

Altar Questionnaire/ for Kay Turner-P.O. Box 49828/Austin, Texas 78765
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Questions 1 & 2

I was born in Ames, Iowa on June 23, 1947. My parents were students at Iowa State University at that time. My mother is a retired medical technologist and my father is a retired mechanical and electrical engineer. My mother took art classes in college and shared her lifelong love of the arts with me. She grew up in a middle class family in Amarillo, Texas where we spent many summers and holidays with my maternal grandmother. It was there that I was first introduced to the Hispanic, Native-American, and African-American cultures. My mother had great respect for these groups and for “difference” in general. My father was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and grew up in an Irish and European community. There is an article from the Waterloo Courier that gives quite a bit of biographical information—I included it in this folder.

Neither of my parents are religious in the traditional sense. We did not attend church, though we supposedly belonged to the Presbyterian Church on the corner near our house. Our family was very matriarchal in that both my grandfathers died before I was born and so my father was the only male in the family. I have one sister, Ann, she is a writer in Los Angeles, and I had a second sister seven years younger who died when she was five of an extremely rare disease in which she did not grow mentally or physically beyond the three month-old stage, though she lived to be five. Thus I experienced the sibling at an early age.

I was a high achiever academically in high school, but an art course and a supportive art teacher my senior year influenced me to go on in art later. Initially I went to Iowa State University in Medical Technology (continuing to draw and make “things” on the side). I changed my major several times ending up in fashion design and merchandizing (as they had no Fine Arts). This was 1965-69 and my campus was a very active protest site in the 60’s so my interests tended to lie outside the classroom. After graduating I went to Chicago to work for a while and ended up attending the Art Institute of Chicago at a time when young Chicago artists like Jim Nutt, Gladys Neilson, and Ed Pascke were establishing themselves as the “Hairy Who”.

They were interested in “grassroots” and “outsider or visionary” art (and took an interest in several untrained, yet visionary, Chicago artists like Max Yoakim. This work was of great interest to me as well. My experiences in Chicago in the 60’s and early 70’s had a profound effect on my life long interest in figurative imagery, visionary art, and alternative forms (such as the altar). I think my first exposure to altars and roadside shrines may have been in Texas as a child, but the first I remember from my adult life was during a trip to Mexico in the early 1970’s. The altars in the small village churches and in each home struck me. I was also

profoundly affected by the small “house-shaped” shrines built along the side of the road in the Yucatan.

These shrines were generally container small altars for someone who had died in a car accident at the site. They were not buried there, but their spirit was housed there. Often I would see that 1 candle had recently been lit in the shrine, or I would observe a local woman leaving food, beer and flowers. Later I had the opportunity to experience Dias des los Meurtos in villages in Michoacan, Oaxaca, and outside of Mexico City.

In the early 70's I also backpacked in Europe for several months and saw similar roadside shrines in Italy, Spain, and Greece. In addition, I visited “visionary” sites like the Palaise Ideale (postman's place) in southern France and Gaudi's architecture in Barcelona. Both seem to me now to have influenced my later interest in creating “shrine-like” altars and sculptures. I began to take photographs of roadside shrines wherever I traveled and used this personal research project as a reason to travel.

I returned to Iowa City in 1973-76 to finish my MFA in painting and New Genres. Once again I was in the right place at the right time (for me). The Women's Art Movement was blossoming and several important women visited The University of Iowa Graduate School while I was there. In particular, Judy Chicago (who had once lived in Cedar Rapids, Iowa), Miriam Shapiro, Lucy Lippard and Mary Beth Edelson. Ana Mendieta (Cuban-American ritual-performance artist, now deceased) and I were greatly influenced by their ideas and work. Though I had been painting about the issues they presented, I began to invent alternate forms for my work and to involve myself in collaborative ritual-performance works.

A discussion of my “1976 All-American Glamour Kitty” video, event and installation, and of my “cat-masked goddess” alter ego performance in Greece, Egypt, and Japan are included in this folder. Generally, the performance aspect of my work was later celebrated in some sort of installation involving shrine and altar “forms”. That element of my work continues to this day, though the installations take priority over performance and much of my work since 1985 has focused on collaborations with disenfranchised individuals in our culture (homeless, terminally ill). I feel my early exposure and involvement with The Women's Art Movement or the 1970's, encouraged me in several ways: Using new forms to communicate new content; a renewed interest in newer forms like performance, ritual, installation, video, site-specific work, work done in public and private spaces outside the usual artists' venue of galleries and museums; and an interest in taking a revised look at art history, images of women in art, and the role of women in creating art (i.e. the role of quilting, fiber arts, chine painting, etc. as “minor arts” rather than “high” art forms).

