile-high masts while maintaining its buoyancy. *Little Top's* pocketbook symbolizes the sails of a large colonial slave ship. The pocketbook and oven rack are tilted at different angles creating dynamism between the objects, so they look like they are in motion.

These are not visually static objects. A very thin, almost invisible wire affixes a corroded fork at the assemblage's lower left end and a spoon at its middle right side. The fork is oriented towards the sky while the spoon points downwards. The fork hangs at a diagonal against the wooden beam, like an oar or a rudder guiding the bow of the metaphorical "ship." The brown spigot of the torn garden hose adds height to the

⁵¹ Holley has represented ships and shipwreck-like debris in other assemblages. Intuit gallery's installation exhibited Holley's *Trash Boat* (figure 5), in which a thin metal sheet stretches between a diagonal and plastic-wrapped string mast--all attached to a solid concrete slab base. Holley comments that it is a testament to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 he made after his drive through New Orleans to Houston. *Little Top's* shape is similar to *Trash Boat*, but the ship metaphor has different ideological functions in each assemblage.

assemblage. It creates a diagonal that cuts across the horizontal edge of the oven rack frame, forming the apex. *Little Top's* lids of varying sizes represent its passengers, packed in one after the other. The larger lids are arranged sequentially before the little tops as if the larger lids “care” for the smaller lids. Moreover, the lids are multiple sizes of the same type of object with similar circular form and the same original purpose. This, suggests it is a group or somehow represents the human subject of the assemblage’s composition.

As a slave ship, *Little Top's* objects carry cultural and conceptual weight. Colonial freight ships, such as the one in this comparison, call attention to the African Diaspora. Historically, the United States has profited financially from the transport and exchange of ship cargo across long distances. In turn, *Little Top's* center pocketbook represents capital with its passengers or lids representing the commodities. *Little Top's* nautical connections likely signify the middle passage transatlantic slave route that transported thousands of Africans to the United States. The chain that hangs across the pocketbook past the wooden beam could invoke the themes of restraint and/or punishment. As a figurative leash, it is connected to ideas of animality, present in a slave and master relationship. This element pushes us to read the assemblage as an invocation of slavery. Within the ship metaphor, Holley also might be referencing the process through which Africans and African traditions alike were brought to North America. Holley often strategically represents an historical event through assemblage, memorializing the event itself⁵² and representing it through objects from his environment.

⁵² Holley’s assemblage *Burning at the Watershead* is a shrine to the Civil Rights Movement. High Museum of Art curatorial files, 1999.

Little Top brings to the surface a veritable scar in America's foundations.⁵³ Several of Holley's assemblages memorialize significant points in history to reveal social inequalities.⁵⁴ In a conversation with collector and author William Arnett about the importance of education, Holley comments on the legacy of social inequality that the transatlantic slave route left in its trail:

The person that put us on the slave ship did not reveal any of his knowledge to us, did not introduce us to the books that he possessed in his cabin...but it is the ancestors who represent knowledge. We were just carried across and put on the salesman's block.⁵⁵

Although this comment is not directly connected to *Little Top*, Holley consciously incorporates these themes into his work. Many of Holley's assemblages explore issues pertinent to the African Diaspora. They acknowledge African survivals in religious practices, lawn adornment, and vernacular architecture. *Little Top's* representation of the Middle Passage reminds us that Africans were bought and sold like commodities.⁵⁶ The pocketbook, hanging in its center, unequivocally claims the passage as a result of imperialist economics. The memory of Middle Passage materializes in the assemblage.

⁵³ In fact, Purvis Young, like Holley, is an African American vernacular artist who depicts slave ships in his work. Young's painting *They Going to Send Us Home* illustrates a mass of figures horizontally arranged in a boat. The exhibition "Souls Grown Deep" featured Young's work alongside Holley's assemblages and sandstone sculpture. See William Arnett, *Souls Grown Deep*, 2000.

⁵⁴ Holley's assemblage *What's on the Warehouse Floor Today?* uses wooden flooring, garden fork, clump of cotton, artificial Christmas tree branch, and plastic shopping bag to pay homage to the "honest labor, honest sweat, and honest toil" of many generations of an earlier work ethic. The Christmas tree signifies contemporary desire for instant gratification. Lynne Spriggs and Susan Crawley, "Lonnie Holley Object Commentary" in High Museum of Art curatorial files. 2000.

⁵⁵ Holley, Lonnie. *Souls Grown Deep*, vol. 2, 28. Cited in Stanley, Michael. *Do We Think Too Much*, 2003.

⁵⁶ In his essay, "Facing X Tradition," Paul Arnett points out that Holley himself knows what it feels like to be a commodity because Holley was traded for whiskey when he was a baby. Paul Arnett, *Souls Grown Deep*, 456.

