

John Clair Watts / INTERVIEW

Ann Rosenberg met with John Clair Watts first, informally, in his basement apartment at 2436 West 8th where tapes vie for space with art and found industrial objects. A recent work called Assisted Lightweight Sisyphian Roller was a focus for attention. This sculpture, a metal trough with a pulley operated 'stone,' makes light of a heavy myth. It is a work that philosophically and technically continues the standards of the pieces that composed Watts' first one-man show at the University of British Columbia's Fine Arts Gallery in January '81. These were discussed on tape at Ann's place in July and are illustrated here.

AR How do your ideas come? Do you daydream and suddenly, *wham*, you have this phrase, this vision?

JCW The really good ones you end up seeing on your screen. The things I make are extensions of me (my thought), rather than being a cohesive extension of the materials or the forms. As you noticed, I seldom make two pieces that are the same, nor do I work in series — although at some point I ought to be able to do that too. I work this way because there's a lot to say. On the other hand, I like working with materials. I go to the junk yard and play with what I get there. Sometimes I'll put thirteen pieces together before I make one. That's what I do when I don't have anything on my screen. I try to have the object dictate itself by assembling all these things.

AR Where do you think you are right now?

JCW Right now I see myself relative to insecurity and that's my battle . . . just trying to find out what the fears are . . . , what you would do if you can do anything and why it is that you won't/can't do it. And I'm looking around at other people and thinking about the kinds of insecurities they have and that, in turn, makes me think about all kinds of personal myths. The

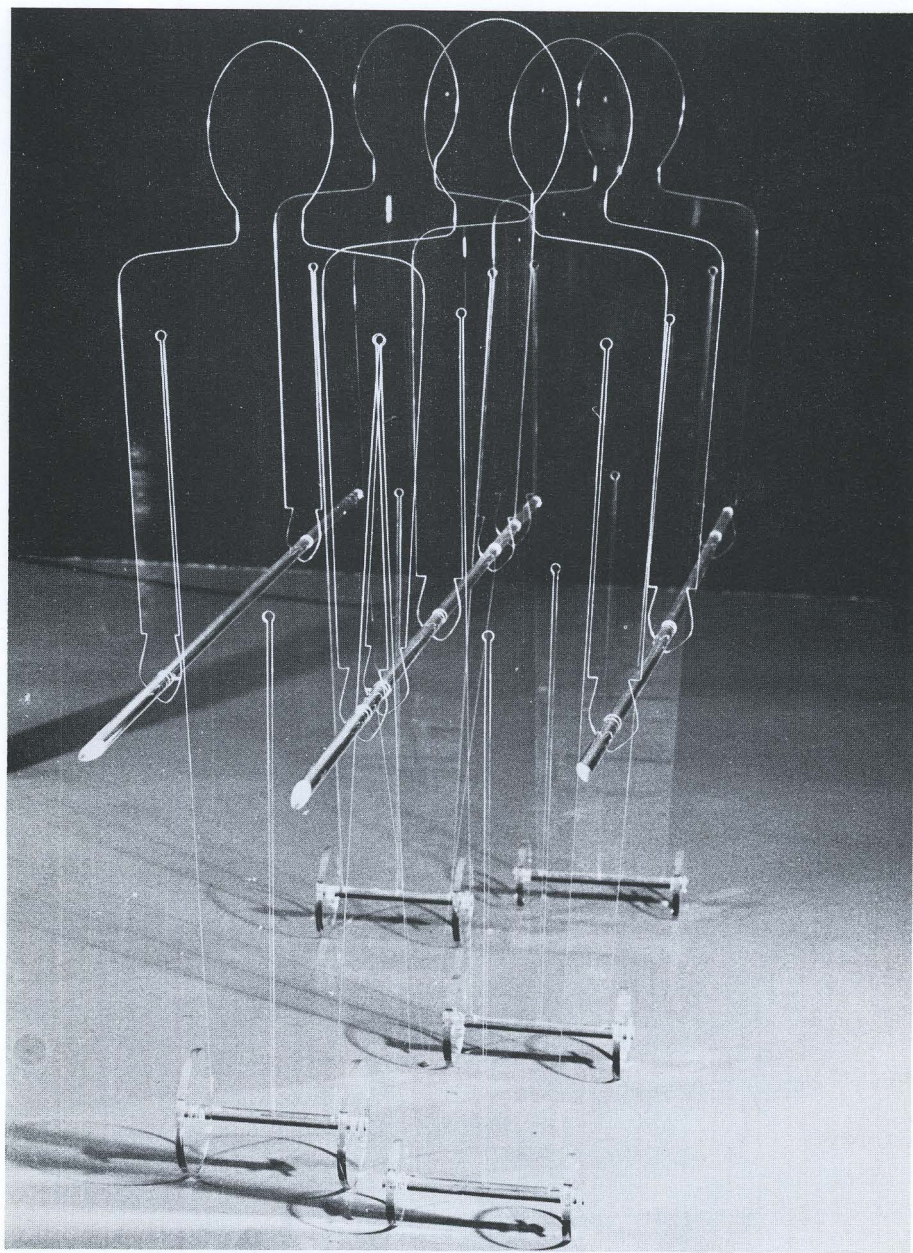
world to me is a combination of a whole number of myths, like get married, get a job, you're given these as a birthright. At some point, taking the responsibility for your actions means that you're willing to deal with the insecurity of knowing that you're everything you make yourself. . . . You're absolutely unique on the planet, so why would you want to look and act like a whole number of other people? . . . So, a lot of my pieces are about why people get into routines. Some of my work is about people who have run out of the energy to keep trying. *Grouped Coasters* would be a piece like that.

