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# "Does Your Faith in God and Country Need a Boost?" Reflections of Idealism and Identity and the Art of Bill John Roth

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"DOES YOUR FAITH IN GOD AND COUNTRY  
NEED A BOOST?"  
REFLECTIONS OF IDEALISM AND IDENTITY  
AND THE ART OF BILL JOHN ROTH

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Modern Languages  
and Intercultural Studies

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Steven R. Warrick

May 1997

"DOES YOUR FAITH IN GOD AND COUNTRY  
NEED A BOOST?"  
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AND THE ART OF BILL JOHN ROTH

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**"DOES YOUR FAITH IN GOD AND COUNTRY  
NEED A BOOST?"  
REFLECTIONS OF IDEALISM AND IDENTITY  
AND THE ART OF BILL JOHN ROTH**

Steven R. Warrick, May 1997, 112 Pages

Directed by: Michael Ann Williams, Johnston A.K. Njoku, and  
Larry Danielson

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The life and art of Bill John Roth offer a paradox to the study of folklore and folk art. The personal and public nature of Bill's art is exemplified through his mural **Geographic Hieroglyphics In God's Own Handwriting**. On the surface the art and artist are seemingly detached from the community, but upon closer investigation this is not the case. I have explored the notion of "outsider" art, the problems associated with artistic interpretation and the difficulties of labelling artists according to academic and elitist standards. Thus the contextual background of the artist and community are important aspects of this study and of any study concerned with the nature and process of creativity. The final product is not the only standard by which folk art should be judged. The ideas and thought processes behind the objects are what really contribute to

the nature of the finished product. The purpose of this thesis is to use Bill's art as an example of the complexity involving the conflict between individual creativity and community tradition. Is this solely the artwork of an individual artist or work that represents involvement in the community? Through observation, analysis, tape-recorded interviews and public performances of identity, I have concluded that Bill's art is a product of community involvement. While his work challenges the traditional notions of folk art, it is contextually folkloric in nature.

## INTRODUCTION

After my first year of graduate school in the Folk Studies Program at Western Kentucky University, I returned to Bowling Green, Ohio, for a summer of rest, relaxation and reflection. During the course of the summer I began reading the books that would be reviewed in my upcoming folk art class that fall. One of the requirements for this class was finding an art object and writing a paper defending or rejecting its folk nature. I had begun looking around for something that I could use for such a project when an acquaintance of mine told me about a mural that a man had painted in a little town about an hour southwest of Bowling Green, Ohio. The following weekend we decided to visit the site of the mural so I could decide if it would be something I could use in my folk art class. We drove along the old highways of northwestern Ohio, passing by miles and miles of cornfields and small tightknit communities that can be seen from a distance due to the terrain of the region. The land is flat, fertile and productive in this area of Ohio. The Great Black Swamp once covered this area and the hot, humid summers continue to make the soil rich and ideally suited for agriculture.

After an hour's drive on a hot and muggy summer day, we

finally arrived at our destination: Delphos, Ohio, a small town of about 6,000 people. The Lincoln Highway, America's first transcontinental highway, passes along the outskirts of Delphos. The Miami and Erie Canal runs through the center of town. The canal is still operational and canal boat tours are a part of the town's history and culture.

A block from the Miami and Erie Canal, off Main Street, is a mural that was painted by Bill John Roth. (Roth is pronounced with a long "o." However, Bill insisted upon being called by his first name and I have honored his request throughout this study.) I was completely unprepared for what I saw. When I looked at the mural, refocused my eyes, and took a second glance I was truly astonished. The mural spans the depth of the building which was home to Bill and also houses The Line-Up, a local diner. It runs from Main Street to the alley behind: close to one-hundred feet long and about thirty-five feet at its highest point (Figures 1 & 2). The array of colors is also something to behold. The mural is painted in the brightest and boldest of colors. Fiery reds, deep blues, striking yellows and other vivid colors give the mural a sense of depth. Another aspect of the mural is the printed text which is alternately light or dark in contrast to the existing background color.

As fortune would have it, Bill was outside doing some work on the mural and I had an opportunity to visit with him. I was hoping that he would let me use his work for my folk art class. He was delighted that I wanted to feature



Figure 1. The Line-Up and Bill's Mural





Figure 2. A View of Bill's Mural from the Alley

his work and began to take me on a tour of the mural. His art and his presence commanded attention, and on this particular day I realized he had something to say. Sadly, I would only talk with Bill--and experience his passionate description, explanation and performance of his art--one more time before he passed away. Bill died on Oct. 13, 1994, only four days before I was set to video-tape him within the art world he had created.

When I arrived in Delphos on October 17, 1994, and could not find Bill I ventured to his sister's house. Bill's sister, Mrs. Kathryn Danhausen, lives only a hundred yards away from the mural. Upon arriving I inquired about Bill and was informed of his death. After telling Mrs. Danhausen about my project featuring Bill and his work she invited me to go through his building with her. Inside the building we both discovered that Bill had also painted many smaller pieces that seem to represent the process by which he worked. Mrs. Danhausen also informed me of *The Land of the Raptured*, a book that Bill had written and published. Sensing my appreciation for Bill's work, Mrs. Danhausen graciously and generously gave me his paintings and several boxes containing copies of his book.

It has been a long, strange journey since October of 1994, and I have taken this time to observe the town of Delphos and interview family and community members in order to present an accurate portrait of Bill and his work. During this period I have also spent much time considering

the nature of Bill's work, as well as different theoretical issues that pertain to the study of folklore and folk art. Bill's work, to say the least, is of a unique kind, but I truly believe that this work is not the product of one individual. Bill drew upon his cultural heritage and community involvement, and this relationship is illustrated in his artwork.

I have attempted to place Bill within his community in the first chapter of the thesis. Through interviews and observation I have noted the apparent aesthetics, values, ideals and beliefs of Bill in relation to those of the community of Delphos, Ohio. Bill was born in Delphos, Ohio, was a lifelong member of St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church and was active in church and community service. Bill had inherited a meat market from his family and operated the business until his retirement. He was in close contact with the community through his business operations and church membership. Bill also owned and operated a roller rink and let the local Boy Scout Troop use his building as a meeting place. He was a devout Christian, a veteran of World War II and a local business person, and these facets of his life have provided context for his artwork. I have tried to weave together Bill's life and art in an effort to provide a strong relationship between the artist and community.

My approach to the second chapter is an examination of "outsider/self-taught" art using Bill and his work as the studied object. Bill lived as a lifelong bachelor in a

three-story building with no kitchen or bed. He often appeared aloof and obsessive about his artwork. These circumstances seem to parallel other artists who have been labeled as "outsiders" by art critics and historians, as well as folklorists. I began with an historical conceptualization on the subject of "outsider" art and also provided a discussion on the concept of the "other" and "otherness" in viewing the "outsider" artist. When I first began documenting this study I was concerned with the labels that have been applied to makers of unusual art; thus, labeling constitutes a section of this chapter. I have used Bill's artwork as the basis for an examination of what I will refer to as visual testimony art.

The third chapter, "Public Display of Personal and Community Identity," describes the nature of Bill's mural. Bill started painting the mural shortly after his book, *The Land of the Raptured*, was published in 1982. His mural is a public extension of the book and a source of identity for the artist as well as the community of Delphos, Ohio. In this chapter I have tried to provide a detailed portrait of the mural and what it meant to Bill and his community. It is within this chapter that I place Bill back within the confines of community. His work is derived from community involvement, and here I attempted to illustrate this point. Bill's mural is both an individual and collective effort. It is also a reaction to social change. Bill saw a decline in the value system of the United States, and he decided to

paint his mural to illustrate this belief. I explored the notion that Bill's mural also constitutes an art environment and suggested that Bill and the community are part of this environment. Bill's mural serves as a concrete visual testimony of ideals, beliefs and values that are situated within the context of community.

In the concluding chapter I looked at the concept of art as text in a performance context. Bill was a performance artist who used the image and text within his mural as a basis for performance. I considered how an artist interacts with a piece of art to invoke an emergent and dynamic process of performance. The issue of performance prompts some specific questions: How does the performance convey the meaning of the artwork to the audience? What is the reaction of the audience not only to the artwork but also to the performer? Does the performance capture the essence of the community that the artist represents? I concluded by looking at the acceptance of Bill's performance by his community. Bill's performance reaffirmed his identity within the community to the extent that he essentially became a living legend.

Prior to embarking on my analysis, however, I must provide a detailed description of the physical aspects of the mural. As mentioned previously the mural is approximately one-hundred feet long and about thirty-five feet in height. Bill began painting the mural in 1982

and continued working on the mural right up until the time of his death in 1994. Approximately three-fourths of the mural is printed text. At some of the highest points the text is not easily read because of the narrowness of the alley. The alley is only about twelve feet wide, making it difficult to view the mural all at once. However, the design of the mural is to be read in sections as it pertains to the overall message that is being conveyed. The text is to be read and then associated with a painting that is in a nearby section of the mural.

Bill used both oil and acrylic paints on the mural. Most of the paint was of a high-gloss finish that makes the boldness of the mural stand out. Bill was neither a trained artist nor a housepainter, and the use of acrylic over oil-based paint contributed to the peeling of the mural. Also, the brick surface had not been properly sealed, and the mural was actually peeling from the inside out as the brick underneath deteriorated. Finally, Bill favored red paint, and with the pigment being so slight the mural had begun to fade by the time of his death. These technical problems kept Bill busy working on his mural. Paint cans and a ladder were not uncommon sights for the people who passed by on a daily basis. The paint cans, ladder and Bill, himself, were all a part of the environment that the artist had created.

**CHAPTER I**  
**FAITH IN GOD, COUNTRY AND COMMUNITY**

To help understand what constitutes folk art, it is essential to assess the values, beliefs and aesthetics of the community from which these objects were created. Even if objects reflect individual creativity, there is a need for further examination of the influences, whether bound in family, social or cultural traditions, that precede and initiate the creative processes.

The folk artist is not limited by creative boundaries but is limited by a set of values, aesthetics and beliefs subscribed to by the part of the community to which the artist belongs. In order to fully understand the needs and desires of artists to produce objects that are functional as well as aesthetically pleasing, it is necessary to look at the process of creation itself. The final product is not the only standard by which folk art should be judged. The ideas and thought processes behind the objects are what truly contribute to the nature of the traditions that influence the artwork.

One such object that represents a complex synthesis of ideas and thoughts is the mural that Bill has painted on the outside of his building. Bill's mural depicts geographical features that are transformed into Biblical, historical and political iconography (Figure 3). This



Figure 3. Bill's Mural



particular assemblage is the creation of one man, but at the same time, the ideas incorporated into this mural are based upon ideals that can be traced back into the artist's community.

The mural is an intricate analogy and interpretation, by the artist, of history as it is revealed in the Bible. Historical and political references, passages from the Bible, and iconographic geographical features are all aspects of the mural. Delphos, Ohio, is a devout Catholic town bordered by several Mennonite communities; thus, one can infer that the community values that shaped the production of the mural are grounded in religious overtones and inspirations. The religious belief system and values of this area and community are indeed represented in the mural. The question that will be examined later in this thesis is whether or not Bill has gone beyond the boundaries of his community traditions with his creativity.

Bill and his mural are the products of community involvement even though his work is highly individualistic. Bill was deeply involved in the Catholic community, and it is safe to say that his work is religiously derived. This mural has a place within the realm of folk art and Bill, in my best estimation, can be viewed as a true folk artist. The mural, entitled **Geographic Hieroglyphics In God's Own Handwriting**, depicts the lifelong fascination with religion and history on the part of the artist. This mural is not only painted on a downtown building in the business district

but also in the space where the artist actually lived. Bill had taken his own private ideas and space and placed them into a public context. Bill's own personal space and place became public--and that was the goal and intent of the artist. By decorating his home, Bill had issued to the public a statement of his own values that rest upon community ideals, values and religious tradition. This work is not solely that of an individual artist but a work that represents involvement in the community. Bill had put forth, in the mural, the values, concerns and aesthetics of the community that is based upon the religious ideals of Delphos, Ohio.

The background of the artist is an important consideration in determining whether or not the artifact is indeed derived from community values and aesthetics. As mentioned Delphos, Ohio, is a stronghold of devout Catholicism and Bill lived in this town for most of his life. Bill remained active in the church, serving as an usher and money counter for St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church (Figure 4). Bill served in the medical corps during World War II and was a member of the Delphos chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. While in the service, he was stationed in the Middle East and traveled throughout the Holy Lands visiting sacred sights.

Bill was born in Delphos on May 26, 1918. Except for two years during his childhood, in which he lived in Arizona, and his military service, he lived the remainder of



Figure 4. St. John The Evangelist Catholic Church

his life in his hometown. Bill attended parochial schools until his senior year in high school. Bill, with his family's consent, decided to forego his last year of high school. During his education in the parochial school system, Bill studied mostly history, geography and the Bible. These were important studies in the curriculum of the parochial school he attended. Since art was not an area of study within this school system, Bill never attended an art class in his life. However, one must not assume that he was entirely self-taught, for he grew up with the art of the Catholic Church, art that formed an everlasting impression on Bill. Art was something that he did on his own. His sister, Mrs. Kathryn Danhausen, told me of the times he "used to get in trouble with the nuns" for drawing during class.<sup>1</sup> It was during his time in parochial school that Bill began seeing images in geographical shapes. Later in life Bill used these images as a basis for his artwork and claimed that "divine revelation" played a large role in his personal expression and creativity.<sup>2</sup> I contend that this is another form of "vision" and that Bill, in many regards, shares characteristics with so-called visionary artists. Although God did not visit Bill in physical form, he apparently believed God to be with him every moment. Bill's upbringing, education, church membership and military service not only formed his own identity but also formed the identity of the community from which his artwork was derived.

