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A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

Susan Thayer Akers

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DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ART

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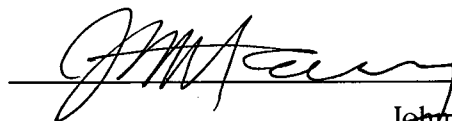
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John Stocking
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Patrick Lloyd
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Department of Environmental Design

May 5, 1994
Date

ABSTRACT

Flexibility connotes a state of openness, a condition of the mind which allows for the possibility of experiencing the variability of life. It is this state which forms the foundation for how I proceed in the world. The exhibition 'Bench•mark' consists of an installation of eight benches and a shelf supporting various objects which explore the contradictions within nature from this perspective of tolerance.

The accompanying support paper begins with a philosophical positioning of ideas in the context of existence. This is followed by a survey of the formal and conceptual considerations of the sculptures made prior to 'Bench•mark'. Having established the personal context of the work, these sculptures are then discussed relative to historical influences. The paper concludes with a commentary on the exhibition and its philosophical relevance within my own existence.

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DEDICATION

To my dog Targhee

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INTRODUCTION

My graduate experience has been in constant flux; an evolution of awareness and a shift in environment. The presence of flexibility and change itself has surfaced as integral to an all-encompassing philosophy within my work. This underlying philosophy has guided my work away from definitions, absolutes, and final truths. It has been essential for me to remain free to reflect upon and respond to situations as they occur in life.

The process of supporting my work has revealed underlying consistencies that have given clarity to sensibilities; consistencies that reveal inconsistencies, thinking which reveals insights. The process of examining my own work in order to defend it has resembled a search for understanding myself through the work and the work through my self. The realization most relevant to this paper is that there is more truth to be found within the gray area between two terms and in the contradictions that are a part of life. Working in these areas, it is not a resolution of terms or an establishment of one term over the other that I seek, but a recognition of the interdependence of the terms, a realization that it is the clash of opposites that is more interesting than the opposites themselves. Arte Povera's expression of 'mediation' best describes my sensibility;

In opposition to the affirmation of immutable and perfect nature...stands an iconoclast attitude and working method that takes account of the problems of real existence and moves in relation to the multiplicity of contexts and of times. For this reason, one must reject all absolute definitions and remain on the plane of attention, in order to acknowledge to art a function of mediation, not of rigid definition.¹

¹ Germano Celant, *Arte Povera Arte Povera* (Milan: Electa, 1985), p. 26-27.

As a source of elucidation for the thesis exhibition, 'Bench-mark', this paper attempts to reveal the process of my conscious evolution concerning the work and its connection to a broader scope of issues.

Chapter One provides an informal 'window' into how I draw connections within the physical and emotional world around me. The logic of some connections is not always apparent and sometimes may not even exist. The point of this chapter is to demonstrate that in thinking about art and life, I prefer to allow my mind to 'play' where it finds the 'glitches' in life, the places where contradictions appear. For me, these locations are where I find what Joseph Campbell feels we are all looking for,

...an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.²

Chapter Two discusses the formal and conceptual considerations of each sculpture made during the graduate program prior to the thesis exhibition. The relevance of these pieces, in this case, is of undeniable importance toward a thorough understanding of the work. Each sculpture is part of an ongoing process, a process that, hopefully, will never reach a conclusion, yet will parallel the constant state of flux indicative of life. The intention of this chapter is to clarify the terms with which the artwork is made and to provide an honest foundation for relating it to the context of an academic discussion.

Chapter Three attempts to position the body of work within a historical context. In this endeavor, the flexibility of my sensibilities became apparent, revealing a discrepancy of perspective. Like the head-tailed cat, the work is form-contented, meaning that the form

² Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 5.

and the content are inseparable, they are of one piece.³ To separate one from the other would restrict the experience of the whole. For the cat, it would mean death; for a work of art, it would simply be incomplete. It is much simpler to focus attention upon the physical aspects, as vision (unless one is blind) is our most immediate connection to perceiving the world around us. That is to say that, in this case, as we are trained to focus our attention by 'looking' at objects, we are caught in the trap of seeing only one aspect of the whole. From this perspective, in terms of attempting to connect the work to historical influences, the difficulty arises when the intention connected to the form of one does not continue into the intention of similar forms. Conversely, the form connected to the intention of another does not carry forth into similar intentions. The reason for this inconsistency appears to be the difference in context in which the objects were made. This chapter, therefore, attempts to deal with this variability through an interweaving of context, form, and intention.

Chapter Four discusses the final exhibition. The intention is that the previous chapters have provided insight and will serve as foundation for the experience of 'Bench·mark.' The paper and the work merge at this point into a complete understanding of how art enhances my own existence.

³ Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), pp. 27-28.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

I was in the municipal park just now. The root of the chestnut tree plunged into the ground just underneath my bench. I no longer remembered that it was a root. Words had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things, the methods of using them, the feeble landmarks which men have traced on the surface.⁴

In this chapter, the aim is to investigate the workings of my mind, to allow an insight into my own process of associating ideas, for this is where the resonances and the points of convergence concentrate. For me, it is the obscure details in life that elicit inspiration and it is this unmediated perception with which I strive to imbue my sculpture. I want to explore in an immediate and tactile way the insights which spark my consciousness and I hope that possibly the result of this exploration will provide a source of contemplation for others.

It is going to be another gorgeous day. The mountains are turning a salmon pink hue. On my second cup of chamomile tea and still pondering, what does it mean? For the better part of the last two years this question has been a quintessential one. Initially, meaning had been in relation to the work, but eventually, this simple little question had infiltrated all other aspects of life. Is the question directed toward the art object's purpose, its significance, or its intention? Or, is the question, 'what is my purpose, significance, or intention?' The two questions are one and the same. The work is not separate from me. My gaze returns to the awakening mountains.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 182.

Maybe significance and meaning in life are equivalent to the reason for existence. That would certainly explain why the question has become such a preoccupation. To question the purpose of my work seems to be the same as questioning my reason for existing. How can I ever answer that? For Antoine Roquentin, a French philosopher in the early twentieth century, the mere experience of a tree root unfolded the mystery of existence;

..existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost its harmless appearance as an abstract category: it was the very stuff of things, that root was steeped in existence.⁵ But faced with that big rugged paw, neither ignorance nor knowledge had any importance; the world of explanations and reasons is not that of existence....That root...existed in so far that I could not explain it. Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me, filled my eyes, repeatedly brought me back to its own existence. ...I saw clearly that you could not pass from its function as a root, as a suction-pump, to that, to that hard, compact sea-lion skin, to that oily, horny, stubborn look. The function explained nothing; it enabled you to understand in general what a root was, but not that one at all. That root, with its colour, its shape, its frozen moment, was...beneath all explanation.⁶

This response to an experience of nature is so revealing, so powerful, that I can only try to remember instances in my own life when something has evoked that sense of having 'seen' something that obviously holds a key to understanding yet which is gone immediately upon thinking the key has been given. These experiences for me have been impossible to convey verbally; their significance seems to be lost in their relating. However, in my sculpture, I find that the softened edges of steel and the raised grain of old planks of wood come close to expressing these experiences. The nature of these materials

⁵ Ibid., p. 183.

⁶ Ibid., p. 185-186.

elicits a sense of immediate insight, a sense of reality that mirrors the experience of 'organic nature,' the kind of nature over which humanity has no control, raw nature. In this nature, I find a relationship with existence that is rooted in an 'astonishment of what is.'⁷ My reaction is not to define and explain my experience of wonder, but to simply identify it and proceed from it with respect. The action of making art, then, becomes, at times, a mediation of experiences.

The Sophist, Phaedrus, comes to mind with his search for quality. He had come to the conclusion that quality is absolute, that it is independent of all other things and that everything else derives from quality. For Phaedrus, quality is reality⁸ and this reality is always the moment of insight before intellectualization occurs.⁹ Phaedrus' quality, if I were to ignore its absolutism, parallels my vision of nature. It also appears to parallel Roquentin's perception of existence. They are reality, or in less definitive terms, an aspect of reality. As such, they are beyond rationalization; any attempt to define or categorize results in illusion or in what Buddhist philosophy terms avidya, or ignorance.¹⁰

Quality. Phaedrus' search for quality grew out of what he perceived as society's lack of connection with their work resulting in a lack of craftsmanship, a lack of caring.

In the nature of art...there's a kind of inner peace of mind that isn't contrived but results from a kind of harmony with the work in which there's no leader and no follower. The material and the craftsman's thought change together in a progression of smooth, even changes until his mind is at rest at the exact instant the material is right. ...When one isn't dominated by feelings of separateness from what he's working on, then one can be said to 'care' about

⁷ Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 71.

⁸ Robert M. Persig, *Zen and the art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam, 1975), p. 248.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁰ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (Boston: Shambala, 1991), p. 24.

what he's doing. That is what caring really is, a feeling of identification with what one's doing. When one has this feeling then he also sees the inverse side of caring, Quality itself.¹¹

For my process, this sense of caring is essential. In the construction of my steel structures, I am not striving to manipulate the material to obey my ideas. Rather, it is a melding of the two; an equilibrium of the idea and the essential qualities of materials. This attitude may be the result of my assumed position of equality; I do not presume to have control, yet I am not being controlled either. If I listen to the elements with my eyes and ears, then abstract ideas evolve into more substantial forms. This is epitomized by the treatment of the surface of the steel. To polish and grind away the marks of time is to exercise dominion over the essential qualities of the steel. Had I done this, the structures would appear lifeless and cold to me. Instead, the surfaces reflect the very nature of their being. This sensibility echoes my basic understanding of living a dynamic existence. In looking for the essential qualities, I have been able to prune the unnecessary, the superfluous from my life.