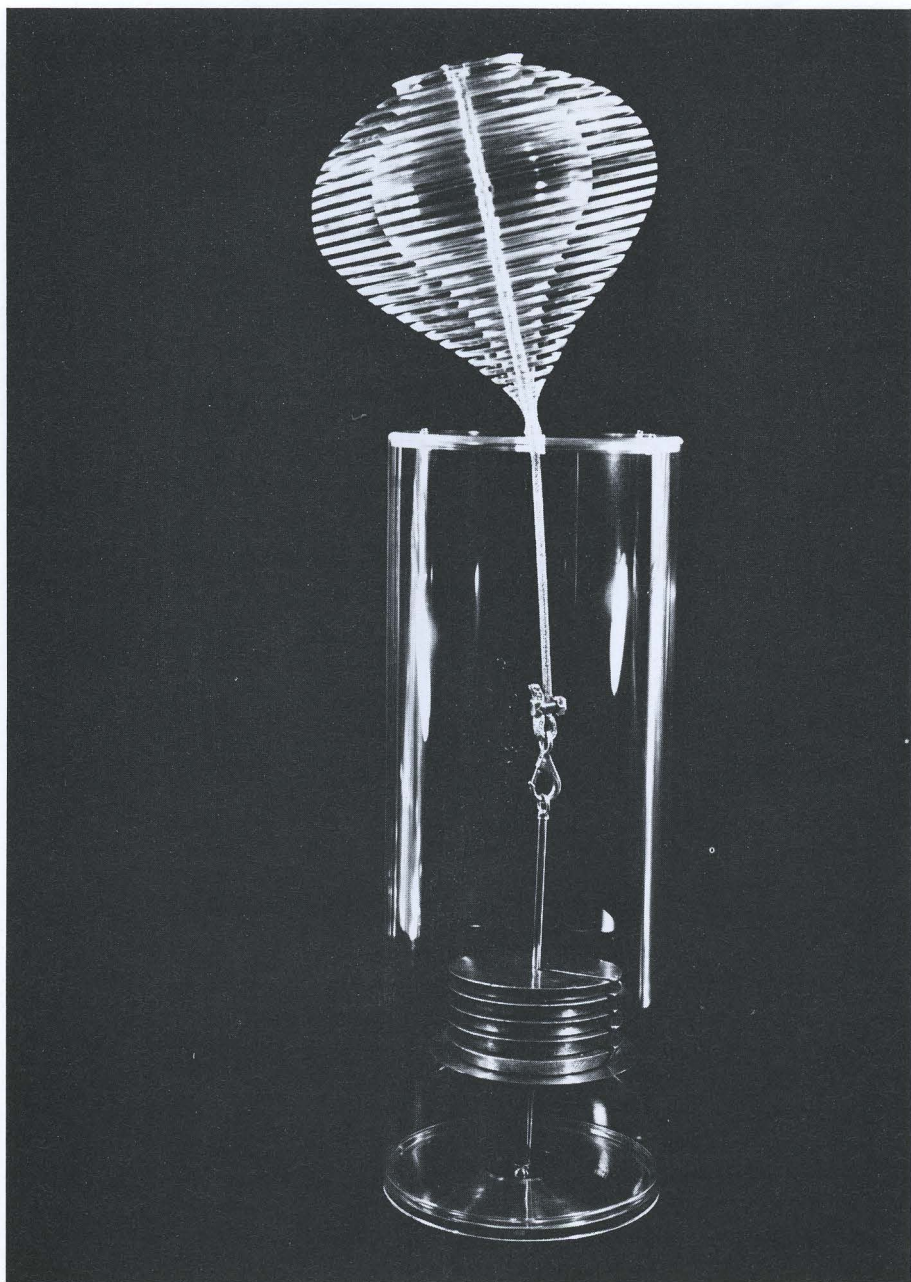
There's an image in *The Waste Land* — although *Grouped Coasters* wasn't based on that — where T. S. Eliot has the automatons coming over the bridge. Somehow, to me, that's a very strong image and one that I can't get rid of.

