

An unmarked brick warehouse on the west side of Atlanta has become the repository for some fifteen hundred works by more than a hundred African-American artists. Supervised by a seventy-four-year-old white man named Bill Arnett, it is the world's most comprehensive collection of art made by untrained black Southerners. The warehouse, at first glance, may call to mind a salvage yard, for the artists used whatever materials were available to them: rocks, chains, clothes, rope, bedsprings, scrap metal, blood. One section features several dozen found-object sculptures by Lonnie Holley, who became an artist after carving gravestones for his sister's dead children; there are also groupings of Mary T. Smith's portraits of Jesus, Joe Light's paintings of hobos, and Ronald Lockett's collages of salvaged tin. Although cheap fluorescent lights illuminate the sprawling space, much of the art has been set up as if it were on display, giving the warehouse the look of a backdoor museum.

"Early Dial," Arnett said when I visited the warehouse, one day in late February. He pointed to "Slave Ship," a painted assemblage of welded steel, wire, and wood, which he bought off a lawn nearly twenty-five years ago. The artist is Thornton Dial, who is eighty-four and lives in Bessemer, Alabama. Friends and family call him Buck. Born in a cornfield and educated through third grade, Dial spent most of his life working as a machinist in a railcar factory, just before he turned fifty, he was laid off, and began making patio furniture with his sons. On the side, he created sculptures out of scrap materials. He had adopted this habit early. "The first thing I remember making, I was a little old bitty thing," he once said. "I hook up a matchbox to two hopper grasses, tie threads around their neck. I wanted to have my own mules and wagon. Called it 'The Green Horses.'" He went on, "I made little cars. Roads and trails in the sand. Roll them out with tin cans or a bottle. Build little houses. Make persons out of corn shucks."

Arnett met him in 1987, when Dial was nearly sixty. Arnett was taken to Dial's house by Lonnie Holley, whom he represented. Holley put Dial at ease by gathering some items from the yard—a bird feather, some wood—and fashioning them into a sort of charm.

"That's art?" Dial asked Arnett. Arnett said, "That's art, Mr. Dial."

Dial had never been to a museum or seen an art book. In fact, Dial cannot read (and, having had two strokes, he now speaks very little). He created art because it was his nature to do so, and because he liked to stay busy. "I ain't no sit-down man," he has said.

Over the next two decades, with financial backing from Arnett, Dial made more than five hundred pieces of increasing scale and complexity, including "relief paintings"—huge wall hangings dense with scavenged objects and layers of paint. He also made more than two thousand sketches and watercolors on paper, in order to disprove an early critic who said that he couldn't draw.

In time, his work attracted serious attention. Two of his pieces were included in the 2000 Whitney Biennial. When I visited the warehouse, a travelling show of Dial's work, "Hard Truths," was on display at the High Museum of Art, a short drive away.

It can be tempting to ascribe Dial's rise to political correctness, but his work is strong enough to counter such skepticism. His early relief paintings weigh hundreds of pounds, and many are six feet wide. They are packed to the edges with everything from buckets to vines, which Dial has affixed with industrial sealant and smothered in paint. Individual elements in the relief paintings are precisely chosen, as in a Rauschenberg combine, but Dial's tone is less playfully absurdist. His work directly addresses subjects such as the economy, women, politics, and natural disasters. (He watches a lot of CNN.) Dial, who speaks in a rich Alabama baritone, once told Arnett, "I only want materials that have been used by people, the works of the United States, that have did people some good." One of his signature moves is to twist fabrics into hauntingly human forms; in one of his best-known works, "Don't Matter How Raggy the Flag, It Still Got to Tie Us Together," painted cloth scraps and mattress coils have been swirled into a chaotic version of the Red-White-and-Blue.

Dial's juxtapositions can be fiercely odd. In "Stars of Everything," spray-paint cans, splayed open so that they resemble fireworks, surround a figure whose greenish hue evokes the Statue of



Thornton Dial and Bill Arnett, in Bessemer,

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

COMPOSITION IN BLACK AND WHITE

A collector's fight to get an untrained artist into the canon.

BY PAIGE WILLIAMS



Alabama. Arnett says of black vernacular art that it "wasn't created to entertain people or to sell to rich people."

Liberty. The color scheme is cheerful, but the paint-can edges, razor-sharp, give the work a menacing cast. Violence is often integral to Dial's process. For "Lost Americans," a wall hanging made with mannequin fragments and tree branches that protrude from the arms of a discarded letterman's jacket, he charred the surface—originally slathered with bright house paint—so that it is almost entirely brown. The wall hangings are as textured as a bas-relief; the photographer who shoots them for catalogues had to invent a special lighting system in order to capture their nuances.

Dial's art is informed by his background in building railcars, houses, and furniture: structures that last. Scott Browning, the acting director of Souls Grown Deep—a nonprofit foundation, started by Arnett, that owns most of the collection—says that the pieces are "engineered within an inch of their lives," adding, "We joke that you could balance a Dial assemblage on the tip of a pencil."

Although critics have compared Dial to major artists, such as Jasper Johns, he has not been fully ratified as a master. His work tends to be categorized as "outsider art"; though his pieces have settled into various collections, no major museum owns a significant number of them. The "Hard Truths" show received some strong praise—in *Time*, Richard Lacayo called Dial's work "assured, delightful and powerful"—yet it travelled only to Indianapolis, New Orleans, and Charlotte before coming to Atlanta.

