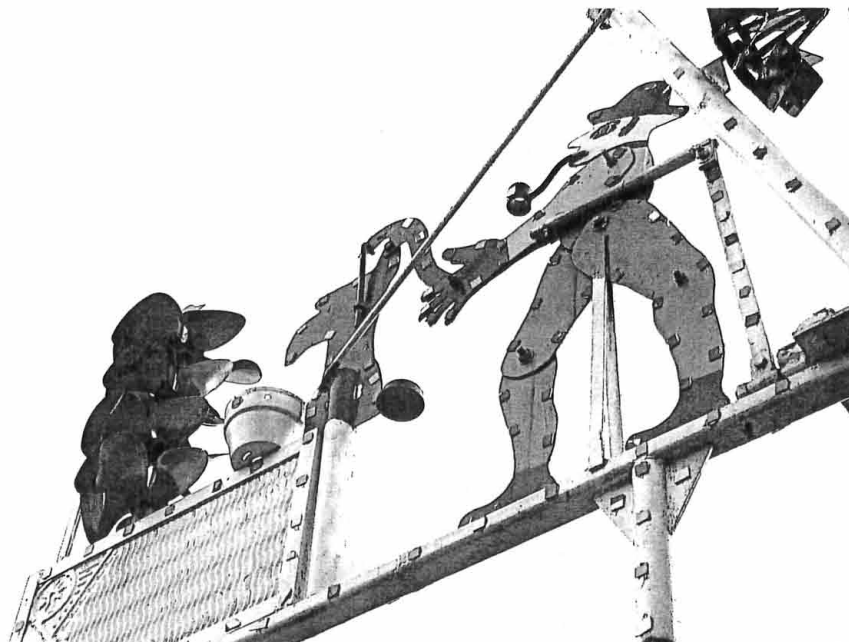
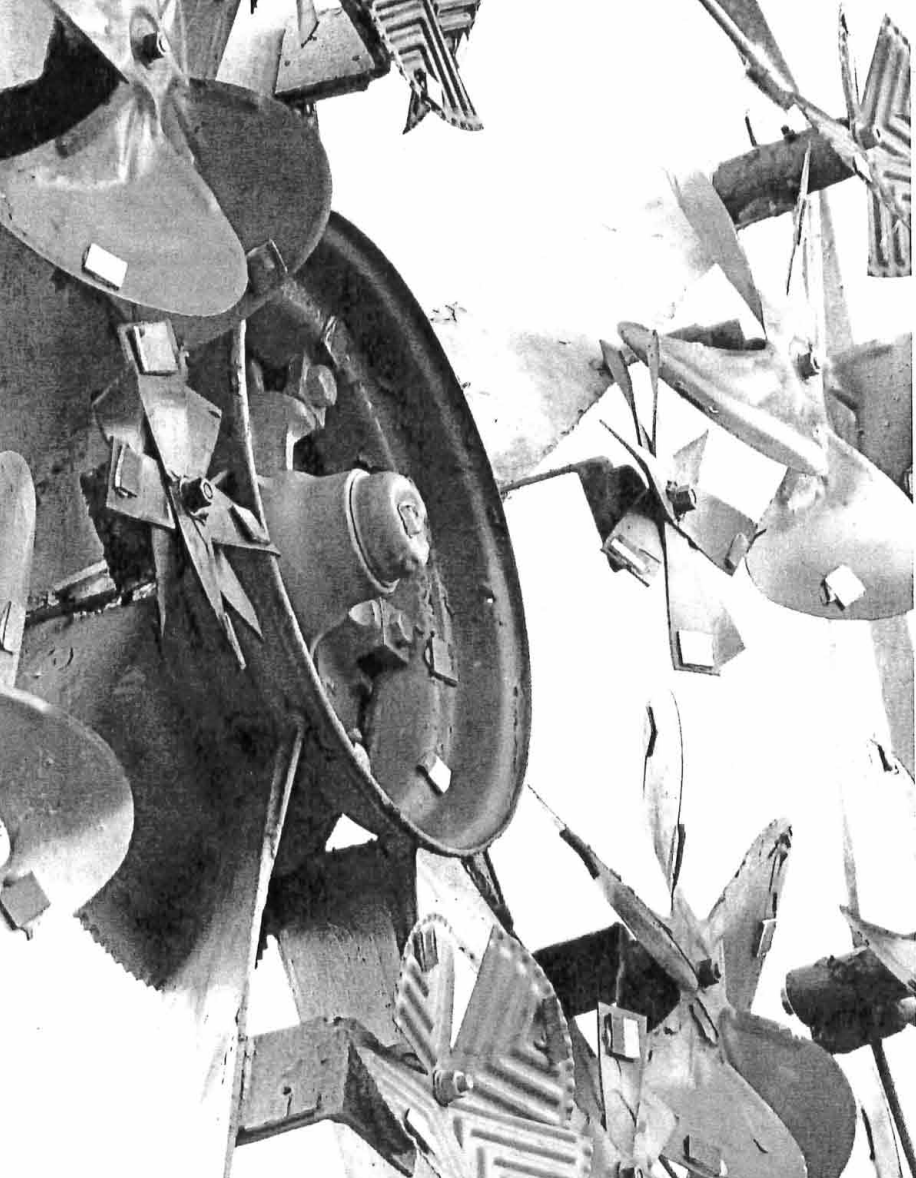