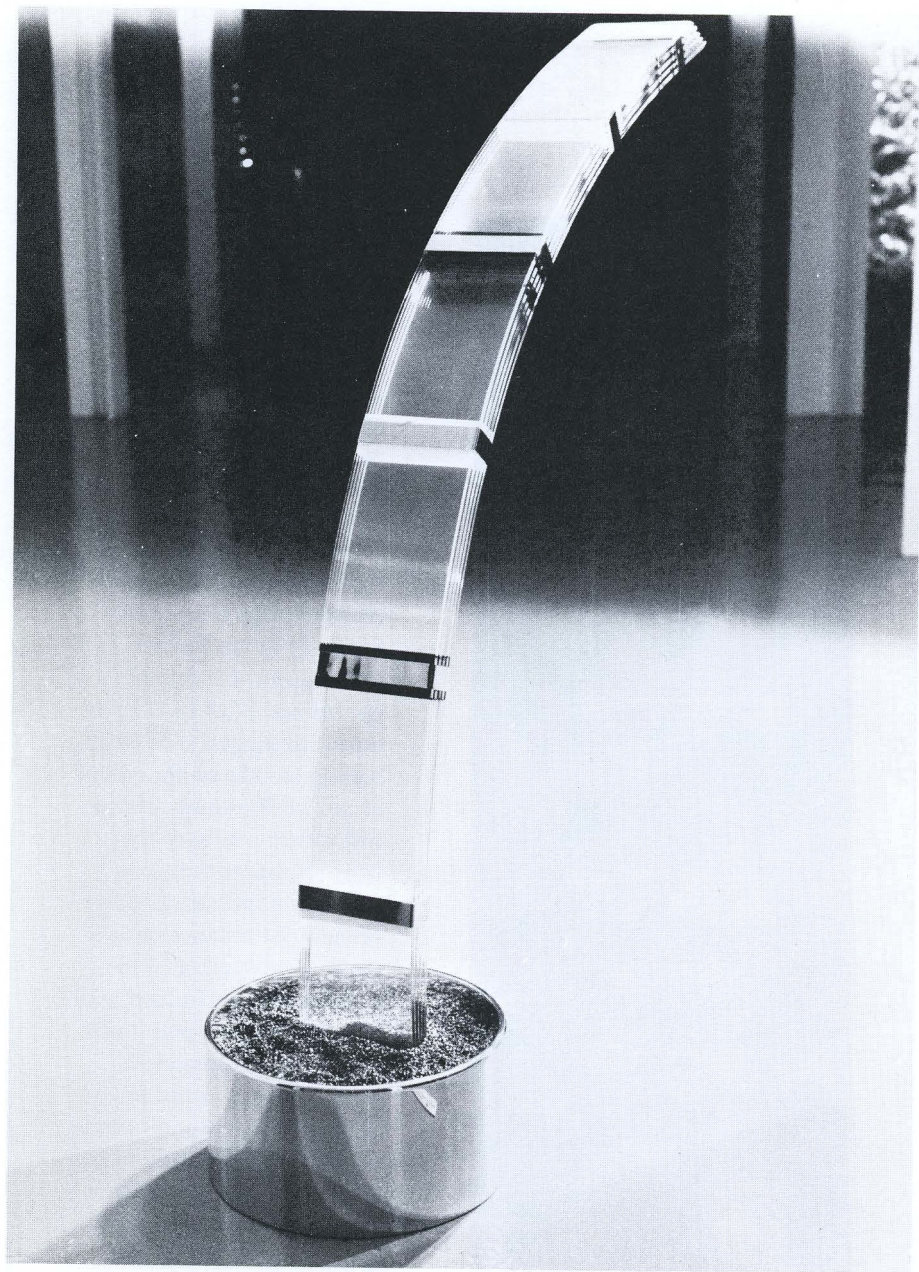
In my work, I'm trying to strike a balance between believing in abstracts and dealing in abstracts. Going to the place where no one else will understand you, but coming to terms with the fact that there is just eating, sleeping and breathing. . . . You wonder about the paths to go. You think about your friends who are married, who are busy buying objects and you think, that's empty, but you worry that in the end you might be holding onto something that's even emptier. On the other hand, I think it's the fulfilling moments that you have, that you don't even know you're raving until you look back on them . . . that keep us going on. They make you realize that you can do anything you want, that you can make anything happen, including your head space.

