STRUCTURES OF EXPERIENCE:

an exhibition in response to Robert Smithson
at Kent State University
This catalogue and exhibition, *Structures of Experience: An exhibition in Response to Robert Smithson at Kent State University*, reflect the Gallery’s long term commitment to documenting the work of innovative artists, especially those with a special connection to northeast Ohio.

In April 1990, the School of Art Gallery organized an exhibit marking the 20th anniversary of Robert Smithson’s creation of the *Partially Buried Woodshed*. In January 1970, Smithson, a visiting artist at Kent State, and with a handful of students from the School of Art, rented a back hoe and piled 20 truck loads of dirt onto an abandoned woodshed until the center beam cracked. This woodshed, originally on property that the University had just acquired, is now located in the heart of the University’s east campus. After an eventful history, most of the physical remains of the Woodshed were removed in January - February 1984. Thirty-five years later, The School of Art Gallery is recognizing Smithson’s work and legacy by exhibiting photographs and artifacts related to the Woodshed. In addition, local artists - including faculty, former faculty, alumni and students have been invited to create work in response to the ideas and the legacy of Robert Smithson.

The exhibition, which connects to *Acquiring its own history: a symposium on Smithson’s Partially Buried Woodshed after 35 years* organized by the School of Art, represents the cooperation and involvement of many individuals and organizations. First of all, I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Ohio Arts Council which also helped fund the 1990 exhibition. Scott Sherer served as guest curator and I am indebted to him for his expertise, hard work and creative energy. I would also like to thank the gallery staff, especially Brian Vollner, Chrystine Keener and Evan Coyne, for their dedication and creative input.

Fred T. Smith, Director
School of Art Gallery and Professor of Art History
"The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of the both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void."

Robert Smithson,
"A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects"
PARTIALLY BURIED WOODSHED

In January 1970, School of Art students and faculty welcomed Robert Smithson to Kent State University as an artist-in-residence. In the mid-late 1960s, Smithson had developed a reputation for his sculptural projects and critical essays that argued that cultural constructions of materials and ideas are inherently born into processes of disintegration and ruin. Smithson was particularly interested in dialectical situations, for example, of landscapes occupied by rusted bridges and industrial waste. These places provide opportunity to consider relationships between cultural history and the mysteries of natural forces. Representations of lived and material experiences are inherently flawed because the character of objects and interpretative frameworks changes in every new context.

Smithson's Partially Buried Woodshed came into being as the chance result of a particularly harsh winter. Smithson had intended to produce a mud pour that would illustrate—and respect—the natural laws of gravity, but the cold weather made such a project impossible. Instead, an unused woodshed on what was then the edge of campus became opportunity for Smithson to realize a project he had long envisioned. Smithson ordered truckloads of earth to be loaded on the structure's roof until its center beam began to collapse. The intention was to allow the Woodshed to undergo processes of entropy—the disintegration of matter and dissipation of energy relative to the vast scale of geological time. The direct interaction between cultural constructions, as signified by the woodshed, and natural forces, such as wind and rain, would allow Partially Buried Woodshed to acquire its own history.

From 1970 to the present, Partially Buried Woodshed has led an arduous existence. In its first spring, after the incidents of May 4, an anonymous individual wrote...
"May 4 Kent 70" on the lintel of the structure. This inscription and the fact that this project immediately preceded the canonical *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake, Utah, have helped secure the fame of *Partially Buried Woodshed* as an important moment in a career that would end abruptly in a plane crash in 1973. In March 1975, a fire destroyed the left half of the structure where logs had been stored. With the input of Smithson's widow, Nancy Holt, and faculty from the School of Art, a fifteen-member University Art Commission voted to save the unburned right half of the work. For many, both within and outside the University, a disintegrating woodshed boldly reminding the community of the tragedy of May 4 seemed to contradict expectations that art should reflect and support normative values—or at least be more attractive. Agreeing to save the Woodshed from further demolition, university officials decided to shield it from the sight of passers-by with a barricade of fast-growing cedars. For the next few years, *Partially Buried Woodshed* decayed of its own accord. Photographs taken in the early 1980s record that the Woodshed's center beam had collapsed. Sometime in January or February 1984, in circumstances that remain unclear, the final physical wooden remains of the Woodshed disappeared.