In 1974-75, I received a one-year position as instructor at Mount Mercy College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa about 20 minutes from Iowa City where I was completing graduate school. Mount Mercy College is a four-year private liberal arts college formerly associated with the Catholic Church. Until 1965 it was a women's college, now it is coed with about 1200 students and 40 art majors from a variety of backgrounds. On the campus there is a very eccentric folk architecture site, The Grotto of Redemption, built in the 1940's by William Lightner. I also recently came

across photos in the school archives of “Isadore Ducan” style, white-toga scarf dances from the 1920’s, May Day rituals at the Grotto, and other images that are uncanny in their similarity to my cat-masked ritual performances at Greek ruin sites in the 1970’s! Though I have had opportunity to take other positions, and I do leave for a year sabbatical every six years, I have stayed at Mount Mercy. I am a Professor of art teaching New Genres, Advanced Painting, and Drawing and Art Education.

I have never been married and am not living with anyone. I have always had at least one kitty cat in residence. I have close relationships with my family and with people I teach to have made art with over the years. I have a circle of women friends who have consistently given me support in all aspects of my life. I maintain a studio in an historic building in Cedar Rapids. In 1990 I helped start a now very successful alternative arts space in that building-THE CSPS HALL-which is artist run and brings in international, regional and local artists, performers and musicians working in alternative ways.

The shrines and altars I create myself and those I create in collaboration with others have given me a sense of connectedness to others. I feel elements of these altar and shrines deal with the physical and visual manifestations of spiritual concepts. It is my belief that art can help make meaning of one’s experiences in life, whether those be “ordinary” or “extra-ordinary” experience. I also feel art can serve as an intellectual critique of “culture” in general. I hope to work with both these issues of content in my work. The roadside shrines of Latin America and the Mediterranean, the vernacular architecture and fold art environments of the Midwest and elsewhere, and the household altars and shrines I’ve traveled from India to Egypt have all effected my work greatly. I think the one great risk the “Avant-Garde” does not always take is to communicate with a broad audience and to observe and credit the methods of “art-making” used in daily lives of people throughout the world. I am interested in the deeper relationships between personal experience, myth, and culture. I want my sculptures and installations to create a ritualistic ambience not unlike that of some “bizarre” roadside shrine. For me such shrine embody the peculiar, the ridiculous, and the meaningful qualities of life.

Questions #5, 6, and 7:

My altar/installations are sometimes very personal and dedicated to individuals in my family, or to friends, to pets. These altars are generally in my studio or home and I only include them in my public installations occasionally. My public artwork generally retains the shrine/altar form and specific installations are often dedicated to a group of people-individuals in state run hospitals, etc. I have enclosed slides of the work done in these categories over the past twelve years. I will describe in greater detail a couple of those pieces for which slides are enclosed. I have also included in this packet copies of statements and reviews or articles discussing these artworks. I hope this is what you’re looking for. As you can see I can go on and on about all this so just ask if you need further information.

I have numbered these slides and will use those numbers for descriptions below. Please feel free to keep any slides you would like to use or keep on file.

Slides #1-4: *Windows*, 1995-96, created in collaboration with seriously ill children and their families (many from low-income families) at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics Pediatrics wards during a one year period of weekly workshops dealing with their responses to illness and hospitalization. Building is 8 feet high, five feet deep, and eight feet wide. It is constructed of wood covered with 36-gauge aluminum. The exterior is covered with writings and drawings created by the children and their families during workshops (see enclosed articles for discussion of content of notes and workshops). There are five small video monitors mounted in the “windows” of the structure. On the loop videotape are the faces of the various children who participated staring motionless out the “windows”. Inside are more writings on metal by seriously ill children, this time in a warm copper colored metal. There are also five “library” type writing desks projecting from the walls (these function like altars dedicated to the children who created the work). On each is an open blank book where visitors can respond to what they are experiencing. The writing in these books is amazing and could constitute another piece.

