

## **EXIT / ALIVE:**

### **The Courageous Life and Critically Subversive Art of Anthony Dominguez**

Tom Patterson

*“Freedom is a state of mind ... a freedom to doubt and question everything and, therefore, so intense, active, and vigorous that it throws away every form of dependence slavery, conformity, and acceptance. Such freedom implies being completely alone....When you are alone, totally alone, not belonging to any family, any nation, any culture, any particular continent, there is that sense of being an outsider.”*

—**Jiddu Krishnamurti**, “Freedom from the Known,” *Total Freedom*, 124–25

*“For me art is a doorway you open yourself there like a flame on a candle dispels darkness. what gets seen along the way has to do with how our mind operates, so if I’m in trouble its because I don’t recognize the god in the thing called trouble!...For me Art is trouble. If it were not so man could not be! All trouble is not undesirable for Anthony Dominguez could not be! he takes his trouble and hangs it on gallery walls for all who are to take the trouble or not to give a hoot! I admire their lack of interest, it finds me asking myself ‘You see life goes on with out so much a concern on whether or not you are going about your Art making!’”*

—**Anthony Dominguez**, from a letter to the author, September 8, 2001

#### **1. Exit**

When the phone rang on that Easter Monday morning two years ago, it was still dark outside my house in North Carolina, and I’d only been awake for a few minutes. The caller ID displayed an unfamiliar number in Mountain View, New Jersey, a place I’d never heard of, but I instinctively picked up anyway. The official-sounding voice on the line belonged to a man who said he was a police officer and asked if I knew an Anthony Dominguez.

Yes, I told him, Anthony's a friend in New York, an artist. I asked why he wanted know.

My name and contact information had been found among some papers belonging to Mr. Dominguez, the cop told me. I asked him if Anthony was all right, and he said he wasn't authorized to give me any more information. If he was looking for Anthony, I offered, it might prove difficult because he had no residence.

"He lives on the streets," I explained. When I mentioned Anthony's New York gallery, American Primitive, the officer said he'd also found some papers with that name on it and had already left a message on the gallery's voicemail. Then he thanked me for my time and bid me a good day.

Alarmed, I immediately emailed American Primitive with an urgent request for information. Later that morning I got the devastating news that Anthony's body had been found in a wooded area in New Jersey, about 25 miles from Manhattan. Apparently he'd hanged himself.

I felt as if I'd been punched in the stomach hard enough to break my heart.

## **2. Free**

After he moved onto the streets of Lower Manhattan, around the time he turned thirty, Anthony Dominguez didn't look conspicuously homeless. He didn't wear ragged clothes, push an overflowing wheeled cart, or sit begging on the sidewalks. Physically slight and habitually solitary, he favored black clothing like many New Yorkers, allowing him to blend in with other pedestrians. But in fact he had decisively walked

away from his day job and abandoned his apartment. Discarding his artwork, his art supplies, and all of his other worldly possessions, he had rejected the trappings of employment and domesticity to embrace a new life out in the open. On the streets and sidewalks of New York, he underwent a sometimes-punishing crash course in the survival basics—how to obtain free food and where to find relatively safe shelter among the city’s derelict buildings, tunnel hideaways, and other unused enclosures. In fact he shunned the homeless designation and steered clear of homeless shelters. As far as he was concerned, he had simply set himself free.<sup>1</sup>

One thing Dominguez didn’t give up as part of his extreme lifestyle change was his inherent drive to make images. At some point during his first two or three years on the street, this impulse began to find expression in an open-ended series of circular-format stencils he designed and cut from discarded vinyl report covers salvaged from a trash bin. Alternating between four and eight inches in diameter, they bore reductively stylized images reflecting his critical view of society. Some of them incorporated minimal texts—a human skull with the phrase PLEASE VOID emblazoned on it, for example, or a skull wearing a feathered Indian war bonnet juxtaposed with the slogan HOME OF THE DESTROYED. There were other skull variations as well. There were also several mandala-like images of houseflies and other insects, with which Dominguez presumably identified as a free-roaming urban scavenger.

Dominguez used these hand-cut stencils in a couple of different ways—to spray-paint the designs on outdoor surfaces where they could be seen by passersby, and to

imprint them on cutout discs of black fabric that could be sewn onto clothing. He devised an ingenious method for printing the images on fabric with a bleach-filled hypodermic syringe, enabling him to maintain the stencil's clean edges in the resulting white/black emblems. As with everything else he used to make art during his homeless years, he obtained the materials for free—the fabric was cut from scraps picked up in the Garment District, and the bleach and syringes were from a downtown dispensary where they were available to help prevent the spread of disease among IV drug users.

Dominguez became a more visible figure on the streets after he started wearing a black leather jacket covered with an assortment of these patches. In addition to lending a performative element to his work—in effect transforming him into a walking advertisement for his self-chosen stance as a societal outsider—the jacket may have also functioned as a kind of symbolic armor to repel potential harm.<sup>2</sup>

Fellow artists and other visually attentive pedestrians were likely to be drawn to the uniquely customized jacket, and curious about the shy, elusive figure who wore it. Such was the case for Aarne Anton and Tina White Anton. Since 1978 Aarne has owned and operated American Primitive Gallery, a commercial venue specializing in folk and outsider art. Tina, his wife, is a sculptor who in the early 1990s founded and directed Art on the Edge, a non-profit effort to provide homeless artists with materials, studio space, and opportunities for exhibitions and sales.<sup>3</sup>

The Antons first encountered Dominguez in early January 1994 at the opening reception for a show by homeless artists on the Lower East Side. It was the jacket that

caught their attention. Tina complimented Dominguez on it and struck up a conversation with him, although she recalls his being so reserved he hardly spoke at all. Nonetheless, he showed them some of his stencils, and they spent nearly an hour looking at them and making enthusiastic comments.

