

A.R.E.

**artist
residency
exchange**

**western new york
1997**

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Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center
just buffalo literary center
Locust Street Neighborhood Classes, Inc.
SUC Buffalo, Fine Arts Program
SUNY Buffalo, Casting Institute
SUNY Buffalo, Experimental Print Imaging Center
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Artist Residency Exchange: Western New York 1997 Catalogue Introduction

Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Pyramid Arts Center, Wayne County Council for the Arts, Genesee Valley Council on the Arts and Niagara Council on the Arts are proud to present the results of the fourth year of *Artist Residency Exchange: Western New York*, an artists residency and regrant program that directly benefits visual artists and writers in the counties of Erie, Livingston, Monroe, Wayne and Niagara. ARE:WNY sponsored six visual artist residencies and three writer residencies in 1997.

The program is made possible by a remarkable consortium of 21 arts, culture and service organizations in the five county area, and the New York State Council on the Arts, which have united in support of residencies for individual artists. In 1997 Niagara County joined the ARE consortium, further extending the reach of this program.

ARE:WNY is built upon a fundamental belief that individual artists are the heart and soul of the arts in New York State. One of the great needs of artists in western New York State is support for artists to do their work. Funding cutbacks in recent years have often been at the expense of support systems for individual artists offered by government agencies, foundations, and arts organizations. Throughout the United States, communities are coming together to create new programs such as ARE:WNY in support of artists and their work. In a recent study titled *Financial Support for Artists*, ARE:WNY was listed as a noteworthy new program, one of many new efforts in which a consortium of organizations have come together to develop new support systems for cultural production.

The primary goals of ARE:WNY are:

- To offer to artists in the western region of New York State much needed facilities, time to develop their work, technical assistance, and financial support.
- To create a unified support system for arts activities in the region which unites contemporary arts centers, libraries, arts councils, and regional organizations.
- Share administrative and artistic resources, relieving the strain on individual organizations, and improving services to artists.
- To increase public interaction and knowledge of artists and their work through an optional service component, publication of a catalogue with documentation and commissioned essays about each artist and increased publicity and visibility via print and electronic media.

Artist applications were solicited in the five participating counties in 1997 by an open application process, supported by vigorous outreach (partially via a growing multi-county arts database of 1,800 artists) to artists in each county. The program grants are awarded by two panels of three regional artists, one for visual arts and one for writing, representing a diversity of arts backgrounds and populations. The criteria for artist selection are: quality of work, as demonstrated by support materials submitted by the artists; the ability and willingness to satisfactorily complete the residency; the feasibility of the artists' goals for the residency; and the degree to which their accomplishment furthers a public appreciation of the arts.

This catalogue is the result of the six visual artist residencies and three writers' residencies awarded and completed in 1997. Each artist was paired with a guest essayist for this catalog, to help convey the artist's work to the community. What started out as a re-grant program for artists became an important way for artists to interact with new communities, and for artists to present their work through exhibitions and readings.

The excitement of the ARE:WNY artists was matched by that of the hosting organizations that formed a network of support for the artists. All of the artists were made to feel at home in their newly adopted communities through the enthusiastic effort of the host organizations. These organizations not only provided working facilities for artists, but also brought the artists into contact with other artists, and with the community at large. These stories and more unfold from the artists' experiences and those of all of the organizations that are a part of ARE:WNY. We hope that this catalogue conveys a lasting sense of the effect these residencies had in their host communities throughout western New York.

Links to Obscurity: Comments on the Work of Charles Agel by Eric Gansworth

The attitudes of any human culture are frequently articulated in the literature found within it, and even when not the explicit intent of a document, those attitudes are generally deeply embedded in a work's sensibility, offering the careful reader insight into the values and judgments of a people at a particular juncture in time. While these documents may seem highly relevant and accurate within their own cultural milieu, once removed from that context, the overconfidence humans have in their own importance in this planet's history becomes embarrassingly, painfully, clear. Through the intentionally ironic juxtaposition of his contemporary images of the Industrial Revolution's ruins that litter western New York against dated, absurdly patronizing, texts pulled from a work composed in the context of the Industrial Revolution — John Lloyd Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas And Yucatan* — Charles Agel, in his work, *Monuments to the Industrial Revolution* (1997), examines this tenuous cycle humanity perpetuates in its desperate bid to avoid obscurity.

The passages from Stephens' document Agel utilizes in his work, by and large, have a curiously melancholy tone tinged with the overconfidence of a speaker sure of his rightfully established place in the continuum of history. Stephens claimed explicitly in his reflection to "not...offer any conjecture...in regard to the people" whose ruined cities he observed, yet frequently littered his descriptions with phrases which were hardly flattering and which revealed his ethnocentric stance on the world. At one point, noticing monkeys in the trees above the ruins, he suggested the primates "seemed like wandering spirits of the departed guarding the ruins of their former habitations." He felt of these people that the "links which connected them to the human family were severed and lost," merely because they were not known within his context. It is not too far a leap to see Stephens felt on some level that a culture's ruination lay, in part, in its lack of a clearly defined set of easily recognizable civilized characteristics.

Agel's photographs of abandoned industrial sites throughout western New York, even removed from the absurdly synchronous passages taken from Stephens' work, speak volumes concerning the impermanence of any culture's presumed mark left on this earth. While the Industrial Revolution was supposed to have earmarked the birth of a "modern America," and while perhaps this is true to some limited extent, it was not nearly as long-defining a force as those living within its context must have believed. The photographs do not illustrate a thriving community or cultural identity, and in the obscure nature of the monuments as presented, without explanation, offer the same mute message Stephens had previously articulated—Stephens' people, those of the confident Industrial Revolution, now also belong to a culture whose "links which connected them to the human family were severed and lost."

The man-made objects in Agel's images are clearly functionless as they gradually return to their natural elements: ambiguous, formidable doors offering ingress and egress to non-existent structures; stairs leading to ominous columns that now support only the vastness of the sky—absurd exercises in the literally archaic. Even in those cases where the structures are clearly recognizable—buildings technically still intact—the society for which they were designed has clearly abandoned them, in some cases even apparently having an active role in the disengagement. Windows in one building have been rendered functionless by having been bricked over meticulously, a suggestion that people actively engaged with the structures had gained a resigned acceptance concerning the minimal longevity of their culture's buildings—had purposefully participated in this loss of functionality.

Evidence within the images, however, suggests this resignation was not necessarily a forgone conclusion. In a number of cases, the structures were created with a confident sense of aesthetic moving beyond the merely utilitarian. Pillars in one building, while of course needed for structural integrity, echo edifices long standing in the architectural history of Western Civilization—perhaps as an attempt to invoke the potential longevity of the Industrial Revolution. The designers clearly believed their's would be a lasting contribution.

Two contrasting, unrelated images within the work document the transitions and evolutions of ideologies even within a culture by offering disconnected cul de sacs of meaningless information to the contemporary viewer. The written passages in both images are composed in English and are ostensibly accessible, minimally, to a majority of any viewers in an American setting, but neither offer much significance beyond being pronounceable—they are almost like cryptic phrases from dreams which seem like they should have some bearing on the waking world, but more often than not, offer nothing in the way of practical communication. The first is clearly connected to the context of the ruins in some inherent way, embossed onto the structure itself—perhaps names of influential people in that context, now lost. The second example is in the form of graffiti, itself an act of defiance, of one, more transient culture against the presumed steadfast walls of another. These passages are, generally, dedications of love between couples long vanished into an obscurity from which they perhaps felt elevated for the moment of the inscription.

While the industrial ruins make up one significant element of the photographs, the images do not merely capture these static objects, are not picture postcards of the moment, convenient visual translations of monuments which may be returned to repeatedly with the expectation that the object will retain the qualities of the previously documented image. They are, instead, documents of a particular moment in the aggressive natural world over which humans claim dominance regardless of such evident contradictory information. The natural world in the photographs again disregards the intent of a self-important species which has attempted to leave some sort of mark.

Trees, undergrowth, plant life which has not been strategically manipulated and introduced, but which has moved in of its own accord, flourishes here. Humans simply do not make the lasting impressions they would like to believe. The strong dynamic of these photographs suggest that permanence is an illusion, and that the ruins will ultimately not even leave the limited traces they do in the images.

It is the natural world which triumphs in Charles Agel's work. The buildings, in fact, even in still photographs, continue in the process of returning to their natural elements. The reminders of their angular, unnatural lines exist for the moment, but it is quite apparent in a large percentage of these images that the more graceful lines of nature truly have the upper hand. While Stephens clearly saw the place of humans in this world as only significantly marked by a presumed conquering of the natural world, Agel has a much more realistic view of man's relationship to the world—that it is as tenuous as any other species' relationship—that the natural world is truly the force which drives this planet.



Untitled, from the series Monuments to the Industrial Revolution (1997)

"For the first time we were in a building erected by the aboriginal inhabitants, standing before the Europeans knew of the existence of this continent, and we prepared to take up our abode under its roof. We selected the front corridor as our dwelling, turned turkey and fowls loose in the courtyard, which was so overgrown with trees that we could barely see across it; and as there was no pasture for the mules except the leaves of the trees, and we could not turn them loose into the woods, we brought them up the steps through the palace, and turned them into the courtyard also."

***Brenda J. Cowe* by E.R. Baxter III**

Brenda J. Cowe rightly calls her seventy-seven pages of poetry, entitled *Music From the Attic*, a "work in progress." This phrase appears, enclosed in parentheses, as a subtitle, and if we tend to read it only as notation that some technical adjustments need to be made, that some revision is yet to be accomplished, we do ourselves and the manuscript, a disservice. Her poems explore family history, identities forged in ethnicity, individuals leaving the old country and coming into the new world — and as such is an ongoing flowering, a dynamic process that must in some way be documented by a poetry that is also ongoing, an actual and emotional record of generations that rise one out of the other unending. It is truly a work in progress and will remain so in spite of the possibility that the writer might complete the "last" poem in the collection.

