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Author(s): Rosa Lowinger and Donna Williams

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Compilers: Ellen Pearlstein and Michele Marincola

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Street NW, Suite 320, Washington, DC 20005. (202) 452-9545

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LOSS COMPENSATION IN CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE

Rosa Lowinger and Donna Williams*

The topic of the general session at the AIC conference in Nashville was "Artist's Intent". In conservation of contemporary art, especially in the area of loss compensation, artist's intent is a key issue in making proper treatment choices, choices that will preserve aesthetics as well as other, unseen results of intent and underlying philosophy.

To discuss loss compensation in contemporary art as a whole appears to be too large a subject. It may seem like talking about compensation of loss in decorative arts or sculpture or ethnographic artifacts in general. The term includes an entire genre with objects ranging in type from the monumental outdoor sculptures of Alexander Lieberman to the ceramics of Kenny Price. Contemporary artists work in a palette of materials that extends from the traditional, such as bronze, to the plastics, postcards, and nylon stockings of the assemblage artists.

As with any work of art, the demands of the material will largely dictate some of the treatment options. However, what makes it possible to discuss this genre as a group is that choices in loss compensation, indeed, the treatment as a whole, is just as likely to be influenced by unseen factors- by the artist's intent- as by the material requirements themselves.

In dealing with any aspect of the conservation of a contemporary work of art one confronts a series of aesthetic and philosophical issues that are fundamental to the work itself. Often these notions run counter to what is considered traditional conservation ethics, which includes the notion that treatments should be carried out with stable, reversible materials, that radical alteration should be avoided, or, indeed, that preservation of the artwork at all is preferable to losing it.

When dealing with contemporary art, what would be considered "radical treatments" are often the norm. Because the very notion of contemporary art means that the genre is alive and changing, conservators need to constantly adjust the approach to loss compensation and treatment as a whole. It is not always easy to do this. In truth, the conservation of contemporary art, especially the issue of loss compensation, can be confusing and leave the conservator with the sense that something other than conservation has taken place in the process of treatment. This is largely due to the inherent conflict that exists between conservation as we practice it, and the nature of artmaking in the late twentieth century.

*The Sculpture Conservation Studio, 1144 South Stanley Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90019

It is not unusual, for example, to repair a break in an object by replacing an entire element or to deal with flaking paint by stripping and sanding the entire object. This latter problem is best illustrated by the demands of painted steel sculpture such as produced by Tony Smith or Lieberman. There are also instances where the aforementioned problems in similar objects may be dealt with entirely differently. Consider the treatments of the Tony Smith sculpture against the same problem when it is encountered in a sculpture by David Smith (figs. 1-2). In the case of the Tony Smith, the sculptures are traditionally sandblasted and repainted. David Smith pieces are more often treated in a traditional fashion, with corrosion spots carefully excavated, cleaned and repainted.

As the authors of this paper see it, the challenges that one confronts in the conservation of contemporary art are linked with three distinct issues. The first of these is the radical experimentation with new materials that has taken place in the late twentieth century. This is represented by the work of the late Ed Keinholz, who works in resins, waxes, auto parts, dolls, and a myriad of found objects, or Bruce Nauman, whose early work consisted of experiments with materials such as synthetic waxes, metals, and resins. It is often difficult to know how our materials, reversible or otherwise, will combine with mixtures of materials that may be hard to identify and whose future stability is questionable.

The second issue involves the challenge of working with a living artist, who often has distinct ideas about the preservation of their pieces that run counter to traditional conservation practice. This was the case with the late Donald Judd, or the assemblage artist Bruce Connor.

But it is in the approach to aesthetic questions in contemporary art that the greatest difficulty is encountered. In contemporary art, approaches to aesthetic questions vary widely. Some pieces, such as represented by the minimalist work of Judd and others like him, require perfect, unblemished surfaces, whereas the work of other artists, such as Mark di Suvero or John Chamberlain, incorporate flaking paint, rust, and loss of elements into their fundamental design. Still other artists, which include di Suvero and Tom Otterness, expect a certain degree of "deterioration," even perhaps loss of paint or patina alteration, to occur over the life of a work. The unifying principle among all of these pieces is that in twentieth-century art the appearance of the object is only one of its components. The integrity of the object may be based on philosophical and poetic underpinnings that will surely impact the choice of conservation treatment. It is a challenge for the working conservator to understand the relationship of all the aforementioned factors- the material requirements, the artist's intent, and the overlying philosophical principle of the work being treated.