Another aspect of Bill's artwork is that it developed from his own personal religious philosophy. The mural is based upon a theory developed by Bill that is an extension of a theory known as the *Rapture of Saints*. This idea is that "the churches of the rapture..., maintain that they, the elect of God, will be carried away bodily and instantaneously, vanishing from the earth and reappearing in the New Jerusalem floating above the earth."<sup>3</sup> Bill's own belief is the *Historical Rapture of the Saints*. This belief is based not only in Biblical thought but also in Bill's perception of historical evidence and envisions the United States as a point of rapture because it is the "New Jer-U-S-A-lem." The driving force behind the artwork was his book, *The Land of the Raptured*, which was published in 1982. The book documents Bill's theory and gives historical and philosophical precedent to the artwork. Bill had woven together many different concepts in order to formulate his theory. His ideas soon made their way into the mural. This is "assemblage" in itself: the ideas, time period, historical, political and Biblical text and icon all form the whole of the mural.

According to Jack Santino "assemblage" may consist of "the combining of a variety of symbolic elements within a single frame, and the creation of a single aesthetic entity by grouping together disparate things."<sup>4</sup> Bill assembled together the ideas that he grew up with, along with other

ideas that were developing throughout his own life experience.

Once the mural was painted, based upon Bill's own rhetoric, it approached the realm of bricolage. Claude Levi-Strauss suggests:

The bricoleur derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he speaks not only with things but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life choices he makes between the limited possibilities. The bricoleur may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it.<sup>5</sup>

By looking at the thought behind the artwork, Bill is able to fall within the definition of a bricoleur. It is also interesting to note that the mural is not complete because Bill passed away before he could express more of his thoughts upon the wall of his building.

When I walked through the building with Mrs. Danhausen, I discovered something interesting. Bill had about seventeen paintings lying around his building. These paintings were of such figures as Abraham Lincoln, Uncle Sam and the suffering image of Jesus Christ. In addition to these smaller paintings there were also cut-outs of many different countries, which resembled those depicted in the mural. The many pieces were assembled together as if they were a giant jig-saw puzzle (Figure 5). This "map puzzle" was cut out of old pieces of paneling. I can only assume

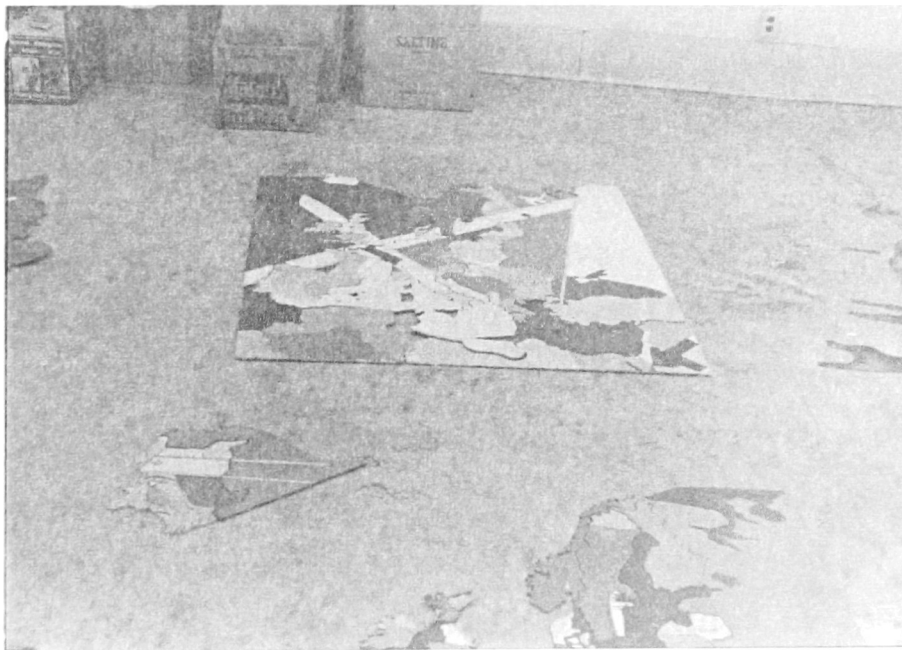


Figure 5. The "Map-Puzzle"

that this process was the one by which Bill designed his mural. With this being the case, Bill does indeed fit literally into the category of a bricoleur. By taking pieces of discarded paneling, which I also assume, Bill was also involved in the act of aesthetic recycling. He was not only using recycled material but is actually recycling his own ideas. These are only speculations to which I still have very limited knowledge. Bill was the only one that knew of and about his creative process, and that knowledge now rests with him.

If one views tradition as situated within cultural context, then as ideas and time change, so must tradition. Bricolage is a construct that accommodates change in tradition. Daniel Franklin Ward states, "Through bricolage a 'new idea' is broken down and compared with old ones and a composite idea is developed to suit the artists psychological nature and his social and physical environment."<sup>6</sup> Not only has Bill assembled ideas of Biblical, historical, political and geographical concepts but also he has assembled together new ideas--his own--with older, existing ideas as well. By painting the mural on the outside of the building he owned, and in which he lived, Bill attempted to express his own thought processes and artistic creativity to the community. His ideas are rooted in the values and traditions of the community, but he also incorporates new and existing ideas that call for change.



Seeing a lack of faith in "God and country," Bill attempted to put these ideas on display so that the community did not lose sight of its beginnings. Even though Bill worked within one medium, painting, it is the ideas and contextual setting of these ideas that lead to bricolage. One can go even further by stating that tradition is always accommodating and inviting change, and it is my belief that this mural represents the concept of innovation within tradition.

Can Bill be viewed as an "authentic" folk artist?  
According to John Vlach authentic folk arts

are not unique but typical and commonplace; they are not usually monumental but ordinary and familiar; they are not singular but precedented, formulaic, and duplicated; they are not the product of a lone instant but are repeated continuously.<sup>7</sup>

Although Vlach may not agree that Bill's mural is folk art because of his own conservative stance on the subject, his criteria do apply to this particular object. Vlach's statement describes Bill's mural because it is not the product of a lone instant but has been repeated over and over in the numerous paintings by Bill. Bill has used the same icons, such as Lincoln and Jesus Christ, that many other folk artists have used over the course of history. Even on the face of the mural one can see the same images and motives produced more than once (Figures 6 & 7).

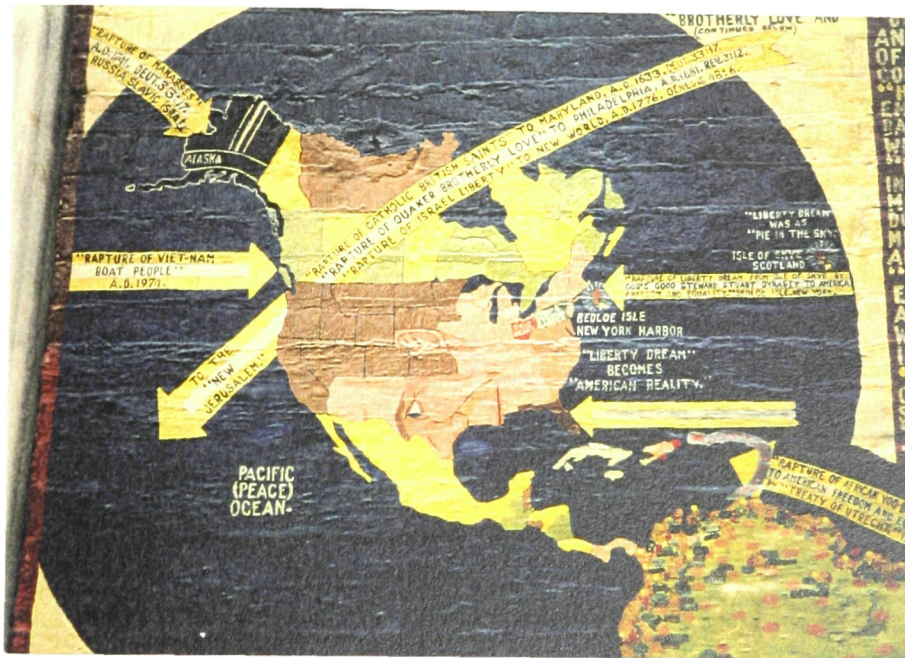


Figure 6. Bill's Depiction of Abraham Lincoln



Figure 7. The Suffering Image of Jesus Christ

However, I would question the notion that such works are not monumental because even that which is ordinary and familiar can be monumental depending on the contextual setting. In many instances works of art take on a life unto themselves and transcend the artist. If this is the case, then the works are not just ordinary but are, indeed, monumental.

Veronica Terrillion is another artist who has produced work of great importance. She, along with Bill, has based her work within the Catholic domain. Varrick Chittenden has paid considerable attention to Terrillion's work and makes this observation:

Particularly relevant to the life and artistic work of Veronica Terrillion has been the considerable influence of the Catholic Church, and especially that of the Franciscan orders who settled, preached and taught in her section of Lewis County (New York).<sup>8</sup>

Terrillion's work, like that of Bill's, shows the religious influence and heritage from which ideas and values have risen. Chittenden further suggests Terrillion's sculptures can be viewed as an expression of socio-cultural values that are linked not only to heritage but also to mainstream society in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Again, this work parallels Bill's because both artists are intently aware of their environments. It is the nature of these two artists to show their devotion to the Catholic Church, and it can be stated that religion does play a very prominent role in inspiring

the creative process among many folk artists. Bill is not alone when it comes to placing religious values into the confines of the art world whether it be fine, folk or popular art.

Another feature of Bill's work is the hand printed text that exists within the mural. The printed text takes up a great deal of space on the mural. This text is composed of passages from the Bible and Bill's own writings. He has incorporated much from the Book of Revelation on the mural along with his own writings that link the text to the paintings. Most of the text is arranged in a neat and orderly fashion executed in the form of columns that begin with a specific heading. The columns are presented much in the same way in which scripture is presented in the Bible (Figures 8 & 9). These columns also refer to specific historical and political events and once again, according to Bill's belief, they are directly tied to Scripture. After all, that is the common theme and vision of the artist.

Other artists such as Jesse Howard have used print in their artwork as a means of self-and-community expression and involvement. Howard was a sign painter from Fulton, Missouri. Richard Rhodes describes the signs in *Naives and Visionaries*, "The signs have messages on them which he composed himself with narrow means that include a sixth-grade education, an old Webster's Dictionary, two daily newspapers and a King James Bible."<sup>10</sup> Howard looked at change as it happens in the Twentieth Century and included





Figure 8. Hand-Painted Text

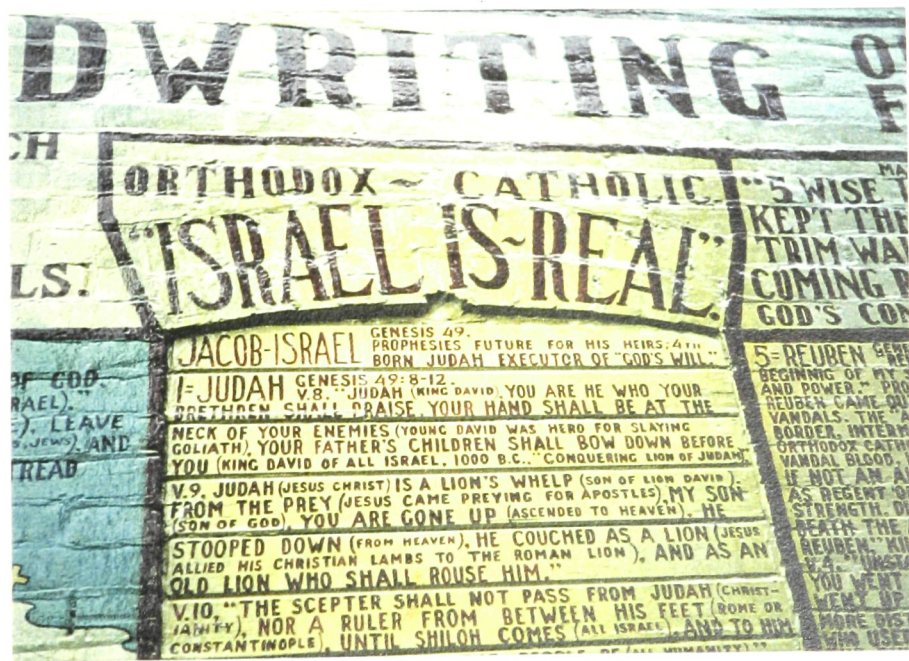


Figure 9. Hand-Painted Text

aspects of popular culture through the medium of print. He, too, is a bricoleur of sorts, for he is taking ideas of the past and present and combining them to create his own work. This approach is very much like Bill's work in that the ideas are a process that results from tradition and heritage, but are then accommodated to fit the changing political, social and cultural conditions. Bill looked at all aspects of his socio-cultural environment and used this as a means of creative impulse in connecting Scripture to present day conditions. Howard and Bill have something in common as they both are looking at the past and trying to make sense out of the present through their respective works of art.

