THE SEARCH: ART, LIFE AND FOUND OBJECTS

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by

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INTRODUCTION

A friend of mine once asked himself out loud, "Who will I be today?" I always try to be myself, I argued, but I understood that we have many faces which we use in different situations. How do we figure out which face to use? We try on one after the other and use the one that fits best. This is the way that I use found objects to build my artwork. I try one object after the other, looking for the one that works best. Finding the one takes as much time and consideration as we take in relating to people that are around us.

If there was an instruction booklet on how to get through life, sometimes I think I'd be the first to buy it, however, most of the time I am amused by not knowing what will happen next. I try to express this amusement in my artwork: what will happen to the piece if I use a round object instead of a square one; what will happen if I stay instead of leave?

When I read about art or artists, I write down quotes that verbalize my thoughts and feelings. A selection of
these quotes appear as headings to my writings, providing framework and insight to what I do and why I do it. I chose to use the "found" quotes the same way as I use the found objects. They allow me to say what I have to say.
"All material has its own history built into it. There's no such thing as 'better' material. It's just as unnatural for people to use oil paint as it is to use anything else. An artist manufactures his material out of his own existence—his own ignorance, familiarity or confidence.

My attitude is that if I am in a working situation, I just look around and see what's around me. If I've picked up something, touched something or moved somewhere, then something starts happening."¹

Robert Rauschenberg

Moving to the mid-west and beginning graduate school caused a transition in my artwork. These two simultaneous events caused me to re-evaluate the way I was making art. I began to search for a new way of learning about and making art. I was not interested in working with more traditional artforms such as oil paint or bronze casting because I felt that these had been thoroughly explored by other artists in the past. I chose to work in a way that began primarily with the Dadaists: using the found object as art. However, the Beat poets and writers of the 50's and early 60's—those "...who rejected the formalism, conservatism and 'classicism' that T.S. Eliot's influence grafted on American writing; who went back to essential sources—in our national experience and in our earlier literature—to be renewed"²—are to whom I feel a closer artistic kinship with, rather than with the Dadaists, Surrealists, and Pop artists who all used found objects as art. The Beats had an urgent
need to develop a mode of expression more in tune with the "realness" that was happening immediately around them. To others' disdain, they held that what was around them was good enough to be used in poetry or literature. Their insistent openness filled their lives with new ideas and experiences, which is how I'd like my life to be filled.

I examine what others have discarded in order to make sense of life's existence and meaning. It's an acknowledgment of what is around me and a way of expressing today what is happening today. I share with the Beats urgency, immediacy and openness. I don't find much of these in most other found object art.

I began to pick up odd bits of trash that I found as I walked around. This progressed to raiding dumpsters at construction sites, and then to going to junkyards - slowly, as the need for quantity and size increased. Rusted, tough, leftover urban junk piled up in my studio: wires, plastics, metals, all survivors of a complicated world, all previously part of a system or a machine. I use them in a way they were not intended to be used. I give them one more chance to exist and to have a new meaning.
imposture

I found a rotisserie, removed the metal spear that ran through the center, and decided it looked better hanging from an end, so that the door was proportional to our doorways. Inside the suspended cage a little larger than a football are four rock-like corndog shaped objects. The corndogs are actually plaster painted to look like stone to give the illusion of weight. They are crowded and trapped and their metal stick-legs poke out of the cage, reaching toward the floor like landing gear. The cage is suspended by an eight foot tightly wound coil that seems to grow right out of the wall. The weight of the empty cage itself provided enough tension to the spring to make it taut, but I wanted the viewer to really feel that this cage was heading towards the floor and that the legs were groping and stretching, so I used the long coil.