The river never stops flowing, and the water is never the same. The bubbles that float in the pools, now disappearing, now coming into being, never last. So it is in the world with people and their dwellings. . . . People die in the morning and are born in the evening, not knowing where they come from, nor where they are going, like bubbles on the water.¹²

This opening passage of the *Hojoki*, as taken from Inoue's Space in Japanese Architecture, not only relates the transitory nature of life as viewed in Buddhist philosophy, but also describes a foundation for fascination of life. In viewing life as a constant stream

¹¹ Robert M. Persig, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

¹² Kamo no Chomei, *Hojoki* (The ten-square-foot hut; 1212), in *Nihon koten bungaku zenshu*, ed. Hideo Kanda, vol. 27 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1971), p. 27.

of mutability, as a bubble on the surface of the water, one engages in an existence of chance encounters and astonishments. One can never know, as a bubble, what direction the flow will travel. For me, this is the beauty of existence; to not direct the flow, but to be open to the fluidity of possibilities.

Herein lies a perplexing point in relation to art. Why would the interaction with nature cause some artists to control and manipulate nature as demonstration of man's will? Malevich's use of the square relates directly to his desire to express the intellect's supremacy over nature.¹³ This view assumes the Cartesian split, the division of reality into mind and matter. It also assumes a position of control through the systematic categorization of matter. Malevich and others--who believe in the power of geometry as a beacon for humanity to overcome the chaos of nature--are not seeing the beauty of the harmony between the rational and the irrational. Instead, they view themselves as being in conflict with the illogical, thus, resulting in the need to dominate. Ironically, the view of nature as the balance of mind and matter reveals Cartesian humanity as being in conflict with the essence of itself. In comparison to this Cartesian sensibility of control and order, Isamu Noguchi assumes a place of harmony as existing in the world. He relates his own concern;

...it seems to me that the natural mediums of wood and stone, alive before man was, have the greater capacity to comfort us with the reality of our being. They are as familiar to us as the earth, a matter of sensibility. In our times we think to control nature, only to find that in the end it escapes us. I for one return recurrently to the earth in my search for the meaning of sculpture - to escape fragmentation with a new synthesis, within the sculpture and related to spaces.¹⁴

¹³ Aaron Scharf, 'Suprematism', *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. by Nikos Stangos, (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1981), p. 138.

¹⁴ Takahiko Okada, 'The Theater of The World in a Garden', in *Isamu Noguchi* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1986), p. 9.

Noguchi's view reflects a respect for the intrinsic qualities of natural materials. His method was to 'bring out latent shapes and qualities' which are inherent in wood and stone.¹⁵ My own work reflects a similar sensibility for the expressive nature of materials; yet, it further explores the potential existential expressiveness of fabricated materials such as steel. It appears to me that steel, as processed iron ore, has the same potential for expressing the intrinsic qualities of nature. It is processed reality and as such, integral to our twentieth-century existence. In his search for the perfect spring to propel his catapult, Harry's experience in a scrap metal yard results in exclamations equal to Roquentin's experience of the root;

God--look at this thing! Look at these tubes! Look at the rust on this thing! You know how much this thing weighs? Look at this--how many times in your life do you get to see things like this?¹⁶

The words are a different poetry, but both are reacting to an experience of nature that reveals for them the nature of existence at that time. For me, this nature is in the coyote scat with hair protruding at each end, in the way my dog looks out over the valley and listens to the sounds of the neighbors waking up, in the piling of rocks, and in the continual fascination I find in the 'stuff of things.' To control nature by imposing a rigid set of rules and definitions, to assume dominance by introducing laws of proportion and hard-lined geometry is to allow the need for understanding existence to overwhelm the possibility of experiencing existence.

The perspective of materialism in the modern world, with its adoration of logic, has made us forget that both sides of our consciousness perceive different aspects of the truth. Unless we are able to be aware of both the finite and the infinite, both the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁶ Jim Paul, *Catapult: Harry and I Build a Siege Weapon* (New York: Avon Books, 1991), p. 70.

conscious and the unconscious, and how they interpenetrate, we will remain imprisoned within a one-sided consciousness - a consciousness that is unable to feel at one with the universe as a whole.¹⁷

It was the juxtaposition of a pile of river rocks with a fabricated, rectangular, steel platform that was to become a foundation of sorts for the rest of my work. Judith Schwartz came into the studio on October 24, 1991, and after a brief discussion, described my sculpture, Bedrock, as 'metaphysical.' Metaphysical literally means beyond the physical. After research, according to Kant, metaphysical means the thing in itself is no thing. It transcends thingness, it goes past anything that could be thought.¹⁸ I am not sure if transcending thingness was what she had intended to say. My understanding at the time was that the work for her prompted an existential sort of contemplation. The positioning of raw nature within structures suggestive of the rigidity of society intimated a feeling that I was questioning humanity's existence. Her response to the work initiated this exploration into the philosophical potential of my sensibilities. In the process, I refined an awareness of the intentions that informed my sculpture.

¹⁷ *Impossible Realities: Marcel Duchamp and the Surrealist Tradition*. Norton Simon Museum, Los Angeles, CA, October 1991.

¹⁸ Joseph Campbell, op. cit., p. 49.

PIECES OF THE PROCESS

The premise of this paper is to support the thesis exhibition 'Bench·mark.' It is appropriate to preface a discussion of the historical and contemporary context with a view of the works and the process that have informed the thesis. Therefore, this chapter will concentrate on the work produced prior to the pieces in the exhibition. It will discuss, primarily, the impetus behind each piece, the formal concerns, the conscious intention, and the unconscious implications. Hopefully, the 'clues' in this chapter will bring clarity to the experience of 'Bench·mark.'

Bedrock, 1991, (figure 1-2) evolved out of my experience of constructing garden benches and other hand-crafted pieces of furniture while working for a welding shop in Boulder, Colorado before entering into the MFA program. The benches were rectilinear steel bases with iron patterned borders and sandstone tops set into angle iron. The style appeared Southwestern or Mediterranean in its use of pattern and material. In translating the bench concept into 'art,' I wanted to emphasize the particular qualities of the materials and not the function of the form. The rectangular platform supported by four square-tubular posts finished to spire points reiterated the 'bench' form. However, I treated the steel work less decoratively; instead of a functional flat stone, I piled river rocks on top of the platform. The juxtaposition of form and material suggests possibilities beyond its immediate reality which is why I called it Bedrock. The rocks allude to nature, the steel frame alludes to furniture and architecture, and together they allude (by way of the pun-like title) to stability in the Earth's crust.

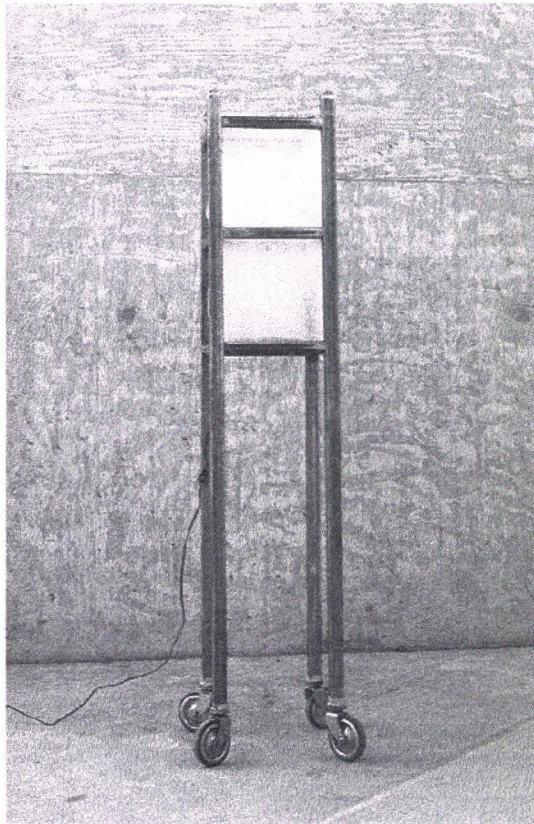


Figure 1-1 Susan Thayer Akers, Anti-Static Machine, 1991

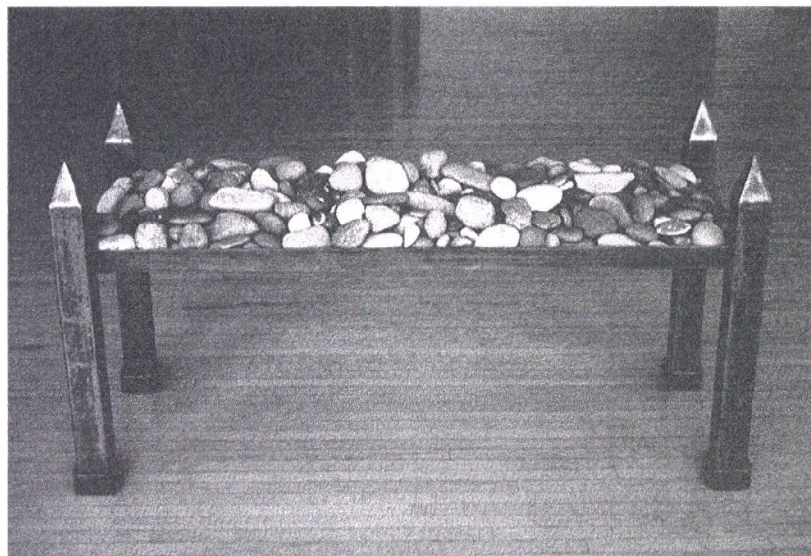


Figure 1-2 Susan Thayer Akers, Bedrock, 1991

Nature's Nipple (for Jodie), 1991, (figure 2-2) is an ironically humorous piece. I found a gorgeous one thousand pound interior gravel crushing cone at the scrap yard and, with some effort, brought it back to my studio. It sat there for a couple of months, stressing the concrete floor. The shape and rusted disposition of the cone suggested an earthen mound like Silbury Hill in England. There were other pieces of steel and more rocks piled around the studio, so I began to play with the possibilities of taking the earthen mound-shape further. On the top of the cone is a large hole that was covered perfectly by a disk from an old disk harrow (a piece of farm machinery for turning up the soil). It resembled an enormous rusty Art Deco tea kettle at that state. Intent upon preserving the intrinsic qualities of the materials, I refused to cut into or weld onto the steel parts. I wanted the characteristics of the materials to animate the process of construction. In the center of the disc was another small hole. I found a rock that just covered it. Like the key in a stone arch, this rock held the tension of the piece. The stone, like the cone and the disc, was akin to a half sphere. Alluding to its nippleness in contrast to their moundness, it sat erect on top of the two steel mound shapes. The name, Nature's Nipple (for Jodie), playfully refers to the form, but also suggests a further connection with the fertility of the earth. The elevation of the form onto an I-beam frame with casters makes the connection tenuous. The intention was to facilitate moving the piece, but the elevation creates the illusion that the mound is hovering.