Of the three aforementioned factors, the one most often discussed in conservation circles is the challenge created by the use of new materials - epoxies, rubbers, silicones, and waxes, the synthetic fabrics, soup cans, metal scraps, and found objects that artists are using to experiment

with in an effort to create images that mirror the contemporary world. Conservators and curators often lament an artist's choice of materials, especially in cases where it is difficult to even sort out what is there. In some of these instances, loss compensation can only be done with whatever will work to give the desired aesthetic. We try to pay attention to the issues of conservation ethics, such as utilizing stable materials, using something other than the original so the repair will be reversible, however, it is often the case that eventually one reaches for whatever works - whatever will bond well to the original materials and provide the desired aesthetic appearance. Often this is some variation on the original material itself.

To be honest, this can leave a conservator accustomed to traditional ethical practice with a guilty conscience. Talking this through with another conservator often provides the best solution because the questions on these objects are being solved communally as conservation itself evolves. Yet fundamental questions arise as treatment choices are made, questions that clash with accepted ethical conservation practice -For example, *should* a different material be used to repair something like a fiberglass or cast resin sculpture? Why would this be advisable? In fact, is the notion of reversibility, of being able to separate out the repair, as important in cases where unstable materials are used in the original work?

In many if not all cases in contemporary art, the material choice of a work is not accidental. The image itself, the content of the work, arises out of the material, from the deliberate or chance decision of the artist that may have, at its outset, nothing to do with the idea of longevity.

In the late twentieth century, the idea of making things to last for years, for generations, forever, runs counter to contemporary notions of the ephemerality of things - cars, computers, architecture, even people. When it comes to compensating for missing sections in the works, our premises as conservators collide with what may be the intended expendable nature of the art itself. The notion that art should last may be holding the artist to a standard that has nothing to do with the world that shaped his or her thinking.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of installation sculpture. Although by definition installations are sculptures that are intended to remain in place for a limited period of time, they are often in need of conservation. One such example encountered by the authors was a temporary, site specific installation by author Williams, entitled *Negotiated Settlement* (figs. 3-4). The piece, which was commissioned at the onset of the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf, consisted of commercial fenceposts and vinyl-coated nylon mesh cloth. It was intended to address the issues of compromise, cooperation, and respect for the unknown - the individual's responsibility to create meaning out of ambiguousness. It was installed for a three month period and was vandalized on two separate occasions (fig. 5). After the first incident, a fifty-foot section was repaired. After the second incidence of vandalism, the artist and the funding agency

made a joint decision to leave the piece standing minus a portion of the fabric rather than remove the piece completely before the completion date. This was decided on, in part, because all available resources for further repairs were spent, and part of the work itself became the situation of the community living with the results of malicious mischief in its midst. This then triggered a response from the community, including the photograph tacked to a section of the fence. Discussions within a family resulted in several family members making a public display of their support for the artwork (fig. 6). In this case, the decision not to repair the piece actually forced the public to confront the meaning of the work itself.

It is not just in the case of installation sculpture that the issues of loss compensation come into question. As in most things, Andy Warhol was part of the vanguard in this area. Some of his sculptural works consist of objects made from a blueprint provided by the artist. There are, of course, a limited number of authorized pieces to be made from the blueprint. One notable series are the Kellogg's Cornflakes crates in the collection of the Norton Simon Museum.

In 1986, when it came time to repair these pieces for installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the decision was made to conserve the various nicks and chips that the plywood had suffered over the years by filling and inpainting the losses, rather than making new pieces from the blueprint. These objects, which had been constructed by a silkscreener and the museum's preparators and were never touched by Warhol's hand, took on the significance of original artwork.

Working with a living artist usually alters the traditional process of conservation. Often this is advantageous because the artist may provide materials for compensation of a loss. In some ways, Warhol's blueprint can be considered such a "compensation aid". Ed Keinholtz provided blue flocking to accompany the *Back Seat Dodge* and Jeff Koons has specified the brand of basketball that should be used to replace the ones in his pieces.

