Independent Film Making in Detroit
by Harry Smallenburg

With the floodlights on, it's hot in the small bedroom Andrea Gomez has turned into a studio in her Ferndale home. There is bric-a-brac on the walls, a 35mm camera for still shots, a packet of pastel pencils, books on shelves that go up to the ceiling, including a set of Muybridge studies in motion, and her animation stand, with a 16mm movie camera high at the top. She moves quickly with her pencils over the paper on the stand, pausing, standing back from the light for each individual exposure, then bending to her work again. She is deft, her concentration intense. The most surprising piece of filmmaking equipment is a small hand vacuum cleaner, which sucks up colored dust, she says, with an amazingly straight-edged line. She uses it to draw as well as to clean up. Off to the side, in one corner, is a large, beautiful oak easel, an impressive furnishing, and one that will eventually be put to practical use when she turns to painting once again, the medium in which she got her B.F.A.

Andrea is an independent film maker. An animator, to be more exact. By "independent" film, I mean films made by individuals — literally: the same person conceives and plans the story (if there is one), adjusts the lighting (if anything other than ordinary lights is used), loads and holds the camera (either 8mm or 16mm), puts his or her finger on the exposure button, does the editing and titles, finds the music, and seeks out a distributor. In the twelve years since Andrea graduated from Tyler School of Art, she has made seven films, working them into the other facets of her life, which

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world.

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include her family and teaching animation at both Center for Creative
Studies and Wayne State University.

She also endures the obstacles and hardships of every independent
film maker: small audiences, a shaky distribution system, and
high cost of production: five to ten thousand dollars, a negligible sum
compared to the expense of studio films, and a hard for others to
raise, grants notwithstanding. This is not a money-making activity.

But Andrea is not after the stuff of Saturday morning cartoons or
Disney specials. Animation gives shape to an artistic vision shaped in
turn by her intellectual, aesthetic, and personal experiences in the
world.

Currently, for example, she is animating “The Enchanted Horse,” a story from the Arabian nights. Her version derives from
reading in both theology and in what she refers to as “the mysticism
of the new physics,” in which the cosmology of the universe is
structured around incessant movement of atoms, waves and light
rather than Newtonian stability. Gilhard de Chardin is the writer she
refers to most frequently.

Animation, she says, offers the opportunity to render that sense of
movement and continual transformation. We went down into her
basement to watch preliminary segments from “The Enchanted
Horse.” The screen was continuously filled with scattered, inchoate
motion that crystallized into objects, living things, and extremes of
perspective. The film ultimately will have to do with the messianic,
the coming of a deliverer. Another piece, “Bus Stop,” finished in
1983, was inspired by Andrea’s rides on the Woodward Avenue bus
and by her general interest in travelogues, journeys, quests, and the
individual’s experiences in the world through which he or she trav-
ells. “Bus Stop” surveys a broad range of human types, attitudes,
and incidents in its short time span (eight minutes or so) — including rape, topless dancing, sleep, hostility, a man picking his nose. The
viewer rides the bus, confronted, astonished, frightened, and puzzled by the passing spectacle. The film’s quest (journeys and travel-
logues often symbolize quests) seems to be for discovery and recogn-
nition of the ugly, gritty, intimidating, but sometimes oddly exuberant

nature of inner-city life.

At eighteen frames per second, Andrea must make, by hand,
roughly 5,400 drawings for five minutes of film. No staff or assis-
tants, no computers. The potential for tedium is as great as in Mel
Brooks’ story of punching sprocket holes individually in a feature
film. But her intention, as with any serious artist, is to be provocative
and sobering, to bring new visual, intellectual and emotional experi-
ences to a viewer, to delight the audience in ways that imply more than
“entertainment.” Her films need to be seen several times,
“like you’d listen to a record,” she says. At the independent film
festivals where she shows them, they sometimes have that chance.

The same is true for the films of Joe Bernard, another local inde-
pendent film artist. I first saw Joe’s work at CCS, where he teaches
full time. I then saw more in his faddishly neat basement studio,
where he spends some fifty to sixty hours a week in addition to his
teaching. He works exclusively with super-8mm film, and his filmog-
raphy lists over 80 completed works, ranging from one and one half
to seventy minutes. He does not use sound. He has found his way
through the labyrinth of private and invitational screenings to a
showing of his work in December at the Museum of Modern Art in
New York.

Joe shoots everywhere — on trips, around the house, when family
and friends are together, when he sees something visually inter-
esting, like color, form, patterns. Thus, the films often begin with
impulses similar to those that inspire anyone’s home movies. But
then he edits and edits, shoots and reshoots, working in the dark-
ened basement of his home, examining the results over and over in
his tiny viewing screen, until he arrives at the combination of image,
movement, texture, and pacing that finally satisfy him. There is rare-
ly a “story.” Rather, color, light, and motion combine to create a
stunning barrage of images that would send most commercial film
makers yelping for the hills.

He’s been inspired on the one hand by Delmore Schwartz, James
Joyce, and the conceptual artist Robert Irwin, not to mention music
and dance. On the other hand, there are films that originate, he says,
from “deeper, more interior regions of dreams and memory, more
difficult to transcribe into words.”

I have a strip of his current project on the desk next to me as I
write. This strip is a piece of plastic, roughly sixteen inches long,
folded over and divided into something like frames. Laminated inside
are bits of hair, scraps of paper with fragments of printing, splashes of
organic material, a dried flower, more splashes of what could be
mold. Some frames are dense with stuff; in others, there is hardly
anything. The colors range from blackish-greenish to orange to
blurish and purplish. Joe will macrophotograph it, transforming it into
something new and strange.

This is not the material of your ordinary Saturday matinee. About
this work, Joe says, “All I know is that I’ve carried the imagery
around since, as a six-year-old, I would fill a jar with water, vegetation
and shards of colored glass from broken Pepto-Bismol, Seven-Up,
beer and wine bottles in the street — and turn that jar against my
eyes in line with the sun. I remember wanting to be inside that jar,
tumbling in color.” On Cape Cod, where he spends the summers,
“underwater in the ocean comes close to that — surrounded by
schools of fish, filtered sunlight and the bottom covered with vitreous
stones. How much like being inside — or better yet, just being
film!” An artist’s desire to become one with his medium, as a fine
musician feels at one with his instrument.

