

# Directions and Order

## EXTRACTING ORDER OUT OF CHAOS—ADOPTING A LARGE FOCUS IN SPITE OF THE DRAWBACKS

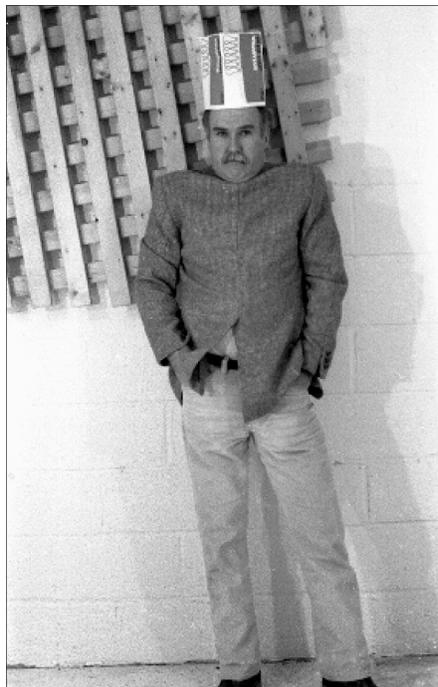
Mike Shaffer

I used to worry about the variety in my work—that the main themes that center around order and wholeness may not be evident in its collective incarnations. Fortunately we've reached a time when presumptions that can limit how artists choose to carry out their responsibilities have changed. There is considerable variety in the early work of David Smith and Robert Smithson, for example. How many people, even art experts, would recognize the early cubist work of Giacometti. The work of artists like John Baldessari, Lucus Samaras, Sol LeWitt and Damien Hirst with their multiplex strategies, can be appreciated on an individual basis but to understand the artists' conceptual approach, each piece needs to be viewed in the context of its relationship to other works in its set. Critics could argue, for example, that the works in some of LeWitt's exhibitions all look the same but they are not. In the absence of on-the-spot explanations, a group of similar but not identical examples becomes the only language available to the artist to convey his/her message (concept) and producing a variety of groups becomes the only way to put the message in context.

The order I am interested in concerns seriality, progression and inclusion—qualities that show up, not in individual works but in groups—how individuals in the group relate to each other and how or

why they belong or do not belong in the group. I regret that “extracting order out of chaos” has become a cliché but the concept nevertheless relates appropriately to much of what I am trying to do. To me, the act of making art is a process that includes thinking about what you are going to do—the chaos—and completing the final work—the order.

On the day-to-day front, I don't know why but I seem to run in and out states of mind that drive me to do certain kinds of work—small drawings, sculpture in wood, large paintings, found object or environmental pieces or video so I zig zag in and out of the different series of work. When new ideas crop up I try to



Clowning around in the studio in 1985 in front of *Sunday One*, a sculpture from the Lattice Systems Series. All of the works in the LS Series are done in lath, mouldings and other stock lengths of wood. They are all designed for wall display and have names that contain the word “day.”

think of them in relation to what I have already done to see if they might fit into one of the existing series. If so, I try to apply the new ideas to the old format. If it doesn't, I try to make sure the new directions are adequately far-reaching and consequential to carry me through another series. I have managed to let some of my earlier efforts go but I prefer to incorporate them into my new directions as much as possible.

My wife thinks I am committed to cleaning up the environment because, not only do I not throw things away, I accumulate things other people have thrown away to add to my store of raw materials. As a result, my studio and its environs looks like a blast site. Psychologists say people who are compulsive “neatniks” are trying to gain control of their lives. I am only a little bit compulsive but I do like order in some places—like where I sleep—but not others—like where I work (my studio). Maybe the solution is in the balance. Does that mean I'm out of control or in control?

Some of my goings on are spontaneous but most are executed in two stages—a thinking phase and a production phase. I spend months, sometimes years, mulling over new directions with what I've seen in the museums, in the art literature and at exhibitions. Sometimes I sketch or draw my thoughts. Then when I've made up my mind I buy or order materials or rummage around to accumulate the right stuff and finally into the studio to put it together. Except for the very large works, I usually decide on a general approach and let the details fall into place as I go along. Some works are completed in a few days or weeks; some take a few months. Sometimes in a burst of inspiration, I drag out pieces that have remained unfinished for years or modify earlier works turning them into something spectacular. #