Anti Static Machine, 1991, (figure 1-1) was my immediate response to the phenomenon of city life. Having lived in either the countryside or in semi-rural areas for the previous ten years, I was not comfortable living in a city with neighbors only 10 feet away. I walked my dog, Targhee, every night after coming home from the studio at around 11-12 PM. What struck me was not the fear of walking the neighborhood at that time of night, but the smell of dryer sheets. It seemed both natural and unfortunate that so

few people in the city dried their clothes on a clothesline. It appeared that everyone just put their wash in the dryer before going to bed; the smell of dryer sheets permeated the air. I found this to be a very humorous observation, especially since most of my friends in the city had never noticed it. It occurred to me that none of them had dogs, so of course they were not routinely walking their neighborhoods at that particular time of night. The frequency of the smell caused me to consider the dryer sheet phenomenon even more. What is the purpose of a dryer sheet? It's not simply to make clothes smell fresh, although they do that, but their purpose is to remove the static from the dryer so that the clothes do not cling. Therefore, in actuality, they are anti-static-make-things-smell-fresh sheets. In continuing this idea, it appeared possible to comment on the dryer sheet by recontextualizing it to accentuate the dryer sheet's anti-static aspect. This twist seemed appropriate as it somehow related to the personal context of situating myself in a new academic system that would certainly have the potential for static. I made a structure similar to a standing Noguchi lantern with a fan and 8 dryer sheets. There were casters on the legs so I could move it to necessary locations and plug it in. During a slide presentation of my work, I positioned Anti-Static Machine in the front of the room to the right of the slide screen. The smell permeated the air and was too overwhelming for even me. There were only a few people present but I think they found the humor in the apparent subversive nature of the piece.

Bag of Tricks, 1991, (figure.2-1) was the beginning of a series of flirtations with the ordinary, electrical, ceramic insulator. In the basement of my first house in Calgary was a box of old electrical insulators that varied in shape. Some were long and skinny, others were stubby and short. The most humorous ones were the long skinny ones used to run wire through old rafters and beams. These particular insulators were ceramic tubes with heads. The phallic nature of their form became the mainspring behind miniature

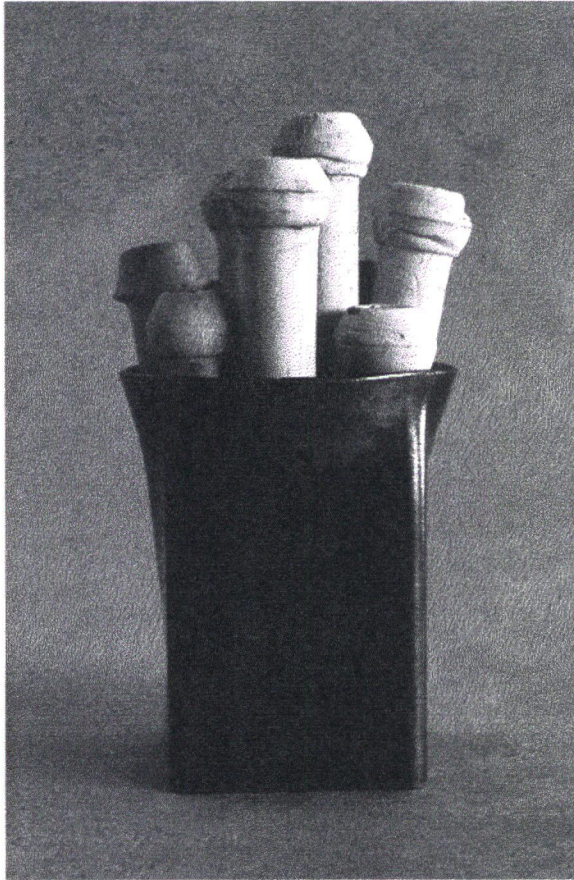


Figure 2-1 Susan Thayer Akers, Bag of Tricks, 1991

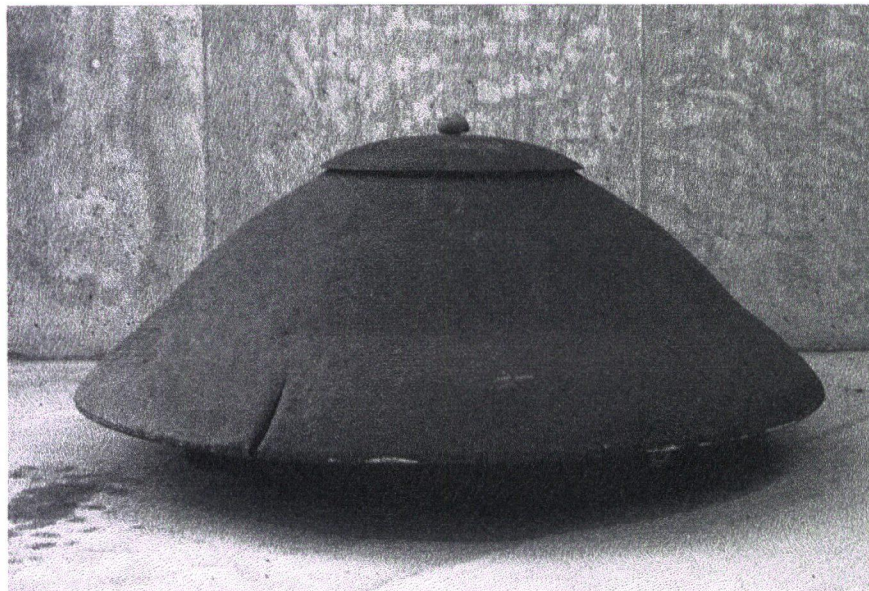


Figure 2-2 Susan Thayer Akers, Nature's Nipple (for Jodie), 1991

constructions that appeared to be very simple compositions in material form. There were certainly underlying meanings to be explored through the connotations of materials.

Caravan, 1992, was an attempt to make something out of the stock-piled collection of scrap metal, lumber pieces, and rocks lying about the studio. Like Nature's Nipple (for Jodie), the intention was to let the nature of the material suggest the form. Rusty brake drums and knobby gears with wooden dowels, strips of canvas, and cast, concrete shapes were the primary components. What evolved suggested a wind powered train whose potential for movement was hopeless; it was too heavy to move. The knobby wheels imbedded into the linoleum from the weight of its load. In its amalgamation of materials and in the formal suggestion of mechanics, Caravan was a rather whimsical piece. However, the multiplicity of elements seemed to dominate any possibility of moving beyond the mere irony of functional impossibility.

Caravan lacked the vibrancy which previous sculptures, such as Bedrock, seemed to have. In retrospect, this may be the result of a more formally orchestrated process; the elements appear to have been controlled and manipulated into the final form. The complexity of the elements overwhelmed the potential for contemplation, thereby restricting any possibility of suggesting anything beyond its own materiality. There were certain parts of the piece that were interesting, but as a whole, Caravan was too literal and formal. Its value was in its illustration of a personal preference that clarified the understanding of an aesthetic of my own; simple abstraction and minimal elements seemed to arrive at more contemplative works.

Brownian Motion, 1992, (figure 3-1) was concerned with particles suspended in space and the random movement of those particles. It was also in response to what I felt at the time to be an over intellectualization of artwork. Few people seemed to be 'looking'

with anything other than the rational side of their brain. Language seemed to be dominating contemporary art, and in fact, it seemed to have become the art. I felt that the art world had become a process of talking and theorizing, not making. There also appeared an assumed hierarchy implicit in this process, a resurfacing of valuing the literal intellect over intuition and other levels of consciousness. It appeared that a discussion of the theoretical position, of which the work was merely an illustration, was preferable to one of process and experience.

The intention in Brownian Motion was to make the point that my personal means of communicating reflects my understanding of the nature of materials and that the reason much of the 'art world' did not understand what I was doing was because they were not looking into the materials and interacting with them, they were only looking at the physical material. The installation was to seduce people into recognizing that a sensual language is also a verbal language; both are communication. The motivation may have been reactionary and naive, but I think there was (and still is) a point to be made here. Verbal and visual communications are essential to our understanding of life. Yet, most people are more accustomed to verbal communication than they are to communication through other levels of consciousness. As the whole consciousness experiences life, it seems unfortunate to cultivate and value only one aspect of the mind to the detriment and ultimate negation of other aspects.