I was most challenged by finding a population of something to fit crowdedly in the cage. I finally had to create my own objects. The resulting corndog shapes are rather curious and mysterious. Being crowded in the cage and hanging on the wall evokes anxiety and frustration.
Plate I: imposture 1990 collected objects and plaster
"I do not seek; I find." -Picasso

"I know what I want when I see it." -Klee

All of my sculptures are determined by objects that I find. Working with one object dictates to me what the next object will be, so I know very little about what my sculpture will finally look like. To me there is a joyful sense of adventure and unpredictability in working this way, which reflects the way life is. Situations arise and cause people to act differently just as objects are found that cause the sculptures to change. This way of working without a plan but with a vision allows plenty of room for me to learn. I see artmaking as a way of learning. A piece is only unsuccessful if I haven't learned something about the materials, art, or myself. For example, I learn how objects change when they're on the floor, on the wall, or suspended in the air; how color can affect an object and its meaning; what objects have stronger associations with other artists or movements; or how I feel when a sharp piece of metal is secured to the floor or when it is loosely hanging from a nail a few inches above my head.
rumination

On one end a shovel-like object cradles a pod or potato shaped object that looks rusted but is made of plastic. A long piece of black surgical tubing connects to one end, crawls on the floor, and then is magically suspended in the air, arching, then connecting to a long, narrow piece of copper-colored metal. The metal is L-shaped. At the other end of the metal the tubing appears again, sneaking out from underneath the metal on the floor. It fits into a hole in a piece of aluminum that looks like a comb or rake. Growing out of two other holes are two wires that have similar pods attached to the ends. These pods lean gently against the wall.

The plastic pods are used to suggest people's connections with themselves or with others. On one end there is a single pod; on the other end there are two pods. The traveling line in the middle suggests the experiences and distance between, for example, being with someone and being alone.

The warbling line of the entire piece directs the viewers eye back and forth so it never rests permanently on either pods' situation, just as in life one is either alone or not alone.
Plate II: *rumination* 1991 metal, rubber, wire and plastic.
"The object no longer speaks to us as it usually does; nor does it lose its identity by becoming just a part of the work of art. It speaks, but not with its everyday voice. The "pure inner sound" of things is heard: the epiphany of the everyday."  

Karsten Harries

One way people feel connected to my work is when they begin to slow down and pay attention to things that they normally wouldn't. They notice how an engine pipe in the street has rusted and worn and the beauty of it, or how the clutter on their desks can look poetic. Just like how when we were kids we could look at the clouds and see cars and animals, or look at a gnarled tree and see an old man; we can look today at two light bulbs and see eyes or breasts. New arrangement can give new meaning to objects.
I had attached the surgical tubing to the wheels; it was a perfect fit. The weight of the wheels tightened the tubing, securing the connection. The other end of the tubes had been shuffled from object to object, but I had never found a good place for them. They sat on the floor in a pile. I scooped them up and tied the ends in a knot, then hung them from a nail. Four legs with wheels stranded on the wall, unable to reach the floor or to untangle themselves appeared frustrating, humorous and painful. We've all been in situations where we've felt like this.
Plate III: **stretch pants** 1991 rubber and wheels
"Any art that is successful in projecting positive feelings about life has got to be heavily erotic." 4

Claes Oldenburg

I collect objects with elements that can be used connectors to other objects such as holes or appendages, which are suggestive of the female and male sexual organs. Some objects are made of material that holes can be drilled into or that can be glued to other things. If an object already has a certain size hole, a tube or nail can be found or bought that fits it. I shuffle objects around like jigsaw puzzle pieces until two objects "fit" together, which is also sexually suggestive. Sometimes it is intentional, and sometimes it just happens serendipitously. Searching for the perfect "fit" is also a way of ordering what is around me; making sense of nonsense. "Fitting" objects together produces a "temporary connection." I never weld objects together because it is too permanent. Most sculptures can easily fall apart and must be disassembled to be moved. The transience, seen in the "temporary connection" (and, in some sculptures, the feeling of being frozen on the midst of movement) is an aspect that reflects so much of life's temporariness. Life itself, the frequency of divorce, or constantly switching television channels are some examples of this.
The light bulb reminded me of a penis. I thought that it was typical of a man to design something in the image of himself and wanted to see if I could use this penis-bulb sarcastically in a piece. At the time I had begun incorporating light bulbs into pieces. Wiring light sockets is a very simple task, an uneasy one, however, considering how dangerous a shock of electricity can be. I hooked up wires that led out from the light bulb socket that looked live. At the ends are alligator clips, clipped to metal shelves that balance on one nail. Singed peanuts sit on the shelves to complete the illusion of danger. All of it is attached to the wall at an average adult pelvis level. Centered between each shelf was the bulb.

