

Beth Galston soothes and stimulates

By Christine Temin
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Beth Galston makes "participatory environments," which means that you, dear viewer, are required to do more than sit back and look at them. It could be argued that all good art is "participatory," in the sense that it demands mental and emotional effort to appreciate. But the sort of environment Galston makes goes one step further: Not only does it engage the mind; it also requires physical involvement. The artist becomes a choreographer for the spectator. This concept is hardly new: The builders of Gothic cathedrals were also making "participatory environments," which dictated a certain attitude and style of movement and which directed people along a straight, narrow, totally focused path up the central aisle toward the altar.

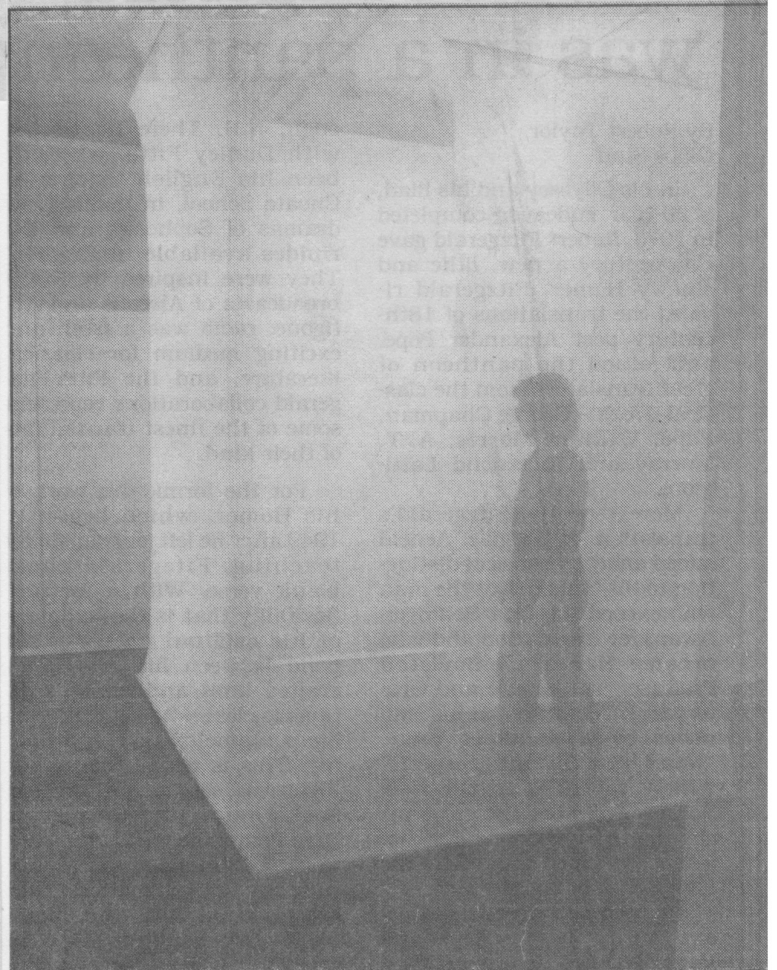
Like a cathedral, Galston's current piece, "Overlay," at the Kingston Gallery, 129 Kingston st., through Jan. 20, also demands a particular attitude, even a particular speed, from the viewer/participant. But Galston allows more freedom of movement than the cathedral builders did. "Overlay" is essentially a maze, made of huge curtains of sheer white gauze, anchored to the ground with metal rods. There are several possible paths to follow, some uncomfortably narrow and others widening into rectangular rooms. We do have some choices about where to go, but there are also paths that are dead ends. When I tried to leave the gallery by the most direct route, I found my way blocked by a gauze wall I was forced to circumnavigate.

"Overlay" calls for more viewer participation than most instal-

lations. It is so minimal that it requires us to fill in the blanks with our own thoughts and reactions. We have to move slowly within its confines: There are too many corners to work up any speed. The sea of white encourages us to seek visual variety, so we look at the worn boards of the floor and the exposed pipes of the ceiling. The atmosphere is quiet and contemplative, thanks in part to dim lighting. The installation is completely removed from the everyday bustle outside, yet we can still hear the traffic noises, which sound very far away. Thanks to the cloud-like, translucent gauze, we can see through the walls of one corridor into the next: I was alone in the installation on the day of my visit, but I can imagine that if there were other visitors in adjacent corridors, the same sense of freedom and privacy I enjoyed would not have been there.

Galston's installation is both soothing and stimulating. What you get out of it depends a lot on what you put in, though; on how much concentration you are willing to expend. I kept wishing there were rest stations incorporated into the piece — chairs or beds or pillows or a rug so I could sit and prolong the sense of quiet. Any sort of furnishing would, however, add unwanted clutter and discourage the sense of flowing through the space.

PERSPECTIVES



View of Beth Galston's participatory environment, "Overlay."