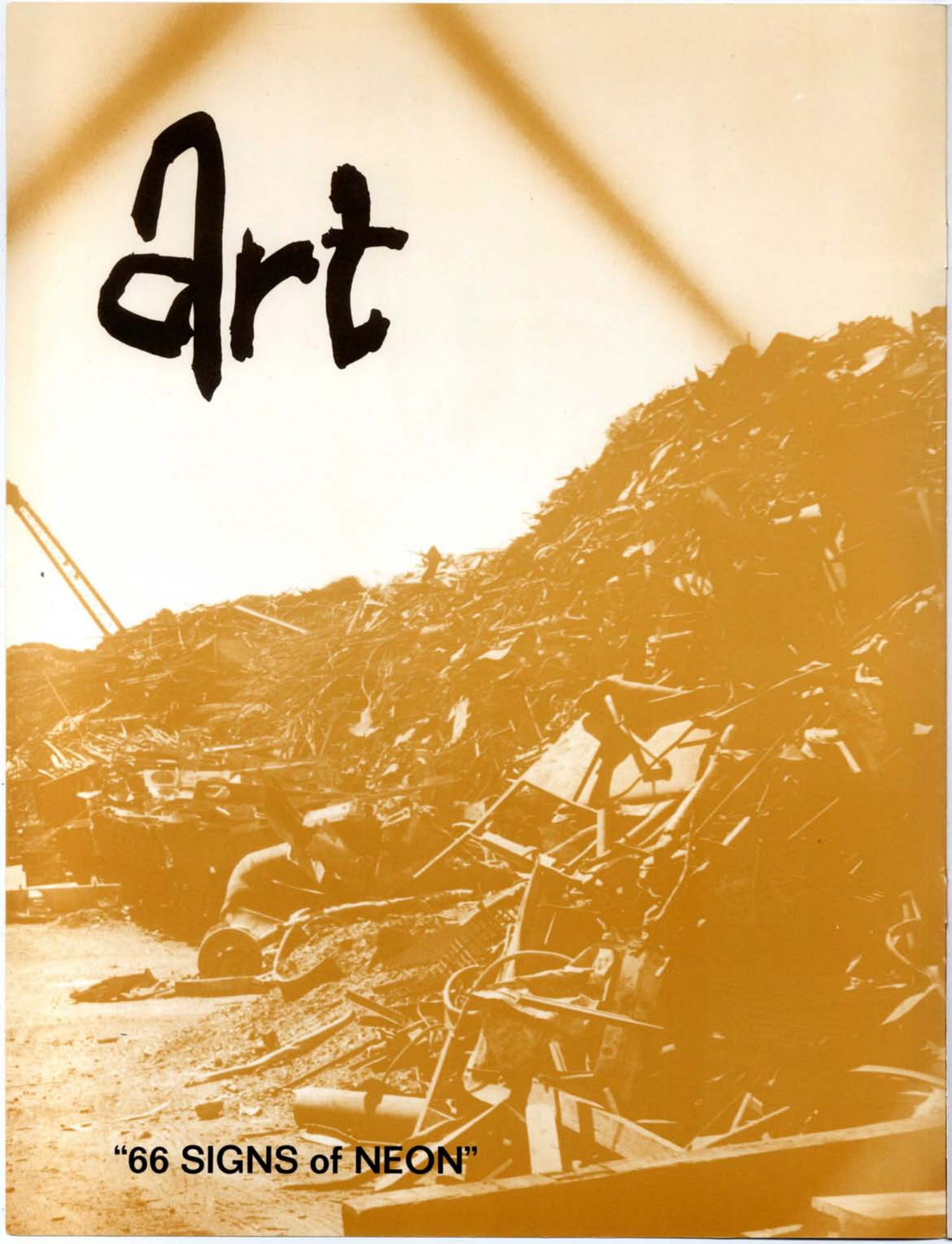
junk

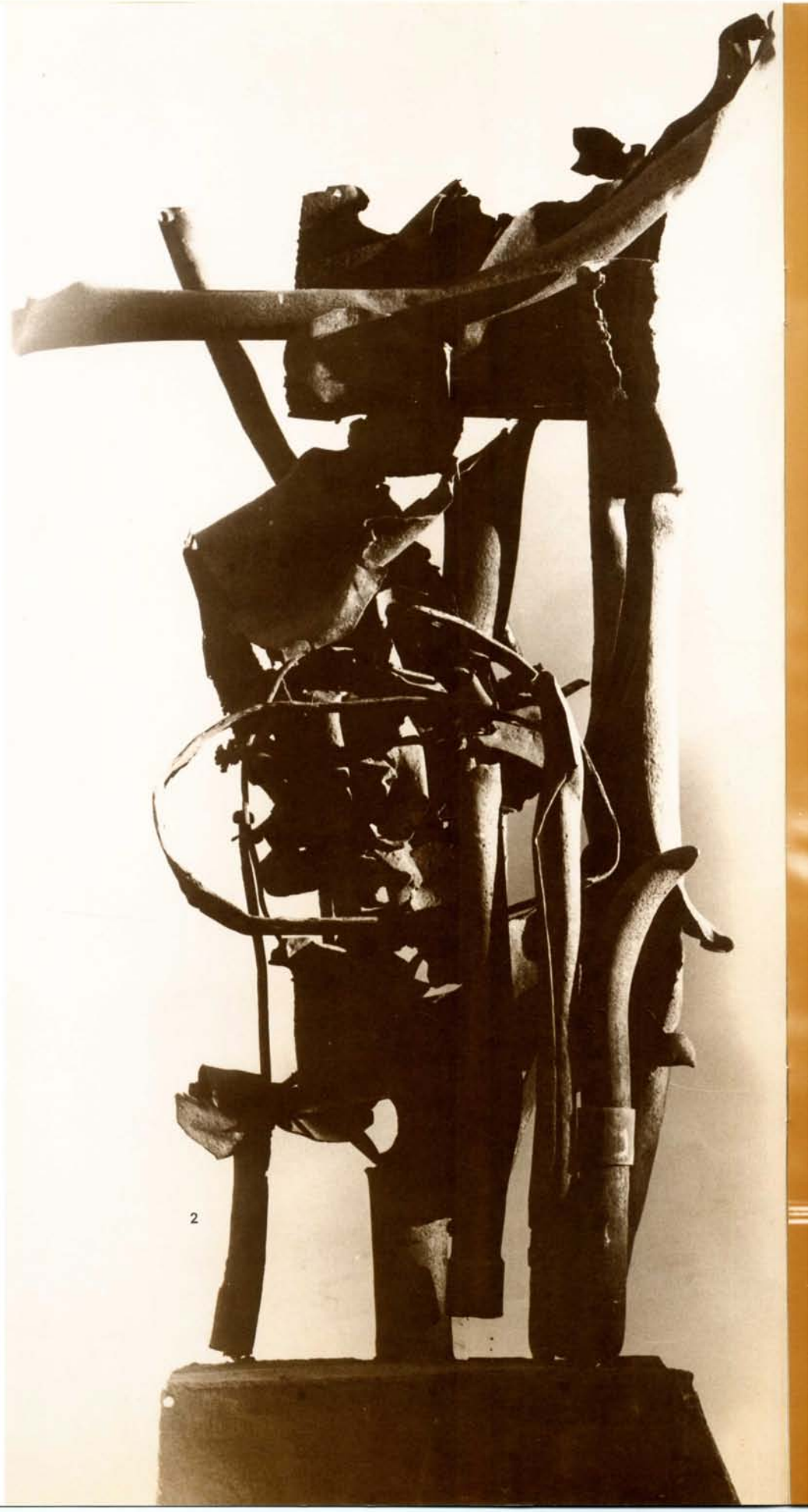
art



"66 SIGNS of NEON"

SIR WATTS

1



2

The Art of Communication as a Creative Act

66 Signs of Neon exists on several levels: as an art exhibition dominated by assemblages of artifacts of the Watts riots; as a one-to-one format of communication between individuals who otherwise would not or could not communicate; as an evolving system of philosophy.

For **66 Signs of Neon,** the time of conception was the Watts holocaust of August, 1965. **Sixty-six** was born nearly 12 months later, in a labor of 30 days immediately preceding the First Annual Watts Art Festival, where the collection initially was exhibited. The festival, expected to be the life span of **66 Signs,** became instead merely its infancy.

The objects of art jabbed the viewer low in the abdomen, squeezed his heart, pricked his mind. It communicated with those blind to its artistic excellence, as well as with those who saw. Unsolicited invitations for showings began to trickle in, then cascade, as further exhibits expanded its circle of advocates. This child of the Watts tragedy now is traveling through major California cities, and as it evolves and matures—new pieces are continually added—there is hope that it will tour the nation, if not beyond. Funds raised by the exhibitions will be partially used to build a permanent gallery to house the collection.

Here briefly then is the story of **66 Signs of Neon,** told primarily in the words of Noah Purifoy, who with Judson Powell, another artist, created the first of the art works and formed the nucleus of the dedicated group now involved:

"Judson and I, while teaching at the Watts Tower Art Center, watched aghast the rioting, looting and burning during the August happening. And while the debris was still smoldering, we ventured into the rubble like other junkers of the community, digging and searching, but unlike others, obsessed without quite knowing why.

