

Willem Volkersz

Domestic
NEON

Museum of Neon Art, Art Museum of Missoula, and The Emerson @ Beall Park Art Center



Willem Volkersz with *Selfportrait - Baggage*
neon, wood, & found objects

96" x 144" x 11", 1991

 designates images photographed by Willem Volkersz documenting folk art and popular culture. Cover image by Jackson Neon Signs, Salt Lake City

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Domestic Neon

Willem Volkersz



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Top: *Drawing Lesson*, neon, 82" x 108", 1970

Bottom: *Waterfall*, neon, 90" x 70", 1969

Introduction

Willem Volkersz' neon art mirrors both his environment and his life. Arriving in America in 1953 with his family, Willem had the good fortune of having a deeply rooted connection established in his mother country of the Netherlands. Yet, at the young and impressionable age of 14, Willem adventurously embraced his newly adopted culture in America.

"As a teenager in Seattle," he writes, "I began exploring my new surroundings, initially by motor scooter and, later, by my first car (a 1939 Plymouth purchased for \$20). Camera in hand, I began to document an unfamiliar yet vibrant landscape: huge billboards, motel units shaped like teepees, and a giant fiberglass Paul Bunyan beckoning me to visit California's Trees of Mystery. I have had an immigrant's fascination with America ever since." ¹

Neon signage, coloring books, postcards and tourist souvenirs increasingly captivated Volkersz. The many photographs he took throughout his teens and into his adult life were to serve as a resource for his later work as an artist.

Volkersz' love of art and all things visual was nurtured by his art-collecting parents. They encouraged him to visit the Stedelijk Museum while he was still a child growing up in Amsterdam. Nevertheless, in college in America, he was unsure of what direction to take, and initially pursued a degree in photojournalism and English. Still searching for direction, he interrupted his studies by returning to Europe to serve in the Royal Dutch Army. In 1962, while in Europe, he made a life-changing decision to return to the University of Washington to pursue a more creative direction in the arts. He completed his studies as a painting major and pursued graduate studies at Mills College in Oakland, California. As a graduate student he began experimenting with adding found objects to his paintings in order

to heighten the illusion painted on the canvas. He explored many possibilities in art, but found that Pop Art allowed more of his own interests in popular culture and in drawing to emerge.

Perhaps it was the combination of his understanding of contemporary art and an outsider's curiosity for American culture as seen by an immigrant, that allowed him to discover art forms associated with popular culture and artists from areas outside the established art milieu. His interest in American folk art and in self-taught artists became a life-long passion that includes an extensive art collection, travels, studies and lectures in America and abroad.

In addition to his love of popular American culture, he was also keenly aware of the activities of contemporary artists. In the 60s he experienced exhibitions of neon work by Stephen



*Power's Twin Teepees Restaurant,
Seattle, ca. 1960*



*Pasaquan environment, Ed Martin,
Buena Vista, Georgia, 1977*



*Paul Bunyan
postcard
ca. 1960*





Face to Face, neon, wood & paint, 90" x 120" x 7", 2000

Antonakis, James Rosenquist and Keith Sonnier. Their use of neon inspired him to begin integrating it in his paintings. Many artists during that era were influenced by the neon signage they encountered in the urban landscape. Chryssa's studies of individual letterforms repeated in a modular way formed her three-dimensional neon sculpture. Sonnier's series of glass, neon and metal was a Minimalist's view of an urban façade reduced to and revealing its bare materials. Bruce Nauman created skeleton neon signs using his own poetic word play and puns. Only Volkersz' use of neon was personal and narrative.

Volkersz' first neon piece, *Waterfall*, was completed in 1969. It was based on his composition of five simple lines that were fabricated into neon tubing by a professional bender. The following year Volkersz created *Drawing Lesson* which was a play with the illusion of the picture plane, the contour line of the drawing and the color of the neon tubing. The skill of the neon bender in

reproducing Volkersz' sensitively drawn lines highlights the expressive fluidity of the material. Volkersz had found a medium to express both his love of drawing and his passion for popular culture through its direct connection with neon signage.

