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Dennis Kowalski Kicks Back 60 Years in the Arts

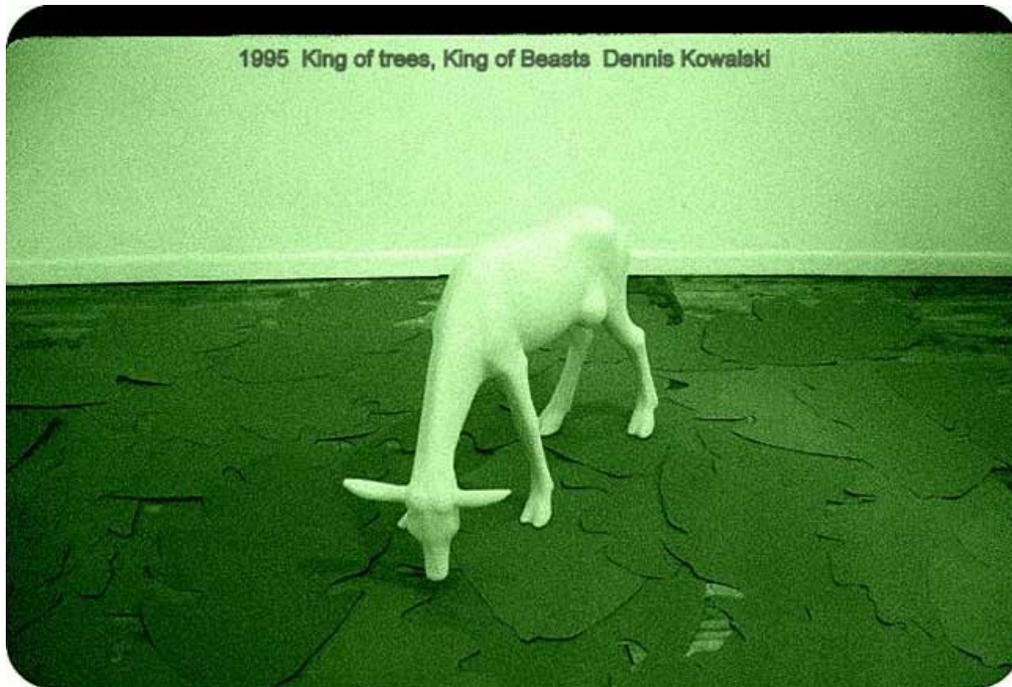
Bruce Thorn

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**Bruce Thorn:** Dennis, you've had quite a long and influential career as an artist and professor. What artists were your major influences when you were starting out? Who were your main teachers and mentors?

**Dennis Kowalski:** Henry Moore, Brancusi, Arp. I loved Giacometti, but I don't think he was an influence, except in the philosophical sense, almost as literature, if that makes sense. Tom Kapsalis was the best teacher that I had and I think I took him for 2-3 drawing classes. My mentors were my sculpture teachers in that I worked for all of them and they were supportive, including getting me scholarships. Mostly, in that regard, were Eldon Danhausen, Eduard Chaissang, and Egon Weiner. Chaissang was the best for meeting at the somewhat seedy Moroccan themed bar on Wabash with the sculpture students and making us feel that we were artists.



Actually, it took a while to get over what I refer to as a Beaux Arts education and come into my own in the early 70s, while also hanging out a lot with Paul Lamantia and Jim Zanzi with very little exposure to the bigger art world. Paul and I being as different artistically as night and day, but we exchanged a lot of ideas and critiques. Bob Donley, a fellow grad student and long time friend, but also very different than me, artistically, exchanged many ideas about art. Bob was one of the ABX guys when I was an undergrad and I thought of them as the SAIC cafeteria equivalent to the Cedar bar. After undergrad school, Bob went to California and I was drafted to DC. We met three years later on the corner of Halsted and Armitage when that was art central for many artists and art students. We both came back for grad school.



**Bruce:** Starting out from the perspective of European modernism, you confronted the reality of your Midwestern location and times. When were your student days at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago?