Art on the Edge had opened a gallery at 594 Broadway, in the same building where American Primitive was headquartered. At Tina's invitation, Dominguez visited her there the next day, and she persuaded him to consign about a dozen of the stencils to her for the 1994 Outsider Art Fair. Both her organization and American Primitive had reserved booths at the fair, set for the end of that month at the nearby Puck Building. Inaugurated the previous year as an annual collectors' market for works by artists outside the mainstream, the fair was still a novel phenomenon. Dominguez didn't attend, but all of his available stencils were bought by collectors who did.

Soon after the fair closed, Dominguez brought Tina some of his bleached-fabric patches and left them on consignment with Art on the Edge. The interest she and others had taken in his work evidently inspired him to break out of the compact stencil format. With invigorated ambition, he began working on a larger scale and expanding his ideas accordingly. During unannounced visits to the gallery, usually once or twice a month, he would customarily leave any new pieces he'd made. The larger, rectangular-format compositions were rendered on loose canvas or other cloth that could be tightly rolled up and in most cases stored with the rest of Dominguez's worldly possessions, in the small canvas bag or backpack he always carried with him. At the gallery he would unfurl these paintings like scrolls on the floor and discuss them

with Tina. As she gained his trust, he overcame his reticence and began to talk more freely about his work and its connection to his philosophy of radical freedom.

### 3. Metamorphosis

Dominguez's earliest works in the larger rectangular format depict the actions of stylized humanoid figures and skeletons in abstracted, stagelike settings. Insects also make frequent appearances in these compact narratives, including and especially butterflies, in their traditional roles as emblems of metamorphosis. The overarching theme is the cyclical, interdependent relationship between life and death.

In the example from which the exhibition takes its main title, *Exit/Alive*, a butterfly spreads its angular wings like an open book and assumes the role of goggle-eyed witness to the procession in the foreground. A generic humanoid figure and a skeleton walk in single file from left to right, enacting a simple allegory of corporeal life as one stage in a process whose next phase is death. The humanoid ascends a staircase to a central landing, meanwhile tossing behind him a small world globe that follows a pointing arrow downward. Ahead of him on the landing, the skeleton raises a celebratory goblet and walks toward a stairway and an arrow pointing upward. The words at the top are ironically placed—EXIT over the living humanoid, ALIVE above the animated skeleton.

Dominguez expanded on this theme in his most ambitious work from this period—and the largest free-hanging piece he's known to have created—an untitled painting on a five-by-nine-foot sheet of black fabric (alternately known as *Kindness Cruelty*

*Continuum*). He painted it in a tunnel where he sometimes slept, beneath 14th Street near Irving Place. Reminiscent of a game board, it features a border of diagonal stair steps interlaced on three sides with skulls and on the fourth (right) side with more of his angularly stylized butterflies. This architectonic border frames a loosely symmetrical configuration of diagonal lines, smaller images, and texts. In the lower left a tiny skull sits atop what looks like a tombstone marked ALIVE immediately above the word PARTY and an arrow pointing diagonally upward—evidently the point where the game begins. Tiny stick figures—each made with two V shapes and a circle—follow this arrow up a staircase in what might be a walk-up apartment building. Identical figures ascend the stairways on all four sides of the painting, but only those on the right—on the stairs of what might be a fire escape, interconnected with butterfly wings—carry celebratory goblets. (Perhaps this represents the biblical Stairway to Heaven described in Genesis.)

At the center of the composition, enclosed by two open-eye shapes intersecting in a cruciform pattern, is a figure with arms and legs outstretched inside a circle, as in Leonardo da Vinci's iconic drawing *The Vitruvian Man*. Strategically placed at the cardinal points around this emblem are four additional symbols, including, on the left, a world-globe, and on the right a butterfly. Diagonal lines radiate from the center, dividing the painting into four quadrants. Each quadrant contains a separate group of boldface words arranged in a list format, collectively offering a succinct commentary on Dominguez's personal philosophy and lessons gleaned from the New York streets. An arrow in the upper right, marked EXIT, indicates the game's apparent end point,

where a skull adjoins a butterfly wing. Just beyond this metaphorical junction, a free-floating stick figure carrying a knapsack on a pole—sign of the archetypal homeless wanderer—leaves the game board and the party behind as he ascends into the unknown beyond.

This is a key piece, among other reasons because it references Dominguez's experience of homeless urban life and poetically alludes to aspects of his street-smart philosophy. Around the time he painted it, or soon after, he added a few more lines alongside his three-stroke stick figure to show it opening a door, and this became his signature glyph, most often placed in the lower right corner of his compositions. (In later iterations he added a Valentine heart on the door.)