In the Detroit area, you can count independent film makers on
one hand. Many of them have studied with either or both Andrea and
Joe. Yet, independent film making has a substantial list of heavy-
weight American artists, including Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas,
Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits, and many others. There are major inde-
pendents in England, Japan, and Canada as well, to mention only three major countries. The reason one tends not to hear much about this movement is similar to the reason one tends to hear very little about fine-art still photographers. People generally know about photography through their Instamatics, through the glitter of advertising stills, or through the commercial photo magazines. Similarly, people tend to associate film with commercial or home movies. They find satisfaction in a thrilling story or the documentation of their child’s first steps.

The experimental nature of film as an artistic medium, on the other hand, often leaves one feeling puzzled, perhaps even angry, compared to the gratifying entertainment of commercial film.

Independent film making, with or without a story, can be what money-dependent film making usually cannot — personalized and exploratory, challenging, upsetting, perceptive, provocative and thrilling. We benefit by having the original ideas and perceptions of these film makers extend our own.

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**Interview: Joe Bernard**

**by Harry Smallenburg**

**Smallenburg:** Who are the audiences for independent film and where are the films shown — in Detroit, as well as other cities?

**Bernard:** I can’t identify audiences. A few years ago, to my knowledge, there were only two local outlets — Detroit Film Project and Projections. The former may still exist, while the latter folded from exhaustion after a year and a half. So, aside from sporadic public screenings, it appears the only place to see independent/personal films in Detroit is in some film maker’s basement. Many years back, in an address at Wayne State University, Duchamp advised artists to go underground — and that’s where the area’s film makers remain, though not by choice.

**Smallenburg:** Why should audiences care about film making that seems insignificant compared to the big-budget blockbuster Hollywood films one is accustomed to?

**Bernard:** They shouldn’t.

**Smallenburg:** Who are some of the major independent film makers?

**Bernard:** Current and long-standing American heavyweights would have to include: Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton (now deceased), Kenneth Anger, Bruce Baillie, James Broughton, Ken Jacobs, Robert Breer, Ernie Gehr, Bruce Conner, Jordan Belson, Andrew Bore, Tony Conrad, Gregory Markopoulos, Larry Jordan, and on into the younger/older and more obscure.

**Smallenburg:** Is this primarily an American phenomenon?

**Bernard:** No. England, Japan, and Canada, as well as so many other countries, have major independents.

**Smallenburg:** What sorts of things provoke you to make films?

**Bernard:** The way women move — that’s something I’m currently shooting. Of equal attraction are the structures and rhythms of poetry, music, and formal dance, as well as every single activity of film making. Often enough some procedure itself, like simply joining frames, will evoke a whole film. A few years after making Splices for Sharits, which involved single frame re-photography of thousands of splices made specifically for this film, I was amused when Paul told me he had an assistance make his splices.

As for provocation, sometimes just looking through the view-finder (love the nomenclature) will suggest something or at least warrant a shot. For example, one summer’s day I was outside working on a film with prisms and such, brought the camera in to reload, and saw my daughter in a bathing suit, lying on the floor watching T.V. while shafts of sunlight patterned her body. That single roll of film, left uncut, is one of the most wonderful and sensual portraits I’ve ever seen! The film I was originally working on was then returned to, after the three-minute interruption.

**Smallenburg:** In the face of the obstacles (money, distribution, audience, etc.) involved in independent film, what compels you to continue with it as a medium?

**Bernard:** Good question! Obviously those aren’t my greatest needs, though I’m sure they deny their desirability. Then too, the possibility that I’m an utter idiot shouldn’t be ruled out, either. But, if pressed for a reason, I can only think to say, with evolutionary overtones, certain things must be done by certain people (see H.D. ‘s “Write or Die”), and obstacles don’t stop, they only prolong, the necessities of a life. This is something I care about and need to do, even if it lacks surface rewards.

**Smallenburg:** What subjects come up in your films?

**Bernard:** Light, color, movement, life, love, sex, death, and dreams are the stock responses of those film artists for whom I’ve the most respect. But these ‘subjects,’ as encompassing as they are, are in my case, only excuses to chase what I see or what I would like to see or what I can’t normally see. Having completed a fair number of films, I can only say certain repetitions of, manner (seeing, shooting, editing) become subject — that is, subject as reason.

**Smallenburg:** Without narrative content, what does a temporal medium like film do? Or do you consider that there are different kinds of narrative content? Or different kinds of content, that are equally important as a “story”?

**Bernard:** I’m not sure I understand this. Certainly other arts, e.g., theater, dance, and music (as well as life itself), can all, also, be defined as temporal. Each do contain narrative and/or non-narrative forms and not one is without content. We’re aware that there exist so-called “absolute” and “program” musics (“‘pure’ vs. ‘descriptive’”), Rauschenberg’s seven white panels and Ghierttti’s Baptistry doors, and, currently, emphatic pluralization in all the arts, each with varying degrees of substance, content, even ‘story.’

Let’s consider the last two parts of your question with some story-tellers in mind; say from Joyce, Bizen, and Eisenstein — to Norman Rockwell, Duane Michals and Judy Chicago. Level of quality or intent aside, again, transmission always contains both narration (and/or non-narration) and content, inseparably. Something and somehow is implied by ‘we do’; whatever that may be — including film making that appears merely visual.

**Smallenburg:** What impelled you to turn from painting to film making?

**Bernard:** It was actually a neutral overlapping; a quiet kind of transition. The paintings I was doing at that time were becoming progressively more and more invisible, (they were white-on-white monoprints of my body on sheet glass), while with appropriate simultaneousness, a super-8 camera was lent and movies began.

My earlier still photography, drawing, and painting is often recalled directly in the films and, as I regard film very much as a collage, there isn’t the feeling of having turned away from former tools and practices, but one of expanding image-making possibilities.

**Smallenburg:** What kinds of film do you like to look at?

**Bernard:** Intelligent ones, made with love.

**Smallenburg:** Do you go to see blockbusters?

**Bernard:** I don’t even like the word.

**Smallenburg:** Is the totality of film as a medium appealing to you, or is it only the “art film” variety that you care about?  