**Dennis:** I was an undergrad from 1958-61 and a grad student from 1964-66. Prior to SAIC, I studied architecture for two years at Navy Pier, University of Illinois. I really never thought about my midwestern location. NY is NY but, if you think about it, my early days at AIC were not that far removed from when NY hit the big time with Abstract Expressionism. In 1965, on a car trip there with the Donleys, we went to a party in Ken Noland's loft on 23rd. Ad Reinhart and Oldenburg were there along with Dennis Adrian, who I

had just met at the party. Adrian had been in NY for a while. When I mentioned that I was thinking of moving to the city, he encouraged me not to and said that things were really looking up in Chicago, but that's not why I stayed.

**Bruce:** You had excellent mentors who were knowledgeable, talented artists and great teachers. Thomas Kapsalis, Egon Weiner and Eldon Danhausen, these were folks who were ready and willing to embrace the new while being thoroughly vetted in art history and their craft.

You made a radical shift to less traditional territories. That's something that came a little too easily for my generation, a "rejection of the establishment." Was it difficult to find your own voice with so many possibilities before you?

**Dennis:** No, I didn't see it as any kind of rejection, but rather growth. SAIC provided a stable, if slightly retarded basis and was pretty typical of the time for art schools. Kapsalis was the exception. He really did embrace the new and had a more thorough, rough understanding of art history. My transition was hardly comfortable. Hey man, it was the 60s. It did however take me a few years to get over SAIC and develop on my own. The School completely changed with Minimalism, virtually overnight. This was a bit after my time, but I was in touch.

Sculpture expanded immensely in the school and the art world generally, painting was pushed to the sidelines. Students were pouring sand and dirt on the floor and making large minimal pieces. I might add that the increased space that was acquired by sculpture was due to the sculpture faculty paying more attention to the building and planning of the new school across the tracks.



I don't believe that I ever subscribed to an art magazine. Looking at them when I was in school was a rarity. I started seeing the magazines at UIC when I didn't have to buy them. Currently however, the views of critics have some insight. I find Barry Swabsky, Jerry Salz and Roberta Smith particularly interesting.

As is my routine, I have large gaps between times going to NYC. I have not been there in probably 10

years. In many ways I was naive as to what was going on in the art world, but somehow I knew. There were a few galleries bringing in new work, such as Richard Gray, Bud Holland and Walter Kelly, who showed Joel Shapiro prior to the MCA. A little later in the 70s, John Doyle Gallery had a gallery off of Armitage. I'm not sure that I can explain the information exchange that occurred prior to the Internet, but it worked, including getting together socially. I didn't even have a phone for a few years. Just hanging out and gathering at bars was crucial.

I had a couple of shows with the Michael Wyman Gallery in the early 70s. In 1973 he got together with the Independent Artists Group in NYC, where a group of sculptors developed a show of indoor and outdoor works for 111 E. Wacker in Chicago. Included were Gordon Matta Clark, Bill Bollinger, Richard Nonas, Jene Highstein and others. I made a large piece for this show that was headed in the direction of other post minimal work in this show. It was the largest piece I had ever made up until then. I didn't even know that I was a post minimalist, but this show was a revelation. I felt like Van Gogh in Paris. It was an eye opener. Gordon Matta Clark's piece blew my socks off. His work was pure genius. Of course, I have slowly evolved since. Art critic Allan Artner called me a "true maverick without a signature style." I'm not sure that's a good thing in the art world.

The thing that drove me nuts in those days was that, if one wasn't doing some sort of imagist or surreal based stuff in Chicago, your work was dismissed as copying NY. That notion of course has changed worldwide and Chicago has become less parochial. I probably made a mistake by staying in Chicago, but more than likely, judging from precedents of some very talented people going there, I would have gotten wiped out in NY just trying to survive. Back then it was financially easier to go to NY. I thought that there was a future in Chicago and was optimistic. NAME gallery was a lifesaver for me as far as kindred spirits and an opportunity to do things that I wanted to do.