Neon was indeed the perfect medium for Volkersz to express the images that he had both mentally and photographically collected throughout his youth while traveling in America. "I was holding a mirror up to the culture and saying, 'this is what I see as being American culture.'" ² Currently, Volkersz titles his solo exhibits *Domestic Neon* because the work is displayed indoors, reflects autobiographical issues and its overall size is scaled down. Over the past thirty years that Volkersz has been working with neon, his own life has become a part of the landscape that he was previously mirroring.

Kim Koga

Director, Museum of Neon Art

1. "Neon: From Roadside Attraction to Museum Pedestal," by Willem Volkersz, catalogue text for *Neon: Current*, an exhibit at the Reed Whipple Cultural Center, Las Vegas, NV, 2000.

2. *Light Artist Anthology, Neon and Related Media*, interview by Christian Schiess, Signs of the Times Publishing Co., 1994.



The New West, neon & wood, 94" x 124" x 6", 2002

Willem Volkersz and the American Dream

Willem Volkersz' life and art has been sculpted by dramatic changes in his immediate physical and cultural environment. The emigration of his family to the United States from Holland was a major turning point for him as an adolescent. Volkersz embraced the "American Dream" of opportunity and the 1950s popular visual aesthetic. The prevailing post-war optimism and Volkersz' newfound freedom contrasted sharply with his previous experience of wartime horror. This emigrant outlook consistently surfaces in his work, on both overt and subliminal levels. His memories and visual experiences of that time have been translated into a series of images that are archetypal, transcendent and lasting for the artist. He returns to these images with a homing instinct, again and again; although specific images change, the essential feeling remains the same.

For the past forty years Volkersz has investigated both urban and rural life in America as an artist, teacher and folk art collector. He has experimented with a variety of media in both large and small-scale works, returning with naive enthusiasm to the symbols of popular art, as only an "outsider" can embrace. He has developed a vocabulary that reveals a fascination with artifacts of popular American culture, including neon signs, destination postcards, travel souvenirs, paint-by-numbers kits and slip-cast ceramic kitsch. Through both appropriation and transformation Volkersz has consciously utilized these symbols to communicate his personal history.

Within his work Volkersz has set the stage for depicting specific, snapshot moments in the lives of family members and imagined characters. The viewer is offered just enough information to become curious, like peering through a door left slightly ajar. Volkersz' figures often face away from the viewer, unrevealed as they walk into their experiences, thus intensifying the feeling of mystery. In the self-portrait *Face to Face* his glowing neon figure in the foreground contrasts sharply with the black and white paint-by-numbers landscape backdrop. The surprisingly realistic figure is significantly separated from the artificial background, emphasizing his intrinsic separation from nature. A contemporary experience of nature has become an "idea" rather than a true experience. Therefore, these sculptures cannot be viewed simply as accessible affirmations and embodiments of our culture. Although superficially idyllic, Volkersz' glowing neon figures and edenic landscapes have another message.

Beneath the visually engaging surfaces and the convincing joy of the inhabitants of Volkersz' narratives, there is a subtle, two-fold ambiguity.



Neon Drive-In
Sign
Oregon
1969

The sculptures instigate a re-examination of American mythologies and our culture of denial. Some sculptures are idealizations of overwhelming storybook happiness. Figures in many of his sculptures are typically generic, stylized, or romanticized (*Wife/Mother* and *Portrait of My Father*). The natural world is unscathed as are our relationships to one another. His portraits within a world of plenty are often too good to be true. They elicit discomfort through their non-compatibility with the viewer's authentic experiences (*The Newlyweds* and *Follow Your Bliss*).

Remembering Rainier combines an idealized paint-by-numbers mountain landscape backdrop, a self-portrait as a generic hiker, a collection of "destination" postcards and kitsch memorabilia. The sweetness of this near perfect image evokes disbelief and an ominous feeling about man's relationship with the natural world. As the physical and psychic body craves profound, authentic experiences of the nature, our culture has commodified and digitized our experiences. Volkersz may be critiquing this new virtual world.