"By September, working during lunch time and after teaching hours, we had collected three tons of charred wood and fire-moulded debris. Despite the involvement of running an art school, we gave much thought to the oddity of our found things. Often the smell of the debris, as our work brought us into the vicinity of the storage area, turned our thoughts to what were and were not tragic times in Watts: and to what to do with the junk we had collected, which had begun to haunt our dreams."

The two artists at last decided to build with the found objects "a sculptured garden" around the Tower Art Center, but before they had completed their plans, they learned that due to lack of funds the school would be closed in March, leaving them "among the community of the unemployed." Their thoughts then turned to the impending first art festival, formally titled "The Simon Rodia Commemorative Watts Renaissance of the Arts," scheduled for Easter Vacation week. Noah and Judson were already committed to participate in some fashion, but their role had not yet been delineated.

"It dawned upon us that unemployment for the month of March gave us the time to do something worthwhile for the Festival. Naturally the junk we had collected came to mind. But the validity of its use as an art expression did not occur to us until we came across the McCone Report, the findings of the Governor's Commission on the causes of the riots. We thought it a good report—that it advocated most things necessary for the betterment of the community. However, we observed that there was no mention of art education. Education, yes, but not art education.

"This was our cue. We decided that **66 Signs** could establish its validity by becoming an addition to the McCone Report. We could become that ingredient which had been omitted...It is not unreasonable to state that everyone is creative, that creativity ranks alongside food and shelter as absolute necessities. But art education in most public schools is seen as mere recreation. Yet in reality it is that aspect of education which stimulates the whole process of learning.