Today, *Partially Buried Woodshed* is reduced to a few foundation stones with healthy trees and plants growing tall between them, and debate continues as to what was and what should have been the balance between natural and human forces.
STRUCTURES OF EXPERIENCE

Structures of Experience: an exhibition in response to Robert Smithson at Kent State University coincides with the 35th anniversary of the creation of Woodshed. The disjuncture between its current state and the accumulation and transformation of its history in photographs and storytelling demonstrate the enduring importance of active, critical engagement with the structures of history. Indeed, the Woodshed is arguably more vital than ever because of its accrued lore and the controversies surrounding its deterioration. For the Kent community and Northeast Ohio, the Woodshed is an opportunity to recognize and value local history as significant for both local circumstances as well as for broader contexts.

Artists included in this exhibition create work that examines the constructed character of history and representation as marked in the dialogue between natural environments and human constructions; the uneven relationships between photographic and literary representations and their references; and the unpredictable relationships between sculptural objects and their viewers. The exhibition provokes inquiry regarding the structures of diverse discourses and the character of spatial and temporal conditions to exceed cultural frameworks of interpretation.

Contributors include current and former faculty, alumni, and graduate and undergraduate students from all Divisions in the School of Art—fine art, crafts, art history, and art education—and a faculty member from the College of Architecture and Environmental Design.
Jo Q. Nelson explores the conceptual and actual dimensions of sight with her Stereographs based on Photographs of Robert Smithson. Nelson bases her work on historic photographs of Smithson at work, transforming them into three-dimensional images for today's viewers. The construction of Partially Buried Woodshed takes on uncanny dimensions as we engage with Nelson's steel, wood, and glass machines, precious and efficient in their construction of images.

Multiple layers of history contribute to the experience with these stereographs: the event of January 1970; the photographic documentation of this construction; models built from photographs to create fictionalized three-dimensional spaces; stereoscopic photographs made to retain and document these illusions; and the gallery viewer's experience of the original project affected and dictated by layers of re-documentation and representation. Nelson's stereographs make clear the character of representation both to miss and to misrepresent conceptions of past events while at the same time photographic representation actively creates opportunity for new viewers to create new meanings.

In Great Horseshoe Attractor, Donald E. Harvey takes as his starting point a curved weir at the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company's generating plant on the edge of Lake Erie. Doubling a photograph of the site over onto itself, Harvey creates what appears to be a panoramic photograph to develop what could be called, borrowing
from film criticism, an establishing shot to bring the viewer into the scene. At eye-level, the viewer is as if in front of a picture window surveying the landscape—if you look closely, you can see some fisherman standing on the weir. By emphasizing the structure of the work’s construction and the mechanics of its installation and by using a color palette that distances the viewer from accurate observations of the environment, Harvey exposes the fact that all vision is mediated—no one sees neutrally. The excessive steel plates that extend the work vertically remind the viewer of the dissonances of viewing “earthworks” through the interpretative frameworks of reproducible media.

**Darice Polo’s** photorealistic drawings derive from her interest in the paradoxes of representing experience. *The First Born of a Ruling Chief (Pu’uloa)* and *Anthropomorphs (Pu’uloa)* are based on photographs of petroglyphs Polo took during a trip to Volcanoes National Park in Hawai’i. Over 23,000 images were pecked into hardened lava between 1200-1450. Polo’s photographs—and her drawing practice—allow her the distance to observe these small historical artifacts that have been subject to the continuous changes of human scuffing and rubbing as well as the effects of weathering. The deliberate process through which Polo creates her drawings, slowly building value and form, with the graphite of her pencil grabbing the tooth of the paper reflects the pecking of stone through which these petroglyphs were originally created. Polo’s painstaking attention to these ancient symbols and the small incremental steps of layering grades of graphite reflect the character of history as an accumulation of individual moments.