The critic and musician Greg Tate has written that excluding Dial's art from top museums is like "excluding Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, and Jimi Hendrix from any serious conversation about postwar American music." At a

recent panel on Dial at the National Academy Museum, in New York, he said that the only remaining question is which "major institutional curator is going to be the first to do a major retrospective of his work east of the Rockies and north of the Mason-Dixon line. In other words, when is Dial coming to New York in full?"

This was the question that drove Arnett. He had been trying to get Dial's work, and the other art in his collection, before a wider audience for years, and he had heard every form of rejection: the work belonged where it was created, in forests and barns; it wouldn't hold up against fine art; given the perishability of the materials, it wouldn't hold up at all. It also bothered some curators that Arnett had paid artists stipends: wasn't he polluting the creative process by turning outsiders into professionals?

Such reservations made Arnett rather angry. His collection had been assembled with care, and represented nearly three decades of travel around the South. He had spent the first half of his career as a dealer in Chinese and African art; the business had been funded by loans co-signed by his father—who owned a dry-goods company—and, later, by a small inheritance. Arnett had devoted the second half of his career to the art of African-American Southerners, funded by the sale of his earlier collections and, occasionally, by loans from friends. He had spent millions of dollars supporting black artists, and had self-published books that explained his views. He argued, for example, that at the turn of the twentieth century uneducated black quilters in Gee's Bend, Alabama, created geometric patterns that anticipated the modernist designs of Paul Klee. As we toured the

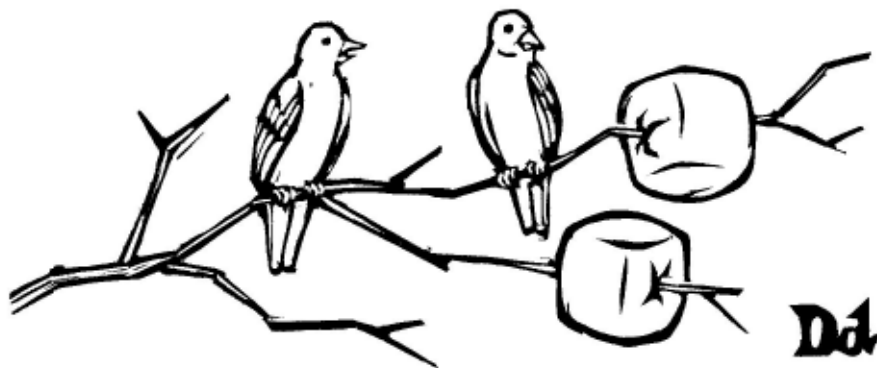
warehouse, Arnett told me that his collection documented "the most important cultural phenomenon that ever took place in the United States of America."

Arnett is diabetic, and he had been talking for so long that Browning stepped out of the warehouse's front office to offer him a fruit bar. "This art wasn't created to entertain people or to sell to rich people," Arnett went on. "It was created to commemorate the culture itself, so that it could last, so that grandma could tell grandson, 'This is what we're about, child.'" He looked pained. "Art in America has been removed from all that. It isn't relevant to anybody walking down the street. It's relevant to a handful of wealthy people who don't even collect it—they *accumulate* it." He added, "I'm trying to create some documents to leave behind, so that when the system changes, just a little bit, somebody will say, 'Wow, you mean we had this going on in America in the twentieth century?' That's all."

Early on, people warned Arnett that unqualified acceptance of artists like Dial might take decades. Nah, he told them—five years, tops. So much time had passed since then that the genre of art he collected had cycled through names: folk, self-taught, visionary, outsider, and vernacular, the term Arnett uses. Now most of the artists in his collection were dead. Dial was one of the few who remained.

But Arnett felt optimistic that things were finally turning his way. The Southern Folklife Collection, at the University of North Carolina, in Chapel Hill, had made plans to acquire his archive: thousands of color slides, field notes, interviews, and oral histories that Arnett has gathered from artists. (No money changed hands; he donated the material in exchange for the assurance that it would be preserved in perpetuity.) What's more, he told me, "extremely important" visitors were coming soon to Atlanta, to see the collection. He had better not say more, though—every near-breakthrough had ended in a setback. The art that he loved had been "brutally murdered," he said, by nefarious figures who wanted to control "what gets put on museum walls."

He was not afraid of hyperbole. We stopped before a yard ornament made by Emmer Sewell, of Alabama: a concrete



"I've got a bad feeling about this."

chunk atop a plastic lawn chair atop an upturned automobile tire. He looked at it and said, “I mean, MOMA—right?”

Fitting in does not come naturally to Arnett. During college, at Georgia Tech, he was often the only white person at the Royal Peacock, an Atlanta jazz club. He feels more at home in Europe than in America. He was born William Arenowitch, but after college he changed his name to Arnett, as did his brother, Robert, who makes photography books about India.

Arnett’s inside voice is an outside voice. He interrupts, a lot. He often begins a sentence with “No, no,” even if he’s about to say something positive. His jokes can sound like insults. He tends to miss, or ignore, social cues, and alienates people before he realizes what is happening; then he tortures himself about his gaffe for days. He has creatively profane opinions of people he perceives as enemies. His excitement can come across as aggression: one day, while making a point during a long drive through Alabama, he beat on the dashboard repeatedly and punched himself in the palm with his fist. It surprises him when others are startled by such behavior. Talking about art, he is a ricocheting monologist: one minute he’s on Verrocchio’s bronzes, the next on the unrivalled magnificence of Borobudur. Trained art historians tend to speak of the grandest masterpieces with critical detachment; Arnett’s default tone is effusive, which can make his views seem suspect to academics.