At first I called the piece "roasted nuts," derogatorily suggesting what I think some particular men deserved. Whether or not viewers comprehended this message, most found it dangerous, or at least, humorous.
Plate IV: *currently* 1991 collected objects
"My works are much closer to soul or introspection, to inner feelings. They are indoor things."  

Eva Hesse

My works, too, are quiet metaphors for feelings and memories. They are elemental, subtle, and their fragility sometimes looks painful and makes the viewer uncomfortable. They contain hidden emotions such as shyness, embarrassment, oppression, frustration, contemplation, silliness, and absurdity which I have dealt with in certain personal relationships. They are accessible because of my use of familiar and tangible objects. Most linear materials, like wire or tubing, are led gently towards the floor by gravity. Objects look as if their connection is inevitable.
pursuer

When I stood the body of this creature in the metal shoe-blocks I was reminded of the robots in the movie RoboCop, and referred to the piece with this title. The power of the pursuer in those type of action-adventure films coupled with the small scale of the objects I used, suggested the overwhelming industrial and technological position of our world in which people can feel threatened by very small tangible or intangible things.
Plate V: pursuer 1991 collected objects
"Many think of art as a mere diversion, a thing that is purely marginal to the real business of life, they do not see that it looks into life's secrets, that it entertains the most honest confessions, confessions that have within them the least element of calculation and must therefore be accounted exceptionally sincere."

Rene Huyghe

Artists that most influence me don't necessarily have anything in common with what my work looks like. They are influential because of their common "confessions" and sincerity. Although my work may be reminiscent of others, after learning about them, I usually find I have few bonds with them. One major influence has been Eva Hesse and she is perhaps the only one whose work visually relates to mine. I read Lucy Lippard's book about Hesse, and I felt an instant kinship to her thoughts and work. The way she uses groping, delicate lines, and her search for an honest approach to materials, to me, involves a presence of one's hand, as opposed to more mechanical processes such as welding. The evidence of metal that has been bent or wrapped around something, wires that have been squeezed tightly into a pipe end, or allowing gravity to direct a flowing cord, have a more honest quality than forcing odd pieces of metal to stand on end in different directions, charging into space.

Robert Rauschenberg is another intense influence. Although our final products are quite different, our
working attitudes are the same. As with the words of Hesse, the words of Rauschenberg seemed to be my own. His openness to materials and experiences when creating his art and life are the same as mine: "Painting relates both to art and life. Neither can be made. I try to act in the gap between the two."\(^7\)

I also find Karen Finley's work inspirational. Her performance captured so many extreme emotions - from laughter to tears - and is expressed with minimal "materials" - her voice, her body, and few props - that I was left in awe of how one woman could make me feel so much in such a short period of time. I hope that my sculpture, while it cannot have the impact that live performance has, can express something with the strength that Finley's performance has.
"toyota"

This piece is simply the light and windshield wiper switch mechanism from the steering wheel column of my car. It hangs on the wall suggesting a crucifix. .. Another suggestion is of the female reproductive system. Some thoughts it provoked were of technology and religion; the male control of invention and industry; and the associations the advertising media has used of sex and cars, particularly using women to see cars.
Plate VI: "toyota" 1991 turn signal and wiper switches
CONCLUSION

In my two years of study here, I have found a way of working that better suits my way of thinking and living than other ways I have studied in the past. I was no longer interested in painting and instead chose to build with found objects. My way of building has allowed me to relate to materials in a way that is parallel to life as I see it. My sculptures are determined by objects I can find, just as my life is determined by what situations arise. I work with discarded industrial plastics and metals and linear materials such as wires and cords, and use them to help make sense of what is around me. My influences are artists who share my way of thinking, rather than those who share the use of the found object. Perhaps as I get older, my attitude will gradually change, and then so will the way I work.
APPENDIX

Figure 1: John Clellon Holmes, "Unscrewing the Locks: The Beat Poets."

1 QUERIES
Indifference to history is as American as the built-in obsolescence of our automobiles. Heirs of the past, we ignore it out of lust for the future — to the despair of our artists, marooned in the unfinished present, and thereby speaking in a language that is often unintelligible to their countrymen, who are bewitched by tomorrow or captive to yesterday.