Even artists working in more traditional materials are keenly concerned about the conservation of their pieces. At the UCLA installation of sculptor Tom Otterness, the pieces are constructed of patinated cast bronze with small dangling figures decorating key elements. The pieces are inviting to the touch, and of course, several were snapped off almost immediately. As a result, the artist had his foundry cast a number of the susceptible pieces so they can be replaced as needed. Because the artist has indicated his wish that the patina alter with time, the replaced elements are provided to the conservator without a patina, so that the proper color may be matched at the time.

One dramatic example of an artist's influence affecting loss compensation occurred during the 1986 treatment of a painted aluminum work by the artist Billy Al Bengston. (D. Domergue et

al., 1987) The work, made of airbrushed automotive lacquer over distressed aluminum, was in storage at a museum which planned to restore it in preparation for installation in a new wing. The main damage in question was a two-inch long, D-shaped loss in the center of the piece.

Originally it had formed a flap created when the artist gouged the metal. To compensate for this loss, the artist suggested filling it with a "Japanese style gilded repair," which would have been highly visible. Because of the unorthodox nature of the request, the artist's dealer was contacted. He informed us that this was what the artist always suggested when the subject of loss compensation came up, although no one had actually ever carried it out. But the artist's request had not been made on a whim. Bengston had been trained as a ceramicist and was particularly interested in Japanese pieces. His request was based on his extensive knowledge of the process and was not made on a whim.

The gold repair patch was prepared to match the size and shape of the gap. It was gilded as the artist requested and set in place. When the museum staff assembled to view the finished product, most were sufficiently unhappy with the repair that the artist was contacted to come in and see it. However, before he came in, a traditional repair patch was also made, so that he could have a chance to see both. During the viewing, the lighting of the piece caused the gold patch to radically show. When the traditional repair patch was put in, the piece looked much better and the artist recanted from his original request. In this case the conservator's influence certainly strayed into the artmaking process, not by creating the gilded repair, but by influencing the artist's aesthetic and philosophical choices.

Determining what is a loss and what forms part of a deliberate omission of paint or surface can also be challenging. This is a question that arises in the conservation of the sculptures of John Chamberlain, which are made of crushed and varnished auto parts. Traditionally, flaking portions of these pieces are tacked down and losses are inpainted, even when these losses are directly adjacent to larger areas of loss that were original to the piece. One asks oneself about this when one is setting down a flake on a crushed auto part. And yet it makes sense somehow. The flaking paint, the rusting, and paint loss are the colors and textures of Chamberlain's palette. Though they formed part of the original concept and construction of the sculpture, they are no longer acceptable parts of its ongoing process.

In the case of the works of Donald Judd, the artist maintained strict approaches on how his pieces are to be conserved. The industrial quality of the pieces themselves further dictates, to a degree, how the work should be approached. Some of the qualities of Judd's pieces are very subjective, and without an understanding of what these qualities are, the standard conservation protocol would dictate a totally inappropriate solution, one not in keeping with the artist's sense of what his work should look like.

In one instance, the approach to loss compensation would be to completely refinish the surface; in another situation, even the application of a protective coating would be contrary both to the artist's wishes and to his intent. Within one artist's body of work you have the dilemma exemplified for the conservation of contemporary artworks.

The necessity for loss compensation occurs as a result of damage to a work of art. It is an indication that something must be replaced, that the piece is somehow incomplete. Our last example in this presentation is the sculpture by artist Nam June Paik, titled *Portable God*. The piece is composed of an antique wooden cabinet, a nineteenth-century Buddha altar, worship money, a Samsung TV and Panasonic VCR, and a Zenith TV. We have been asked to address the loss of the cable that connects the VCR to the television. Both of us feel that any standard cable for that equipment will be acceptable. Would it be acceptable to upgrade the wiring as new and better/safer technologies become available? What about the TVs and VCR? Would one replace a broken set only with one of the same model and year? Is a used TV an acceptable replacement? The approach to loss compensation in contemporary art in many instances requires a review of not only the conservation ethics and standards of practice but a review and determination of how, in fact, contemporary art will be treated as an artifact.

