

An Interview with Diane Katsiaficas

Mary Hark

Mary Hark:

Paper pulp has been an important and consistent element in your work and there is a wonderfully rich materiality that includes a frequent use of found objects, both organic and man-made. Can you talk about your choice of materials?

Diane Katsiaficas:

In about 1977, I started scavenging materials, both natural and man-made, and paper. Using naturally-made paper collected from riverbanks or deposited on the sides of fences, and then mimicking that kind of alluvial deposition in handmade paper became a very important part of my work. That kind of paper, combined with what it hung on – barbed wire, wood, metal – has grown more and more into an emphasis on collecting and working with materials that are either potentially recyclable or recycled.

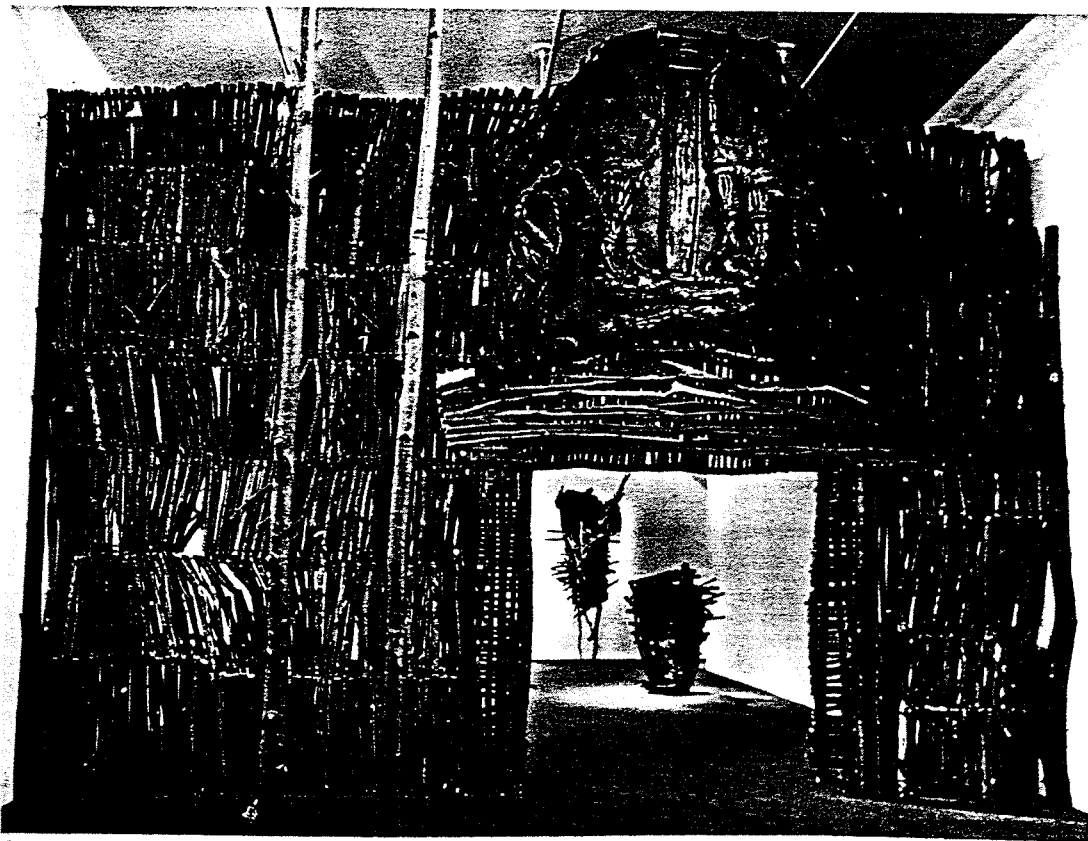
MH:

So, right from the beginning you were recycling materials to make your paper, you weren't using cotton linters.

DK:

No, and that's a wonderful story.

When I was in graduate school in Seattle I started painting on paper that I got at the American Can Company. It was what they stacked between cans. I would go down there with one of the professors and we would pull out the sheets of paper that didn't have large can marks on them. They were 44" × 56" sheets. I could prime them



Gate, Dianne Katsiaficas, 1983 installation at Traver Sutton Gallery in Seattle, WA, 14' × 16' × 15", slash wood, seine twine, nails, recycled paper bags, stabilizer, enamel and bronzing powders. Photo by Dick Busher.