I'm talking about the mid-60s, more or less. I experienced Jim Zanzi becoming quite upset about Cosmo Campoli's troubles and perhaps its relation to

the vast change in the art world that wiped out a lot of artists careers if they weren't doing Minimalism, one of the last Ism's changing, with post modernism, to what we have going on today, with art being more accepted culturally, more galleries, more of a market. Abstract art was once radical and kind of scary to a lot of people. Now it is so widely accepted that it often becomes mere decoration, unless it is exceptional. In terms of art in general being more widely accepted with a more successful market: there is that old saying, watch what you ask for. Certainly a double-edged sword.

Jim Zanzi was quite connected to the Contemporary Art Workshop, which had been started up by Cosmo Compoli, Leon Golub and John Kearney. This was quite the place for the times. Through Jim, I got to know CAW better. I made a fairly large bronze there in 1966 for the fellowship competition at SAIC. A few years later, Jim Zanzi built the foundry at SAIC based upon his experience at the Contemporary Art Workshop.

**Bruce:** Do you think it was something particular about the times that SAIC changed focus so abruptly? Could that kind of change be seen as a natural part of the art school business or the political climate?

**Dennis:** All of the above. The art world changed abruptly just as it had with Abstract Expressionism. The truly brilliant Minimalists, with their terrific writing

and concepts, changed direction again. Art schools followed, to a large extent. Pop was a big deal and upset a lot of people. This is a natural course of events, but for a variety of reasons there is now better faculty than in the past. The entire system is so different now; it's difficult to make comparisons.

**Bruce:** Community is historically very important to artists. The 60s art scene you are describing sounds like a talented, engaged and intimate group. Did SAIC's prominent role in pedagogy have something to do with this?

Was the 60s art community competitive? Did it feel like there was a future in the game for many, more than just a few stars like today? Has this changed at all? The game to me seems much larger in 2016 than the old days but also without center or focus. It's very scattered in many ways.

**Dennis:** The geography is different. Artists are all over the place in the Chicago area, whereas they were more centered in the past. Obviously there are still pockets of artistic community here and there

I never felt a fierce competition when I was young. The community was rather small and we all mixed together. As much as I am not interested in the Imagists, they were a smart group that got together and made a statement at the Hyde Park Art Center. It was clear that something was happening and it put

Chicago on the map. This was exciting stuff, especially with Don Baum's openings at the Hyde Park Art Center. Don showed a variety of work. He was a very important figure for a long time and helped the careers of many artists, including mine. In other ways, the Surreal/Imagist tradition held Chicago art hostage, probably until the Eighties. With so many vested interests, that still hangs on.

Being an alumni of SAIC, I am not aware of the school having a pedagogical base. They pretty much cover it all, with good facilities, visiting artist programs, a variety of good faculty. They graduate a lot of students. Those students who decide to stay in Chicago naturally have an effect on the art scene and are picked over by the galleries.

There were the welded metal public sculptors of the 70s inspired by Richard Hunt and Joe Goto after the precedent set by David Smith. Quite simply, the fabrication of the welded metal box now made it easier and a lot cheaper to make large-scale sculpture. There had been a lot of welded metal sculpture during the 50s, with a less industrial model. That brings to mind Steve Urry, a very good but unfortunately short lived sculptor whose large scale works were biomorphic in nature and truly original. Chicago now has a number of significant artists who are world class, including Kerry James Marshall, Inigo Ovalle Magnalle, Dan Peterman, Tony Tasset, Julia Fish, Theaster Gates and Nick Cave.



**Bruce:** How important is it for artists to be in touch with what's going on in New York, other art capitals, or what's being covered in arts publications and the press?

**Dennis:** Artists and everyone else for that matter should be in touch with as much as possible. I read a lot of political publications that usually have good articles on art. Art magazines as such, I find are not very interesting. I prefer to take in as much as possible and have it filter into my art. One of my favorite authors is Thomas Bernhard, who I like for two reasons: one he disliked Vienna, but was one of the few Austrian writers to stay there and two on his first trip to NYC he walked around for four hours in the rain, not visiting museums or any of the other things

that tourists usually do. Unless I really know a city, I do the same thing. Being born in Chicago and spending most of my life there, I still tend to walk around a lot when visiting. I only go to select shows. One only has so much time.