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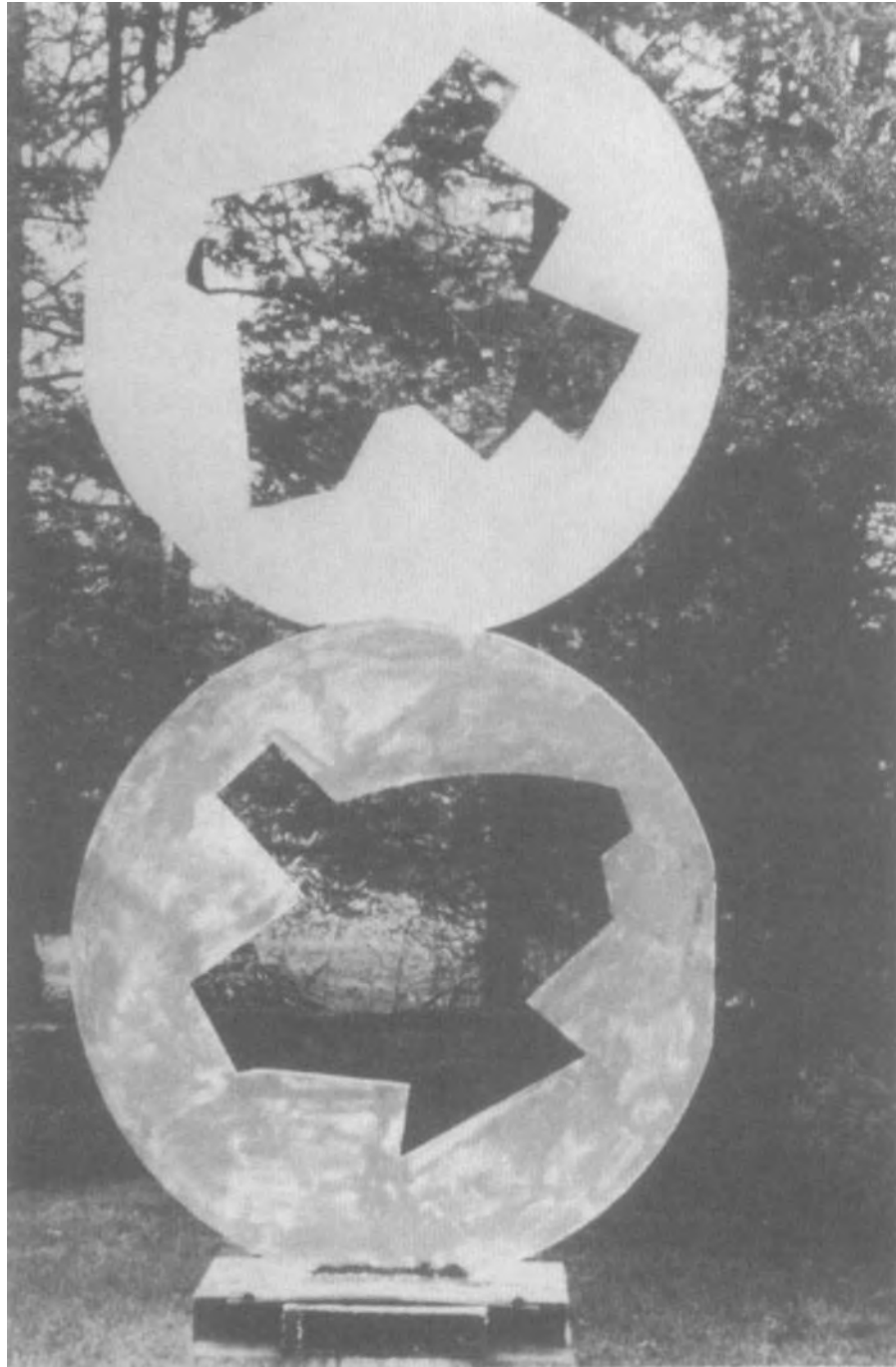


Figure 1. David Smith, *#2 Circle IV*, Private Collection
Philadelphia, PA.