The current manuscript begins with the death of a child in "Another Child Die," with a dark sky over a "lake,/ uncut by sailboats/ or laughter," and the "wind (beating)/ down/ into the earth," and concludes with a poem entitled "What Have You Made," in which a grandmother apologizes for a quilt she has not made, for the "patchwork (that) is someone else's," while the poem quietly observes that she has shared her life with her descendants, in flesh and in word, "blossoms/ erupting (from) thick winter bud,/ each a heart beating,/ petals as smooth/ as swallows singing."

The lake water of the first poem rises through the collection, the most often used of the elements — and appropriately so. It is the "fickle sea" that takes a half dozen of her family to their deaths at one time; it is the water of the Atlantic that floated her parents to a new life; it is the passing thunderstorm soaking the pipers at the Highland games, who play "against the clouds/ of history,/ wet, unchangeable..." and it is the water of the new place they must live near to feel at home: the water of Cattaragus Creek on which they float "lazy, hot...past ducks and...bloomed and leaved trees," seeming to culminate in a poem entitled "Family":

flows on
like Niagara,
a river pulsing over rocks
falling deep into
hidden caverns,
buried under mist,
each sorrow crushing,
then free to float,
hope for evaporation.

Family curls in around
each sadness,
if only in heart,
smoothing rocks
that form riverbed,
though unable
to completely erase
the etched calligraphy
of grief.

Yet this "etched calligraphy/ of grief," coexists with joy. The poem called "Shoes" lists the styles that "grac(ed) Netta's feet": Black chunky heels/ ...slim t-straps/ cream button shoes/ high ankle wraps/ open toes/ flat white casuals/ high heels/ ankle boots/ Maryjanes/ double vamp straps/ ribbon bows/ and "black slip-ons." A family member, Frank, tosses a novelty-shop item, a "lump" of rubber molded to appear like dog excrement, under the "dining room buffet" and the dog, "Puddles," begins "to believe" she is responsible. Uncle Tuck chases the young children of the family around the yard, his false teeth "chattering in his hand." In the evening he tells them stories, while they are "scattered like seeds/ on the floor around him." A father makes beer in the cellar during prohibition and plays "Two-handed euchre" with his son and now empty bottles hold the memories, "cards like money,/ beer like honey."

Experiencing the poems in *Music From the Attic* is to be adopted, as an adult, into a new family. Gradually, its members are introduced: Netta; the narrator (the person, the voice who serves to introduce the others); Frank; Tuck; and Bill, long deceased, who we come to know from stories and from photographs, though they are unsatisfactory.

But of what use is such an adoption, we may ask ourselves. Most of us have, after all, our own families, our own histories, our own stories to retell and hand down. While all of this may be true, we value *Music From the Attic* because it encourages us to listen to the notes of music in our pasts, to value those who've come before, in our own families, and in the families of others. When poetry affords us this opportunity, we find our lives enriched by some measure — which is, as our pasts drop away from us, of course, not a small measure at all.

Barnstormers

Six corners
was just farmland
wheat and cow corn
spreading out like a star.

Here bi-plane soared
against the blank face of field.
Dollar rides,
shining and battered,
in barnstormer from World War I,
pilot flew in and out
of small towns.

Frank, cousin, friend
close their eyes behind goggles
gripping seats with no belts
feel the rush of wind
open their eyes to see
loops then a nose dive,
plummet to the earth.

Did they have time
to breathe or dream

it was them
piloting their course?
Did they know
for an instant
the fear of bombs,
the silence
before each explodes
against the earth?

Braiding

Her long white hair fell
in wavy cascade
like a curtain of gentle water,
down her back at night.

Hands born of Mediterranean blue
carefully parted and wrapped
each third length of hair
into a single, uncomplicated braid.

Judy watched, wanting to float
among the water of Great Grandma's
hands weaving out the days work

down the middle of her back,

the thick silver braid ended, wrapped
into tight, sophisticated bun;
each gossamer filament tucked into
the daily prayer of braiding.

Here was patience given with
the intertwining of fingers in hair,
still Judy's locks fell open
unable to coalesce yet into stream.

So Minnie wove fine, shorter hair
among weathered hands and ribbons,
her angelic caress bringing shivers,
her gift rooting in child's flesh.

Window Bench

unfolds like a muir
sloping into brae,
grassy green
waving in the breeze

here Alec watches
sisters run off
like pristine burns
down to the pools
of North Sea

unable to see, he imagines
their wet sandy fingers
picking out crabs and pebbles
from the shallow eddies
as he waits on their return

in the window seat,
he attaches matchsticks
to the crab claws,
matchboxes to the matchsticks,

like a wee horse and cart,
his imagination recreates
perhaps, his own
disablement from years ago

horse and cart
trampling a leg
his high boot reminder;
only Alec replays
the scene, this time

he louns and flees
aboon the stane and stour
an' escapes ye see
hair flyin an' glintin'

as wee, bauld legs
flatten th' bonnie green.

Dinna ye believe
Alec isn't runnin'
wi' all the ithers.

What Have You Made

The comforter lays open
installed along the flat wall
of her bed like a painting
stretched from cherry foot
to straight grooved headboard.

Netta's agile hands
finger a panel of fabric,
she explains to me,
apologizes,
that the fine pink threads
woven into petals
have not been slivered there
by her,

the patchwork is someone else's,
its fragile edges
now beginning to fray,
still she has decided
to fold it into my arms

saying again
I don't have anything
that I have made,

nothing but this flesh
that carries me
and fifty-four other descendants,
these stories poured
like tea steeping,
your life entwining
like a needle sewing,
has moved through me,
opening up, your heart given,

see here
the pastel flower etched
and sewn across my cheek,
what have you made
but this sudden knowing
of you as you are,
alive, each sorrow, all hope;
the photos, your voice,
stories of my grandfather
I have never known
but now know as Bill.

What have you made
but these blossoms
erupting out of thick winter bud,
each a heart beating,
petals as smooth
as swallows singing.

Mapping the Body: The Work of Ann Curran **by Karen vanMeenen**

Ann Curran's work exhibits a complex array of sights, sounds and translated experience. Her work is not only layered with a montage of sensory explorations, but displays a depth of informed thematic investigation. Curran relies heavily on stories, testimony and the function of memory as well as on the nature of language as an elemental construct that forms identity. She also plays with notions of borders and boundaries—national, artificial, hidden, forced, internal and external, private and public—and their prevalent applications, creating a common, and shared, experience for viewers.

Curran began taking photographs and shooting film and video at about the same time. The juncture between, and ultimate compatibility of, these two forms—still and moving imagery—has been fundamental to her work. She sees her involvement with large-scale multimedia installation pieces as a “development that has grown out of [a] core interest in film and the relationship of the environment to the subject.” Although she claims to have long resisted narrative, she now considers installation as an appropriate arena for it, saying it “provides a physical and emotional site for the viewer or body in the space.”

Sille Island, a photo-based work from 1993, was Curran's first attempt at using slide projection in an installation. The dark room, straight-backed chair and single bare hanging light bulb captured the essence of an interrogation room. Projected onto the back of the chair were life-size historical photographs by Lewis Hine documenting immigrants at Ellis Island. Curran took these humanist portraits and related them back to their origins—elucidating the bias, discrimination and impersonal nature of the immigration process—by photographically adding to each portrait a bar code, affixed to suspenders and shirts or placed as though emerging from breast pockets. The images slowly dissolved into one another, producing the tension of waiting, of a methodical process. Curran certainly has the agency with which to broach this subject: she herself immigrated from Dublin, Ireland in 1992.

Curran is also concerned with the representation of the female body in contemporary media. *Moving the Body*, a 16mm black and white



Still from "Transmission," 16mm b&w film-in-progress

film, is based on a *New York Times* article about a woman who was found murdered in Greenwich Village in 1996. Investigations revealed that the woman had led what some considered to be an aimless and self-destructive life and had been homeless for some time before her death. Curran contends that the language of the report, and the personal recollections it relies on, imply that someone with such a past was a natural victim. She weaves a captivating narrative using a variety of images, some rephotographed again and again, and an array of voices to cite the tragic history of this "complex woman."

By combining individual film and video pieces with other media in her installations, Curran creates spaces where the viewer's body mingles with that of the subject of the work. In *Patient Discharge* (1996), viewers witnessed the visual transformation of the images created by the

application of the artist's effluence to a growing medium, heard the musical sounds that linger in the wake of the absent body or patient, experienced the three-dimensionality of these powerful, actualized spaces. Distinctions between object and observer, insider and outsider, were blurred. This elaborate installation "centered around the position of the female body/patient within the representations of medical history and related discourses, extending this exploration to the wider issue of the immigrant body as a site of conflict."

The work touched on a number of aspects surrounding the case of Mary Mallon, an Irish immigrant on the Eastern seaboard in the early part of the century, who, because of her invisible carrier status and the trail of death she left in her wake, came to be known as Typhoid Mary. The installation consisted of several components in various media. At the center of the piece was a simple iron bed, where a miniature Irish harp made of ice was placed each day. The subsequent daily melting of the harp created a deepening stain, a detectable remnant of the subject's invisible body. On a hospital privacy screen, there was a video projection of a harpist, attired in surgical scrubs and face mask, playing her instrument. The gentle siren's song filled the space lulling the viewer into a false sense of security. Scrolling onto a sheet of clear plastic was projected text referencing the sensational press treatment of a young British woman who was accused of intentionally spreading the HIV virus to men in Ireland in 1995. In this modern example of the premeditated use of the body's harmful potential, Curran comments on the issue of complicity and touches on matters of guilt and innocence.