By recalling the Middle Passage in real objects, its unapologetic abrasive textures, *Little Top* is a testimony. It bears witness to the event. Its presence and existence cannot be ignored once it is exhibited before an audience under a spotlight.

When museums exhibit *Little Top*, it hangs flat against a wall so that the oven rack is clearly seen as a background, with separate objects affixed to its metal frame. While *Little Top* is a three-dimensional assemblage, viewers do not experience it in the round. Its display emphasizes a frontal view, lending itself to comparisons with two-dimensional paintings or drawings. In two-dimensional reproductions, one is even more inclined to see *Little Top*'s pictorial qualities such as contrast and shape before noticing its relief or sculptural effects like texture. The deterioration of the found objects is more obvious when viewed as a three-dimensional physical object.

CHAPTER 3: *COLD TITTY MAMA I*

Lonnie Holley's *Cold Titty Mama I*⁵⁷ is a freestanding assemblage. When museums exhibit it, viewers see it on all sides.⁵⁸ *Cold Titty Mama* shares physical space with the viewer, so a new kind of relationship is formed with a sense of imposition felt by the object's presence. Unlike *Inner Suffering* and *Little Top*, *Cold Titty Mama* communicates like a humanlike figure that confronts the viewer.⁵⁹ The assemblage, resembling a human figure, communicates as a physical presence. Its objects combine both industrial materials and computer-age technology, creating a powerful juxtaposition that refers to different economic phases in Birmingham's history. These meanings are constructed under the guise of maternal figure.

In *Cold Titty Mama*, Holley uses the human form satirically. Its components are obsolete technologies that are made to represent the future. He combines a computer screen, slush machine,⁶⁰ five-gallon metal can, car batteries, metal shelf, stainless steel

⁵⁷ *Cold Titty Mama I* (hereafter *Cold Titty Mama*) is the first of its series. Later permutations of *Cold Titty Mama* place the wire shelf between the box and the lower cylinder so that the horizontal wire shelf obscures the rusted five-gallon metal can in video stills from the exhibition "Four Outsider Artists: The End is a New Beginning: Lonnie Holley, Mr. Imagination, Norbert Kox, Charlie Lucas." The exhibition displays *Cold Titty Mama* on a two-foot high podium. The computer screen "head" is tilted towards the ground so that it looks down at viewers rather than *Cold Titty Mama I* that reaches the viewer's eye level. To the best of my research, I have found only two other documented versions (three in total) of *Cold Titty Mama*, however, more may exist.

⁵⁸ Girardot, Norman, *Four Outsider Artists: The End is a New Beginning*, 8.

⁵⁹ This is barring the fact that for both assemblages, visual analysis comes from a two-dimensional reproduction of a photograph of the work.

⁶⁰ Holley claims it is a slush machine while later exhibition catalogues, *Do We Think Too Much, I Don't Think We Can Ever Stop* record it as an air conditioner. Holley, Lonnie. Interview with author.

cylinders, battery clips, and a chip display wire with twelve metal clamps (figure 6). The work stands four and half feet tall, eight and a half feet wide and approximately one foot in depth. The computer screen is stacked on top of a metal shelf that separates it from a rectangular slush machine with two shiny twin cylindrical cans jutting out its front. Just below the slush machine is a rust covered five-gallon metal can that rests on two black car batteries.

Cold Titty Mama is a social commentary directed to all living organisms that produce, use and dispose at increasing rates.⁶¹ Unlike *Inner Suffering of the Holy Cost*, *Cold Titty Mama*'s objects are less an amalgam of personal artifacts that recall an individual's legacy. *Cold Titty Mama*'s objects are culturally resonant and no less significant than *Little Top* and *Inner Suffering*. The car batteries, the computer screen, and other technologies like the computer monitor and industrial cast-offs such as the five-gallon metal communicate Birmingham's history, similar to the early histories of many towns in the American south. These obsolete technologies are clearly manmade objects. The plastic and metal exteriors of *Cold Titty Mama* are cold; there are no organic or conventionally domestic items in *Cold Titty Mama* like the bloodstained quilt fragment in *Inner Suffering* or *Little Top*'s pocketbook. *Cold Titty Mama*'s objects represent some of the most common objects that fill American landfills in the 21st century. While technology advances at an alarming rate, a proportionate amount of waste accumulates as a consequence. My interpretation of *Cold Titty Mama* relies heavily on the circumstances of its installation within Holley's solo exhibition at the Birmingham Museum of Art (BMA) and his explanations, each directly and indirectly related to the piece itself.

⁶¹ Ratliff, Philip. "The Trashman Cometh" *Birmingham Weekly*.