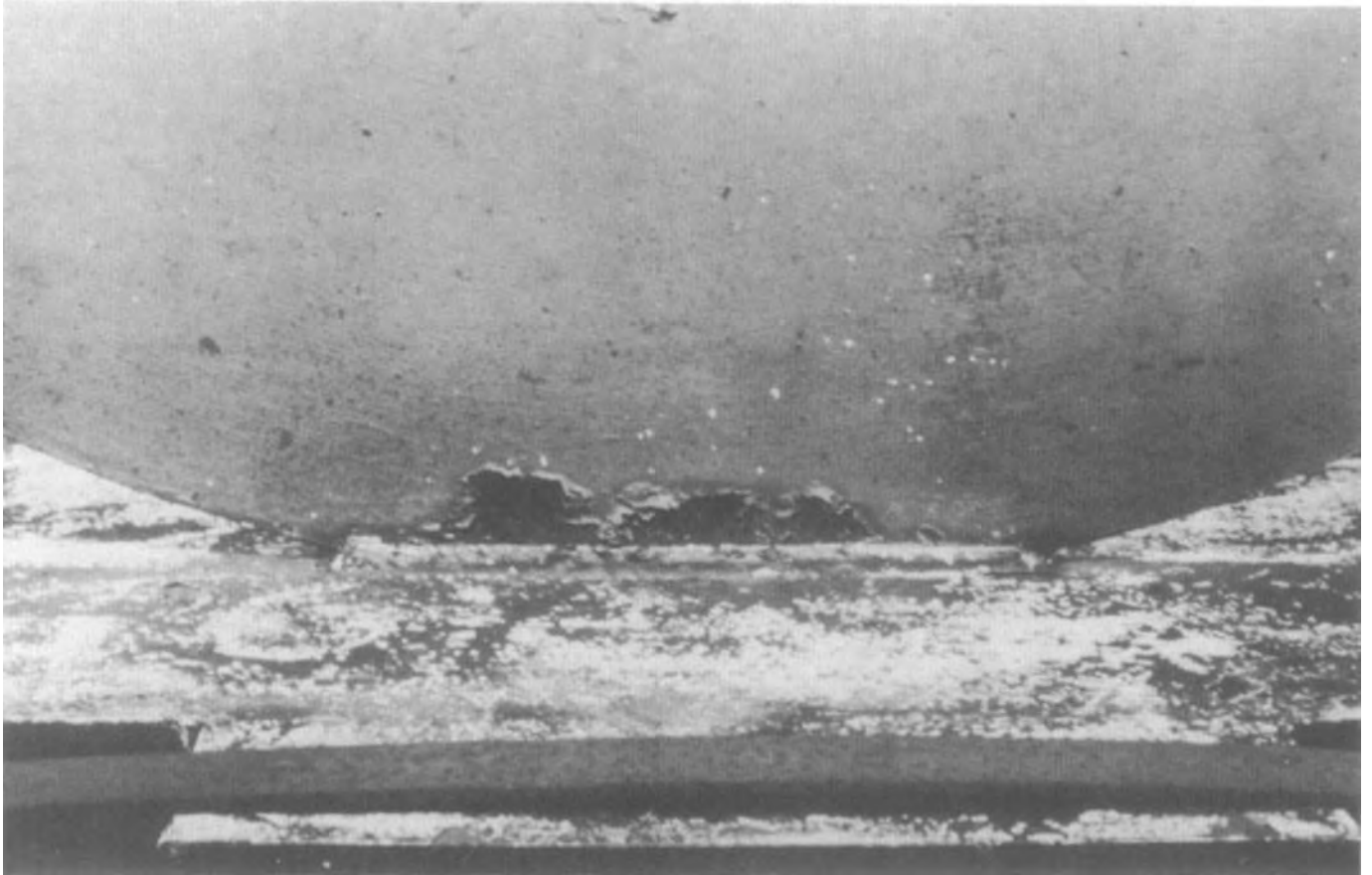


Figure 2. David Smith, #2 *Circle IV*, Private Collection
Philadelphia, PA. Detail, corrosion at base.



Figure 3. Donna Williams, *Negotiated Settlement*, 1991
Site specific installation, Claremont, CA
7' x 125' x 150'
Vinyl-coated nylon mesh, commercial fence posts.