**Bruce:** Tell us about your involvement with NAME Gallery.

**Dennis:** I had a show in the early 70s at Michael Wyman Gallery in Chicago. Shortly afterwards, I was approached by Barry Holden, Jerry Saltz, Guy Whitney and someone else (I think it was Phil Berkman) about having a show at NAME. Having just done a show at Wyman, I was very interested and asked to have the show a bit later. We made it

happen on Hubbard Street in 1976. I did my first architectural installation, taking up half of their rather large space. My work was composed of a kind of half roof that one had to walk under to get through the gallery and a perimeter boundary with basement implications. This had a lot to do with vernacular architecture and used common and primarily domestic building materials.

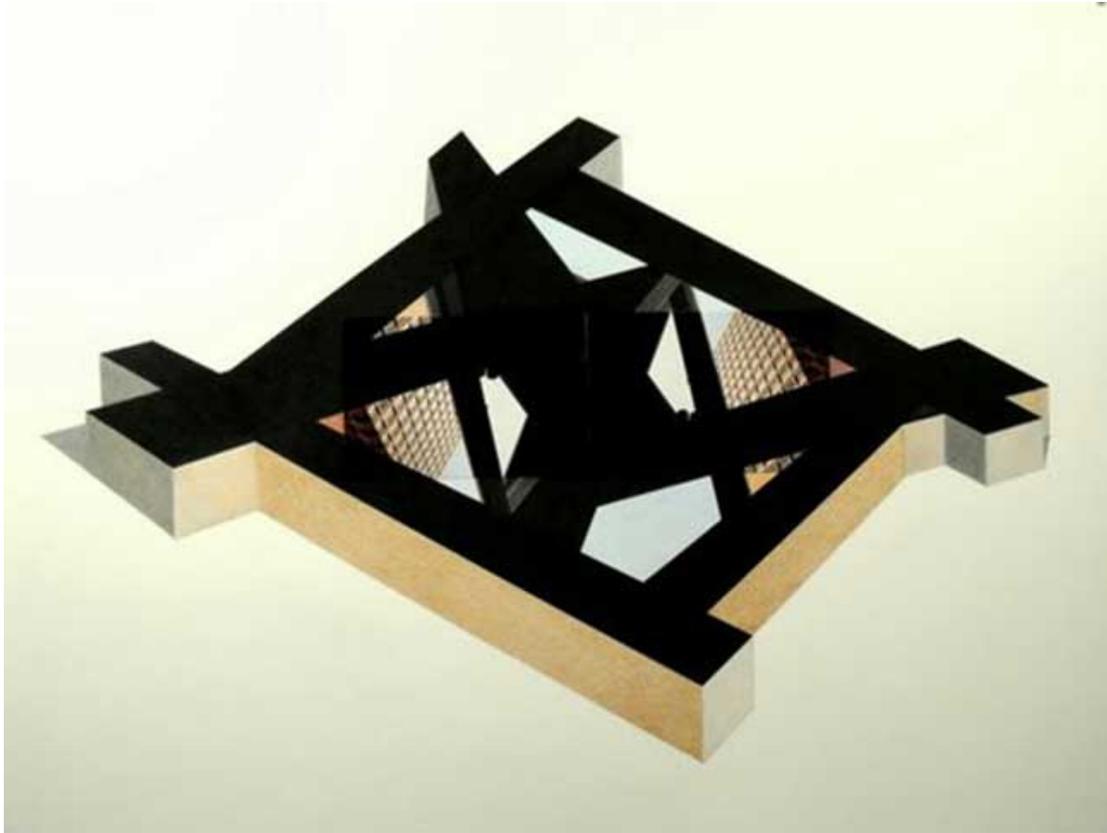
I had another show at NAME in 1980 and filled the entire gallery with an installation and some smaller pieces. The installation was composed of three elements: a lead covered steeple, a bench like swing and a somewhat difficult to enter tower, with a diminishing toehold ladder and a menacing inverted pyramid at the top (if one got up that far).