He is round of shoulder and of belly, with thinning silver hair that curls at his collar. He tends to wheeze when he talks. At one point, he lifted his untucked shirt, unprompted, revealing a wide abdominal scar from colon surgery: an old wound. He has had two heart attacks, and describes his diabetes as “out of control.” The struggle over the art has done it to him, he jokes.

Bernard Herman, a professor of folklore and American studies at U.N.C., helped facilitate the archive arrangement. He said, “Bill’s passion and commitment to this art and these artists is so focussed and powerful it overrides almost everything else. He is trying to change the way we think about not just American art but world art.” He added, “That

kind of no-holds-barred advocacy creates adversaries.”

Jane Livingston, the former chief curator and associate director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., said, “Bill has almost a monomaniacal, feverish, missionary zeal about what he’s doing, but it’s very hard for him to compromise, to listen. I do not think the guy is dishonest or intentionally negative. He’s simply—it’s almost like Bill has never grown up.” Livingston has curated



shows from Arnett’s collection, but she found working with him too difficult, and decided to stop.

Arnett has maintained a better relationship with Maxwell Anderson, the director of the Dallas Museum of Art. “There’s a kind of apostolic flavor about Bill that can turn people off,” Anderson said. “They’re accustomed to the delicate minuet of the art gallery, where you don’t really sell, you just hint, versus his *cri de coeur* that this work demands your attention. Bill has stuck his neck out time and again, only to find disappointment and betrayal—no doubt, in part, because he, too, is not a player in the ‘correct’ social circles. He’s a self-made person in ways that breed defensiveness. That defensiveness expresses itself in loquaciousness, and in anxiety about people’s judgments—which has been borne out by subtle whisper campaigns in the art world that he must be corrupt, or coaching these artists, or other ridiculous allegations.” Long ago, when Anderson was the director of the Michael C. Carlos Museum, at Emory University, he oversaw the donation to the museum of Arnett’s huge collection of African wood carvings. In 2002, as the director of the Whitney Museum, Anderson approved a “Quilts of Gee’s Bend” exhibition, curated from Arnett’s collection. A surprise blockbuster, the show made the quilts famous.

Two decades ago, Susan Krane, the director of the San Jose Museum of Art,

was a curator at the High Museum, and she got to know Arnett. She said, “Curator, gallerist, advocate, promoter, patron—those are all categories that, in the art world, we try to keep barriers between. My concerns were how he functioned as a patron with artists who were, by and large, poor. He was providing a stipend and materials, and owning or selling the art. Was there an aspect of colonialism that infiltrated his position as a patron? There was a question when Bill provided Dial with paper. Would works on paper be eminently more salable than a large construction? Is that a medium that Dial naturally would’ve wanted to work in? Or did it have a market-driven suggestion behind it? And whose suggestion was it, the artist’s or Bill’s? There was also a question because Bill was creating art history around these artists while functioning as a dealer and promoting exhibitions. If you’re a museum person, it raised every red flag you’re taught to pay attention to.”

It frustrates Arnett that, after all these years, he still inspires doubts. Hadn’t his long-term relationships with the artists proved his commitment to them? Sure, he paid the artists—other collectors were shortchanging them. Yes, he created a body of scholarship where none existed—was he supposed to wait for someone else to do it? As for Dial’s works on paper, Dial wanted to make them. Arnett gave him the materials, and he’d do it again.

Arnett was baffled when people insinuated that he was the art world’s equivalent of the executives at Chess Records: white men who, in the nineteen-fifties, got rich by exploiting black songwriters. “I told everybody when I started, ‘We’re not gonna make money on this—I’m not gonna let us,’” Arnett told me. “I mean, how’re we gonna do books that document a whole field of art that may or may not become as important as any other field of art that exists on the planet in the last century, if we’re making *money* off of it?”

Now, with time bearing down on him, he was becoming even more impatient. He said, “It’s true that in my old age I’ve become cantankerous, bellicose, belligerent, contemptuous of society and all the people that run it.”

Arnett lives alone in a small apartment near the High Museum, amid

ever-rising mountains of paper. He sleeps on a mattress and box spring on the floor. He sits in a worn leather recliner dead-centered before a large television. The walls are bare, and there's little other furniture; his treadmill is ignored. Early in his life, he loved dogs, but when his wife, Judy, developed dementia he bought her a cat; then the cat seemed lonely, so he added one. By the time Judy died, in 2011, he had four cats, and now he prefers cats to dogs, because he finds them more "discriminating." His cats are named Giuseppe, Lottie, Harito, and Julio Caesar—all "fancy" names, out of fear that those without them would feel slighted.

In Atlanta, the "Hard Truths" exhibition was in its final days at the High Museum. Arnett was scheduled to give a talk there at six o'clock, and arrived early. On his way into the lobby, the toe of his loafer caught on a grate, and he fell toward a steel beam. His forehead just missed it. A guard helped him up, but Arnett dismissed him and hobbled inside, his khakis ripped at the left knee. "Can knees sweat?" he asked. "I don't think so. I'm bleeding." Soon, the khakis were wet and red.