This is what the artist calls "The Berlin Process." Left to right: 1) Small round vat of paperpulp, rectangular screen, and sticks on a blanket; 2) Making a sheet of paper; 3) Couching onto the sticks; 4) Pressing the paper by standing on it.

beautifully, with Gesso. God knows what was in the stuff. Several paintings that are in collections are actually painted on that. But then I graduated to using more elegant papers: Rives, long rolls of Arches.

I first started making paper in 1977. I was in Berlin on a Fulbright Fellowship. I was just starting to incorporate different materials into my paintings. In addition I was stitching into the paintings. I had just done a show that was all sewn work into paper, but it was other people's handmade paper.

When I went to Germany I was thinking it would be interesting to create my own surface as well, not just adding things to it, to simulate a kind of entangled ground. I coincidentally teamed up with a group of people at the arts school there who were interested in a book that they had from England on handmade papermaking. They asked me if I would help translate some of the words, and we ended up looking like a witches coven, making paper in a little Berlin apartment, with a meat grinder, pots and pans, and blankets from people's beds.

We were collecting paper out on the streets and pulping it up, hand shredding it (the meat grinder didn't work) and making these little sheets of handmade paper. They were wonderful. I had an artist's studio in an art center in Berlin and there was a beautiful press set up in a studio next door to mine. When I walked in with these pieces of paper that had everything in them and asked to run it through their press, the perfectionist hairs rose on the back of the necks of the German printmakers. They would not allow me through the door! So I went back to my studio and put blankets on top of the paperworks and started stomping on them. My Greek heritage went to work.

We had constructed simple little screens and we were dipping them into large vats with recycled paper pulp. It was all wood pulp. Right from the beginning I was working with phone books and off cuts from newsprint. It was an attempt to use not just the material of paper but the significance of paper, as a record of society's activity, a carrier of information.

MH:

The reference to things we think of as paper – maps, letters, documents, collected information, phone books, paper bags – that's very important.

DK:

Yes, and playing with that as an entropy metaphor. It was there inside the paper. I was not aware of the large paper movement that was happening in this country at that point, in the late 1970s.

MH:

Were these early pieces two-dimensional but very textural? Were they objects, shelters, off-the-wall forms?

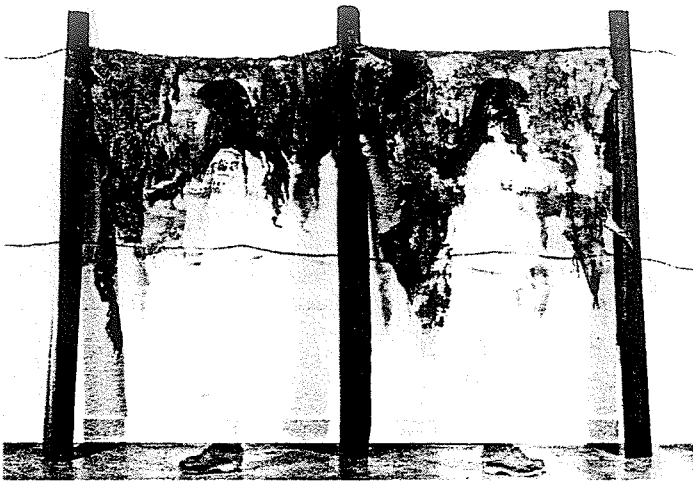
DK:

No, these pieces were like everyone's initial experiments, except they sandwiched many things in them. That year, on some trips to West Germany, to the area along the Elbe River, I visited friends who were working for the Green Party movement. At that point the party was just being formed, trying to stop a nuclear waste disposal plant from being built outside of Hamburg. Aesthetic elements were a part of the social consciousness. A small town or camp was constructed near the proposed location, with images that documented the protest.

I'm not a real fan of social realism. I admire elements of it, but I was looking for something that was perhaps a little less literal. In my walks along the riverbank there I saw that decaying vegetation had literally been picked up in flood and deposited on the barbed wire fences. These matted deposits, left as the water receded, were so haunting.

I collected it from the fences, but I didn't know what to do with it. I photographed it. I didn't know what it was. I took it back to Berlin. I put it at the bottom of a crate of artworks that I was sending back to this country.