**Bernard:** It is very much the totality of film I care about — its history, mechanics, and viability — so much so that I’ve poured a good piece of life into seeing what has to be the very best and very worst of both camps. Big-buck movies don’t always fall, just as ‘art film’ doesn’t generically mean quality. But what I find amazing — and you can
check this out at any independent S-8/16mm film festival — the most inane Hollywood flicks are the ones latched onto by the small format, pipe cleaners and clay crowd for attempted parody. Bad film mimicking bad film.

You know, Harry, to reiterate common knowledge, just as early photographers tried (and failed) to imitate painting, most movie makers continue to do likewise with the stage and novel in mind. They use one medium to describe another; one tool to do the job of another. And, just as any drawer can drive a nail with a plane or a pair of pliers, they (the money boys) do sometimes succeed! I have absolutely no quarrel with this approach, as it's often rather ingenious. Besides, I couldn't read The Godfather in a couple of hours. (And that's one that I enjoyed!)

**Smollenburg:** Describe your work habits (film work).

**Bernard:** Well, it's a year-round, daily kind of thing. My teaching schedule allows four days free which means I can usually get in an average of fifty to sixty hours a week working on film. Having never had any formal training, I consumingly advance and recede via the slow-grope technique. Aside from outside shooting, all is done in my light-sealed basement studio/ambrosial cave which I've customized with a 2'x8' work table, light box, projector and screen, storage and file cabinets, a modest film and poetry reference library, and a bed. Another part of the basement has facilities, lights, and equipment I built especially for shooting down there. It is all, always, compulsively in order.

I don't know what can be said about my 'work habits' specifically, other than while down there, I work my ass off going, adequately tranced, through a hell of a lot of cigarettes, wine, time, and music.

**Smollenburg:** What sorts of things get funneled into your work directly or indirectly (e.g., music, dance, other film making, literature, artistic or other traditions)?

**Bernard:** The direct influences or sources are easier to acknowledge. A passage of a Delmore Schwartz essay provided a whole cycle of films called *Intrigues I - VII*. A conversation with Robert Irwin gave reason for *Implications of a Totality*, while two others, *Splices for Sharits* and Semblance: A Frampton/Brakhage Relation obviously received impetus from the work of other film makers. Another pair, *Film for Untitled Viewer* and *The Function of Film*, developed from my writing. *Eye Reels* came from Irish dance and then, various portraits from family, friends, and places.

Many of the other films, however, aren't as issue-oriented. Those that originate from deeper, more interior regions of dreams and memory are more difficult to transcribe into words. A life of stored, infinite sensations — from the widest possible sources — actually encode/give shape to each as a distinct entity and I think, that's where any art comes from.

As an example of the process, these days I'm making transparent collage strips to eventually macrofilm. This activity and that film will hopefully reflect on a particular time and set of circumstances binding both past and present. All I know about this in-progress work is that I've carried it around since when, as a six-year-old, I would fill a jar with water, vegetation, and shards of colored glass from broken Pepto-Bismol, 7-Up, beer and wine bottles in the street — and turn that jar against my eyes, in line with the sun.

I remember wanting to be inside that jar, tumbling in color. Underwater swimming here in the ocean comes close to that — surrounded by schools of fish, filtered sunlight, and the bottom covered with vitreous stones. How much like being inside — or better yet, just being film? Perhaps that's what the artist has been after all this time — not to dance or make sculpture, paintings, poetry, or music, but to be these things — to just really absolutely be these things.

**Postscript: Joe Bernard**

In the time that has passed since this 1984 interview, at least one issue of consequence has changed. Following the Nov. 13, 1985 screening of my *The Detroit Films* at the Detroit Institute of Arts, I quit both the making and public showing of my films. Ten years and a hundred films later — the relentless impact of I.R.S. audits, dependency on Kodak's monopolized screw-ups, lack of local venues, minimal Midwest insight of the very expense and critical support of this medium (except the Center for Creative Studies and Craig Garver/Michigan Council for the Arts), and the time and the strength needed and the abandonment of running with one's head down — all my acute survival instincts eventually suggested a reevaluation of habit.

Given time and justification, obsessions change. I've now reverted to the making of wall-hung plastic tape, film, object and paint collages. They, like the films, rely on translucency and a particular color/image density. Medium's form aside, I'd like to think all previous concerns remain adamantly intact.

Harry Smollenburg, head of the General Studies Department at Center for Creative Studies, is currently commuting between teaching posts in California and Detroit. He is also a musician and novelist.

**Joseph Bernard,** Professor of Fine Arts/Center for Creative Studies, is a former independent film maker who is now affiliated with Cantor-Lemberg Gallery.
Interview: Robert Martin
A conversation with Gilda Snowden

ROBERT MARTIN is artist and new Assistant Professor of Design in the art department of Wayne State University. He is originally from Bainbridge, Georgia, and did his graduate work at the University of Wisconsin.

Snowden: Your work has an autobiographical bent even though it is abstract — does that present any problems for you or do you find that it is easier to deal with allegory and metaphor?

Martin: It’s only a problem when you meet with people that don’t understand abstraction and just don’t believe that abstract work has content. I like laughing it off. If they want to give me a hard time, then I give them a hard time, too.

Snowden: So you’re sure of yourself — you’re positive about your work and your identity as an artist. How do you feel that identity will be helped or hindered by the new position you have at Wayne State?

Martin: It won’t be hindered in any way because I knew a little bit about the campus before I came. My brother lives here and I know more about Detroit than most think I do. I’m pretty perceptive; I would say that’s how my work and my career has progressed. At Wayne State I can see a lot of possibilities for my work as well as for the department.

Snowden: So you see your position in Wayne’s art department as one of growth. Have you started any kind of collaborative efforts with other departments in the university or in the art department itself, and do you have any plans for new classes or the restructuring of old ones?

Martin: Just yesterday I attended the first visiting artist meeting by the School of Visual and Performing Arts. Just by having that one meeting I could see the enthusiasm of the few people that I met from the other departments. We are already talking about creating multimedia productions, things like performance art and other experimental things. They have the resources at Wayne State, they just haven’t had the chance to work together as a cohesive group. This will give me the opportunity to start new classes in experimental art, which will probably include things like computer art, performance art, and video.

