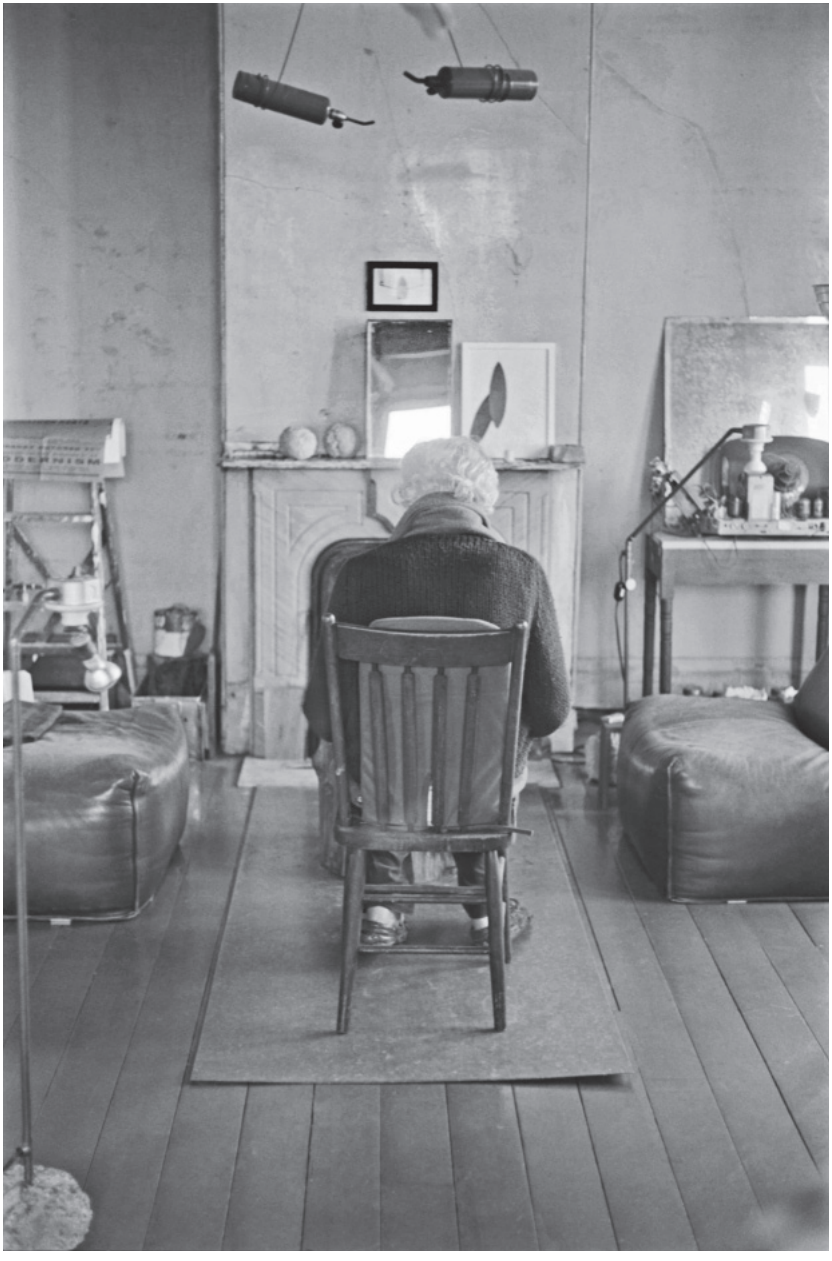


Introduction

I first met David Ireland in 1975. It was during that year that he purchased his 500 Capp Street home in San Francisco's Mission District while I was simultaneously at work renovating a commercial building in the city's South of Market Street district. Cheap real estate was abundant at the time, and a year earlier I had purchased the Coast Casket Company while it was in its last throes of business. Thereafter, artist Jim Pomeroy and I each set to building out our respective live-in studio lofts on the old brick warehouse's second floor, while below us the first floor of 80 Langton Street was also being renovated and soon opened as a vibrant alternative artists' space that we and others helped to cofound. It later became New Langton Arts, which remained a vital space for exhibitions and events until it closed in 2009.