He ignored this and walked over to "Monument to the Minds of the Little Negro Steelworkers," one of two large Dial sculptures that dominated the ground floor of the Anne Cox Chambers wing. "Monument" has the look of an overgrown garden. Hand-forged curlicues of rusted metal—adorned with dangling cow bones, glass bottles, wire, and cloth—sprout from a steel frame.

Arnett pointed at the metal flourishes and said, "This is based upon funeral sculpture that was in all the old graveyards. . . . Dial and all the people who grew up in his generation, they went to graveyards all the time that looked like this—stuff all over the place, hand-made iron ornaments. Dial's version is a lot bigger than most. And it's not like Dial's trying to copy cemetery art. He *is* cemetery art. I mean, that's what he came out of."

An administrative assistant came by with bandages. Arnett's son Matt, who works with him, had phoned the museum and asked someone to check on his father. Matt has a daughter with Vanessa Vadim, a filmmaker; in 2002, he and

Vadim released a movie about the Gee's Bend quilts. She is the daughter of the director Roger Vadim and the actress Jane Fonda, who has helped Arnett publish books and has called him a "mad genius." Fonda collects Dial's work; a relief painting that she owns, "Trophies (Doll Factory)," was included in the exhibition.

Arnett sat in a security guard's chair. The museum assistant knelt before him, rolled up his pants leg, and wiped away rivulets of blood with a wet towel. "Are you *kidding*?" Arnett said, when asked if he wanted to go home and change clothes before his presentation. "How often do I get the chance to walk around with battlefield scars? I'm gonna say that I was defending the art against people who don't think it belongs in museums."

By the time he reached the second floor of the exhibition, he had invented an explanation for the blood: a story about fighting off forty Klansmen who disapproved of the art. Arnett found it humorous, and he tried it out on a gallery visitor, a black Army veteran in his forties who, overhearing Arnett talking about Dial, had asked him a question about scale. The man, Mike Sauls, an artist, was happy to discover that he was talking to Arnett: he knew of his role in championing African-American artists. Elated, Arnett gave him a tour of the show, narrating so exuberantly that another visitor asked him to hush.

He stopped before "Driving to the End of the World," a stunning five-piece assemblage made with disjointed chunks of a rusted pickup truck that Dial dragged out of the woods. Arnett said, "I told him from the beginning, 'It doesn't matter how good you are, somebody's gonna have a target on you. Because if they accept you as the greatest artist in America, they're *gonna* have to take you out. Because they can't open doors to you.' Just like fifty or sixty years ago—they couldn't open the door to black music, because that meant who's gonna listen to the white music anymore?" He added, "If you can keep the real black artists out of the museums, nobody's ever gonna know about them."

"Well, with the exception of Jean-Michel Basquiat," Sauls said.

"Yeah, but that's a different thing," Arnett said. "He was an educated guy, picked up by the New York art world."

"He was doing a lot of graffiti—"

"He was doing it to get noticed. He was a good artist, I'm not knocking him—"

"He had the vice that stigmatizes a lot of African-American artists who are on the rise to become famous," Sauls said. "They stigmatize us as being drunk, alcoholic, on drugs."

"Hey, man, I was giving these lectures before you were *born*," Arnett said. "You ain't telling me—I might be the wrong color, but no, hey."

"Yeah, that's what's been stigmatized."

"Hey, I was *there*," Arnett said. "Basquiat came to my house once. Yeah, to see *this* man." He meant Dial.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. A lot of people did. I liked the guy, and he's a great artist. They can take *one*, you see."

Sauls's late father also had been an artist, and before Arnett went to deliver his talk Sauls told him, "My dad always applauded what you've done for the vernacular artists. They weren't known in the art world, so this never would've come to the forefront if it hadn't been for folks like you who said, 'This is art.'"

"No, I didn't say, 'This is art,'" Arnett said. "I said, 'This is the greatest art in this stinkin' country.'"

Arnett was born in Columbus, Georgia, on the Chattahoochee River, bordering Alabama. Dial was born in Emelle, Alabama, near the Mississippi line. The drygoods company that Arnett's father owned was started by his grandfather, a Lithuanian Jew who immigrated, alone, at the age of twelve. Dial's mother, an unmarried sharecropper, had ten other children and sent him to live with relatives in Bessemer, a steel town. In college, Arnett took a course on ancient civilizations and became fascinated with the art of other cultures. For Dial, school didn't work out. "I tried to go to Sloss's Mining Camp School, but the children made fun of me because I was so big," he once told Arnett. "Thirteen in the second grade and stuff like that. . . . They told me, 'Learn to figure out your money and write your name. That's as far as a Negro can go.' I learned that."

In 1963, Arnett graduated from college; soon afterward, he boarded a ship to Liverpool with a small savings, a

Eurail pass, and a plan to see the cathedrals and museums of Europe. Dial, meanwhile, poured iron, loaded bricks, welded pipe, mixed concrete, and delivered ice. "I done most everykind of work a man can do," he once said.

Arnett decided that Europe was the place for him. He and Judy, who had been his girlfriend since high school, married and moved to London, where he worked for an American manufacturing company. In his spare time, he travelled. In 1964, he joined the Air Force reserves; four years later, he was called to active duty at Dobbins Air Reserve Base, near Atlanta. He moved into an apartment in the city and plotted a permanent return to Europe, as an art collector and dealer based in France.