I did what you do when you don't know what to do with something: I tried everything. I incorporated it into already-made paper pieces, I sewed it on, I took the photographs and made transfers, I put them on drawings and drew over them. Finally, I got some fence posts and some barbed wire, and installed what I had left as a drawing, moving two feet out from the wall, the fence post



Postdiluvial, installation at Seattle Pacific University, 1979, 7' x 12', cedar posts, barbed wire, river residue.

leaning against the wall. I was thinking of a drawing as the working out of an idea. It was in a drawing show in Seattle and it caused quite a stir because people kept asking: "Well, is this really a drawing?" It was for me: line was physically assembled.

And the installations grew from there. I didn't have any of these alluvial deposits after that, so I went to some of the river areas around Seattle and the farmers said: "Yes, we have that kind of stuff, but this year we haven't had any floods, so there's none around." I thought about pulping up all the collected paper I had and sandwiching the natural detritus I collected inside. And that's what I ended up doing.

I used a friend's Cuisinart while she was at work. I would go and pulp up the papers that I collected (and I cleaned up very well). I took all of the pulp over to my studio and started making large sheets of paper, literally couching one sheet onto another to make large pieces, and then installing it.

MH:

Were these big, thick, heavy, textural sheets?

DK:

Actually, they were very lightweight. The Seattle Art Museum has one and it's about 4' x 4' square. It's the A's and B's of the Berlin phone book. You can read it somewhat. It sandwiches dried irises. It's very lightweight and suspended from a piece of barbed wire. It was a part of an installation. It wasn't until later that I started making really big pieces.

MH:

What kind of response did you get to the work? It seems like such a poetic transformation of common material.

DK:

The responses are always varied. There are people who are fascinated. I thought it would be something to try and take ordinary materials and put them in a situation that would cause people to look at them again, to examine them. If you're

walking down the street you don't really look at a piece of paper blowing by you, unless you're like me and pick it up and put it in your pocket and take it home and eventually it ends up somewhere, usually in some kind of paper pulp.

I want the pieces to have a certain elegance, a certain formality about them, and that's an edge I try to work toward. I don't want them to just look like squished up pieces of cardboard. I want people to understand what they are but also to be open to a particular transformation in their perceptions of the material.

MH:

A lot of your work has to do with the environment and really challenges the way we live and what we must do to continue living on the earth, yet I don't feel it's dogmatic. The use of materials is inviting, it's luscious, it's generous, and in that way you're able to invite people in to enjoy it on an aesthetic level. Then you're giving us other information and asking other questions that are very important.

DK:

I also think that we need to have a physical response. When a young person is trying to deal with how to recycle newspaper, that's a very difficult responsibility to deal with on a daily basis. If you read about it, it's one thing. If you can let it become a physical experience that is enjoyable and playful, it's something else and it stays a while longer. It's another language.

So, in a lot of the installations, I want people to touch the work, I want them to feel the surfaces, I want them to think about the rocks and sticks, the things that are in the paper.

MH:

And as they encounter these surfaces the issues of decay, death, and transformation are also encountered.

DK:

And they'll literally disintegrate. I know that in fifty years those pieces will not be around. Many of them are not around; they have either been recycled into another work or have been destroyed. Some of them have been frozen by the use of different types of stabilizers, size or – heresy to a fine art papermaker – Rhoplex or Adobe Stabilizer.

Bernie Toale just roared with laughter when he first saw my work. He showed me a beautiful laid mold for pulling paper, which he brought with him when he came to Seattle in 1981. He asked me how I made my nine foot by twelve foot paper. I pulled out my tiny window frame on which I had stretched very fine polyester curtain material, all of nine by twelve inches, with thumbtacks around the back side.

MH:

Can you talk a little bit about how process is important in your work, in making a huge sheet from a tiny little mold? For me it's very impor-

tant. It's time to be with the materials, it's time to think about what I'm doing, it feeds the thoughts, it lets things gestate. I'm not always sure about the exact mark that I'm going to make in this long process, but I love the material.

DK:

I have the same reaction. In 1980 I went to Yuma, Arizona, where I was going to be a resident artist in painting. They knew that I was making large sheets of paper at that point and when I got off the plane they kept looking for all of my equipment. "Where's your Hollander?" they said. And I said, "Well, I actually have it right here," and I pulled out the imitation Cuisinart from K-Mart that I'd gotten and I said "I have a tub – a cement mixing tub – in my studio, I thought I could get one here; and my screen," and I showed them my screen. So, I could take the materials that I needed to any place and gather the other materials there. The process became wedded to place. Circumstances of materials found on a site became an integral aspect of the process.