Figure 4. Donna Williams, *Negotiated Settlement*, 1991
Detail of entrance after first incident of vandalism.

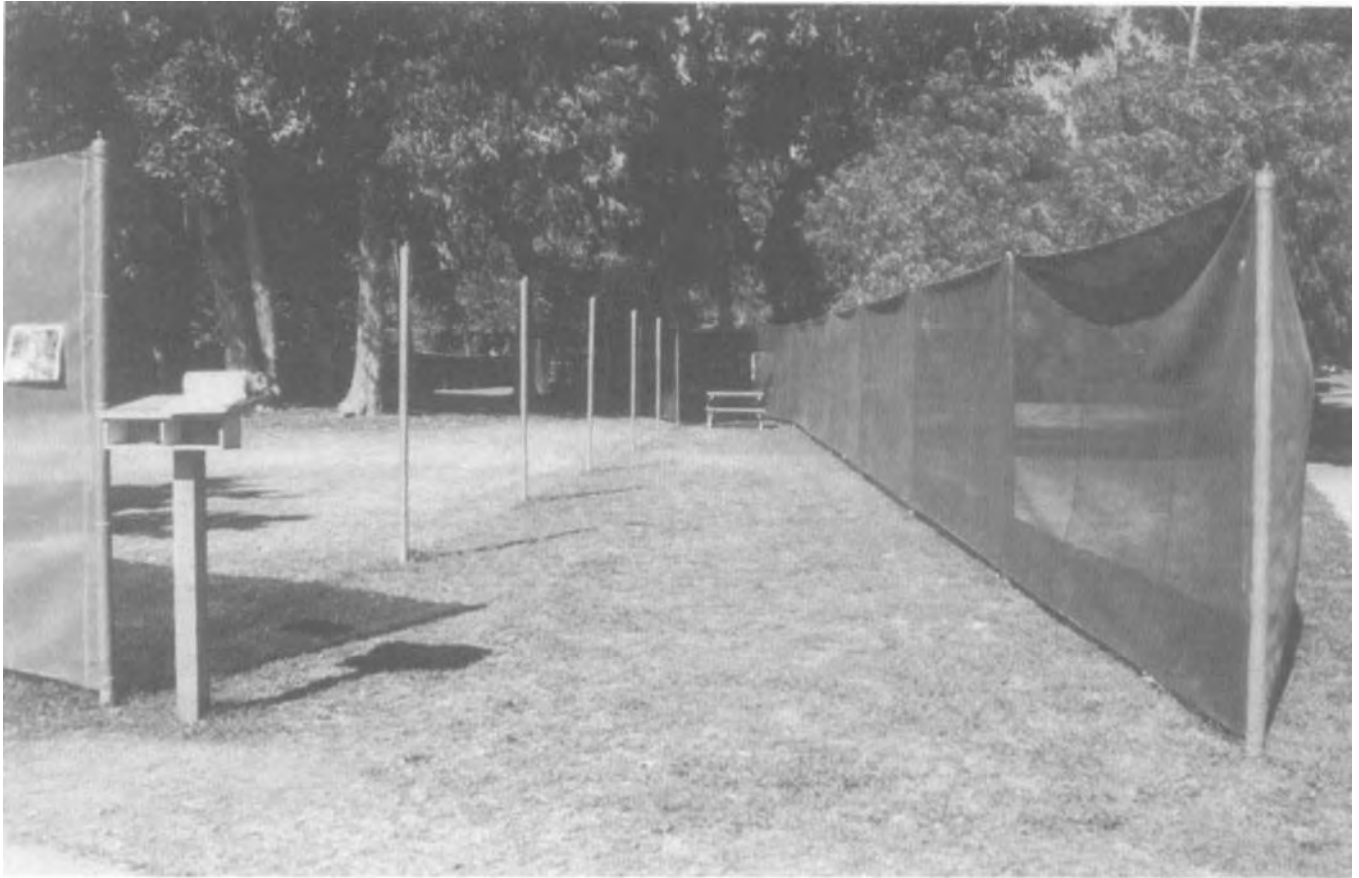


Figure 5. Donna Williams, *Negotiated Settlement*, 1991
Detail of entrance after removal of vandalized mesh panel.
Installation exhibited in this manner until one month later.