Brownian Motion was an installation occupying the space of the Little Gallery. Supporting the piece was a steel grid suspended from the ceiling. Manila ropes went through the junctures of the grid, across pulleys, and back down through another juncture. I tied all sorts of materials that I use or collect to the ends of the ropes: wood, brick, rock, glass, steel, concrete, clay, etc. The idea was that should anyone cause one 'thing' to move in the space that another 'thing' would move. For the opening, I suspended the

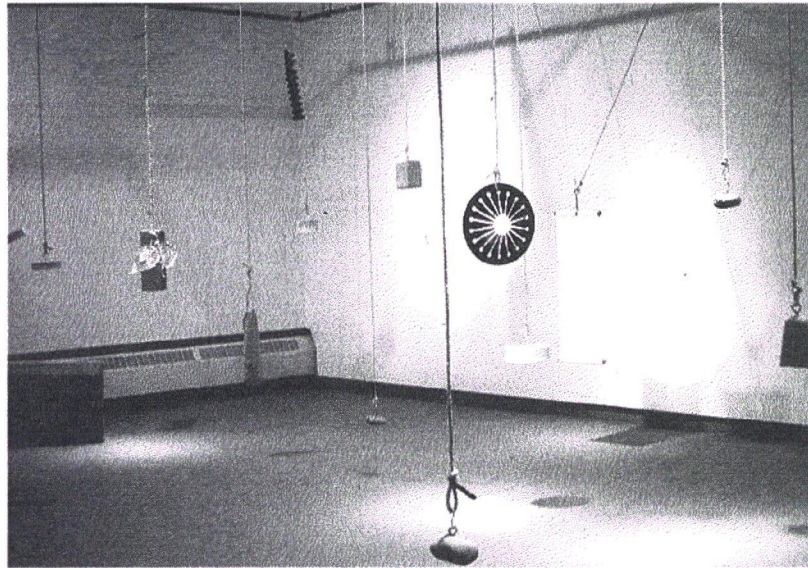


Figure 3-1 Susan Thayer Akers, Brownian Motion, 1992

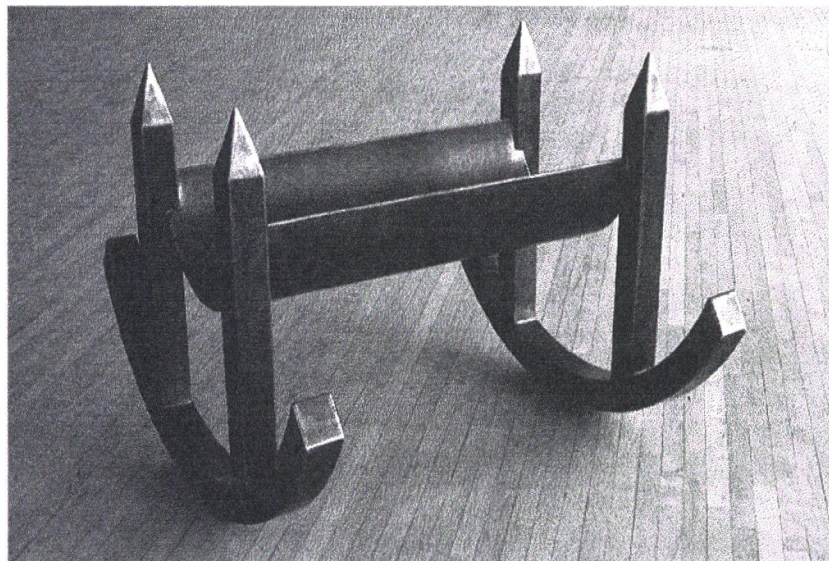


Figure 3-2 Susan Thayer Akers, Cradle, 1992

bowls of fruit, dip, crackers, and cheese from some of the ropes so that people would indeed interact with the piece and not just stand at the door and stare in. The opening was a sarcastic and blatant expression of seduction by incorporating directly into the work that which most people consume at openings...the food.

Cradle, 1992, (figure 3-2) evolved out of Bedrock and initiated a series that explored the concept of juxtaposing furniture forms with contradictory materials. I intended it to be a rocking barbecue, but it stopped where it is now, without sides or a grill. The end pieces seemed to ruin the open fluidity of the rockers and the trough. I had made a futon for it in an attempt to resolve the form with the original idea, but the combination was too literal. It made no connotations other than to Frankenstein's cradle. There appeared to be no material that would poetically dislocate the conventional interpretation of a cradle. Its context may still be the most metaphoric location of the juxtaposition. It might have worked better if I had put it out in the middle of a field by itself (sans futon), so that someone could come along and rock under the wide, Alberta sky. This piece is still unresolved to date and might simply be torched apart.

Ladders, 1992, (figure 4-1) is a companion to Cradle and is also in a state of flux. The steel ladders supporting both ends of an open trough allude to bunk beds and jungle gyms. At one point, fescue grew out of the trough, but the combination did not resonate, so I removed the fescue. Both Ladders and Cradle remain unresolved. Instead of forcing a resolution, they are monuments to a place in time when I was unclear of my intentions. They have remained in my mind as structures without skins; they never really came alive. Because of this, their only apparent potential is in their formal qualities that obscure my intentions.

4 X 5 (4 by 5), 1992, (figure 4-2) was another installation piece. It comprised a collection of 20 two foot cubes constructed of square tubing. Each cube was elevated and mobilized by casters. The top platforms carried a variety of materials -- both organic and manmade. Bricks, tar, fescue, salt, charcoal briquettes, wood, sand, rocks, concrete, and checker plate constituted some of the materials on the tops. The intention was for people to come into the gallery, make their own assumptions about the materials, and then to arrange them, or not, into whatever configurations they chose, thereby reflecting their own assumptions regarding the implications of the materials. By placing the materials in a mobile situation in a gallery, I presented aspects of the environment for consideration and manipulation.

During the critique, the focus was on the contradictions inherent within the piece -- that coarse salt did not coincide logically with paving stones or grass and that charcoal briquettes made no sense whatsoever in the juxtaposition of manmade and/or organic 'nature.' Making sense became the central argument. The essential point for me was that the piece could simultaneously make sense and no sense. The conclusion depended upon the philosophical perspective of the viewer. If one is accustomed to linearity and logical resolutions in work, then contradictions would appear to obscure the 'meaning.' Conversely, if one views the illogical as potentially providing some sort of insight, then it enriches the meaning of the work. If there had been no potential of insight and if all juxtapositions had followed a logical format, the process of the piece would have ended on paper. I view contradictions as an essential part of life. Their ambiguity arises when we attempt to define an aspect of life that is beyond definition and it is this uncertainty that transcends logic. Although I did not see the salt and the charcoal as contradictions, they were distant enough to dislocate a linear way of thinking. Salt is sprinkled on walks to melt ice. Charcoal, although man-made in this form, is a product of natural forest fires.

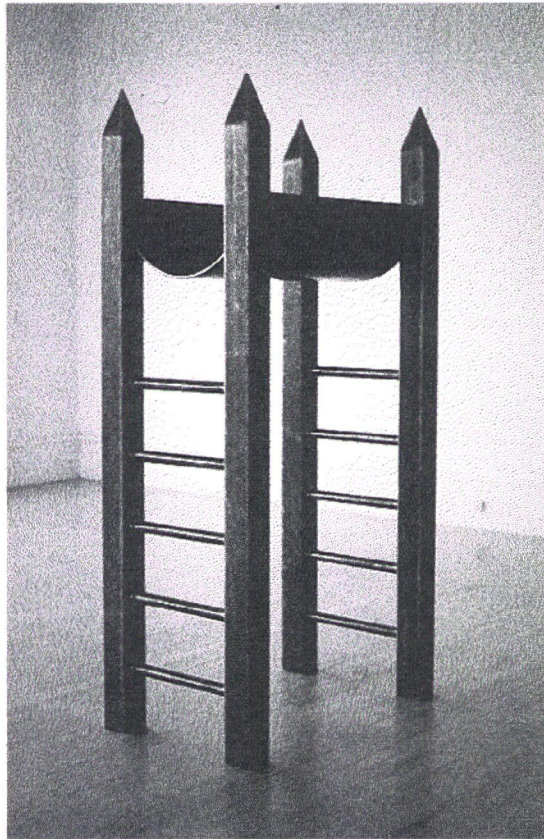


Figure 4-1 Susan Thayer Akers, Ladders, 1992

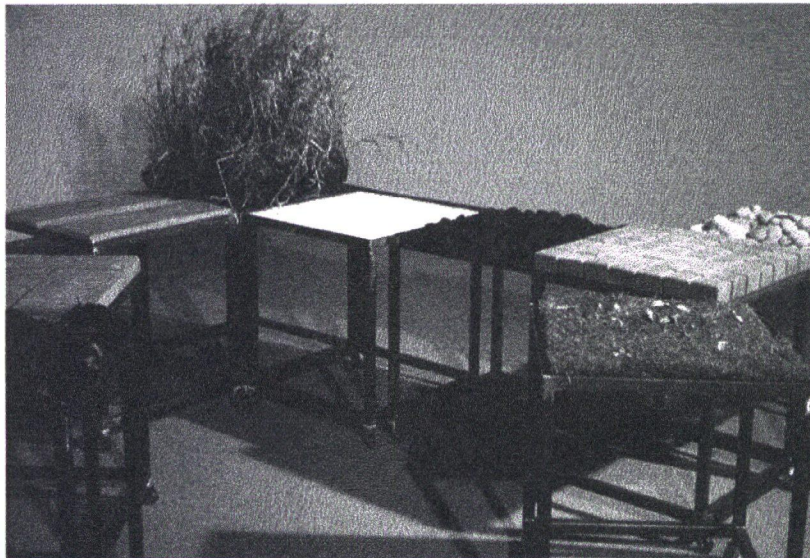


Figure 4-2 Susan Thayer Akers, 4 X 5 (4 by 5), 1992

4 X 5 (4 by 5) concerned itself with material usage, context, and the forming of environments. The simple tabletop format brought materials that are usually under foot, up to a new height for consideration. The supporting structure, the cube and by extension, the grid, alluded to the nature of social structures that use and manipulate the landscape. As mobile units of a grid, the cubes could be maneuvered to either align the grid or to subvert and skew it. This interaction represented the participation of humanity in the perpetuation of accepted notions of structures that help define our perception of nature.