Snowden: This sounds really exciting. Not that long ago the art forms were very clearly defined — painting, sculpture, photography, drawing — and the only area that really seemed to have its foot into multimedia was the printmaking department. I don’t know exactly why that would be. Do you have any ideas? You do prints and photography and work with computer-generated images.

Martin: I think one reason for that is because printmakers are taught to see things in layers and in certain processes. That’s one reason why you’d be surprised at how many printmakers eventually go into computer graphics. Photographers also get into it because they can distort and stretch and change different images in a way that you cannot do in an enlarger. You can also adapt photographic techniques such as four-color separations from computers and put them into photosilkscreen.

Snowden: You don’t have formal training with computers, but are self-taught. Do you feel that this kind of self-education has enabled you to better see this medium than someone who has been taught?

Martin: I’ve already been trained as an artist, so that gives me more of an edge than, say, a computer scientist because they were trained in how it works, how to repair it, how to apply it to more of the applied arts rather than the fine arts.

Snowden: So maybe they would be more in awe of the machinery and an artist would see it as just another paintbrush.

Martin: Some artists. There are not enough artists that are interested in it. That is its only downfall because you have a lot of people who are just dabbling in it. . . . that do images and then call it art. The next thing you know you have this work that looks elementary . . . that gives fine art a bad image.

Snowden: Right. I have to admit that when I first was told that you use computers, I thought, ‘Oh God, another artist that got hold of a computer and now they’re making these designs.’ I was surprised when I saw your slides, when I saw how rich that work was. I felt good about it and hope you can influence students to be more daring in their choice of materials and media.

Martin: That’s one thing about teaching . . . basically one of the problems with getting people interested in new media is that it’s just a basic fear they have to get over . . .

Snowden: What is your philosophy of teaching, if you have one. I don’t know if people sit down and make one up.

Martin: I guess I don’t really have one; I didn’t think that was necessary.

Snowden: Maybe not having a philosophy would make teaching a lot more fresh?

Martin: It’s difficult for people to change after they have put something down on paper. I like the experimental approach to teaching. If something doesn’t work I don’t do it again, I just keep on improvising as I go along. Depending upon the class you get, the entire semester flows differently.

Snowden: So you have to tailor yourself to each semester and each student.

Martin: With some students . . . you have to really dig down into their subconscious as well as their conscious mind to get them to understand certain things: what makes art work, what makes good art work.

Snowden: And then you have a satisfying feeling when they get it.

Martin: Especially when you have people grab you when they come back . . . they really realize that the things you were trying to get them to understand were really true.

Snowden: Have you been teaching long enough to have that kind of turnover, where students come back and say thanks?

Martin: I’ve been fortunate enough to have had a few people do that. That’s one of the great rewards of teaching.

Snowden: Who are some of the artists that are your influences now?

Martin: I would say Frank Stella, Sam Gilliam, Williams T. Williams, who is a pretty well-known artist in New York, people like that. Also Cezanne, Gauguin — I like the color in their paintings . . . and Rauschenberg. I’ve gotten away from the photographic imagery but there’s still some influence there. In my latest work I’m beginning to go back into some painting.

Snowden: You are an artist who teaches, not a teacher who makes art.

Martin: That’s a good way of putting it. I’m in teaching because I enjoy it, not only for the financial support.

Snowden: There are ways in which you can get more money, other than teaching.

Martin: Right. I could have easily gone into commercial photography, but I hate the field. I used to be a photojournalist.

Snowden: Tell me about that. What did you do?

Martin: That was in Tallahassee, Florida, and it was right after I got out of undergraduate school in 1978. I got lucky and got an internship. It was nice, because I got to get out; I’m not a person that likes to stay indoors all the time and work. I would go out and meet all of these different personalities. It was a little like teaching, except you
don’t have to make sure that people get an education. It was fine until it started to get routine. It’s good for an artist to find a secondary means of support . . . it is tough to survive in a society that still wonders why artists are so poor and why they can’t survive. The only reason for that is they never buy any of the artists’ work.

Snowden: That’s what I tell people. If you want to support artists, buy their work, don’t pat them on the back. If you weren’t teaching, what would be the job that you would like to do that would be art-related? I can’t see you doing anything that wouldn’t feed or add to your art.

Martin: I would probably start my own photography business . . . that’s a really comfortable way to make a living once you get a reputation. I was thinking of maybe even having a staff that could do commercial work and I could do my art work.

Snowden: You’ve exhibited quite a bit. Did you feel that you exhausted the Montgomery area?

Martin: Well, no . . . I only showed in Montgomery a few times after my first or second year. I didn’t show there any more because I wanted to be more than a regional artist.

Snowden: That’s a question: how do you break the barriers of a region? For example, a lot of people think of Detroit art as being only Cass Corridor oriented even though we have many artists around here that are about their own personal environments that don’t have anything to do with the Cass Corridor. That as a style has permeated the artistic consciousness of a lot of people. If they want to put on a Detroit show they say, “Oh, here’s the Cass Corridor ten years later’ or “second or third generation Cass Corridor artists.” Moving into this situation do you feel that this is something you will have to battle?

Martin: I don’t think I have that problem because if anybody ever tried to do that I would start using day glo colors. That would take care of it.

Snowden: Yeah, but some of them use day glo colors, too.

Martin: I guess travel has kept me out of stereotypes or labels . . . my trip to Haiti gave me a different outlook on life as well as my art work, which is my life. . . there’s no way I could get caught up in the local, regional thing . . .

Snowden: Have you become introduced to the art scene around here much yet?

Martin: No I haven’t and I’m not in a hurry. I’d like to start on another body of work and then try to take it from there. I’m sure Detroit’s environment will influence my work . . . right now I’m getting into the habit of producing as much work as I can just to keep myself from getting in a certain rut.

Snowden: How do you think time will deal with your art?

Martin: It probably depends on my attitude about what I’m doing. It’s kind of hard to say anything about that. I feel fortunate that I’m in an academic situation because you’re not catering to someone else’s financial taste. I love my art so much that I probably would still be doing it no matter what . . . most people give you on the average of five years after graduate school to try to make it as an artist, and if you don’t make it within those five years they think that you’re declining, and it seems to hold true. I haven’t taken a really consistent poll, but it seems like most people that don’t try to do art work within that time span tend to get out of the profession and don’t do any art work at all.