MH:

So it really grounded you. It allowed you to go out and explore the topography and to feel the light of the place, to get to know it and to make work as a direct response to it.

DK:

Right. I wanted the work to respond to issues of particular places. In Yuma it was to respond to the siphoning off of the waters of the Colorado River. Paper seemed an appropriate way to document the traces of the action of water on the land. When I did the large tractor track cast there, I was working on ground – literally, the earth itself – that was not in the normal visual community of artists. It was in the community of agricultural people, of farmers. I went to a farm and asked if I could make a cast of a heat fracture in the earth. When I drove up in a pickup truck with buckets in the back of pulped up phone books, they said "Are you from the college?" I said, "Yes, I'm from the college," and they thought I was one of the agricultural people. I wasn't trying to impress them with the process as much as I wanted to make a record of their process. That was important. Paper allows us to do that.

MH:

It's a wonderful entry point. Different kinds of people can look at the work and respond to it. When we know that it's made out of the stuff that we live with all the time, and not art materials, I think that it makes people less afraid to look at and think about the issues that you raise.

DK:

In 1983 I was part of a show called *Living with the Volcano* at Washington State University in Pullman. It was in response to the eruption of Mount St. Helens. One of the main components of the installation was a large sheet of paper that

I cast in an erosion gully. It was made of shredded phone books from all of the areas of the ash deposition from Mount St. Helens. People could actually read their names. I shredded the phone books and pulped them, and then cast them and mounted them on a framework of wood I had collected in the blast area. It also incorporated ash and pumice, and Noble and Douglas fir seedlings that had been used in the reforestation of the blast area. There was a sense of cycle, from the paper itself, the wood pulp that carried the names of the people who had been caught in the dust, to the framework held up by the burnt trees, to the new trees, growing in the dust. I was trying to "draw" that cycle. A lovely part of it was that at the opening one of the people there found their name in the paper.



Losing Ground, for *Living with the Volcano* exhibition at Washington State University, 1983. 14' x 15' x 10'. collected wood, ash, pumice from Mount St. Helen's blast area, seedlings from Weyerhaeuser, shredded phone books from areas of ash deposition.

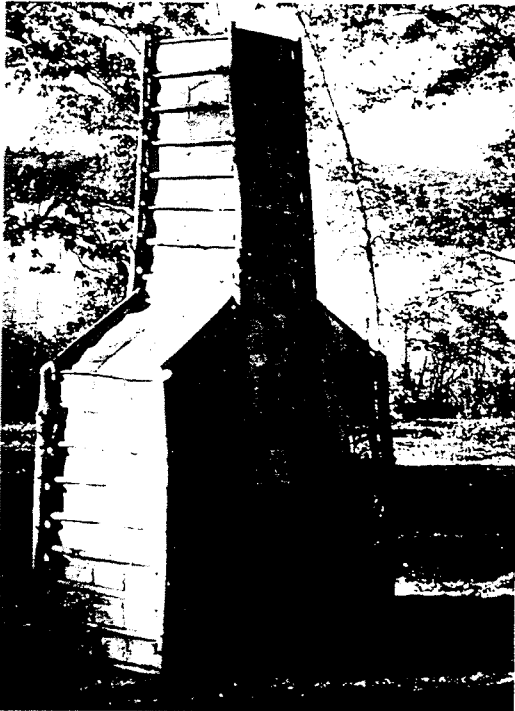
MH:

It might be a good time to talk about the work at the DeCordova Museum in 1989. Maybe we can start with a quote from Hafthor Yngvason, writing in *Art New England*. He says:

Not engaged in a purely aesthetic debate, but rather in an active response to particular situations, the social pragmatists' art tends to be site specific, in the sense of addressing critically the social, ecological, and political characteristics of a specific site. And for the same reason, it tends to be temporary as it reacts to current social issues – emphasizing the process over product and objective over the object. The point is to alter a single situation and to change the viewer's positions from being passive contemplators of aestheticism to being active participators in a process that speaks in a direct way to their concerns.