In the most ominous portion of the installation, 32 Plexiglas petri dishes, secured to the end of short tubes and lit from behind, were attached to a fabricated wall that acted as a giant light box. In each plastic dish was a portion of film text printed with verbs referring to leakage such as ooze, gush, weep, escape. The use of text within such a physical, organic medium created what Curran refers to as "a biological landscape of language and a meeting point between culture and nature." The dishes contained agar gel colored in hues of green: a natural, elemental color of both growth and decay. Each layer of gel was imbued with cultures of bodily fluid taken from the artist's mouth, throat, nose, ears or eyes. The gel medium facilitated the growth of cultures and molds throughout the duration of the installation. Materials such as ice, plastic and Plexiglas functioned as metaphors for the transparency of the secrets of the inner body as they are revealed to the outer world. *TransMission: The Story of Typhoid Mary*, a 16mm, black and white film, acted as a companion to *Patient Discharge*, using a blend of documentary and experimental techniques to investigate a case that challenges notions of "embodied deviance."

Inside Out, an installation exhibited at Pyramid Arts Center in Rochester in June 1997, condensed the dynamic of *Patient Discharge* from open, individual walls to a singular, enclosing space. Here the space was smaller and more confined, the petri dishes more ubiquitous. Each held an image derived from a 16mm film negative of the hands of the artist washing different parts of her body. The lithographic film was layered with gel in shades of magenta and again containing cultures of bodily fluids. The close physical formation of the installation created a confusion of spatiality, again a blurring of boundaries between inside and out, public and private. The petri dishes were a means not only into the machinations of the inner body they literally represented, but a way out of the space of the installation as well. Although the traditional scientific function of the dishes is a means to discover what is (or was) within, the round, tactile dishes so resembled portholes—objects used to look out—that their function, and the space itself, became ambiguous.

At the opening of the ARE: WNY show at Hallwalls, Curran exhibited elements from an installation titled *Inside Out II*, consisting of two simultaneous video loops, positioned side by side, and a slide projection. As in the 1995 video *Round and Round*, which was edited to mimic the cycling or "switching" ability of a series of surveillance cameras, these video loops are silent and again show their subjects

under surveillance. In *Round and Round*, a woman is witnessed performing the increasingly bizarre rituals of a daily routine. There is the sense of a public staging of a private event as well as echoes of Curran's concern with the representation of the female body. In *Inside Out II*, the left-hand video shows a woman preparing for an apparent homecoming. On the right a man enters a building, slowly making his way toward the other monitor/room, but never reaching that space where he is awaited. There is a palpable tension between the expectant preparations of the individual inside and the imminent arrival of forces from the outside environment, a meeting that, frustratingly, never transpires. Completing the space were two images projected onto canvas stretcher frames covered with vellum. Each was of a padlocked door, one (an) outside (entrance), one indoors. A female voice was periodically heard to shout, "let me out." The viewer is left to consider the nature of the subject's confinement: is she locked in or is all else locked out; is she trapped by her expectations or her disappointments; by being watched, and judged, by outside forces?

Curran's residency in Buffalo allowed her time to re-evaluate her current interests and confront past methodological concerns. She is interested in working more closely with the perceptual and emotional aspects of immersion in her installation work, creating a more complex and nuanced experience for the viewer. She plans to produce a video installation titled *I know by the sound of your voice that you're an honest person*, based on firsthand testimonies and interviews from a pool of respondents generated by newspaper advertisements. The piece will focus on the splitting of sound and image and the matching of different voices or accents with other individuals' faces, testing documentary perception regarding the relationship of voice and the visual identity that embodies it.

Quotations are excerpted from conversations with the artist, as well as her printed statements.

***Sarah Freligh, Fiction Writer* by Jeanne Raffer-Beck**

I retired from a promotional-writing career as a fund-raiser in the spring of 1993 and promised myself my wanna-be-a-REAL-writer fantasies of my first forty-plus years of life were finally going to be realized. I signed up in the fall for a class in short story writing at Writers and Books taught by a writer named Sarah Freligh.

From my first class with her, it became quickly evident that Sarah's passion for writing short fiction was potent; it sent classmates' hands flying, filling blank pages with freewriting exercises. The example of Sarah's commitment to writing and to the class fueled our own efforts. Through class after class, we savored the results of each other's efforts, and heard each other's ideas begin to grow and develop into stories. Through each session the unique perspectives and strengths of our classmates' writing styles became more apparent. Sarah orchestrated it all, pausing to note and savor a line or phrase she heard one of us read, applauding a character's voice, or a description of a setting. She shared her own freewrites with us, her own unpolished beginnings, and responded to ours with encouragement, enthusiasm, and a continuous push to develop the bits and pieces into a finished whole. The message she drove home again and again was that writing is a craft; it has to be practiced, the process takes commitment, the products will improve with time.

Sarah dressed for almost every class in a black skirt or pants, with a black sweater or turtleneck and workshirt layered over it, black leggings, and black Doc Martin boots. Her hair was cropped so short at the time it could be described almost as a crew cut with a fringe of longer spikey bangs around her face, which she tugged at a bit and played with them when she talked. To me, a country dweller for so many years, the look seemed very urban and very chic.

Writers and Books published an interview with Sarah in one of their newsletters shortly after our class ended. The interviewer asked Sarah why she always dressed predominantly in black clothing; I read on, eager for her response, because I had wondered the very same thing. Was it a philosophical or perhaps an artistic statement? Her candid, wry answer made me laugh out loud - she wore black clothes to save money and time because they look clean longer - and I decided that I wanted this wryly honest and humorous woman to stay in my life. I wanted this writer as a friend.

Although I wanted to take another class with Sarah, it never quite came together, and some time passed before we ran into one another again. At that point we just became two people who both love to write and talk about writing. We began to get together periodically and talk about authors, publishing, characters, frustrations...and sometimes about life, irritating people, or the sensual pleasures of being middle-aged women watching very young males in tight jeans. Sometimes we'd do freewrites, or I'd fantasize about the privileges of wealth and how well total financial independence would suit me. Sarah would argue that wealth would take away my "hungry edge"...and even if she never convinced me, we enjoyed the banter. Sometimes she'd share one of her stories with me, and I could recognize and appreciate how skillfully she chose each word, crafted each image, and polished each story until it was smooth and glistening.

The characters Sarah has created that I've met so far are often young, awkward, and inexperienced. They strain to absorb and understand the events and other characters which surround them; they experience life and other people in fragments, bits and pieces of

conversations and images that deepen their alienation. They seem to float through the crises and pain of their lives, suspended and devoid of emotion or meaningful human contact. In "The Absence of Gravity," a teen-age character finds out she is pregnant, and at one point shoves toilet paper up inside her in the school lavatory in a futile effort to make the fetus just go away. In "Uncle Jack", a sixteen year old girl attends her uncle's funeral after he's killed in the Vietnam war. These young girls are studies in alienation; both from themselves and from the people around them. They are watchers, on-lookers in tragic sequences of human events from which they seem to remain oddly detached yet acutely observant of the responses of others. Sarah's characters seem to stand suspended and motionless, frozen in a moment of experience, with little real promise their lives or their consciousnesses will ever change.

One story that presents a very different perspective is "First Aid", which I especially enjoy because it began as a freewriting exercise in the class I took from Sarah. We chose random words from pages in a book, words like carrot, Bible, and coffee. Sarah made a list of the words on the blackboard, and then challenged the class to incorporate as many of the words as possible into a short story in fifteen or twenty minutes of freewriting. Sarah continued to develop the fruits of that exercise into a story that's energizing and more hopeful than many of her other pieces. "First Aid" introduces the reader to a widow who finally begins to exorcise the controlling voice of her dead husband from her consciousness a year after his death. Its protagonist finally connects with herself; she laughs, she chooses how she will act, and recognizes she is moving into a more self-determined life course. The hopefulness and freshness of the character's small but encouraging step makes this my most favorite of Sarah's pieces. I'd like to believe that Sarah's work reflects the growth and development of many women who grew up in the post World War II era of American culture; that while her adolescent sixties-era females struggle and are deeply affected by the sexual stereotypes and cultural pressures prevalent at that time, Sarah's body of work also presents a concept of women who can move past those beginnings to assert their independence, free themselves of inner controlling voices, and evolve towards autonomous, authentic lives.

I view Sarah herself as one of the most autonomous, authentic, and independent women I have ever met. I recognize and enjoy her strength, her dedication to her craft, and her ability to carve out a simplified life - she doesn't even own a car so she has fewer expenses and can commit more time to her writing. I know few writers who are so focused, or so disciplined, or so unpretentious - the creative world can only benefit from giving more such voices the support to work and grow, and receive and hear them with appreciation.

***First Aid* by Sarah Freligh**

In the emergency room of the hospital a young man the color of chocolate frosting sticks his doctor tools down Lula McGee's throat, shines a light in her eyes and asks her to tell him how she got that lump on her head.

"From my husband," she says. This is the truth. Harry McGee has been dead a year, but he still comes around while Lula's doing something he wouldn't approve of, using cold water to wash a load of white clothes, say, or pressing her good housecoat with a steam iron. She'll swear on a Bible, on a stack of Bibles, that it's him, speaking to her from wherever it is he's gone to. He'll say to her in a voice as clear as a stream on a spring morning, *Spray starch, Lula, never steam*, and hearing Harry, she'll do what he wants. That morning she put everything aside and hurried out to find the can of spray starch she stuck away in a closet someplace, forgetting that she, in a fit of melancholy, had washed and waxed the floors of the hallway the day before. Her feet skated out from under her and while she was floating in the air, she heard Harry again: *Not in your stockings, Lula, those floors are slippery.*

And then it was dark.

The young doctor touches her shoulder. Lula begins to cry because it has been so long since someone has touched her like she was a flower.

The doctor pats her hand and asks her if she wouldn't like to talk to someone about her marriage.