As a highly educated and trained artist, Volkersz has been undeniably influenced by social realism and contemporary commentary. In his most recent works *Triple Threat* and *The New West* Volkersz has shown more direct images of doom. *Triple Threat* intimates the possible demise of odd characters within a

theatrical environment. All the characters are unknown and strangely unrelated to one another. As the main character leaves the picture plane, we are left not knowing the outcome of this near accident. In *The New West* Volkersz superimposes a series of "affordable" houses on top of one large idealized landscape. He uses familiar formats such as the grid and replication of identical, generic images to create an abstract game board. Diverging from previous works, this image is less idealized: the sad neon houses together comprise a generic subdivision that is antithetical to the romantic West. Volkersz has moved beyond his former tongue-in-cheek paradise to an arena of straight-ahead critique. This new work initiates Volkersz' re-examination of America as the land of plenty, safety and opportunity. Perhaps the American dream is no longer living up to its promised potential; the country is not quite as unblemished as when Volkersz arrived.

Ellen Ornitz, Visual Arts Director
The Emerson @ Beall Park Art Center



Triple Threat, neon & acrylic on wood, 83" x 93" x 7", 2001

Excerpts from An Interview with Stephen Glueckert

SG: You have talked about remembering the Nazi occupation, the Allied rescue and immigration with your parents to America after the war. How have these memories played out in your work?

WV: I have done several pieces about events I remember from the war. One is *Canadian Hero*, two interrelated freestanding neon figures (a girl waving at a Canadian GI). The soldier holds a pack of cigarettes and salutes the girl; this is based on my memory of a jeep with liberating Canadian soldiers in our street in May, 1945, handing out cigarettes to the adults and gum to the kids. I was given a cigarette after I promised



