

TO TEACH A TEACHER

by Joel Armstrong

More than a year ago, I was invited to exhibit one of my wire installation pieces, "emersion)the sign of jonah," at the University of Northern Colorado. Before I was even halfway through installing the piece, I was asked if I would be willing to participate in their upcoming Winter Workshops, which are held each year for local public school teachers. The purpose of the workshops is to excite and provide a boost for teachers who may be running out of ideas for things to do in classes. The university wanted me to teach wire sculpture...nothing really close to what I was doing at the time, and nothing I had much interest in.

Thinking it would be a good experience, I decided I would give it a try.

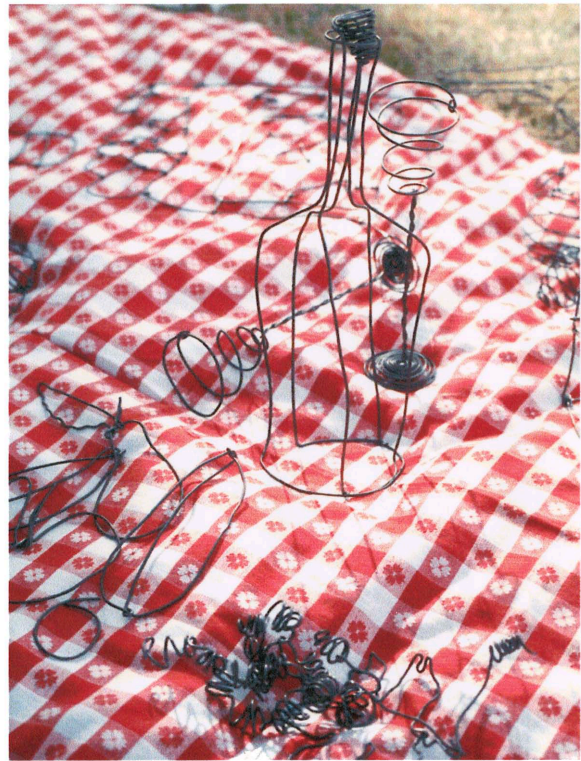
I was required to write up a short syllabus, which I kept rather vague. I planned on experimenting with the idea of building an installation piece cooperatively with a group of people who had never met. I dreamed of taking these schoolteachers...untrained in the art of installation art or wire construction...and turning them into Anne Hamiltons in two days' time. I bought enough wire to go around the school several times, 20 pairs of wire cutters, 20 glass vases, and \$60 dollars' worth of the most unique flowers that could be bought in the Loveland-Ft Collins area. My plan was to have them create a flower cart or flower show made entirely out of wire flowers. The flowers could either be placed down the hallways on pedestals that I had arranged for, or we could take the installation outside.

Besides having plans for what they would be doing for two days, I also purchased two

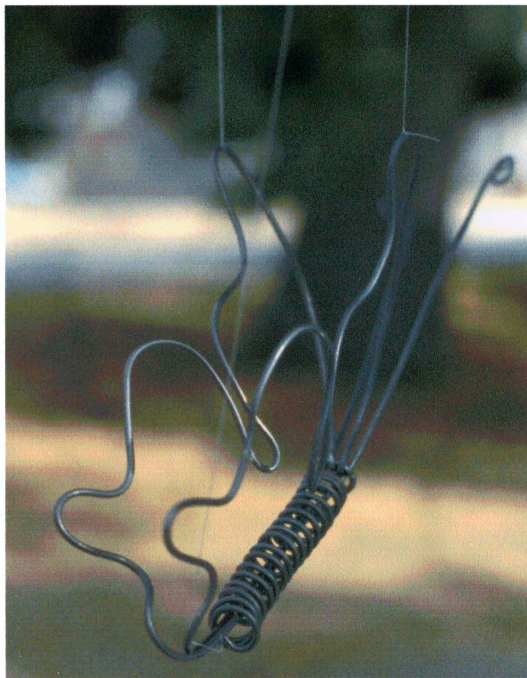


videos to play for them before we got going. One was of Alexander Calder and his flying Circus, and the other was about young artist Liza Lou who beads kitchens, backyards and presidential portraits...all with the help of her community. On the first morning, I showed then Liza, Alexander and a few of my installation images to give them the idea of where I was coming from. The class seemed hyped, and so was I!

The class turned out to be approximately 20 high school art teachers. What I soon discovered about high school art teachers is that they don't like to be told what to do. My first surprise



came when I told them that they were going to be drawing these flowers...and I was politely told, "No, we aren't." Some of the more timid teachers did try to do flowers; the others created sports cars, giant insects, and jewelry. (See, the jewelry class that they all really wanted to sign up for was filled, so I was the choice between coming here or staying home and watching Oprah.) Within the first hour, I had



lost complete control of these rebellious high school hoodlums. When it was almost time for us to head outside to eat our bag lunches on the lawn, I was still trying to figure out how to regain control...or lose my lunch. I told the class that after lunch it would be time to get on with the task at hand. Every one of them would create at least 10 flowers to go in the vases...and they would all go into the art books for this wonderful achievement.

About an hour after lunch, they were done with their flowers. (I was thinking at least a day and a half)...and the best word...the best word that I can



think of to describe them is...ah..."sucks." Here were 20 vases stuck with yucky flowers that I certainly didn't want to show to anyone. How quickly could I get back to Loveland and hide under the covers? I still had three hours and one day left to spend with these evil people, and I had to figure out what to do with them...besides hit them with their ugly flowers. I needed to take a deep breath and regroup quickly. I suggested a brainstorm session. Since the flowers didn't seem to make everyone happy, we needed a topic that would hold everyone's interest for the following day. There had to be guidelines. First of all, we had to choose a topic,

and everyone would need to stay on task. We were going to brainstorm more items than there were people, and if someone were to finish early, his or her job would be to choose something else and complete that item, too. After deleting ideas such as a day at the stock car races, I was pleased to accept a day at a picnic as our finished product goal. We brainstormed everything we could think of that would be on a picnic, including baskets, bees, ants, kids playing, birds, plates, food, etc. We filled a board with ideas.

On day two, I wasn't surprised that we had lost several people from the class, but the ones who remained were hard workers. It wasn't long before things began being crossed off the list on the board. We had wineglasses, wine bottles, and a loaf of bread quickly created out of wire. One of the biggest independent thinkers from the day before turned out to be one of the biggest helpers. We had a lunchtime



deadline for setting up our installation, so people were working fast. Someone went out and scouted out a site. Another brought in a red gingham tablecloth to lay down on the grass. I'm proud to say that the group came together, bonded, and proudly showed their finished work. They had learned something about art-work that comes together for a common goal...It was no longer "look what I did," but "look what we did".