DK:

That was from an article, called "Socially Interactive Art" [February 1990]. I was very touched that he discussed this installation at the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, done for an exhibition of collaborations with Rugg Road Paper. I had been working with Rugg Road for many years and greatly admired the work that Bernie Toale and Joe Zina had done. I was invited to do an installation outside as a part of the site works that the Museum had been sponsoring. Sondra Goldman, the curator at DeCordova, worked very hard towards realizing this installation; she became a papermaker to do this.



Housewarming. Dianne Katsiaficas, DeCordova Museum, 1989.

She asked me to develop a work which could involve the community. I wanted to deal with some issue about the site and I wanted to deal with some thought about the environment there. Lincoln is an actively involved community. The pond that DeCordova faces is adjacent to Walden Pond. If Thoreau had been better friends with the farmer of that pond, Flint, *Walden* wouldn't have been called *Walden*, it would have been called *Flint*. When Flint turned Thoreau down, Emerson, Thoreau's good friend, let him use some property on the pond next door. That's where Thoreau built a small house and wrote his observations of living there through the seasons.

One of the sections in the book, the section on Autumn, has a chapter called "House Warming". One of the ideas is that the stone hearth is usually all that is left at the end of the life of a home. I thought: "This hearth has been a motif in my work for many years; why not build a hearth out of the wood of that area (cut down and trimmed

out by the grounds people) and then create a shelter right there on the grounds, a temporary work, that would then have a sheathing of paper? That paper would be the recycled paper collected in the schools and from the museum." Which we did. We collected the paper. Then Sondra stood at a paper shredder in a local lawyer's office for us, then at Rugg Road we rough pulped the paper in a Hollander. Bernie was hysterical, scrubbing it clean. We pulled and couched the sheets right there on the ground at the DeCordova. People were welcome to come by and make a sheet of paper, using my same nine by twelve inch screen. All sorts of papers from the community were included. I also threw my copy of *Walden* in.

Each of the sheets of paper had bits and pieces that could be read. Each sheet had its own texture. We hand sewed them together and waxed them with beeswax. It really became a community effort. Students came from Mass Art and worked on it. People coming along the jogging path saw us sitting there, sewing sheets of paper together, and joined in. The piece went through the seasons. An unusually heavy snowfall helped to take some of the paper down. After the snows they took the paper off and left the wood frame there. And now that's gone as well.

People remember it. I've heard from different people who say: "I remember when that was there," so it became part of the history and memory of that place.

MH:

And it was an integration of all of the people who were there. The passers-by, the park users, the contributors of information.

DK:

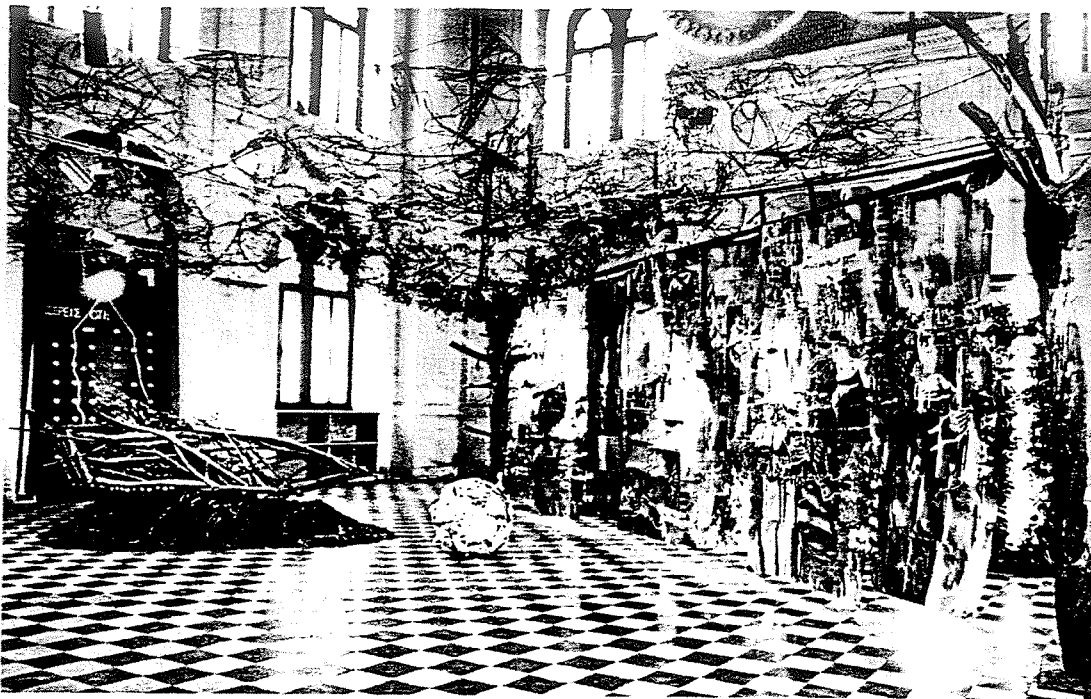
Yes, and people who went in and used it as a shelter in the rain, as well.