He and Judy now had a young son, Paul, and eventually they had three more boys: Matt, Harry, and Tom. After Arnett left the reserves, in 1970, he put off moving to Europe and instead began travelling there, and to Asia, shipping home Haitian pottery and Chinese porcelain and jade. Later, he got into West and Central African tribal masks and wood carvings, and curated exhibitions from his holdings. In the early seventies, he moved his family into a large house near the governor's mansion. He put his boys through college. All of them have worked with their father at some point.

Around this time, a historian introduced Arnett to a Florida woodcarver named Jesse Aaron, whose creations fused black, white, and Seminole cultures. Arnett was excited by what he saw, and it made him wonder if the South held a hidden landscape of similar work. Folk art was gaining visibility, and pieces by black artists were showing up in collections and in exhibitions. By the mid-eighties, Arnett had suffered his first heart attack, and he abandoned the idea of living in Europe. Turning his attention to the South, he began amassing evidence of a deeply embedded visual language that had grown out of the black experience, not unlike the blues, jazz, and gospel.

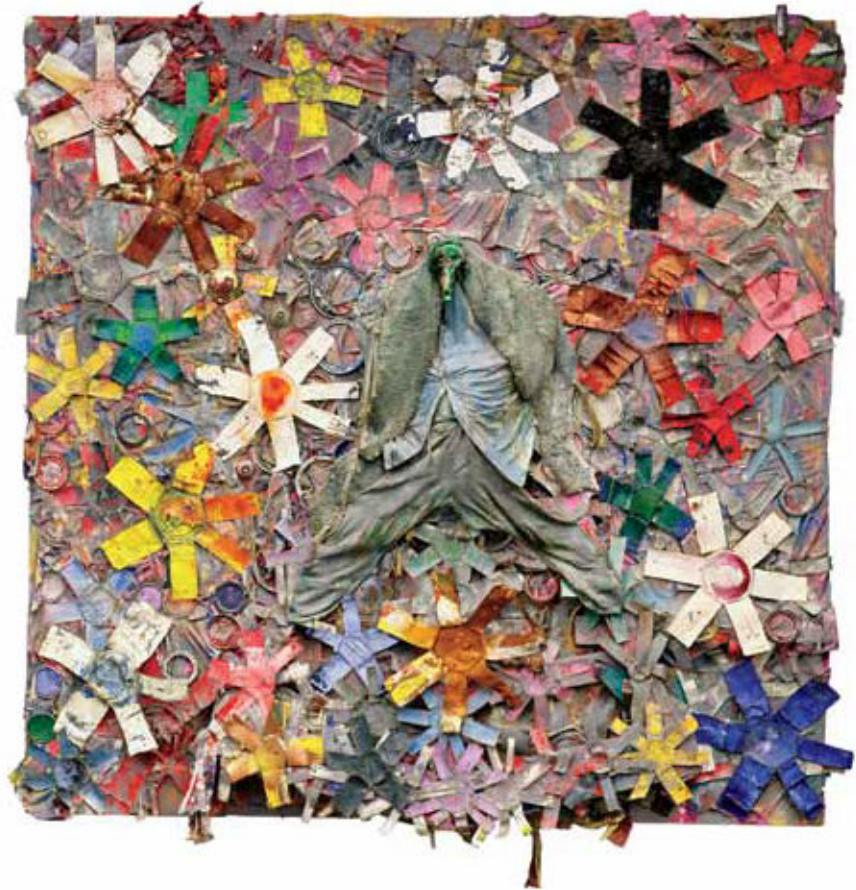
The artists he found were being paid very little, if at all. Arnett encouraged them to raise their prices and started giving some of them a monthly salary—hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars—in exchange for the right of first refusal. This doubled the income of

many of the artists. He got to know the families, and he asked the artists how they worked and why they felt compelled to create. His notes and photographs documented the artists' lives "in a really thorough way, at a time when that was just not happening," Bernard Herman, of U.N.C., says. "It wasn't that the artists were unknown. There just wasn't a systematic seriousness of purpose to preserve what was in danger of passing with

influences, the phenomenon sprang up largely on its own.

In an essay included in the first volume, Arnett elaborates on the genre's lack of "historical precedent":

There was no traditional framework within which their art had to conform, no body of traditional work to act as historical guideline, no ongoing dialog with other art traditions. . . . Their independence and relative isolation permitted them to make nearly all formal aesthetic decisions, notably those



"Stars of Everything" (2004) features spray-paint cans that have been splayed open.

little more than a cursory examination."

In 2000 and 2001, Arnett self-published some of this research, along with essays by notable curators, critics, and civil-rights figures, in a remarkable two-volume book, "Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South." Each volume weighs ten pounds, and together they cost more than a million dollars to produce. Arnett paid this out of pocket, with significant help from Fonda, who lived in Atlanta at the time. "It's really scholarly work," Herman says. Among other things, the books argue that, though the work of Southern black artists can sometimes be connected to African

pertaining to choice of content, style and method, medium and materials.

Two aspects of this process radically distinguish it from any previous traditional art. First, the artists were free to decide who their audience would be. . . . Second was the artists' inclusion of themselves in the content of their work. Inserted into their art were personal philosophies, attitudes, and autobiographical references.

The sculptures of Lonnie Holley supported Arnett's thesis. Holley had turned his family's one-acre property, near the Birmingham airport, into a landscape of stories told through repurposed junk. Arnett called it "possibly the most brilliant conceptual-yard-art environment in the world." He paid Holley more than two

thousand dollars a month for the exclusive right to buy his work, and for help locating other artists, which led him to Dial.