It is necessary to look at other definitions of folk art in order to understand the nature of an object and its relationship to an individual and ultimately to a community. Henry Glassie views folk art as a collective expression of communal traditions:

If we characterize our own art as more personal than collective, as filling with anguished expressiveness, as gaining its life and direction from innovative individuals, then folk art will appear to be more collective than personal: it will carry the social message, it will hold to tradition.<sup>11</sup>

This viewpoint is precisely what the mural in question is depicting: that of social relevance not only to the creator but to the community. I believe that Bill's mural can be



viewed as displaying and embodying the collective soul of the community. Even with Bill's innovations and accommodations of tradition the mural is relevant to the citizens of Delphos. Its relevance lies in the themes and ideas that emanate not solely from the viewpoint of the artist but also from the community.

One can even make a case that Catholicism is an ethnic subculture. With this in mind one can further state that Bill's work is a form of ethnic art. By drawing upon Catholic doctrine Bill is displaying his membership in this group through his artwork. Bill's cultural heritage and identity are a source of inspiration for his work. Lydia Fish has adapted Raoul Narrol's ideas of defining Catholic ethnicity:

Catholics do meet all of Raoul Narrol's classic criteria for a distinctive ethnic group; they (1) are biologically self-perpetuating, (2) share fundamental cultural values realized in overt unity in cultural forms, (3) make up a field of communication and interaction, and (4) have a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguished from other categories of the same order.<sup>12</sup>

Even though his art strays from Catholic doctrine Bill was considered a good Catholic who was always willing to help when it came to matters concerning the church. Bill's art and rhetoric stray from Catholicism because of his focus on the book of Revelation. Bill had adapted a much more

fundamentalist viewpoint within this aspect of his work. However, the Catholic Church was a guiding influence; even within his home there were portraits of the Virgin Mary and of several Popes. Beneath Bill's own creativity lies the direct influence of the Catholic Church. The mural seems to qualify as folk art in the sense that it not only adheres to community values and sentiments but also to the values and aesthetics that are placed upon objects of folk art.

Bill's mural reflects the multifaceted nature of American culture by displaying the religious thought and patriotic ideals that have been inherent and developed even further within the United States. These themes represent two of the foundations upon which the United States was established. Although the constitution maintains a separation of church and state, these two tenets of the American ideal are viewed as one in describing what it means to be an American: the love of "God and country." The tradition behind these two tenets is readily inherent and accessible when looking at objects of folk art. Although the mural may be unique to the region of northwest Ohio, it conforms to that which is typically labeled as Americana.

Where Bill used geographic features to depict icons of religious, historical and political significance, he did so because that is what he saw in the landscape. He believed God had carved these features into the earth, thus prophesying future events in the history of the earth's inhabitants. Marshall Fishwick suggests icons become

"cultural ciphers, these admired artifacts help us to decipher, to unlock, the mystery of our attitudes and assumptions. Those who believe in them operate on an emotional level--the level of love and reverence."<sup>13</sup> When looking at Bill's mural this idea is definitely put into play. Bill not only had an emotional involvement with the Catholic Church and the United States but also with the icons that have come to represent these institutions. I am to the point of looking at Bill Roth as an icon of the past and lost America. Bill was participating in the iconic way of life because he truly believed in the icons that are present in his artwork. Bill had taken icons such as Jesus Christ, Uncle Sam and Abraham Lincoln and established their connections not only to geography but to the community of which the artist is a member. These particular icons represent such strength and integrity that has not been equaled to this day in the United States. There may be rivals of these icons, but none display the symbolic meaning that is inherent in these figures of Christianity and American Culture as depicted in Bill's artwork. These are icons of everyday life in the United States, the authentic nature of which have stood the test of time and tradition.

Superficially Bill might appear at odds with his community. It would seem that Bill was rejecting the values of his community and replacing them with his own beliefs and values. Beneath the surface and influencing Bill's art and rhetoric are the values and ideals that are a part of the

community of Delphos. Bill embraced his community for what it represented to him. He was not lashing out at the community but, rather, showing a deep sense of commitment and concern. The image and text in the mural show not a hostility towards his community but a positive affirmation of values, ideas and beliefs that are part of the heritage of Delphos. As Posen and Ward note of Simon Rodia, the creator of the Watts Towers, "he did not seem to be a man who had lost touch with reality so much as a man who longed for a time when traditional values ruled."<sup>14</sup> Bill, like Rodia, longed for a return to values that seemed to be dismissed by the community, especially those of the younger generations. Bill, although a bit eccentric, was not crazy. He was acutely aware of the changing socio-cultural value system. It is this awareness that gave rise to the writing and publishing of his book and stimulated the painting of the mural for everyone to see.

Many people assume that painting is typical of folk art, or craft, but this is not always the case. It just happens that painting has been studied and put on display, or exhibited, more so than other items that carry overtones of folk art. To help substantiate Bill's mural as folk art I have touched upon the use of iconography in his painting. Burt Feintuch concludes that folk art is still representational even when icons or symbols are altered due to the creativity of the artist.<sup>15</sup> The mural takes on an iconographic identity all its own by employing and depicting

several icons in an abstracted or arbitrary form. Few other artists, with the exception of political cartoonists, have depicted icons that parallel the geographical terrain of the earth. Not only does the mural boast an impressive display of iconography, it also connects Biblical beliefs and historical facts to existing geographical features spanning a time period from the beginnings of Christianity to the Cold War decades. This highly abstract process is one of thought and design on the part of the artist.

I have attempted to place Bill, and his artwork, within the confines of his community. Change happens in all communities and, by the same token, the traditions and values are also in a constant state of flux. It is evident that Bill saw the world around him changing in a manner that was not in accordance with the traditional values, beliefs and aesthetics of his community. The values and aesthetics of the Catholic Church can be found in the mural. The image of Christ is in conjunction with many works that have arisen within the Church. The image of the suffering Christ with a crown of thorns can be directly linked to the Catholic Church. However, Bill has taken this image and combined it with the Iberian Peninsula. "Perhaps God used The Iberian peninsula to give us a portrait of the agonized Jesus of the Christian trials and of the Crowned Jesus in the future of Christian triumph."<sup>16</sup> According to Father Christopher Vasko, a priest for the Delphos Parish during the 1980s and a friend to Bill, "Bill was much more a citizen of Delphos

than many of the people that come by and look at his work might suspect."<sup>17</sup>

When dealing with issues such as community, tradition and creativity there lies a need for a better understanding of the connection among these concepts. Bill took ideas that derive from the traditions of the community, but his own creativity, and outside influences, seem to follow another direction. Do individual artists find themselves on the periphery of society but still generating and implementing elements of folk traditions? Bill was in conflict with society and his creativity did emerge from this situation. Bill's own values conflicted with the changing norms and values of American society. Bill valued the sacred nature of society, and throughout the years the United States has become much more secularized. Also, the decline of the military prompted Bill to express his ideas about patriotism within his artwork. Has Bill gone beyond the boundaries of his own community with his creativity? Has he produced new values that are acceptable to his community? His actions, the way he lived and his personal philosophy indicate that he could have been on the fringes of the community. Even if creativity is inherent in tradition, there are boundaries that guide the community through the process of change. Bill had an agenda that may not be in line with that of the community; this issue will be explored in the context of "outsider" art.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Kathryn Danhausen, Tape-Recorded Interview conducted by author, October 18, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Bill John Roth, Informal Interview conducted by author, July 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Bill John Roth, *The Land of the Raptured*. Vantage Press, Inc., 1982), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Santino, "The Folk Assemblage of Autumn: Tradition and Creativity in Halloween Folk Art," in *Folk Art and Art Worlds* eds., John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner. (Utah State University Press, 1986), p. 159.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*. (The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Franklin Ward, *Authenticity In The Cultural Hybrid: A Critique Of The Community Paradigm In Folk Studies*. (Doctoral Dissertation, Bowling Green State University, 1990), p. 190.

<sup>7</sup> John Michael Vlach, "The Concept of Community and Folklife Study," in *American Material Culture and Folklife: A Prologue and Dialogue*, ed. Simon J. Bronner. (UMI Research Press, 1985), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Varick A. Chittenden, "Veronica Terrillion's 'Woman Made' House and Garden," in *Personal Places: Perspectives On Informal Art Environments*, ed. Daniel Franklin Ward. (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984), p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Rhodes, "Jesse Howard: Signs and Wonders," in *Naives and Visionaries*. An Exhibition Organized by Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. (E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1974), p. 61.

- 11 Henry Glassie, "The Idea of Folk Art," in *Folk Art and Art Worlds* eds., John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner. (Utah State University Press, 1986), p. 271.
- 12 Lydia Fish, "Ethnicity and Catholicism," in *New York Folklore* Vol. 8, No. 3-4, 1982, p. 83.
- 13 Marshall Fishwick, "Icons of America," in *Icons of America*, eds. Ray B. Brown and Marshall Fishwick. (Bowling Green State University Press, 1978), p. 3.
- 14 Sheldon I. Posen and Daniel Franklin Ward, "Watts Towers And The Giglio Tradition," in *Folklife Annual 1985*, eds., Alan Jabbour and James Hardin. (Washington D.C.: American Folklife Center, 1985), p. 156.
- 15 Burt Feintuch, "A Contextual and Cognitive Approach to Folk Art and Folk Craft," in *New York Folklore*, No. 2, 1976, p. 76.
- 16 Bill John Roth, *The Land of the Raptured*. (Vantage Press Inc., 1982), p. 245.
- 17 Father Christopher Vasko, Tape-recorded interview conducted by author, Sept. 22, 1995.



## CHAPTER II

### VISUAL TESTIMONY: A RE-EXAMINATION OF "OUTSIDER" ART

In this chapter of the thesis it is my intention to look at the boundaries of the labeling process that have been applied to makers of unusual art which has often, and of late, been referred to as "outsider" art. For the basis of this analysis I will use Bill and his artwork to examine the conceptualizations of "outsider" art. I contend that folklorists are in the rare position of, and can lend a particular insight to, re-examining the labeling and contextualization of so-called "outsider" art and those who produce such works. In a recent article, "Magic Loves the Hungry," Judith McWillie, a painter who has been documenting self-taught artists since the 1960s, provides a simple but optimistic forecast: "Our hope is that, beyond the standardized appropriations of the art industry, new identities will emerge that render the Insider/Outsider dichotomy obsolete."<sup>1</sup> I hope this trend will develop not only within the study of art but within the humanities as well, and the discipline of folklore seems to be one of the best places to begin phasing out such problematic labels.

I will begin this chapter with an overview of conceptualizations of outsider art. Folklorists must break through the barrier of labels that perpetuate stereotypes of the "other" and start looking at these unusual art forms as expressions of personal experience. I believe one way of

dealing with this issue is to regard these works as sources of visual testimony. This view enables me to place Bill, and his work, into context without bringing into play the negative overtones associated with terms such as outsider, and others, that are often used to describe this particular type of work and artists. Bill did not regard himself as an outsider, for he held a definite position in his community. Further, I believe he was fully aware of what he was doing. If anything, I believe Bill regarded himself as a serious artist because he was so personally involved with the material that he wished to present. My belief is illustrated by the sign above his door proclaiming entrance to an artist's studio (Figure 10).

To better capture the nature of Bill's work, one must view art as being a visual testimony of faith and a reflection of personal experience that is shaped and informed through contact with the public. I also believe that this notion may be used in looking at sign painters, story cloths, of art quilters, and other artists who rely upon text in their work. After all, this type of art is meant to communicate with the public. Even within the title of his mural Bill uses the word hieroglyphics, which suggests a means of artistic communication. Bill is suggesting that God has created a world that is "readable" and has expressed this concept through his artwork. This art is Bill's life experience; instead of its being aural it is conveyed through a visual medium. I do believe that a



Figure 10. Bill's Studio

painting, or in this case a mural, can and does speak to the public. Bill's ultimate goal was to spread the message of salvation--he wanted people to take more of an interest not only in their own lives but also in the lives of others. Kenneth Ames suggests that outsider art is more about the people that create and perpetuate this notion through labels. The artists are, in many cases, well aware of and highly interested in social, cultural and political matters that shape the world we live in.<sup>2</sup> Bill was truly interested in worldly matters and was calling for others to take an interest. The way Bill went about this enterprise was to make his intentions known to the public. In this instance he falls on the periphery of thought and action in his community. The people of Delphos are more conservative in nature, regarding such a public display, and as a result Bill was viewed as crossing the boundaries established by the community. However, he was allowed to continue painting the mural. Father Vasko recalls the beginning stages of the mural and concludes:

Most people in Delphos have a private faith--a city of tremendous faith but it is very private. When Bill put it out for all to see as a big huge billboard many people sort of rejected that public notion of what he was doing but when push came to shove, and they began to discuss it, they were in agreement with what he was saying. The private values were equal to Bill's public stance.<sup>3</sup>

There have been many efforts to define what an outsider artist is really all about. Outsider art has often been described as brut, naive, primitive, isolate, grassroots, idiosyncratic, self-taught, visionary and even environmental. Many conclude that the outsider is not working within the paradigms of community but is operating from an intensely personal and private viewpoint. It is evident that Bill did have his own unique "vision," and I have mentioned--in the previous chapter--that he claimed "divine revelation" helped him produce this work. However, Bill never claimed that apparitions or heavenly spirits appeared to him.