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**Donald E. Harvey** (Adjunct Professor of Drawing; Emeritus Professor, University of Akron), *Great Horseshoe Attractor*, 1991. Inkjet print on aluminum, steel and aluminum, 116"x106".

**Darice Polo** (Assistant Professor of Drawing), *The First Born of a Ruling Chief (Pu’uloa)*, 2005. Graphite on bristol board, 4"x 4-3/4".
Kathleen Browne's *Accusations* series demonstrates the uneven power of visual and verbal languages to create meaning. Mirrored surfaces and the direct address of text composed of word and image produce active exchange between individuals and between their actions and reactions. "Accusation" marks relationships of knowledge and power, but the wry transformations of the subject "I" into an image of a human eye, the verb "saw" into an image of a hand tool, and the direct object "you" into the vernacular "u" form uneasy relationships with the specific and serious actions of "following her," "steal it," and "slip her a mickey." Browne engages her viewers with gorgeous materials and fine craftsmanship and by asking her viewers to engage creatively with the production of meaning across discursive frameworks. As soon as the viewer catches onto the game, the viewer is caught by—and lost—within structures of exchange that continue regardless of truth or falsehood, of cause and effect.

**CONSTRUCTING HISTORY**

Lilian Tyrrell's *The Lesson* is a work from *The Disaster Blanket Series*. Using material from camouflage netting, military banners, and uniforms from armies from across the globe juxtaposed with pastel-colored tapestry and ribbon, Tyrrell reminds viewers of the consequences of belligerent political discourse. *The Lesson* presents the terrible irony that a blanket's comfort and protection is often a reactionary attempt to counter violence and suffering. A disconcerting contrast between clear and nuanced text and image reflects the multiple levels of engagement and disengagement, care, neglect, and abuse that inflect ethnic and cultural relationships. Camouflage netting, composed in part by what would be in other applications cute silhouettes of woodland creatures, partially obscures and still calls attention to the ferocity of war slogans and the consequences of suffering—in this case, a young Kurdish child.
"It seemed to me that the University ended up with a very major artwork which it didn’t know it was getting, wasn’t sure it wanted, didn’t quite know how to handle, so it did nothing, which was precisely the right thing...and lost it without knowing it has lost it.” — Brinsley Tyrrell

CONSTRUCTING HISTORY

Carol Hummel and Barbara Moser’s video Partially Remembered Woodshed collects the reminiscences of eight individuals who have maintained interest in Partially Buried Woodshed over the years. These recollections of the planning, construction, and transformations of the earthwork not only document changes in a specific work of art but they also demonstrate the conceptual character of the Partially Buried Woodshed as opportunity to consider broader issues of entropic change. The processes of natural erosion and human activity that have altered materials correspond to the diverse and unstable character of subjective human memory. Just as Partially Buried Woodshed exemplifies entropy, Partially Remembered Woodshed demonstrates the continuous erosion of personal and shared memories as well as the correlative creation of new reflections.
Henry Halem's *Family Secrets* demonstrates the realities of the illusive character of memory. A photograph of Halem's father as a child, created, of course, years before Halem's birth, inspires consideration of the ephemeral character of representation to create multiple meanings about the past, in the present, and for the future. Possessing this image of his father throughout his own life, the photograph carries multiple family memories. Two wrapped vessels inside the box allude to the character of history and memory to be simultaneously present and enigmatic. They are containers and metaphors for histories that linger in the structures of experience and interpretation.