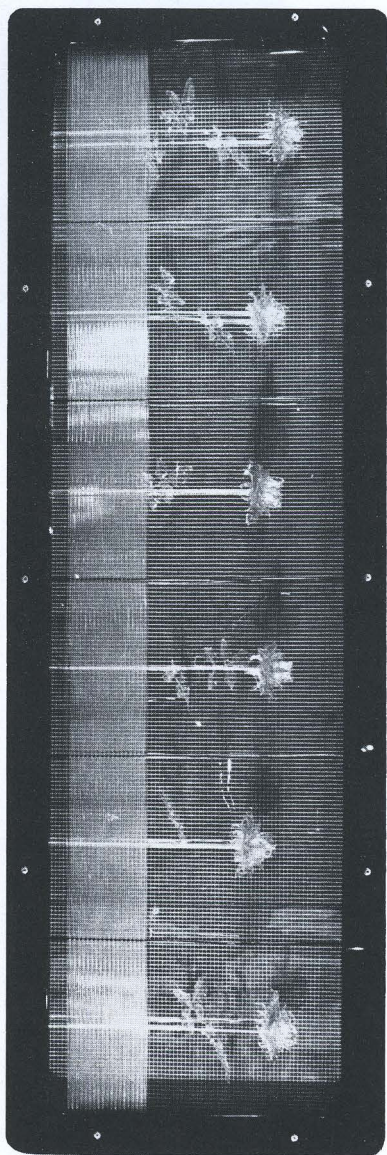
AR Is *Sisyphus* (and the other works) to do with these myths, these insecurities?

JCW Well, *Assisted Lightweight Sisyphian Roller* represents to me, the American *way of work*, in terms of the pain people will take on. You can wheel this object up and down and say, "I'm working, I'm working!" *Off Centre Under Pressure* would represent the feeling that I always have that fulfillment isn't something that you live with. . . . There are brief moments when you pass between the ying and the yang . . . The top of the sculpture implies that movement; the pressure is the weight, the anxiety you feel when you're under pressure, when you know you'd rather be upright.