Outsider art incorporates not only creations that are usually "home-made" or hand made but that also deal with beliefs, ideas and values that are strictly those of the artist. Although these beliefs, ideas and values may have origins rooted in community, the manipulation and thought behind such work is so highly stylized that it can no longer be seen as traditional. Many artists may seem disenfranchised from mainstream society, but the artwork will provide more insight if it can be placed into context. Bill's art can be viewed from many perspectives including economic, historical, political, religious, and social contexts. His art is a reaction to current events. Thus there is evidence that while his work may be on the fringe of society, the thoughts behind the art stem from daily interaction with the rest of his community and the rest of

the world. This interaction may be from his community or it may be from reading the newspapers and listening to the news. Bill was an avid reader and subscribed to numerous journals that featured articles dealing with politics, religion and societal issues. Is this a man who is really disconnected from the rest of society? Is his artwork, the message he is trying to convey, truly out on the fringe far enough to be labeled outsider?

In 1968 Greg Blasdel wrote "The Grass-Roots Artist," the first such article on the subject of "unusual" art. Blasdel states:

the grass-roots artist is a phenomenon of a particular economic and social situation that is rapidly approaching its close. He has no definition in art history: the term "grass-roots" is only the best of a number of inadequate classifications such as "primitive," "folk," and "naive." He is unaware he is an artist.<sup>4</sup>

Blasdel perceived early on that the terms used to identify this type of art are awkward and leave room for debate and thought on how this art form should be considered. Interestingly, he does conclude that the artist is of a particular economic and social status. This brief statement is significant because he is actually ascribing a group status upon these individuals. Blasdel has provided some context to their lives and artwork, and it is peculiar that throughout years of research scholars have only recently begun to emphasize context.

Blasdel also saw this strain of art as coming to an end. However, that is not the case. Artists and artwork have been springing up in every corner of the United States, and in other parts of the world as well, because people's daily lives and beliefs are at the core of this kind of activity. The need to create is apparent throughout the history of civilization. Although some works may be outside of a so-called mainstream, the desire to interpret thoughts and beliefs is at the center of all peoples regardless of economic, cultural or social background. Also, many people, including Bill, see themselves as artistic.

Folklorists and collectors of folk art have been debating this particular issue for years. I believe that folklorists are in a position to look at outsider art in such a way as to provide context to this type of artwork. However, there have been some definitions of "folk art" that I feel come closer to the notion of "outsider" art. Herbert Hemphill's definition of folk art looks at works of folk art without ascribing to them any social or cultural context and concludes that the artwork is of independent origin. Hemphill suggests the folk artist is a singular entity without outside influence. The folk artist has created a "personal universe" that does not draw upon public resources.<sup>5</sup> Hemphill's view of folk art does not even follow the rules established for high art, but does adhere to early statements regarding that of the outsider. However, in the past decade there have been many attempts at

providing context for the outsider, especially in viewing the social and political aspects of this type of art.

In 1972 with the publication of Roger Cardinal's *Outsider Art* a new beginning was found for those artists that could not be grouped into any existing category. Using Jean Dubuffet's concept of "art brut," Cardinal termed various artists outsiders. When speaking of "art brut" Cardinal writes, "The concept embraces not only the art of the clinically insane, but also other art of an authentically untutored, original and extra-cultural nature." Cardinal posits a formidable question: "can art be conceived that is not "cultural?"<sup>6</sup> Cardinal suggests that there are other forms of art that even the cultural elite do not recognize as art. "For Cultural Man, art is the monopoly of the privileged intellectual and the professional artist."<sup>7</sup> This theme is a common one that runs rampant in the art world and throughout academia. Those with power status are the ones applying labels and deciding on what is and is not art. If there is a recognized art that does not come from the trained artist then it must come from the "other." Cardinal is describing works of art that have been produced by people outside art circles. The writing of this book was critical in the recognition that not all artwork is controlled by the cultural elite.

Although the term "outsider" designates "other" status upon those producing works of art who have not been trained in the academy, it must be stated that Cardinal was looking



at particular works with only aesthetics in mind, thus following the example of Dubuffet. Cardinal and Dubuffet are challenging the notions of beauty and aesthetics ascribed by those who believe they know what is acceptable as cultural products.

Outsider art has now become fashionable and the darling of the art world. This concept coincides with the fact that people from different cultures have consistently been described as the "other," and those who produce works of art are always found to be even more exotic. Collectors and gallery owners are actively seeking those who produce works commonly associated with outsider art. Even academically trained artists are influenced by and are embracing the work of the alleged "outsider." One can find "outsider" pages on the internet that include both the work of untrained and trained artists coexisting with one another. The ultimate "other," the "outsider," is now *en vogue* among the cultural elite. It seems that we can no longer categorize this type of art as something that exists only on the periphery of society.

Those people who fall on the margin of society have often been viewed as the "other." The concept of the "other" has been at the forefront in recent decades, especially within the fields of art history and folklore. Can we, in academia, still justify the concept of the "other?" Should certain people or groups really be regarded as the "other?" Who would be qualified to establish the

boundaries of this category? In these days of multiculturalism within the world of academia it is important that we move on and establish new directions when dealing with different people and cultures. Simone De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, stated, "the category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality--that of the self and the Other."<sup>8</sup> This notion has been perpetuated throughout this past century in academia. The notion of binary opposition is as old as human kind itself, but there seems to be room for modification in looking at people different from ourselves. This concept is also an underlying theme of humanity--celebrating our own cultural heritage. Within the field of folklore the move is underway to recognize that all people should be studied within the context of culture. The concept of the "other" perpetuates stereotypes, brings into play the notion of the exotic romantic and distracts from the study of culture as well as culture itself.

With the writing of *All That Is Native And Fine*, a study about cultural intervention in southern Appalachia, David Whisnant examines the relationship between "otherness" and arbitrarily ascribed social boundaries. Whisnant opens the dialogue by stating, "this is a book about cultural "otherness," about how people perceive each other across cultural boundaries--especially those boundaries that correlate with social class."<sup>9</sup> It is

noteworthy that the perceived "otherness" of those labeled "outsider" strongly correlates with economic and social status. In viewing Bill's work, most would assume that this is the work of an "outsider," but the perception would only be based only upon appearance and subject to the belief system of those looking at the art as something that is beyond their immediate ideals and values. In order to accurately appreciate and reflect upon this type of work, we must strive to gain knowledge of the individual and the culture that lies behind the creativity. Otherwise, we are intervening in the natural act of creative expression and ultimately in the very existence of distinctive people and cultures.

In the introduction to the *Naives and Visionaries Exhibit* at the Walker Art Center in 1974, Martin Friedman suggests that artists who have created elaborate "naive and visionary" works and environments have rebelled against the values of mainstream society. The artwork is a means by which the creators can distance themselves from the dictates and restraints of society.<sup>10</sup> Friedman, in large measure, brings into play the idealism of anti-culture put forth by Dubuffet when he was challenging the power structures of academia and the art world. Dubuffet writes, "We should note that in 1900, individualism was highly encouraged. This attitude flourished at all social levels, and it also reigned among intellectuals and artists, provoking the innovative spirit manifested in this period by its

creations."<sup>11</sup> Dubuffet initiates thought and discussion when dealing with the concept of creativity and artists whose work is highly individualized. One can conclude that innovation is key in perpetuating society at all levels. However, without diversity, society will stagnate under the direction of those who use their own criteria to claim to know and understand culture as they designate cultural status upon various works of art.

Working with the thoughts of Friedman and Dubuffet one must address the motivations of those individuals who are producing works of art that seemingly are anti-establishment. Is it inherent in the human mind to rebel against societal control due to staunch individualism? All people have the capacity to reflect upon societal norms and many express their thoughts through written, verbal or visual means. Can it be concluded that if one expresses personal opinion that he/she is no longer part of the community? Are those supposed "outsiders" really disconnected from society or are they aware of the dictates of society and simply refuse to be bound by attitudes and norms that contradict community values?

I regard Bill, and his work, as an intersection of time and space. This intersection lies between individual creativity and tradition. Bill's work can be linked to artistic activity that has come to be known as "border art." The border is a merging of cultures and the traditions that prevail. Bill and his thoughts are the border of past and

present Delphos, Ohio. Bill's art is constantly reaching across the boundary between current beliefs and those that had shaped and molded his own life. Guillermo Gomez-Pena views the border of Mexico and America as an intersection of cultures. Gomez-Pena raises a call for change when viewing and interpreting the work that is produced along this border:

Educators, artists, activists, and journalists are dealing with a project of redefinition, which conceives of the border not only as the limits of two countries, but as a cardinal intersection of many realities. In this sense, the border is not an abyss that will have to save us from threatening otherness, but as a place where the so-called otherness yields, becoming us, and therefore becomes comprehensible.<sup>12</sup>

If one takes a good look at Bill's mural, one can see that it is a cardinal intersection of time, tradition and reality. Bill's mural is the border between the old and new Catholic Church. It is the border of Christianity as depicted by a person that is seemingly on the margin of his community. At the same time, it is made comprehensible by the fact that the creator is striving to maintain traditional values. It can also be stated that Bill is at the cardinal intersection of his own involvement with the larger community of Delphos, Ohio.

Although Gomez-Pena does not use the term "outsider," he is delivering a message about the perceptions people have towards those who are part of a different culture or who see

things in a light different from that of the *status quo*. It would seem as though Bill were not alone in depicting the conflict between social change and tradition. Through his efforts, Bill was trying to negotiate the channels of social change by longing for a return to more traditional values and beliefs. By looking at the title of his mural and the text that follows, it is evident that Bill was crossing into a grey area. Bill illustrated this point by stating that he is "An Orthodox-Catholic Pentecostal Witness In Bible Fundamentals" (Figure 11). He was making a statement through his artwork but may appear to be on the periphery of current thought because he was not exclusively following Catholic doctrine. Bill may be viewed as marginal, for he is straying away from the dominant religious and belief system by initiating a hybridization of Christianity. Father Vasko suggests:

Much of what Bill did is obviously avant-garde in what we would refer to as how we [The Catholic Church] refer to how one interprets Revelation. Bill wanted to make it relevant to the twentieth century and into the future. Mainstream Catholicism would see Revelations as already having been fulfilled...mainstream Catholic theologians would never take that track.<sup>13</sup>

With the production of art there is the problem of giving the artifact and creator a label. Labelling, in itself, is problematic but within the world of art--whether fine, folk or outsider--there is a trend to apply labels to



Figure 11. Bill's Relationship With The Art

the work and to the artists. I have already stated that Bill and his work may fit into the realm of marginality. If this is true and Bill's work is not the product of the core of the community, some would stipulate that this is the work of the ultimate "other"--the "outsider" artist who is relying upon imagination and "vision" to produce such work.

Everett Stonequist has defined the "marginal man" as

a personality type that arises at a time and place where, out of the conflict of races and cultures, new societies, new peoples and cultures are coming into existence. The fate which condemns him to live, at the same time in two worlds is the same which compels him to assume, in relation to the worlds in which he lives, the role of cosmopolitan and stranger.<sup>14</sup>

Bill was a prominent business person in the town of Delphos, Ohio. However, he resisted change as it came about and his solution is reactionary in nature. Bill longed for a time of more traditional values not only in his community but for society as a whole. Bill was truly the "marginal man--" very much a part of the community but perceived by most as one who could not adapt to the changing times. He was a person reaching to the past in an effort to confront the changing times, times that were radically different from his own upbringing. In a time when the secular is more prominent than the sacred, Bill is truly on the fringe of society.



The term visionary conjures up notions of religiously derived obsession which is manifested in the inner-self of the artist. Alice Rae Yelen proposes that there is a definite link between the terms self-taught and visionary. She suggests self-taught artists may be visionaries because their work is more personal in nature. The art seems to flow from within the individual and issues forth something spiritual in nature "which may or may not be interpreted as a religious impulse."<sup>15</sup> I do not believe that these terms should be linked because all of us have some "vision" that sustains us through our lives. We are all motivated by forces within us and to some extent all artists, writers, and philosophers have been granted the title of "visionary" due to original ideas and subsequent work. But, we all depend on external forces to stir up those motivations that are inside of us and are aching to be released. I firmly believe that environmental factors play a stronger role than some would lead us to believe. With this assumption I contend that "self-taught" is a vague concept because we all look for something that will invoke the need and desire that is ultimately manifested in the creative act.