The Newlyweds, neon, wood, paint & found objects, 87" x 93" x 11", 2000

Van Gogh's Bedroom

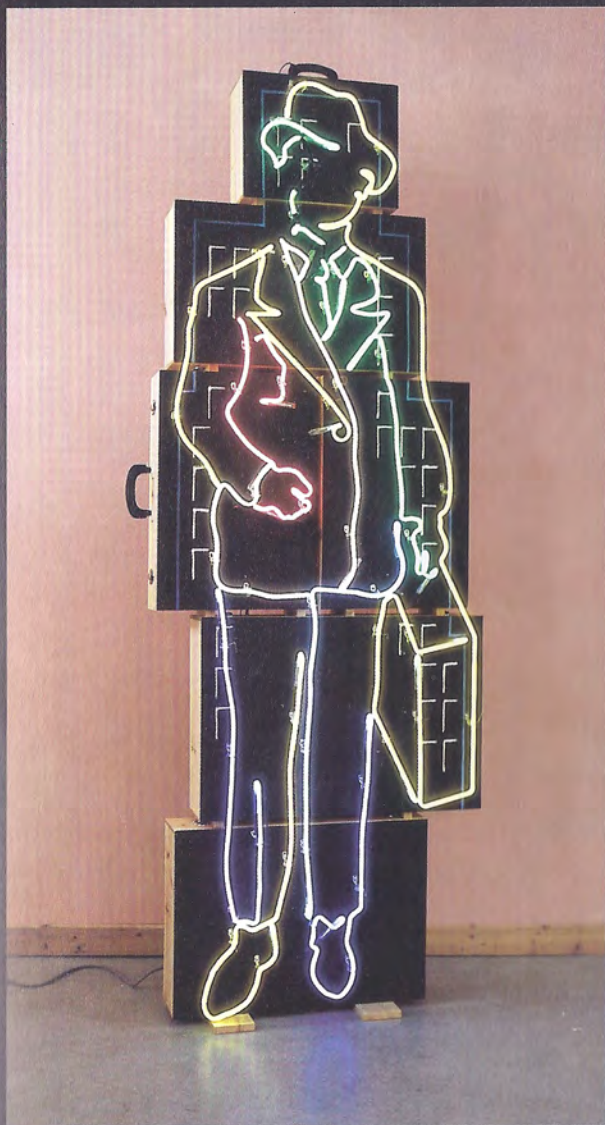
neon & wood
43" x 61" x 13"
1994



to give it to my father; he kept it in a corked glass tube until I became an adult. The original cigarette was part of the sculpture when it was in a traveling show in Canada and was stolen; I replaced it with a full pack. After we left Holland in 1953, the immigrant experience became a major force in my life and, hence, my work.

SG: What artists or styles have influenced you?

WV: As a boy, I was interested in the geometric abstractions of the Constructivists and Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, and members of De Stijl (such as Theo Van Doesburg). I saw a lot of work by these artists at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in the early 1950s. The work I did at the time was almost entirely non-objective. Later, I became fascinated with members of the Cobra group (especially Karel Appel). I was never that interested in literal representation (i.e. realism) except when it was used to support a larger idea. I always loved Paul Klee (even before I learned that he was influenced by Adolf Wölffli and other "self taught" artists). In college, I was introduced to the German expressionists (Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, George Grosz) and artists related to that movement (like the Austrian Egon Schiele, whose house I visited many years later). Among my teachers, I especially



Portrait of My Father
neon, wood, paint & chalk, 98" x 37" x 12", 2002

remember Alden Mason for his playfulness and use of multiple magazine photos as a source for a single painting, and (in graduate school) Rafael Canogar for his powerful figurative work.

SG: *What artwork do you seek out today?*

WV: One group of artists that has captured my attention since the early 1960s includes the builders of folk art environments, outsider artists, and folk artists. I like their directness, their innovative, idiosyncratic use of materials, and their unique formats. I went to see the Watts Towers by Simon Rodia in 1964 and was very much taken by their scale and unique, powerful, visionary nature; the only thing I could relate these structures to at the time was Antoni Gaudi's *Sagrada Família* which I had discovered in Barcelona a few years earlier. Rodia's work led to a lifelong interest in environments built by self-taught artists, both in the US and Europe (where I documented many sites with a Fulbright Senior Scholar award). Among more mainstream artists, H. C. Westermann's drawings and sculptures are a wonderful example of an art that engages me and the fascinating paintings by the British artist Carel Weight (Hockney and Kitaj's teacher in London) possess a disquieting narrative not dissimilar from James Ensor's *Christ Entering Brussels* (which I recently saw at the Getty Museum).

SG: *The scale of your work, whether a drawing or a neon construction, often appears larger than life. How did you arrive at this scale? How does it serve your intentions?*

WV: When I first saw them as a teenager, I was struck by the size of billboards, larger-than-life fiberglass advertising figures, and large neon signs. In the mid-1980s, I was building miniature environments (the interior of rooms 14" x 14" to 18" x 18" in size) and someone suggested I build them life-size. I applied for a grant, and the first piece I built in Montana in 1986 (appropriately titled *Made in Montana* and eventually exhibited at the Art Museum of Missoula) included an 8-foot

Vincent's Hats
neon & wood
62" x 84" x 11"
1992





Remembering Rainier, neon, wood, paint & found objects, 67" x 95" x 9", 1998

stud wall, a copy of my wife's ironing board, and a neon stream – all life-sized objects). While they are large, they are not really larger than life, but I do keep in front of me the impact of those earlier roadside attractions.

SG: *Your work ranges from two-dimensional drawings in watercolor to more physically encompassing mixed media installations, yet you maintain your integrity of vision. What elements and issues do you believe are consistent in your work?*

WV: If there is any consistency it is probably the result of having worked for 45 years in all kinds of media, two and three dimensional, encompassing all kinds of styles. About 15 years ago, these explorations grew into a personal language which not only suits my needs (to tell stories and to use media which, at least in some part, require physical manipulation), but also use a visual vocabulary which appears to evoke a response from a larger audience. It is this response to the

*Pilchuck
Globes*
graphite &
acrylic
22" x 30"
1999



work which really completes the evolution of idea, visual articulation, and critical response (without which the cycle is not really complete). I really enjoy the comments and insights into the work, and the dialogue between the work, the viewer, and myself.