For the so-called Beat Poets of the 50's and early 60's, dissertation-time, retrospective-time has come. Who were they? Where did they come from? Were they significant? Did they make any difference?

Above all, have they become safe enough — back there a decade or more ago — for us to confront what they were saying so insistently?

2 GROUPS
I take this movement to include all those poets and writers who would agree, either whole-heartedly or with minor reservations, with William Carlos Williams' reaction to T. S. Eliot's The Wasteland. Williams felt that it would set American poetry back by twenty years, and by the late-40's those twenty years were over, and the prophecy redeemed. I take this movement to embrace all those writers who rejected the formalism, conservatism and "classicism" that Eliot's influence grafted on American writing; who went back to essential sources — in our national experience and in our earlier literature — to be renewed.

The New York group, which included Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso and others, became officially known as the Beats. There was the so-called Black Mountain group, loosely including Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and others. In San Francisco, there was Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Michael McClure. Another New York enclave, centered around the art scene there, was composed of Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch.

No artist, I suspect, is ever completely at ease finding himself shoved into a category. But I believe that all these writers more or less instantly recognized a similarity of life-attitude and aesthetic-direction in each other, and felt less alone, and drew fresh energy, from that recognition. Most of them found their ancestors in Melville and Whitman, rather than James and Hawthorne. Most of them believed that Ezra Pound and Hart Crane held out more hope for a new and vital American poetry than T. S. Eliot or W. B. Yeats. And most of them felt a fraternal kinship with William Carlos Williams that signaled the victory of his long struggle to establish a new poetics here.

24
During this explosively creative span from 1950-1965, a multiplicity of actions were coinciding, and the challenge of an aesthetic ideal involved with producing unique and unrepeatable experiences was being tested and altered. Much of what was being changed or transformed, questioned or reconsidered was not only the traditional boundaries in art but also habitual ways of perceiving one's world or environment.

Allan Kaprow alludes to the bond between contemporary art and mental life by stating that both tend to "think in multimedia, intermedia, overlays, fusions, and hybridizations." After all, isn't the American mind an assemblage.

"Junk art" is descriptive of this phenomenon in that there is a non-judgmental acceptance of all matter just as a junk yard acts as a receptacle for society's refuse without making any distinctions amongst the deposited objects or establishing boundaries of aesthetics related to origin and previous function. The city as a fundamental source permits a non-hierarchical presentation and acceptance of discarded objects which the citizen unconsciously allows to fall from his hand into the net of the "gutters". The net brings the spectator assorted fragments, although the aesthetic sense of these objects undergoes a physical displacement from the streets, and a new awareness is achieved. Robert M. Coates, in his January 2, 1960, review of an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, comments upon relationships between the Beats and several artists' use of the castoff and commonplace, in which the underlying philosophy was one of "getting down low". "Where Stankiewicz ransacks the junk pile, Rauschenberg, equally enthusiastically, upends the wastebasket, and embellishes his compositions with shreds of old posters and newspapers, paper doilies, empty Coke bottles, and all the other odds and ends one might find there... The artist himself speaks of this phenomenon: "I really feel sorry for people who think things like soap dishes or mirrors or Coke bottles are ugly, because they're surrounded by things like that all day long, and it must make them miserable."
How do you feel about craftsmanship in the process of your work? I do think there is a state of quality that is necessary, but it is not based on correctness. It has to do with the quality of the piece itself and nothing to do with neatness or edges. It’s not the artisan quality of the work, but the integrity of the piece. I’m not conscious of materials as a beautiful essence. For me the great involvement is for a purpose—to arrive at an end—not that much of a thing itself. I am interested in finding out through working on the piece some of the potential and not the preconceived. As you work, the piece itself can define or redefine the next step, or the next step combined with some vague idea. I want to allow myself to get involved in what is happening and what can happen and be completely free to let that go and change. I do, however, have a very strong feeling about honesty—in the process. I like to be, it sounds corny, true to whatever I use, and use it in the least pretentious and most direct way. If the material is liquid, I don’t just leave it or pour it. I can control it, but I don’t really want to change it. I don’t want to add color or make it thicker or thinner. There isn’t a rule. I don’t want to keep any rules. That’s why my art might be so good, because I have no fear. I could take risks. My attitude toward art is most open. It is totally unconservative—just freedom and willingness to work. I really walk on the edge.