**Mapping**

Based on real-world maps and satellite images, Lori Kella's photographs are fictional reconstructions of isolated landscapes. In the series *The Long Cold Advance*, Kella imagines the last ice age, recreating the ice sheets and glaciers that covered much of North America. The photographs catalogue individual glaciers as well as the expanse of the northern ice sheets. By creating aerial photographs of these constructions Kella illustrates an ancient time before cameras, satellites, and airplanes. In so doing, Kella signifies the omniscient view and conceit of the modern viewer who, distanced from the landscape, occupies a privileged position that is both a fantasy and an illusion. The photographs are a fiction, a speculation, based on scientific reasoning. In exposing the constructed character of the landscapes and technological imaging systems, Kella challenges the power of the viewer's gaze and the authenticity of photographic representation.
Simplified definitions of “grids” as devices for organizing materials and of “weaving” as “the process of creating planar surfaces using an intersecting grid of warp and weft” inspire Carla Tilghman’s Reconstruction. Maps, spreadsheets, and utility networks are all useful tools through which we understand and represent the world. Tilghman understands that the methods through which we collect, create, and communicate information are central to the production of cultural knowledge. For example, television news reports present visual and verbal information—sometimes called “coverage”—of events from across the world. These networks simultaneously create opportunity for us to learn, but they also determine the character of information itself. Reconstruction takes its inspiration from American news reports about military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and skepticism about the successful future of “re-building.” Tilghman’s abstractions gesture toward the character of boundaries and the knowledge they create to shift over time and make evident how we seduce ourselves with our own constructions of experience.

In Flipped and Mirrored Peel and Corner Peel (for Robert Smithson), Todd Schroeder begins with the peeling of an orange. Keeping the entire peel intact, Schroeder flattens the three-dimensional flesh of the object into a two-dimensional shape. The pictorial result is an abstraction that brings to mind diverse imagery: sections of maps, clouds, spilled ink, or human figures. While every orange could be reduced to its peel, no two peeled skins can be exactly the same, regardless of how carefully peeled. This shifting from a three-dimensional context to a two-dimensional register suggests how representations are inherently
Ann Hanrahan (Graduate Student in Painting; KSU-BFA Painting), *Irregular Brick Pattern as Map #1*, 2005. Oil on panel, 40"x48".

Carol Hummel (Adjunct Professor of Sculpture; KSU-MFA Sculpture and KSU-BS Photojournalism), *Levels*, 2005. Yarn, saplings, and steel, Installation.

Jason Lee (Adjunct Professor of Sculpture; KSU-BFA Sculpture), *Greener, from Euthenic Device Series*, 2004-05. MDF, Lexan, extruded foam, backlit Dura-Brite prints, Installation.

always abstractions. While maintaining fidelity to his original source material, Schroeder experiments with variations of color, surface, layering, and figure-ground relationships—as well as the suggestion of narrative—as these are elements that contribute to the possibility of pictorial representation.

Ann Hanrahan finds inspiration in the shapes and patterns she observes, whether crafted or natural. *Irregular Brick Pattern as Map #1 and Irregular Brick Pattern as Map #2* are based on surfaces she discovered while walking in Manhattan. Patterns often help us negotiate our environments, yet while the drawings in these paintings imply maps, no keys are present here with which to decode the information. Across these works, broad fields of color and contrasted lines are all that is provided—and perhaps all that is necessary—to organize a visual field. In so doing, these paintings begin not only to hint at some specific place in the world but also to suggest the coordinates of movement in time and space that imply the possibility of narrative. With no specific information and hence with no restrictions, some may be inclined to wonder what these patterns mark, where these paths may lead, and to speculate about conversations with Hanrahan or another.

**CREATING ENVIRONMENTS**

For *Levels*, Carol Hummel mapped a stand of brush, created a grid, and removed four saplings from that demarcated place to bring indoors. The trunk of each of the saplings, though cut and fixed in square steel bases, seems to grow branches that sprout delicate twigs that reach for the sun. During a painstaking 250 hours, Hummel created crocheted yarn coverings, which represent an exploitation of the graphic language of topographical mapping, in order to represent how organic experience is translated in cultural discourse. The garishly colored crocheted yarn is symbolic of nurturing—which functions here as comforting, yet controlling, and constraining—and of the discursive systems that would map a parcel of land and subject...
its existence to the controlling and constraining demands of human frameworks and needs. *Levels*, then, is paradoxical as it respects the natural relationships between elements in an environment while demonstrating the ambivalent repercussions of cultural acts.