Demonstration: Electronicalisms

Cold Titty Mama reflects Holley's conception of "electronicalisms," a term that was initially documented in a review of his 2003 installation at the BMA. In June of 2003, in a typical impromptu demonstration at the BMA, Holley began to explain an oft-explored theme in his assemblages, "electronicalisms," by unraveling the various objects and combining them in unexpected ways. As Holley stood before a family that happened to approach him as he was constructing the installation, he began to explain the collected objects: concrete bits, a flattened burner from a gas stove, a clutch and a square point shovel, amidst a trailer piled high with telephone receivers, computer wire, a rusted school desk and other objects from a landfill that would become a part of his installation (figure 10). He assigned a role for each fragment. Concrete represented "solid foundations" and clutch meant "get your thoughts in gear."⁶² He collected the many receivers that we use to communicate with each other and began to preach about the "electronicalisms" to the family that stood before him:

People must have the smooth, the cool, the manufactured // Electronicalisms' is what they have in their houses // Kilowatt and megabyte // Computer chip // Big papa chip // Chippity chip chip.⁶³

Holley lists a stream of technological terms prevalent in our 21st century reality. The list seems never-ending. He pokes at the absurdity of it when he says, "Computer chip,⁶⁴ Big

⁶² Ratliff, "The Trashman Cometh," 2.

⁶³ Ratliff, "The Trashman Cometh," 3.

⁶⁴ Holley uses exposed or raw-looking computer chips in his assemblage *Fighting at the Foundation of the Cross* (1988) in which wood blocks have been nailed together at to form a cross while two computer chips, connected by wire, stretch diagonally across the cross' center. A pair of torn black boots are nailed

papa chip, Chippity chip chip.” “Big Papa chip” is what Holley sees has replaced human interaction,⁶⁵ to the point that technology has now infiltrated all aspects of our daily lives. Holley asserts that it even affects the way we think and raise children.⁶⁶ He disguises the serious threat of overconsumption in a benign way, playing with the sounds the words make. It rolls off the tongue spontaneously, as if he is improvising.⁶⁷ “Chippity, chip, chip” trails at the end like it is the offspring of “Big papa chip.” The smaller “chip, chip” sounds like the “chirp, chirp” a bird makes. However, this bird is made of wires. Holley pairs “kilowatt and megabyte,” kilowatts give power to electrical appliances while megabytes store a computer’s information. This wordplay makes Holley sound as if he is speaking another language. Amidst the pile of discarded technologies, he confuses the discernable line of what is real, what is naturally produced and what is artificial or manmade.

The installation’s accompanying exhibition catalogue *Do We Think Too Much, I Don’t Think We Can Ever Stop* includes images of various renditions of technology anthropomorphized.⁶⁸ For instance, two assemblages standing across from each other

to the bottom of the cross and a profile of a face hangs at the top. See exhibition catalogue *Testimony: Vernacular Art of the African-American South*, The Ronald and June Shelp Collection, 2001.

⁶⁵ Describing *Cold Titty Mama*, Holley remarked, “Where the computer will become your mother. Slush machine with the two breasts coming out. Oil stick with battery come out of...All these things that people come up with in the future...” Holley, Lonnie. Interview with author.

⁶⁶ Holley bases this observation on the experience of his grandchildren. “They are 10 times smarter...” He sees it as an important source of education. Holley, Lonnie. Interview with author.

⁶⁷ Note that Holley’s speech and demonstration were not a part of museum’s programming. In other words, they did not invite visitors to hear an institutionally sanctioned “performance.” Holley took advantage of the opportunity by his own accord.

⁶⁸ Figure 11 shows an aerial photograph of the installation space after Holley completed it. Rubinstein, Ralph. “Alabama Assemblage,” *Art in America*. (May 2004), 145.

have computer monitors for heads (figure 12). While a metal air conditioner serves as the torso in one figure, stacks of disk drives consist of the “body” in its alternate. In several areas of the space, Holley has bent electrical wire into a profile of a human face. In one instance, a yellow construction hat tops the profile with a telephone receiver attached to represent an “ear” and the lens of a Polaroid camera as its “eye.” Overhead, spools of unraveled black magnetic tape connect the two technological figures. Technological figures scatter the space, as if Holley has assembled a technological community with which visitors can interact. In the BMA installation, *Cold Titty Mama* and its many twin counterparts reflect a population of new species with which humans gradually share more space. *Cold Titty Mama*, once a character among many others extracted from its installation space, does not communicate Holley’s emphasis on mass and its effect upon the viewer.

