Kmart for Kmart's Sake

A Thesis

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by

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Plate I.
Introduction

The place where I began and the place that I arrived at two years later seem, at first glance, to be very far apart. Yet within the ensuing body of work there are fundamental concepts which survived incessant variations in media and approaches to creating. It is their reoccurrence which grants them significance and their reworking which gives them renewal.

I began with an interest in personal resources. How does one create, grasp and use them? Searching for an image, I chose to make a well, thinking that it is a type of vessel that could hold one's resources, and then created a small scale model for an environment in which such a well could be visited. At the time, I rejected making a long term commitment to such a complex installation, but two years later found myself building one. This room operated in three basic ways: as a self-reliant system, as an expression of my world view and as a self-portrait. This installation, _Kmart for Kmart's Sake_, provided the viewer with both the stimuli and necessities which, in my view, a person requires in order to function as a fully involved human being. During the two year interim almost all the ideas I had about and approaches towards artmaking were turned around. The route to developing a completely different creative process was not a straight course. My path twisted and turned, jogging in all directions. The most crucial turn, however, was a movement away from preconceiving concepts and my expression of them. Before I could return to my original impetus to make an environment, I recognized
the importance of defining a new attitude towards my working process. The experience of attaining moments of clarity and discovery when, after experimenting with them, the parts of an artwork seem to fall together became infinitely more significant than fabricating an object according to a plan.

_Two Years of Work_ presents an account of the journey between the small scale model and my thesis exhibition. It reads as a journal in that a series of changes in my life and thinking led to a series of visual experiments. As events passed and artworks were made, they created their own sequential logic. As the pattern unfolded, it revealed itself.

As my sense of engagement with my work grew, my workspace became a sanctuary. This realization placed a premium on its environmental qualities. _Imagine Yourself in a Cement Box--on the Need to Recreate My Environment_, entails the necessity of learning how to manipulate the situational aspects of a space as well as creating engaging activities in an unresponsive geographical location. Mastering these lessons often meant inventing survival techniques. Using these newly found tools, I incorporated my lessons on environmental affectiveness into the creation of a system, housed in a gallery. _Kmart for Kmart’s Sake, My Thesis Exhibition_ tours this installation with an emphasis on the impetus for and the relationship of its various parts.
Part I: Two Years of Work--A Trail of Experiments

Fall 1987-

I began graduate work with an interest in personal resources. How does one create, grasp and use them? In search of an image appropriate to expressing these ideas, I made a well, conceiving it as a type of vessel that could hold one's resources, and then created a model for an environment in which this well could be visited. The well was an image that had become important to me during my undergraduate study. I had started working with it by beginning with the question of how a person grapples with the dilemmas faced by mankind in the twentieth century.¹ My written response described how one maintains one's personal resources in an internal well. Its water contains the emotional, psychological and intellectual resources which we need in order to function. In turn, we feed our wells with experiences that we gain from our environment. These experiences function as the input for the system. As an undergraduate I started exploring the various ways in which I could visually communicate this concept.

Moving to Columbus, Ohio induced severe changes in my personal life and the expectations I normally placed on my environment. I soon found that Columbus was not going to feed me in the way a more culturally sophisticated and multi-ethnic

¹ This question was asked by Professor Richard Schoenwald in the course, Great Ideas in the West, Carnegie-Mellon University, Spring, 1985.
environment had. These changes were draining in effect and, I began asking myself these questions about personal resources: "What if the well has run dry? What if you are gutted? What then?" Reflecting on these despairing thoughts, I made dried out spoons which hung inside a large, figurative urn filled with ashes and used shale in a second piece to suggest cracked, parched earth.

For several years I had approached artmaking with intended content. Working would begin with plans: "this will mean this . . ." As a result, my art had a forced appearance. I would push the material into the form and surface I thought I wanted. I felt that I had to control every element of an artwork, not allowing the elements of chance, response or flexibility to come into play.

Winter 1988-
The visiting artist in the ceramics area, Ann Kraus, affected me in some primary ways. She introduced me to meditation as a route to a looser and yet more concentrated state of mind. Beginning studio time with meditation can dissolve the chattering thoughts which often interfere with artmaking. A crucial sense of clarity evolves along with an indescribable flexibility and freedom in thought. In this sense intense focusing on a phrase, image or action becomes a "tabla rasa" process. You arrive at a clean mental slate to devote towards creative endeavors.

With the realization that meditation utilizes a repetitive thought or action its dual nature became apparent. Repeating a motion or thought becomes somewhat trance-inducing. Your thinking procedures are loosened and become extremely

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2 A Latin phrase meaning, "wipe the slate clean."
flexible, and you are able to engage issues of concern (in this case, art) from multiple points of view. Yet, attaining this state requires an extreme sense of focus.

Philip Guston used to tell a story describing how his sense of engagement with his art evolved while painting. As he began to work he mentally held a room full of people in his mind. One by one they walked away, leaving his consciousness. Eventually, Guston felt himself leave. When his decision-making ego left the room, he felt as if his painting began to paint itself. This is the moment I was trying to reach through meditation: a time when any stable sense of time and place is lost and it seems that Art begins to happen behind my back.