Lula has a bruise on her brain and must stay in the hospital for observation. She is wheeled to a room on the seventh floor by a fat man who whistles harmony to the elevator music. The woman in the next bed is asleep and snoring.

Lula slides into a half sleep where she is aware of the sticking sound of rubber-soled shoes on the linoleum, of people peering in doors to look at her. When she wakes up, her dinner is on a tray table hooked to the bed: a turkey sandwich, a couple of listless-looking potato chips and some beige-colored soup.

The woman in the next bed is also awake. Her white hair stands away from her skull like angry snakes. She is smashing potato chips with her fist, scattering them on the bedspread. She looks up and points her index finger at Lula like a gun. "Dead poop," she says.

"I beg your pardon?" Lula says.

The woman gets out of bed and walks toward her. Lula feels around for the button to call the nurse. The snake-haired woman leans over Lula and snatches her dinner.

"Mine," the woman says, dancing away. Lula's heart knocks against the bones of her chest.

The woman squats in the corner of the room over Lula's dinner. She is giggling and splattering soup with her fist when the night nurse finally comes in.

"Oh, Mrs. Sirecki," says the nurse. She uses Lula's phone to call for another tray for her. When it comes, Lula eats two potato chips and discovers she is not hungry. She stares at the reflections flickering on the blank screen of the television over her bed and listens to the hospital whisper around her. She turns away from Mrs. Sirecki. The light over her bed makes Lula's head ache.

During breakfast the next morning, Mrs. Sirecki smears scrambled eggs all over the television screen and crumbles her toast on the floor.

"That's not very nice, Mrs. Sirecki," says Mae, the day nurse, who comes for their trays. Mae floats around the room and hums to herself while she wipes the eggs from the television screen and sweeps up bread crumbs.

Mae whispers to Lula: "She mostly a sweet lady, but the Alltimers got her full time now."

After breakfast, a woman dressed as a tomato comes to their room and talks to them about the importance of eating vegetables. "Especially for girls your age," she says, winking at them. She gives them pamphlets with color photographs of vegetables and a list of the vitamins they contain. She gives Mrs. Sirecki a felt eggplant and Lula a terrycloth carrot.

After the woman leaves, Mrs. Sirecki snatches the carrot from Lula's nightstand.

"Mine," Mrs. Sirecki says.

Lula turns down the corner of the magazine she is reading and shuts it.

"No," Lula says carefully. "The carrot is mine. The eggplant is yours."

Mrs. Sirecki puts her face up close to Lula's. "Mine," she says.

Lula can smell the coffee on Mrs. Sirecki's breath. "No." She points to the eggplant. "*That's yours.*"

"Yes."

"*No,*" Lula says. She yanks the carrot away from Mrs. Sirecki and pulls the covers to her chin. "Mine, mine, mine, mine, mine," Mrs. Sirecki sings the words. Lula shuts her eyes and there is Harry, driving the old, humpbacked black Buick they owned when they were first married, his hands high on the wheel.

Lula, he is saying, not looking at her because you must never take your eyes off the road when you're driving. That wasn't very Christian of you, Lula.

Lula takes a deep breath and says, "Shut up, Harry."

Mrs. Sirecki sings: "Shut up, shut up, shut up."

Harry died in this very hospital, on the seventh floor. At the moment he died, Lula was trying to get a cup of coffee from the machine in the hallway on the sixth floor. She pushed the "light cream" button but no cream came out, just tar-black coffee that tasted as if it had been simmering on the stove for hours. She looked around for a wastebasket to dump the coffee into, but couldn't find one. She finally put the full cup of coffee on the windowsill behind the Venetian blinds.

She dropped another quarter in the slot and pressed "light cream." The machine gave her black coffee again. She left that cup on the windowsill next to the other one and searched her purse for something to write "out of order" on. She marched up the stairs to Harry's floor, and stopped outside his room to catch her breath. "Do you know what that old cheaty machine did to me?" she planned to say to him, knowing that he would be as indignant as she.

When she got there, Harry was dead. The doctor put his arm around Lula's shoulders and told her how sorry he was. One of the nurses brought her a chair and a cup of coffee with light cream. She was sorry. Everyone was sorry for Lula.

Lula thanked them. She didn't feel sorry. She felt angry at Harry, like he, too, had cheated her out of something. But for the life of her, she couldn't think what.

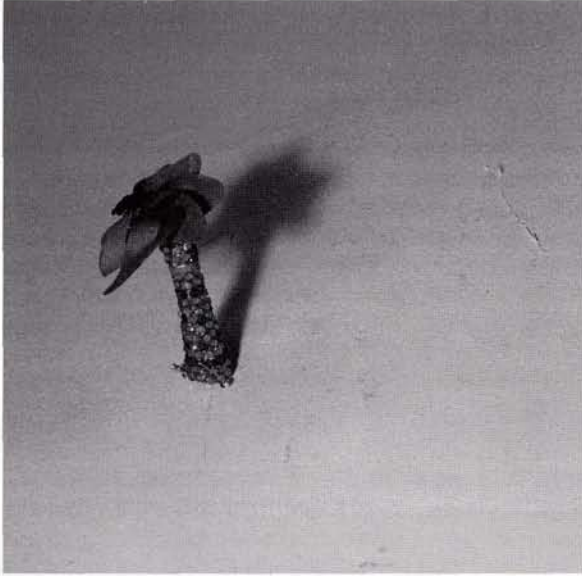
On the third morning the young doctor from the emergency room comes to see Lula. He points a light at her eyes and tells her to move her eyeballs to the right and the left, up and down. He clicks his ballpoint pen and scribbles something on her chart.

Mae helps Lula into the housecoat she was wearing when she fell. The fat man brings a wheelchair for her and lifts her in, putting the terrycloth carrot on her lap. "Goodby, Mrs. Sirecki," Lula says. Mrs. Sirecki doesn't look up. She is humming a lullaby to the felt eggplant.

The fat man wheels Lula outside and parks her next to the curb where the cab will come for her. A thaw has set in. The melting snow moves in a swift stream in the gutter at Lula's feet. She holds the carrot in her arms, imagining she is young again. Her life is in front of her like an empty street. She is driving a car; Harry is sitting next to her in the passenger seat. On impulse, she takes a right turn without bothering to signal. When Harry begins to lecture her, she laughs at him and rolls down her window, loving the feel of the wind as it musses her hair.

Nicole Kowalski's *Parallel Kitchen* by Paul Ford

Nicole Kowalski needed an efficient way to mix sugar, spit, and dryer lint, so she built *Lint Mixer*. It's a complicated machine, made of



blackened steel and aluminum bowls, held together with varnished wood. The turn of its crank blends the sugar, saliva, and lint, then presses the mix into candy molds. The lint dries firm in the shape of whatever mold it's pressed into, whether it be JFK's head, anthropomorphic rabbits, or little lambs.

"I collected the dryer lint from other people's dryers. The spit is mine," she said. "And I buy the candy molds."

Nicole's sculptures are cribbed from the kitchens of a parallel universe. Her domestic machines look like well researched, historically accurate reconstructions of century-old rural tools. They're the kind of devices you see on a farm museum tour: "Now, a farmer's wife would use this to make cloth. And over there is a cotton gin, and a buttermilk churn." Except very few farmer's wives ever needed to mix lint with spit and sucrose.

"I like the cranks. When you stick a crank into a piece of wood, it becomes a machine," she explained. Some of Nicole's machines do even more esoteric work than *Lint Mixer*: one relies on a participant to turn the ever-present crank, which pulls a roll of cotton paper through a steel frame. A dangling chunk of lead sketches lines onto the moving

paper. But where *Drawing Machine* (1995) creates automatic art, *Sewing Machine* (1996) makes cloth, producing bolts of light linen. "I wanted to invent a new kind of sewing machine, with 22 needles, and have it actually make fabric," she said. When demonstrated, the needles, wrapped by white thread from 22 bobbins, look like chomping teeth.

The machines blur the lines between work and play, and between work and art. Clean, straightforward, and functionally elegant, their aesthetic purposes are less clear. *Sewing Machine* produces cloth, but was built for operation in a gallery, not a factory. Its operator uses the machine to make fabric that could be turned into clothing or curtains, but hangs on a wall instead. This deliberate mix of art, work, and action comes out of Nicole's employment experience.

On her first job out of college, at Progressive Rug Design in Buffalo, she secretly soaked paper towels in coffee dregs, then dried the towels on the radiator. *Good Work*, fifteen small boxes made from the stiffened paper towels, is Nicole's take on the "make money" vs. "make art" dilemma that drives young artists to distraction. "It's important to make some money. I like the process of making it, too, and it's necessary to have a job, but art keeps getting in the way," she said. *Good Work* asks the viewer to think about his or her submerged creativity, and the odd ways it sneaks to the surface: "My supervisor kept catching me with these paper towels, and really wondered what I was doing. Finally, I explained it to him. He seemed to understand." The boxes, brown from the coffee and striped from drying on the radiator, impersonate corrugated cardboard. One thing becomes another—an employee turns into an artist by night, spit and lint crystallize into a plaster, wet paper stiffens into a material for construction. By placing these transformations in a gallery, they take the mundanity of 9-5 work and elevate it to a quirky statement on our secret and public lives. That Nicole purposefully hid the process of making *Good Work* from her employer is part of the piece. While she describes art as a luxury, it's plain that her creative drive can be compulsive, sometimes overriding the "practical" part of her life. The responsible persona that aims for a paycheck and the creative persona that wants to build unearthly machines don't always share the same goals. Rather than give one precedence, Nicole's work emerges from their conflict.