MH:

Again, the choice of paper is not arbitrary. It's going to decompose, to carry information: its history as well as its material qualities.



No Garbage Here. Dianne Katsiaficas, installation of potentially recyclable materials, Yeni Tsami Municipal Art Gallery of Thessaloniki, Greece, 1991



No Garbage Here, detail.

DK:

My original idea was that sometime around Winter solstice we would burn the "hearth." But that kind of pyrotechnic was not a good idea in a wooded area, even though the shelter was located in a clearing.

MH:

Would you like to talk a little bit about the most recent projects you've done, in Greece? These involved all sorts of materials but the same issues and maybe the same kind of interactive attitude, although perhaps on a larger scale than you had worked previously.

DK:

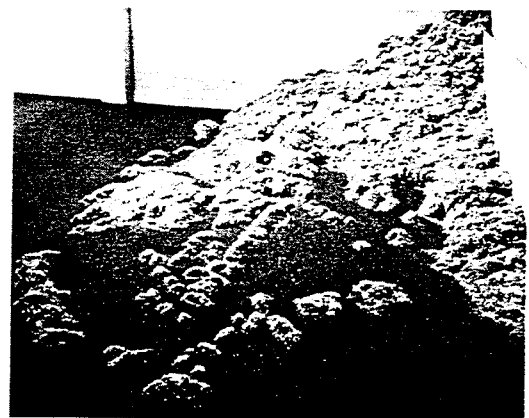
It was an installation called, *No Garbage Here*. The idea was to respond to various aspects of the problem of solid waste in the city of Thessaloniki, which is the second largest city in northern Greece. I was there on a Fulbright, working on researching the structures of narrative in the Byzantine frescoes.

How do you tell stories? I think this installation utilized aspects of Byzantine visual rhetoric: descriptions, exaggerated juxtapositions. It was a real collaborative effort. A lot of people got involved. We tried to create, in an old mosque that had become an archaeological museum and was now a municipal art gallery for showing contemporary work, a metaphorical environment, a landscape that was made primarily of potentially recyclable materials. We did it so that people could envision what the possibilities were for reusing these materials. Recycling and thoughts about that are at a very, very elementary stage in Greece.

I wanted one of the components to be paper which was shredded but I wasn't sure how I could

shred it. Paper shredders were not readily available in Greece; mostly because there isn't much need for them. I happened to meet Kay Thompson, the wife of the American consul general in Thessaloniki. I asked her if she would ask her husband if I could use the paper shredder at the consulate. She asked him. This was right at the time the Gulf War was starting. So, throughout the Gulf War I was driving down to the consulate with large bags of paper collected from the school where we lived and we were shredding it on the consulate paper shredder. It seemed to break down after an hour or so.

It was a double shred, not the single shred that we normally see. This was because of the information-gathering that happened during the Iranian hostage situation when the Iranians pieced together the shredded bits of paper at the American Embassy. People had been apprehended from those reconstituted documents. After that, I'm told, all the consulates and embassies throughout the world use double-shred shredders:



No Garbage Here, detail of map of Greece, 3' x 8' x 10'

the single vertical shred and then a diagonal shred. You can throw in magazines, just about anything made of paper. You end up with little, tiny bits of trapezoids that are absolutely gorgeous. Beautiful. It's just extraordinary.