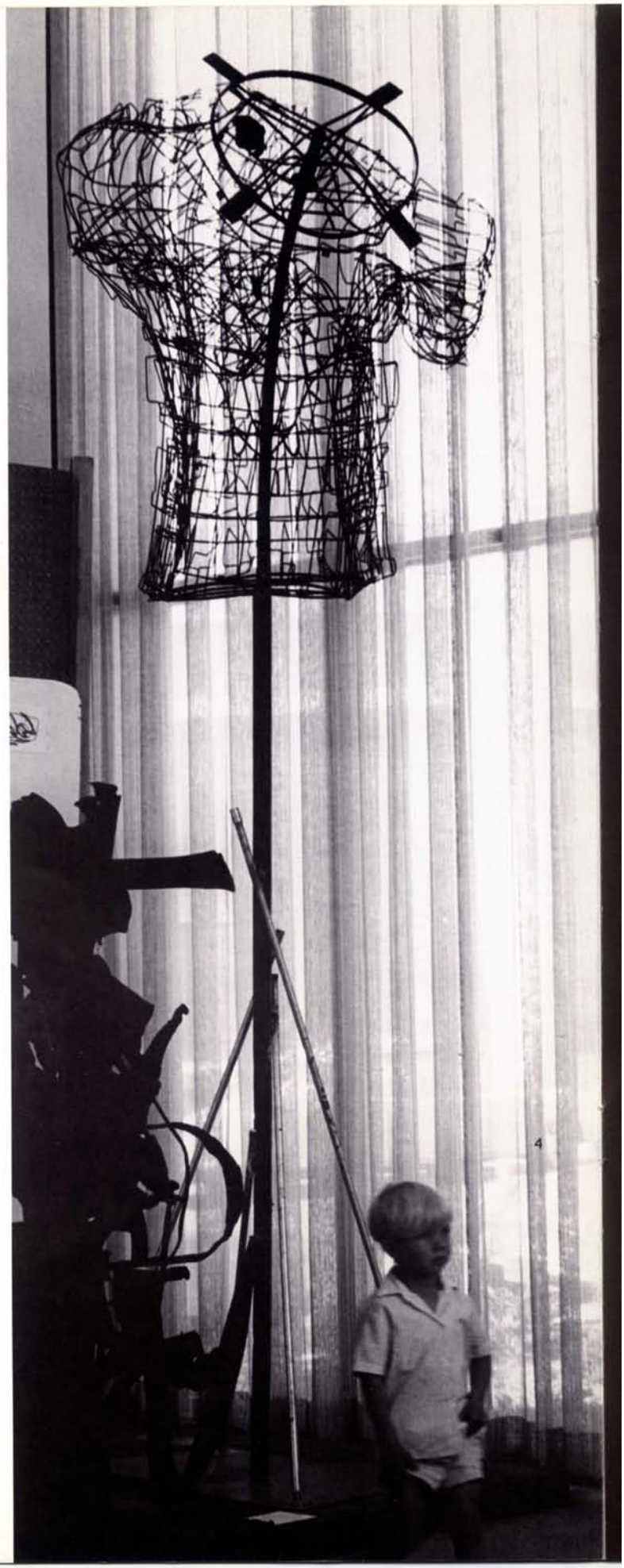
"We recognize that to rediscover himself, each person need not become a graphic artist. But we are certain that, child or adult, whatever one's potential is, it should be given the opportunity to express itself."