In an uncanny chain of events, the big painting narrowly escaped destruction before it was publicly shown. Tina Anton first learned of this work's existence not from Dominguez but from another homeless artist who had seen it inside the tunnel where it was painted. The tunnel adjoined the basement under the original site of Lüchow's, a well-known New York restaurant that relocated uptown in the 1980s. Soon after hearing the painting described, Tina had a dream in which she sensed it was somehow imperiled, and she told Dominguez the next time she saw him. When she asked to be taken to see it, he refused, insisting the tunnel was too dangerous. Instead he brought the painting to the gallery. That very night, an explosion set off a fire that destroyed the old Lüchow's building—an event that to this day remains shrouded in mystery.

Art on the Edge featured the “game board” painting at the 1995 Outsider Art Fair. Mounted, framed, and installed above a selection of the bleached-fabric patches, the piece dominated the organization’s booth by virtue of its scale alone. It helped attract a larger audience to Dominguez’s work—the beginnings of a following—and a sharp-eyed collector snapped it up.

During its three-year existence, Art on the Edge found other exhibition opportunities for Dominguez and helped sell his work to important institutions and adventurous private collectors, but it was essentially a one-person operation. In the fall of 1996, nearing the end of her pregnancy with her and Aarne’s son Willi, Tina reluctantly closed Art on the Edge out of personal necessity. Dominguez accepted Aarne’s immediate offer to represent him on equivalent terms at American Primitive. This new affiliation marked the start of a unique artist-dealer relationship that would last for the remainder of Dominguez’s life.

Like Art on the Edge, American Primitive operated on the 50 percent–commission basis that was standard for New York galleries at the time. Beyond that, Dominguez had his own special arrangement that reflected his consistent disinterest in money and his aversion to using it (MONEY = DEATH was another catchphrase he cut into a stencil used to bleach some of his fabric patches, and sometimes used to sign correspondence). When the gallery sold a piece of his work, the sale was recorded and half of the income added to his total, which the gallery held in reserve for his future use, as with a bank account. His only other known income during his years in the open was from secondhand books—including occasional rarities—which he

scavenged and sold to book dealers in New York and his hometown of Fort Worth, Texas. Aarne recalls that the only purpose for which Dominguez requested cash from his gallery fund, on fairly rare occasions, was to cover basic expenses for long-distance travel—across the country or overseas. In those cases, he withdrew no more than the cost of a round-trip ticket for a particular destination and a limited allowance of traveler’s checks. The only luggage he took was the small bag or pack he carried every day in New York, and wherever he traveled - except when visiting family members in Texas—he customarily slept outdoors or in deserted hideaways he discovered. In the United States he preferred overland travel by bus or train; when going abroad he was a light-traveling, homeless jet-setter.

#### **4. The Path to the Streets**

Before his self-reinvention as the elusive, unencumbered artist of the New York streets, Anthony Dominguez grew up in Fort Worth during the 1960s and 1970s. He was the second of three brothers of Mexican and Anglo ancestry, raised by their commercial-artist father, Prisciliano “Pris” Dominguez. Their father’s unmarried sister Celia, a doting aunt, filled the maternal role after the boys’ psychologically troubled mother could no longer manage the responsibility and went to live on her own.

Encouraged by his father’s example and with easy access to art materials, Dominguez started drawing early on. He also began absorbing many types of imagery from art books in their home library, and through his observations of work by his father’s artist associates. His art received special honors during his public-school

years, including a winning entry in a contest sponsored by UNICEF when he was twelve. The organization paid for him, his brother Chris, and his proud father to attend the awards ceremony in Geneva, Switzerland.<sup>4</sup>

After finishing high school Dominguez spent a few years taking courses in design, illustration, and art history at Texas Christian University, where his father sometimes taught. A scholarship helped support his studies at the school, where he won more awards, although he left without obtaining a degree. Remaining in Fort Worth into his late twenties, he taught himself the craft of sign painting and briefly supported himself as a freelancer in that profession. In 1987 Fort Worth's public-art program commissioned him to paint a mural on the rear exterior of the Northside Fort Worth Public Library, overlooking a grassy lawn and a view of the city's skyline. Still extant, the mural features multiple colors, unlike his mature work, but its graphic style incorporates a hard-edged, stylized approach more closely related to his later work.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after completing the mural, on what he recalled as a whim, he moved to New York. For two or three years, he lived in an East Village apartment and earned his income from graphic-design and commercial-signage jobs, until he decided to drop out of the workaday world.

It remains unclear exactly what prompted Dominguez to break so dramatically out of his routine, completely abandoning any semblance of a secure, socially stable life. In subsequent years he spoke of this pivotal move in philosophical terms, insisting that he preferred an autonomous position on the margins of the world he had previously inhabited. His notes indicate that he found encouragement and inspiration in the

writings of Aristotle, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, as well as those of French novelist André Gide, popular inspirational author Joshua Loth Liebman, and Japanese martial arts master Morihei Ueshiba, among other sources.

