

# South of the Garden

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## Crows

by Bryant Holsenbeck

Have you seen the crows? They are everywhere: on the telephone wires as I drive down West Club Boulevard in Durham, in yards, in fields, in the woods, in parking lots, and always by the side of the road. In groups and in pairs, they gather. Sometimes I hear them before I see them: a few stark and loud caws from a tree, or just somewhere in the distance. They are talking to each other. Like us, crows are social animals. They live in families connected to larger groups, they use tools, they play, and they store food. A wild species is living, loving, mating in our midst. They have learned to live all around us, yet they are wild and free.

I make crows. It began to dawn on me that I am drawn to making crows because they represent two values I hold sacred: freedom and community. As artists and humans we need both.

I began my professional artistic life as a basket maker, hunting and gathering natural materials to weave into my work, much like a wild bird. Very soon, I started collecting and using post-consumer waste, because I got interested in the “stuff” I saw everywhere: the man-made detritus of our industrial society. Because I was using all sorts of “junk” in my work, it seemed like the entire world wanted to leave all their own absolutely great stuff on my doorstep. All of this led me to my work as an environmental artist.

For over a decade now, I have been documenting the stuff of our society that we use once and throw away. Americans create more garbage per capita than any other culture, yet we are blind to our waste. I collect many things, among them bottle caps, credit cards, pencils, shoes, and chop sticks. I use these everyday items to make works that transform the objects and surprise us. We are used to using things once and then throwing them away. We may throw them away, but I hope my work makes us aware of their continual impact.

Through the years, my art has taken many shapes. In 1993 I had a show at The Durham Arts Council entitled “Collection.” I decided to collect certain common everyday objects for a year. I wanted to see how much garbage one person was responsible for. So I saved my bottle caps, any plastic utensils I came in contact with, and my mail. My mail alone filled eight paper grocery bags and weighed 95 pounds. During the opening of the exhibition I kept seeing a familiar man out of the corner of my eye. “Hmm,” I thought, “I know that guy—who is he?” Finally he came up to me and told me that he was my mailman. He was very interested in what I had done with the 95 pounds he had carried to my house that year. “Here’s the thing, Bryant,” he said. “Actually, you don’t get that much mail. Most people on my route get lots more.”

I am an environmental artist—I collect everyday objects that were used and thrown away (where is away, by the way?) and make them into art. These works are not only about our environment, but about our throw-away culture as well. My installations are both meditations and questions. Where does all this stuff come from? Where does it go? What do we do with it? Why is it here?

As a community artist, I love to inspire people to make their own art and to motivate groups of people to make art together locally, right where they live. Most recently I have been making large-scale installations: mandalas out of thousands of bottle caps, wild animals made out of plastic bags, string, and fabric, or flora out of old books and garden hoses. Last year I assisted a large group of people in Chapel Hill in constructing a labyrinth in a



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public park out of invasive species of shrubs and trees. It was very inspiring to work with so many people of all ages. Kids were running in and around the paths with joy. The huge pile of brush we had gathered dwindled to nothing as the day progressed. We were all humming, like bees.

A couple of years ago, RCWMS invited me to do a community art project as part of its Art and the Feminine Divine exhibit. So I organized “What Do Kids Care About?—A Labyrinth of Shoes with Souls Attached.” You might have seen it in the park across from the Durham Farmers’ Market. Kids from Central Park School collected old shoes and then wrote on the shoes whatever was most important to them. We then formed the shoes into a labyrinth so that others could walk and read the thoughts. The project was only possible because RCWMS saw the value of it and the community worked together to make it happen.

This year I have served as the artist in residence for RCWMS. We’ve been making up the job description as we go along. It’s a lot about community. RCWMS has given me the support of an intern and a larger circle of friends interested in my work. As I write this, they are looking for funding to make a video about me and my work!

A young woman came to my house recently to film me for an assignment to make an environmental film for a class at UNC. I was making journals when she asked, “Why do you make art?” I was at a loss for words. Well, why do people breathe? Why do writers write and singers sing? Why do people play sports or run or play the piano? Because it makes them feel whole; it makes them feel better about themselves and the world around them. If they are lucky, this feeling of joy and fullness—this curious quest to pursue what they are good at, what they love and find important—is something they can pass on and share with others. And if they are *very* lucky they can make a living out of it.

William McDonough, a well-known green architect, likes to quote a South African proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” It is this sharing of ourselves, this searching for what we are best at and pursuing it, teaching it, and growing with it, that feeds us. Artists need time to work alone to contemplate and develop new ideas. We enjoy the quiet meditation of our work and the insights that come with that. We need an inner world in which to form and develop our ideas and we need the support and curiosity of a larger community in order to grow and understand both ourselves and the wider world.

I am grateful for community on many levels. I am very happy to live in a community of friends and neighbors, crows, and rabbits who sustain me. As I write this, I am looking out at blue sky shining through the red and green leaves of the huge oak tree in my neighbor’s yard. I have residencies to plan, books and butterflies to make, a film meeting this afternoon, a new president to celebrate, a walk to take, and, I am sure, a few other things I am forgetting. Like the crows who live all around us, I am finding my place, and every day learning to live and love in my community.

*Bryant Holsenbeck has been fortunate to make her living as an artist for over thirty years. For fifteen of those years, she has also been making pies. After not eating pies for much of her life, she woke up one day knowing she had to learn to make them. For six months, she interviewed everyone she knew. Finally, she went to the home of a neighbor, well known and loved for her pies, and watched her make one. Bryant has been making and eating them ever since. To find out more, visit her web site at [www.bryantholsenbeck.com](http://www.bryantholsenbeck.com).*