A daily swimming routine and participation (as a swimmer) in Linda Montano's *Earth, Air, Fire and Water* performance piece led me to an evaluation of the meditative state I gained through this activity. Ann Kraus' consultation helped me realize that it is swimming's rhythmical breathing, repetitive arm strokes and floating nature which induce a dreamlike, meditative state of mind. Responding to these insights, I made several different *I Dream of You as I Swim* sculptures during the following year and a half. The series culminated with a sculpture of a swimming pool.

My desire to effect a dreamlike state of mind led me to more sensitive experiencing of the various stages of waking up. I noticed that just prior to becoming fully conscious the mind is more susceptible to free association. It is a time when thinking patterns are supple enough to yield to bending and rearrangement without

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much effort. This period, if prolonged, is useful as it is a good time for problem solving. The repressive mechanisms inherent to a wakeful consciousness have not, as yet, clamped down on your brain and heart. Issues in your life can be addressed in a more relaxed and creative manner. I began to cultivate this particular part of the day and use it to think about my artwork, address problems, focus my energies on daily goals, repeat self-affirmations, and change my attitudes and approaches towards existing. This practice became an important tool.

Free association as an artmaking device was also introduced to me by Ann Kraus. Ann would slipcast a number of objects, and while the castings were still soft she would cut, rearrange and attach them. The resulting ceramic assemblages were surreal in nature as they were pieced together from sections of different wholes. This way of making things became the key to my new approach to creative thinking and working. As I juggled cast parts, trying different combinations, I noticed that as its position changed, each part assumed a different role in relation to the cumulative effect. My choice of parts and their relative positions was reflected in their combined meaning. Trying one combination and then another became a form of repetitive, bewitching, experimentation. As I became involved and lost in this process, the parts would fall together into a new whole. Collage processes, three and two dimensional, fascinated me, and I adopted them as an approach towards all materials.

Spring 88-

Hoping to put some of my year long emotional struggles to rest and begin again, I set out to make a winter burial/spring renewal piece. I converted my largest spoon
molds into caskets, their medium being appropriate for this use. Plaster has an alchemical quality. It moves through a life cycle: changing from a powder to a fluid, living liquid that hardens into an immovable (dead) solid.

I buried the caskets with the intent of ridding myself of them, their meaning and their planned nature. Late one evening, by the eerie blue light illuminating the Hayes/Hopkins courtyard, I dug three graves. Looking down at them, my stomach jumped slightly. I filled their empty cavities with earth, hoping to grow plants in them and bring a sense of regeneration to the piece. A sense of rebirth actually did become a part of this process, but not through planting. Once the graves were left to change and decompose with time, their shape and surface were changed by nature. This was the first time I created a piece that would continue to evolve after I stopped manipulating it. I walked away from it, allowing elements that were beyond my control to affect my art. My steadfast approach towards artmaking was soundly shaken.

As I strove for a sense of renewal through making artworks, it came from an atypical source: writing a folklore paper. For the month I researched and wrote, I had little or no desire to make a work of art. Recording verbal histories is most often the basis for folklore studies, and my participants in this endeavor were my father and fellow art department graduate students. My chosen topic was What I did for Kicks as a Kid. There has been a significant amount of psychological research, theorizing and writing conducted concerning the phenomena of children's play processes and their relation to creative ones. Discovering and using this material to analize my collection of stories was the second large step I was to make this quarter
towards thoroughly reevaluating my artmaking procedures. More clearly than ever, I saw how a playful attitude could unlock fixed assumptions about what art is supposed to be.

In addition, my father's stories assumed a great deal of meaning for me. I saw how my father and his friends had incredibly, inventively created something out of nothing during the depression years. They made toys literally out of garbage off the streets of New York City. By giving these bits and pieces new uses, they gave them new life. Formerly rejected objects and materials were assembled in a new configuration for a new purpose. The children's poverty enforced invention by necessity, survival by wit and a "make-do" attitude. The following story is reprinted, in part, from my father's interview:

_The item I'd like to talk about was the situation of making things in my boyhood days. I come from a poor family and generally speaking everybody who lived in the neighborhood did not have money to buy many things, anything that we wanted to play with and so, naturally, being what we were, we became inventive. Most of the toys we had when we were kids, we made ourselves. There was no such thing as a store bought toy. Some of the items we made that I can remember were wagons, things we called scooters and boats._

_The wagons were made from lumber which we stole from nearby building locations and the wagon wheels and the axles that went with them. I'm sorry to tell you they were taken I really mean stolen from baby carriages. We would disassemble the baby carriage and then attach that to a 2" x 4". And we'd build a box out of the lumber that we took and then at the front of the wagon we would make a hole in a 2" x 4" that was attached to the box; put a cross piece on it to which was attached another axle with wheels; and then with a rope on either side of this crosspiece we could use it for steering. And we made some real fancy wagons I can tell you. In some cases some of them were even painted. But the sad part of that story is that we actually stole these goods in order to make the wagons and as far as I can see there was no other way._

_Now scooters, generally speaking, we didn't have to do too much stealing to build a scooter. A scooter was basically an orange crate which had attached to it a_
2" x 4", and the 2" x 4" was nailed to the orange crate and then underneath the orange crate we would attach the fore and after sections of the metal skates. I don't know if you kids know what metal skates are, but these skates were ball bearing skates with metal wheels. Today I see mostly plastic types of devices. The skate could be taken apart in two pieces. The front part of it was attached to the front of the scooter and the back part to the back. Now on the front part if you recall these skates they'd use to have a rubber grommet in the front part which was used as a cushion for absorbing shock and to keep the wheels in line. Well, we removed this rubber grommet so that what was left in effect was a way of steering the scooter by leaning it to one side. It would lean on this hinged portion of the front wheel and permit the scooter to be steerable. Now the scooter, we used to make some of the scooters quite fancy because at the front of the box for instance, we'd make a streamline by putting in a tapered front in front of the orange box, and then, of course we'd have steering handles on the thing which would be pieces of wood which would be nailed at an angle across the top of the piece.