I did two similar pieces in the late 70s on Wards Island in NYC and in 1978 did a large work at Artpark, which had elements of the 1976 work from NAME. Also in 1978, I was invited by Steve Luecking to do a piece at DePaul. I reproduced the steeple on the church there and put it in front of the church, calling it "Dark Aspirations." After NAME moved to South Wabash, I had a show there in 1995 proposed by Gary Cannone. The installation in this show dealt with the environment, and included a fawn with a tumor on its side, standing on a floor covered with large brown paper oak leaves. On three walls were 35mm sized full body, police style mug-like photos of me, frontal

and both sides, implying my guilt. The small size indicated my smallness in the scheme of things.

When Barry and Jerry lived in a loft on Hubbard across the street from NAME, Artemisia and ARC were across the street. I think those were the most exciting times in Chicago for artists, at least for me. This activity also opened up the art world here to become what it is today. Prior to this, things were a slow slog.

In the 80s my work continued to become more political. I showed at Marianne Deson and at other places. The 90s brought on the Uncomfortable Spaces: three galleries, Beret International, Ten In One and Tough, respectively run by Ned Schwartz, Joel Lieb and Richard Kelly. These were experimental spaces, with Ten In One being the most commercial. I did two shows at Beret, continuing my work in the same direction.



**Bruce:** How do you feel about the potential for artist-run gallery spaces in today's art world?

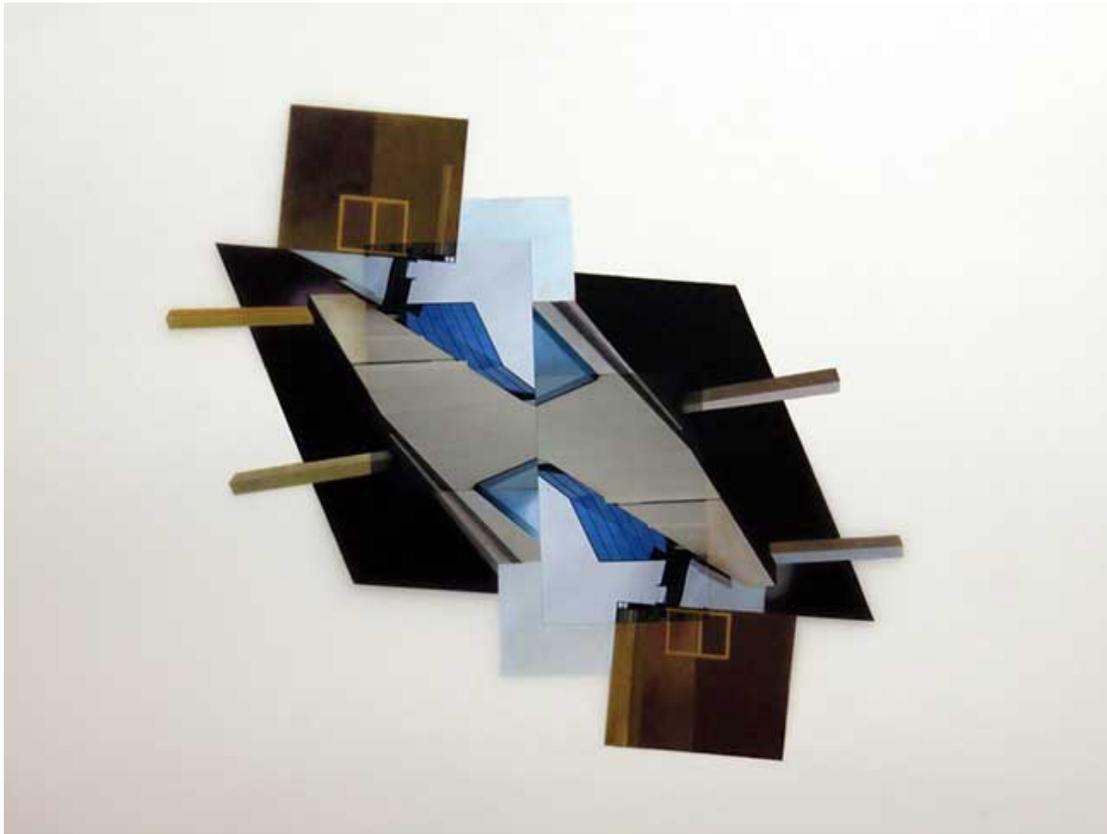
**Dennis:** They are good places for artist to get a start showing their work and to get experience putting together shows. They usually provide more freedom from commercial considerations, but to survive, one way or another an artist has to think of making money, which is of course is self-evident. There are probably more alternative spaces now than ever, with apartment shows, studio shows, pop ups etc. Most don't appear to have the lasting effect of say NAME, 112 Greene Street and AIR in NY, nor the women's alternatives that were in Chicago. An exception would be the Suburban, now in Milwaukee, which also