Bedknot, 1992, (figure 5-2) is a similar structure to Bedrock, continuing the idea of juxtaposing furniture forms with contradictory material. This piece is also a platform supported by four legs made of heavy square tubing finished in spire points. The platform in this piece consists of a thick piece of uniformly perforated plate through which drop equal lengths of manila rope. These ropes are knotted at one end; the loose end of each piece is bound by whipping with waxed cord: a traditional nautical method to prevent unraveling. The simplicity of the juxtaposition alludes most directly to eroticism by way of the knots. Beyond the pun, the knots suggest other concepts of binding, non-linearity, and impasse. Unlike Cradle and Ladders, Bedknot seems to have reached a point where the structure and the rope bounce back and forth, never completely resting on one or the other, resonating in their material suggestiveness.

Studmuffin, 1992, (figure 5-1) is a joke. It plays with the phraseology of referencing a certain type of human being, usually male with particular characteristics. The intention is to juxtapose the literal image of the term with its connotations. The humor is in the ridiculousness of the term once both experiences are realized. The piece itself is a bran muffin cast in bronze with tire studs inserted in the top like a healthy muffin bursting with blueberries.

Hairy Sconce, 1992-93, is another flirtation with the ceramic insulators. In contemplating the form of the insulator, it appeared that in addition to its penile connotations, it also resembled a man's shaving brush without bristles. Having just cut my hair much shorter and having saved the pony tail for whatever reason, the 'bristles' were inserted into the brush. This 'thing' sat on the shelf for several months and gnawed at the back of my mind. Eventually, I returned to this form. Upon contemplating its resemblance to lit candles and torches, I made an iron bracket to support it. The accumulation of connotations conjures images of both erotic toys and sconce-like fixtures from medieval time. The ceramic insulator seems to have initiated a series that is intimately tied to a sense of humor provoked by the nature of the insulator.



Figure 5-1 Susan Thayer Akers, Studmuffin, 1992

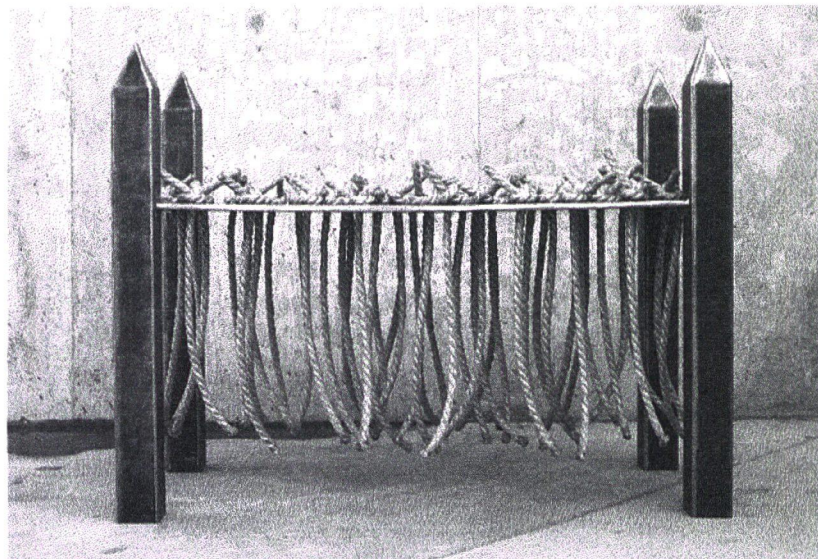


Figure 5-2 Susan Thayer Akers, Bedknot, 1992

Historical Context

Within a linear, dualistic perspective, relating a contemporary 'occurrence' to a historical 'occurrence' implies that an experience of the historical causes the contemporary. It emphasizes the historical as either point of reference or point of departure, minimizing the notion of the historical's circumstance. In consideration of this perspective, the purpose of this chapter is to integrate a discussion of my work relative to historical movements with hypothetical manifestos that position both formal and conceptual aspects of the historical. I chose to write the contextual statements -- hypothetical manifestos -- in the first person as a way of reflecting the immediacy and fervor of the time of which they speak. They are amalgamations of academic information and are interpretations of statements by various artists and critics. As such, they are also interpretations of moments in history.

The discussion draws attention to parallel relationships and oppositions relative to the historical. The discussion intends not to pigeonhole my intentions into any specific style or movement. Rather, it aims to demonstrate the ease with which I borrow from a spectrum of movements depending upon the context of the specific piece.

The summary will attempt to position the work with relation to its own time.

A Hypothetical Anarchists Manifesto / Dada

Art is dead. No longer will we, the artists and poets, pander to a society saturated by bourgeois capitalism. No longer will we participate in the perpetuation of societies motivated into war by their own greed, nor will we passively stand back and observe the destruction of human life for material profit. Our goal is the recovery of 'the natural and unreasonable order,' 'the illogically senseless,' the chaos of nature.¹⁹ Dada negates all that is logical nonsense in society and all that results from materialism and greed.²⁰

It as is to of and with **my** that obliged me obliged together believe of an that **my mutually**. Any **choice** society to consort must **me obligation**. I that to I society **allow** the accept is in am artist, symbiotic choice **partnerships**. We responsibility **advantageous** to obligation.²¹

Attack, attack, attack

In 1915, Marcel Duchamp signed R. Mutt to an inverted ceramic urinal, titled it Fountain, and submitted it to The Independents Exhibition in New York. Humorously, the up-side-down urinal alludes to a fountain, especially if the direction of the water is taken into consideration. However, Duchamp's presentation as a work of art teases the art world and annoys society by subverting the accepted notion of the art object. It comments on the art world's inability to attain independence from the materialism of the bourgeoisie. In retrospect, it initiated two issues relevant for this discussion; the emergence of humor and the use of common objects in art.

Although Duchamp's intention was mockery of the art world, his punning humor is a precursor to the sort of humor indicative of my titles. Anti-Static Machine, Nature's Nipple, and Studmuffin are titles meant to bring multiple layers of meaning to the surface

¹⁹ Hans Arp, 'I become more and more removed from aesthetics', *On My Way*, p. 48 as quoted in *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. by Nikos Stangos (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 114.

²⁰ Dawn Ades, 'Dada and Surrealism', *Concepts of Modern Art*, op. cit., pp. 110-120.

²¹ example of automatism

of their forms. The difference between my work and that of the dadaists is that my works and their titles comment on life and not on the art world. In that sense, they are certainly not anti-art. On the contrary, these pieces are absorbed into the art world by their association to dada. The incorporation of machine-made objects: dryer sheets, a gravel crushing cone, tire studs, is historically justified by dada. These objects act as springboards for meaning. The connotations of the materials subvert the actuality of the object. They attempt to push the viewer into a relationship with apparent illogical layers of meaning and away from a direct relationship with the form.

Dada provides reference for satire, irony, and humor in art, political or otherwise. In an attempt to topple society through incessant mockery, the dadaists unknowingly established a 'standard' of sorts. Humor existed as freedom from the rationality of bourgeois society. Similarly, humor in my work exists in defiance of accepted or 'legitimate' modes of activity or thought which I experience in contemporary society. The impetus is the same; a provocation of the viewer to question the rationality of the familiar.

A Hypothetical Illogical Manifesto / Surrealism

The Dadaists have completed their task; they have negated everything to the point that they, too, no longer exist. In the wake of their nihilism and anarchy, we are faced with a society still so deeply controlled by bourgeois materialism that it has lost its perspective on the totality of life. The human psyche has been divided and further separated by the bourgeois propensity towards greed, thus emphasizing the logical and the rational as a means of attaining status. This needs to end. We, as artists, have the task before us of rebuilding society and, in so doing, rebuilding the art world. The dadaists initiated the movement, questioned the social value structure, but did nothing to resolve the division.

They merely exposed and numbed the raw nerve. We have yet to massage that nerve as a means of increasing its sensitivity and awareness.²²

Toward the ultimate unification of the human psyche, society must be provoked into an awareness of the infinite expanse of reality, beyond their bourgeois materialism. The ambiguity of metaphor, is our means of penetrating society. The logical patterns of interpretation established by the art of the realists and of the constructivists, no longer apply. The bourgeoisie will have to look beyond their assumed notions of form and symbolism and into an engagement with the erotic, the bizarre, and the unconscious. Only then, can we move toward a society in touch with a deeper logic than that of the rational mind, a logic of the unconscious.²³

The surrealist inclination toward the juxtaposition of elements represents a desire to project the viewer beyond the materiality with which they are confronted and to propel him or her into a state of ambiguity. This situation provokes the viewer into re-evaluating the conventional terms of understanding the experience. In Brownian Motion, the arrangement of elements became an environment of sorts, a single reality that questioned the prevalence of conventional communication, verbal language. My intention in using sensuous elements was to allude to a poetic reality that associates meaning with the ambiguity of metaphor and not only to a linearity of thought. The juxtaposition of the two realities affords the viewer the possibility of moving beyond conventional reality and attaining insight into a reality of another realm. The Surrealists consider this 'other realm' to be an ultimate reality. Although I do not wish to speculate on any sort of absolutes, I prefer to consider the possibilities of other realms.