The trained artist also works within the creative parameters that have previously been set but is free to explore the boundaries of values and aesthetics established by the art world. The folk artist is not limited in creative boundaries but is limited to a set of values, aesthetics and beliefs on part of the community to which the

artist belongs. As mentioned earlier, tradition is ever changing. Thus the values change as well, and the artist--no matter what one is labelled--is depicting these changes through time. I believe that even those labelled as "outsider" artists are still working with larger issues in mind--issues that ultimately affect each and every one of us in some manner. I believe that no matter how eccentric the artists appear to be they are still working within the parameters of society or are reacting and rebelling against the established order. With this in mind it would appear disadvantageous to suggest that the assumed eccentric is personally driven by a singular "vision." Eugene Metcalf has explored the connection of the "outsider" to societal and cultural boundaries. Metcalf states:

In order to begin to understand outsider art, we must view it not as the solely aesthetic creation of individual eccentrics disconnected from culture, but as the symbolic product of a complex and ambiguous relationship between more- and less- powerful social groups, a relationship which helps map the boundaries and chart the nature of cultural identity.<sup>16</sup>

Bill could be characterized as an outsider artist by the way he lived. He was a lifelong bachelor who lived in a three story building by himself. He had no bed but slept on an old sofa and had surrounded himself with books and mail order items that he was constantly sending away for. Except for church and occasional trips to the Knights of Columbus

Hall, he had very little contact with people after he retired. On the surface Bill's artwork may appear to be from within his own being yet the political, religious and social context provide a basis for placing him not only in his community in Ohio but also into the community of other artists that are creating and producing similar works. Thus he has a cultural identity even though he had somewhat isolated, even alienated, himself from the town in which he lived. As Mrs. Danhausen states, Bill could be very aloof: "If he thought people were not here to learn or take an interest in the work he would sort of brush them off. He would usually say something they did not understand and they would go away and he would continue with his work."<sup>17</sup> On a grander scale he belongs to that group of "marginal" artists that are distributed around the United States and around the world. He also belongs to the community that takes a particular interest in the work that he created. Although the community members have mixed reactions to Bill and his work, there is little doubt that his mural is part of their society.

There is symbolic and cultural relevance to the mural, as manifested by the knowledge the artifact conveys. It is obvious that no lone individual could have produced this work by the reading of Scripture and historical accounts of the world. Lynette Rhodes has commented on the subject of "naive folk artists." Rhodes does not believe that individuals and communities are isolated from mainstream

culture. She further adds that it is improbable that the "naive folk artists lives and works in a vacuum."<sup>18</sup>

One would have to be aware of the process of community in order to take certain ideals and values, or lack thereof, and place these into an object that reflects, and even tests, the time honored traditions of community and ultimately the larger society itself. I believe that Bill and his community are neither isolated nor insulated from complex social changes that have taken place during the last half century.

A prominent aspect of Bill's work deals with issues related to Communism and the Cold War. Bill believed that Communism and the demise of civilization were intricately linked and he reacted against this political belief by making it a large feature of the mural. I believe this is a reflection of the nationalistic spirit that is clearly evident and manifested not only in the mural but also of the town itself. Bill starts the rallying cry against Communism with a portion of the mural that is entitled "Satans Sickle 'Cycles of Time'" (Figure 12). From this point Bill has developed his own numerology system in which he has manipulated historical dates to come up with the number 666-the mark of the beast. Bill has concluded that "'666' the 'marks of the beast' are the 'Marx-Marks,' 'in the right hand,' as a 'card carrying red,' 'in the forehead,' as an 'idealistic pink.'" (Figure 13).

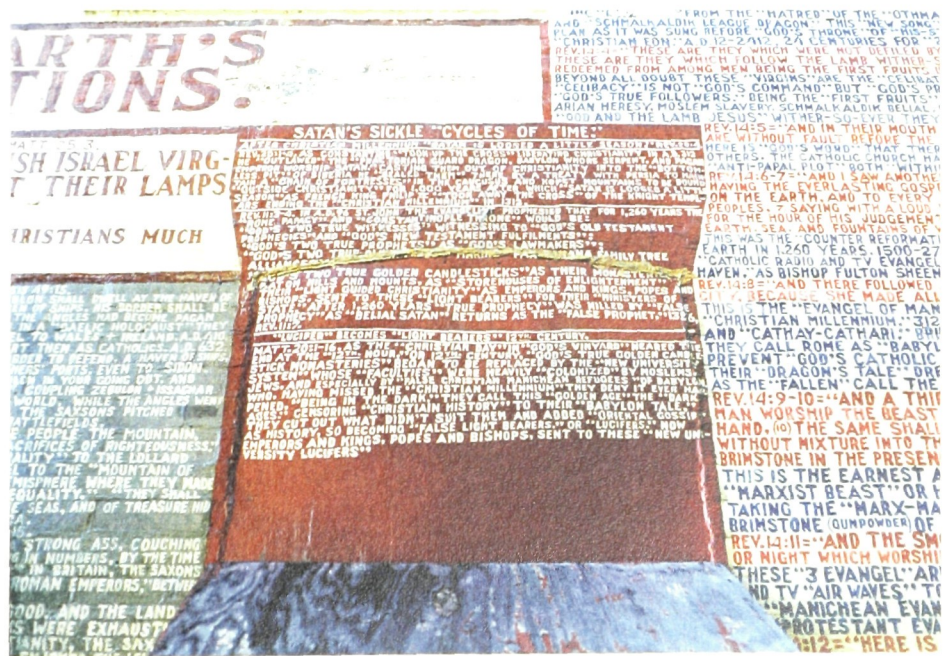


Figure 12. Satan's Sickle

BABYLON" AS WIFE). AND GOES INTO PERDITION (Suicide), "A.D. 67.  
 REV. 8:3-9. 6 CENTURIES LATER WE FIND AN OTTOMAN BECOMING THE 3RD CALIPH OF  
 ISLAM, ATTACKING CONSTANTINOPLE IN A.D. 696.  
 REV. 13:1-10. 6 CENTURIES LATER WE FIND THE OTTOMAN TURKS INVADING "CHRISTIAN  
 HISTORY" UNDER OSMAN IN A.D. 1520.  
 REV. 13:11-18. 6 CENTURIES LATER WE FIND THAT STALIN WAS BORN AS THE "MAN OF SIN"  
 AND THE "SON OF PERDITION" IN THESALONIANS 2:1-4, IN A.D. 1879.  
 1866, AGAIN, THE PAGAN ROMAN EMPEROR OF THE "GOING INTO PERDITION," AND STALIN  
 AS THE "SON OF PERDITION" 18 CENTURIES LATER, COULD STALIN BE GENETICALLY DESCEN-  
 DED FROM THE PAGAN ROMAN EMPEROR OF THE "SON OF BABYLON" WIFE.  
 "THE LAST PROPHESED BEAST OF THE BIBLE," REV. 13:11-18, A.D. 1926.  
 1826- OTTOMAN SULTAN MAHMUD II, THE "FATHERS OF THE JANNISARY CORPS  
 BEAST" OF REV. 13:11-18, IS STALIN, USING THEIR POWER, MANY "INTERNATIONAL  
 JANNISARIES" BECOME UNEMPLOYED, SOON TO BECOME THE "INTERNATIONAL MARXIST  
 BEAST" OF REV. 13:11-18, AS THE O.S.A. IS BORN.  
 1878- KARL MARX IS BORN.  
 1917- VLADIMIR LENIN CAME TO POWER IN "MARX'S NAME" IN 1917, BUT IN A PERFECT "100  
 YEAR CYCLE," IN 1918 HE "DISMISSED ALL RELIGION" AS "SATAN DEFEATS GOD,"  
 X THESALONIANS 2:1-4 PROPHESED THIS "GREAT FALLING AWAY" OF RUSSIA TO PRECEDE THE  
 COMING OF THE "MAN OF SIN," STALIN, "SITTING IN "GOD'S SEAT" IN  
 THE KREMLIN, THE "CATHEDRAL OF THE NORTH," THE "MUSKETEER TO ATHEISM,"  
 AFTER A "FINE, TONGS, AND TONGS," 214 YEARS, 214 BECAME, ON 69 YEARS, STALIN DIED  
 IN 1953 AS THE "LAST PROPHESED BEAST" OF THE BIBLE, AFTER ANOTHER 35 YEARS IN  
 A "100 YEAR CYCLE," NIKHAIL KRUSHCHEV, AGAIN BECAME STALIN BEFORE THE "POLY-  
 BURD AS HE "REENCARNATED ALL HIS... IN 1953, 214 YEARS, AFTER  
 THE "CHRISTIAN CONVERSION OF RUSSIA" IN 988 AS "100 BECAME SATAN."  
 666 THE "MARKS OF THE BEAST" ARE THE "MARX-MARKS."  
 "IN THE RIGHT HAND" AS A "CARD CARRYING REP."  
 "IN THE FOREHEAD" AS AN "IDEALISTIC PINK."

Figure 13. The "Marx-Marks"

As one moves down the alley and continues examining the mural, one finds that Cuba has been depicted as not only a hammer and sickle but also as a "Great Red Dragon." He has also displayed Jamaica as a "Devil Fish" and Martinique as "The Pearl of the Antilles" (Figure 14). Some of the accompanying text reads as follows, "'The Spirit of narcotic spirits' is upon Jamaica in the 'image of a devil-fish, manta-ray, sting-ray.' Overturned in 'death.' Noted for 'Devil Rum,' stronger narcotics cause 'manta-chean crimes.' A 'ray of hope' is 'sting the dope.'"

There is no doubt about Bill's patriotism, but to some observers this would seem a little out of the ordinary. Since the collapse of The Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union these thoughts are seemingly on the fringe of American thought. One question that comes to mind is how are the people of Delphos reacting to the linking of Communism and the demise of civilization as we know it? Father Vasko responded accordingly when asked about the connection of Bill's work to the feeling of the town concerning the issue of Communism:

I think it does. There was sort of a heightened parochialism where we are going to be on our own because of whatever events are going to shape world history. It leads to a sort of isolationism, it leads to a protectionism of the past, ...anything from the outside tends to be a least suspect to the community if not totally rejected by it.<sup>19</sup>

Mr. Shenk, also a veteran of World War II, supports this





Figure 14. The West Indies



notion of community: "Perhaps we can think of Bill's mural as being an important part of Delphos's past. If it can be preserved it would be considered a good part of Delphos history."<sup>20</sup>

Bill's mural reflects the character of Delphos, Ohio. The look and feel of Delphos recalls images from the 1950s and early 1960s. All of the buildings are neatly and freshly painted, the department store downtown is locally owned, and there is still a Fallout Shelter sign prominently displayed on the local post office (Figures 15 & 16). Bill's patriotism captures the nationalistic viewpoint and spirit of his community. His work is reaching far into the past but at the same time the community is also embracing the more traditional values and beliefs of the past. Bill's work evokes images of a romantic era of American society. The community of Delphos has held on to their ideals and thus a nationalistic spirit is clearly evident. Bill and his artwork represent the transcendental nature of art.

In his recent essay, "Toward an Outsider Aesthetic," Cardinal implies that "outsider" art is on the verge of becoming accepted within the art world. He concludes:

It is that radical flavor of secrecy slowly becoming openness, of individuality becoming community, which guarantees aesthetic integrity, communicating an eerie beauty born of a tension between our unsettlement and our simultaneous sense or reaching back, nostalgically, to a place we somehow remember.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 15. Downtown Delphos



Figure 16. The Fallout Shelter

With the above statement in mind can we really believe that there is such a thing as "outsider" art? Through heightened awareness of the artist's life, we can bring about a change in perceptions and attitudes about those designated as extra-cultural. Cardinal has re-directed his line of thinking since he first wrote on the subject. An interest in context has replaced the search for the "other." Hopefully this trend will continue to the point that people appreciate this artwork for what it is rather than the sheer uniqueness or novelty of it. This art is highly personal, but at the same time it is also communicating a connection to everyday issues that arise through the network of communities. I have a feeling that Bill had already conceived this thought long ago and was more than willing to put his creativity to the test. I am under the impression that Bill believed artistic achievement was a romantic ideal and that he had decided to play the role of the romantic artist whose work will reveal universal truths to the rest of the world. I believe that this is further evidence that Bill was not disconnected from society but actually embraced its attributes and idealism. Bill's work is a visual testimony of his life and community. His influences are directly related to the themes of his work. He may have stepped over the boundaries normally protected and defended but in the end he became a living testament to the notion of communal spirit.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Judith McWillie, "Magic Loves the Hungry," in *Unsigned, Unsung...Whereabouts Unknown: Make-Do Art of the American Outlands*. (Press of the Florida State University Gallery and Museum, 1993), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth L. Ames, "Outside Outsider Art," in *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, eds., Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> Father Christopher Vasko, Tape-Recorded Interview conducted by author, Sept. 22, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Greg N. Blasdel, "The Grass-Roots Artist," in *Art In America*, Sept.-Oct. 1968, p. 24-25.

<sup>5</sup> John Michael Vlach, *Plain Painters: Making Sense of American Folk Art*. (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), p. 166.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art*. (New York: Praeger, 1972), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. xvi.

<sup>9</sup> David Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region*. (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1983), p. xv.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Friedman, "Introduction," in *Naives and Visionaries*. An Exhibition organized by Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. (E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Dubuffet, *Asphyxiating Culture and Other Writings*. (Les Editions de Minuit, 1986), p. 12.

- <sup>12</sup> Guillermo Gomez-Pena, "The Other Vanguard," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, eds., Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine. (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), p. 66-67.
- <sup>13</sup> Father Christopher Vasko, Tape-Recorded Interview conducted by author, Sept. 22, 1995.
- <sup>14</sup> Barbara Babcock-Abrahams, "A Tolerated Margin Of Mess: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered," in *Journal Of The Folklore Institute*, Vol. XI, No. 3, March 1975, p. 149.
- <sup>15</sup> Alice Rae Yelen, "Religious and Visionary Imagery," in *Passionate Visions Of The American South: Self-Taught Artists From 1940 to the Present*, ed. Alice Rae Yelen. New Orleans Museum of Art. (University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 135.
- <sup>16</sup> Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., "From Domination to Desire: Insiders and Outsider Art," in *The Artist Outsider*, eds. Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), p. 215.
- <sup>17</sup> Mrs. Kathryn Danhausen, Informal Interview with author, Oct. 1994.
- <sup>18</sup> Lynette Rhodes, *American Folk Art From The Traditional To The Naive*. The Cleveland Museum of Art. (Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 35.
- <sup>19</sup> Father Christopher Vasko, Tape-Recorded Interview conducted by the author, Sept. 22, 1995.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert Shenk, Tape-Recorded Interview conducted by author, Sept. 4, 1995.
- <sup>21</sup> Roger Cardinal, "Toward an Outsider Aesthetic," in *The Artist Outsider*, eds., Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), p. 39.