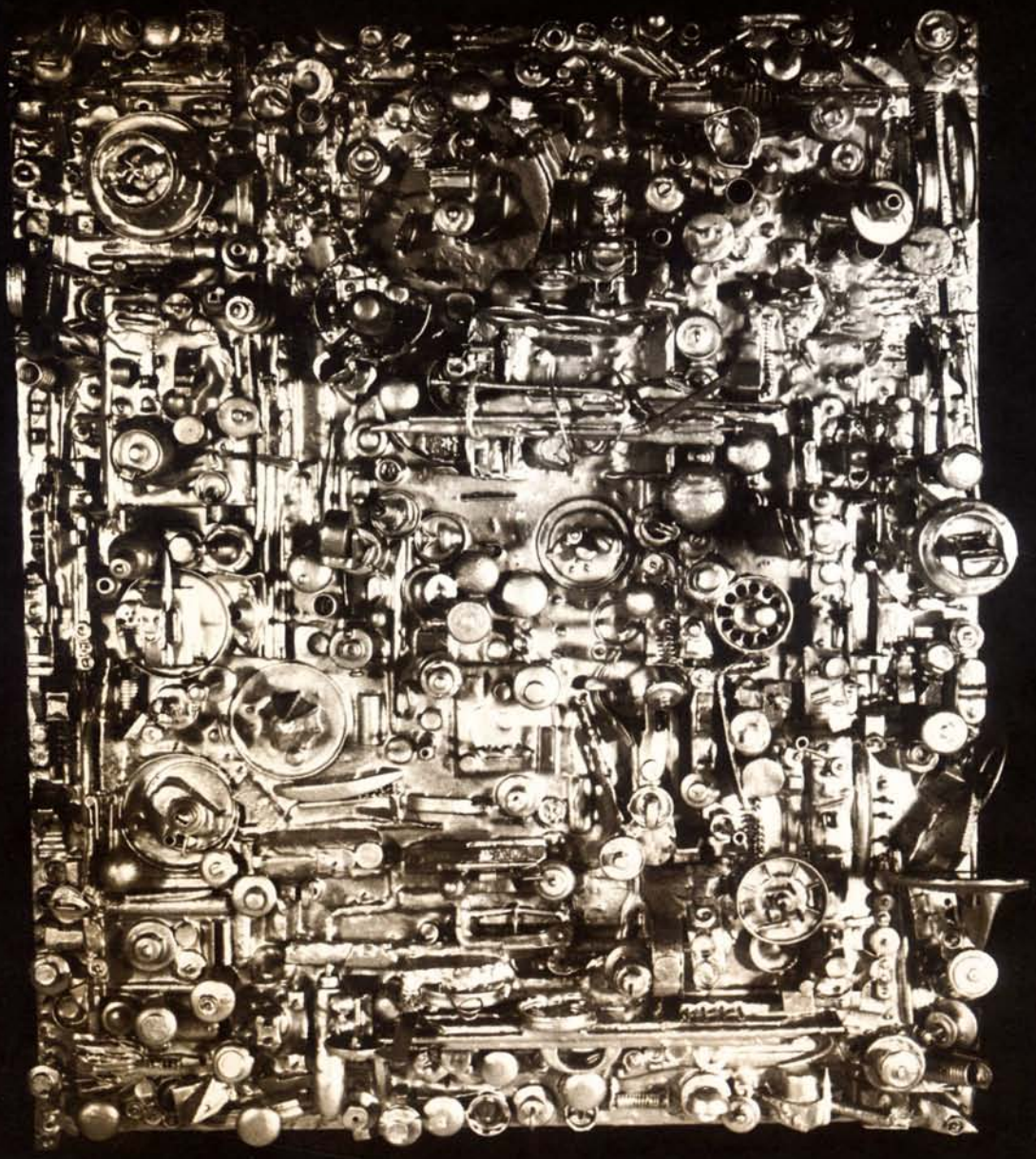
Thus **66 Signs** began as an expression of the necessity for art education, affirming the importance of this avenue of self-expression to individuals in the community of Watts.

Noah and Judson began with six assemblages created from the lead drippings of melted neon signs, artifacts of the riots. As their work continued they recruited six other professionals skilled in the plastic and graphic arts. In concert, the group set out to create **66** separate works of art for the festival, in the incredibly brief period of 30 days. They labored literally night and day, groping through "the glittering, twisted, grotesquely formed materials, each interpreting in his own way the August happening"; and they achieved their goal.

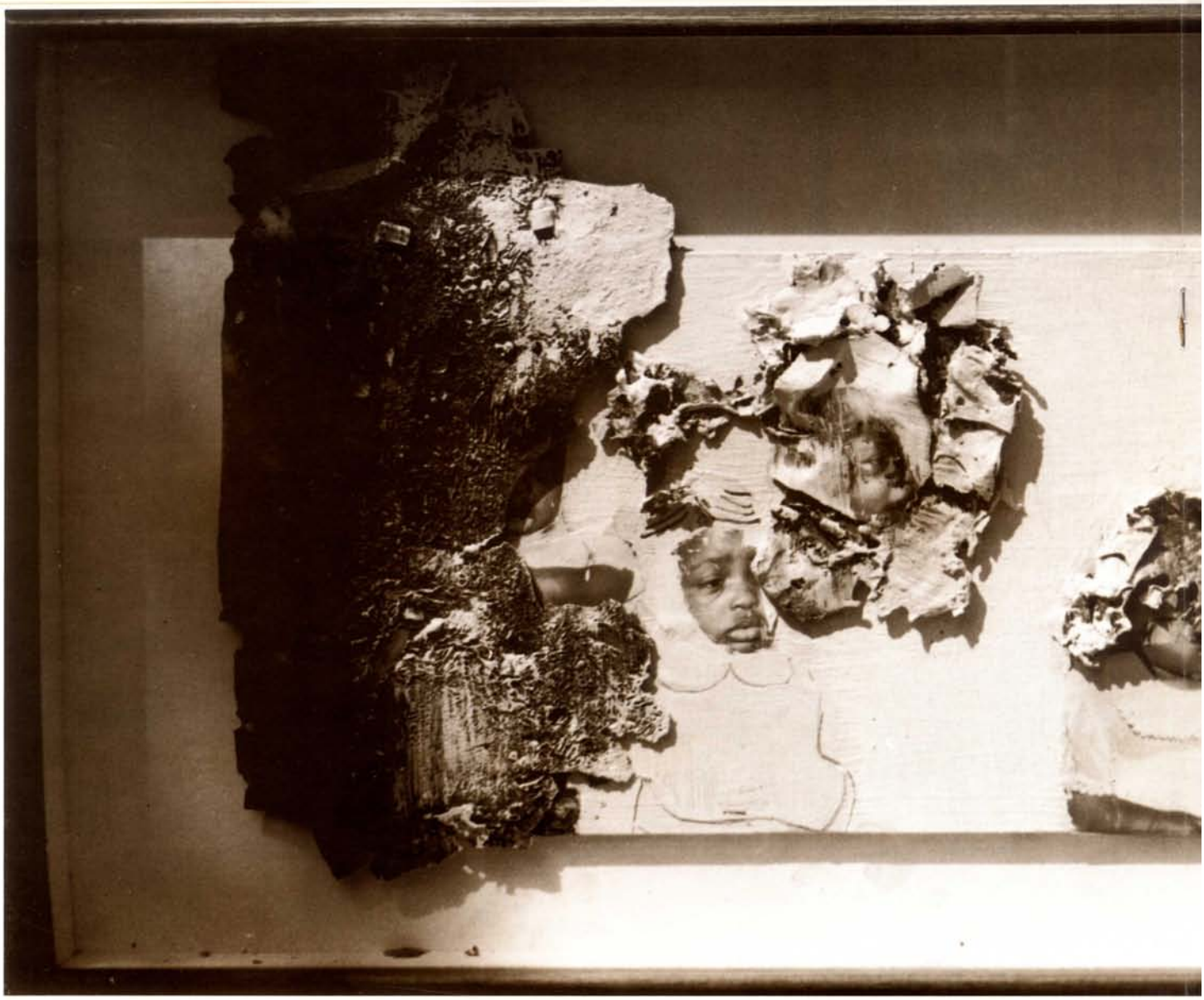
"The ultimate purpose of this effort, as we conceived it then, was to demonstrate to the community of Watts, to Los Angeles, and to the world at large, that education through creativity is the only way left for a person to find himself in this materialistic world."