When her art is tongue-in-cheek, like the dead flies on the floor that spell out "beauty" in cursive script, arranged below a magnifying glass *Beauty* (1997), it still doesn't sag beneath the nested levels of irony that often make conceptual art scary and inaccessible. "It's important that people play with the machines," she said. "I like to think about my Dad coming to the gallery—how can I entertain him? I want him to feel comfortable. Galleries can be uninviting, and I want my work to be fun, maybe a little silly. If I'm lucky, someone will walk away with a shifting perspective on taking things seriously. When they're with my stuff, I want people to see things as a game."

Her most recent lint and spit piece, *Sweet Dream Luxury Diorama* (1997), is a small box made of licked-together sugar cubes, with dozens of candy-lint lambs inside. "'Sweet' because of the sugar, 'Dream' because of all the sheep, 'Luxury' because I could make it after work, and I think it's a luxury to create things like it, and 'Diorama' because, well, it's a diorama." When asked about the Christian symbolism of the lambs, Nicole rolled her eyes. "I chose the lambs because they were cute." She paused. "Oh, and I was sick of doing rabbits."

Correspondence between Peter Anson and Jane Huber: Comments on the work of Becky McLaughlin

Dear Jane,

Reading Becky McLaughlin's stories and sketches I have often been struck by a kind of ambiguity in the voice, which seems to act like a "half-silvered" mirror, so that we see both the transmitted and reflected image of the same scene. I'm not sure I would have noticed this at all except that sometimes the mirror makes itself visible by reflecting a fragment of a parallel world (as anecdote or flashback). The net effect is an illumination of the central character or characters as both participating and observing subjects. This is immensely compelling because, of course, it is our own essential condition!

If I had to "axiomatize" this method, I think the principal elements would be something like the following:

1. The observing subject inherits the flaws of the participating subject and therefore doesn't presume objectivity, doesn't intrude. The flaws are also the active geology of the story, the generative layer. (Cf. The role of the "unreliable narrator" in Tanizaki)
2. Life's incremental ingredients always add up to something. (The human order is "dense" in the physical world as the rational numbers are dense in the reals).
3. Using principals 1 and 2 to "grow" a work of fiction produces a polyvalent structure which manifests both above and below a (conscious) surface.

In the story "The Very Small Things That Fall" the tension between observer and participant produces a kind of stress fracture. The crack appears in the surface layer as misplaced desire, or perhaps as a loss of faith in the ritual order of desire. Bobby's program invests the whole erotic portfolio in (the specific conventions of) sexual intercourse. This singleness of purpose, and the playacting which has evolved to support it, has become a nightmare for Rose, whose alienation grows quietly to panic. Alienation from the expected and the consensual, from her own desire and therefore from the power of self-definition, extends the surface crack into the rational layer, producing the schizophrenic logic of "Bobby would forgive her for everything if she gave him something really special for Valentine's Day." But beneath this layer of the story, or perhaps at its boundary with some other story, where it is only accessible to peripheral vision, the complex nature of desire is being coaxed out of the marble. A dance of attraction and revulsion, dominance and submission, balance and vertigo is played out in the physical details.

Rose's desire is dislocated and fragmented; its evocation goes "underground", into the power conduits, a network of associations receding into the infant past. What is remarkable is the economy of the representation. The metaphorical support is pervasive, but delicate. Although we sense the expanding roots, the eruptions into daylight are startling. The account of the young driver changing a tire binds a momentary spark of Eros to a complex social situation in which there are multiple displacements: of rank and privilege, of pairwise symmetry, even of innuendo (a mapping of sexual associations of rain between European and Asian languages). Deference/affection embarrasses; illness simultaneously invalidates and humanizes. We are seduced by the apparent simplicity of gesture, the phenotype of a complex cause.

What is the unifying thread among these dislocations of geography, culture and expectation (as in Wang Moxi's story)? It is the act of representation which links the intractability of the unconscious and the defects in the logical and the social order. But whose representation is it? It belongs, I think, to the one who notices "the very small things that fall."

Best regards,

Peter

Peter

Perhaps even more ambiguously, Becky's story goes "about" or is "about," its theme. And any abandonment of the theme, to discussions of rain, or tire changing, would be an abjuration, rather than an assertion. Is it possible to say that the more primitive the feeling (in this case Bobby's singleness of sexual purpose) the more objective the disguise it assumes?

If so, then Rose's resistance would be a request to enlarge the boundaries of the permissible. That Rose's desire goes "underground" brings to mind the paradox of the beautiful nightmare, which is really not a paradox, but rather the exact expression of conflicting feelings resolved in a synthesis. If the theme of "The Very Small Things That Fall" is about this dislocated desire, the Rose's statement that "Bobby would forgive her for everything if she gave him something really special for Valentine's Day," would be an instance of desire abjured, and then relocated, on Rose's terms. For me it echoes Schoenberg's statement, "One must be convinced of the

infallibility of one's own fantasy and one must believe in one's own inspiration."

Rose's transgression, implied by her expectation of forgiveness, is a statement of her ability to change and adapt. What is represented links the individual impulses of the unconscious to the totalizing defects in the logical and social order. As you say, representation belongs to the one who notices the very small things that fall: is the story "about" its theme "about" identity? If so, the individual abjures, the things tell. Walter Benjamin says, "I am not interested in people; I am interested only in things." The energy of negation is identical with the productive energy of the one who notices.

So, Peter, Theodore Adorno says that "letter writing simulates life in the medium of the frozen word. In a letter one can disavow isolation and nonetheless remain distant, apart, isolated." The description reminds me of Rose, who seems "predisposed to mediated, objectified immediacy."

J.

Excerpted from "The Very Small Things That Fall" by Becky McLaughlin

Customers began to filter into the restaurant as Rose tied her apron and set her empty tip jar on the bar. Today she had Section C, which was usually a good section, but because it was cold outside and her tables were near the door, it was the most unpopular. As she waited for a customer to sit in her section, she chatted with Hank, the bartender.

"Nice weather, eh, Rosie?" said Hank, wiping a coffee stain off the bar.

"It hardly seems right for Valentine's Day," said Rose.

"Oh, I don't know," shrugged Hank. "It probably suits that half of the world who hates the other half for having a sweetheart."

"Maybe so," said Rose. "But it doesn't suit me."

"That's because you're part of the half that has," said Hank philosophically. "How about a chocolate turtle?" He held a box of chocolates toward Rose.

"No, thanks. I lost my taste for turtles seven years ago."

"Sounds like a good story," said Hank.

"It's not."

Hank selected one of the turtles. "Tell it anyway," he coaxed.

Rose frowned but spoke. "Seven years ago today, Bobby borrowed money from me to buy chocolate turtles—"

"What, he didn't pay you back?" laughed Hank.

Rose thought for a moment. "Come to think of it, he never did. But that wasn't the bad part. It was Valentine's Day, and the weather was just like it is today, cold and wet. Bobby and I had just gotten engaged, and I had made him this Lady Baltimore Cake with thick, white icing and little red hearts . . ."

Rose paused as a customer moved into her section and sat down at a table for two. She filled a glass with ice and water and tucked a menu under her arm. "To make a long story short, Hank, the same day Bobby borrowed money to buy his 'sweetheart' chocolate turtles, he broke off our engagement," she said as she moved away from the bar.

"I can see why she don't like chocolate turtles," said Hank, biting into the turtle and taking a swallow of coffee.

When Rose returned to the bar, Hank had just eaten his second turtle. "You know, Rosie," he said, "you really shouldn't hold a grudge against a chocolate turtle. After all, you got the guy, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but I'm superstitious," said Rose. "Anyway, I'm not going to keep him unless I can make \$31.80 today."

"I thought Bobby was the one in the hole," said Hank, looking into Rose's empty tip jar. "What do you owe him for?"

"Nothing, but there's a book I want to buy him, and I need \$31.80 to do it."

"What, he's gonna leave you if you don't buy him the book?"

Rose laughed and moved across the restaurant to wipe a table. She did not tell Hank this, but she felt sure that Bobby would forgive her for everything if she gave him something really special for Valentine's Day. She thought to herself that the book would make up for all the days she had left the dishes undone, all the meals she had not cooked, all the groceries she had not bought, all the money she had not made, all the games she had played, and, most importantly, all the nights she had not been in the mood. The book would make up for everything she had done wrong. Or not done right.

Throughout the rest of the afternoon, Rose felt tense. The rain was keeping people in their homes and out of the restaurants. And her labor of love was feeling more and more doomed. For the fourth time that day, Rose poured her money out onto the bar to count it. Hank counted the change, while Rose counted the bills.

"You got five dollars' worth of quarters here," said Hank, stacking quarter on top of quarter, "and ten dimes here."

"I count eighteen greenbacks," said Rose, smoothing out the bills. "Eighteen plus six is twenty-four."

Hank looked at the clock. "Well, Rosie, you've got one hour to make eight dollars—"

And not a customer in sight," said Rose. The restaurant was completely empty now. She put the coins and the bills back into the

jar and sat down on a bar stool.

Hank lit a cigarette. "I always thought the way to a man's heart was through his stomach, not through his brain." He blew smoke toward the ceiling. "Why don't you fix him a big candlelight dinner and forget the book?"

Rose thought about the mess she had made in the kitchen. "I baked two dozen double fudge muffins for him this morning."

"I'd take a double fudge muffin over a book any day," said Hank. "Especially if you baked 'em, Rosie." He jabbed his thumb into his chest. "Me? I don't have nobody to make muffins for my poor old hide."

The door of the restaurant opened suddenly, and four young people came in shaking the rain off their umbrellas. They glanced around for a moment as though sizing up the place; and then, without warning, they retraced their footsteps.

"There goes a good tip," said Rose, viewing their departure as a personal rejection. "It's going to take a miracle now."

"Ain't no such thing as a miracle, Rosie," said Hank, stubbing out his cigarette. "Just good luck or bad."