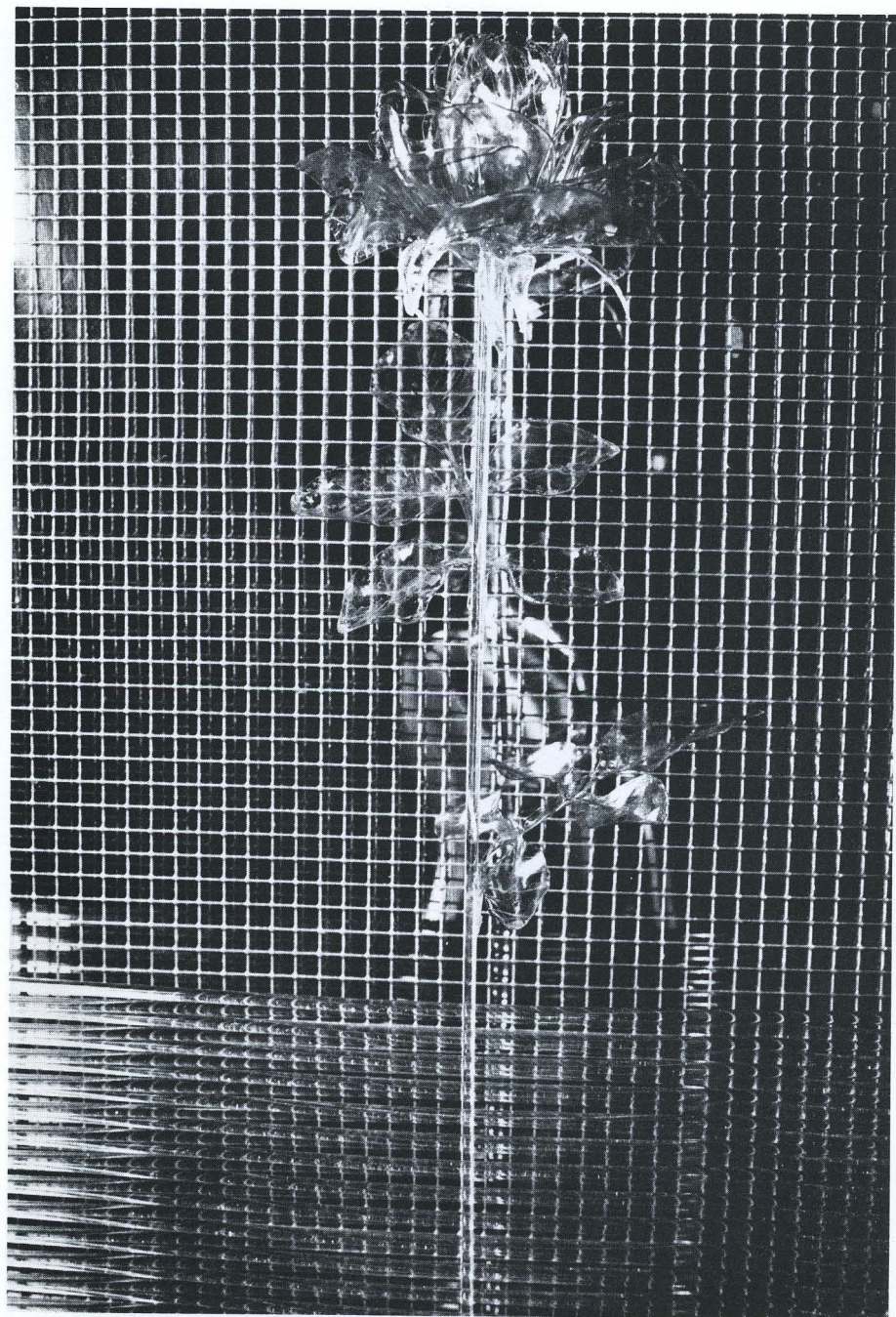


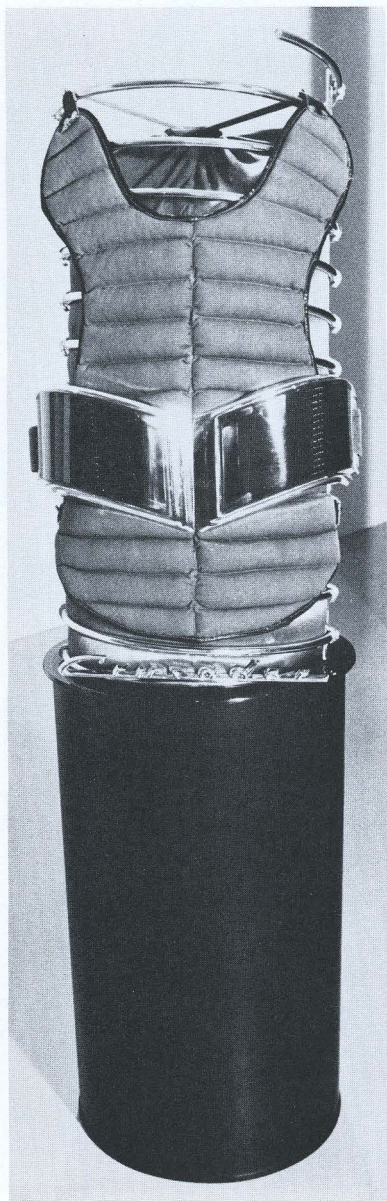






I think of sociopsychological myths, too. There's two kinds of half imaginary in *Half Imaginary Rainbow*. First, you have to imagine the colours, because the 'rainbow' is clear plastic with black and white dividers for the acrylic bow, strapped together with stainless steel. Secondly, you must mentally complete the rainbow. The rainbow carries with it the implication of the pot of gold at one end, and that is materialized for you. This piece represents my feeling that for every living concept, one must supply the colour. *Restrained Wall Flowers* is meant to suggest that we're willing to take on the colour of our backgrounds. People will reflect you back to yourself rather than presenting an individual point of view. At a dance or at a party, we are all of us to some extent, restrained wall flowers. It was a real problem to make those clear flowers. I had lots of fancy ideas, but in the end I made each one individually in the oven, melting plastic over the mold, pushing it down by hand until it got cool. The screen is hardware cloth. The frame is plexiglass and the backdrop,





polished steel. *Death of a Crusader* is composed around a chrome coil that sticks out at the sides, and the thought was to suggest someone who persisted in wearing a uniform he'd outgrown, who persisted in playing the role. The red bag at the top that was tied, that bulged out through the top of the coil, is kind of like a body bag. The lights on the belt, the red catcher's chest protector is a parody on uniforms.

AR The colour in this piece is splendid . . .

JCW Well, mostly I stay with the colour of the material. Material colour is the range of colour I can use . . . The materials I choose are my reaction to my heavy hippie period when you related to everybody in terms of organic materials. I figured I'd use the more contemporary non-organic materials and, at that time, I experimented with electronics. I discovered that such devices took time and maintenance. The lights go out. It's enough to give you a nervous breakdown.

AR *Angelica* is electronic . . .