This piece is now in the Des Moines Art Center and is on long-term display there. Sometimes people draw in the books inside; others respond to specific metal notes or writings, others write poems or tell their own experiences with illness and death. The piece stood in the main lobby of The University of Iowa Hospitals for 6 weeks in 1995 and was seen by over 50,000 people. This piece has reached more people, and had a powerful effect on visitors. I credit this to the content of the metal messages the children and their families contributed. My contribution was the suggestion to communicate with others about their personal experiences with illness and the form of the sculpture/installation itself. Sometimes people leave small objects inside the “shrine” or on the “altar-like” structure where the books are, but most contributions are in the form of drawings or writings.

Slides #5-8: *Thank-You Shrine*, part of an installation at The Cedar Rapids Museum of Art and at I.A.R. Gallery in New York in 1994-95. Slide 5 shows shrine in Cedar Rapids. It is 8 feet high x 5 feet wide x 2 feet deep. The shrine/altar was dedicated to all the homeless individuals who collaborated with me in creating the larger installation in the CR Museum (elements of which are seen in some of the other slides I've included). A metal border around the outside edge says repeatedly “home is where the hearth is, home is where the heart is---home is where the earth is---home is where?...” The walls of the top section of the altar space are covered in writings and drawings by homeless individuals from shelters throughout the US. (I've been working on projects in homeless shelters as one part of my work since 1986).

Also included in the top selection is found folk art (home crafts collage found at a Salvation Army Thrift Store) of an idealized log cabin overlooking a forest, ocean and mountains! The picture is painted but has real bark attached to the surface creating the mountains and house. Below this is an old “hearth”—or part of one from a gas fireplace. In the bottom section of the altar I've written on metal the names of all who participated in this continuing project dealing with home as a physical manifestation for a spiritual concept. In the center of the floor beneath the names is a cast ceramic black cat typical of those made at ceramic green ware shops

for peoples yards or homes. The ceramic car has personal meaning for me beyond its representation of “home” and “hearth”, as it looks exactly like my own cat of 18 years who died around the time of the exhibits opening. The cat is on a motorized disc that allows it to spin slowly. On a small metal note near the cat I’ve written, “Feel free to leave small objects and notes.” This aspect of the altar suggests participation from visitors. The response was amazing. I have a box full of interesting notes, photos, objects, sales receipts, business cards, keys, found notes, grocery lists, money, cigarettes, etc. left over the five week period of the exhibit. I also noticed that the “offerings” would change from day-to-day. For example, one day there would be a cigarette left and the next day the cigarette would be gone and there would be a quarter in its place! For me it became an altar to everyday life as well as to those who created the installation.

Slide #8 is one of several examples of metal drawings and notes created by a young man from a small Appalachian town who had come to Washington DC to earn money for his family. He had no education, was not able to find work, and eventually became alcoholic and homeless. This picture shows him in a hospital bed remembering his mother cooking a big meal (in window on left side) and the words “The Other Side of Time”. He shows an I.V. hooked to his body and has words indicating that “hope” is going into his body and “alcohol” is on its way out. Below he also wrote “ A thousand points of light—ha” his bitter feelings about the administrations approach to homelessness in Washington DC.

Slide #9 and 10 show a recent installation at AIR Gallery in New York. The floor is covered with metal notes by children. On the wall are a series of drawings by children I found in a London trash bin (transferred to metal and framed) with small chains connecting them to a 3” x 5” metal books I have created from found letters. These rest on down pillows covered with metal pillowcases. The piece is titled “Pillowpicturestory” and is an altar of sorts to my own experiences working in homeless shelters and hospitals during the last ten years. Ironically, beds and getting onto one of out of one- seem important elements for both groups.

Slide #11 is an 8” x 12” metal note created by a seventeen year-old woman living in a shelter in 1990 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She described her drawing to me as representing her favorite place—under the bridge by the river looking out at the water”. She had been the victim of sexual abuse by her mother’s boyfriend until she sought shelter.

Slide #12-37 show details and overall shots of several other installations and altar type elements of installations. I’ve marked each slide with basic information— if you’d like more information just let me know and I can explain in more detail.