Snowden: I wonder what they must feel like, after committing themselves to getting their degree, being an artist, then giving it up.
Martin: Some of them are out of the situation because they couldn't be what they wanted to be.

Snowden: How do you think it is affected by racial difference? Do you think that minority artists become tougher because of an adversarial atmosphere? If a black or minority artist goes to graduate school and then gets trounced by the art world at large, do they retreat within themselves; or do you find that they become stronger and tougher because it's one more thing nagging at them?

Martin: In most cases minority artists are used to being in a tough situation, so they expect it. In my case I didn't have a bad life coming up, so I feel lucky . . . but some of my other friends have had a rougher life, so it was nothing new to them. They expected it. People who have been spoiled in life are the ones that have a tough time dealing with the situation.

Snowden: It would seem that that would be the time when your art is needed most, to describe what is going on with you, and how you feel about it.

Martin: It's about having the time and the patience and the strength to continue to do what you want to do. In some cases it also tests how much I love you with your art. Some give up too soon; what I would suggest to my friends is that we keep in contact with each other, that we try to keep each other up whenever we're down. That's a good idea, to have some support groups to help you out.

Snowden: A network to fall back on . . . we used to have a black artists' group where we would get together and talk about each other's work. It was a thing that came about naturally because we were friends. We have since disbanded because our interests diversified. Talking about expectations — you are a new assistant professor at Wayne State University, and you've got all these ideas. Do you find that people expect a lot from you? The faculty expects, your family — how does all that relate to what you expect of yourself? Is there any great pressure on you to succeed?

Martin: My parents never gave me any extra pressure to be the most successful person in life; that helped me a lot. The only person they taught me to please was myself. I don't worry about pressure anymore . . . I'm not the kind of person who might think about a situation all night. I'll just wait until I get to the position or the appointment or whatever I have to do and (snap) an idea might come just like that. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't. It's just like applying for job interviews. Some of my friends used to say to me, "You're not nervous or anything about this stuff?" That's when I tell them that what you don't see inside makes a difference. I may look (calm) outside most of the time, but inside — I have my ways of exerting stress, like playing tennis, or just going out. Sometimes I like just taking a drive out to areas that I've never explored before.

Snowden: So you channel your pressures and your energies, your anxieties, into different areas so they don't eat you up and take anything away from your art.

Martin: Sometimes it might even go into the art. I might work when I'm in that situation and it comes through in the art work.

Snowden: So you'll make a really angry piece, or a really frustrated piece . . .

Martin: Right.

Snowden: You've been influenced by artists like Judy Pfaff and Nancy Graves. When I think about Pfaff's work I think of this visual cacophony, environmental things, a real sense of whimsy, gaiety. With your work I get another sense, like you got from her a more formal structure . . . I don't know your sense of humor. Do you try to incorporate a really obvious sense of humor in your work, or is that something that is toned down?

Martin: Thus far it's a little bit toned down because my work has a lot less of a sense of humor than 1 do. I'd say that a big influence from Judy Pfaff went into my photography, where I set up installa-

tions of a set that I paint on . . . I used to have a studio in an old building that was going to be demolished. I would set up installations and photograph them. You get a different sensibility when you photograph a situation like that than when you're actually looking at the installation.

Snowden: So they are artworks in both senses: on one hand, it's temporary and on the other hand, you have preserved it. Do you think that one is more important than the other?

Martin: No. When I'm photographing it, I'm directing you to see what I want you to see at that moment. If I were to do just an installation for exhibition purposes you could browse around and be selective about what you see. I never try to make one seem more important than the other. That's why I feel good about doing silkscreen. That's one medium that many people still feel is commercial. I like working with things that are considered 'non-art' because people just don't know how to use the medium. People look at my silkscreen and they say that this looks like a painting, or it looks like a collage, which to me is a compliment . . . that means to me that I made a work of art instead of a print.

Snowden: Aren't prints works of art?

Martin: They are works of art (but) I think the reproductive process gives people some problems. People don't realize what a limited edition is. I wouldn't go over 250 for a limited edition. It depends on the complexity of the print. Some of my editions are no more than 15, or might vary between 10 and 15.

Snowden: Do you print them yourself?

Martin: I print them all myself.

Snowden: How do you structure your career? I read your resume and was very impressed with all of the shows that you've been in, and you've seemed very intelligent about what shows to be in. How do you think about structuring your career, say for the next fifteen or twenty years?

Martin: I'm glad you asked that. That's one important thing that artists should think about when they submit work for a show — I don't submit work any more to exhibitions, juried or non-juried, that don't have insurance.

Snowden: Have you been burned?

Martin: I've been lucky. I haven't been burned by the ones I submitted work to, but now that my work is worth a lot more I think about it more. The last thing you want is to see your work lost, stolen or lost in a fire and you don't get any compensation. Once I had a show, and there was a change in administration, and I didn't receive any of the financial backing that I was supposed to receive. That has to do with the business aspect of it, and that matters a lot.

Snowden: When was it that you felt like an artist? Was it when you had your first show, or when somebody bought something from you for the first time?

Martin: When I felt good about what I was doing. You have those periods in graduate school where you are still insecure, you're still not sure that you really like what you're doing. You think too that you shouldn't always be satisfied totally about what you are doing, because if that is the case you should retire. The thing I like about the art profession is that you never retire. Even when I retire from teaching, I'll still be an artist.

Snowden: So you have a sense of yourself in the future. You're not looking from day to day, but you are thinking of this career as being your ultimate work of art.

Martin: I like seeing students become artists. I'm teaching other people to do the same thing that I am doing. Not as far as subject matter or my medium, but as far as just being an artist and enjoying themselves. Getting them to see that they are doing something that they love and not something just for the money.