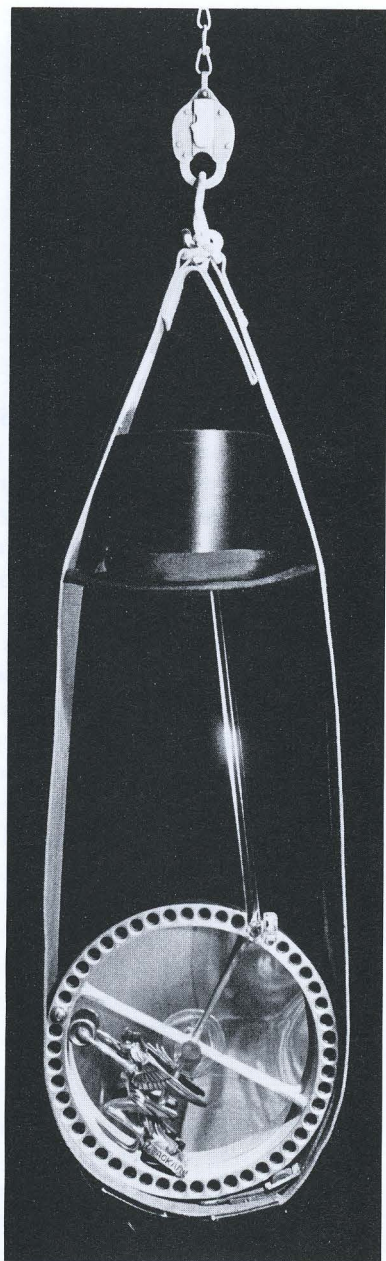
JCW Yes, there's the lights that are going around, that are

essentially about *time*. The angel with the roller would be essential man, just rolling, rolling and rolling like a rat on a whatsit. The lights, the L.E.D.S. that flash here and there are those brief illuminated moments, those fulfilling moments that make you feel there's more out there than you can comprehend. . . . that there's something you can tap, if you try. The hat was just the stereotypic hat. Just placing it up there was, for me, important. I can't define what it is, but for me it's obvious what it is.

The piece came out of the materials. I put the materials together and ended up with that. The whole thing is tied together in an arrow belt, which is a helicopter belt for lifting objects.

AR *Angelica* reminds me especially of the piece you've recently finished, your Sisyphian toy. The hat reminds me of those moments of high you talked of, like Fred Astaire with his hat.

How does *Support System* fit into your material and philosophical schemes?



JCW Well, the inside of *Support System* was the beginning of the piece. I had those six round plates and I was going to hold them together. They were probably huge copper lamp shades. I took them and stripped them, pounded the dents out of them and I put them all together and I was sure that I could hold them all together with turnbuckles on the inside and cables. To make a rigid structure, I thought I could use a couple of plexiglass rods holding them out while the turnbuckles pull them in. Well, I fooled around with that idea for a long time, then I had to fake it. As it is now with the weights and cables, everything you see is interdependent. If I take one of the weights away it will swing or it will fall down . . . I see it as something like what most people have — a support system. You'll like me if I like you; if you promise not to be different tomorrow, then I'll promise not to be different tomorrow and we both won't change together. And in some way, the system will never fall apart. The whole world is a huge support system; it's looking for agreement rather than for disagreement. Disagreement is an intellectual sharp point, something you hone your own opinion against, something which may make you feel secure, your support system. And you lose it all if you take one piece away. As I said in my statement for the U.B.C. show: "I long to align myself in the one or more myths, yet I desire even more to avoid the complacency that accompanies being the one who knows anything. No one should be without a question. I'll want to keep asking, just like Gauguin in 1897: 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?'"



John Clair Watts / IMAGES

Assisted Lightweight Sisyphean Roller, 1981, stainless steel, aluminum, nylon rope, 2.7 m x 2.5 m.

Grouped Coasters, 1981, plexiglass, 2.13 m x .45 m.

Off Centre and Under Pressure, 1980, plexiglass, brass, lead, 1.2 m x .38 m.

Half-Imaginary Rainbow, 1980, plexiglass, stainless steel, brass, aluminum, 1.2 m x .91 m x .25 m.

Restrained Wallflowers, 1980, plexiglass, stainless steel, hardware cloth, 1.8 m x .60 m.

Detail, *Restrained Wallflowers*.

Death of a Crusader, 1980, chromed steel, Opel tail lights, cloth, catcher's pad, plexiglass, tin, 1.5 m x .40 m.

Angelica, 1979, solid state electronics, Aero belt, top hat, Packard symbol, glass, 1.2 m x .30 m x 1.5 m.

Support System, 1980, copper, aluminum, acrylic, stainless steel, 2.13 m x 1.2 m.