Vollis Simpson

Vollis Simpson, a retired WWII veteran and farm-equipment repairman from North Carolina with an 11th grade education, was officially labeled a self-taught artist or Junkyard Poet of Whirligigs and Windmills by the New York Times in 2010. Simpson, who is a 94 year old mechanical genius was one of twelve children who learned to fix things before he learned to read and write. While in the Air Force he made his first windmill from parts of a junked B-29 bomber to power a giant washing machine for soldiers' clothes. After working fifty years as a repairman, twenty-five years ago Simpson began collecting material from junkyards including discarded steel and aluminum, and parts from bikes and air conditioners, which he hammered and assembled to create large-scale kinetic sculptures. When asked during an interview if he considered himself an artist he responded that he is simply a country boy. However, his work has been sited at the Museum of Visionary Art in Baltimore, Maryland, among other notable art venues.





Simpson is the product of a simple rural childhood where making something from nothing was a common survival tactic. Such family backgrounds have produced other Visionary artists including Grandma Prisbrey from rural Minnesota who at 60 years old started collecting discarded bottles at the local landfill in Simi Valley, California to build a series of light filled colored bottle buildings or *Bottle Village* (1956-1982); or Leonard Knight, raised in rural Vermont, who built *Salvation Mountain* (1982-present) with buried waste covered with cement and salvaged paint to express "God is Love" in the California Desert near Slab City. Although these visionary or otherwise outsider artists were not formally trained in aesthetic pursuits, their desire to retrieve waste was similar to that of Noah Purifoy who attended Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles in the mid 1950s. In 1963 Purifoy stated, "I do not wish to be an artist. I only wish that art enables me to be." Throughout the 1980-90s he sited dozens of large-scale sculptures and installations assembled from found objects on ten acres of land near Joshua Tree, California. His art was formally identified as Assemblage in the 1960s.

However, the evolution of creative applications for those who see waste as a source of inspiration is changing with our massive supply of electronic waste at hand. Post consumer conceptual artists Jonah Brucker-Cohen, who holds a PhD in Disruptive Design, and his partner Katherine Moriwaki, have recently been conducting Scrapyard Challenge Workshops internationally where participants employ salvaged e-waste to make simple electronic projects including building robots. This activity demonstrates that making something from nothing also has the potential to provide practical applications in our resource-based economy, which is consistently shrinking with our growing population and capitalist consumer habits.

– Patricia Watts

Flickr © photos in order of appearance: Jon Betts, bobistraveling and bobistraveling.