In my conversations and correspondence with him after he'd spent ten years on the streets, Dominguez repeatedly referenced the writings of J. Krishnamurti, who in his early thirties likewise made a radical break with his past. Following a profound visionary experience Krishnamurti declared that "truth is a pathless land," and disassociated himself from the spiritual movement (the Theosophical Society) in which he'd held a special position. His sole concern from that point, he wrote, was "to set man free ... to free him from all cages, from all fears." Krishnamurti advocated a revolution of the individual psyche and independence from spiritual teachers or socio-political leaders.<sup>6</sup> Dominguez identified closely with such ideas, although it is unclear whether he discovered Krishnamurti's writings before or after freeing himself from his own self-perceived cage.

Dominguez lived on the streets by choice, but he did not find the experience easy, especially at the beginning. At some point during his first unsheltered year he underwent a breakdown and was committed to the psychiatric ward at Bellevue Hospital. Contacted by authorities back in Fort Worth, his father traveled to see him, hoping to persuade him to re-enter society. Dominguez regained his psychic equilibrium, probably due in part to consistent nutrition in the hospital, but he declined his father's appeals. On his release he resumed his life on the streets. His father

returned to Fort Worth, where, sadly, he became severely ill and died several months later, in November 1990.<sup>7</sup>

## **5. Momentum**

Not much else is known about Dominguez's life or his art during his first few years living on the streets. The record becomes much more detailed after his fateful meeting with the Antons and his first showing at the Outsider Art Fair. Following his introduction to the art world, his work developed rapidly and continued to evolve, often in surprising ways. His reliance on the white/black formula remained constant for years, however, simply because it only required one color—an advantage for an artist who lacked storage space and lived an extremely portable life. Ever resourceful, he experimented with different white mediums, depending on what he was able to find in the course of his walks around the city. He abandoned his bleach-stenciling technique in 1995 but for some time continued to use black fabric exclusively. For a while he tried painting with white typewriter correction fluid, containers of which were easy to find in trash bins in those years. Later he was more likely to use enamel or acrylics. He also employed different painting implements over the years, including cone-tipped plastic condiment dispensers, found drafting tools, and pens or brushes he made by hand from found materials.

I use the term “paintings” here in discussing Dominguez's works on fabric because paint was what he used to create these images. It might be equally or even more appropriate to call them “drawings,” though, because of their hard-edged linearity.

There are no brushstrokes, broad or otherwise. In this respect he could be said to have used paint as a drawing medium.

A chronological review of the art from his last twenty years reveals a progressive refinement of style and techniques. Dominguez's awareness of having an audience clearly propelled him into a more ambitious mode. He started expanding his range of imagery, giving more nuanced treatment to his themes and bringing more narrative invention to the work. Many pages of notes and drawings left with American Primitive indicate a mind constantly generating new ideas and images. By the turn of the millennium, his line was cleaner and his shading techniques more sophisticated. His compositions continued to reveal new layers of complexity as he produced new work, and his forward momentum appears rarely to have flagged. Amid all the changes, however, his work retained an overall coherence and consistency. In part this is because it all came directly out of his own experiences, in both the external world and the internal world of his visionary imagination. Another key overarching factor was that, no matter how serious his subject matter—often as serious as life and death—Dominguez always approached it playfully, with a sense of humor.

## **6. Face to Face**

By 2001 I had followed Dominguez's work with keen interest for seven years, at which point I began work on a curatorial project conceived in part with him in mind—a group show by artists whose materials were scavenged from the streets of American cities.<sup>8</sup> After arranging to borrow several of Dominguez's paintings, I got in touch with him to

arrange a meeting. He was such a mysterious figure that I wanted to meet him face to face, talk with him, and take some notes for an essay I was writing in connection with the show. I contacted him in the most efficient way one could—a letter care of General Delivery, New York. All mail sent to that address goes to the James A. Farley Post Office on Ninth Street in Lower Manhattan, which Dominguez regularly patronized. In my letter I expressed admiration for his work, briefly explained the show I was curating, and told him I would be in New York in late September, when I proposed to meet him.

I wrote my letter on August 30. Dominguez replied in a neatly handwritten letter dated September 8, worth excerpting here at some length—with misspellings, idiosyncratic syntax, and punctuation oddities left intact:

*In directing a response toward you're interest in sheading some light on Anthony Dominguez I'd say he is lead to be greatful for a chance to share what he is lead to believe toward the 'workable route' so long workable sees fit!....it would seem that my personality is directed toward visualization as when two opposites meet the yin & yang in hanging out together...The common breeding ground has equal opportunity for the exchange in love & hate relationship! Let's term something J. Krishnamurti said on love and hate: love is a gap which is ever present beyond time. it exists in 'Now.' Now is death ever renewing itself; on hate he said it's like a tail with the body saying 'I love you' waiting to take a swat at you while your not looking! Can you have love without the tail? Only if you are willing to die psychologically that something new can happen!*

*For me art is a doorway you open yourself there like a flame on a candle dispels darkness. what gets seen along the way has to do with how our mind operates, so if I'm in trouble its because I don't recognize the god in the thing called trouble!*

*For me the artist has two heads, looking at one another through two headsize holes against a up-right plank (so to obscure the body) On the right side of the plank is the head of a cat gazing with contempt at the left side the head of a ferocious Dog! They keep up the good fight unbeknownst while querling the plank dissolves revealing the cat and Dog head are attached to the same body! For me Art is trouble. If it were not so man could not be! All trouble is not undesirable for Anthony Dominguez could not be! he takes his trouble and hangs it on gallery walls for all who are to take the trouble or not to give a hoot! I admire their lack of interest, if finds me asking myself 'You see life goes on with out so much a concern on whether or not you are going about your Art making!'"*

He closed this amazing communiqué with a suggested date, place and time for our meeting. One day after his letter was postmarked, terrorist hijackers crashed airliners into the towers of the World Trade Center.