Cold Titty Mama resembles a figure, akin to a robot. While Holley finds a discarded item to stand for human extremities, in forming the likeness of a human, he makes no attempt to soften its appearance of metal body parts. As suggested by its title, *Cold Titty Mama* is visually “cold.” The computer monitor is the head and brain of *Cold Titty Mama* (figure 8). An average height person would meet *Cold Titty Mama* at eye level or “computer screen” level. *Cold Titty Mama* looks out toward the viewer as the viewer looks in. The white metal shelf sits horizontally like broad shoulders while the rectangular slush machine below it serves as the figure’s torso. The two cylindrical cans that jut out parallel to each other from the slush machine, are its breasts, indicating that the figure’s sex is female (figure 9). The five-gallon metal can represents its legs. The

two boxes that rest on the ground are its feet. Holley stacks the slush machine on top of another liquid container, the five-gallon metal can and alongside a wire supermarket shelf and chip clamps for hands. The can once contained oil. He combines liquid and food containers because as he says, “we cannot run without food or oil.”⁶⁹ Yet *Cold Titty Mama*’s industrial materials do not have milk to give. Even as a working slush machine, *Cold Titty Mama*’s torso did not provide nutrients. When he says, “electronicalisms’ is what they have in their houses,” Holley suggests technology has become so familiar that it occupies our domestic, personal spaces.⁷⁰ *Cold Titty Mama* calls attention to this reality and our projected future by evoking themes of consumption through its once-familiar now obsolete technologies and uninviting metal exterior made to stand for a maternal figure. The figure would seem symbolically dead since the objects no longer serve the purpose for which they were manufactured. As “Mama,” with its cold and harsh corrosive components, *Cold Titty Mama* actually becomes the antithesis of maternal nurturance or Mother Nature.

⁶⁹ Holley describes *Cold Titty Mama*, “...supermarket shelf where they sell those chips and things because we cannot do without food and we cannot run without oil.” Holley, Lonnie. Interview with author. Birmingham, AL 2009.

⁷⁰ “For us to have such a technical viewpoint. To give us quickly a daily report of what happened around the world. What we have is we have such sharp technology now...TV did that. But it has come to a point. We can’t look at TV without having H— (HD) without having a certain type of receiver or something. We are at a technical age where technology is very very - Not only impressive to us but is important to us and important for us to discover. To understand futuristic opportunities for us to develop...” Holley, Lonnie. Interview with author.

Recalling Local Histories through *Cold Titty Mama*'s Harsh Exteriors

Cold Titty Mama, in its robot-like form confronts a technologically literate generation and questions the way of life that accompanies this audience. Closer analysis of its exterior reveals its relationship to its historic Birmingham origins. Marks of deterioration, particularly rust, personalize the assemblage's found objects. He chooses objects according to the marks they have in the original state in which he finds them. He describes the process:

“When I pick it up I immediately think about the age, you can tell by the rust or how deformed it may be. You can almost say where this came from.”⁷¹

The marks of erosion, water damage or dirt are choices that constitute his artistry in the same way that sculpting and brushwork do in his sandstone sculpture and painting.

Sometimes he will tear away the plastic coating from an electrical or telephone wire to expose its copper interior and bend it into multiple profiles, one flowing into the other like an interconnected web.⁷² The distinct indexical signs of deterioration on *Cold Titty Mama*'s exterior are imprints of iron ore industry that once flourished in Birmingham.

Rust occurs in large patches around the middle front of *Cold Titty Mama*'s cylinder and in small specks spaced evenly over the entirety of it (figure 7). It looks as if marks of rain that fell on the can have been branded permanently on the can, by the rust spots it left in its tracks. The signs of age and damage are evidence of Holley's process of uncovering objects from the dirt that were once buried. Now assembled as a figure, *Cold Titty Mama*'s objects bring local histories back to the “surface” for reflection.

⁷¹ Holley, Lonnie. Interview with author.

⁷² Holley's assemblage XXX is an example of this.

Cold Titty Mama's rust not only signifies the time that has severely eaten away at the metal can but also indicates the deterioration of the iron ore industry in Birmingham during his lifetime. For Birmingham, the introduction of telecommunications meant the death of traditional industry. It is no coincidence that Sloss Furnaces, Birmingham's iron plant, now an historic landmark is located near Holley's former residence. For nearly 90 years, Sloss Furnaces produced pipes.⁷³ Oral history accounts describe the iron and steel industry as the foundation of Birmingham's economy, an industry that is now all but dead. Moreover, iron ore still consists of the city's major cast-off debris, making it an available source of material for Holley. As long as pipes were produced, layers of iron ore accumulated under the city of Birmingham. Entangled in roots, the material has now been mixed in its soil for decades making iron ore bits as common as fragments of concrete and rebar.

Culturally, rust is like patina. It is a sign of the past just as computers are symbols of progress. Nevertheless, *Cold Titty Mama*'s computer monitor, a 1980s "Cado" model, and its cracked exterior suggest obsolescence⁷⁴ rather than progress.⁷⁵ The computer monitor's brand and model make it a distinct cultural symbol.⁷⁶ The plastic cubic

⁷³ Historians call Sloss Furnaces, an "urban iron plantation" because of its reliance on slave labor. See http://www.slossfurnaces.com/images/stories/learning/lessons/cast_in_iron.mov

⁷⁴ Holley's assemblage *Copying the Rock* also speaks to his use of obsolete technologies. The brand "Minolta" (an old brand that makes electronics) is attached to the front of the assemblage, drawing attention to its obsolescence. To give you an idea of the machine's age, Minolta last manufactured these copy and fax machines in the early 1970s. Its gray and orange color detailing is indicative of 1970s era aesthetic.