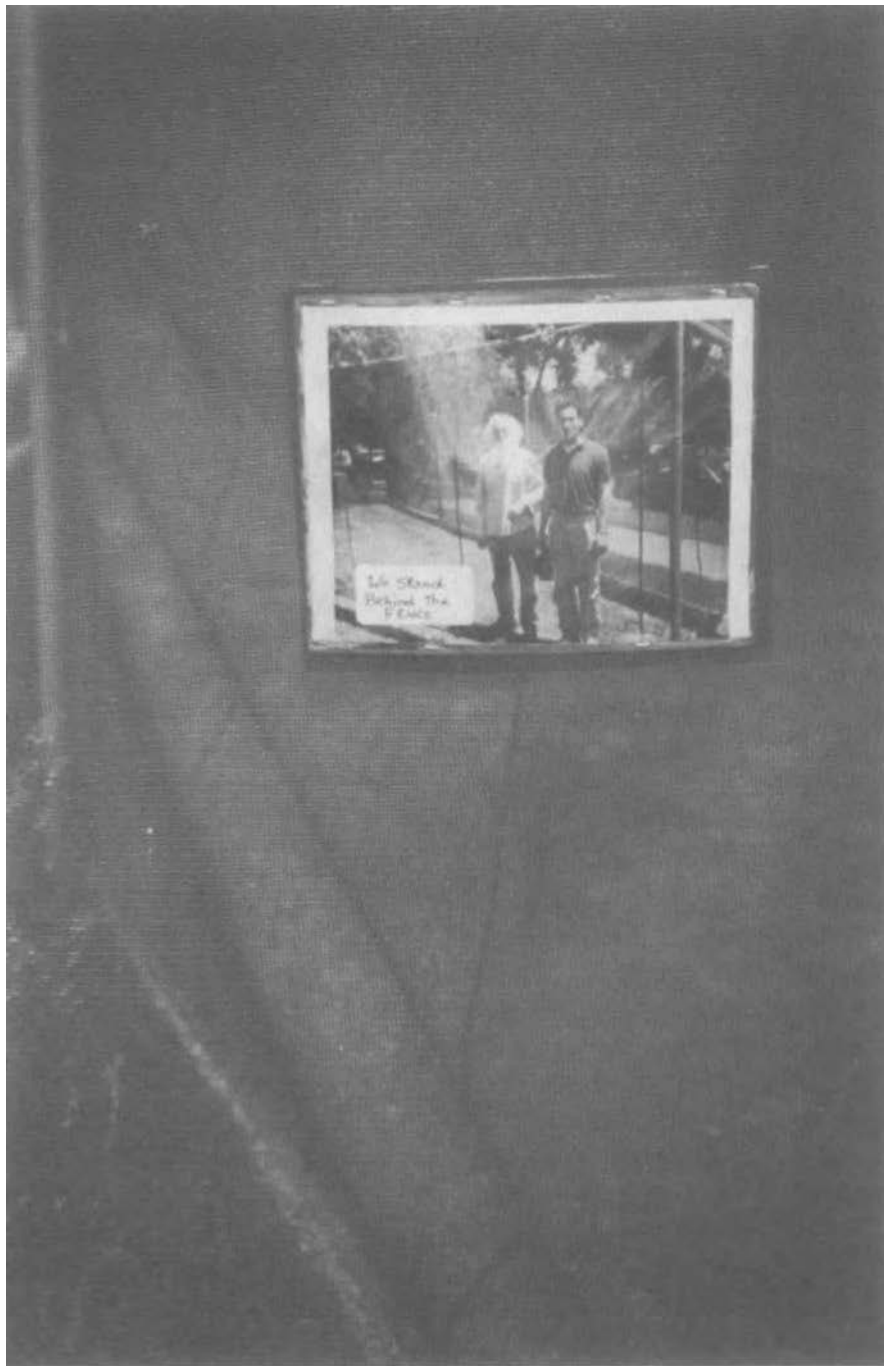


Figure 6. Donna Williams, *Negotiated Settlement*, 1991
Detail of color xerox affixed to artwork by
community members in support of the exhibition.