Junk was chosen as the medium for a vari-





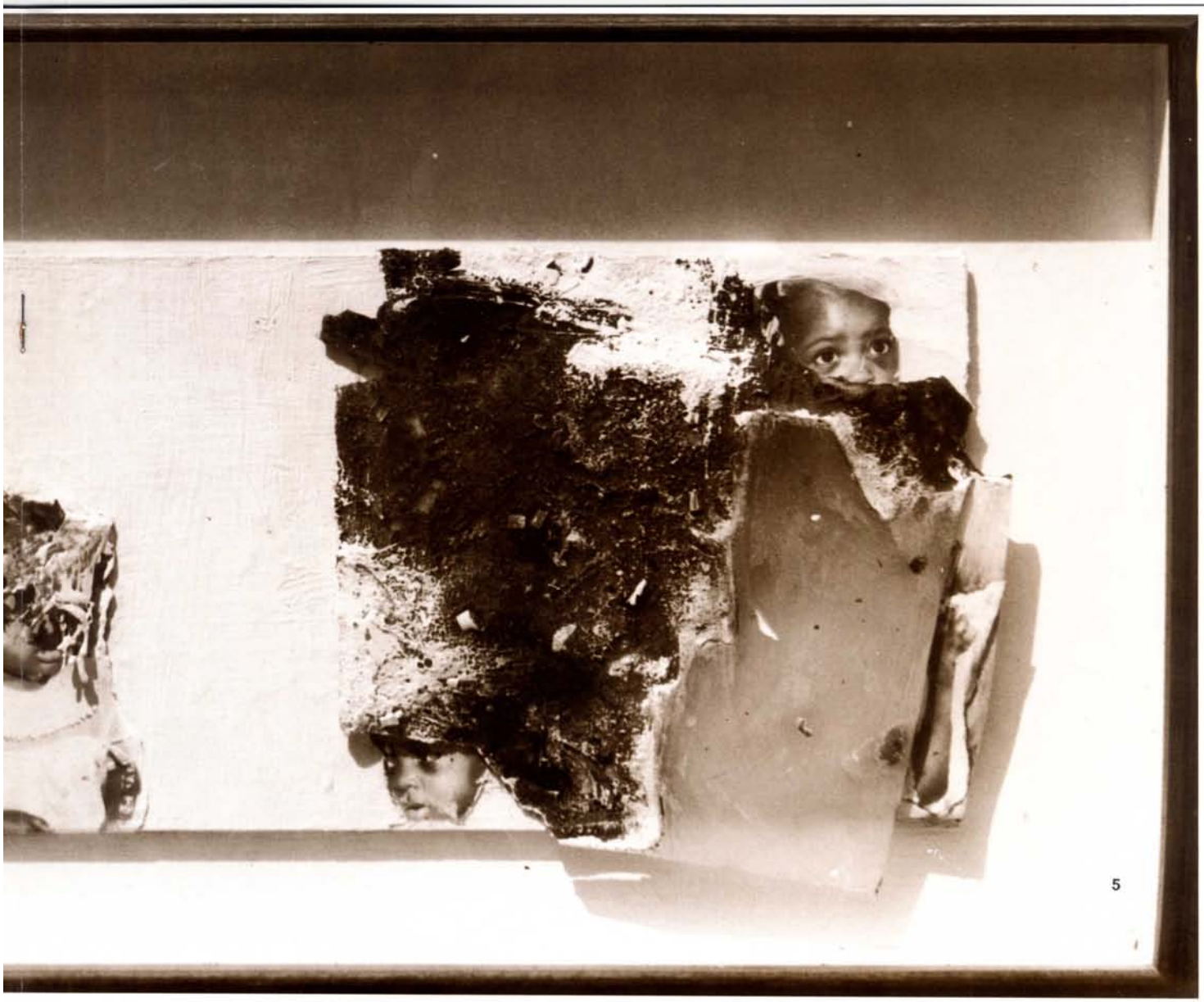
THE CITY



ety of reasons, in addition to its obvious impact as the artifacts of tragedy. "Watts finds itself virtually set down in the center of junk piled high on all sides. Its main industry is junk! The essential question being posed to the community by the exhibit was, what is the true value of these materials over and above sale to the junkyards for a few cents?"