Nature's Nipple (for Jodie) assembles elements of simultaneously distant and intimate realities. The rock is of organic nature, from a stream. The gravel crushing cone

²² Dawn Ades, op. cit., pp. 121-134.

²³ Briony Fer, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 174.

is machine-made, yet its purpose is for the crushing of rock. The disc is, again, a piece of machinery whose purpose is the overturning of soil (and small rocks). The irony of the form is in its allusion to the fertility of the earth through pieces of machinery that reap the benefits of that fertility.

The surrealists sought also to expand their awareness of a whole reality through an exploration into the erotic.²⁴ Meret Oppenheim's fur covered teacup, spoon, and saucer, Object : déjeuner en fourrure (Object : fur breakfast), 1936, pushes the playful mind into a consideration of connotations that surpass the literalness of the immediate object. Closely paralleling this propensity for an exploration into the erotic is the series of flirtations with the ceramic insulator. Juxtaposing the form of the insulator with the sensuousness of human hair subverts any attempt to interpret the work literally. It is not just a ceramic tube with hair coming out of one end. The connotations suggest further possibilities attempting to expand toward an awareness of connecting irrationality with the rational. It continues the metaphoric suggestiveness with a sense of humor reflecting a desire to unify the literal and the poetic.

A Hypothetical Square Manifesto / Suprematism

Realities 'no less significant than the realities of nature herself'²⁵ are revealed in a geometry based on the straight line; the square and its permutations, the cross and the rectangle. Rationalism succeeds imitation. Where once the artist sought only to mirror nature, the human mind has gained control over its chaos. This geometry is not found in nature and therefore, is an assertion of man's superiority, of the supremacy of mind over matter.²⁶

²⁴ *Impossible Realities: Marcel Duchamp & the Surrealist Tradition*. Norton Simon Museum. Los Angeles, CA, October 1991.

²⁵ Aaron Scharf, 'Suprematism', in *Concepts of Modern Art*, op. cit., p. 138.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 138-140

Not only do these forms symbolize man's ascendancy over nature, but elemental geometry will free us to the reaches of infinity, thus bringing the inexplicable mysteries of the universe within our reach. We must remain free that we may create from our subjective consciousness, unrestricted by the influence of the masses. Bonding art with science and technology, as the constructivists advocate, would be to the detriment of art, the manifestation of a superior, superconscious mind whose ultimate statement will be a state of nirvana, the white square on the white field, the merging of humanity with infinity.²⁷

Formally, in three-dimension, my work appears to adopt Malevich's position that an elemental, straight-line geometry represents man's assertion over nature. In Bedrock and in 4 X 5 (4 By 5), the confinement of 'natural' elements by the square (its three-dimensional permutation being the grid) and the rectangle appears to suggest manipulation and control by the superiority of the geometric form. However, in clarifying my position, the intention was not to establish a dominance of one element over the other. Instead, I intended to present the notion of the interdependence of the terms as a way of considering larger implications within reality. I refrain from the totality of Malevich's ideals. His spiritual intentions appear dogmatic and idealistic in their exclusion of other possibilities and in their celebration of rationality. The similarity to my work is within the notion that the contemplation of objects has the potential of eliciting insights into reality, be that existence or infinity.

A Hypothetical Orthogonal Manifesto / Ideal De Stijl

A new age is upon us. The clarity of life has been too long obscured by the consciousness of the individual. Every aspect of our social structure, our homes, our cities and towns, our politics, has been fractured by subjective individualism. This consciousness has restricted the possibility of humanity attaining any sense of order and harmony within itself. In the new age, life will realize universal harmony through an

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 139-140

understanding of the relationality of all properties, that the validity of one value is in its relationship to other values. Humanity will finally see 'a true vision of reality.'²⁸

The art of the age, NeoPlasticism, has envisioned this pure form of reality and will lead the rest of humanity on to harmony, toward a consciousness of the human spirit.²⁹ Our vision is reflected in our painting, our sculpture and our architecture. It moves away from the subjective nature of illusionistic creations and toward a creativity of precision and purity reflective of the technological age before us. A unity of art and life, essential to universal harmony, is implicit in our realization of the new consciousness. The right angle and the straight line, the fundamentals of Euclidean geometry, represent, in abstraction, our commitment to clarity and the will of humanity over the arbitrary chaos of nature and the subjective individual. The orthogonal gives creative form to absolute harmony and provides the basis for 'a language of visual terms' expressive of 'the human urge towards order and regularity,'³⁰ Red, yellow, and blue, the primary colors, together with white, black, and gray are the only colors and non-colors in our language. Their purpose is to delineate volume and modulate internal space without illusionary tactics. Purity of color, line, and space reflects our ultimate goal for art, its purification, which will lead to ultimate harmony of all of life.³¹

The rectilinear form of pieces such as Bedrock appears to illustrate the De Stijl commitment to the dominance of the human will over the irregularity of nature. The furnitureness of the steel platform does relate to the nature of humanity, to the social structure inherent within it, but, in this case, it does not subscribe to the notion of dominance. De Stijl sought to triumph over nature through the use of order and balance. Bedrock, on the other hand, seeks a coexistence, a return to an understanding of the interdependence of the human mind, the rational, with the apparent irrationality of nature. The rocks and the implications of their regularity (or lack of, as the case may be) illustrates this position.

²⁸ Hans L.C. Jaffe, *De Stijl* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p. 22.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 9-35.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

³¹ Ibid., p. 21.

My intention in placing the rocks randomly was to attempt to re-create the 'nature' of an understanding of rocks. The first assembly of rocks was an accumulation of river stones from road embankments. Before my involvement, these stones had been relocated from the river and manipulated to serve a practical function; the prevention of soil erosion. They were not untouched stones direct from the river, although they appeared as such. In placing the rocks on the platform, I tried to randomly select each stone from my collection with the intention of arriving at an irregular-looking pile. This irregularity assumed the appearance of natural-ness. Upon exhibiting the piece a second time, the assembly was composed of stones acquired from a gravel quarry along the Oldman River. The regularity of this assembly appeared more controlled. The actual difference lay in the context from which I collected the rocks. Both rock accumulations were from previously manipulated sources. However, the one of irregularity assumed the appearance of a 'truer' nature. The notion of difference, in this case, assumes that the natural state of rocks is one of relative diversity. However, as visitors to Brimstone Island (off the coast of Maine) can attest, there are occasions where nature deposits rocks of relatively uniform color, size, and shape, possibly due in part from their having originated from the same vein, been crushed by the same glacial flow, and deposited at relatively the same time. This uniformity appears unnatural, as if the result of human control when, in fact, man had nothing to do with the placement of rocks on that island. The source of humanity's intervention, in this case, comes from its fascination with this unnatural phenomenon and its removal of the stones as mementos of nature's control. To intentionally present rocks of uniform nature as art, implies human control when, in reality, it also represents the control of nature. This situation is blurred by humanity's appearance of control through order and regularity.

The De Stijl philosophy seeks universal harmony through order and regularity and through the control of 'arbitrary and capricious nature.' To this end, it ignores the

interdependence of chaos and order: two aspects of a whole reality.³² In Bedrock, the two appear to coexist. However, the process of constructing such a piece excludes any possibility of actual 'nature.' The only possibility is the presentation of an understanding or interpretation of nature.

A Hypothetical Machine Manifesto / Constructivism

The age of technology is upon us. The artist is no longer concerned with the expression of the individual. Now, he is in direct dialogue with machine production as a way of contributing to the advancement of society as a whole. The artist, creative designer, has taken his place beside the engineer and the scientist at the frontier of the new style.³³ In his rapport with industrial technology, the artist aims toward the unification of art and society. His concern is with the obliteration of the hierarchy of fine art over applied arts as established by capitalist societies. Our arts will serve to direct the individual toward the rational order and standardization of our socialist collective. Material production will determine social, political, and intellectual order.³⁴

Geometry, pure color, the use of industrial materials; these will be our tools for expressing the modern rise to clarity. No longer will there be art objects, such as easel painting and figure sculpture. The art of our time will be one of constructed reality; a rational calculable system of construction investigated scientifically and, upon the erection of principles, applied in utilitarian work.³⁵ The construction is 'the cultivation of real space and real materials.'³⁶ The foundation of this constructive process is in the synthesis of two aspects of the material ideal; its implications within society, thus merging content with form, and 'the realization of the natural propensities of the materials themselves, their peculiar conditions during fabrication, their transformation.'³⁷ The hand of the creative designer will be replaced by an aesthetic of technology. Meaning in our art is intimate with

³² Ibid., p. 19.

³³ Aaron Scharf, 'Constructivism', in *Concepts in Modern Art*, op. cit., pp. 161-162.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 160-168.

³⁵ Briony Fer, op. cit., p. 91.

³⁶ Aaron Scharf, 'Constructivism', op. cit., p. 244.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 163.

technology; a line drawn with the accuracy of the set square is superior to the inconsistency of the line drawn by hand. The accurate line is concrete, it is real, and it represents an efficient society.³⁸

Tatlin's directive to construct reality with real materials in real space has had an immense influence on the understanding of sculpture over the last seventy-five years. Basically, the constructivist's ideological stance on the industrial aesthetic, the belief that an ordered society would evolve out of an art of rational, geometrical forms, seems to have evolved into the basis for the formal language of art. The aesthetic of the technological is apparent in my work, primarily in the use of welded steel; all the works involve some amount of welded steel. Simple geometric form is predominant, and an attitude toward the unification of art and life, ignoring hierarchical definitions of fine and applied art, also prevails. The point of departure from constructivism comes not so much from the formal aspects as it does from the conceptual.