And then, of course, the supreme part of making a scooter was to find some old beat up wallpaper and wallpaper it in different kinds of designs so that it would be nice looking and then put reflectors on it and all other things. This was quite a pastime for us when we were young kids and of course we were all trying to outdo each other with fancy designs of scooters. It was great fun I can tell you that.⁴

Collecting a series of stories like this one and placing them a in theoretical context was a significant step towards understanding the basis for my sense of invention. The effort I gave to the project reflected the significance my family history has for me. Using pertinent psychological theories, I analyzed the playful and creative behaviors described in these stories to establish a greater understanding of them. Doing so directly connected my family history with what I was trying to become, an artist.

As a methodology, Folklore recognizes the worth of personal stories by collecting and storing them. These stories become empowered when they are used as tools for understanding human behavior. A collection of stories regarding a particular topic, event, or activity delivers a bulk of evidence pertaining to the behavior being

⁴ Terra Ludens, English 575 with Professor Amy Shuman, The Ohio State University, Spring 1988.
investigated. Once patterns are discerned from this information, theories can evolve. In turn, these theories verify personal stories by fitting them into grand scale understandings of how humanity works.

I grew up on my father's stories. They came to life when we spent the day in "The City." I would look around as we walked, and it made sense that he and his boyhood buddies built their toys out of street refuse. There was so much of it. The potential for making things was enormous. Collecting materials (such as street refuse) is a "divergent activity" according to creativity psychologists. Invention begins with divergent or exploratory activities. Searching for, gathering and inspecting a material heightens our awareness of it, and these preliminary actions carry just as much weight in the creative process as any other.5 Inspired by these stories, I was busily filling my studio with so many found materials and objects that they started to fall together by proximity, and I quickly learned that what you choose is just as important as what you do with it.

Continuing the divergent phase of creating, manipulating materials follows gathering them. Trial and error leads to knowledge of a material's capabilities. Putting these newly discovered qualities to work leads to narrowing your ideas: the convergent phase of creation. As some pieces fall into place, others fall by the wayside, and the invention is made. A new combination is created.6

I connected my research on the psychology of creativity and play with Philip Guston's description of his state of mind while painting. I found that for a piece to

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6 *ibid.*
arrive, my mind had to attain a certain focused (convergent) moment. Manipulating and re-manipulating materials became the repetitive trance-inducing process that is used to sustain a meditative state, and the passage of time spent with these elements provided me with the intuitive knowledge that invention necessitates. I found that a playful approach insured this all important phase of reshuffling the parts of an artwork. If parts of an artwork are planned and (in your mind) immovable, however, the trial/retrial process has been effectively aborted. My former attitude of "I will make this and it will mean this" left little room for play and discovery to become a part of my creative activity. As I worked to change my attitude to "Here I have all this stuff, let's see what happens" my artmaking became an inviting, self-nourishing experiment.

Summer 1988-
This quarter became a very magical, playful time in my studio. Inspired by Joseph Beuys, Bill Woodrow and the Italian Arte Povera artists, I began collecting found objects and worn materials. Beuys imbued old cans and a simple, but implication-rich material like fat, with alchemical, transformative qualities. Looking for materials like fat which can easily change from one physical state to another, I started using plaster and wax in conjunction with an assortment of discarded materials. This resulted in a series of tool and toy-like assemblages that were small, intimate and at times, humorous and punlike. These sculptures were more associative than narrative in content as found materials bring with them inherent meanings, histories of former use. Using a collage approach I found and exposed content as I tried different combinations of objects and materials.
The summer culminated in an exhibition at Artreach gallery in Columbus, my first attempt at creating an installation. I covered the walls of the gallery's long, narrow space with pegboard. The wall covering allowed me to hang and rehang my small sculptures, and it related to the tool quality of the work. I used pegboard hooks and hardware, to indicate that the pieces could easily be rehung in different orders and at different heights. This combination of materials gave me the flexibility to play with the spacing and ordering of the sculptures. The spaces between the pieces, the pauses, punctuations and silences, were just as important as the pieces themselves. The installation process helped me realize that the ordering of artworks is crucial to experiencing them, just as the chronology of book pages or slides in a slidesheet produces a particular reading or phraseology.

Fall 1988-

My studio environment changed when I was moved from a small, intimate sunlight studio into a larger room which provided more spatial flexibility but no sunlight or fresh air. With this change in working spaces my environmental sensitivities (allergies, dry skin, and on and off case of Seasonal Affective Disorder)\(^7\) became more pronounced. My desire to work was effectively stifled by this situation in combination with a switch in media: from pliable, easily manipulated materials to gears, metal pipes and other rigid objects.