In July, 1951, Dial married Clara Mae Murrow, and they had five children: Thornton, Jr. (Little Buck), Richard, Dan, Mattie, and Patricia, who was born with cerebral palsy. The family lived in a brick bungalow that Dial built amid the shanties of Bessemer's Pipe Shop neighborhood, not far from the Pullman-Standard railcar factory where he worked as a machinist. Shortly after Patricia died, in the spring of 1987, Arnett appeared. Dial took it as a godsend.

One of the first pieces that Arnett bought from Dial was a tall sculpture of a turkey, for two hundred dollars. "I said, 'What? This man crazy,'" Dial recalled to the collector William Louis-Dreyfus and the gallery owners Frank Maresca and Roger Ricco, when they visited his Bessemer studio, in 1991. When Arnett offered to pay Dial two thousand dollars a month so that he could concentrate on art full time, Dial said yes. Arnett wrote out a contract, on a brown paper bag, and read it to Dial, who signed it.

At first, he titled his work simply: "Factory," "Deer." As they got to know each other, Arnett suggested more elaborate titles. Dial produced "Birds Don't Care Whose Head They Crap On" and "If the Tiger Had Knew He'd Be the Star in the Circus, He Wouldn't Have Hid So Long in the Jungle." He didn't talk much about his work, but Arnett did, functioning almost as an interpreter: tigers often symbolized black-male strength; un-recycled tin cans, the laboring class; monkeys, white men. These readings were blunt, but they primed critics to consider Dial's work with a more careful eye.

As Dial started having shows and selling his art for thousands of dollars, dealers sought to represent him. He would work only with Arnett. Articles appeared in industry magazines, questioning Arnett's role. "He was saying what's right and wrong like *he* was the authority," Ned Rifkin, a former director of the High Museum, said in "The Last Folk Hero," a 2006 book about Arnett and Dial. "It is the role of the museum to adjudicate these issues. He couldn't help himself from playing God. He had his own pantheon of hierarchical dimension

about this art. He would say, 'Dial is Picasso, this one is Matisse, that one is Chagall.' Bill was manic about all of this, and if you didn't agree with Bill Arnett you were 'bad' in his eyes."

In the early nineties, Dial's reputation took off. A Paris show of his work was planned. In New York, a joint exhibition was announced, at the American Folk Art Museum and the New Museum of Contemporary Art. *People* included Dial in a spread on "amazing" Americans.

The Dial family, seeking privacy, wanted to move from Pipe Shop. When Dial had trouble getting a mortgage, Arnett refinanced his own home and, for three hundred and forty thousand dollars, bought a six-bedroom house, on twenty-one acres in Bessemer. The Dials moved in. Arnett and the Dials agreed

MESH

Everything in the world
has a name
if you know it.
You know that.

The fungus
secreting itself
from the bark
is Colt's Hoof.

The dignity
of cataloguers
bows before code.

The thing
about elements—
they don't want
to be split

Every time
I collide with your mind
I give off—
something happens—
we don't know what

Particles, articles
this bit, a bit
digital, simple
fission, fusion
—a great vowel shift.

I saw the world
dissolve in waves

that the property would stay in Arnett's name for the time being, to spare Dial a tax hit, but would eventually be transferred to the Dial family.

In 1993, "60 Minutes" contacted Arnett about doing a segment on Dial. Arnett's inner circle was skeptical: the program had just aired a notorious story in which the correspondent Morley Safer characterized contemporary art as ridiculous, and dealers as people who "just after the hype-able." But, as the art historian Thomas McEvilley later wrote, Arnett—"with his usual sort of Jewish redneck teenager bravado, and perhaps with the promise of wide public recognition for Dial"—decided to take "the CBS crew to Dial's anyway." "60 Minutes" taped the story, with Safer as the on-camera reporter.

the trees as one
with the sun
and their shadows.

The trees on the shore
the trees in the pond
branch in the mind

The screech of the subway
decelerating its knife
into the brain
of all riders

In the morning the hummingbird
In the evening five deer

Why should I feel bad
about beauty?

The postmodernists
are all rational
& sad though they mug

in zany gear.
Everyone knows
what is happening.
They disagree why
& what then.

It turns out
the world was made for us
to mesh.

—Maureen N. McLane

That fall, the joint Dial show opened in New York. Roberta Smith wrote a positive review in the *Times*, noting that the “swirling colors and brutal topographies can make you think of Jackson Pollock, Julian Schnabel, and Anselm Kiefer.” A party was held in Dial’s honor. It was not his idea of fun, but he and Clara Mae dressed up and went, in a white stretch limo. Arnett sat beside Dial in the car that night. A filmmaker shot footage of them, which later appeared in “Mr. Dial Has Something to Say,” a documentary by Celia Carey. Arnett said to the camera, “Success is going to come to him like nobody ever could dream it. It’s just the beginning. This is a big deal, a black man getting to ride in a limo and he doesn’t have to learn to dribble a basketball to do it.” Dial laughed.