### CHAPTER III

#### PUBLIC DISPLAY OF PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Public art documents our place in time by visually rendering issues, ideas, traditions, and history. Through visual symbols, signs, and images, it identifies and comments on the challenges that affect us. Public art can be a mirror we hold up to ourselves and a reflection of ourselves we present to the outside. Unlike work displayed in museums and galleries, public art is a shared and common experience.<sup>1</sup>--Sietu Jones

Bill's mural is a shared experience among the people of Delphos, Ohio. The public nature of the mural, and mural art in general, exhibits the connection between individual and community. This type of art is meant to provoke interest among those who share the viewing experience with the artist who created the work. This mural was Bill's document which he hoped would inspire future generations to look back upon their heritage as something that may be carried over into the future. Bill had conceived a piece of art that does indeed reflect a certain place in time and history. The artwork is a reflection of his own ideas, as well as the ideas that are commonly held and sustained throughout the community. In essence, Bill's mural spoke to the public and also spoke about the public. By painting his building, Bill was showing how much he cared about his community--his reality--and this was the basis that prompted the undertaking of such a project. Simon Bronner suggests,

"decoration becomes a productive way to show involvement in one's space or community...Decoration becomes important socially, because it visibly shows social organization."<sup>2</sup> The mural represents Bill's commitment to community; it also suggests the socio-religious-nationalistic spirit that is a strong part of the identity of the artist and also of Delphos, Ohio.

Bill was presenting an alternative view to the long-standing private faith of his community. By placing his ideas, and those of the community, into a public context, Bill is involved in the act of inversion. Barbara Babcock, in the book *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, states:

Symbolic inversion may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious or social and political.<sup>3</sup>

Through his artwork Bill was expressing ideas that are not traditional. However, the values are directly in line with those of his community. Bill was making a symbolic statement of what he perceives as being important to the welfare of his community and to American society as a whole. Bill was taking a risk with his place in the community by presenting these ideas in a public space, but as Babcock suggests, "symbolic inversion creates a space--a space in



which to take chances with new roles and ideas."<sup>4</sup> Bill is assuming the role as "voice" for his community. The reflections he presents may pose new ideas, but the community responded by accepting this notion of public display in contrast to the more conservative traditions of community life. In many regards mural art represents an alternative to the private values of individuals and communities. The public nature of murals provides an insightfulness to not only to communities themselves but to those who are outside visitors.

Bill's mural, especially his views on religion, may not be defined as community in concrete terms, but his artwork has created a forum which must be addressed when looking at the town of Delphos. According to Eva Cockcroft, "a mural becomes a symbol of a neighborhood, defining its character in the eyes of both its residents and outsiders."<sup>5</sup> In this instance the mural does define place--it defines Bill's home, neighborhood and also the community of Delphos. It has been suggested by the townspeople that the mural caused a commotion in Delphos during the beginning stages but ultimately the town gave its approval. Thus the nature of such a public art form is constantly watched under a guarded eye. Cockcroft further states:

public art differs from other media art in that the large scale and public visibility automatically elicit public response. The artwork thus created becomes part of community life and therefore the creators are necessarily in a more

vulnerable and responsible position than if they were creating "gallery" art.<sup>6</sup>

Bill clearly put himself in an awkward situation when he decided to go public with his painting. He was more open to criticism but was looking forward to meeting the challenge. Bill was not challenging his community but was making the town of Delphos aware of its own beginnings. In order for Bill to be successful with his work he used the founding of Delphos as a starting point. Bill included a portrait of the founding father of Delphos, Rev. John Otto Bredeick, and aspects of local history which further demonstrate his awareness of cultural heritage (Figure 17).

This mural is not just for Bill or for the sake of art, it is for the people of Delphos. Referring to mural arts, Alan Barnett observes, "This painting is in fact the most democratic art America has produced. It has become customary to refer to it as an art of, by, and for the people."<sup>7</sup> Bill wanted his community to be fully aware of its history and also believed that the younger generations should be more involved in this representation. Bill believed that if he could reach the younger people of his community that the town may not be destined for the same hardships that are taking place elsewhere in America at the present time.

During the 1930s the Works Progress Administration initiated a mural program that would not only employ artists

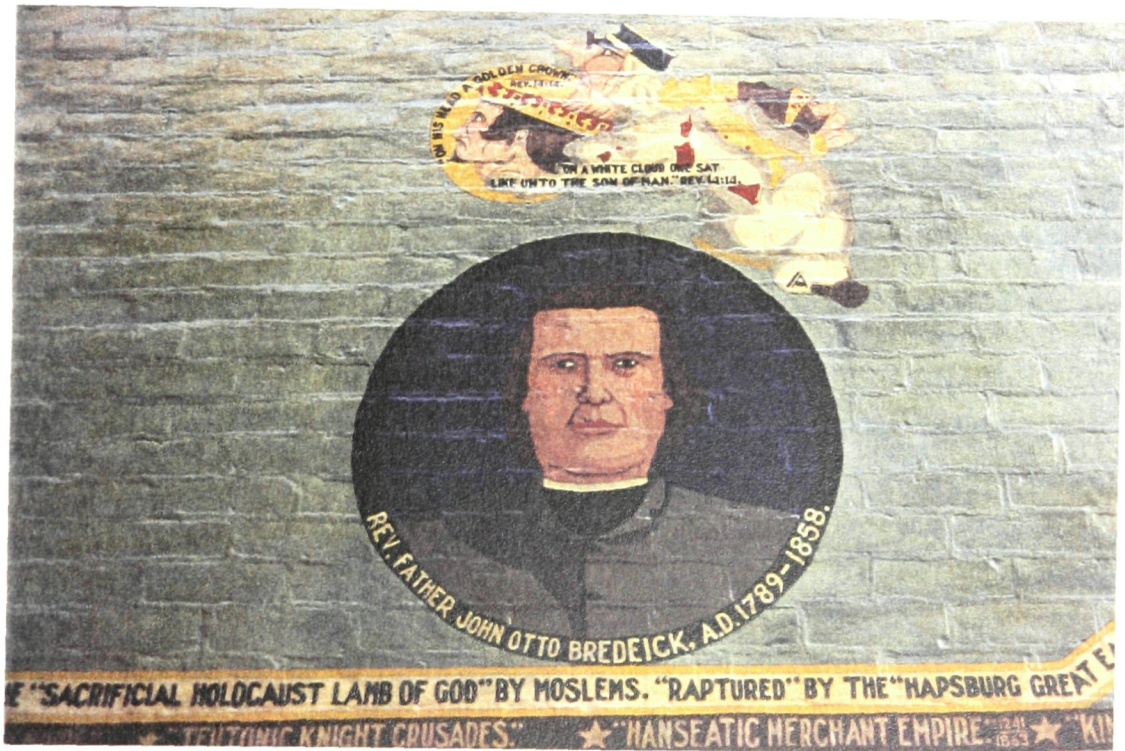


Figure 17. Founding Father of Delphos

but those who would accurately reflect the nature of the communities that were being depicted. Karal Ann Marling concludes:

The mural remained a painting but it was a painting last; first, it was a depiction of objects and scenes, a picture, a symbol, an event. The mural was an aesthetic entity last; first, it was a forum for discussion of national issues, a window of times past and times to come, a mirror of current anxieties and aspirations.<sup>8</sup>

When viewing the mural one does realize the importance placed upon social issues. Although much of the mural is religious in nature the implications of calling for social change is prominent. Bill had derived a solution for the problems of society by issuing forth a statement that suggests people should reinvest more time with religious, social, and national issues and, finally, with one another. Bill was suggesting that people make an effort to understand each other and to accept one another regardless of the similarities and differences. This fact can be seen by the painted block of text identifying Philadelphia as the city of "Brotherly Love" (Figure 18). This block of text becomes symbolic for it seems that Bill wants America to embrace all of its inhabitants regardless of status. The mural beckons a call of national pride. To make this happen people must begin to realize that we should embrace the concepts which combine to bring about a national identity. Over the years the United States has slowly relinquished its standing as a

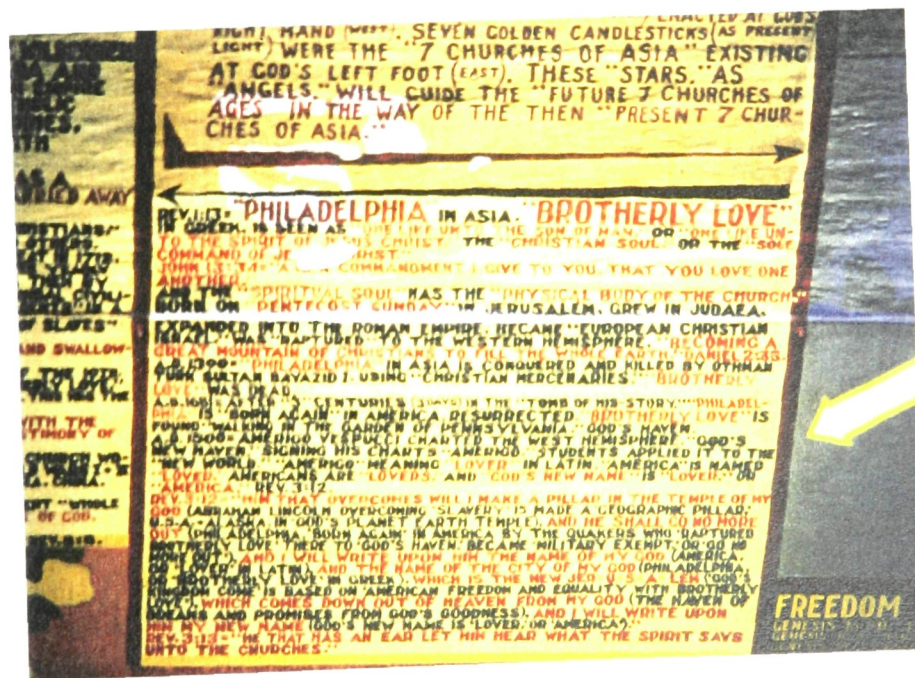


Figure 18. City of Brotherly Love

protector of peace and democracy. Through this mural, Bill is projecting, almost pleading, with the public to stand behind American ideals. At the same time he is wishing for a return to the simpler times when people did realize what it meant to be an American. These concepts of spirituality and identity issue a powerful statement to the viewer. This work is not merely a mural, it represents a memorial of time and belief.

Although Delphos is not an urban center there are certain characteristics and themes depicted in Bill's mural that are similar to those of New York City's Memorial Walls. Joseph Sciorra states, "The urban memorial offers an implicit, or sometimes explicit, critique of social, economic, and political conditions that inflict terrifying injustices on the city's working and unemployed poor."<sup>9</sup> Bill was offering a memorial to the America that he knew, the one that shaped his identity. He was looking at the social injustices of the world and believes that all could have been prevented if people had a deeper relationship with "God and Country." I do not believe that Bill saw religion and patriotism as "dead," but it is evident that he saw these two concepts declining throughout the United States. Bill has woven together the ideas of religion, patriotism and societal dilemmas into one giant canvas--or in this case brick--and has memorialized Church, State and Nation. With the depiction of such icons as Jesus Christ and Abraham Lincoln, Bill was making a statement about those who have

put their lives on the line in order to help make a better world in which to live. Bill was using certain images because they are symbolically significant to many people including himself. By using the images of slain leaders Bill was not only memorializing the person but also the values that each stood for. In this instance Bill was bringing his own identity into play.

Bill had consciously chosen icons and passages of Scripture that are familiar to those in his community. These images and the visual means by which they are employed form a connection between personal and collective identity. According to Cockcroft, identification is compatible with "theme" and images that are associated with a particular culture evoke strong symbolic meaning.<sup>10</sup> Since the town of Delphos is so devout regarding religion and American idealism, Bill has provided a window for others to see this concept of identity. In viewing this mural, one must be aware of the circumstances that form the identity of the community as well as the artist.

On the surface the mural may appear to be individually derived. It may appear to be the visual rambling of someone who is connected only to an individual sense of being. However, one consideration that is of utmost importance in discussing the connection between the personal and collective identity of the mural is vandalism. Bill's mural has never been vandalized nor have there been any threats to deface this work. Barnett suggests, "the ultimate test of

community support is whether the murals are defaced, since most of them are outdoors." If people regard these works as a shared experience then the mural has been accepted and has achieved community status.<sup>11</sup> Bill's mural extends beyond community support in that it is representational of the value system that is a part of his town.