An imposing deadline for a one person exhibition at the University of Dayton's Rike gallery became the much needed incentive to break in my new studio space. I planned to make a second installation, but unlike Artreach, the Rike gallery had

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\(^7\) A form of mood disorder (depressive in nature) triggered by the change in seasons. In 1987, S.A.D. was recognized as a true mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association.
strange architectural spaces. Its curved walls, shelves and dividers located at odd
heights in unusual places gave me physical elements to respond to. The installation
was more site specific than the exhibition at Artreach. Instead of ignoring or
covering the gallery's architecture (as I did in the Artreach show) I attempted to use
its spatial constructs to my advantage.

Winter 1989-

During her second visit to OSU, Linda Montano asked our class to "gut it out and
delve into our material" through personal, emotional displays enacted during a
performance. This type of dark imagery was precisely the type I was working away
from. I had been trying to construct a more humorous, healthy and positive
approach towards dealing with personal distress. Replacing cadmium red dark,
prussian blue and expressionistic imagery (which I had worked with for several
years as an undergraduate) with brighter colors and goofy-weird materials was a step
in this direction.

Our class met in a room blessed with a wall full of windows, but Linda kept the
shades down as she thought talking about our crises in the dark was more
effective. Having a strong case of S.A.D. (Seasonal Affective Disorder) that winter
made windowlight become a paramount issue for me. Feeling deep ambivalence
towards Linda's approach towards performance art, I tried to develop a more
constructive route to expressing the issues which concerned me. One avenue was
developing a performance piece about healing, Ways to Feel Better, Part III. Ways
was derived from a simple listing of all the tricks I used to perk myself up. In this
context, putting jelly snakes in people's mailboxes was just as significant as burning
urns, burying crypts (as I had done) or crying in front of twenty people (as Linda encouraged us to do).

*Ways to Feel Better, Part III* was created to alleviate my current state of depression and as an alternative to Linda's confessional methodology. Instead of standing before an audience and reciting a litany of my personal trials, fears and insecurities, I wanted to share my methods of healing. The audience was given instructions to sit in a circle and cover their laps with a blanket. As they sat with a single, yellow (sunlike) spot shining into the middle of the circle, ambient music recorded by Jon Hassell began to play. I then stepped forward bearing a tray of glasses of spring water and Stresstabs which I gave to each audience member. Pieces of peeled and sectioned oranges were the next offering as my text, *How to Eat an Orange in the Rain*, was recited over rain-imitating Brian Eno music. As the rain began to storm, I read a particular passage from *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing. Lessing's central character, Ann, divided her life into sections and allocated a colored notebook to each part. These notebooks delineate our experience of her life and create the formal structure of the novel. As Ann divides her life into a multiplicity of sections, her personality begins to disintegrate. After reaching and passing a distinct moment of crisis Ann (and I) lifted our heads, the lights were slowly raised, and John Lennon began to talk about finding himself, (*What was this feeling? It was me.*) For the next stage of the performance, traditional Japanese music played as I washed each person's face and hands with a steamed cloth. As the music became lighter-in feeling (Pat Metheny) I read my list of ways to feel better, including soothing things to eat (*hot milk/chicken soup/and Irish Mist*) and do (*Take a sauna/a walk in soft, spring rain/Rock yourself to sleep*); activating your mind through fresh input
("Go to a talk/a lecture/a concert/ Buy a roll of unexposed film") and performing leavening actions ("Have a flying dream/Paint your nails metallic cobalt blue/Watch a late night T.V.- a Fred Astaire movie/Buy hightop sneakers with acid yellow linings"). The last item I passed out to the audience was, of course, jelly snakes.

Ways to feel Better, Part III as a poem, methodology and performance returned to the question of how to survive in the twentieth century. Like my previous attempts at answering this question, Ways included using one's personal resources, but with a different approach. My old concept of utilizing an internal well to contain one's resources was based on an image of the individual as a stoic, dark, tower of strength. Ways, on the other hand, suggests that an alternative route to effectively dealing with despair is with a slice of humor, the gummy snake aesthetic, and a slice of kindness towards yourself. The poem lists direct, pragmatic, approaches to comforting oneself which begin the transformation to a psychological state of wellness. These devices appeal to our sensual natures; intellectual and psychological selves; humor and primarily, our attitude. If sparkly toothpaste, jelly snakes and Fred Astaire can make us smile, they have become effective and respectable tools for inducing transformation.

Spring 1989-

During my vacation I made a familiar trip, touring the vertexes of my geographical universe: Pittsburgh. New York and back to Columbus. This time, I realized that each place is a world in itself, existing in its own spherical system that can expand

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8 For the full list, please see appendix A: Ways to Feel Better, Part III in this document.
microcosmically or macrocosmically. While I visited each one of these spheres, it was my world. As I drove between them, I felt as though I was traveling from planet to planet. Returning to my studio, I covered a plastic hemisphere with a map of Columbus. Some friends asked "What are you doing"? "Well," I answered, "if my entire world is Columbus, I might as well make it so." I made the globe realizing that if I was going to bring the isolated parts of my existence together, I had to name them and place them in context of each other. It became clear that on an individual basis, we have to recognize and name our disparate parts, and then perhaps we can develop and arrange them into a working system.