Gilda Snowden is an artist who lives and works in Detroit.
Ron Leax has termed his enterprise "heuristic." The heuristic method of education proceeds along empirical lines, correcting false assumptions as "facts" are revealed. In prescribing a program of self-education, Leax lays claim to the territory of all magni op, which are, in some sense, always "heuristic." The key to understanding Leax's endeavor, however, is not found in the "self-education" construct, but rather, in the "empirical" one. Leax's recent work does not attend to physical phenomena, as did Dow/Cannibal Collection (1981-2), which used the grid as a "net" in which to (de)posit empirical evidence, or Why Study Science (1984), where geological specimens were used as aesthetic raw material, but instead addresses the experience of phenomena. (In another context, I erroneously identified this shift as "metaphysical" when "metaphoric" is more accurate.) When Leax uses "experience" to factor "knowledge," he does so at a distance, using the idea of empiricism as his foundation. This methodological sense of the empirical, that is, as "scientific practice," presupposes an ideological Empiricism, a philosophic underpinning preceding method, which holds experience as the only source of knowledge epistemologically.

In his new drawings, Leax revives the grid as an ordering device. According to Rosalind Krauss, grid structures in Modernist art practice are either centripetal, solely delineating space within the frame, or centrifugal, having reference to the outside world. Falling into the thoughts, at other times purely symbolic (standing for knowledge as such), survey the "perceptual screens" (categorical matrices) which exist between experience and phenomena.

In Looking Through Layers and Orders (1985), the "screens" are classifications of biology contained in a grid as categories marked: "Bacteria," "Blue Green Algae," "Mollusks," etc. Another table, not gridided, lists the geological eras. The epicenter of the drawing is entitled: "Magna Core." Cutting through the center of the grid, directly into the Magna Core, is a shaft designated: "Quaternary Quest." As we are currently in the Quaternary Epoch, the "Quest," then, is our own age, according to Leax, passing empirical evidence through its categorical matrices to expose the Magna Core or "true knowledge." Ironically, the idea of peeling back "layers" of experience to behold the "core" of truth is entirely mystic, the epistemologies of Gnosticism and the Kabbalah as cases in point. Krauss states that: "The grid's mystic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion or fiction)."3

Twenty Arbitrary Spheres of Influences (1985) consists of a grid in which twenty circles are each inscribed with the name of a branch of physical science. The system breaks down three times within the matrix: "Psychology" and "Archeology," which are not physical but human sciences, and "Philosophy," which is not a "science" at all. Leax's use of the term "arbitrary" to describe the "spheres of influence" leads to the belief that classifications are assigned speciously. But in fact, the obsessive listing of classifications in the drawing, and of all manner of data in the "Magna Core" series and throughout much of Leax's oeuvre generally, gives evidence that a major function of the scientific project has been the naming, measuring, and classifying of things to bring the physical world into the acculturated system of signs. In that phenomena must be present-at-hand to be Named, Measured, and Classified, the dominance of ideological Empiricism in the Modernist age is not surprising.

In analyzing his body of work, an issue which warrants consideration is Leax's need to assume ideological Empiricism. In the Modernist age, art has continually searched for a raison d'etre. "For . . . . " as Donald Kuspit states, " . . . Implicitly the modern is, because of the scientific outlook which makes it modern, indifferent to art regarding it as essentially trivial (decorative)." A way of combating art's "formalist crisis," a crisis not unique to pluralism, has been to posit "content" as a means of investing art with utilitarian value. By appropriating the scientific project as his own, Leax seeks to establish parity for art within Modernism.

The Achilles heel of this plan of action is the same one that Kate Liner ascribes to the equal rights and gender equity strategies of the seventies, that "(t)hese strategies, based in the elimination of discrimination and in equal access to institutional power, in no way attempt to account for the ideological structures of which discrimination is but a symptom . . . " The ravages visited upon the planet by a technocracy at the service of ideological Empiricism are plainly and extensively documented. Leax is arguing for a system of values that is both humanist and humanitarian. Toward that end, a questioning of forms, rather than an affirmation of them, to discover their origins and structures in order to illuminate their value is paramount. In this light, then, it can be seen that the critical path is not one of heuristics but hermeneutics.

4. The Latin root scire means "to discern, distinguish," the Old English scordan "to separate."

Vincent A. Carducci is Michigan Regional Co-editor of the New Art Examiner.
Edward Fella, *Art makes me nuts*, Offset reproduction on offset paper, actual size.
Questions with multiple overtones of place and time arise in the exhibit of works by Beverly Shankwiler at Stubnitz Gallery of Adrian College. She does not so much "make art" as draw attention to the similar and sometimes joint activities of nature and humans.

Taking the Black Swamp surrounding Bowling Green, Ohio, as focus, Shankwiler compresses activities of 20,000 years with a passage of moments in works which alter perceptions of time.

In "Wood County Landscape," Shankwiler plotted area soil types and set out to collect specimens located along an arc sweeping several miles over the region. She documented the activity in text, photos of landscape and activity, and a casting of the soils. Ancient glacial deposits and strata requiring thousands of years' "work" jostle with dry observations of events on the trip itself, such as coming across trash deposits and looking for a place to buy film. They strike a witty tone about the overwhelming importance humans attach to their time and actions on earth, the similarity between natural and cultural debris, and the aesthetic questions in presenting and representing nature. A resin-casted arc embedding the soil samples holds the same beauty as low lying farm fields locked under crystalline winter ice.

This is a viewpoint of warmth and humor, reaching its most deadpan heights in "18,000 B.C." Plaster castings of small sections of exposed strata are ceremoniously embedded in three pristine white pedestals which echo the way the Western world enshrines its most important documents for museum exhibit. Across the room a single beautiful weather-worn rock is displayed, calling into question which works are "real" and which are "art." This juxtaposition points to the intersection of humanity with nature and the reliance of both on raw material and processes for expression.

Such inquiry relates to the rituals of prehistoric people, who perceived the earth as "great mother," literally the personification of generative power. In Avebury, England, a series of several Stone-Age worship sites takes on added significance in aerial view when an imaginary line connecting them outlines the figure of "the Hag," the deity of the time. People believed themselves to be organisms inseparable from the great body of the earth, their ritual observances were of the earth; their ritual observances were integrated with earth as place and time as they moved from one site to another in the yearlong celebration of seasons, "completing" the body. Shankwiler's "Ground Water" and "Alpha and Omega," floor installations with anthropomorphic schemes, allude to this prehistoric sense of person as environment and to life cycles.