Many of us artists living in San Francisco during the 1970s possessed the tools and hand skills needed to undertake such renovation projects, most of which were correctly wired, plumbed, and constructed, but seldom undertaken with proper building permits. Nobody had much money back then, and hence we often relied on each other for good advice and swaps of labor and materials. I remember becoming aware of David Ireland's considerable skills with tools and materials when Tom Marioni commissioned him to sensitively restore a wall that had been altered during a performance within the Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA). Tom had opened MOCA in 1970, and it was yet another young South of Market arts institution that was greatly enlivening a growing community of artists who were busily working across multiple creative disciplines and media with utter comfort and curiosity.

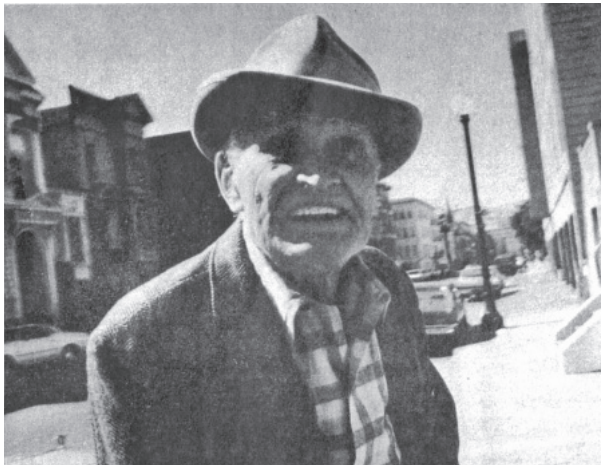
David Ireland in back parlor, 1987.

Before I had ever entered David's 500 Capp Street home, I had witnessed the repairs he made to the sidewalk directly adjacent to it in 1975, something he was ordered to do by the city and carried out with great care and interest, not simply as a legal obligation. At the time I was not aware David had already been working with concrete as a creative medium for quite some time, but remember telling him about a FLUXUS piece I had earlier performed as a student member of Robert Watts's Experimental Arts Workshop during my senior year at the University of California, Santa Cruz during the spring of 1969. Back then, Watts had booked his entire workshop of students to perform FLUXUS events within and without San Francisco's Committee Theater in North Beach. The piece assigned to me required that I dress up formally as a dentist and then fastidiously clean a single square of sidewalk with professional dental tools. I was to extract all accumulations of chewing gum, dirt, and other urban plaque, an activity that soon attracted a puzzled public audience that congregated to observe both my actions and my great seriousness of purpose.

It was not until 1976 that David and I began to form an enduring friendship. A long multi-day conversation, one that ironically occurred in Los Angeles rather than in San Francisco, started to bring us closer together. Each of us was invited to create a temporary installation of our own making for a show of works by eighteen Bay Area artists organized by Bob Smith, the founding director of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), yet another alternative arts space that was then strongly supporting new work. David and I had each been given one of the two large entry walls that flanked the entranceway to LAICA's galleries as the

sites for our work. David commenced his installation by mixing up and then brushing a slurry of raw concrete onto his wall while I troweled linoleum mastic onto my wall and then applied a fragmented grid of linoleum floor tile shards over its surface. Talking together as we worked, we soon realized that our respective renovation projects back in San Francisco were feeding our mutual, increasing interests in building materials and working processes that often didn't lead to the creation of a traditional painting or sculpture, but instead were centered on where and how we were creating new places to live and work and what we were discovering and learning in the process of doing so. David had by then decided not to simply gut and completely remodel his new 500 Capp Street home, but was instead meticulously making decisions as to how much of its basic architecture, walls, and floors he wished to alter, reveal, refinish, and/or "stabilize" in some manner. He had also begun paying particular attention to a variety of objects and detritus left in his new home

Ireland making wall work for the exhibition *18 Bay Area Artists*, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 1976.