As I appropriated map imagery it began to operate in fundamental ways. Directly representing aspects of my life, the images were personal, and yet maps can incite a number of universal metaphors. Primarily, maps are guides that can be used when a person is lost or planning. The way our existence is structured in large areas of concentration creates mental geography. Externally, maps contain geographical, historical, social and political information. They delineate patterns of human movement, indicating past and futuristic journeys. Maps are also found material. Depending on their age, they contain their own history as objects. An easily manipulated material, I started using maps for collage and paper mâché. Once I started playing with maps I quickly felt their ever-expanding potential to represent both personal and conceptual ideas. They provided a path back towards expressive meaning in my art. For several quarters I had been experimenting with materials with the intent of discovering and exploiting their inherent characteristics, rather than communicating a greater meanings or personal messages. As I was having fun
exploring materials on a subterranean level, I had been searching for a source of more communicative imagery.

The Week, Spring 1989-
One particular week my principal mentors\textsuperscript{9} soundly chastised me for the elements that they believed were missing from my work: a personal touch and a coherent vision. Only several weeks before my fifth quarter review, I desperately, on some incredibly instinctual drive, started to paint everything. I forced myself to make friends with my nemesis, the activity I had deliberately walked away from: Painting. Painting or drawing on all of my assembled collages and sculptures very simply brought down two birds. As my "artist's hand" (my advisor's term) became apparent, I began to transform and own the found objects I was using. More aptly put by a friend, I was "scenting them--scoping my territory,"\textsuperscript{10} and as I touched everything with a brush, a coherent vision began to pervade my studio. It became evident that one artist resided there, not three or four. If I had not arrived at this solution so quickly, who knows what might have happened. I might not have passed. In a funny way, desperation forced my hand.

\textsuperscript{9} Richard Harned and Deborah Horrell, Associate Professors, The Art Department, The Ohio State University.
\textsuperscript{10} Arron Schroeder, The Art Department, The Ohio State University, Summer, 1989.
Plate III.
Part II: Imagine Yourself in a Cement Box—
on the need to recreate my environment

Moving into a cement box studio was just like moving to Columbus, where there is very little to respond to environmentally. Like Columbus, my cement box studio made me resentful because it wasn't stimulating and it could never be home. In order to survive as an artist, I became involved with activities that consumed and fed me at the same time. In both places, city and room, I scurried around, working so much and so fast that something had to happen. I worked myself into a new level of awareness—mentally speaking, an alternative situation. As I became engrossed, I lost my sense of time and place, letting go of the taxation of living in an unresponsive environment and inhabiting a mental state in which I could truly address my art.

My new workspace was larger than the last one, and from its ceiling hung incandescent light fixtures, not humming, buzzing fluorescents. I looked at its walls, seeking places for my boxes which categorized the bounty of my constant hunt for new materials. They didn't look promising: three of them were unreceptive cement block. The fourth was roughly built from homasote. Clay dust from the claymixing room seeped in through this porous material on a daily basis. Just thinking about it, my allergies assembled in uniform, heels together, boots shined. They prepared to march into action as I looked at the incredibly small window and sewer-smelling, clay-clogged sink. My eyes began to dim and my disposition crawled into hiding when it became clear that there would be no fresh
air or sunlight in this room. I was missing some primary elements: ventilation (air), water and sunlight, especially considering that this was not just any workroom. A studio is by definition a place where magical things can happen: where artists solve problems, think flexibly and invent. When I am engaged in creating an artwork, my senses (mental, emotional and spiritual) have been unclogged and are operating at full tilt. Yet, practically speaking, everything in this room was stopped up. I couldn't properly see, breathe or wash my hands. My immediate task was to fix the room—to find a fan small enough that it would fit the window; manipulate the light; unclog the sink; block the homasote wall with plastic, etc. Little did I know that this mending process would teach me how to transform the space (in both the physical and aesthetic sense) and eventually provide me with all the clues I needed to make a full blown installation.

Converting my studio into a more inviting place meant working with the cement box' environmental facets—the characteristics of its air, sound, light and water. I found that I had to use my own resources, my own tricks, to create and change the situation. I derived my own "Ways to Feel Better" in this studio. The performance had taught me a direct, pragmatic approach towards problem solving. Manipulating the room's elements gave me ideas about creating situations. For instance, I installed a set of broad spectrum, sunlight-imitating lights in my windowless studio. Through the use and help of these special bulbs, I became acutely aware of the properties of light: how it affects color, the felt size of the illuminated space and my mood. These lights became lifegivers: sunlight in a tube. Having the ability to transform, they assumed strong alchemical properties. They allowed me to energetically perform in a space in which I had been barely able to function. As the
cement box became a place where I could fully operate as a creative being, my art became the making of situations, and I began to use my newly acquired devices to create a second environment: my thesis exhibition
Plate IV.
Part III: Kmart for Kmart's Sake,

My Thesis Exhibition

Beginning with an empty room, what does one need to function? Air, heat, water, food. These are our familiar, fundamental human needs. Fulfilling these needs translates into locating objects with life giving properties: humidifiers, plants, fans, and broad spectrum light bulbs. But after the basics are taken care of, what else do we need that will enable us to fully function as interactive individuals? You may have a desire for intimacy. In response, you may provide yourself with a way to emit declarative, romantic statements: "I Dream of You as I Swim," for example. Likewise, you may surround yourself with the objects you are close to and use every day. The familiar is soothing. You may also need the types of stimuli provided by books, audio and video. You may need pathways for direction and structure in your life. And you may need a place to sit, rest and figure out all that is going on around you.