The synthesis of factura and tectonic result in constructive reality.³⁹ Factura parallels my view of materials as having 'natural propensities' or a nature inherent to themselves. It also reflects my realization of the nature of their fabrication and transformation, the nature of their human-madness. Our viewpoints differ, however, in the placement of content. The constructivist meaning is intimately tied to 'the formal and material character of the object' and to the social use and expedient nature of the material.⁴⁰ It excludes elements of the subjective, literary, mystical, and creative, and instead, aligns itself with the technologically rational.⁴¹ In my work, meaning is ultimately connected to the intrinsic qualities of the materials in a poetic manner that connotes rather than denotes.

³⁸ Briony Fer, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

³⁹ Aaron Scharf, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁴⁰ Briony Fer, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

Meaning is in the unseen reality of the work. The only way of finding it is by contemplating the associations of the materials as one would contemplate the words of a poem. My intention is not to systematize and rationalize an actual nature or to present nature in an instructive manner. Because of this, the work itself does not represent constructivist ideals. The nature of the constructed form, however, alludes to these ideals as elements within the opposition.

A Hypothetical Cubic Manifesto / Minimalism

The paradigm has shifted. The artist is no longer motivated by the spontaneous freedom and self expression of the abstract expressionists. To this end, we purge our art of all metaphor in favor of lucid specificity. We replace romantic illusionism with a commitment to clarity, conceptual rigor, literalness, and simplicity.⁴² The rationale of the logical mind is, again, brought to the frontier, however, this time, in an attempt to clarify the terms in which art takes place in the world and in which art depends upon its viewers. We must again question the accepted social value structure dominating the art world.⁴³

Minimalism might appear to best characterize my sensibility; a strong element of simplicity, the use of geometric forms with juxtaposed natural elements, the use of the cube, the arrangement of materials into simple ordered patterns. These are prevalent characteristics of 4 X 5 (4 By 5) and Brownian Motion. Modularity, repetition, symmetry, and fabrication are all consistencies in the work which parallel minimalism if one were to focus only on the form. Even then, the industrial aesthetic is not hard-edged or clean enough to be truly minimalist. In actuality, this is the clue to the works departure from the minimalist sensibility. The steel is not polished and the wood is not planed smooth as a

⁴² Suzi Gablik, 'Minimalism', in *Concepts of Modern Art*, op. cit., p. 245.

⁴³ Kenneth Baker, *Minimalism* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), pp. 21-22.

means of distracting the attention away from the Euclidean geometry of the minimalists. My geometry assumes a more poetic relationship with the materials.

...The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled, and intertwined. (This new geometry) makes a claim about the world, and the claim (is) that such odd shapes carry meaning. The pits and tangles are more than blemishes distorting the classic shapes of Euclidean geometry. They are often the keys to the essence of a thing.⁴⁴

The intention is for the material aesthetic to produce multiple layers of meaning. Minimalists were committed to clarity, literalness, and lucidity; I am concerned with metaphorical suggestiveness and the possibility of multiple layers. Minimalist modularity centered on an ordering principle that excluded the necessity for decision making and rearranging, and instead focused on the ability of the mind to impose rational order.⁴⁵ The minimalists equated their rational identity with the scientific principles of Euclid and Newton emphasizing the neutrality and specificity of their materials. These principles are theories that, as David Bohm explains in Wholeness and the Implicate Order, are 'insights which are neither true nor false but, rather, clear in certain domains, and unclear when extended beyond these domains.'⁴⁶ Minimalists strove to push the boundaries of the art world. Now that the boundaries have changed, and new ones have been established, their methods and theories no longer apply to works that appear similar.

⁴⁴ James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 94.

⁴⁵ Suzi Gablik, op. cit., pp. 246-247.

⁴⁶ David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Ark, 1980), p. 4.

A Hypothetical Fusion Manifesto / Arte Povera

We will not adopt the systematic, technological, coherent machine of the American minimalists. Their modular, standardized way of working is the antithesis of our European 'intuitive, illogical, and recycled' sensibilities.⁴⁷ Their romantic association with technology and order opposes our dialectic positioning that prefers, instead, the affirmation of relativism. The dictatorial mentality of the Americans allows little possibility of a metamorphosis of their position; the rigidity of their industrial cube protects the shores of their rationale. In contrast, our creative action is to weaken and destabilize the borders between the dualities in life so as to move freely, unencumbered by a linearity of thought indicative of American mentality.⁴⁸ Our method of working does not cling to its own assumptions, rather, it 'questions, compares, and deconstructs them in the search for an existence in the discontinuity of understanding the world and oneself.'⁴⁹ The geographically sheltered American mind is ignorant of the potential of a new, inclusive culture that depends on the free transfer of international attitudes.

Our dialectic emphasizes the elevation of matter over the mind and recognizes a material reality in constant flux. The resolution of contradictions, inherent in this reality, offers clues to understanding our existence. Like the surrealists, our aim is toward the fusion of dualities (apparent contradictions) and toward a blurring of the boundaries between juxtaposed elements. The refusal to separate sense and nonsense allows us to experience the wonder and coherence of the incoherent. Creative works, then, become metaphors for the thoughts and actions reflected in our European reality of the incoherent.⁵⁰

Conceptually, 4 X 5 (4 by 5) is more closely aligned to the European inclination toward metaphoric suggestiveness. Formally, the piece seems minimal, as described earlier. However, the idea of an arrangement of mobile cubes carrying segments of 'nature' is not celebrating technological materiality. If anything, it alludes to an underlying

⁴⁷ Germano Celant, op. cit., p. 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 21-28.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

problem in society for its perception of 'nature' as multiple objects of control and consumption. The use of the cube, in this case, intends to be critical of the modularity and standardization of American society. It intends to imply the skewing of such systematic linearity.

4 X 5 (4 By 5) and many of the other pieces engage the questioning of life and the search for an understanding of existence. They are pieces that respond to situations in life and, as such, are influenced by personal experiences. In this sense, the implications parallel Arte Povera's concept of mediation. The work reflects the middle ground between two realities. In the case of 4 X 5 (4 By 5), the boundary is between fabricated nature and organic nature, between society and the contemporary notion of wilderness. The mediation of such dualities necessitates interaction with apparent contradictions. Within the process of mediation, the two 'sides' are viewed as a whole. Their relativity eliminates the need to take a side and declare absolutes. The freedom from absolute definitions provides the work with the flexibility to shift and change depending upon its context. For Pino Pascali, 'art is the discovery of a system of change...After the first time making a bowl is academic.'⁵¹

A Hypothetical Relative Manifesto / Mono-ha

Our art is reflective of Buddhist concepts that emphasize the unity of divinity and nature. In the wake of commercialism and the printed word, we seek to re-establish the harmony between nature and man and to transcend the propensity toward intellectualization of international art ideas. According to Buddhist philosophy, man is not at the center of the universe, and as Western sculpture would have us believe otherwise, the antithesis of anthropocentrism is of great interest to our ideals. Rather than imposing our will upon the materiality of the sculpture, our way is to work with the materials to discover their inner

⁵¹ Pino Pascali, as quoted in *Arte Povera Arte Povera*, op. cit., p. 231.

being. We intend our work to be meditative in nature as this is deemed the function of Buddhist art.⁵²

The non-dualistic view of the world, for me, represents a freedom that is foreign to Christian based cultures concerned with defining, thereby controlling, all aspects of life. The philosophy behind Mono-ha reflects a way of thinking about humanity's relationship with the universe, as a part of a greater whole over which the part has no control.

The aesthetic of Mono-ha artists is similar to my own aesthetic and to my own philosophy toward materials. Simplicity allows clarity and enhances the qualities of the materials. All things have their own intrinsic value. This is the reason I try to manipulate the material, as I find it, as little as possible. It is also why I do not polish the steel or consistently sand the wood. I believe that materials have their own existence. My intention, therefore, is not to re-work everything so as to negate its presence. Rather, it is to increase an awareness of the material in itself to enhance a perception of reality. I recognize an affinity toward the Mono-ha aesthetic 'based on judicious rearrangements of life's ordinary or daily items into a form that shows their natural beauty and enhances their overall environment.'⁵³

Conclusion / Now

Much of the work prior to 'Benchmark' was made without having developed an understanding of my motivations as a theoretical position. The process of elaboration has clarified the notion of an aesthetic that borrows from many movements within contemporary art history. It has also revealed a consistency toward the avoidance of

⁵² Howard N. Fox, *A Primal Spirit: Ten Contemporary Japanese Sculptors* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), pp. 25-27.

⁵³ Janet Koplos, *Contemporary Japanese Sculpture* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), p. 41.

definitions and absolutes. Instead, I have realized that it is the boundaries within the contradictions in life that provide a source for my energy. As noted in Chapter Two; Pieces of the Process, there is a consistent thread of humor throughout my work. This humor serves to temper the inherent seriousness of many of the underlying subjects; confusion, conflict, existence. In Arthur Koestler's The Act of Creation, he explains the presence of humor as being dependent upon 'a shift of attention to some feature of the situation, or an aspect of the problem, which was previously ignored, or only present on the fringes of awareness.'⁵⁴ This explanation suits my sensibilities; I prefer to allow myself the freedom to explore this area of ambiguity and, by doing so, to remain dynamic.

⁵⁴ Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Arkana, 1964), p. 93.

BENCH•MARK

The Thesis Exhibition

'Bench·mark' is an installation of eight benches and a shelf that explores the idea of contradiction within a dualistic perspective of nature as a way of eliciting insight into our perception of existence. The intention is that through the experience of these benches, each a balanced moment of nature as I understand it, there is the possibility of insight into human existence. Similar to Roquentin's experience of the root of a chestnut tree, the pocked surface of rusty steel or the grain of weathered boards has the potential of provoking the confrontation of existence.