When I arrived in New York two weeks later, the acrid stench of destruction still hung over a traumatized downtown, haunted by spirits of the dead. I was relieved to find Dominguez waiting for me at the designated time and place. He had directed me to an art-show reception at a gallery on Wooster Street with free food and drinks. I recognized him right away from photos Arne and Tina had shown me—slightly

disheveled, wearing all-black clothing and black horn-rimmed glasses. We introduced ourselves and stayed long enough to enjoy some snack food washed down with wine from plastic cups. The art didn't encourage close inspection, and a few apparent regulars were looking askance at Dominguez, so we ducked out and continued our conversation while walking south toward Ground Zero.

I was staying at a friend's loft in Tribeca, just seven blocks from the smoldering ruins of the twin towers. From the roof of his building, my friend had watched the towers come down and had seen some of their trapped occupants perform their final acts, leaping from impossibly high windows to avoid the encroaching flames and plummeting debris. Accepting my invitation, Dominguez joined me for a visit to my friend's loft, where we had more refreshments and kept talking with each other. We were together for a couple of hours, during which I gently prodded him to discuss his work, his strategies for street-living and art-making on the fly, and his ideas about the transitory nature of life. His voice was quiet and unassertive, and his speech was as idiosyncratic as his writing.

About living on the street, he said, "I'm exposed to the environment, as opposed to someone living indoors. I have an opportunity to encounter what is unfavorable [*sic*] and what is favorable. They both are there, but it's a matter of balance. It's important to be a non-identity. If there's too much identity, there's too much attention. If there's too much attention, there's less coming and going. If you're free from identity, you're free from the constraints that society brings to bear on you. That way, you open yourself to how you see things. That's why I use the door." The latter comment

referred to his signature sketch of a stick figure opening a door. “You open yourself anyway,” he added, “so that’s just the way it is.”

Responding to some practical questions about how and where he made his paintings, he summarized the process: He continually sketched his visual ideas on pocket-size scraps of paper, manageable almost anywhere. When ready to paint, he found a quiet spot in a public park, if the weather was favorable. He would unroll his fabric scraps, take out his supplies, and go to work, using a pencil or crayon to enlarge the preliminary sketch before starting to paint. When the weather was cold or otherwise not conducive to painting outdoors, he went to the New York Public Library on 42nd Street, where he was known to the staff and allowed to use a study cubicle as his mini-studio.

Asked about sources for his ideas, he said, “Mostly I base it on what’s happened to me. If it’s something terrible, I look at it in a funny way. I look at it in ways that aren’t favorable, and I have fun with it.”

He discussed his ideas about intentionality and fortune, implying a view of the universe influenced by unseen forces: “Often I make a suggestion, and it will appear. It happens all the time in New York, especially if you’re looking for something to eat. If you want to get something, you’ve got to let go; you’ve got to give something in return. If you leave three pennies in a telephone coin-return slot—preferably heads up—you’ll find a quarter. Try it. It works.”

On death, a subject foregrounded in much of his work: “In our culture, you don’t want to befriend your death. You want to be with things that offer comfort—to be away

from that. But that's the inevitability. Everything is transitory and is leading up to that. We hope to find ourselves on the up-side of that, rather than on the down-side, because all this is going to be taken away.... It's like the World Trade Center. You put all your hopes in things that are offering security when in fact there is no security."<sup>9</sup>

## **7. New Developments, Further Adventures**

After our introductory meeting Dominguez and I corresponded occasionally and saw each other a few times, and I included his work in several subsequent projects I undertook.<sup>10</sup> I felt strongly that his art deserved much closer examination and more widespread recognition. The next time I saw him was in January 2002, during and after the opening reception for the group show I'd curated at the Jamaica Center for Arts & Learning. Also present were three of the show's five other artists—Curtis Cuffie, Kevin Blythe Sampson, and Gregory Warmack (aka Mr. Imagination)—all of whom immediately bonded with Dominguez in a mutual-admiration society. It was good to see him in the company of his peers, who so obviously respected him, in a setting where people were admiring and discussing his paintings.

In the years that followed I saw Dominguez's work more often than I saw him, as I made a point of visiting his gallery any time I was in New York. There were always new paintings to see and new developments to observe and ponder in his work. Around 2006 he made a 180-degree turn to painting in black on white canvas—a change that only highlighted his work's graphic punch, even if it made the paintings look more like illustrations. From a slight distance they resemble outsize woodcut

prints. There is also an obvious comparison to be made with comic-strip art and single-frame cartoons. A few of his work's admirers have complained that some of these paintings are *too* cartoonish, but he clearly found this kind of imagery amusing. Dominguez didn't forsake his signature white-on-black, but after the initial change he switched back and forth from one to the other, depending on the materials at hand. Late in his career he also made a few unusually small, palm-size paintings on scraps of blue denim.