I wanted to make a system, a place, in which one could fully function. I was given spaces: my studio and then the gallery. The fundamental question of what one needs was asked by my cement box studio. On multiple levels, the empty room posed the problem of surviving. It was my job to solve it. Addressing the needs I had identified, I constructed or located a device that could satisfy them. The answers took the form of an installation and filled the gallery.
The title of the exhibition, *Kmart for Kmart's Sake*, was artschool graffiti, lifted directly off a wall at Carnegie-Mellon University, my undergraduate school. I always liked the idea that there could be a "Kmart" aesthetic, and the phrase encapsulated my approach towards locating and adopting materials. For instance, the materials that covered the floor of the installation: black roofing, grass carpeting, and purple foam were definitely of the "Kmart" (vs. the fineart) variety.

I chose the dymaxion globe model for my announcement emblem with a specific intent. The structure utilizes 20 parts (triangles) with 60 sides that reinforce each other when the model is fabricated. I adopted the structure from Buckminster Fuller's sphere of ideas, because it is a perfect paradigm for an installation made from many parts that when put together form a world of their own. My foray into globe and map imagery was provoked by the need to pull the isolated parts of my existence into a relationship with one another. As an aesthetic and structural mechanism the dymaxion successfully filled this purpose.

The exhibition, a system contained within a room, held the aspects of life that I felt were needed by an involved, interactive human being and at the same time, expressed my worldview. It presented the contents of my conceptual sphere with a floor covering that was designed to arrange its parts. The pathways provided structure and direction for a viewer's journey through the space.

My systemic notion was made evident by the way light was controlled in the gallery. Its glass doors and windows were tinted at the front end and at the back, covered with opaque black paper. The installation's primary light source were rows of
broadspcetum lights. Equally important (but dimmer) light sources were a video monitor, internally lighted paper mâché globes, spherical nightlights, sculptural objects and the slide projections which constituted an important part of the sculpture, *I Dream of You as I Swim*. These projections and the broad spectrum lights were controlled by electrical timers, and every half hour one turned on and the other, off. When the lights were off, the paper mâché globes became especially effective. One could see the layers of triangularly shaped pieces of paper used to make them. The video monitor and the lighted signposts became beacons in the darkened room. When the slide projector was activated, the pool was visually completed by the images which were projected into its shallow basin. Conversely, the broadspcetum lights illuminated the more concrete objects and collages, enhancing their colors and dimensionality.

As you entered *Kmart for Kmart's Sake, My Solar System* was hanging immediately above you; and on your left, *Fifty-Foot Wall Sentence*. *My Solar System* expressed my conceptualization of geography. Each of the large paper mâché planets were covered with pieces of maps depicting one specific location: Columbus (the largest) was followed by Pittsburgh, New York City and the Far East.(the Pluto in my system) In *Fifty Foot Wall Sentence*, I arranged shelves along the length of the gallery. Their levels were staggered. The last one was hung upside down and painted turquoise (to act as a punctuation mark). The objects and collages that I placed on, around and hanging off these shelves were small works that I had become intimate with through the process of making them. When they were installed, these assemblages were arranged and rearranged in the same
manner their parts had been. I was following up on and refining my experience with the Artreach gallery exhibition.

As you passed the globes and shelves you saw a trapezium shaped pool located at the back of the gallery. Its tile color and glazed lettering were inspired by the Varsity pool located in Larkins Hall. The relative magnitude of the sculpture within the exhibition expressed the depth of my associations with swimming. "I Dream of You as I Swim" (the statement glazed on the pool's tile) alludes to one of my past romances and to the dreamy, trancelike state which I obtain through swimming. As I swam in the Varsity pool I became aware of the soft glow (similar in its effect underwater to broadband lighting in a room) emitted by underwater portal-shaped lights residing in its walls. These lights are particularly transfixing and beautiful in effect when they illuminate swimmers. Thinking about possible imagery for the photographic projections, I chose to capture the swimmers moving alongside the lighted edge of the pool. These photographs were projected in a series at five second intervals, a slow animation. Other types of imagery I used for the slides were inspired by my Taijiquan exercises (as meditative an activity as swimming). In Taijiquan there is a phrase of ten movements called, "Hold the Ball," where one holds one's hands in a circular fashion as if holding a ball of energy. A mental image of a circle or globe can easily be used as a point to focus on while in a meditative state. In the slide projections, a white ball was held by a man practising Taijiquan underwater. Then the ball became a globe following a path across the watery horizon, disappeared, and was replaced by a swimmers's white bathing cap.