The concept of personal identity can be seen in the mural by closely looking at the image of France that Bill has painted. According to Bill's sister, Bill had discovered he had some French heritage and after this revelation depicted France as a French Foreign Legionnaire. If one closely inspects this image it bears a considerable likeness to the artist (Figure 19). The concept of personal identity can also be seen in the van that Bill owned. He customized his van with artwork that can also be found in the mural (Figure 20). In his book Bill writes, "God has portrayed France as a tired, but tried and true old warrior...he personifies mid-aged Christianity and looks with hope to the future and to the west, the Land of Rapture, The New Jerusalem, The New World in the West Hemisphere."<sup>12</sup> The above statement does seem to reflect the idealism that Bill displayed to anyone who ever had the chance of talking with him. Even beyond the idealism the physical characteristics are remarkable. Why does the French Foreign Legionnaire wear glasses? Bill did happen to wear glasses, had a rather pronounced and distinguished nose







Figure 20. Bill's Personalized Van

and he was a "warrior" when it came to presenting his views to the public.

Elliot Oring refers to personal identity as "...composed from memories, identifications, and repudiations of individuals, ideas, and experiences which come to constitute a shifting, but nevertheless discernible configuration."<sup>13</sup> Bill has made a stand about his own personal identity through his artwork in both a figurative and literal sense. Although I do believe he has depicted himself as the country of France, it points even deeper towards the collective experiences--through interaction with family and community--which have formed Bill's identity. Without the connection to heritage the mural would stand as a lone statement of personal identity. Thus the mural provides an insight into the collective soul of the community of Delphos, Ohio. It transcends the individual artist and approaches the realm of community artist.

By placing his heritage in his mural Bill is drawing upon group membership. Because Bill had been a lifelong resident of Delphos and a student of local history, he has produced a piece of art that may accurately reflect the feelings of the community. Besides the portrait of the founding father, Bill has described the history of the town on the first panel of text (Figure 21). This is a statement of membership--of belonging to a group of people that share many of the same values, ideas, traditions and history as the artist. To quote S.K. Throat, collective identity



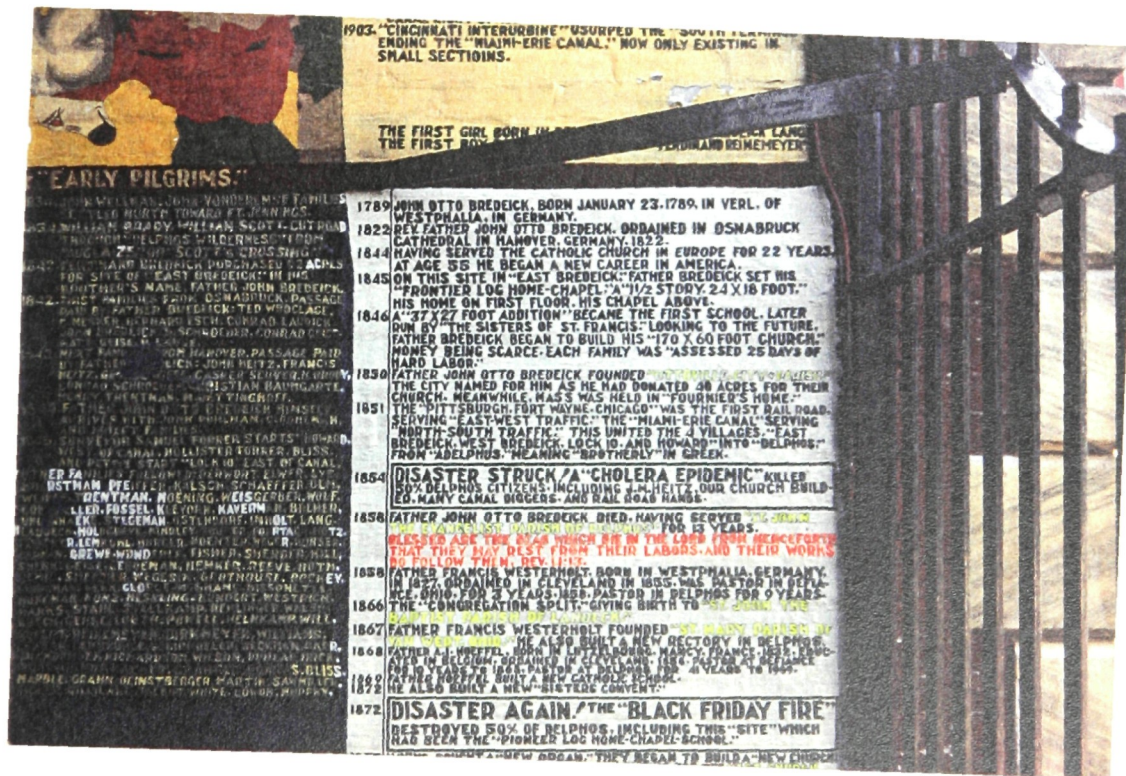


Figure 21. History of Delphos

can be regarded as "those aspects of personal identity that are derived from experiences and expressions common to a group. It is recognition of this collective aspect of personal identity that produces a deep sense of identification with others--the consciousness of kind."<sup>14</sup> Recognition is the key term here, for it implies that the individual unconditionally knows of and about the collective body from which they were created. I believe that Bill has indeed generated a work of art that has established and depicted the essence of community. Father Vasko also suggests that Bill has indeed reflected the very nature of the community in the mural: "I think Bill captured that notion of community as provincial, as isolationist, as suspicious of the outside world very well."<sup>15</sup> The townspeople of Delphos were very friendly and accommodating to me while I roamed around taking photographs of the mural and other sites in the community. I believe this is due in part to the fact that Bill and the community truly identified with one another. This study has grown from being about the artwork of one artist into an examination of the interaction between individual and community. This interaction results in the display of identity as well as the emergence of environment. I contend that the painting of the mural, and subsequently the finished product, constitute the nature of an art environment--an environment that is shared through the visual testimony of the artist.

Bill's mural, **Geographic Hieroglyphics In God's Own Handwriting** is an art environment. Seymour Rosen and Louise Jackson have suggested that a folk art environment can be defined as

Handmade personal spaces, generally with a component of accumulated objects, often those discarded by the broader society and not traditionally considered as materials for the production of art. These spaces are almost always associated with the creator's home or business.<sup>16</sup>

I would suggest that this definition be refined somewhat to include thoughts and ideas in the mental process which are derived from personal and community experiences. Although the word environment suggests a three-dimensional aspect, I believe that the ideas, building and public and private space are all incorporated into Bill's mural. If this idea is taken into consideration then the mural becomes more than just a painting on a wall--it becomes an environment. It is imperative to look at the ideas behind the mural for they give it substance and life. The art environment becomes a sanctuary for the creator and those who visit the site.

Another aspect of the mural is that Bill's building is on the site of the first Catholic Church in Delphos. This site is now commemorated by a plaque that recalls this historic part of the community (Figure 22). Thus I believe that is one more reason that Bill's mural can be considered an environment. I do not know if the site was a motivating

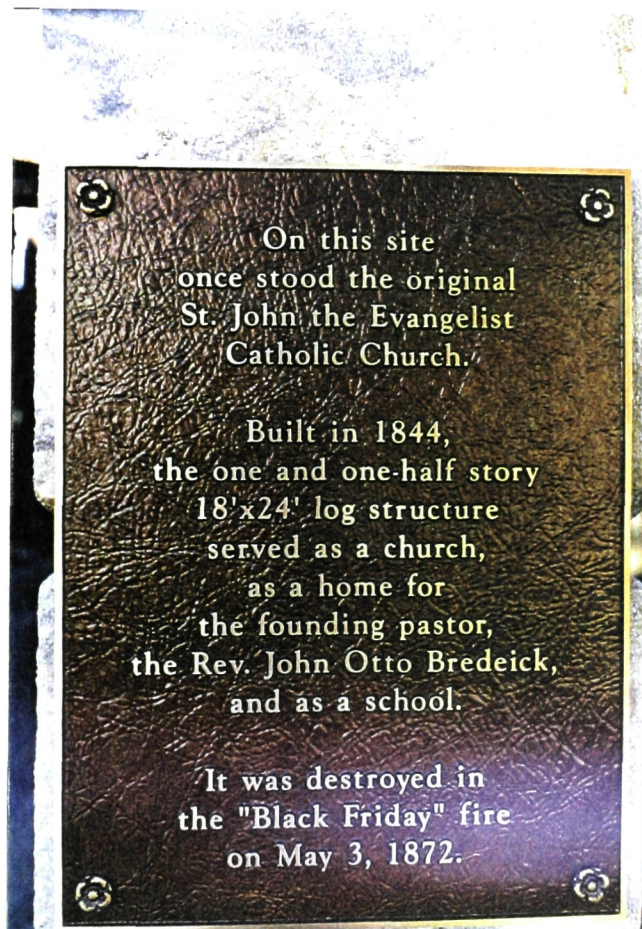


Figure 22. Site of First Catholic Church

force behind Bill's creativity but one can assume that he was aware of this connection. This idea brings into play the more meditative and spiritual aspect of the environment.

In the recently published book *Gardens of Revelation*, John Beardsley looks at environments, what he calls visionary environments, which he perceives as gardens. Beardsley suggests the relation of space, size and shape is of secondary concern. The ideas, beliefs and principles that have guided the construction are of primary importance.<sup>17</sup> Bill's space was bounded by concrete and brick, but his ideas transform the physical structure into something that is transcendent in character.

By perching himself on his ladder and harvesting ideas and a philosophical code that are tied to community, Bill was planting the seeds for the construction of his garden. The ladder was part of the display and identity of the artist. The ladder was visible to the public who knew that Bill was working on the mural. The ladder became a symbolic tree and the paint became water that helped the ideas grow and mature (Figure 23).

One can see the beginnings of Christianity in the mural growing from the Roman Empire across the Atlantic Ocean to the Western Hemisphere. Bill cultivated his own philosophy with regard to the spreading of Christianity. His belief was firmly rooted in the European history of Christianity, but as it crossed the ocean it was given new life and new





Figure 23. Bill's Ladder

hope. Bill had provided to the public a mural that conveys the evolution of Christianity from humble beginnings to the modern world. This art environment is much like a garden, for ideas--like plants--continue to grow and evolve through time. Thus it would seem that Bill had produced a garden--an environment. Philosophical thoughts, ideas, beliefs and values are intertwined with historical and political events of the past and present which have shaped and defined the character of the artist and his community.

With the display of the mural so prominent in the downtown area one cannot help but be entranced by this environment. People are constantly using the alley to get to Main Street where they do their shopping and other business. The mural is in the middle of the downtown business and shopping district. In this instance I believe that Bill was acutely aware of his location and set about to create something that called for attention. People who do walk down the alley are not only experiencing the environment first hand but are also witness to a living gallery. Bill was outside nearly every day for over twelve years. Thus he became part of this environment and in turn it became a "live" outdoor gallery experience. Bill did become part of the environment and so do those that happen to pass by. Bill became a tour guide for those that were both familiar and unfamiliar with his work.

Environments become a sanctuary for the artist because they provide security and comfort to the creator. It is

within the actual "live" experience that the artist has dominion over space and can completely control the environment. Willem Volkersz relates this idea to outsider environments by suggesting the artists' tours serve as a means to shape and control the visitors' perception of the environment as a whole.<sup>18</sup> Bill guided people through the many twists and turns of his mural. He was able to do this both visually and verbally. However, I believe that all art environments are controlled no matter what they are labelled. Being in control of one's environment is common in all manners of display whether they be private or public. When visiting someone's home for the first time a grand tour is almost required and expected. There is no difference between this space and an environment such as the one Bill has constructed.

Bill's home, mural, and environment, crossed into the realm of an active and happening performance piece. It became a place in which Bill would tell others about his work and generate discussion among the visitors who entered his domain. Bill was able to transform his painted environment into a lecture hall. Thus Bill, his home, mural, environment and audience became part of an interactive exchange, all of which are crucial elements in this type of public display. The environment of Rosetta Burke shares a symbiotic nature with that of Bill and his performance setting. Burke had painted and nailed different objects onto the side of her house in inner city Detroit.

While she worked, Burke usually sang and preached to those who passed by. Michael Hall states, "it was an autobiography and it was also a teacher and a classroom. It was grand and it was intimate, it was both raw and sensitive and it instructed at the same time that it provoked and offended."<sup>19</sup> Is this not what public display is supposed to be about? Public display became theatre in the sense that Bill was deriving his rhetoric from the artwork that he had created. The ultimate test for artists is to put their work on display but at the same time they are also putting themselves on display. Bill's art environment and ensuing performance was part of the daily scene in Delphos, Ohio. It is this daily interaction that makes Bill's work "real." Bill used his visual testimony as an aide in generating a verbal connection with his audience. Through his involvement with community Bill was able to issue forth a statement of belonging not only with images and paint but also by the spoken word. His art had become a script from which Bill "read" to the public. Bill and his painted environment were indeed a voice of individual, community and society.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Sietu Jones, "Public Art that Inspires: Public Art that Informs," in *Public Art Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Sept. 1990, p. 8-9.
- <sup>2</sup> Simon J. Bronner, "The House on Penn Street: Creativity and Conflict in Folk Art," in *Folk Art and Art Worlds*, eds. John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner. (Utah State University Press, 1986), p. 145.
- <sup>3</sup> Barbara Babcock, "Introduction," in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. Barbara Babcock. (Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 14.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- <sup>5</sup> Eva Cockcroft, John Weber and James Cockcroft, *Toward A Peoples Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*. (E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York, 1977), p. 86.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- <sup>7</sup> Alan W. Barnett, *Community Murals: The People's Art*. (Associated University Press, Inc., 1984), p. 15.
- <sup>8</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-To-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 14.
- <sup>9</sup> Joseph Sciorra, "In Memoriam: New York City's Memorial Walls," in *Folklife Annual 1990*, ed. James Hardin. (Washing D.C.: American Folklife Center, 1991), p. 150.
- <sup>10</sup> Eva Cockcroft, John Weber and James Cockcroft, *Toward A Peoples Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*. (E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York, 1977), p. 84.
- <sup>11</sup> Alan W. Barnett, *Community Murals: The People's Art*. (Associated University Press, Inc., 1984), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Bill John Roth, *The Land of the Raptured*. (Vantage Press Inc., 1982), p. 238.