⁷⁵ Cado brand computer systems operated from 1979 until 1983. Since it was the one of the first manufacturers of the Intel-based microcomputer chip for business based systems, their computers were prevalent in corporate offices. <http://rs79.vrx.net/works/jobs/CADO/>

⁷⁶ It is interesting that Holley chose not to include the monitor's accompanying keyboard. Both Holley's Birmingham Museum of Art and Intuit Gallery installation images show a number of monitorless keyboards entangled in spiraled telephone wire and tree branches among other assemblages. It is as if he

encasing parts are no longer sealed together, so that the shell parts could be easily disassembled to reveal its interior. The interior may be even more damaged than its exterior. Holley uses computer parts often in his assemblages. Discarded computers happen to be readily available since telecommunications has become a leading industry in Birmingham. In general, computers make up a large percentage of the country's discards.

Of all the found objects in *Cold Titty Mama*, the computer screen displays the least visible signs of deterioration, however it remains the most harmful waste product. All computers are filled with heavy metals such as mercury, lead, arsenic and cadmium and toxic chemicals that can only be broken down with an acid wash.⁷⁷ While technological advance is to be celebrated, it comes at the price of a continuously growing pile of toxic waste.⁷⁸ The amount of discarded obsolete technologies that filled the BMA's sculpture garden for Holley's installation illustrates the sheer mass of electronics that humans discard daily. Even the number of different types of technology present in Holley's found objects pile is overwhelming. Images show multiple misshapen motorcycles, and lost parts of a car's motor entangled in PVC pipe (figure 10).

deliberately separated the parts from their whole or he found them already separated and divided in their respective categories. See *Do We Think Too Much...* Girardot, Norman J., Lonnie Holley, Mr. Imagination, Norbert H. Kox, Charlie Lucas, and Ricardo Viera. *Four Outsider Artists: The End is a New Beginning: Lonnie Holley, Mr. Imagination, Norbert Kox, Charlie Lucas*. (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Art Galleries, Zoellner Arts Center Main Gallery, Lehigh University, 2001).

⁷⁷ Electronics Industry Alliance: Consumer Education Initiative. <http://www.eiae.org/faqs/index.cfm>

⁷⁸ The rates at which they are discarded continue to grow. According to recent studies, in the next five years, about a billion computers will be discarded. In other terms, 130,000 computers are discarded daily. Ibid.

Holley illustrates that the technologization of daily life can cause us to forget our origins. The rapid pace of these changes, happening both culturally and socially, make it virtually impossible to remember what was discarded before a new model replaces it. As evidenced by his works, Holley's assemblages and interpretive explanations consistently share his own personal history, the local history of Birmingham, the broad problems of consumption and waste, a concern for the maternal, and the cycle of life and rebirth.

CONCLUSIONS

Holley describes his role as artist educator and foreseer with an acute awareness of our past.⁷⁹ He describes his own process as “futuristically reforming objects.” Holley remains just as aware of the future while preserving the past. For instance, in a conversation with collector William Arnett, Holley talks about how his role as artist involves predicting future problems:

The artist must try to reach the most intelligent level that he can—can I say that this is a *futuristic*—can I say that this puts me in the mind of a *space shuttle*...it also shows me that it’s an old piece of—I know what it came out of. It came out of an old pine tree, the center of an old pine tree, you see what I’m saying, that had laid there in the woods for a long time, that’s deteriorating and rotting away.⁸⁰

Holley’s mission to preserve memories for people in his community for future generations is apparent in *Inner Suffering of the Holy Cost* and *Little Top to the Big Top*.

Holley’s interest in teleology almost always leads back to mother as a universal origin. *Inner Suffering*, *Little Top* and *Cold Titty Mama* refer to the cyclical process of life and death. Mother is a recurring theme that takes on different formulations. The symbol of mother universalizes the found objects, which Holley uses as a vehicle to represent his teleology. For instance, *Inner Suffering* uses different objects to represent moving (emotionally and physically) objects that stand for a figure or spirit in its absence

⁷⁹ “Spirituality” in the sense of an afterlife, what is outside planet Earth.

⁸⁰ Arnett, Bill and Paul Arnett. “Lonnie Holley” in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000), 567.

Cold Titty Mama's industrial objects signify a spiritually drained substitute of a provider figure. By recalling an event through a shiplike form, *Little Top* represents the journey rather than a container of the holy that is an icon and an empty vessel in *Cold Titty Mama*. Now that we live in a secular society, people worship "electronicalisms" like the pious praise icons.