by its previous owner and a boarder—well-worn brooms, hundreds of rubber bands removed from daily newspaper deliveries, and the like—materials that beckoned him to pay closer attention to some of the myriad daily tasks that all of us perform in our lives over passages of time. David thus became something of an archeologist and folklorist in his new abode, even honoring the last tenant of 500 Capp Street before his departure with a ninety-fifth birthday party at which a candled cake was presented and then extinguished with a celebratory breath by its appreciative recipient. This was one of the first social functions performed in David's new home and countless others would follow in the years ahead. David documented this event via a small color snapshot that portrayed the aged "Mr. Gordon" blowing out his candles, an image that to this day remains framed and slowly fading atop a sealed Mason jar filled with the remainder of the unconsumed birthday cake. Continuous reflection and regard for how time can be spent throughout a lifetime became a central creative theme for David as he continued to live within 500 Capp Street, as did his interest in how literal reflections of light functioned within his new home. David began to play with light

Mr. Gordon, circa 1975.

in many ways; finishing some of the walls and floors, he carefully stripped to bare plaster and wood with multiple coats of a polyurethane that gave off a wondrous glow and sheen when struck by daylight, gaslight, candles, lamps of David's making, and a small array of florescent light fixtures he installed in several strategic locations.

So many of the days and nights I spent with David and others in 500 Capp Street over the years involved the pleasure of paying close attention to how light functioned within his home. On some occasions we would talk while being warmed before the fireplace in his living room as a two-tank propane torch lamp David had made was lit and bounced gently above us, suspended by wire as dusk fell and the room gradually darkened into a deep soft hue of flickering light. We would then head downstairs to share a meal together in the dining room illuminated by candles and other lamps of David's making, the lighting of which always seemed to further animate hours of lively conversation. In his unique dining room, with its long, well-worn, and repurposed workbench table that was surrounded by chairs and artifacts galore, David carefully displayed and sometimes rotated small installations of objects that revealed evidence of his own personal passions and life experiences. There was always a wide array of animal skulls and horns to be contemplated as relics he had retained from his early business venture leading safaris and trading in African artifacts. I especially enjoyed an old Ireland family photograph David cherished and installed, beautifully illuminated on the wall just above a chest of drawers on whose top a number of books were bracketed with bookends made of raw cast concrete. He also maintained a miniature shrine of

sorts that featured a color postcard image of the youthful actress Natalie Wood, which he set upon a small wall-mounted shelf side by side with a vial of hand-panned gold flakes (David loved and treasured beautiful women). On another wall of the dining room he hung two framed artworks, a print and rubbing created by two close friends of his: Tom Marioni and Jim Melchert. Both of these artists, like David, were terrific social communicators within the San Francisco arts community. Tom Marioni's weekly gatherings at MOCA's Breen's Bar, where "Drinking beer with friends is the highest form of Art" became much more than just a slogan to all of us at the time, and were seldom missed by David. And I simply can't think of any artists then living in the Bay Area who more faithfully attended countless openings and performances in support of their peers and students than Jim Melchert and David Ireland, both of whom were deeply respected as innovative artists and teachers.

Jim Melchert's influence and generosity as a teacher at the University of California, Berkeley was already legendary by the time David completed his MFA degree at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1974 in middle age and then began his teaching. For many years he regularly taught a course or two at the San Francisco Art Institute, California College of the Arts, or at San Francisco State University, where I was then directing the graduate program at SFSU's Center for Experimental and Interdisciplinary Art. Both of us often enjoyed participating in the creative assignments we gave our students, frequently learning as much from collaborating with them as they learned from us. Thus 500 Capp Street became a place visited not only by many of our students, but also by students who were

Cabinet in dining room with family photograph and objects, circa 1981.

studying with a good number of our peers, many of whom were also teaching throughout the greater Bay Area. They too considered David's home to be an artistic experience not to be missed. Sessions held there always stimulated fascinating observational commentary and conversations among the aspiring young artists who had never before experienced the integration of art and daily life that David was developing within his home.

After I moved east in the early 1980s with my artist wife Suzanne Hellmuth and our two sons, my regular return visits to San Francisco almost always included a stay with David in 500 Capp Street. David's guest room at the time (which later became a second office) was directly across from his bedroom, and both of the room's walls had been stripped back to bare white plaster, across whose surfaces ran beautiful skeins of cracks that were to be seen and enjoyed. David considered them to be wall drawings of a sort, created by the stresses that time, earthquakes, and other natural forces had caused and that he discovered and revealed via his careful labor. David's subsequent and extensive use of wire in his artwork, which he would bend with clear purpose and intent and often also by chance, was without doubt inspired by the beautiful cracked walls he revealed and then stabilized throughout 500 Capp Street.