A few days after the show opened, the “60 Minutes” piece, a survey of the outsider-art movement, aired. It portrayed Dial as Arnett’s dupe. Without citing sources, Safer said of Dial, “There are those who accuse Arnett of having total control over him.” This claim was juxtaposed with Dial telling Safer, “I don’t fool with nobody but Bill Arnett.” After Dial casually referred to the Bessemer estate as “mine,” Safer declared, in voice-over, that the property was actually owned by Arnett. The implication was that Dial had been tricked, but Safer did not ask Dial if he knew of the arrangement. The segment quoted only one Arnett critic: Bessie Harvey, an artist, who told Safer that Arnett owed her money for sculptures. Arnett, on camera, nervously denied the charge, coming

off as the embodiment of white exploitation. After taping the segment, Harvey, who has since died, rescinded her accusation; Lee Kogan, a curator emeritus at the American Folk Art Museum, told me that she saw Harvey publicly “apologize to Bill Arnett on two separate occasions.”

The segment’s producer, Jeff Fager, who is now the head of CBS News, said in an e-mail that he stands behind the story, noting, “The only thing Mr. Arnett told us about the house Thornton Dial lived in was that Mr. Dial owned it, and we felt, at the time, that he wasn’t forthcoming about their relationship. We checked the public records and found out Dial did not own the house, it was in Arnett’s name—a fact we reported and Mr. Dial seemed unaware of when we interviewed him.” Arnett told me that he informed “60 Minutes” producers about the Bessemer deal; two years before the segment aired, the magazine *Atlanta* published a long article about Arnett and Dial that described the property arrangement and Dial’s satisfaction with it.

Although the “60 Minutes” report proved no wrongdoing, its effect was catastrophic. Exhibitions were cancelled. Those who had expressed interest in Dial’s art backed away. Three years later, Arnett curated an exhibition on vernacular art for the 1996 Summer Olympics, in Atlanta, but, while the show was acclaimed, the artists failed to receive the mainstream recognition that Arnett believed they deserved. Dial’s work was no longer being shown in New York, where it mattered most. In 2007, several quilters from the Gee’s Bend community sued Bill and Matt Arnett, alleging insufficient compensation for their art, which had been reproduced on calendars and licensed for home-décor products. The suits were settled, for an amount the parties are barred from disclosing. Arnett claims that the lawsuits were orchestrated by outsiders, “just to discredit us.”

He traces most of these difficulties not to any enmity he has aroused but to the art world’s defensiveness. The work of Dial and the other artists “was right under their noses and they never respected it, approved of it, owned it,” he told me. “They couldn’t take credit for it. They figured, ‘Well, let’s just kill it and nobody’ll know we missed the boat.’ It was more sinister than

anything I'd ever seen in the art world."

As the years passed, Dial's work became bolder and more intricate. The Arnett and Dial families grew closer. Clara Mae and Judy died. In Bessemer, Dial's sons built him a studio in a corner of the warehouse where they made their patio furniture, allowing him to work near his children. In 2009, Dial had the first of the two strokes. By then, Arnett had survived his second heart attack. Both men returned immediately to work each time they got out of the hospital. In "Mr. Dial Has Something to Say," Dial is shown saying, "Life have been rough with me. How it been with you? Life is rough with everybody. We all have had a hard time. If you got a million dollars you still got a hard time in life, because it ain't nothing easy."

In March, a few weeks after the "Hard Truths" show closed, Arnett and his son Matt visited Dial at home. It was late afternoon by the time they reached the house, which is on a wooded hill that overlooks a horse pasture. The Arnetts found Dial at the kitchen table, wearing plaid slippers and a pressed blue shirt buttoned to the top. He had spent the day resting. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren were coming and going. In the den, the TV was on. His daughter

ter Mattie had her laptop open to a traffic report, a Virginia Slim burning in a metal ashtray.

Arnett noticed a tin of homemade banana pudding and dipped himself some. Dial murmured, "Mr. Arnett at home, ain't he? You can bet that. He at home." He didn't say much else.

Dial's recorded thoughts on art exist almost entirely in Arnett's books. "It seem like some people believe that, just because I ain't got no education, say I must be too ignorant for art," he once said. "Seem like some people always going to value the Negro that way. I believe I have proved that my art is about ideas, and about life, and the experience of the world. . . . I ain't never been much good at talking about stuff. I always just *done* the stuff I had a mind to do. My art do my talking."

Dial looks barely different today from the way he did when he and Arnett first met: he has a long, regal face; a high, lined forehead; shrewd, narrow eyes set above prominent cheekbones; a pencil mustache like Little Richard's. He has always been wiry but freakishly strong, "like Popeye," his son Richard says.

Arnett calls him "Mr. Dial," and Dial calls him "Mr. Arnett," or "Arnett." They were sitting at opposite ends of the

kitchen table, like chess kings, when Arnett brought up the critical response to "Hard Truths." In December, 2011, Karen Wilkin, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, listed the show as one of her favorite exhibitions of the year, along with retrospectives of de Kooning and Kandinsky. In an earlier piece, Wilkin had lauded Dial's "lack of sentimentality, his ravishing color sense, his virtuoso 'drawing' with unlikely materials, and his uncanny ability to create poetry by combining radically disparate things."

For Arnett, the particulars of Wilkin's analysis registered less strongly than the ranking. He told Dial, "They put you in with the most famous artists that lived in the last hundred years."

"Oh, yeah?" Dial said.

"They sure did! It was a big honor. Fabulous. I mean they're naming the most important shows, and they're naming important people, all of them dead except you."

"Yeah, I ain't dead yet," Dial said. Everybody laughed and went back to talking about diabetes and fishing.