"Ground Water" limply combines an orderly and sobering oval ring of twigs piled on a mirror with combinations of white PVC pipes and elbows in the center. It evokes associations of body parts, monsters rising from polluted swamps, funerary pyres, and very funny — and devastating — human stirrings for transcendence. The haunting reflection of a spotlight in the mirror took me back in time to a day in the Everglades when the sun followed me in symbolic reflection on the water's surface, a unification of the natural world, my perception of it and my position in it.

Bricks made from honey-colored sand outline the figurative "Alpha and Omega," which is marked by oppositions. The rich black soil "upper body" is separated from the light crushed brick lower portion; an opening at the lower end allows the escape of a congealed flow. Sited within each "natural" soil section are giantized sprouting seeds, like somethin out of a Pop natural history exhibit: polychromed and vibrant in the rich black soil and withered gray in the sandy section. The unexpected relationships stretch ideas of flux/stasis, life/death and humanmade/'naturalmade.' Stamped with the word "Empire," the bricks in fact enclose only a small territory of inert soils in sardonic commentary on the concept and fate of all empires. Culture, that human perception, is still under the control of an enormously patient universe.

Kathy Constantinides is an artist and teacher working in Ann Arbor.

Beverly Shankwiler
Stubnitz Gallery Jan 12-31/87
Adrian College, Adrian, Michigan

Three Sculptors: Collet, Luckman, Packer
Muskogon Museum of Art, Aug 13-Oct 19/86

Robert Mark Packer's kinetic works in this show are among the most accomplished, powerful and troublesome to be found anywhere. In our age of hype, this is a dangerous way to start a review and not lose a thoughtful reader. Nonetheless, I think that the statement will stand.

The five works are large, complex, tightly ordered assemblages of mass-produced, mostly plastic parts; imitation fruits, vegetables, meats, masks, toy parts, as well as handmade objects, hardware and considera-

ble carpentry and painting. Parts are set into motion by small electric servo-motors, fans, hair-dryers (in the shape of Old West reolv-

ers!), humidifiers, a garage door opener and more — all choreographed precisely to music or accompanied by other sounds. The ensemble at the Muskogon Museum of Art gallery produces an initial effect more like an old carnival side-show or, in the words of the artist, like a "noisy penny arcade," than a contemporary art show. To take the works even further from polite art, one piece, The Transcendental Model isn't Dead, It Just Smells Funny, discharges a pungent onion odor from a group of humidifiers which permeates the gallery and clings to the viewers' (the smellers?) clothes long after leaving the show. None of these devices, in context, are cheap shots, however, because among the real accomplishments here is Packer's ability to amalgamate an impressive variety of American kitsch (made in Taiwan, of course), sleaze, plastic overabundance, societal platitudes, cliches and puns and still produce visually coherent, stage-like productions which lure us into their orbit of sound, color, and motion with the usual expectation on our part to be amused and entertained. The works then wrench those expectations and turn them into puzzlement, bewilderment, irritation and, in some instances no doubt, a feeling of betrayal. This feeling of betrayal stems not only from Packer's use of devices usually associated with entertainment, but — more seriously — because we have been thoroughly conditioned to expect entertainment from almost everything. Packer knows well the techniques of television hypsters (no different from art hypsters, just quicker) and uses them with a skill and terrible incisiveness which impeals the viewer — a kind of "It only hurts when I laugh" situation. This is still only part of a substantial accomplishment.

The careful thought given to the multi-vaule of a piece, to the cohesive visual and sound organization, to the coordination of sound and motion, as well as colors, lights, and texture, while mostly in the realm of traditional sculpture, is far greater in complexity and number of parts than most — even Tinguely. And the powerful thrust of meaning, altitude, and visual configuration in Packer's work is far different from Tinguely's others because his iconography is clearer and more clearly rooted in common American experiences ranging from a Protestant funeral ceremony to the dance of a tumbleweed. His work differs also because of its more pointed and more poignant social comment — which is not to deny those elements in Tinguely's works; the degree and clarity of thrust differ.
In visual configuration, some of Packer's ancestors might include the destroyed Futurist's works from around 1914-15, but without their optimism about technology. Calder's Circus comes to mind with its sprightly qualities - qualities especially evident in Packer's Tumbling Tumbleweed (How the West Was One), although there is nothing else in common. Closer to Chicago where the artist earned his M.F.A. at the Art Institute School, one might think of the attitudes of H.C. Westerman or Jim Nutt and the Imagists, but the visual connection is remote.

To stay within the kinetic arena and Chicago and Michigan it is a fortunate coincidence that Packer was studying at the Art Institute when Lew Alquist was teaching there. A brief encapsulation of the kinetic stances of these two artists is a study of contrasts. Lew Alquist's mature kinetic constructions or perhaps propositions are so direct, generally univalent, and shocking in their uncompromising simplicity and use of naked motion, that he could be thought of as a Zen master of kinetic art. Packer takes a different path: a path of near sensory overload, the kind of overload one experiences when entering a K-Mart, Sears, or any other large department store. The incredible crush of things, of colors, of sound and motion: rows, stacks, piles, pyramids; things hanging, turning, flashing, jingling, even squawking and swimming are the raw materials for Packer's works.

"I have a passion for putting together," Packer's statement is that of an assembler. As an assembler, he transforms some rather unlikely materials into focused statements of high intensity, technical virtuosity, and dense meanings.

The artist has given us some insights into some intentions about specifics pieces. The Hari Kari Ketchup King has a front of a painted flag with an oblique reference to the Japanese rising sun motif, or in this case, the rising tomato. On the reverse side is a portrait of chairman tomato, mixing in one context two Far-East totalitarian regimes. The "back" of the piece has rigid rows of bright orange plastic tomatoes each equipped with a sharp x-acto blade and serve-motor "arm" with which to commit hari-kari accompanied by exactly coordinated, tinny, cliche's music. These "warrior tomatoes" are arranged in rows which combine the ideas of bleachers and shrines (the entire back arrangement is strongly shrine-like) and, to my mind, the combination of the sacred and the profane, the juxtaposition of the absurd and deeply serious, the wild humor and horror produces a necessary troubling tension and ambiguity which is a profoundly correct metaphor for living. To quote the artist, "This piece is about the self-sacrifice necessary to uphold an ideological system." But he also added that all the works are about more than one thing, indeed they are.

