

# AROUND TOWN

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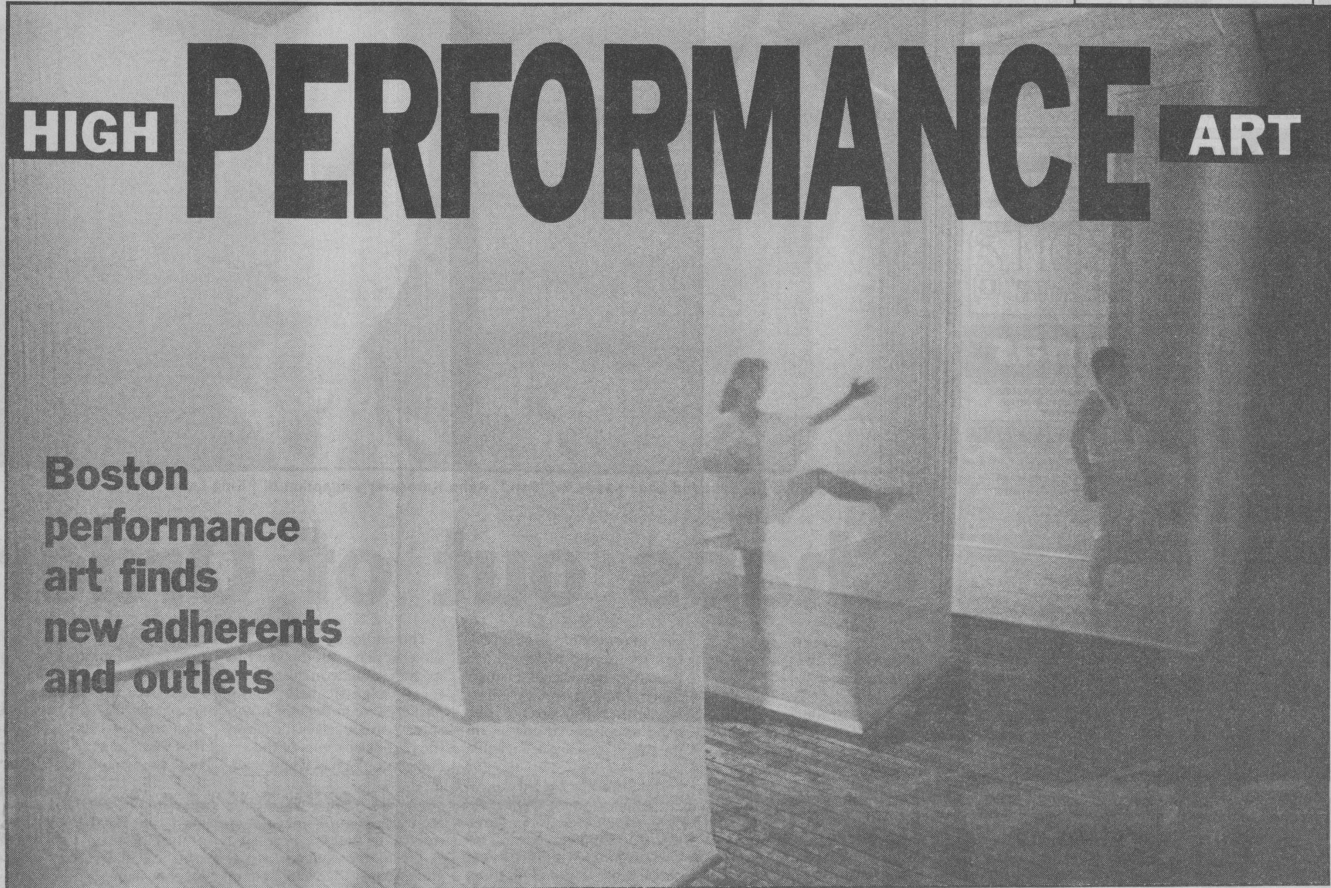
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## HIGH PERFORMANCE ART

### Boston performance art finds new adherents and outlets



Environmental artist Beth Galston's installation/performance piece "Appearances/Disappearances."

By Carla Reissman

On a weekday evening, in a Boston-area apartment, a tall, young man in a large top coat enters and shakes hands with his hostess. He takes off his coat to reveal a slightly oversized, European-cut suit and accepts the offer of a cup of tea. Then the visitor pulls up three chairs — an easy chair for his hostess facing a straightbacked chair for himself and one for the television set.

He hooks up the set to a stereo and video deck and motions his hostess to be seated. The visitor pulls out a large, chrome-plated accordion, gives a short explanation of what is to come and turns on the television set. After the opening credits roll by, he launches into a song in a style reminiscent of The Talking Heads' David Byrne, and music fills the room.

On the television set beside him images of the performer's mouth and face accompany him. Sometimes his disembodied mouth appears upside down, gruesomely singing the lyrics. On the soundtrack drums beat out the rhythm and beneath the images phonetically-spelled lyrics appear.

As he plays, the performer often looks at his hostess; he seems as comfortable performing for an audience of one as he would in a music club or gallery full of people. This is because Danny Mydlack is a performance artist, and the piece is part of a series he is doing in living rooms around the state.