Euthenics refers to the science of adjusting and improving human living conditions. Jason Lee's *Greener*, from *Euthenic Device Series*, uses light boxes to depict high-resolution images of lush green grass (and the occasional dandelion). Along both sides of a white picket fence, painted a bright orange and with exposed electrical cords that extend from floor to ceiling, six light boxes appear alternately as containment or environmental oasis. The artificiality of the installation in its distance from any natural setting or naturalistic representation provides commentary about conceptual separation between zones of habitation and "natural" zones. Each light box delimits an "ideal" landscape, and the installation seems to question whether the fencing serves to protect the careful arrangement of greenery for aesthetic appreciation or whether these fabricated gardens are accessories to aggrandize the function of the fence to divide, organize, and manage space.

**CREATING ENVIRONMENTS**
**Jonathan Fleming** (Assistant Professor of Architecture; KSU-BArch and KSU-BS Architecture), *Sod on Armature*, 2005, Sod, stainless steel, and steel, Installation.

**Charles Basham** (Adjunct Professor of Painting; KSU-MFA Painting and KSU-BFA Painting), *Fallen Brooder House*, 2000. Oil on linen, 22" x 30".

**Theodore Cowan** (KSU-MA Painting), *Cenotaph*, 2005. Oil on panel, 24" x 72".


**Jonathan Fleming’s** *Sod on Armature* disengages organic material from common perceptions of the "natural" character of living plants. Relocating a plot of grass onto a metal framework and putting it inside a gallery space reminds us that the American lawn is often a product of industrial culture, dependent on large quantities of fertilizers that can be destructive to other plants, soils, water supplies, animals, and humans. Often, environmental destruction remains invisible as we are distracted by cultural values that reside in the pursuit of perfect turf. Further, Fleming’s work also expresses the tensions that generate design solutions that could rehabilitate the poisoned earth of brownfields or could incorporate environmentally friendly methods, materials, and experiences in new structures.

**HUMAN ECOLOGY**

**Charles Basham** chooses subjects that are filled with tension. The stronger contrasts of light and color in the early morning and early evening provoke Basham’s interest in pushing color away from its local nature. As in *Chippewa* or *Fallen Brooder House*, the built structures and places that Basham chooses to paint are not imagined, idealized, or sentimentalized. Rather than considering his subject matter as nostalgic or symbolic of historic change, Basham’s paintings depict the character of places as he encounters and responds to them. Relatively few plots of land have not been shaped by human intervention; likewise, Basham’s compositions and color choices are attempts to find abstraction in natural forms.

**Theodore Cowan’s** work merges cultural history, autobiography, and fantasy. As a child, Cowan would walk along the banks of the Chagrin River, delay at a Hopewell Indian mound, and survey the beech trees that stood upon it like sentinels. Through experience...
and imagination, a pause on a trail becomes a "sense of place." At the base of Cenotaph, a stone axe is meant as a cultural reference in juxtaposition to a sublime "natural" experience; hence, Cenotaph, suggests the presence of memory in landscape. Building upon criticism that points to the constructed character of historical stereotypes of the "ecological Indian," important questions develop regarding the conceptual and ecological constructions of contemporary "wilderness" in a consumerist society.

Diane Archer creates work that attempts to locate historic experiences. Combining "relics" such as maps, stones and butterfly wings, functional tools such as a compass or a level, iconic imagery such as solar system charts, and text, Archer implies relationships that imply specific circumstances as well as reflection about the relationships immanent within a "deep" ecological sense of indissoluble lived and spiritual experience. Superimposing drawings of the human skeleton onto copies of U.S. Geological Service topographical maps suggests the similarity between schemas of human experience and those that represent environmental contexts. These references to discursive frameworks combined with text that directly addresses her viewers and glass vials that contain physical objects contribute to Archer's demand for engagement with the environment as an ethical act.
Nadine B. Schreyer created a plaster skin for the passenger side of her Isuzu Trooper to collect a record of her travels during eight days of an Ohio winter. *Eight Days a Week: There and Back Again* accumulates the patterns of earth, water, and wind and functions as a journal of Schreyer's experiences operating the vehicle in space and time. The plaster could change subtly, or after hitting a pothole, it could change dramatically. The mundane activities of driving from home to work in her studio, to attend and teach classes, or to run errands do not often merit particular attention; nevertheless, these activities create some of the color of her life. The absurdity of the sculpture jutting into a gallery may be amusing at first glance, but the work also provokes thought about the character of both everyday experience as well as unique events.