The last major area of the exhibition was a place where one could sit and interpret what was going on. For this purpose, I created a resting space complete with a rug
(imitation grass), chairs, a refrigerator, clock, books in a bookcase, video and audio monitors. These last three provided stimuli and clues to understanding the system presented as the exhibition. While sitting in this space all of the conceptual keys (ideas contained in the books, video, refrigerator magnet images and clock) to the installation lay at arms' length. The books covered my primary influences during the time leading up to and creating the installation: a Max Ernst catalog, a Joseph Beuys catalog, _The Transfiguration of the Common Place_ by Arthur Danto; _Buckminster Fuller's Universe_ by Lloyd Steven Sieden; _Simplified Taijiquan_ and _Light Up Your Blues, Understanding and Overcoming Seasonal Affective Disorders_ by Robert N. Moreines, M.D. and Patricia L. McGuire, M.D. They were presented to provide the public with the clues it might need in locating and understanding my sources: the theoretical underpinnings which supported the content of my work. The Max Ernst catalog informed my approach towards collage; the Beuys--the transformation of common and discarded materials and objects; the Danto book--the power an artist has to designate a given situation or object, Art (he uses Duchamp and Warhol as examples). In addition, the Fuller biography related the importance of systemic situations; the Taijiquan handbook--the relationship between meditation and lithesome movement and the S.A.D. book--the effectiveness of light quality. I had made the three other books in the stack: _My World; Self Portrait_ and _Kmart for Kmart's Sake Working Pages_. _My World_ is a small catalog of my work. _Self Portrait_, a second xerox book, delineates my journey from the east coast to the Midwest. _Working Pages_ is a compilation of all the drawings, notes and lists made during the planning stages of _Kmart for Kmart's Sake_, and it provides the most direct evidence of the problem solving inherent to creating a large scale installation.
The video collage was nonlinear in form and content. Its source material was culled from ancient educational science films. They present explanations of the earth's rotation; solar and planetary system characteristics; and astronautical Apollo voyages. Their images ranged from a plastic globe lit by a flashlight to illustrated and computer generated animations to T.V. news documentaries. In the video, images were lined up and visually hinged together in the same manner as my xerox collages.

The *Talking Head Record Player*, a kinetic sculpture, provided the audio stimulus for the system. A viewer/listener could listen (through a headset) to an audio collage utilizing interviews and radio samplings. It included recordings of my father's stories; New York radio; my radio shows (as a DJ) on WRCT Pittsburgh, basement parties and garage bands performing in Pittsburgh; Folk music from Pakistan and an interview with Buckminster Fuller, among other sources. Moving from one sphere to another, this audio journey connected itself with the video collage and paper mâché globes.

Within the sitting area, a chair made for the East/West Man was given its own corner. The East/West Man is a real life person with whom I had been romantically involved. He had significantly affected my life and worldview, and I created a number of artworks for and about him and his reaction to American culture. For instance, "*I Dream of You as I Swim*" is an autobiographical statement directed towards him. My appropriation of map imagery was at least partially caused by my increased awareness of the differences between Eastern and Western cultures. A chair, table, signpost and book, *Midnight's Children*, by Salman Rushdie were
arranged together in recognition of his presence in my life. The tabletop, covered
with a map and an Indian-made wooden duck, narrated his journey from East to
West. The difficulties he encountered in the West and during our relationship
resulted in a cultural collision, metaphorically splitting his psyche into geographical
halves. The image on the signpost pictured his mind undergoing psychosurgery as
it is being wrapped together with maps of the Eastern and Western hemispheres.

The personal significance of *Kmart for Kmart's Sake* lies in the process of making
the exhibition. The installation posed aesthetic, conceptual, fabrication and
budgetary issues. Adopting an axiom of *Using All that I Know (at all times)*
provided the appropriate mind-set with which to approach problem solving as the
piece assumed my complete mental, emotional and physical involvement. Feeling
that stretching and stress were required for growth, I had consciously presented
this challenge to myself. The road towards completion was not as much a trial as it
was a game of quick wits and endurance.
Part IV: In Retrospect

The narrative of development provided by *Two Years of Work: A Trail of Experiments* loosely takes the form of a "Kunstlerroman," a literary term for an account of self-realization where the individual becomes an artist or poet. Like my narrative, this form reflects an interest in the growth of the artist as a person: to realize the physical, intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual capacities inherent in his personality.11 As Goethe's prototypical hero Wilhelm Meister explained, "my goal was to develop myself just as I am."12

Reconstructing my process of artmaking is at the heart of the narrative I have presented. Learning how to assume the role of an alchemist became instrumental in adjusting my approach to gathering and handling materials. It became obvious to me that playful experimentation is a much more engaging experience than planning and processing an artwork. I was excited by the results as they exposed my perceptions as I arranged, rearranged, shined, dipped, painted and eventually, "owned" my chosen materials. My art descriptors moved away from "fabrication, preconceived, emotive" and "well-crafted" and towards "experimentation,

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discovery, engagement" and "punlike." The work became much more intriguing to make as well as experience.

My persistent theme is the application of personal resources towards changing or creating a situation. My art became the transformation of an empty space into an environment which allows and promotes full involvement with life. Now the task is far greater and more elusive: it being how to create such a situation in the world gallery. I am no longer responding to the question: "How does mankind grapple with the dilemmas posed by living in the twentieth century?" I am asking myself: "How am I going to create a way of living and a situation where I can continue to fully function as an artist in the twenty-first century?"
Part V: My Purpose has been . . .