The Dials and the Arnetts don't publicly discuss their business arrangement, except to say that all parties are satisfied. Dial's art has sold through the Andrew Edlin gallery, in Chelsea; his wall hangings have sold for as much as two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. (Arnett receives a commission, but will not disclose the percentage.) Six years ago, Arnett deeded Dial the house in Bessemer; Dial shares it with some of his family. Richard, who is also an artist, told me, "Mr. Arnett gave Daddy a pretty fair handshake. It made Daddy happy. So as long as he was happy, everybody else was happy. I'm not saying everything been perfect in this whole situation, but Daddy probably never would've got the status that he got if it had not been for Mr. Arnett."

Arnett says that he is nearly broke: "I haven't made fifty cents total net profit on all that I've done on black culture in the past twenty-five years." He supports himself, and pays the small staff of Souls Grown Deep, the nonprofit, by selling off the remains of his personal collection, which, he says, he keeps separate from the art owned by the foundation. In late 2011, he hired Scott Browning, a Maine native with a background in nonprofits, to help run Souls Grown Deep. He and Browning reorganized



"What will change my life?"

the board, which had consisted solely of his sons, to include Richard Dial; Louisiana Bendolph, a Gee's Bend quilter; E. T. Williams, a financier and collector who is chairman emeritus of the Romare Bearden Foundation; and James Sellman, a family friend who serves on the board of the Folk Art Society of America. Herman, of U.N.C., joined the board in April; he has recused himself from further decisions involving the archive. With the archive transfer, and an ongoing effort to digitize the gigantic "Souls Grown Deep" books, Arnett seemed to be preparing for a next step.

As the sun set, he and Matt left the house and went into town, to join Richard and Dan Dial at their father's studio. The warehouse was chilly and dark, and full of large, hard objects related to the making of furniture. Arnett walked to the back and turned on a floodlight.

Seventeen of Dial's newer pieces hung from plywood walls. One was called "Fading of Days"; another, "Everlasting Life." Dial had been using paler tones, and his work was getting smaller. These assemblages were detailed but stripped of feverish excess. If his early work erupted with exuberance, his late work suggested an artist quietly sure of his voice.

Arnett paused before a vertical assemblage titled "Two Sides of the Mountain." It featured wire mesh, fake leaves, scraps of tin and wood, and house paint in dusky white, pinks, and blues. "I've seen very few pieces of contemporary art that are that good," he said. "It has balance—balance of color, and opposing themes that are sort of butting heads." He stepped closer but did not touch. "You've got a side over here that has things 'growing.' This is a trick that Dial often uses, where you think you're seeing something growing but he's actually put something on the wet canvas and then pulled it off. It's like a monoprint. And over on this side nothing's growing." Arnett's inventory of effects might not impress a critic at *Artforum*, but it was apparent that he knew Dial's process better than anyone.

A few minutes later, he stepped out to make a phone call. Matt and Richard started talking about the late eighties, when Arnett's sponsorship allowed Dial to make art full time.

Matt said, "Clara Mae would call my dad and say, 'Bill, you gotta come



"Getting warm...warmer."

over here. Buck hasn't been inside in four days."

"He ain't got no cut-off switch," Richard said. "He don't know when to stop. He been that way all his life. He just enjoy *doing* things. That's my daddy."

"He's a lot like my dad," Matt said. "My dad would rather be writing or thinking up a show than, like, going to an opening."

"I look at the twenty-something years they been associated with each other," Richard said. "They don't never get to the place where they throw bricks. Even your own family, you get to the place sometime where, as they say, your teeth and tongue fall out. If they have an argument, in thirty minutes' time they'll be back to where they were. They're too much alike. Just like twins."

Soon after Arnett returned to Atlanta, the "extremely important" guests came to visit him. He still declined to identify them; for once in his life, he let nothing slip. But, the art world being what it is, people talk.

The visitors were from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's new division of modern and contemporary art. Last year, the Met hired Sheena Wagstaff, the chief curator of the Tate Modern, to lead the division. There had been much commentary about what the Met would, and should, do as it prepares to transfer much of its modern and contemporary collection to 945 Madison Avenue—the con-

crete building, designed by Marcel Breuer, that the Whitney will move out of in 2015, when it relocates to the Meatpacking District. In the *Times*, Holland Cotter advised the Met not to install "four floors of the same sort of contemporary art that we see everywhere else in town."

After Wagstaff was hired, she told the *Times* that she hoped to place the Met "in the vanguard of reinventing a new understanding of what art means."

The museum would not say if this effort might include acquiring part of the Souls Grown Deep collection. Nor would Arnett, no doubt fearing the collapse of the biggest opportunity of his life, and of Dial's.

Arnett went back to planning shows, and to writing. He has been working on a memoir. In one passage, he compares the efforts of the past quarter century to a problem, by the British mathematician John Horton Conway, involving angels, devils, and a game of cosmic chess. "I don't play chess and am too right-brained to understand the intricacies of higher mathematics," Arnett writes. "But I consider myself an expert on the visual arts of the African-American South along with the cultural politics of the region. It is my nervous and trembling, but history-based and always optimistic, prediction that great culture will outlast corrupt bureaucrats and their heavy-handed abuses of power, and the greed-driven, callous, and destructive tactics of bloodless profiteers. So, metaphorically speaking, I am betting on Art." ♦