<sup>13</sup> Elliot Oring, "The Arts, Artifacts, and Artifices of Identity," in *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 107, No. 424, Spring 1994, p. 212.

<sup>14</sup> S.K. Throat, quoted in Elliot Oring, "The Arts, Artifacts, and Artifices of Identity," in *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 107, No. 424, Spring 1994, p. 212.

<sup>15</sup> Father Christopher Vasko, Tape-Recorded Interview conducted by author, Sept 22, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Seymour Rosen and Louise Jackson, *Cat and a Ball on a Waterfall: 200 Years of California Folk Painting and Sculpture*. (Oakland Museum, 1986), p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> John Beardsley, *Gardens Of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*. (Abbeville Press, 1985), p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Willem Volkersz, "Private Spaces, Public Places," in *Public Art Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Sept. 1990, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Hall, "The Bridesmaid Bride Stripped Bare," in *The Ties That Bind: Folk Art In Contemporary American Culture*. The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1986, p. 50.

## CHAPTER IV

### ART AS TEXT IN THE PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY

It is my intention, in this last chapter of the study, to explore the issue of how an artist interacts with a piece of art that will invoke an emergent and dynamic process of performance. The following concept that arises is how art can be used as text in the context of performance. That is to say, the actual piece of art is the construct behind and the impetus for the performer to comply with the cultural values and aesthetics of the community. Other specific questions that pertain to this study: How does the performance convey the meaning of the artwork to the audience? What is the reaction of the audience not only to the artwork but also to the performance of the artist? Does the performance capture the essence of the community that the artist represents?

Through my own interaction with Bill I came to realize that the performance of his art was also an area of great importance. Bill relied upon the public as an audience in order for his art to become a complete composition. Bill was using his own visual testimony to explain to others the message he was trying to convey. By itself, Bill's mural is a narrative statement of the values, beliefs and ideals of both the artist and community. However, the explanation and lecture that accompanied his art was the key in detailing

his involvement with the community. Ultimately, Bill's performance was the summation of his artwork and community. In this chapter I will establish the relationship between performance, art and community.

Lucy Lippard, an art critic and activist, writes in "Crossing Into Uncommon Grounds" that in the 1980s a strand of art appeared which includes performance. Lippard calls this a "new genre" of art that is composed of artists and "true outsiders"--audience and participants--who become part of the artwork, setting and subsequently the performance routine.<sup>1</sup> Bill took the public nature of his work one step further by not only placing his painting on display but also involving himself in a narrative performance as he explains his work to passersby. Bill used his mural as the basis for street theatre. The painted images and text are directly tied to his performance and his identity. Bill had linked the writing of his book and the art of the mural into an actual performance that was based upon his philosophical concepts which were rooted in community values.

Bill's performance of his artwork parallels that of performance art. Matthew Goulish states, "performance art, like other art forms, has grown out of a tradition: Its startling imagery did not appear full blown from a void."<sup>2</sup> This fact corresponds to the study of performance but the departure does not rest in tradition, it rests in the act of rebellion. Performance art has a history of rebellion that establishes its tradition. Bill's mural and ensuing



performance is an act of rebellion. Bill was rebelling against the declining moral standards in American society and that aspect was prevalent in his art and performance.

According to James Brandon, "all artistic expression is created through interaction between performance and text. Text is the total dramatic content of the performance..."<sup>3</sup> The performers often rely on oral transmission in order to adapt to particular performance settings.

Bill always had the time to explain his work to people; that is what he lived for. Mrs. Danhausen recalls that Bill was eager to talk about his mural to the public: "If anyone came along to discuss it with him there was no end to the information he could give. He could talk about it for hours on end and was quite happy when people asked him questions about his art. I think, for the most part, that people did enjoy listening to him"<sup>4</sup> (Figure 24). Through his performance, Bill addressed not only issues that concerned him but also issues that are fundamentally connected to his community. He did this both visually and verbally.

It was essential that I observe the local culture to grasp the realities of the performance setting and to understand the dynamics that would take place during Bill's performance. According to Richard Bauman, the factor of "identifying events with local understanding and institutional context"<sup>5</sup> is important when describing a particular cultural performance. The idea that art promotes



Figure 24. Bill Explaining His Mural

and initiates performance must also adhere to local and cultural understandings of what is acceptable and valued in a performance setting. Bill's art was indeed dependent upon the local culture. Bill derived inspiration from his community and became readily apparent in the artwork. I have stated that he included local history in the mural because he valued the heritage and traditions of the community.

I had visited Delphos on several occasions to try to understand the dynamics surrounding Bill and his "art-based" performance. I have come to the conclusion that Bill was displaying, through his performance, his role as a sort of folk-hero to the town of Delphos. Bill was a veteran of World War II, attended church regularly and was always willing to help out anyone in need. Bill had taken a keen interest in salvation and one way of pursuing this was to work with the young people of his community. Bill let the local Boy Scout Troop use his building as a meeting place (Figure 25). By letting the Scouts use his building, Bill was able to have a captive audience for the performance of his art and identity.

Another aspect of his identity is performed by the people from the community. There are several stories that are circulating about his good deeds and also his strength. Mr. Shenk passed along a few stories that can be described as legendary in nature. These tales were also confirmed by



Figure 25. The Scout Meeting Place

Father Vasko and Mrs. Danhausen. Here are two of the local legends that describe Bill's amazing strength:

We were having a party at the Knights of Columbus Hall and we had to move a piano from the second floor to the third floor. Bill would take one end of the piano and four strong guys would take the other end and they would move the piano. Bill was an exceptionally strong fellow.<sup>6</sup>

Another story is as follows:

I recall being at his meat market one time. It was a change of seasons. He had a pot-bellied stove in there--in the middle of the floor--that heated the room. Bill said, 'I'm going to move this out of here for the time being.' He had already detached the stove parts. He lifted it up and carried it, by himself, to the next room for storage. I've never seen anyone else do that.<sup>7</sup>

I believe that with the above stories in mind, Bill did belong to the community. These stories are told with great affection and regard for a man that held a firm position in his community. It is interesting to note that Bill's identity is still a part of life in the community.

Bill was involved in the act of expressing his personal and communal identity to the public. Barre Toelken describes folklore as something that "comes directly from dynamic interactions in communal-traditional performance contexts."<sup>8</sup> Bill had placed himself as an intersection between the art and the audience. Bill created a piece of art which relied upon community for interpretation. The

performance of this art can be seen as a bridge between artist and community. His art and performance became an interactive link between individual and community. Jan Mukarovsky views art from the perspective of semiotics. He suggests, "the work of art is viewed as mediating between the creator and the community capable of the meaningful interpretation of the artifact; thus the material object stands in dialectical relationship between its creator and the interactive domains of culture."<sup>9</sup> I am suggesting that Bill's art can be viewed much like a narrative. Thus when referring to Bill's art as text it can be seen as a visual testimony of individual and community. I believe that Bill, through his actions, was reinforcing the traditions of his community.

For the purpose of looking at art as text, I have employed the following view of tradition: tradition is a practice situated within a cultural context. This view reflects the dynamic and emergent processes that are continually evolving in culture. This concept allows for accommodation and innovation within culture and ultimately in performance. Performance is all about innovation and accommodation. Although grounded in the aesthetics, values and beliefs of a culture, there is the almost overwhelming psychological and emotional need for change. Bill's performance of his art was certainly innovative. His performance was also accommodating to the notion of community. Bill was calling for a change in society. The

public nature of his art and performance clearly advocates his position and stance on the subject of tradition.

Critic, art collector and playwright Lansford Wilson makes the point that this type of art, image and text combined, can be looked upon as relating more to "American literature than to American art."<sup>10</sup> With so much emphasis placed upon text in the mural I believe that the artwork can be viewed as an example of literature. Many performances do revolve around the written word, and Bill has provided his own text for his performance. His book was the basis for the mural that he painted, and the mural gave him the opportunity to explain his work in detail to an audience.

In 1994 The Museum of American Folk Art staged an exhibition called "Every Picture Tells A Story: Word and Image in American Folk Art." Wilson suggests that text is a powerful form of art and that the artists are indeed involved in a means of communication. He further suggests that the written word and image is inherent in American thought and realized through "comic books and T-shirts to television and print ads."<sup>11</sup>

It can also be stated that the function of the artwork is the key to the performance, for the art is the whole basis as to why Bill's performance event took place. Bill's painting and performance functioned as a symbolic space-- Bill used his home and environment as the performance arena. He reshaped this space using the alley as a stage and the mural as a backdrop to the performance event (Figure 26).

The artwork is indispensable to the performance, for it conveys a meaning that transforms it from a piece of art to a functional text upon which the performance is based. Bill's art functions not only as text for the performance but also as a text for the culture and community from which it developed.

The performance of identity is apparent as Bill engaged in interacting with the audience. As I have stated earlier, in the thesis, Bill's individual and community identity is present within the artwork. From this point I believe that he did indeed establish his identity even further in the actual performance. Bill was not outlandish in style or presentation but was more concerned with the message he was trying to convey to the audience. His performance routine was more in line with the conservative nature of the community of Delphos, Ohio. Bill's performance was based upon the ideals and values of the community and was much more a philosophical discussion or lecture than a sermon. James Clifford asserts that identity must be constantly performed and spontaneous, as well as a direct link to the memories from which the performance is based.<sup>12</sup> Bill, as I have stated, was using his performance to issue forth a call for the more traditional values and beliefs that were, and still are, present in Delphos, Ohio.

To accurately capture the essence of the art it is important to regard the artist's life and community also as text in a performance setting. I contend that the artwork





Figure 26. Bill's Performance Setting

generates text not only about the community but also about the individual artist. It is my belief that Bill, his art and the community of Delphos, Ohio, have generated text. Bill had generated not only a "diary" about himself but also one that included his community. Bill's painting became a performance of individual and community identity that provided an autobiographical sketch of himself and Delphos, Ohio.

Bill's performance was based upon both memory and meaning. Bill was presenting ideas that held a definite place in his memory of the past--the past and lost America. Bill was drawing inspiration from older more traditional values that were a part of, and still are, the community of Delphos, Ohio. When an individual presents a performance it is most likely to be within accepted boundaries of tradition and will conform to the aesthetics, values and beliefs of the existing culture and society. I believe this point is well illustrated by the fact that after Bill passed away the community of Delphos decided to hold Midnight Mass at the site of Bill's art environment. The people of Delphos were not just commemorating the site of the first Catholic Church in town but were showing a deep commitment to one of their own. The town's performance of Mass also coincides with Bill's performance because both are based upon values and ideals that are part of tradition within the community. School children are now being led on tours through Bill's painted environment. The children were given copies of *The*

*Land of the Raptured* and were told of Bill's deep interest in community.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the people of the community have now taken it upon themselves to explain the significance of Bill's work to another generation, and I believe that is what the artist wanted. The performance tradition is still intact in the community, and it can be concluded that Bill was within the boundaries of tradition when it came to his artwork and performance. Although the mural is now in a state of disrepair, Bill's legend and identity are still alive because of his connection to community. Bill wore his cultural heritage like a badge of honor; his art, performance and community celebrate this fact (Figure 27).



Figure 27. Bill Walking Away After A Day At Work

## NOTES

1 Lucy Lippard, "Crossing Into Uncommon Grounds," in *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, eds., Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), p. 8.

2 Matthew Goulish, "Performance Art and the Tradition of Rebellion," in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol.40 No.5., 1993, p. B3.

3 James R. Brandon, "Text Creation and Performance: A Kabuki Perspective," in *Modern Drama*, Vol.35 No.1. 1992, p.159.

4 Mrs. Kathryn Danhausen, Tape-Recorded Interview conducted by the author, Oct. 17, 1995.

5 Richard Bauman, *Story Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*. (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 4.

6 Mr. Robert Shenk, Tape-Recorded Interview conducted by the author, Sept. 4, 1995.

7 Ibid., Sept. 4, 1995.

8 Barre Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore*. (Houghton Mifflin Co. : Boston., 1979), p.28.

9 Jan Mukarovsky, in Williams, Michael Ann & Young, M. Jane, "Grammar, Codes, and Performance: Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Models in the Study of Vernacular Architecture," in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architectures* Vol.5., 1995, p.8.

10 Lansford Wilson, "Getting Slapped Into Next Sunday," in *ArtNews*. Oct. 1993, p. 153.

11 \_\_\_\_\_ "Creating Art With The Written Word," in *The New York Times*, Sunday Sept. 14, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. (Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Kathryn Danhausen, Informal Interview conducted by author, March 1995.

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