In the first week of December 2006, Dominguez flew to New Delhi on a round-trip ticket with a scheduled return flight three months later. He had been to India at least once before, on what turned out to be an inspiring no-budget trip. In February 2007 I received a postcard from him—a photograph of the Virupaksha Temple at Hampi with his tiny handwriting on the stamped side briefly summarizing his travels to date. The trip was going well, according to his concise present-tense rundown, which concluded, "Arrv in Hampi Stay in Cave w/Bat outside main temple Explore Bolders by Day!"

I received no further word from him until the third week of March, when I got a call from Aarne Anton. He told me Dominguez had been arrested at the New Delhi airport, when he turned up one day late for his flight to New York and attracted suspicion with talk of assassins pursuing him. He was thrown in jail after scuffling with airport officials. U.S. State Department personnel in New Delhi were working with Dominguez's cousin Linda to get him freed and returned to New York.

Dominguez spent almost two months in prison before he was finally released to the State Department, which secured a replacement airline ticket and assigned a staffer to escort him onto the flight. He returned to New York with a harrowing account of his trip's final weeks, up to his incarceration—being in jail felt like a vacation to him, he told Aarne. Dominguez condensed the story into a single page on which a map of his itinerary is paired with a handwritten narrative recounting his pursuit by Hezbollah assassins through the countryside between Darjeeling and Calcutta. According to Dominguez, a rumor quickly spread in the region's villages that he was a Latin American spy for the U.S. Army. Almost overnight he became known throughout the area as “the Latin from Manhattan” and was marked for death. Whether the product of actual events or the paranoid imaginings of a deliriously undernourished, sleep-deprived traveler, Dominguez's ordeal included a fifteen-day, 295-mile (475-kilometer) walk to Calcutta and a three-day train ride from there back to New Delhi. The clearest evidence that Dominguez was in a paranoid state at the time is this passage near the end of the narrative: “As I'm ready to board plane 10 March I think once I pass through doorway ‘they'll hang me in the basement’ I decide to exit airport, IGI police say no! Fight breaks out....”

Back in New York he told Aarne that when the State Department official escorted him to the airline for his return flight, an Indian customs official stabbed his passport with a knife and warned him, “Don't come back!”

## 8. Words, Music and More

Everyone who cared about Dominguez was relieved to have him back in the United States, but I was still troubled by the information that had reached me about his problems in India. Whether or not his desperate narrative of pursuit had any factual basis, it highlighted his extreme physical and psychological vulnerability.

During the summer after the ill-fated trip, I began corresponding with Dominguez about a museum-scale exhibition of his work, an independent curatorial project I was eager to undertake, if I could locate a sponsoring venue. He approved of the idea and even made some amusing suggestions—such as naming the show “The Also-Ran.” I wrote a proposal and sent it to a few places where I thought there might be some interest. There were no immediate takers, and I was soon sidetracked by other projects, but this posthumous retrospective had its origins in the earlier proposal.

I did not see Dominguez again, but we continued our occasional correspondence. In the spring of 2008 he sent me postcards from Tucson and Los Angeles, with news of his latest bus trip. He planned to see his beloved Aunt Celia on his way back east, he wrote. Meanwhile, during visits to New York I continued to see much of the new work he produced.

Around Halloween—apparently a favorite holiday—he sent me a custom-made postcard that contained something new. Cheaply printed on one side was his seasonally appropriate, white-on-black painting *A Haunted Leaf Shuffle*, which juxtaposes an image of a fanciful scrollwork tree with three lines of musical notation and accompanying lyrics (“Fall to a Haunted Leaf Shuffle, / Bring Gloom to Bloom, /

Surrender All at the Spirit Ball”). Traditional symbols of life’s transitory nature, falling leaves had been a favorite motif since the early 1990s, but this was the first time I had seen him include music and lyrics in an artwork.

As it turns out he had taught himself to read and write music. It was an effort he undertook around the same time he learned to make a pennywhistle flute, by boring strategically spaced holes in a piece of plastic pipe. Taking this project a couple of steps further, he added lyrics and integrated the resultant songs with his painting to commence a new, open-ended series he would eventually come to call his Picture Songs.

This was the first of three significant new developments in Dominguez’s art in those final years, as he approached and passed his fiftieth birthday. The second was the addition of red to his palette—maybe just because he happened to find some discarded red paint in a shade that appealed to him. Given what we know about him, though, we can safely assume he was thinking of red’s associations with blood and the heart—with both life and death.

These years also witnessed the emergence in a number of Dominguez’s new paintings of overtly Christian iconography, imagery, and song lyrics. Crosses and stylized cartoon portraits of Jesus made repeated appearances. This third development was no doubt rooted in his Roman Catholic upbringing, but it also reflects something of his own self-perception. As a humble soul who had suffered all manner of painful experiences and indignities in more than twenty-five years without a home, he had apparently come to identify closely with the persecuted, crucified figure

of Christ. For someone in his circumstances, waking up each morning—or whatever time of day—must have felt like something of a resurrection. But then there were evidently more than a few occasions when he would have preferred not to wake up.