SG: *Neon is a medium loaded with cultural and symbolic meaning. The history of neon is tied to nightlife, entertainment, commerce, greasy spoons, glitz and kitsch. What first attracted you to the use of neon as an artistic medium?*

WV: It was probably its visual power – strong yet simple drawings which light up the night. I had not seen much neon in the Europe of the 1950s, so it was a largely new medium for me. In time, it came to sum up the energy and excitement that America offered me, the immigrant kid, and began to symbolize the dream my family had about this land and culture. I enjoy the apparent contradiction that my life has been steeped in "high" art and that I now revel in the "low" arts of kitsch and popular culture. Perhaps I

am taking the vocabulary and materials of popular culture and giving them new life; just as the American Dream is what you make of it, I am taking the raw materials and imagery of popular and roadside culture--its glitz and kitsch and commercial qualities--and turning them into a sum greater than their parts.

SG: *Throughout history, artists have talked about, longed for and have been inspired by natural light. Unlike natural light, neon is artificial. Neon offers both the opportunity for manipulation and responsibility for control. What have you learned about using artificial light?*

WV: I like the world of artifice, of otherness, and the rawness of *art brut* while continuing to appreciate the skills of the masters. There is something egalitarian about using the vocabulary of popular culture that appeals to me as an immigrant in a land that provides opportunities for all. All artists choose to work within a set of limitations even while they are pushing the boundaries



Follow Your Bliss, neon, wood, paint & found objects, 104" x 135" x 60", 1994

Selfportrait

oil paint &
fluorescent
light

30.5" x 23" x 4"

1967



suggested by those limits. I work with a palette of luminous tubing produced by the industry; they are vibrant and exciting colors! Many artists who work with neon de-emphasize the medium's commercial history and stress its subtle color nuances. I work within the medium's tradition of roadside signage (indeed, my tubes are bent by Bill Todd, the owner of a Bozeman sign shop).

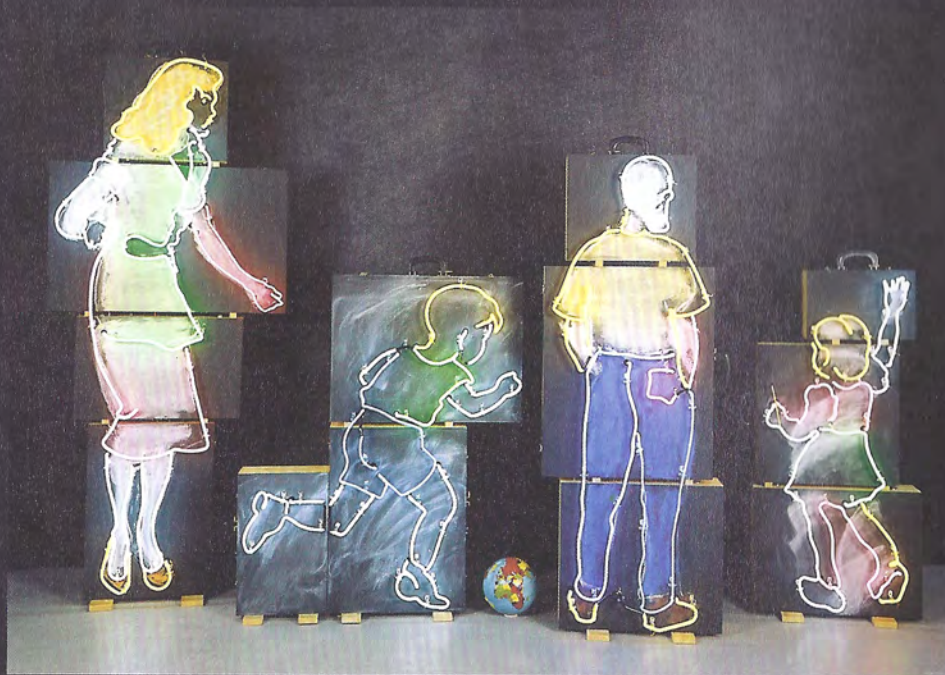
SG: *Your work incorporates the symbols of hats, postcards, clothing, chairs, suitcases and imagery expressing an underlying kinship with your countryman, Vincent van Gogh. Furthermore, you place these symbols within environments suggesting leaving and arrival. What have you left behind and where have you arrived?*