On another level, the assemblage of junk illustrated for the artists the imposition of order on disorder, the creation of beauty from ugliness. Its analog was the essence of communication, for the placing of unrelated objects in a pattern conceived by intellect and emotion made them speak coherently, much as the juxtaposition of two persons in a certain context permits them to converse in a way that would be impossible under so-called normal circumstances.

The group does not now see **66 Signs of Neon** as an "art show as such, nor as a mere adjunct to the McCone Report." Rather "it is a feeling or sensing of something difficult to describe. It is evident that it is a utilization of the August 11th event, but that it transcends it, and rises above social protest. It seems to be saying that there is some uncertainty about



our direction. That we all take equal responsibility for the Wattses of the world, and that only we can prevent their happening again.

"The art works of **66** should be looked at, not as particular things in themselves, but for the sake of establishing conversation and communication, involvment in the act of living. The reason for being in our universe is to establish communication with others, one to one. And communication is not possible without the establishment of equality, one to one.

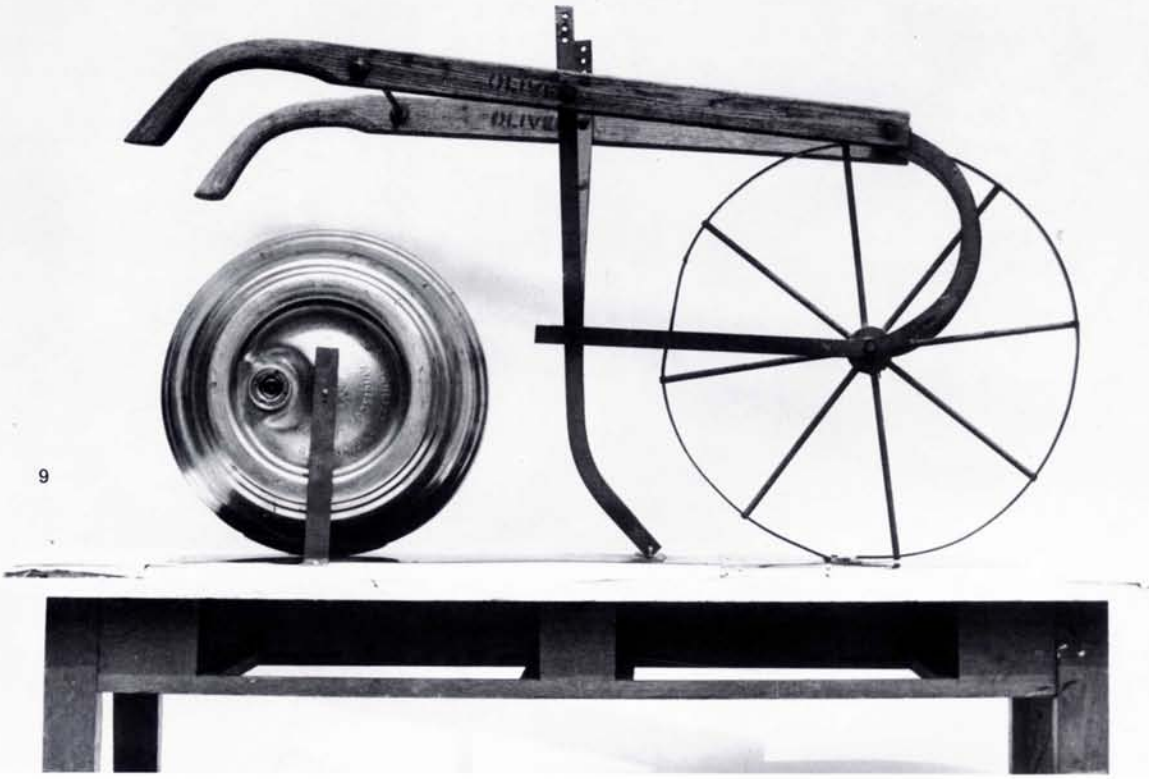
"If junk art in general, and **66** in particular, enable us only to see and love the many simple things which previously escaped the eye, then we miss the point. For we here experience mere sensation, leaving us in time precisely where we were, being but not becoming. We wish to establish that there must be more to art than the creative act, more than the sensation of beauty, ugliness, color, form, light, sound, darkness, intrigue, wonderment, uncanniness, bitter, sweet, black, white, life and death. There must be therein a ME and a YOU, who is affected permanently. Art of itself is of little or no value if in its relatedness it does not effect change. We do not mean change in the physical appearance of things, but a change in the behavior of human beings. And changes in behavior are effected through communication."

The philosophy of **66 Signs** postulates that the activities of each and every human being are attempts to dispell his peculiar anxieties. If the outlet chosen is creative, then the nature of the individual experiences change, evolves with this activity. If the outlet is materialistic, then the dispelling of anxiety is purely transient, and without permanent benefit. But the common denominator of all humans is the absolute necessity to dispel anxiety. This means that any human action, no matter how reprehensible by civilized or personal standards, stems from the same motivation. Therefore, we all are brothers, and the possibility of mutual understanding, as well as communication, exists.

The distilled spirit of **66 Signs of Neon** tells us that the world is a confused and fearful place, that God is difficult to find, that our philosophic systems are imperfect, that the only hope is communication between individuals: "I DON'T HAVE ANYBODY BUT YOU!"