I have purposefully not concluded this narrative of development, as my presentation is just a portion of a greater timeline. My development as an artist started prior to these past three years and it is my aim that it will not end with them. Specifically, my intent has been to teach myself how to continue to ask questions, to continue to look for situations where I have not been, to continue to discover solutions I have not used before, and to continue to "use all that I know (at all times)." My purpose has been to embrace the attitude that will enable me to continue.
Appendix A: Documentation

Plate VI.
Clay, glaze, slip, fire, plasticine, model, oil, gauze, room, vessel, shale, sheets, silicone silicate, water, molds, plaster, earth, plant, time, stories, history, garbage, walking, found, junkyard, second-hand, used, rejected, treasures, oddlots, wax, pegboard, hardware hooks, latex gloves, insulation foam, condoms, netting, terminology, chronology, spacing, frames, slide order, photocopy, gears, tires, metal pipes, nuts and bolts, curved walls, balance, vitamins, steamed cloth, window light, dust, room, fans, humidifier, music, mending, fixing, converting, transforming, sunlight in a tube, maps, spheres, direction, paint, scenting, sampling, audio-video-stimuli, purple foam carpet, orange frame, artschool graffiti, 20 triangles, perfect paradigm, opaque black paper, rows of light, electricity timers, more concrete objects, shallow basin, projection, slow animation, intimate objects, tile, circular fashion, ball of energy, mental image, taijiquan, turntable, clues to understanding, conceptual keys, primary influences, theoretical underpinnings, lithesome movement, in the stack, lit by a flash, budgetary issues, magnets, baitfish, computer, neon.
Appendix B: *Ways...*

This poem provided the basis for my performance of the same name, presented in 330 Hayes Hall, The Ohio State University, Winter, 1989.

*Ways to Feel Better, Part III*

Drink a cup of tea  
hot milk  
chicken soup  
wine  
Irish Mist,  
clear, sweet, water.

Cook yourself a meal,  
eat an apple  
orange  
banana  
tofu  
cinnamon toast  
spicy chicken  
wash the dishes with warm water.

Take a sauna  
a swim  
sit in a pool of hot water.

Take a hot shower  
a cold shower  
wash your face  
brush your teeth  
drink a tall glass of water.

Take a walk in soft, spring rain  
Clap your hands!  
turn up the heat  
use an extra pillow.

Laugh loudly for as long as possible.  
Rock yourself to sleep.
Take a nap
a rest
a stretch
a meow
a belly-up-rub.

Have a flying dream
meditate
level it out
lighten up
think about it
till the land.

Stare into the sun with your eyes closed.

Talk to your Mom
Pop
sister
brother
lover
friend
--someone who knows you very well.

Have a hug
a smooch
a back, front, side, inbetween rub.

Take vitamins
A
B
C
D
And
E.

Write a letter to an old friend
receive a letter from an old friend
Comb your hair
Oil your skin.

Change your socks, underwear, shoes and sheets.

Paint your nails metallic cobalt blue!

Buy a tube of cool, super gel toothpaste with sparkles.

Tell a joke
read a poem
a good book
the comics
a newspaper.

Watch late night T.V.--
a Fred Astaire movie

Listen to your favorite old time rag.
Wear
purple, turquoise, feusha, chartreuse,
hot pink
safetygreen
and safetyorange
colored shirts.

Go on a trip
take a boat
a train
a car.

Walk to work
skip to work
roller skate to work
ride you bicycle
--don't look for a parking space.

Breathe some fresh air.

Go to a party
a talk
a lecture
a meal
a concert.

See a band
sweat a quart.

Go dancing:
do the twist
the watussee
a waitz
a headbanger
footstomper
the swing
two step.

Buy high top sneakers with acid yellow linings.

Get a toy
a game
a book
a tape
a magazine
a roll of unexposed film.

Buy jellysnakes and put them in your friends' mailboxes.
Appendix C: A Longitudinal Study of Problem Finding in Art

During the early to mid 70's psychologists, researchers and writers, Jacob W. Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi began the first longitudinal study of artists with the intent of developing an analytic description of the creative process. Several Hundred students from the Art Institute of Chicago participated in the initial study. Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi collected as much information as possible about them personally; about the processes underlying the creation of their work; and the social forces effecting the continuation of their expression following graduation.

During the course of their study Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi introduced a specific term for the process which consistently increases an artist's chances of arriving at original responses: Problem Finding. Individuals engaged in this process see a problem emerging from the situation itself. They do not identify the task in terms of an already existing definition; they are willing to experiment and to learn about the reality they confront in its own terms rather than in terms of previous assumptions. The artists actions revealed that they were working in a goal-directed way, but without being full conscious of what the goal was. Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi then went on (in follow up studies) to see if there was any correlation between the students who were "problem finders" and those who developed a bonafide career as artists. They concluded that artists who approach their work with personal yet not stereotyped problems in mind not only produce drawings that are rated more original and of greater aesthetic value, but persist in making art longer and achieve greater success in their creative profession. It would seem that problem finding is an integral part of a person's cognitive style; it is a reliable characteristic, not just a temporary trait accidentally elicited by the experiment.

It is very interesting, however, to take a closer look at their findings. Five years after graduation, out of a specific group of 31 students, about half had dropped out of

14 Ibid., pp. 171-183.
15 Ibid., p. 172.
16 Ibid., p.177.
17 Ibid., p.182.
fine art. Eight had dropped out altogether without any record of their whereabouts. Seven of these students (23%) had achieved a minimum of success. They had kept up with peripheral connections with the artworld. They were working as department store decorators, elementary school teachers, etc. None from this group were showing their work professionally. The remaining nine artists (29%) of the group had established a recognizable artistic identity. These artists ranged from those who exhibited their work sporadically to those represented by major galleries. One has achieved unconditional success. He continues to paint. One of his works belongs to the collection of a major museum. His paintings are exhibited in prestigious galleries and reviewed by major art journals. He has a teaching position which supplements the sale of his work.\textsuperscript{18}

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 164.}
Plate VII.
Bibliography