WV: It is not so much the departure and arrival, but the journey I am interested in. Perhaps I am restless like Vincent van Gogh. I think of life

as a grand adventure and have embraced some of what it has offered me. The fact that life includes many departures and arrivals is less important to me than their transformative possibilities. As a result, I have always enjoyed the stimulation provided by travel and often use metaphors which speak to travel and adventure (i.e. postcards, globes, and suitcases). The sculpture often reveals to me where I am at in this journey--much like the Jungian dream which contains the archetypal rivers to cross and dragons to slay.

SG: *Contemporary Euro-American society has a tendency to see its social and political activities through rose-colored glasses. Your signs and symbols of landscapes, romantic partners and memories can be interpreted as idealized. Are you commenting on the ways in which this society reflects on these issues? What are the contrasts between the values of North America and your birthplace?*

WV: My sculptures are just signposts documenting one man's path through life. One recent viewer told me that he especially enjoyed the fact that my work was



Family Gathering, neon, chalk & paint on wood, various sizes, 2001-2002



*Untitled
Painting*

Alva Gene
Dexhimer

Missouri

early 1980s



upbeat (I get that kind of comment often, as well as references to the perceived humor in the work) – I think this is essentially a reflection of my approach to life. It is up to the critic, perhaps, to determine if this is an idealized view of the world; to me, the sculptures are like frozen moments along my path of following my "bliss"--to use Joseph Campbell's evocative phrase. There may be something about the work which suggests the immigrant pursuing his dream. I like the way American culture rewards entrepreneurial activity and, like the good son of an immigrant family, I think that I have embraced some of this potential.

SG: *Some of your pieces comment on the ways in which nature is idealized or romanticized. What are your thoughts about the relationship between art and nature?*

WV: My use of idealized landscapes is not so much a comment about nature as it is a metaphor for a dream or



Mint Bar Sign

Sheridan,
Wyoming

1974

something difficult to attain. However, in my most recent work *The New West*, I use a paint-by-number landscape to make a political comment (I divided the painting into nine equal segments, each with a neon house) to suggest that we are irrevocably dividing up the "last best place." I am least interested in decorative art. At one end of the spectrum, I am captivated by narrative art (as it expresses personal stories, myths, and reflects cultural traditions) while I also find great sustenance in those artists who express their feelings through non-objective work – I will always remember the power of standing in front of Mark Rothko's large canvases at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, of coming around a corner at the Cleveland Museum of Art and really "seeing" a Jackson Pollock for the first time, and of being moved by George Rickey's gently swaying sculptures when we visited him at his farm in New York.

SG: Finally, what is your next direction or project?

WV: It is great to have the time, now that I am no longer teaching, to fully explore new ideas. I have started to work on a series of freestanding neon figures called *Family Gathering*, a group to which I plan to add more members over time. This work is about embracing family, relationships, and the ongoing process of life and death. I have enjoyed being able to bring family members together in art who did not know each other in life (such as my father and my grandchildren). In other new work, I hope to further investigate the narrative potential of diptychs (previously explored in *Canis Major and Friends* and *Orion the Hunter*). I'd like to do more of these, either by juxtaposing two images on separate (but adjacent) panels or by superimposing one image onto another.

Stephen Glueckert has been curator at the Art Museum of Missoula in Missoula, Montana, for the past ten years. He has taught sculpture at The University of Montana and the University of Papua New Guinea.