The titles and puns give us immediate clues to "more than one thing." The Fall of the House of Udder is a Holstein cow shape with a chest freezer body which when the lid is lifted reveals plastic steaks dancing to the squeals of slaughter. What initially appears to be a large, kids', hands-on playground sculpture turns back on us with a reminder that our sanitized and compartmentalized existence separates us from some fundamental processes. The piece also functions as a kind of cow sarcophagus with the steaks buried alive — the Poe reference.

Of the five large pieces in the show, Ein Gruner Graesengarten (An Old Green Folks Home) is most difficult perhaps because of the intention of the artist: "Not to let people forget." The choice of imagery — various intravenously fed, green vegetables rocking and lurching in miniature wheelchairs, and walkers — encourages a reminder of the cliche about a subject which is only distressing and painful. To broach such a subject without falling into bathos or strident outrage is commendable. Using a tape of a German rock group counting forcefully in German along with a German title incorporating the word Graesengarten provides us with a clue to leap to an opposite Germanic institution in American culture — the kindergarten. That institution with all its positive connotations brings a beginning-end polarity to this work and keeps those large issues of society before us.

Tumbling Tumbleweed (How the West Was One) and The Transcendental Model Isn't Dead, It Just Smells Funny, are the two remaining works in the show. Tumbling ... contains one of the most delicate and beautiful ballets in the artist's repertory. A tumbleweed (from the artist's grant year in the Southwest) dances between the forces of opposing hairdryers in the shapes of large silver Western revolvers accompanied by turning, variously colored large masks. The Transcendental Model ... has an onion odor and a winged onion ascending — to heaven?

When encountering these works, nothing is what it seems on first impression. For the viewer who penetrates beyond the sometimes frenetic entertainment paraphernalia, the results are wholly substantial and satisfying. The sober core of these multivalent pieces reminds us that that 1984 never came in America, but the brave new world has.

The other two sculptors of this trio work in a more traditional modern mode.

Lee Colet has constructed a large arch in front of the museum using high-finish, corrugated aluminum conduit welded at angles near the uneven top. The piece can be walked through and because of its surface, can "'gather in'" the adjacent visual reflections. The sculptor has carefully considered the sight, natural lighting, weather and wind, as well as the symbolic and architectural elements of the arch.

Inside the museum, a small gallery is devoted to preparatory drawings, a plastic model and a video-tape of the processes of

Robert Mark Packer, Tumbling Tumbleweed (How the West was One), 1984
building the work. This is a fine educational experience for the general public.

Stewart Luckman is well represented at the museum show and in the Midwest generally. In West Michigan alone, Luckman has major outdoor stainless steel sculptures on the campus of Hope College in Holland and in the Grand Rapids suburb of Wyoming. His work in the Muskegon Museum is decidedly different, however. The scale is smaller, the color is dark and the subject is personal. The workmanship is consistent with the large pieces, however, and is impressive in itself.

A packing-crate motif runs through the works. The wooden crate models are transformed into steel slab constructions, some larger than the models, while preserving the associations of the model as well as the structural principles. These are empty "crates." They are black, simple, quiet, and discreet. They are, according to Luckman, the product of memories of his African experience as a youth. They are as different as can be from the adjacent kinetic show and demonstrate how effective a strong contrast can be for shifting the viewer's frame of reference and encouraging a quiet contemplative experience after adjusting to the shock of change from the kinetic.

There are other objects, some common, lying near the crate structures which add a sense of mystery and perhaps displacement (of what?). These are extraordinarily evocative works.

The Muskegon Museum of Art deserves special recognition for sponsoring three regional sculptors, providing for the execution of a large outdoor sculpture on its grounds, and giving over two large galleries and a smaller one for what is essentially three one-man shows. Too many museums still acknowledge regional artists in only the most token manner and alternative spaces are still too often the bleachers of the art world. To see this show mounted with all the benefits of a well-lighted, spacious, secure, accredited institution and with monetary and curatorial support is hopeful.

Previously published in Dialogue. James Karsina teaches art history and painting at Aquinas College.

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- Get ready to broaden your horizons by traveling to Chicago — Thursday, May 7th, to be part of the Midwest Regional Conference of the National Association of Artists Organizations. The one-day conference will be hosted by Artemesia Gallery from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. This is the same weekend as Navy Pier. Guest speakers at the conference include representatives from the National Endowment for the Arts, Arts Midwest, Illinois Arts Alliance and the National Association of Artist Organizations. Susan Wheeler, Director of Printed Matter in New York, will conduct workshops directed at remaining on the cutting edge of the art world. The program will also contain a segment drawing attention to cultural diversity as an arts policy across the country. The conference hopes to provide a vehicle for dialogue between artists and organizations in the Midwest area. Contacts for further information about the conference are:
  Gere Baskin, NAAO Midwest Regional Representative, Director, Detroit Focus, 313-962-9025
  Fern Shaffer, President, Artemesia Gallery, 312-751-2016

**Detroit Focus**
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**Focus Flash**
The Detroit Institute of Arts Department of Twentieth Century Art is calling an artists meeting Friday, April 24, to introduce the new Ongoing Michigan Artists Program (OMAP). For further information, call 833-7973.

The Sales Gallery will open Extended Media — Fresh Visions Part II March 8-May 10, featuring 25 Michigan artists’ paintings, works on paper and crafts.

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<td>Apr. 24-May 23</td>
<td>Sustained Visions: Morris Brose *closed May 23 — Memorial Day Weekend</td>
<td>Invitational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2-31</td>
<td>From the Studios of Curators: Mel Rosas and Carlos Diaz</td>
<td>Studio Visit Program Slide Entry Deadline: Sat., May 2, 1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 11-Oct. 9</td>
<td>Review Committee Selections</td>
<td>1987 Review Committee Annual Slide Review</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Review Committee 1986 / 87**
Artists: Ed Fraga, Lucille Nawara, Tom Phardel, Michael Sarnacki, G. Alden Smith, Mary Wright, Director, Xochipilli Gallery

Schedule is subject to change