The improvisational and poetic style of Holley's exhortations comes from the objects he assembles and their ability to incite/retain memory in the viewer. His found objects become visual props in his demonstrations that eventually turn into assemblages. Some appear as permanent art objects secure in museum collections, some are as impermanent as products of temporary installations. His visual vocabulary, religious signs mixed with personal objects or industrial materials, becomes more apparent after extensive observation.

By relying on Holley's words as my primary source of interpretation of his three assemblages, *Inner Suffering of the Holy Cost*, *Little Top to the Big Top*, and *Cold Titty Mama*, I attempt to provide an alternative method of interpretation concentrated in listening to and examining an artist. Holley's work, non-traditional art practice, and performative style of explanation have earned him status as a vernacular southern artist with a contested membership in "outsider" art. My method attempts to privilege the art without burying the artist. I strive to avoid what scholar Eugene Metcalf describes as older "outsider art," meaning interpretive strategies that either interpret the art without the artist or treat the artist like the subject while casting the art as an afterthought.⁸¹

⁸¹ Eugene Metcalf writes, "when creativity and art matter so much more than people, there is no need to attempt to communicate with the makers of Outsider art about what they think their art and lives are about." "From Domination to Desire: Insiders and Outsider Art," in *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the*

My interpretations evolve from my own training of visual analysis. While I attempt to make sense of *Inner Suffering*, *Little Top to the Big Top* and *Cold Titty Mama I*, I do not exhaustively analyze the origin of each individual object or their relationships to objects outside of the assemblage to which they are directly attached. I recognize that I am a viewer offering an interpretation that derives partly from previous analyses of his work and partly from my own cultural background, replete with specific and universal images of visual culture.

Boundaries of Culture, ed. Eugene W. Metcalf Jr. and Michael D. Hall (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 221.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Lonnie Holley, *The Inner Suffering of the Holy Cost*, 1990, barbed wire, shoes, plastic bottle, painted rope, antique lock, cloth fragment, reflector headlight, and metal pan. Reproduced from Judith Wilson, *Next Generation: Southern Black Aesthetic*, Winston-Salem, N.C.: Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 1990.



Figure 2. Byzantine, Khludov Psalter, fol. 67r, Psalm 68:22, ninth century (detail).
Reproduced from Kathleen Corrigan, *Visual Polemics in the Ninth-Century Byzantine Psalters*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, figure 42.



Figure 3. Lonnie Holley, *Little Top to the Big Top*, 1993, metal lids, pocketbook, eating utensils, garden hose, oven rack, chain, wood, wire, found metal. Reproduced from William Arnett, *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000.



Figure 4. Artist unknown, HMS Bounty, photograph. Reproduced from http://home.uchicago.edu/~advorak/Web_pictures/Bounty/Bounty_Ship.jpg .



Figure 5. Lonnie Holley, *Trash Boat*, 2005, mixed media. Reproduced from http://www.flickr.com/photos/agent_ladybug/524065935/sizes/l/ .



Figure 6. Lonnie Holley, *Cold Titty Mama*, 1999, computer monitor, air conditioner, five gallon metal can, car batteries, metal shelf, stainless steel cylinders and metal clamps. Reproduced from Lonnie Holley, *Do We Think Too Much? I Don't Think We Can Ever Stop: Lonnie Holley, a Twenty-Five Year Survey*. Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2004.



Figure 7. Lonnie Holley, *Cold Titty Mama*, 1999, five gallon metal can (detail).
Reproduced from Holley, *Do We Think Too Much*.