shows more recognized artists. And there's Dan Devening Projects. The lack of commercial pressure is a plus for these spaces, but artists have a difficult time surviving without it.

**Bruce:** Tell us about your career as a professor of art.

**Dennis:** I started in 1966 at DePaul part time, while working another job full time. I got fired from there and started working at UIC in 1971. UIC of course at that time was heavily influenced by the Institute of Design and was a kind of a watered down Bauhaus. Designers pretty much ran the place. That started to change somewhat with Morris Barazani, Keith Morrison and then me. When Charles Wilson came from Yale a year after me, I had an ally so we pushed for change in the program that eventually divided the studio arts from design. Some connected concerns remained in place, primarily the foundation program.

After the initial political hassles of getting that done, the school became a great place to work. The faculty was very compatible and there was a minimal amount of political nonsense. On the design side of things, John Walley was the most open minded and supportive of the entire process of change. There was a mutual respect. A BFA was created and then the MFA. I think that we in studio arts hired well and created an outstanding faculty. The designers eventually did the same. UIC is a very good art school.



**Bruce:** Are you a veteran? Has that experience influenced your vision as an artist?

**Dennis:** Yes. I first went to Baltimore, as what the Army called a “cartographer in photo intelligence.” The post was in an old six-story brewery. There was a wood shop on the first floor and storage on the second. The rest of the place was my studio. There was a freight elevator and a view of downtown Baltimore. After a year, I was transferred to DC, where I didn’t have a studio. I enrolled in the Corcoran for a place to work. I met the painter David Smyth there and he remains a lifelong friend. David now lives and works in Vienna.

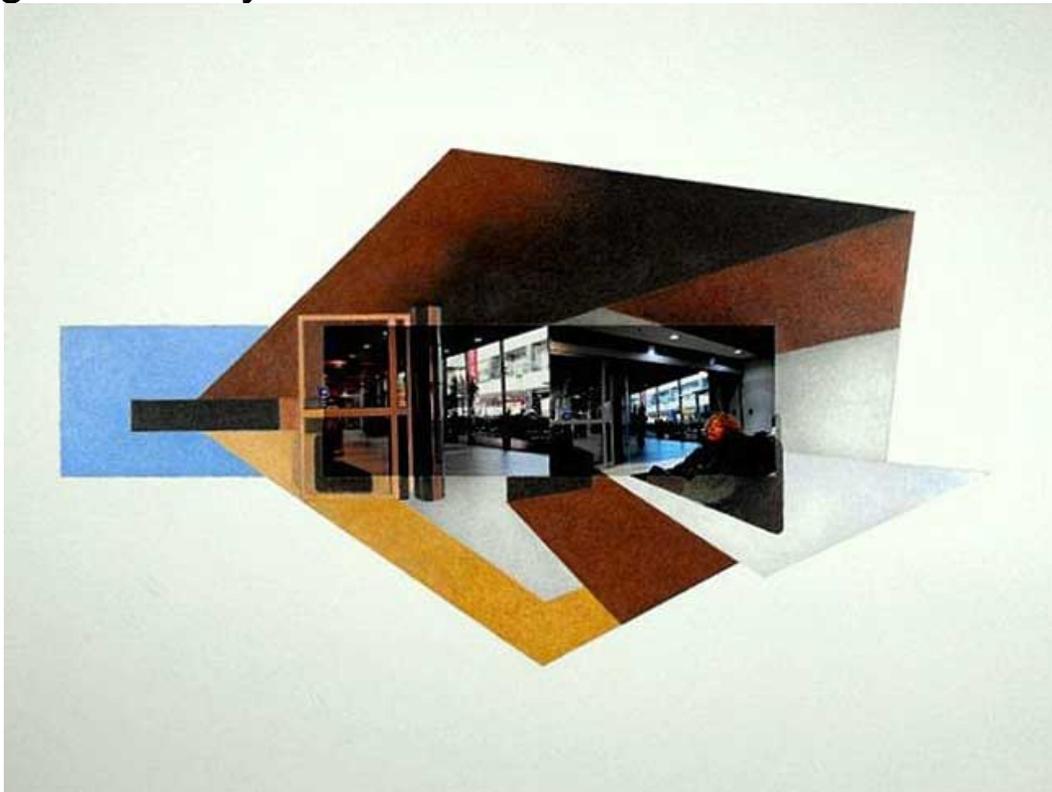
Maps, photos and a high security clearance, yes these influenced my work visually and politically. So did most any job that I've had, most notably as preparator at the Chicago Academy of Sciences and as a tech at IIT researching in metallurgy. In both of those jobs I learned a lot about materials and photography.