## **9. On the Way Out the Door**

An eight-minute video segment posted on YouTube in late 2012, bittersweet in retrospect, yields brief but informative glimpses of Dominguez's life during this period. It features an informal interview and commentary by artist/activist Clayton Patterson (no relation to the author), along with footage of Dominguez playing one of his handmade flutes, working on his art in the New York Public Library, showing off the inside of a tunnel where he had been sleeping, and exchanging friendly words with visitors to an exhibition of his work at Patterson's Clayton Gallery, aka The Outlaw Art Museum, on the Lower East Side. Characteristically, Dominguez doesn't say much, but his familiar, polite, self-deprecating personality comes across. He appears almost cheerful, but he's also extremely thin and hollow-cheeked—sure signs he wasn't getting enough to eat.<sup>11</sup> His seemingly upbeat on-camera demeanor masked a much darker reality.

Aarne Anton, who saw and communicated with Dominguez more regularly than anyone else in New York, noticed increasing evidence of paranoia and depression in the years after Dominguez's last India trip. His observation is confirmed by correspondence he received from the artist during this period, especially after 2010.

Sometime during 2011 Dominguez became convinced his photograph had been posted on an internet website promoting gay prostitution, in an effort to defame him. A letter about his concerns indicates he was worried that he might be “arrested and put through the system” as a result. In another related letter from a few months later, he wrote, “I somehow feel its too late for me...and once I’m picked up I’ll be sold through ‘Terrestrial Global Market’ into prostitution or at least this is the message I get from passersbys....my time in NY is coming to a close the law wants to put a end to my kind, it’s not safe to have me seen on the streets....it is said my picture is at a site for ‘INTERPOL’ so no place on earth is safe...”<sup>12</sup>

More letters in this vein continued through 2012 and 2013, outlining increasingly paranoid fears of being sold as a sex slave or having his face slashed and being forcibly removed from society by the police. These fears were also on his mind during some of his sporadic visits to the gallery to drop off new work, and he mentioned suicide on more than one occasion. But he told Aarne he had promised Aunt Celia he would never kill himself as long as she was alive.

Linda Dominguez, with whom the artist maintained a strong bond throughout his life, has made her career as a nurse practitioner in New Mexico. Emphasizing the close connection between diet and psychological stability, she has made the pertinent observation that bouts of paranoia, such as her cousin was clearly experiencing in his last years, can be exacerbated or directly caused by inadequate nutrition. A history of psychological problems and past suicides in his mother’s family also indicates a possible genetic factor underlying Dominguez’s late psychological problems.

As the leaves were falling in New York the autumn of 2013, Dominguez received a letter from Linda informing him that their aunt was seriously ill and declining rapidly. About a week later, in early November, he arrived in Fort Worth. Most of his time over the next several weeks was spent by his aunt's bedside, until her death on Christmas Eve. He stayed on into the early weeks of 2014 to help close her house and take care of some related family business. Then, in the third week of April, he left Fort Worth, presumably bound for New York. He never made it back to the city. Perhaps his paranoid fantasies began to overwhelm him as his bus or train approached the familiar skyline on his horizon. In any case, he stopped twenty-five miles short of the city he had once called his mother. His body was found soon after he took his life.

In light of the Christian imagery that appears in some of Dominguez's late paintings, it is particularly significant that he chose to make his exit on Holy Saturday. Traditionally this day commemorates the transition between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection—after Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried but before he rose again and ascended into heaven. This mythological transition recalls the upper right corner of that big painting from the 14th Street tunnel, in which the homeless stick figure has evidently escaped the maze of stairways, left through the EXIT, and stepped out into the open beyond.

## **10. Sophisticated Outsider**

Twenty-five years ago Anthony Dominguez became a societal outsider by choice—a choice that also set him apart from the mainstream art world. For that reason his work

was most often shown during his lifetime in outsider-art contexts, but his history of art studies and commercial-art practice has always complicated his identification in those terms. In addition to his exhibitions at American Primitive Gallery and other venues previously mentioned here, his work was included in several of the American Visionary Art Museum's annual mega-exhibitions; presented in the Czech Republic in his first solo show, in 1995 at the Gallery U Recickych, Prague; featured at other important commercial galleries, including Cavin-Morris in New York and Philadelphia's Janet Fleisher Gallery; and shown at this publication's sponsoring venue, the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, College of Charleston, in "Obey and Slay: Art from the Street," a dual exhibition with Charleston native Shepard Fairey—an inspired pairing—in October and November of 2001.

Given the span of twenty-plus years during which Dominguez's art has been a known quantity, nationally and internationally, these bursts of attention have been relatively few and far between. Perhaps one reason his work hasn't received more widespread notice is that many collectors specializing in so-called outsider art don't see him as a true outsider, and too few other private and institutional collectors have been made aware of his art. Even among those who have known of his work for some time, most have seen only a small fraction of his prodigious output, and few have any sense of his creative arc—how rapidly and almost-constantly his work changed and developed while staying true to its fundamental characteristics. In group exhibitions, his paintings have sometimes been overwhelmed by "louder" work.

This project is intended to sort out some of these issues regarding the presentation and reception of Dominguez's work. It is of course literally a crying shame he hasn't lived to witness it. Contrary to popular myth, an artist's reputation and the market value of his work aren't necessarily enhanced by his death. Many factors, including luck and chance, figure into the equation. But death certainly puts a period on the career, at least theoretically bringing it to completion so it can be reviewed as a whole, from start to finish. That is the aim here—to commemorate an extraordinary, under-recognized artist, to lend some context to his defiantly unconventional life, and, especially, to celebrate his provocative, profoundly amusing, constantly shape-shifting art.