Unbeknownst to many, David also prototyped a room within 500 Capp Street that he called the "Stabbin Cabin," a tiny sleeping loft that was reachable only by climbing up a narrow wooden ladder he fastened to the back wall of his second floor hall closet. Staying up there I was able to observe how David began thinking about how to create a new series of architectural apertures that would bring

light into a second house he purchased and then radically transformed at nearby 65 Capp Street. It was to become David's second major architectural renovation endeavor, one that his great benefactor Ann Hatch purchased in 1979 and within which she founded The Capp Street Project. Its long and subsequent series of generously sponsored artist residencies brought an abundance of important new contemporary art into being and also helped to bring much greater attention to David's art as artists from around the country and world began coming to the Bay Area for working visits within 65 Capp Street, as well as for visits, meals, and conversations that David would host for them within 500 Capp Street. It wasn't long before many photographers, filmmakers, writers, curators, composers, architects, and dancers also began visiting with David, wishing to meet him, view, and sometimes even document his home. The choreographer and dancer Douglas Dunn, for example, was just one of many artists who struck up a close friendship with David, one that led to a notable performance in 500 Capp Street and a subsequent collaboration for which David designed costumes for Dunn's dance company.

The three architectural projects I came to later initiate with David in the 1980s and 1990s—each of which produced artist-in-residence facilities at the Washington Project for the Arts, the Marin Headlands Center for the Arts, and the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, Andover—all had their roots in visits and conversations first held in 500 Capp Street. These projects brought a host of other strong artistic partners and collaborators richly into David's life, the likes of Robert Wilhite, Mark Thompson, Henry Moss, and many others who assisted in supporting these creative endeavors.

Hence as the years rolled on, David's 500 Capp Street home remained the central place within which he fully integrated his interests in time and light with his love of object making and architecture. He also had a penchant for enjoyable conversation and social engagement, which he demonstrated continually with many friends and visitors over tea, tasty home-cooked meals, and good cheap wine. Cooking was another pleasure David and I greatly enjoyed together.

And although the labors of domestic "maintenance" were never a central interest of David's, it is worth noting that during the early years of his working and living in 500 Capp Street, before he began traveling extensively to exhibit his artwork and create commissioned artist-in-residence apartments and installations in other architectural settings, David used to keep 500 Capp Street fastidiously clean. Its windows and floors during those years were spotless in order to let light dance at its best. During this time David also took up a more Zen-like interest and engagement with labor, creating for many years hence hundreds of what he came to call *Dumbballs.* David fashioned these simple spheroids with his own gloved hands from wet concrete until they firmed up, dried, and could be displayed on tables, in buckets, and within cabinets and/or display cases and presentation boxes that David either found or made.

Connie Lewallen's fine central text in this book delves much deeper into the history of David Ireland's 500 Capp Street home than I do here. She discusses the many distinctive and subtle ways in which David treated and altered not only the house but also its ever-shifting array of found and created contents—certainly the best context for full consideration and appreciation of David Ireland's artistic

legacy. Happily, this legacy is being preserved via the creation of the 500 Capp Street Foundation, an entity founded by its chairman and chief benefactor, Carlie Wilmans, who also serves as the director of the Phyliss Wattis Foundation. I am also a founding board member of the 500 Capp Street Foundation along with Ann Hatch. Together she and I also served as David's executors and have sought to carry forth his final wishes as best we could.

The 500 Capp Street Foundation now owns not only David Ireland's original Mission District home, but also gifts from his estate—a large inventory of objects, paintings, drawings, prints, and furniture David made that will be selectively rotated on view in his home once it has been sensitively restored and made publicly accessible.

David Ireland's personal papers have been donated at his request to the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, and many examples of his artwork now abound in numerous private and public collections. Connie Lewallen is to be thanked for her excellent research and scholarship in producing this important book, Nina Zurier for assisting Connie in the image selection that documents David's unique home, and the University of California Press for its willingness to publish a volume that so well discusses and illustrates one of the most important contemporary artworks created in San Francisco during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Jock Reynolds
The Henry J. Heinz II Director
Yale University Art Gallery

PAGES 22–23 Back parlor, 2007.


IRELAND