Anderson Turner creates work that locates personal experience within natural and social landscapes. *Lucky Penny Bundle* takes its name from the farm on which he lives with his family and *Headwaters Bundle* takes its name from a hiking trail that abuts the farm. The malleability of clay and plaster and stray streaks of slip and glaze allow Turner to create idiosyncratic compositions. Thickly drawn designs and irregular volumes signify this individual's hand, and his color choices derive from the colors of winter around his home, the time and place in which these works were made. The similarity between the overall structures of these works reinforces Turner's concentration on the point where actual objects and experiences enter a creative practice of abstraction. Insisting that art objects function within and outside of frameworks of communication and cultural exchange, Turner's bundles reflect his sense that one's attention to particular characteristics of an environment is but a moment within the fullness of experience.
The block of salt and volcanic ash in Brinsley Tyrrell’s *Salt of the City* was mined in Cleveland from under Lake Erie. When crushed, this ancient material is used to combat ice for today’s motorized vehicles. The pedestal structure and the designs Tyrrell carves echo the architectural elements that are found in the modern city. Like Smithson, Tyrrell is concerned with the character of materials to conform to their own inherent logic and mystery. Salt, of course, is an unstable material—even in blocks weighing a ton or more!—as it is subject to nuanced changes in the amount of moisture in the atmosphere. Like its material base, Tyrrell’s carving has historical references, an historical present, and an unpredictable future.

Lorri Ott finds a poetic beauty in her experience observing the cast-off plastic bags and sheeting flying in the wind and catching in trees along the roadways she travels everyday. These plastic sheets possess the pictorial quality of abstract painting and sculpture; they inspire emotional response as they are lost and overlooked objects; and they inspire a certain sadness as they are environmental litter. *Untitled (Green, Red, Magenta, and Orange)* is a poetic and experimental exploration of materials and processes. Removing almost all traces of individual subjectivity, Ott pours and casts resin and latex and acrylic paint in thin sheets. Ott encourages synthetic materials to gather into the beauty of frozen waterfalls.
In the installation *Hypertrophy*, **Dylan Collins** references the language of the wall trophy to challenge the concepts and practices of human dominance over other beasts and fauna. Traditionally, wall trophies function to display man's conquest over the animal world. By casting wooden mounts in a neutral color and in an unlikely material (rubber), Collins maintains the idea that mounts signify the production of cultural value, even if, as in this case, the value is relatively small. Disembodied animals are replaced by forged oak branches that refer not to the owner's prowess as a hunter but to the power of conceptual frameworks. Hung on the gallery's wall like beasts in a hunting lodge, not only do Collins's mounts refuse the meaning such an arrangement might be expected to convey, the branches nurture lathed-turned acorns of grotesque dimensions. The absurdity of these acorns suggests a natural system gone awry, as the unintended result of an industrial culture's excess, as adaptation to difficult circumstance, or as fantastic escape from physical and conceptual confinement.

**COLLECTING EXPERIENCE**

When hiking through woods, we may follow a path. Or, we may wander. What attracts our attention? Do we monitor our movements with the help of a map, or a compass? Do we feel tension at the edge of a trail? What systems of thought determine the "natural"? When rain and fallen leaves obscure our way, is an omnipotent Mother Nature challenging us to reconsider our comfort zones, or perhaps reclaiming the land?

From ancient to contemporary times, buildings are abandoned, neglected, and destroyed due to changing demographics and the dictates of fashion. Spring
gardens yield wheels of toy trucks, loose change, bits of brick and glass, and plastic doll parts and farm animals, barely one-inch-tall. Tides throw up prized pieces of glass, remnants from adventurers, colonists, and beer drinkers. Photographs and postcards mingle in shoeboxes. Small stones and shells take up residence on windowsills. Fall leaves eventually lose their color.

—Scott A. Sherer, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Art History
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