The door of the restaurant opened again, and the same four people re-entered, taking off their wet raincoats and closing their umbrellas. They sat at a big, round table for ten and talked excitedly. Rose took glasses of water and menus over to their table.

"There'll be four more of us," they said, holding up four fingers as though they were children telling Rose their ages.

She took their drink orders and returned to the bar. "Who said there's no such thing as a miracle?"

"What's the story, Rosie? Are they big spenders?"

"It's a wedding party," said Rose. "Their old dad's getting remarried."

When the wedding party had finished eating, they asked Rose to take a snapshot of them. As she focused the camera and told the men on the ends to lean in, she thought of the waiter in New Orleans who had photographed Bobby and her on their honeymoon. The picture had turned out so dark and fuzzy that it was difficult to tell who or what was in the picture. And Rose was superstitious when it came to pictures. In her view, if an event could not be captured on camera, then it hadn't really happened. That's how she felt about their trip to New Orleans and their honeymoon celebration at the restaurant in the French Quarter: it had never really happened.

"Say 'cheese,' everyone," shouted Rose, hoping this photo would turn out well. She did not want to be remembered as the waitress who botched the wedding picture and cancelled out a lifetime of marital bliss.

After the snapshot had been taken, the wedding party left, and Rose began cleaning off the table. As she sorted through the debris, she found bills hidden beneath napkins, pressed under water glasses, tucked between the salt and pepper shakers. She was like a child on an Easter egg hunt, hardly able to suppress cries of joy at the discovery of each new bill.

Hank was waiting for her at the bar. "Did you hit the jackpot?"

She waved ten dollars bills in the air. "Is this a miracle, or is this good luck?"

"Maybe a little of both," said Hank. "But just to be sure, I'd genuflect to the big man upstairs and courtsey to the little boy with the bow and arrow."

Rose took off her apron. "Mind if I shove off early, Hank? I want to get to the bookshop before it closes."

"Go ahead," said Hank, surveying the empty restaurant. "I think I can handle a crowd of this size."

She smiled and leaned across the bar to give Hank a kiss on the cheek. "Happy Valentine's Day!" she said as she pulled on her coat.

"Want a turtle for the road?" asked Hank, holding out the box of chocolates again.

"Nope," said Rose. "I don't want to jinx things now."

"Take my advice, Rosie. Forget the book and fix the man a good meal," said Hank.

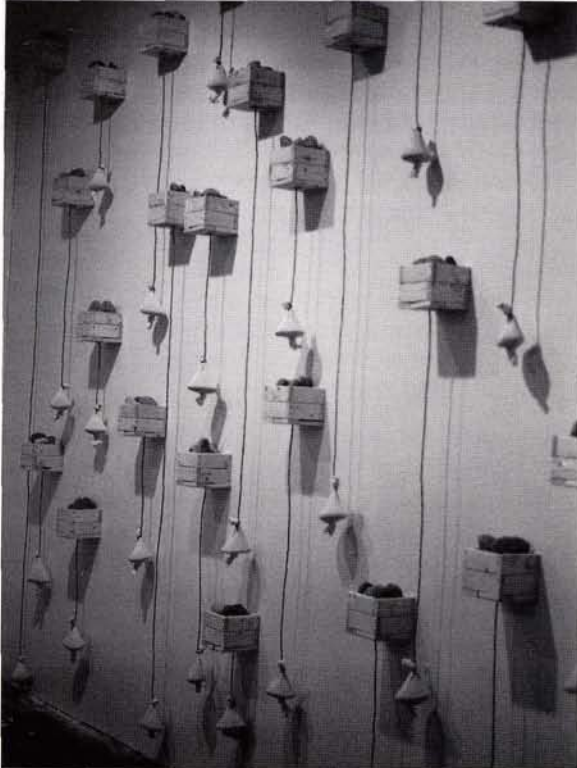
"I know Bobby, and he likes poetry," argued Rose as she moved toward the door.

"Don't know Bobby, but I know men. Any one of 'em worth his weight in salt has an appetite. Ain't there poetry in a good appetite?" He waved as Rose disappeared through the restaurant door, and then he carefully plucked another turtle from the box.

Arthur Brett Reif by Marc Lowenthal

"You should not let thoughts from the back of your head slide too far down your back." —Erik Satie

"To look raw without looking immature," is how Arthur Reif describes his ambitions with the work sprouting from his ARE:WNY residency in Sodus. To this end, his most recent efforts veer slightly away from the fluency of his previous work, an impressive five year stint of humorous and confrontational performance and installation pieces. The performative works have drawn most heavily on a sense of humor: one of the more memorable ones involved an earnest year-long training for the North Carolina Basketball team (which he didn't make). Reif's defining characteristic, though, has been an elegant use of less than elegant materials: his lusty and luminous grease paintings, spackled onto walls and floor in razor-edged disks; the visual chaos of his MFA thesis, which consisted of three tons of wood "orphans," nobly rescued from woodshop scrap heaps and painstakingly assembled into a something of a schizophrenic giant's jigsaw puzzle; or the golden rustling of his "Post Fall Facade," a series of post-it archways whose passive adhesive



would give way to sporadic autumnal shudders.

Often odiferous (three tons of anything will end up producing a new smell), and sometimes intimidating in its sheer bulk or threat of messiness, Reif's use of material has tended to bring a somewhat blue-collar materiality into the white collar space of the gallery. The end result makes for a meditative beauty in which the ordinary becomes less than ordinary: the gallery space lets its seams show, while the hardware store is allowed its own approach to aesthetics. A sensibility, then, that is as refined as it is raw.

His newer work displays this sympathy for the less appreciated raw materials of aesthetics (he has actually held on to the grease and post-its of his earlier works, hoping to rediscover their future use). Wishing to avoid what he has called the "safety net" of his earlier work's impermanence, his stay at Sodus has resulted in a good number of semi-sculpted, semi-manipulated objects — impressions of his residency which make an interesting blur between work and environment. The ever-present garage alarms and security systems of the more or less crime-free town, for instance, get amusingly transposed into his self-conscious "paranoid objects." Although not present in this show, an object such as his *Alarmed Lunch Box* (1997), (an old-fashioned lunch box rigged out with a light sensor) displays a comical withholding of its contents which can be seen played out in some of the other works. The apple groves of Sodus, with their sagging apple trees (whose overburdened branches struck Reif as noticeably "depressed"), turn up in spirit in the sad-sack ambiguity of his weight-and-measurement pieces: weights which droop more than weigh, and measurements that would sooner hide than measure. The sisal-twine of the haystacks, the

cheap wood of the apple crates, and the uncomplicated, yet somehow incompetent efforts of ultimately functionless objects to function: all hint at a potential and unrealized energy. This potential energy is one of the things that creates the formal tension (and humor) of Reif's work, but also points to the formal tension of Sodus (what Reif refers to as a "sagging" town), whose population draws seasonally upon migrant and somewhat homeless workers.

It is these Sodus pieces that provide the germination for the larger-scale works of this show. His theme of weights and measurements are extended to greater proportions with *Wink* (1997), something of a clockshop shooting gallery. Misaligned boxes of cobblestones balance out their orphaned cousins with varying lengths of rush cord and stockinettes; limp loners who are not so much weighed as abandoned, like pendulums forced to keep time rather than participate in it. The lack of any apparent calibration makes it seem that nothing is so much weighed or measured as weight or measurement itself.

Reif's fondness for what he refers to as "material irony" continues in *Largo* (1997). Parallel planks of wood have been hammered into the forms of rocks, scattered as if upon a field, each one emitting the sound of a metronome in varying rhythms and volumes. Although the wood used seems to be of a low-grade caliber, the ephemeral is here not so much manifest as it is described. The surprisingly soothing tick-tocks summon up various ideas of time and tempo: Is this the clockwork missing from *Wink*? Erosion? Rock and roll? A harvest of stones? Rice Krispies under construction? Rocks trying to "rock," or wood in rock's clothing? All these notions get more ambiguous by the real cobblestones one can make out through the slats of the wood: the kernels to these pieces?

Of course, if one should feel any doubt as to the nature of their meaning, the sprawling wires make it obvious that these pieces are indeed plugged in and "functioning." The materials Reif uses may indeed be obvious, and the shapes he puts them into are clearly defined, but their meanings are elusive, uneasy, even sad in their humor: a disquiet of the ordinary that is more fragile than surreal. Even when, in one of his Sodus model-works, a slab of barely recognizable pigeon shit lays upon a world atlas (the two bizarrely captive in a chicken-coop display case), the result points not so much to the shock of juxtaposition, as to the humility of the irreconcilable.

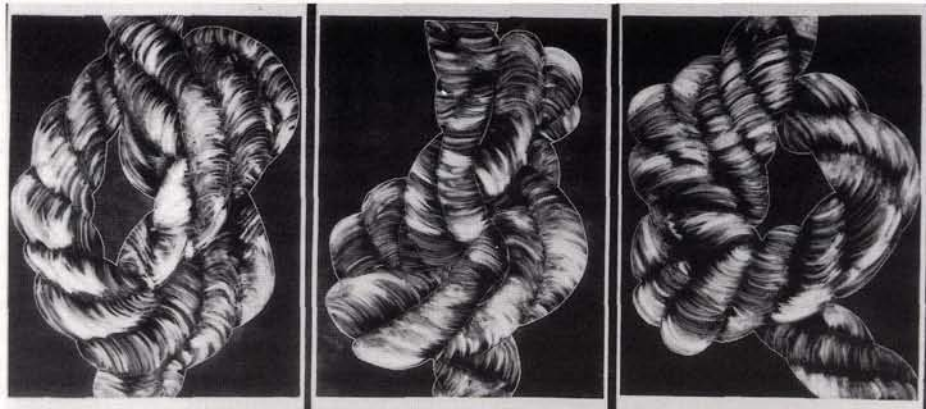
Taken as a whole, Reif's works make an odd testament to an unemployed formalism, an argument against (dare I say it?) floccinaucinihilipilification in its most primitive, material state. To obtain such results, of course, some assembly is required (although this might be the first time Reif's materials haven't made his work impossible to ship); but the how-to instructions are nothing but intuitive, and the end product remains hidden, even humble. No statement has been made, nothing significant has occurred, nothing radical has been demanded; but a thought has stirred. In these works, nature finds itself contained, compartmentalized, aestheticized, perhaps on occasion even unrecognized: nature as object, without function, yet also without the freedom of the branch or stone to simply be.

