



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF  
AMERICAN ART

Smithsonian Institution

Gallery Place  
Eighth and G Streets, N.W.  
Washington, D.C.

May 5, 1987

Fred Zemel  
P.O. Box 1280  
Newark, N.J. 07101

Dear Mr. Zemel:

I am writing on behalf of efforts to preserve Kea Tawana's monumental Ark in Newark. As Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture, I am the National Museum of American Art's specialist in the works of self-taught artists, especially those of the twentieth century.

Our museum is privileged to own James Hampton's Assemblage: The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly (see enclosed pamphlet). In a 1976 article in Time, art critic Robert Hughes described The Throne as America's greatest work of visionary art. Since 1972 it has been exhibited at the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center (Williamsburg), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (Alabama), Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), Menil Collection (Houston), Detroit Institute of Art (Michigan), and Field Museum (Chicago). After completing its highly successful tour, The Throne has been permanently installed in our museum's lobby since 1983.

All of this acclaim and attention for whom? An uneducated black janitor. For something made of what? Secondhand furniture, burnt out light bulbs, aluminum foil and cardboard. Made where? In a garage in a Washington, D.C. ghetto. Made why? To warn and instruct others about the Second Coming of Christ.

The sum total of such factors might seem to be a gleaming pile of recycled junk by an eccentric--an improbable object for admiration, preservation, research, exhibitions, and publications. Nonetheless, The Throne is a widely recognized masterpiece among this country's numerous architectural monuments or environments constructed by self-taught artists. The Throne's exceptional character warranted its acquisition by a national art museum, which is a bureau of the Smithsonian, the world's largest system of museums. Artists and art historians respond to Hampton's complex, breathtaking design and his innovative use of materials, all conceived without the benefit of any art training. Cultural historians rightly see in The Throne's design and spiritual impetus evidence of Hampton's Afro-American heritage. Scholars and lay people alike have also noted that The Throne resembles creations found in Far Eastern, Middle Eastern, and South American cultures; the similarities are accidental yet they indicate the universal qualities that creativity yields. For those of spiritual inclination, The Throne has proven to be a compelling source of contemplation. And viewers--regardless of their educational, cultural, religious or economic backgrounds--seldom fail to acknowledge, indeed marvel at, the ingenuity, commitment and ambition of one man, humble in origin yet rich in vision.

I bring The Throne to your attention because Kea Tawana's Ark is an object of similarly high and distinguished value, and therefore merits the same considered preservation and

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presentation that The Throne has received.

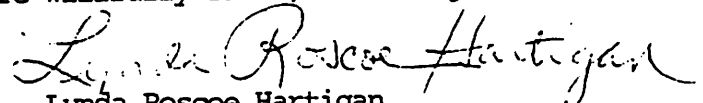
Kea Tawana may be defying building codes or engineering principles (remember those who said that skyscrapers would never stand). Kea Tawana may be trespassing (remember the squatters who developed the American West). Kea Tawana may be working with junk (remember the goods produced from recycled paper and scrap metals). In the face of a good deal of logic and against many odds, Kea Tawana is nonetheless creating art that is genuinely original, uncommercialized, and straight from the heart and mind-- a precious exception today. Our culture prefers to recycle ideas, including the "isms" and styles of art history. Our culture measures its success according to the prices attached to its materials and products. Our culture worships technology that frequently eliminates spontaneous or individual ingenuity.

How can Tawana complete her work? Who will take responsibility? Where and how can the Ark be safely and legally relocated and then maintained? These issues and others raised by Tawana's Ark are troublesome, time-consuming, and require funding for their resolution. These issues exist not simply because the Ark exists but because the Ark must continue to exist. Understandably, I suppose, the Ark can be construed as an uncomfortable reminder of hard times in a struggling neighborhood. Yet the impulse to eliminate that reminder must lose out to the wiser evaluation of the Ark as a positive witness to the need to regenerate and to strive toward some larger goal. Individually, Tawana's creative odyssey symbolizes a troubled urban area's will to survive. Someone may not be able to accept Tawana's goal of sailing the Ark to Japan in memory of her mother, just as someone may not acquire a belief in the Second Coming of Christ when looking at Hampton's Throne. Unconsciously, individuals like Tawana and Hampton build into their projects multiple levels of meaning that communicate far beyond their initial inspiration. To someone like me, the Ark is consummate art, architecture and monument all in one. To an anthropologist or cultural historian, it captures the essence of urban life. To any human being, it can demonstrate courage and resourcefulness. The very fact that the Ark evokes these positive readings--as well as negative ones, for that matter--means that a varied audience can learn much from Tawana's project. Based on the eternal symbol of salvation, Kea Tawana's Ark must be saved for what it says about individuals in our world today.

On a practical front, I would urge the Newark community to develop a Newark-based context for preserving and exhibiting the Ark. Our museum is only a few blocks away from the site where Hampton built The Throne. Working in Washington, D.C., he was influenced by the capital's governing functions and organizations as he developed his project's concept and the titles of his objects. Although Hampton's message is universal, having his work publicly available in the city where it was made enhances understanding of its context. This same sort of place-oriented meaning attaches to Tawana's Ark and should help determine its relocation in Newark if at all possible. Treasures dispensed are seldom regained.

I certify that the statements made by me in the foregoing are true. I am aware that if any of the foregoing statements made by me are willfully false, I am subject to punishment.

Sworn before me, a Notary Public in and for the District of Columbia this 7th day of May 1987 by Lynda Roscoe Hartigan who is personally known to me.

  
Lynda Roscoe Hartigan  
Associate Curator, Painting and Sculpture

 5/7/87