How do the materials relate to the content of your work? It’s not a simple question for me. First, when I work it’s only the abstract qualities that I’m working with, which is the material, the form it’s going to take, the size, the scale, the positioning, where it comes from, the ceiling, the floor. However I don’t value the totality of the image on these abstract or aesthetic points. For me, as I said before, art and life are inseparable. If I can name the content, then maybe on that level, it’s the total absurdity of life. If I am related to certain artists it is not so much from having studied their works or writings, but from feeling the total absurdity in their work.


Absurdity? It’s so personal. Art and work and art and life are very connected and my whole life has been absurd. There isn’t a thing in my life that has happened that hasn’t been extreme—personal health, family, economic situations. My art, my school, my personal friends were the best things I ever had. And now back to extreme sickness—all extreme—all absurd. Now art being the most important thing for me, other than existing and staying alive, became connected to this, now closer meshed than ever, and absurdity is the key word. It has to do with contradictions and oppositions. In the forms I use in my work the contradictions are certainly there. I was always aware that I should take order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge versus small, and I would try to find the most absurd opposites or extreme opposites. I was always aware of their absurdity and also their formal contradictions and it was always more interesting than making something average, normal, right size, right proportion.
Plate VII: Wexner Performance Space program.

Karen Finley

We keep our victims ready

Nov. 14-17
I WAS NOT EXPECTED TO BE TALENTED

I have never been out of the county nor have I ever been to New York City even though my husband goes to work there every day. I am a committed waitress and mother, who looks forward to purchasing a new thousand dollar sofa set. Isn't that what working is for?

Last night I cried till dawn. I cried because I want a daughter but instead I have had three sons. I feel if I have a daughter I can give her chances I never had. This is something perhaps only women would understand—that up to this very day, girls, daughters are killed for being just that. Girls. Daughters. Females. No wonder the entire psyche of women is universally coached to be as desirable as possible, as boring as possible, as cute as possible. Obviously, it's for the survival of the female species.

Yes, maybe my daughter could have the chances I never had. Maybe she could get another kind of job instead of serving, nurturing for pay that most men would never work for. For a waitress there is no pregnancy leave, maternity leave.-bearing a child can mean the end of a career. a woman can be abandoned by society, and the government wants to make it impossible for women to have a fair share along with men. Waitressing, which is shiftwork, doesn't correspond with day-care hours, and a sitter costs more than half a woman's salary. No Insurance. No sick leave. No paid vacation. Restaurants are paying below minimum wage. In fact, many upscale hotels and restaurants hire men, not women, to work the dinner shift, which brings as much as three or four times more money. I keep all this to myself because I was not expected to be talented.

I WAS NOT EXPECTED TO BE TALENTED. You see, I was not expected to be talented. That's why I wanted a daughter, who I could encourage, who could lead, who could eventually leave this god damn domestic cycle. But I've been told by the doctors that I could not have anymore children. I worked too hard and long into my pregnancy even though most waitresses stop working when they "show" since most customers find a pregnant woman serving food unappetizing.

Yeah, you tell me I'm supposed to stop thinking about everyone else's problems and start thinking about my own. Well, as soon as I start doing that everyone else's lives collapse and I'm left to pick up the pieces. Just smile, act pretty, open the door, and clean the toilet. You say, "One day at a time." Well, it's a slow death! I'm told to remember those who are less fortunate than myself. Remember the homeless, the poor.
the suffering. Well, I’m suffering inside! Anytime I see someone caring or sharing, I burn up inside with envy. You know why I only feel comfortable around the collapsed, the broken, the inebriated, the helpless and the poor—CAUSE THEY LOOK LIKE WHAT I FEEL INSIDE! They look, they look, they look like what I feel inside!

You see, I WAS NOT EXPECTED TO BE TALENTED. And when I see you after you beat me after you degrade me and you stand on top of me in some god-awful museum you say to me, There are no great women artists! There are no great women artists! There are no great women artists! We are always the exception. I was not expected to be talented.