What I saw in the Army radicalized me politically. I missed the GI bill by a month, which really pissed me off. However, I must say that I had a good experience. There was so much to see in Baltimore and DC. I took trips to NYC and lived the east coast experience.

**Bruce:** After retirement, you left Chicago for Iowa City. It's inevitable that you miss many friends and places. What are some positive or engaging changes you've found from the relocation? Has the change in geography changed your work?

**Dennis:** I don't think that the move has changed my work. I do miss the Chicago art community and friends. There really is nothing here to replace that. Coming into the city from time to time doesn't work as well as I had thought that it might. Moving was more of an issue of economics and, after my neighborhood of 25 years gentrified and I had pioneered many more, I just could not face the prospect of looking for a new neighborhood.

I was ready for a change. Nothing much appeared to be happening for me art-wise to make it all worthwhile. There is a Chicago expat artist in Fairfield, Ken Dubin, who keeps me connected here by having a mutual history. I have done some shows in Iowa. Back when I got out of grad school, I was determined not to go to a place like this just for a teaching job. I wanted to stay in major cities. Things worked out for me in that regard. Iowa City is however like living in a good Chicago neighborhood, but it's less expensive. The writers' workshop makes this a great literary base, if one likes to read.



**Bruce:** Tell us about your work today.

**Dennis:** I had a show a couple of years ago at the Bridgeport Art Center curated by Lelde Kalimite. The installation that I did there was the second part of a trilogy dealing with maintenance, deterioration and destruction. The first part was more architectural and city-like in nature. I am looking to continue that piece. The third and final part would result in complete rubble and fragments.

I am mostly drawing now, using photos, usually the standard 4×6” snapshot size, of things that interest me visually and sociologically, mostly urban. After juxtaposition of the photos, I extend outwards from the photos with drawing. I take photos in established, touristy, high affluence areas of our cities, distort them and change their context. On occasion, I will do the same thing with nature, which is a more neutral subject. The surface of these works is then homogenized with a dead flat spray.

Ironically, this has made some people think they were computer generated. I like the irony because it takes a great deal of handwork to avoid the flatness of a computer image. These images of accepted visual reality are then re-combined to create an alternate reality. The images look somewhat familiar, but they are not. I have been altering photos seriously for about 15 years. My intention is to make something extraordinary out of the ordinary, which I suspect that I have been doing all along.

**Bruce:** Is there anything else you'd like to mention?

**Dennis:** Educationally I began in architecture, thought about industrial design, skipped it and studied sculpture. Almost my entire career was spent in Chicago along with three years on the east coast, including NYC. Besides making art my favorite activity is to travel.

Our neighborhood in Chicago became gentrified. Tired of pioneering neighborhoods for both living and studio space, sick of traffic, yuppies and Starbucks, we moved to Iowa City. The city is missed, but it's not that far. It's OK here.