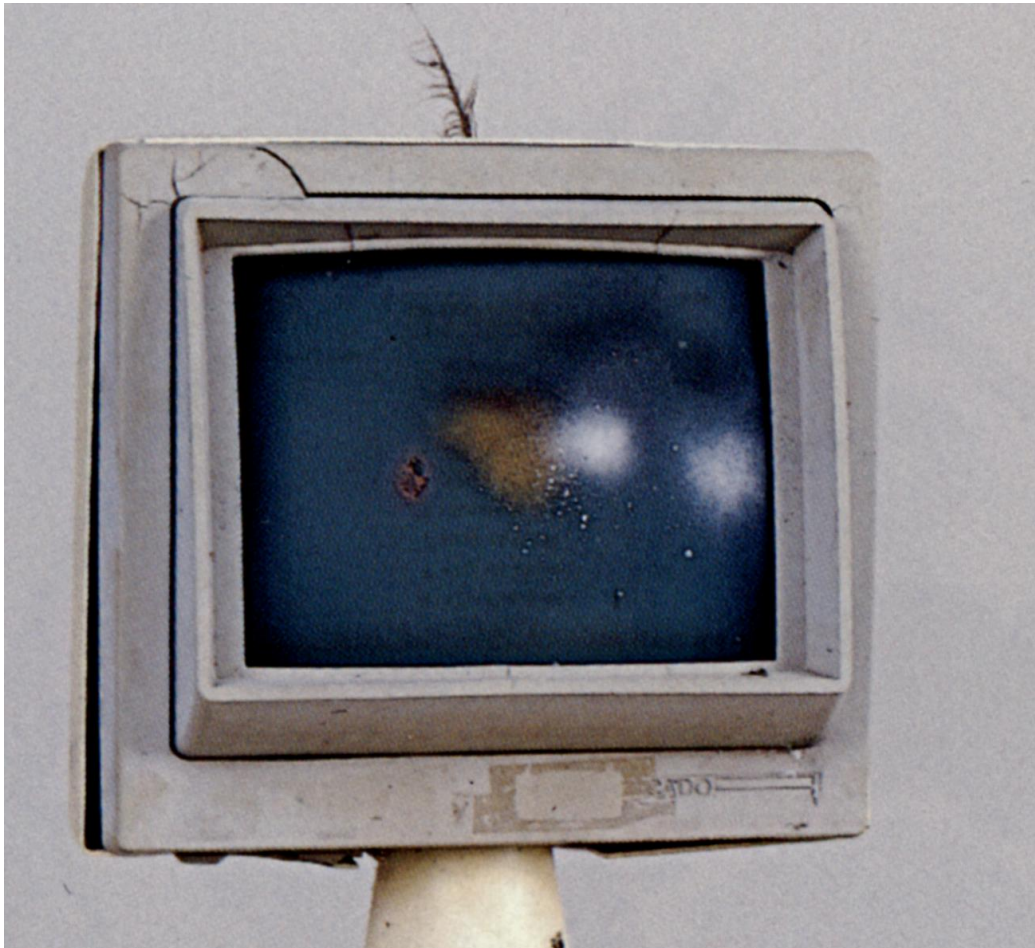


Figure 8. Lonnie Holley, *Cold Titty Mama*, 1999, computer monitor (detail). Reproduced from Holley, *Do We Think Too Much*.

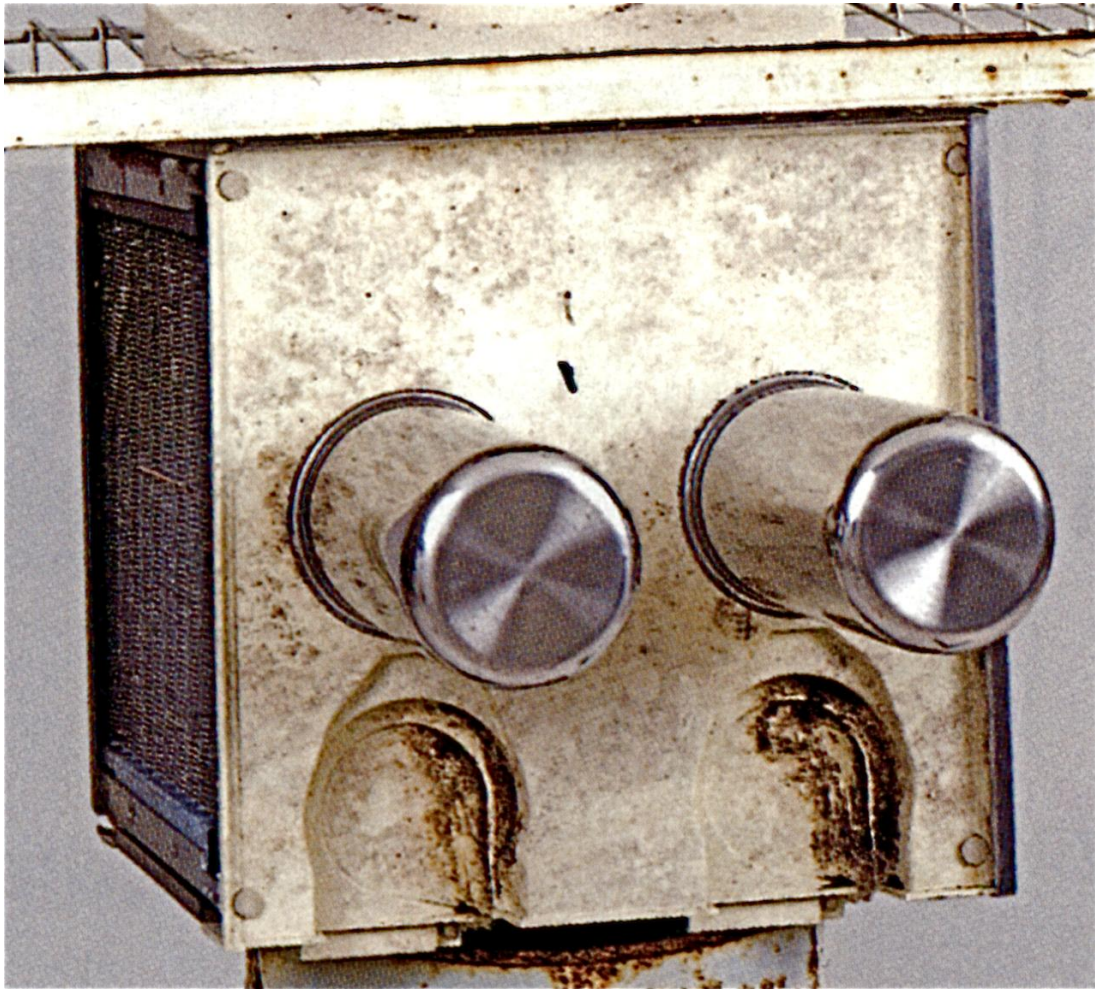


Figure 9. Lonnie Holley, *Cold Titty Mama*, 1999, air conditioner (detail). Reproduced from Holley, *Do We Think Too Much*.