Kathy Sherin's Knots by Mark Lavatelli

The metaphoric significance of the knot - tying together - provides the key to understanding Kathy Sherin's monoprints. By juxtaposing knots with other images, and by subtly changing printing methods and formats, Sherin creates and connects a range of emotional and physical associations: entanglement, binding, and tension. At the same time, she reveals a light-hearted and playful side, with titles and the inclusion of unexpected formal elements.

The images are clearly identifiable as knots, but they are not strictly illusionistic representations. The individual shapes of the knots become starting points for a series of autographic gestures that have a life and interaction of their own. Typically Sherin engraves the rope and knot outlines on polystyrene plates, and creates the interior forms by the complex and delicate process of wiping the plate, which in this case is analogous to a painter's brushwork. The knots are usually large and form strong figure/ground relationships in front of backgrounds that are either blank, colored, or pale fields of texture.

Initially, Sherin merged two disparate sources to create the direction revealed in the prints made during her month-long ARE residency in Wayne county, east of Rochester; a visit to Italy in the summer of 1994 that led to an extended meditation on the theme of the Annunciation, and the use of piles of rope as still life subjects for drawing classes she taught at Niagara County Community College. The ideas linked up in the issue of women's control of their reproductive processes and the relationship between facing a difficult life decision and feeling one's stomach being "tied up in knots."



The Supremes (Poverty Celibacy Obedience), 41x29, 1997

For example, in a transitional piece from 1996, a knotted rope hovers above abstract symbols that relate to conception, such as a spiral (IUD) and a vertical lozenge (vagina).

One of the strongest images, a triptych entitled *The Supremes - Poverty, Celibacy, & Obedience* (1997), simply focuses on three large knot forms in black and white against a maroon background (which refers to blood). The knots are rendered fairly illusionistically, yet they are surrounded by white outlines that contradict the illusion and function as clues to the observer that the images are more than close-up pictures of knots. And the title proposes an affinity between monk's vows and the Motown sound, suggesting that the underlying messages of both are deeply connected in the human psyche.

A vertical triptych entitled *Temptations* (1997) presents a series of knots that are self-contained and, because of the silk aquatint process, very soft-looking, like yarn. These knots are pliable and approachable and perhaps, as the title suggests, tempting. In contrast, a group of knots printed on paper targets complete with dark blue "bullet holes", entitled *Top Hits* (1997), proposes a very different relationship. The targets also provide a perfect geometric foil to the knot's organic nature.

Consistent with Sherin's approach to image-making, intuition and curiosity lead the way and the connections and content emerge later. Knots are frequently accompanied by squares or other seemingly unrelated geometric shapes, which function as a reminder of the formal world of image making. In *Twist and Shout* (1997), blue and yellow-ochre knots are accompanied by small narrow rectangles and a triangle, joined by an irregularly spiraling wire-like line. The juxtaposition of the two disparate scales emphasizes that the artist is not limited by the visual subject (i.e., ropes) she represents.

This is also evident in *Untitled (Large Knot Diptych, 1997)* where one knot is juxtaposed with a smaller open square. The square is a recurring element, sometimes used as a focusing device, but here present as a balancing agent. It provides formal equilibrium and contrast (geometric versus organic shape) and also emotional contrast in that it is a reminder of the work's underlying formal reality. The square contradicts the illusionistic space created by the three-dimensional knot and suggests emotional distance instead of emotional connection. Unlike *The Supremes*, in this diptych the wiping marks do not correspond to the outlines of the individual strands of rope. Instead they follow the direction of the rope itself, yielding large sweeping movements.

Another large multiple-part piece is entitled *Strung Out* (1997). In this case, seven twenty-two by thirty inch monoprints are hinged together and stacked vertically. This orientation promotes the connotation of hanging, and this is paralleled by the title's reference to stress. Like the triptych, expressive gestures suggesting the strands of rope contrast with the figure-ground relationships of the

individual knots against the empty backgrounds. Some units are nearly empty, while others are filled with bulging knots.

Sherin's future direction is suggested in a piece that includes a black circle that she identifies as an eclipse. The knot exists here in black outline form and the print is energized by a lively dark field created by the active wiping of alizarin and beige. The large circular dot presages a forthcoming series based on dominoes - one that includes her interest in formal order and in chance processes.

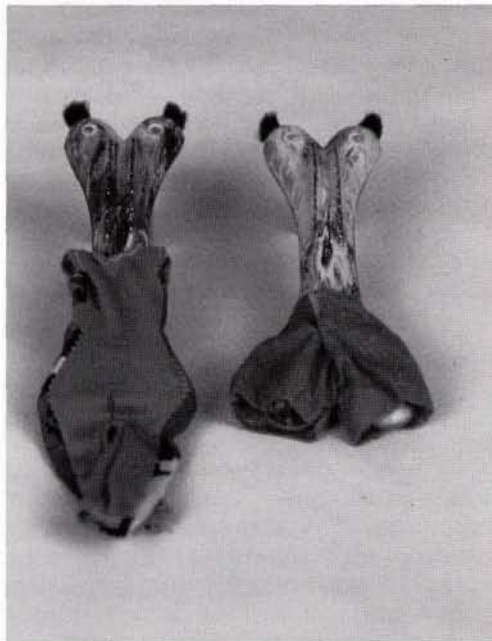
The other main image that the knots evoke is that of muscles and this, too, is appropriate. The image of a bulging, flexed muscle reflects the sheer physical labor that is required to create these prints. And to Sherin's credit is the seamless merging of a variety of printmaking techniques resulting from years of concentrated effort. Finally, the muscle suggests the strength and confidence necessary for Kathy Sherin to continue to pursue her artistic vision.

***Alfonso Volo* by Ellen S. Comerford**

Multi-media artist Alfonso Volo is both painter and sculptor; he also writes poetry. "I consider all media to be in dialogue with each other," he states. "Painting, drawing, sculpture....they're not separate." His work comes from interaction with everyday objects. His exhibition *PETS ARE US* is comprised of found objects concentrating on dog toys (bones) and dog clothing (sweaters). Ordinary objects such as scouring pads and sponges hold interest for Volo. Somehow these lowly objects in Volo's hands become transformed and thought provoking. They are items that "fade into our woodwork so that we don't even see them or notice them," he says. "We depend on them in a way never noticing them."

In *PETS ARE US* Volo concentrates on pet clothing and toys because he feels that at one time or another we have all had some associations with pets. It is an idea in everyone's consciousness, Volo maintains. In his relatively small, whimsical sculptures Volo uses an assortment of found objects. There are dog bones, dog sweaters, dog chains, bits of wire and other hardware, and craft items such as glitter, beads, pom-poms, feathers, buttons. In several pieces he incorporates electrical parts.

In *First Fruits* (1997) the body of the piece is made of a green knitted dog sweater. In place of eyes are artificial flowers combining things usually thought of as separate entities belonging to different classifications. Volo, however, brings them together here and that is where he believes the humor steps in. Volo's sculptures are indeed humorous. In everyday life, Volo maintains, we tend to keep things in a distinct order in an attempt to get the ordinary tasks of life done. And though we laugh at his figure made of a green dog sweater, we are also disturbed by it, perhaps even somewhat threatened for our perceived natural order of things has been challenged.



Casual Fashion, 1997, Mixed Media, 2"x6"x2" each

In *Casual Fashion* (1997), two marbled rubber dog bones are "dressed" in shocking pink doll clothes. Do dogs really have a need for a sweater? We try to socialize, to humanize animals when we bring them from the wild into the domestic world. They come from a free world to a world filled with rules, regulations and social structures. Volo's dog bones are actually decorated with fake pearls as well as pink and blue pom-poms (gender colors which he uses throughout) and glitter. Volo points to what we do to animals. We try to humanize them covering them in the fake trappings of society. There is a wild contrast between surface and interior, between the raw bones and the decoration in which they are clad. The viewer laughs at the glitter and fake pearls but is also, at the same time, somewhat disturbed.

Dumbbell With Eyes (1997) is a rubber dog toy with painted eyes; it has multiple layers of reference. A single string with a hook dangles from the sculpture, a device frequently used by the artist in an attempt to engage the viewer. It refers to the pulling in, the so-called hooking of the viewer. Volo suggests it is a "fishing for ideas."

Sweet Reflections (1997) is constructed of a child's toy, an animal with a mirror. There is viewer participation here also but in this case, as you look into the mirror, you are to see yourself as a child once again. The main component is a dog's sweater with roses (a plant form) forming the arms.

Though artwork often evokes the sense of touch, in a formal gallery setting, the viewer is usually admonished not to touch. Here Volo invites us to touch just as we are inclined to touch pets. "Where we are not able to touch others," he says,

"we can touch animals."

Universal Finger is a parakeet perch which uses the gesture of a pointing finger seen throughout art history. In *Cheap Imitations* (1997),

a false parakeet keeps a real one company, the real versus the artificial once again. *Camouflaged Heat* (1997) is full of ambiguities as cat toys are sewn together to form a heart.

High Horse (1997) is the largest piece in the exhibit. A hobby horse wrapped in rope, it is too high for even an adult (let alone a child) to ride. The rope itself brings immediate associations; it is rope we use to tether horses in an attempt to domesticate them.

