

Is Public Art for the Public?
Narrative Painting
Beth Galston Explores
the Magic of Light
Regional Reviews
Visual Gallery Guide

2.00



New England

Volume 5 Number 7 June 1984



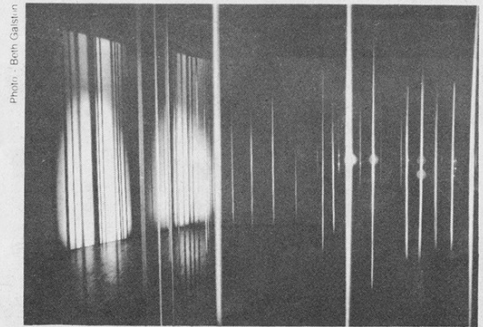
Photo: Sally Weber

Beth Galston - *Mirror Light*, performance, 1983, mirrored Plexiglas strips, aluminum and fabric screens, spotlights, projectors, three performers

Art New England: A resource for the visual arts

Alternative Space

Beth Galston



Installation, 1984
Freely suspended mirrored Plexiglas strips, two projectors, wall reflections



Mirror Light, performance, 1983
Mirrored Plexiglas strips and wall reflections, aluminum and fabric screens, theater spotlights, projectors, flashlights, three performers.

It is easy to see how latter-day explorers, armed with flashlights and mirrors, won over entire native villages. Even in this civilized world many of us are still captivated and mystified by light and reflections. In the face of all the scientific explanations such as optics, frequencies of light waves, amperes, watts, and what-have-you, the magic of light won't go away.

Beth Galston is a sculptor who, for the last few years, has worked environmentally with light, reflections, and shadows. She spoke with me at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis, where an entire room was given over to her installation. In the darkened space long strips of mirrored Plexiglas hanging from the ceiling shot back flashes of light from two projectors. The sparklike reflections moved with the viewer's eye level. The warm light from the adjoining gallery seeped under the door, creating another level of less intense light that reflected from the mirrors like countless bobbing candle flames. At the same time, the Plexi strips, moving slightly in the agitated air, sent bright streaks sailing across the walls. Galston utilized the entire room, from ceiling to floor, from the center to the walls, to produce a feast of lights.

Visitors entering the dark room invariably uttered sounds generally reserved for fireflies and falling stars. They approached the strips tentatively, uncertain as to whether they were connected by invisible barriers. Finding easy access, the viewers roamed among the free-hanging mirrors, thereby jostling them and causing the streaks on the walls to lurch about wildly. People spoke in hushed tones. One young man said, "I'd like to live here forever."

In the words of the artist, Beth Galston, "This is a formal room, octagonal in shape and with a certain elegance about it. I knew I wanted to do something with the formality. I also knew I would use mirrors and that I would suspend them from the ceiling. By gluing two thin strips together, I made the double-sided mirrored Plexiglas. I hung these strips from within a square on the ceiling marked out by the track-light fixture. You can see that I taped over the fixture and covered the corner glass cabinets of the room with Homosote. In the end, I had a square within an octagon.

"The room has a lot of air currents. The mirrors are turning more than I had expected they would, and the sparkling, which was not necessarily something that I intended, has become an important part of the piece. So I have this installation that is seemingly at rest yet creates, through reflections, a lot of quick movement. The two aspects balance each other off. This piece is the fifth of the mirrored Plexiglas series and perhaps the last. But one never knows for sure.

"I have worked in other media. My entry into applied art was through a pottery course at MIT. I began spending all my time learning how to be a potter—largely production pottery, but also fantasy pieces. Recently, I've realized there's a relationship between what I do now and what I did then. I made little environments that were much busier than my present work. You had to imagine that you were little and that you were walking through them. Now, with very different materials I am making environments that are full scale, through which you can actually walk.

"For a while, however, I thought I was going to be a potter for the rest of my life. I had a studio and I was teaching and selling. But I started thinking about working in other materials and about doing sculpture. I felt I needed more education. In looking around at schools, I only got excited about the Kansas City Art Institute, which had good ceramics and art history departments and was an open place where I could experiment.

"When I graduated in 1977, I was in a transitional position. I was juggling three activities—sculpture, photography, and filmmaking. I still hadn't made a decision to turn away from clay. It seems odd now that the path wasn't totally clear to me.

"After making the decision to be a sculptor, I worked for a couple of years at a studio in Branford, Connecticut. There, I developed a portfolio of work, because I had decided to go to graduate school. I did outdoor, architectural sculptures of wood, brick, and steel. They related to one piece I had done at the Kansas City Art Institute in which I employed found objects, a couple of dozen doors from a demolished building. I built frames around them and stuck them

in the ground so that they were free standing and you could open them and walk through. There were rows of these doors that grew closer together toward the center so that you arrived at a more contained space.

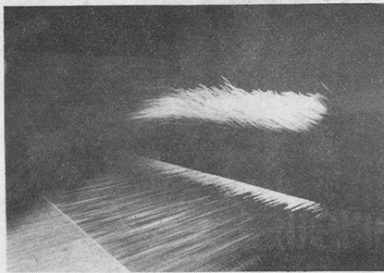
"In Connecticut I didn't work with found objects; I built my own. In the back yard of a friend's house there was a curve of grass edged by a thick border of trees. There was something about that semicircle of grass that called for something to be there. I built a brick wall that had a window in it. The neighbors didn't know that it was a sculpture. They were waiting for three more walls to go up. I was playing with the idea of inside and outside and the absurdity of putting up a wall outside with a window in it so you could look through it to the trees.