Figure 10. Lonnie Holley, *Perspectives 8: Lonnie Holley*, 2003, installation (detail).
Reproduced from Holley, *Do We Think Too Much*.

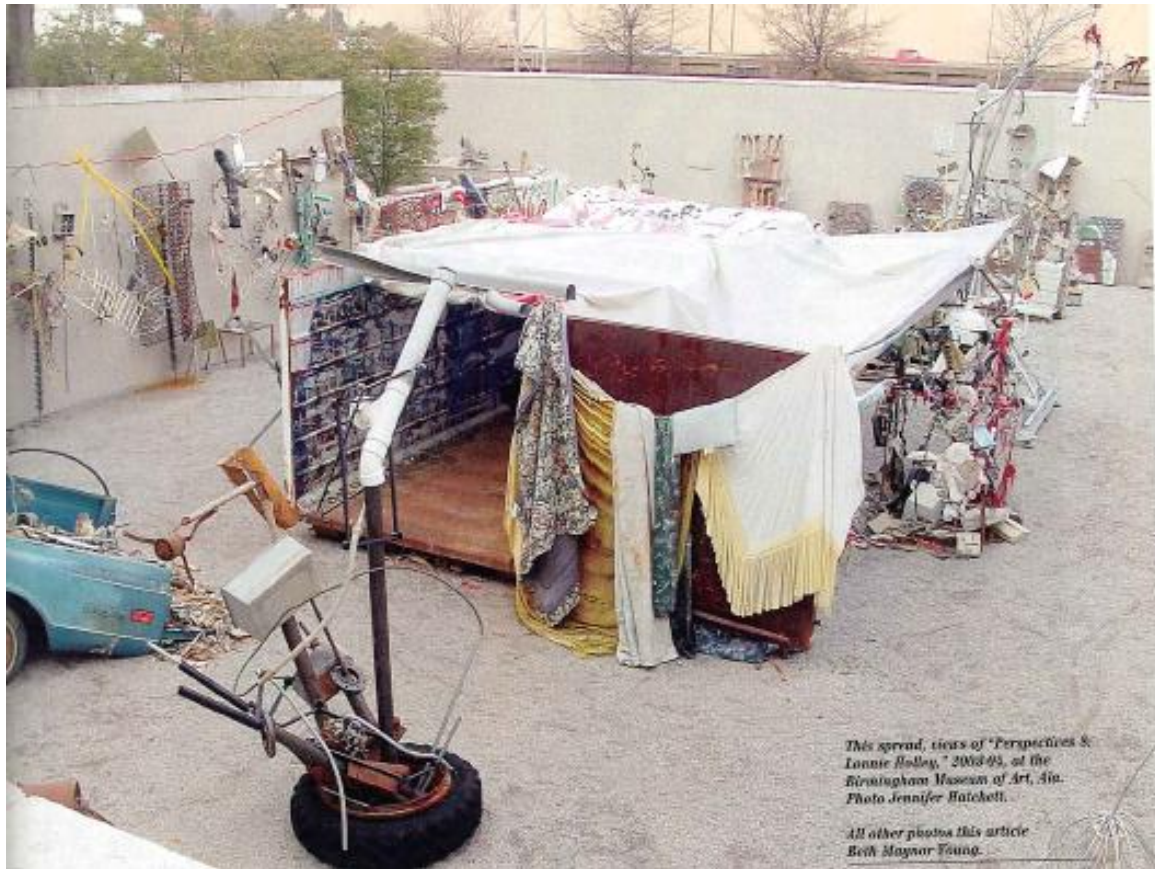


Figure 11. Lonnie Holley, *Perspectives 8: Lonnie Holley*, 2003, installation. Reproduced from Raphael Rubinstein, "Alabama Assemblage – Lonnie Holley's Outdoor Installation in Birmingham Features Dozens of Sculptures Made On-Site." *Art in America* 92, no. 5 (2004): 144.



Figure 12. Lonnie Holley, *Perspectives 8: Lonnie Holley*, 2003, installation (detail).
Reproduced from Holley, *Do We Think Too Much*.

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- . "Sandman's Blues: Part 2," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 15, 1999, Living section. DI
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