Instead of going to church I walk past the sites in Central Park where women have been raped and murdered And think about the men who just walked away after they performed their deed And then I think of this country’s heroes and how they treated their women Like the Kennedys how they treated their women Marilyn Monroe—they killed her, left her for dead. Mary Jo Koppechne—they killed her, abandoned her like shit.

And I barf when I see William Hurt— He thought he was so cool when he played a queen When he made love to a deaf woman For the world to see. But we’re used to it. We can only fuck to get access to power And if we don’t we’re raped anyway. All single women with children with no health care, no child care, no child support— We’re used to it. It’s a life of Lies It’s a life of Selling Out

And the last time I saw my mother she had a skillet above my head.

Why should I pretend to stop drinking? For the children? Shit, they’re the reason I drink! My so-called daughter hasn’t called me in years because of my so-called intoxicated lifestyle, my liquor-motivated decisions. No one cares about me. Why should I care about me? Let’s see how low they’ll let me fall before they’ll pick me up. Besides, I can stop whenever I want. And you know children, as soon as they’re in trouble they call on you to bail them out.

I know everything, that’s my problem. I’m too smart for this world. My analysis can be so deliberate that I’m known for my psychic pain. Clever, smart, driven pain. I’m always right.

I feel you shiver when you suspect me drinking, but you’ll never find my vodka behind the kitty litter box! ’Cause I’m the only one who works around here. No matter how much I drink I always make it to work on time! I’d like for you to feel pain, to feel my pain of
raising a family alone. I don't get any widow benefits. People and family members are scared of me. They don't know what to do with a widow. Everyone blames his life on me. Everyone blames his death on me, even though he pulled the trigger. And the only consoling words I ever receive are, "You're so lucky he didn't kill you and the children too." Or, "You're so lucky he blew his brains out in the garage and not in the living room." Yeah, I'm lucky. I'm so lucky. I hate people who rationalize suffering. I hate people who have to have a reason for everything. They can't just accept the fact that bad things happen to good people because if they did they'd be like me—out of control. Out of control. Yeah, I admit it. I'm out of control.

I deserve the right to drink. No one else rewards me for going to work everyday, for cleaning this damn house. I had five kids, three miscarriages and one abortion. I've been a mother, a whore and a slave. I've been needed, rejected and desired, but never valued by anyone. Soon my words will slur, my muscles and facial expressions will drop. My head will bob, my sentences will run on and on and on. And I'll tell those god damn repeated stories over and over and over again and I'll never stop even though you'll want me to. I'm a living Hell and I intend to keep my devil out.

I live in a state of never getting better
I live in a world of caving in
I live in a life where
pleasure means death
I hate REHAB
I hate DENIAL
I hate Queen Victoria.

Why is it I hate independence?
Independence Day?
I want Dependence Day.
I want to be dependent on drugs, alcohol, and sex again
I want dependency
This country takes all my independence away
They are trying to take abortion away
and freedom of speech
Because this country spends more time on this stupid burning flag
When our own citizens' stomachs are burning with hunger
When people with AIDS are burning with fever
Let me tell you, God has failed
And God is bureaucracy
God is statistics
God is what you make and not what you feel
We've been oppressed
We're only tolerated
And they say we're lucky cause we don't live in China
But they don't even care about the people of China
I want more than a biological opportunity
I want more than a biological opportunity
Listen to me...
Plate VIII: *creases* 1991 firehose, wire and wheels
Plate IX: circuit 1990 metal, rubber, pastel
Plate X: locked arch 1991 collected objects
Plate XI: Eva Hesse, Ennead 1966 dyed string and painted papier-mache.
Plate XII: Eva Hesse, Untitled or Not Yet 1966
nine dyed net bags, weights, and clear polyethylene.
Plate XIII: Eva Hesse, Seven Poles 1970 reinforced fiberglass over aluminum wire and polyethylene
Plate XIV: Robert Rauschenberg, Monogram 1959
Plate XV: Tony Cragg, Minster 1987 rubber, stone, wood, metal.
Plate XVI: Tony Cragg, $ 1982 mixed media.
Plate XVII: Edward Kienholz, *The Beanery (detail)* 1965
Plate XVIII: Louise Nevelson, Royal Tide II 1961-63
LIST OF FOOTNOTES


3. Ibid., p. 47.


7. Ibid., p. 43.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