Considering Dominguez's acute psychological distress during those final years and the heartbreaking circumstances of his death, it is easy and tempting to view him as a tragic figure. But for those with eyes to see and affinities for his critical take on society, the substantial body of art he left behind provides a stronger, more lasting impression. It is the work of a heroic figure, a true American original.

#### **NOTES:**

1. Except where otherwise indicated, information about Anthony Dominguez, and his quotes, are taken from conversations and correspondence with the author beginning in 2001. I have transcribed the conversations using traditional punctuation and spelling. Dominguez's written quotes are reprinted verbatim and reflect his idiosyncratic writing style. Other useful sources not specifically mentioned in the essay include *The End is Near: Visions of Apocalypse, Millennium and Utopia / Works from the American Visionary Art Museum* (Los Angeles: Dilettante Press, 1998), 132–33; and Jenifer

Borum's review of Dominguez's spring 2001 exhibition at the Arts Alliance of Haverstraw, New York, *Raw Vision* (*Raw Vision* #36, Fall 2001, p. 67).

2. Another artist whom American Primitive Gallery represents is Charles Benefiel, who also created a strikingly distinctive, personally customized leather jacket at around the same time Dominguez was wearing his own. Benefiel's related comments, quoted by Julian Stern in "Accidental Magic," *Brut Force* (March 4, 2015), <http://brutforce.com/accidental-magic/>, are pertinent here: "When you were in the punk scene, you could wear your politics on your sleeve with your leather jacket. The jackets ended up being really intricate forms of personal armor, and in a scene where people were literally looking to kill each other on a daily basis, armor came in handy."
3. Tina White Anton founded Art on the Edge: Art Program for the Homeless, in 1993, and operated it for three years. Evaluating the project in its final year, she wrote, "Being an artist myself, I've used an artist's eye in looking at the creativity of numerous homeless artists in NYC. The project revealed a great deal about the harshness of life and times in urban America today. For the past three years I have worked to help some of these artists by providing art materials, encouragement, and a link to the artworld with exhibitions and opportunities to sell their art ... to make opportunities and visibility for some of these artists now."
4. The author is indebted to Linda Dominguez, Anthony's first cousin, for providing invaluable information about his childhood and upbringing in several telephone conversations with the author in June 2016. She also shared useful insights into his life in New York, where she enjoyed several happy reunions with him during his years on the streets.
5. A chronology of awards, exhibitions, and other art-related milestones in Dominguez's life through the early 1990s is included in a document prepared by the artist at that time and recently provided to the author by American Primitive Gallery. Information on Dominguez's Fort Worth mural, along with color photographs of the mural, was provided to the gallery in an email dated September 13, 2005, by an acting collection manager for Fort Worth's public-art program. A copy of this document was recently provided to the author.

6. For more on Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), see *Total Freedom: The Essential Krishnamurti* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).
7. The account of Dominguez’s hospitalization and his father’s trip to visit him was shared with the author by Linda Dominguez in a telephone conversation in June 2016. The Fort Worth Public Library’s genealogy department confirmed Pris Dominguez’s death on November 28, 1990.
8. “Street-savvy: New and recent works by Curtis Cuffie, Anthony Dominguez, Lonnie Holley, Kevin Blythe Sampson, Herbert Singleton, and Gregory Warmack aka Mr. Imagination,” guest-curated by the author, Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, Jamaica, Queens, New York, January–March 2002. See Edward W. Puchner’s review of this exhibition in *Raw Vision*, no. 39 (Summer 2002), 65.
9. Quotations from Dominguez’s conversation with the author on September 25, 2001, previously appeared in his article, “Street-savvy: The Urban Street Art of Curtis Cuffie, Kevin Sampson & Anthony Dominguez,” *Folk Art* (Fall 2002), 46–53. A detail from Dominguez’s painting *No Luggage Required* was reproduced on the issue’s cover.
10. The author included several of Dominguez’s paintings in “High on Life: Transcending Addiction,” the eighth annual “mega-exhibition” at the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore (October 2002–September 2003), for which he was guest curator. The author also wrote about Dominguez’s work in articles that appeared in *Art Papers* and *Raw Vision*; see Patterson, “Dust Storms In The Parallel Art Universe,” *Art Papers* (November/December 2001), 36–42, and “Art Along the Boundaries,” *Raw Vision*, no. 46 (Spring 2004), 32–39.
11. *The Life of an Outdoor Artist*, eight-minute video of exchanges between the artist and host Clayton Patterson, downloaded by TajCam, December 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AQtdGuiA-E>. Clayton Gallery: The Outlaw Art Museum, at 161 Essex Street, closed around the time of Dominguez’s death. See Alan Feuer, “Last Bohemian Turns Out the Lights: Clayton Patterson, Rebel and Photographer Plans to Leave the Lower East Side for Europe,” *New York Times* online, April 4, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/nyregion/clayton-patterson->

[rebel-and-photographer-plans-to-leave-the-lower-east-side-for-europe.html?\\_r=1;](#)

(published in print April 6).

12. Quotations in this paragraph are from photocopies of the artist's correspondence with Aarne Anton, who provided them to the author.