All the pieces that comprise 'Bench·mark' are influenced by a trip to Japan a year ago. The purpose of the trip was to explore the Japanese integration of inside and outside as exemplified in Zen gardens and temple architecture. The experience affirmed sensibilities somewhat numbed by the questioning atmosphere of academia and eventually necessitated an eight month extension of my MFA program. It seemed essential that I allow the experience the time to filter not only into the work, but into my own understanding of it as well. The Japanese fluidity of internal and external space epitomized my own desire to eliminate the distinction between the two. In a sense, this unconsciously became an essential consideration behind 'Bench·mark.'

In a circuitous manner, the title, 'Bench·mark,' alludes to a blurring of the separation of inside and outside. The bench, as a piece of furniture, can exist in either space. It is associated with the garden, the park, the hallway, and the window. It is also a human-made mark 'of known or assumed elevation from which other elevations may be

established.⁵⁵ A societal variation follows that a benchmark is 'a standard or reference by which others can be measured or judged.'⁵⁶ The connotations seemed appropriate as subtle commentary on my position at the particular time; the nature of academia positions the student in relation to all other variables, as a vacuous shell to be first filled with knowledge and, then, quantified against the accepted standard of the given profession. In jest, the title positions the work as the new standard. The irony is the contradiction in which the title and the work engage. The title implies reference while the work connotes flexibility and change.

The show consists of eight 'benches' positioned parallel to one another the length of the gallery. Each 'bench' is a steel structure that is approximately ten feet long and supports apparently contradictory materials. The qualities of the particular materials being juxtaposed defined the configuration of each structure; the materials' social implications, practicality, and metaphoric suggestiveness were primary considerations for the proportions of the steel structures and for the manner of the materials' placement. The arrangement of material exemplifies a personal philosophy that avoids the differentiation between 'organic' and 'man-made' material. I consider the two as the same. The intention in presenting the juxtaposition is to expose the contradiction, thereby blurring the distinction. Occasionally, a material such as the charcoal briquette, will amalgamate the fabricated with the organic, thus confusing the duality and maximizing the viewer's consideration.

A third element, water, is incorporated with the other materials in most of the benches. Coexisting within the friction of the other two elements, water alludes to the transitory nature of contradictions and to the dynamic living aspect of every thing. It is a

⁵⁵ bench mark, Webster's College Dictionary (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 126.

⁵⁶ benchmark, *ibid.*, p. 127.

metaphor for life's fluidity, for its potential to erode and obscure boundaries. In the piece with the thick fir plank, the water reacts in the trough to form rust patterns that mirror the grain of the wood. The variation in patterns within the troughs reflects the difference in functionality from one bench to another. Vibrations caused by sitting on the plank are transmitted to the water, creating a rust pattern distinct to the act of sitting.

The arrangement of the 'benches' in the gallery space -- a series of narrow rectilinear forms within a narrow rectilinear space -- alludes to a series of pews in a place of worship. This association is somewhat happenstance in that it was not my intention to recreate such an environment. However, the work's relationship to this particular space enhances the possibility of a spiritual interpretation of 'Bench·mark.' Individually, the sculptures might allude to altars or benches or tables or bridges, but as a collective, in this formation, there occurs a multiplicity of layers distinct to their existence in this space. Acknowledgment of this observation does not preclude the possibility of the 'benches' existing equally in another space. It merely recognizes the relationship of the pieces to their context. In the gallery, as a collective, the pieces emphasize the notion of supporting society. Individually, as functional furniture or form, each piece relates to the intimacy of the individual within society.

Around the perimeter of the space, attached to the wall at window sill height, is a line of angle iron. This line supports various and sundry objects that have occupied sills, shelves, and table spaces within my environment during my process of arriving to this point. Some of these objects have initiated many parts of the individual works. The nature of their being has suggested further possibilities, thus contributing to the process of realizing the work.

At the opening of 4 X 5 (4 By 5), a friend gave me the single black stone that now sits on the sill. He understood, better than I at the time, the nature of nature. As a structural geologist, he is intimate with the various processes which 'organic' matter undergoes in its evolution. The stone that I was given appeared chipped and pocked in its indentations, yet smooth and silky on its outer surface. Upon closer examination and explanation, the indentations were revealed as 'bruises,' points of compression at a time when the stone was an amalgamate of stones and mud. Scientific knowledge of the earth's crust dated the rock as being eighty-seven million years old, give or take a few years. Having always had an affinity for stones, this new insight led me to a contemplation of the nature of the stone; how the earth had processed through heat and tension the tiny particles of matter ultimately forming this stone, how the element of chance must have affected its apparent variation from that of other stones, and that due to the relative nature of its surroundings, this stone evolved differently from another stone of the same original elements. All of these assumptions were purely speculative; their basis was a skeletal understanding of a 'thing'. It was this skeletal understanding that elicited further associations; it became a metaphor of visceral assumptions connecting apparent contradictions in life.

In contemplating the stone, associations with more immediate aspects of humanity's existence became evident. The transformation process of certain elements, such as iron ore and coal, within the earth's crust is the same as our fabrication process, our re-manipulation of the natural material. The important difference is the element of time. The further differentiation of the organic from the man-made does not acknowledge the intrinsic quality of the materials. The separation is widened by humanity's utilization of processed natural resources; lumber, gasoline, asphalt, paper, which defines our reality as being relative to our exploitation of nature.

In this assumed position of control, much of humanity further strives to eliminate the 'chaos' of nature by definition. This includes not only the categorization of existence but the delineation of physical reality as well; we explain the mystery out of the unknown and we establish walls and boundaries to claim territories. In Western cultures, the fear of the irrational and the illogical has evolved as the basis for our understanding of nature. The inclination is for humanity to align itself within the realm of order as a way of providing protection from the uncertain. Western architecture, normally void of any integration of inside and outside other than a view through a glass window and an enclosed yard or garden, is a perfect example of this need to establish security.

Returning to the exhibition, the benches have evolved in part as a result of contemplating my relationship to the enormity of an eighty-seven million year old rock. The original question of 'what does it mean' becomes irrelevant by comparison. Relative to the nature of the stone that I can hold in my hand, the existence of humanity appears absurd.⁵⁷ By looking to the essential qualities of my own existence, I have been able to sustain an outlook that thrives on the immediacy and dynamic nature of life. In this way, I find that every time I turn the 'bruised' stone over in my hand, it seems like a different rock.

Existence is not something which allows itself to be thought of from a distance; it has to invade you suddenly, pounce upon you, weigh heavily on your heart like a huge motionless animal - or else there is nothing left at all. ⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, op. cit., p. 185.

⁵⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, op. cit., p. 189.

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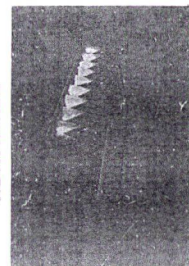
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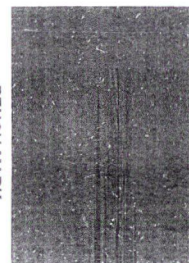
BENCH.MARK

Installation view 1

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Installation view 2

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BENCH.MARK: Shelf

detail 2

2"x3"x630"

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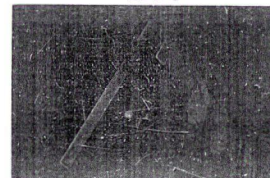
steel, limestone, glass, water

7"x30"x125"

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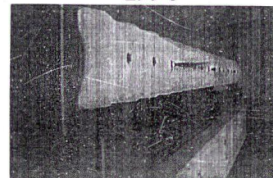
BENCH.MARK: JDR.35

steel, fir plank, concrete, insulators, hair, water
12"x30"x125"

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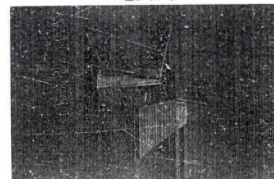
BENCH.MARK: JDR.35

detail

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BENCH.MARK: K

steel, concrete, fir beam, pine dowels, water

64"x34"x120"

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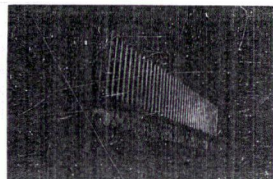
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detail

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steel, conveyor, rocks

11"x24"x125"

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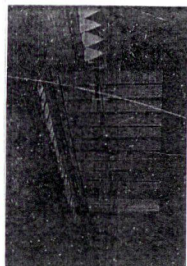
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detail

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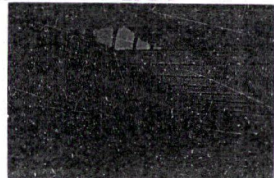
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steel, wood, clay, water

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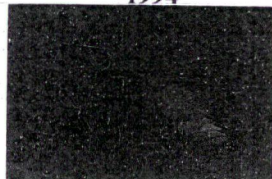
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detail

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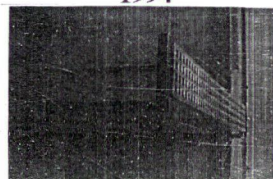
steel, paper, rivots, water

24"x15"x125"

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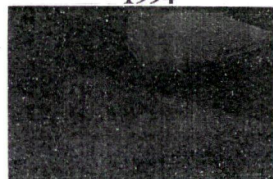
steel, mahogany, oak, water

31"x22.5"x125"

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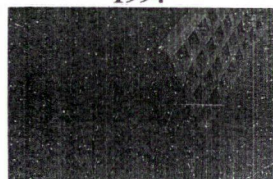
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detail

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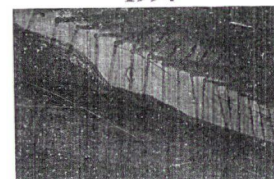
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