In several sculptures technology plays a role. In *A New Best Friend* (1997) technology replaces the dog as the traditional guardian of the home. The viewer interacts with the sculpture when his movements activate a sensor.

In *Corn Pet* (1997) Volo once more comments on artificial versus natural. A lawn ornament in the form of a large piece of candy corn is reference to the plant kingdom, but everything here is artificial. *Corn Dog* (1997) uses real corn with a dog sweater. In both pieces Volo raises questions about the artificial versus the natural worlds.

Pacifier (1997), constructed of a large rubber dog pacifier, makes reference to man's domestication of animals, and his attempt to treat them like human babies. The wild animal is pacified when he becomes a pet.

Self Portrait as Fur Ball (1997) serves as a fitting commentary on the entire exhibit. Volo uses found objects to make his statement which is both humorous and thought provoking. The ball is constructed of lint from a clothes dryer, from bits and pieces of the artist's clothes. There is a tiny spike of the artist's red hair and a fake pearl for the mouth. Here is the artist, crafted by the artist, as seen by the artist and made of found objects and the leavings of society. The piece is quite small; his role is that of mere observer who is not didactic. Instead, he is, like all of us, an observer, and the artist asks his observers to draw their own conclusions.

Alfonso Volo is multi-talented; he wears many hats. He has a degree in philosophy. He lives and sometimes works on a farm in Eden, New York. Perhaps it is the hat of the philosopher that fits him best, for philosophy is a reoccurring thread woven throughout his work. Volo, the silent observer, raises questions which have no answers. He simply asks us to observe along with him. He tickles our funny bone; he makes us think, but there are no given answers here.

Biographical Notes

Charles Agel was born January 27, 1957, in Binghamton, New York, currently lives and works in Buffalo, New York.

Eric Gansworth is Assistant Professor of English at Niagara County Community College. He is a painter, photographer, and a writer. His first novel, "Indian Summers" is just being published.

Brenda J. Cowe is a poet living in Buffalo. She is employed full-time as an Intensive Case Manager working with emotionally disturbed children. Brenda has had poetry published in *Buffalo Spree*, *The Buffalo News*, *Artvoice*, and *Writing For Our Lives*. She has conducted creative writing groups for mental health consumers in a variety of settings. Currently, Ms. Cowe is collaborating with visual artist James Knapp on a project incorporating her poetry with his ink drawings.

E.R. Baxter III has been a fellow of a New York State Creative Public Service Award for fiction, and a recipient of a *just buffalo* Award for fiction. He is a Professor Emeritus of English at Niagara County Community College, Sanborn, New York. His latest book of poems is *Looking for Niagara* (Slipstream, 1993). Other publications include: *And Other Poems* (Lone Ranger Biology Press); *A Good War* (Black Rabbit Press); and *Hunger* (Press: Today: Niagara).

Ann Curran is a visual artist who works with time-based imagery to create installations, films and videos and continues to explore the potential of image projection.

Karen vanMeenen holds a degree in Creative Writing and Literature from Binghamton University. She is currently Managing Editor of *Afterimage*, The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism, published by Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester.

Sarah Freleigh's short stories have been widely published in many literary journals including *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Third Coast* and *Cimarron Review*. She lives in Rochester and is currently working on a novel.

Jeanne Raffer-Beck is a writer and fabric artist living in Canandaigua, New York. She is widely published as a non-fiction writer.

Nicole Kowalski is a sculptor. She has lived on the far shores of New Jersey, in the depths of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and amongst the puffing smokestacks of Buffalo, New York. A 1996 graduate of NYU, she is currently exploring the southwestern possibilities of Flagstaff, Arizona.

Paul Ford develops web sites and writes promotional copy. He lives in Brooklyn. The curious can learn more at [<http://www.interactive.net/~ford/metdiary>].

Becky McLaughlin is a writer/Assistant Professor; Mobile, Alabama.

Peter Anson is a poet/musician/engineer; Toronto.

Jane Huber is a poet/musician/graphic designer; New York City.

Arthur Brett Reif was born in New Orleans, Louisiana where he received his BFA from Loyola University. He received his MFA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and currently lives in Buffalo. He teaches sculpture at Canisius College and at St. Barnabas Elementary School. His residency was in August, 1997 in Sodus, New York at Fingerlakes DDSO.

Marc Lowenthal lives in Buffalo, New York.

Kathy Sherin received her MFA in 1985 from SUNY at Buffalo with a major in painting and a minor in printmaking. Her work focuses on one of a kind prints, many large in scale. She is currently pursuing her work at the ePIC (experimental Print Imaging Center) located at the University at Buffalo.

Mark Lavatelli is an artist, professor and critic who received his BA from Cornell in 1970, his MA in Art History from the University of Illinois in 1973 and his MFA in Painting and Drawing from the University of New Mexico in 1979. He has taught art and art history for twenty-five years. After seven years of teaching at the University of Dallas, Mark has taught at Medaille College in Buffalo for the last ten years.

Alfonso Volo was born in 1954 in Buffalo, New York. He graduated from the State University College of New York at Buffalo in 1979 with a Bachelor's in philosophy, Summa Cum Laude. He now lives on a farm in Eden, New York where he does art work as well as write. He continues to exhibit his art work and publish his writings and give readings. In addition, he does free lance gardening and cultivates his own gardens. Currently, he is on the Visual Art Committee of Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center.

Ellen S. Comerford is a painter from Lewiston, New York. She holds a BA in English literature and an MA in art and art history from SUNY at Buffalo. Since 1986 she has been a free lance arts critic for the Niagara Gazette reviewing art and theater. Ms. Comerford is also an adjunct professor at Niagara University where she teaches writing courses in conjunction with art and theater. In the spring of 1999 she will teach a new course titled Women in Art.

Administering Organizations

Genesee Valley Council on the Arts
Livingston County Campus
Building 4, Apt 1, Mount Morris, NY 14510
716/658-4770 • Contact Ellen Herzman

Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center
2495 Main Street, Suite 425, Buffalo, NY 14214
716/835-7362 • Contact Sara Kellner

Niagara Council on the Arts
300 4th Street, Niagara Falls, NY 14303
716/284-6188 • Contact Jackie Lodico

Pyramid Arts Center
Village Gate Square
302 North Goodman, Rochester, NY 14607
716/461-2222 • Contact Elizabeth McDade

Wayne County Council for the Arts
P.O. Box 164, 2 Broad Street, Lyons, NY 14489
315/946-5078 • Contact Kevin Schoonover

Host Organizations

ERIE COUNTY SITE DESCRIPTION: VISUAL ARTS

Buffalo Arts Studio
2495 Main Street, Suite 500, Buffalo, NY 14214
716/833-4450 • Contact Joanna Angie

Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center
2495 Main Street, Suite 425, Buffalo, NY 14214
716/835-7362 • Contact Gail Mentlik

CEPA Gallery
617 Main Street (Suite 201), Buffalo, NY 14203
716/856-2717 • Contact John Valentino, Bob Hirsch

**State University of New York
Photography Program, Department of Art**
Center for the Arts, North Campus, Buffalo, NY 14260-6010
716/645-6885 • Contact Tyrone Georgiou, Daniel Callieri

State University of New York • Casting Institute
Center for the Arts, North Campus, Buffalo, NY 14260-6010
716/645-6203 • Contact: Tony Paterson, Burke Paterson

State University of New York • Experimental Print Imaging Center
Center for the Arts, North Campus, Buffalo, NY 14260-6010
716/645-6878
Contact: Jeff Sherven X1369, e-mail jsherven@acsu.buffalo.edu,
Adele Henderson X-1367

Locust Street Neighborhood Art Classes, Inc.
138 Locust Street, Buffalo, NY 14204
716/852-4562 • Contact: Lenore Bethel

MONROE COUNTY SITE DESCRIPTION: VISUAL ARTS

**Genesee Center for the Arts, Education and New Ideas:
Community Darkroom**

713 Monroe Avenue, Rochester, NY 14607
716/271-5920 • Contact: Sharon Turner

**Genesee Center for the Arts, Education and New Ideas:
Genesee Pottery**

713 Monroe Avenue, Rochester, NY 14607
716/271- 5183 • Contact: Rick White

Visual Studies Workshop: Media Center
31 Prince Street, Rochester, NY 14607
716/442-8676 • Contact: Bob Doyle

Visual Studies Workshop: VSW Press
31 Prince Street, Rochester, NY 14607
716/442-8676 • Contact: Joan Lyons

NIAGARA COUNTY SITE DESCRIPTION: VISUAL ARTS

Niagara Council on the Arts
300 4th Street, Niagara Falls, NY 14303
716/284-6188 • Contact Jackie Lodico

Artpark
150 South Fourth Street, P.O. Box 28, Lewiston, NY 14092
716/754-9000 • Contact Joan McDonough, ext. 265

WAYNE COUNTY SITE DESCRIPTION: VISUAL ARTS

Finger Lakes DDSO
703 East Maple Avenue, Newark, NY 14513
315/331-1700 • Contact Sue Epstein

LIVINGSTON COUNTY SITE DESCRIPTION: VISUAL ARTS

SUNY Geneseo, Art Department
Brodie Hall, 1 College Circle, Geneseo, NY 14454
716/245-5814 • Contact Carl Shanahan

ERIE COUNTY SITE DESCRIPTION: WRITING

just buffalo literary center
2495 Main Street, Buffalo, NY 14214
716/832-5400 • Contact Cass Clarke

LIVINGSTON COUNTY SITE DESCRIPTION: WRITING

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Livingston County Campus, Bldg. 4, Apt. 1, Mount Morris, NY 14510
716/658-4770 • Contact Ellen Herzman

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716/284-6188 • Contact Jackie Lodico

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716/473-2590 • Contact Joe Flaherty, Wendy Low

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