MH:

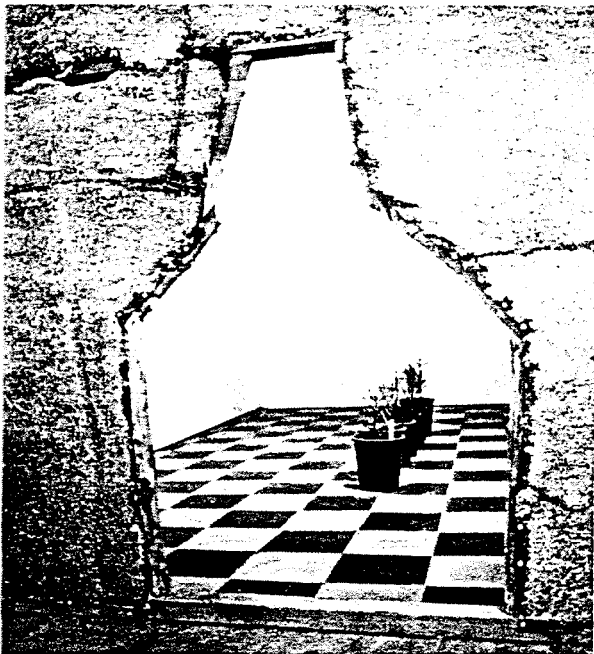
The Greek students at the American Farm School collected the paper and the people at the consulate helped you shred it?

DK:

Yes, and actually the consulate papers were in there as well. In the exhibition we created two rooms that were viewing screens: window screening stitched together and stretched over wood frames made of scavenged natural wood. We framed tiny little windows into these walls. The two-sided screen walls were filled with the shredded paper.

It was very compressed and very dense. It created this incredibly warm place: a pointillist mosaic of color and text. Inside one of the rooms was a puppet show, with puppets made of recycled materials. The people could work the puppets from outside. In one corner was a map of Greece made of shredded paper laid down on the ground. It was a mound, with Mt. Olympus about two or three feet tall.

In the other room there were seven trees, tiny seedlings. Seven is the number of trees that would have to be planted to replace the amount of paper that each Greek uses annually. There were didactics in the front part of the exhibition, on the porch area of the old mosque, but the intent of the environment was to use your senses to inform you. It was a very exciting project.



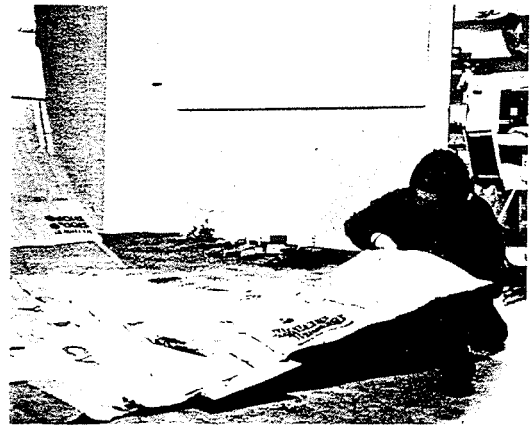
No Garbage Here, detail of the Tree Room, shredded paper, window screening, wood, seedlings.

MH:

Have you done any other work with paper that isn't pulped?

DK:

After the Thessaloniki show I went to Mass Art in Boston and did a workshop there with fiber students and 3-D students. We got a paper shredder donated and worked at shredding collected newspapers and papers from around the school: newspapers, paper bags, lunch bags, whatever. Unfortunately we jammed the shredder after about two hours, but we had enough to give us this wonderful mass. We created a giant shredded mass on the wall that just hung there and shedded. It was a strange environmental metaphor: something between a cheerleader's pom-pom for Casper the friendly ghost and a tired cloud.



Helper working on No Garbage Here II.

MH:

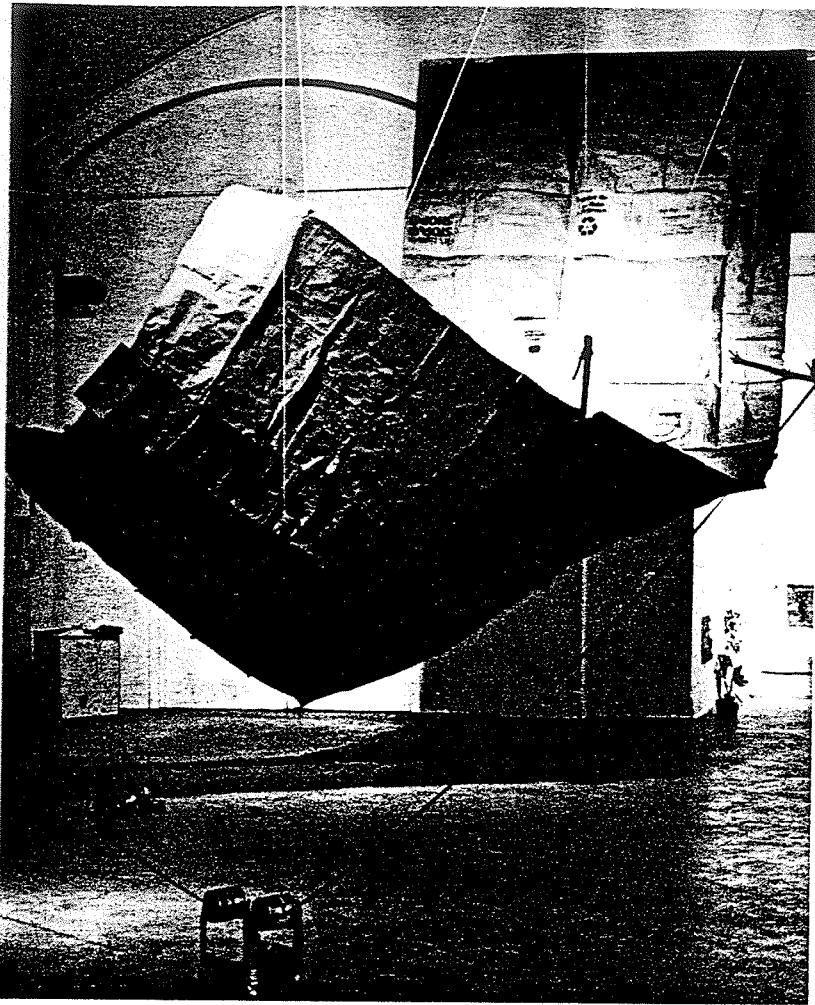
This thing really did shed? Did it fall apart?

DK:

Yes. The exhibition was only up for a few days. It was a collaborative work. We also sewed together a paper bag piece. I had done several stitched-together paper bag works previously. One at Mills College in 1983 had passages gleaned from books on the contributions of women to higher education, typed on the bags before I stitched them together. I Rhoplexed the work so it could serve as a sheathing for wooden frames, constructed from collected eucalyptus branches being trimmed from the trees in the area where the work was located. An alternative reading room for a campus of women.

At Mass Art we made a giant tent. There were three large parts: the tent; a metal shed that was made of cans riveted together – that had a shadow quote about using materials in a wiser manner; and the shredded paper that was shedding on the wall.

It was a curious dynamic because the paper bag tent could be moved by the people in the exhibit. It was just attached at one point to the wall and



No Garbage Here II, Dianne Katsiaficas, made with students at the Massachusetts College of Art. Sewn together paper bags.

then there were cords and lines that you could use to lift and lower it. Very interactive.

MH:

What I find exciting about your work over the last fifteen years, beyond the wonderful materiality of it, is the way you use paper: the obvious references that paper has to things such as letters, books, documents, maps; things that are very personal; things that have to do with the individual, that guide our lives, that we interact with every day, that carry specific information about place, about a particular history. There is a reference that is obvious to paper and is important to the larger issues that seem to engage your imagination.

DK:

I think that it's the idea that paper is a map of memory. It's a way to assemble, to acknowledge, and to mirror our experiences.

MH:

Paint on canvas is Art with a capital 'A', whether a good painting or a bad painting. Paper has other sets of references. Phone books carry very different messages from cotton lintens. It's exciting and engaging to know that a piece is made of phone books that contain the names of individuals who live in that very place. It's a wonderful transformation of materials.

DK:

It's also wondering how long we can afford to have cotton lintens. If we can learn to work with the materials that we have around us, maybe we can imbue that experience which we call art with a quality that brings that experience back to our immediate world and our daily activities.

MH:

Your work seems to be such a wonderful record of your explorations, your experiences. When you went to Arizona you collected the materials for the work you had in mind. It meant that you had to walk on the ground there and consider the light in a real, interactive way. You had to use the material of that place to make the work.

DK:

Yes, but it's also art about other people's experiences and their willingness to share these. It's also about the artist as a kind of mediator and paper as the mediating material for those experiences. In the making this work, I've walked paths with many other people.

MH:

I applaud your ability to create community. The specific situations you describe bring lots of different people together. Often art is an elitist activity. It doesn't have to be that way. You're opening things up and giving us important information on beautiful terms.