Mydlack says he is a member of the second generation of performance artists, and with this piece, called *Living Room*, hopes to take an upbeat theme and make it entertaining to audiences. It is an approach that runs counter to a widely held notion that performance art is an intellectual and abstract form of art, somewhat inaccessible to the general public.

Mydlack, who studied visual arts at Mass College of Art, has worked in performance art in Boston for the past five years. He is representative of one of the area's well-kept secrets: a rich, lively and local experimental performance scene.

The work performance artists do is dif-

ferent from that of a video artist collaborating with dancers and a composer. Or a theatrical piece without characters, acted out in a sculptural setting created by an environmental artist. Or a sound art performance amplifying the sounds made by a reed blowing in the wind. The common thread that runs through these works is that they are hybrid art forms performed in a variety of places: art galleries, colleges, performance spaces and even on the street. Sometimes they are fun, sometimes intellectual, and all of them aim to fully engage the senses.

One performance artist whose work has a theatrical bent is James Williams, director of public space development at Mass College of Art. One of his pieces is "Beatitudes for Dying Men," about a friend who died of AIDS. The performance is made up of six dancers, two performers speaking their lines, and slides and audiotape.

Although his work could be considered experimental theater, Williams calls it performance art because it is "not narrative in the fictional sense and no one in the piece is pretending to be a character." Like many performance artists, Williams's work also plays with the traditional role of the audience; audience members must move to see the complete performance.

An experimental performance group that specializes in exploring the relationship between audience and performers is the Mobius Performing Group, based at 354 Congress St. in Boston. Mobius, which has been in existence since 1979 and has operated its permanent performance gallery since 1983, is a collaborative performance group that rents its Fort Point Channel space to other experimental performers at relatively inexpensive rates.

In a recent Mobius piece called "Time Against Time," the audience sat in the center of the room while the action took place on the edges. Throughout the performance the audience, sitting in 25 swivel chairs, had to choose which performer to watch. The performers sat surrounded by props from their

real lives, chatted about how time affects them and performed tasks on stage: Joan Gale cut up apples, brushed her dogs and placed long distance phone calls to friends; Jude Aronstein wrote letters, figured out bills and flossed her teeth, and at intervals handed out messages to audience members. By placing the audience in swivel chairs, the piece forces viewers to look at each other as well as the performers, and to become part of the piece.

Mobius performances are varied in media, since the members have interests and expertise in theater, video, music, sculpture and movement. "We're oriented to the artist and to trying out new ideas, whether or not they're commercially successful," says Mobius member Marilyn Arsem.

One artist who has taken advantage of Mobius's support is Beth Galston, an environmental artist. She collaborated with Mobius members and other artists last August on *Appearances/Disappearances*.

In the large front room of the gallery Galston hung white, ceiling-to-floor screens of scrim, creating rooms and walls. In one piece two dancers "appeared" and "disappeared" behind the wall. In the second piece poems by Dallas Miller were spoken by three seated performers, while two others moved through the installation. Using performers, says Galston, is an extension of her sculpture, and reveals it in new ways.

Another collaboration between an artist and dancers is painter Deborah Boardman's "Sun-Fixed (E) Motions," an animation on video of the process of creating a drawing. It will also include six dancers moving to a libretto based on the *Song of Solomon*. The piece is about love relationships, says Boardman, a Mass College of Art graduate who has performed at Boston's Basement Gallery. It is also more collaborative than any of her past work, she adds.

Working in a different realm of performing is sound artist Richard Lehrman, who has presented his work internationally, and is on the faculty of Boston's Museum School. He creates live performance by amplifying

sounds such as that of a string stretched across a pond. Lehrman has organized a sound art series at Mobius for 1987, which will bring together local and national or international artists.

One of these is Cambridge performance artist Ellen Rothenberg, who creates works for both the gallery and open-air street setting. Her gallery performances include work with film, video, slides, shadow play and made-up sounds. Of her street performances she says, "I'm interested in the kind of thin skin between life and art."

If you're in the right place at the right time you can catch her piece *Soap Box*, which she performs on streets throughout Boston. She dresses up in a suit and clown nose, and has an American flag in her lapel. She gives a speech about being an American, then talks with the crowd that gathers. "I become a lightning rod for sentiment on the street," she says.

A more predictable place to see performance pieces is Eventworks, an annual spring program run by the Mass College of Art's Department for Interrelated Media. The department has been instrumental in producing performance artists in Boston, and, along with the Institute of Contemporary Art, in attracting performance artists from other cities.

Another new performance art forum is the Brattle Performance Series at Cambridge's Brattle Theatre. According to program director Connie White, this spring's "Boston Performs" series will feature local performers (including Deborah Boardman, Danny Mydlack, Beth Galston, and Ellen Rothenberg) in four events, from February through May.

Additions like the Brattle series to the Boston experimental performance scene mark an encouraging sign. By highlighting the limitless potential of this hybrid art form, they are smudging the boundaries between performance and other kinds of art. They ask audiences to take some risks by viewing something new, and show that Boston is keeping pace in stretching the boundaries of convention.