Canadian Hero, neon, wood & found objects, 78" x 50" x 52", 1995



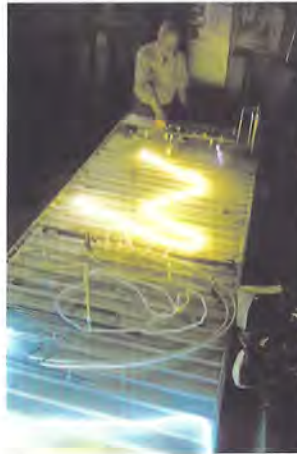
Vincent, Come Home, neon, wood, paint & found objects, 104" x 72" x 34", 1989-93

Brief Biography

1939	born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands	1965	BA in painting, University of Washington; begins graduate studies at Mills College as teaching assistant to Rafael Canogar; marries Diane Power, fellow UW art student		School of Art, Montana State University
1951	begins playing with electricity by wiring all bedroom lights, radios, etc. with bedside switches; builds crystal sets, vacuum tube radios			1989	author of article on American folk art for first issue of <i>Raw Vision</i>
1952	begins visiting Stedelijk Museum	1967	MFA, Mills College; teaches at Ohio State University	1990	begins series of <i>Domestic Neon</i> sculptures which combine painting, neon, found and constructed objects; solo exhibitions, Yellowstone Art Center and Holter Museum of Art
1953	family emigrates to Seattle; begins working for Miller Pollard, an interior design firm	1968	begins teaching in Foundation Department, Kansas City Art Institute (until 1986)		
1956	photographer for high school newspaper and annual; buys 4" x 5" camera and starts photography business	1969	first work in neon	1991	Fulbright Senior Scholar Award to document folk art environments in Europe; resumes full-time teaching
1962	begins studies in interior design, architecture and fine arts, University of Washington	1970	first solo exhibition, Polly Friedlander Gallery, Seattle	1992	first inclusion in Corning Museum of Glass' <i>New Glass Review</i> (also 1993, 1997, 1999)
1963	painting accepted in <i>Northwest Annual</i> and purchased by Seattle Art Museum; works as curatorial assistant at UW's Henry Gallery	1972-3	teaches at Jacob Kramer College, Leeds, England; solo exhibition, Leeds Polytechnic	1993	included in <i>The Light Artist Anthology</i> by Christian Schiess
1964	visits Watts Towers folk art environment in Los Angeles; sees work by the premier European and American artists of the time in <i>Painting and Sculpture of a Decade</i> exhibition at Tate Gallery in London; spends summer drawing in Ireland	1976	teaches at Montana State University as visiting artist; son Jason born; on sabbatical, begins to visit folk artists and environments in southern states	1996	Phi Kappa Phi Fridley Award for Distinguished Teaching
		1985	begins making narrative sculpture; folk art interviews accepted into Smithsonian's <i>Archives of American Art</i>	1997	Montana Arts Council Individual Artist Fellowship
		1986	Mellon Senior Fellowship in the Humanities to research folk art, University of Kansas; curator of <i>Word and Image in American Folk Art</i> traveling exhibition; becomes Director,	1998	Wiley Research Award, Montana State University
				1999	James & Mary Ross Provost's Award for Excellence, Montana State University
				2001	retires from teaching, Montana State University

I would like to thank all three museums for inviting me to show my work. I want to especially cite Ellen Ornitz for her enthusiasm for this project, for writing a successful grant proposal, and for her insightful essay; Stephen Glueckert for his evocative interview questions; and Kim Koga for her catalogue introduction. Special thanks to the Meadowlark Fund for supporting this catalogue and the exhibition's educational outreach to the fifth graders of Missoula and Bozeman. My neon hat is off to Bill Todd, who has been a silent partner in my work by expertly bending my neon tubes for the past 16 years.

Willem Volkersz



 Bill Todd in his shop
Bozeman, MT, 1988



Willem Volkersz in his studio, 1994