7

8

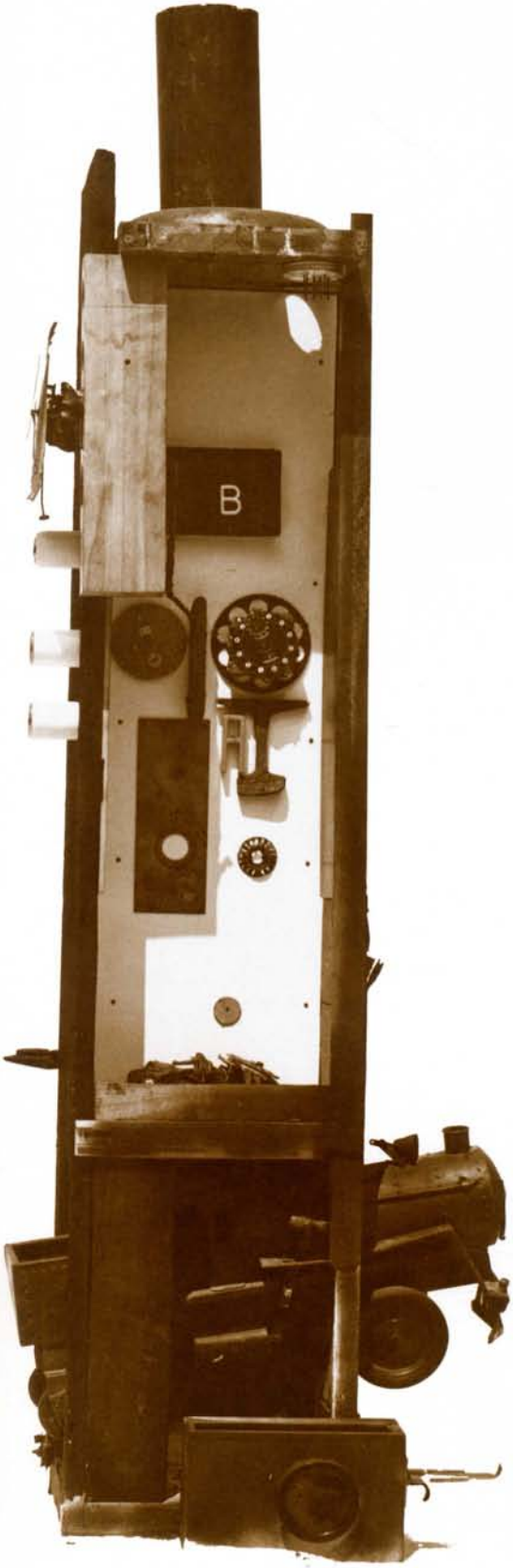


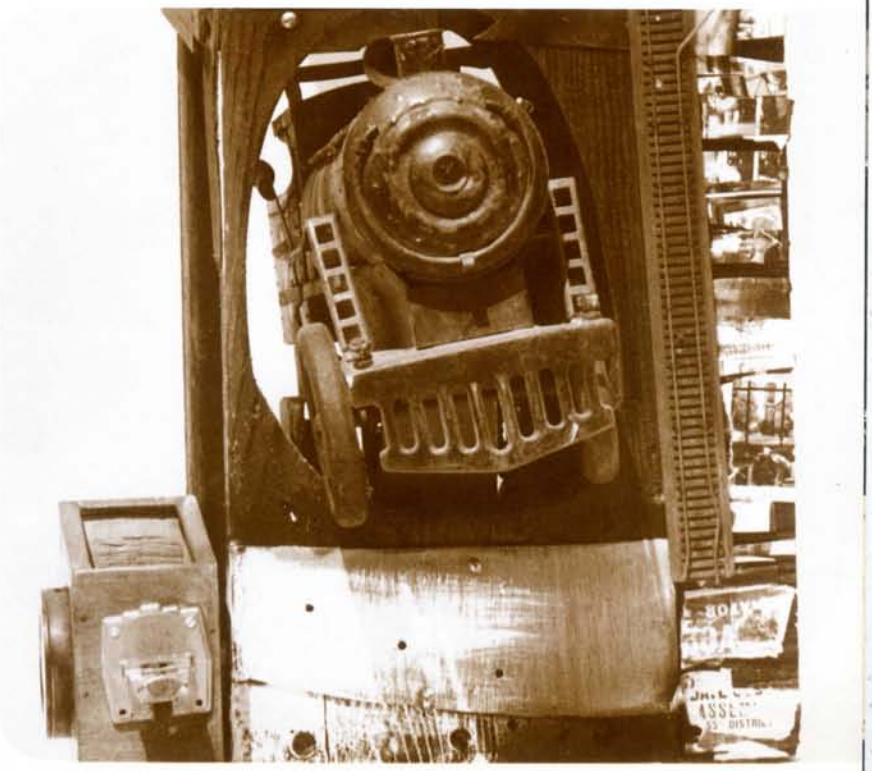
9

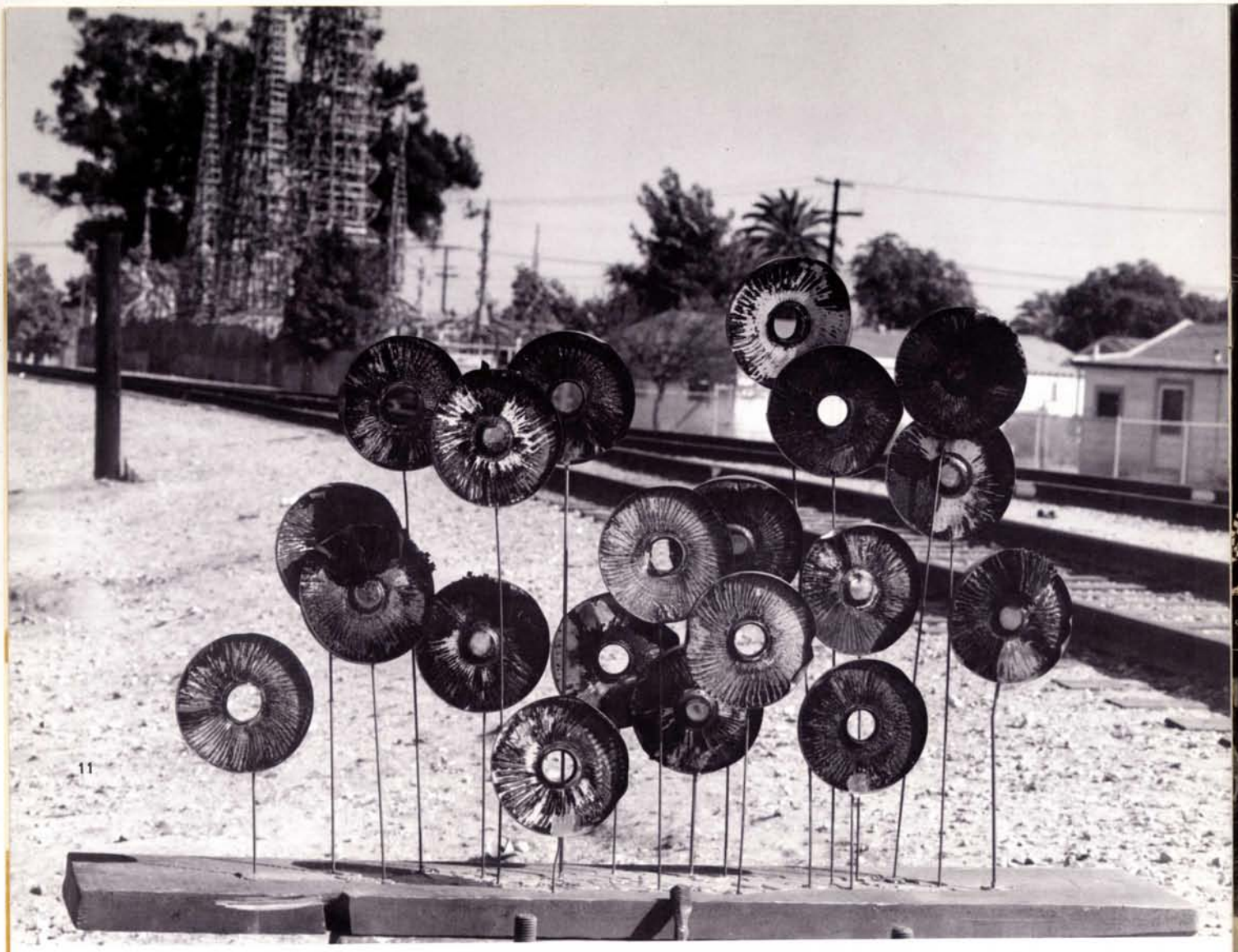
10

GENTLEMEN
PLEASE DO YOUR PART
TO KEEP THIS FACILITY
— CLEAN —
IT CAN BE KEPT CLEANER
THAN THE PERSONS
USING IT.

THE SINK


B





11

CREDITS

COVER PHOTOGRAPH—Breath of Fresh Air

SIR WATTS By Noah Purifoy
7 **SPOONS** By Max Neufeldt
2 **MAX UNTITLED** By Max Neufeldt
3 **SIGNS OF NEON** By Judson Powell
4 **FEMALE RACK** By Judson Powell—Noah Purifoy
THE CITY By Arthur Secunda
5 **RACE BABY** By Ruth Saturensky
BREATH OF FRESH AIR Noah Purifoy (Cover Photograph)
1 **PHOENIX** By Judson Powell
8 **SUDDEN ENCOUNTER** By Noah Purifoy
10 **LETTERS FROM WATTS** By Max Neufeldt
9 **BARREL AND PLOW** By Noah Purifoy—Judson Powell
THE SINK Group Effort
6 **THE TRAIN** By Noah Purifoy
11 **SUN FLOWERS** By Debby Brewer

PHOTOGRAPHY Harry Drinkwater
LAYOUT AND DESIGN Al Khanasa
GRAPHICS Debby Brewer
COPY Noah Purifoy—As Told To Ted Michel

PUBLISHED BY 66 SIGNS OF NEON • 2219 SOUTH LA BREA AVENUE • LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA (90016)

THE ASSISTANCE OF AMERICAN CEMENT CORPORATION OF LOS ANGELES IN MAKING THIS PUBLICATION POSSIBLE IS GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGED

66 SIGNS of NEON

–TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE
LILLIAN TESTI-
RUTH SATURENSKY
EUNICE SAUNDERS-
PAUL TANZAWA
WALLY SMITH
KATHY KOMAROFF
DETTER LANGER

JUDSON

Noah Purifoy

DAVID MANN

HARRY DRINKWATER

AN
THO
DEBBY
ARTHUR SECUNDA
DEBBY BREWER
LEON SAULTER
TED MICHEL
AL KHANASA
FRANK ANTHONY