"There were several staircase pieces, movable skeletal structures of wood and welded steel, with which I worked with shadows. In all my work there is an interest in barriers through which you can see. I continued to work with the skeletal pieces at graduate school at MIT. I didn't fully realize until I was deeply involved that the light was more interesting than the structures I was making.

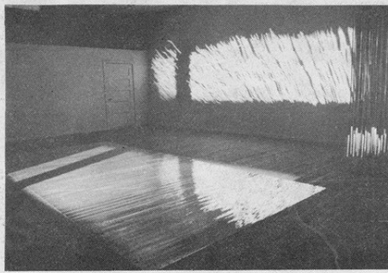
"My graduate thesis piece had its origin in a course I was taking in building construction. We had to do drawings of mortar patterns and ways of laying bricks. In order to achieve a three-dimensional effect, I cut away the brick shapes and ended up with a book of lacelike pages, each backed by a plain page. Depending on the light, shadow patterns moved across the page as you lifted the cutouts. It was like a little performance piece.

"I tried to duplicate this work in wood on a huge scale. It just didn't work. I had to give up the idea of joining these enormous wooden grids like the pages of a book. It drew too much attention to where they were hinged. I thought it was a lost cause until I found a two-story room in which to work with the pieces. In this larger space, and set up like an exploded book, the work held its own. That was the beginning of my working environmentally.

"It took me a while to come up with the right kind of



Lightwall, installation, 1983
Two panels of mirrored Plexiglas strips, one on the floor



and one suspended, four projectors. In a sequence controlled by a computerized dissolve unit, reflections change



as light bounces off of the mirrored panels.

Photos - Beth Gaston

lighting. I ended up with twelve lights—ten theater spots and two projectors—connected to a manual dimmer. It was a fifteen minute performance of loosely choreographed lighting changes.

"In the second part of the performance two people dressed in black walked through the space with flashlights going on and off. The illusions were of shadow pages turning on the walls. After the performance, the audience, which was sitting in a loft area, was invited to come into the space, walk through, and play with the lighting panel and flashlights.

"That piece radically changed my process of working because it was entirely improvisational. I knew it was the only way I could work from then on. It's anxiety producing and a challenge. When I'm doing an installation in a gallery or a museum like this one, I can think things out to a point. I can say, 'Formal space, square within an octagon, suspend mirrored strips, get screweyes, etc.' But I don't know until I'm here. That means things are down to the wire. I have to play with the space a few days; the physical work is very little.

"I can't say why I started working with the mirrors except that I wanted to use light in a different way and I wanted to deal with reflections. Before, my modules were doors, windows, or grids. Now, I've laminated the mirrors to make them double sided, and I have a module that relates to the viewer.

"I did my first performance piece with them at MIT. I called it *Mirror Light*. It was a sculptural set activated by people. The elements were a couple of lights, five translucent screens, a floor panel of many mirrored strips laid edge to edge, a few suspended strips, and three people. A performer crouched in front of a projector, his body blocking the light. He was holding a strip of flexible mirrored Plexiglas. When he bent it, he could make a reflected spot on the wall expand to an arc that went across the whole room. There was something biological about it. The moving bits of light were like protozoa, something alive. People's shadows overlaid the reflections on the wall from the mirrored floor panel. It looked like a weaving of light on the wall. Many unpredicted things happened, the subtle kinds of things that occur when shadows and reflections meet.

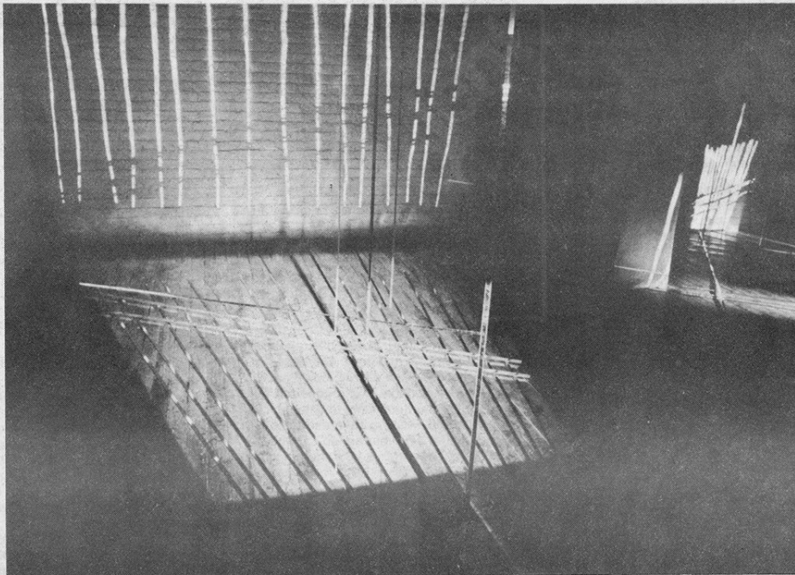
"Once again I announced that after the performance people could enter the space. They raced in to try things out. It was truly gratifying.

"At the Kingston Gallery, where I did *Lightwall*, once again the unexpected happened. My intention was to suspend a wall of mirrors. I cut the laminated mirrored Plexiglas, laid some plastic on the floor, and lined up the mirrors. I kept struggling to suspend them. Finally, I realized that in terms of the light reflections, they looked good on the floor. Although it wasn't apparent, the floor was uneven and the flexible strips sagged into it. So instead of a rigid line of light, there were soft and wispy lines. Many, many lines of light reflecting on the wall made the piece very animated.

"In this installation I overcame my resistance to using a computer for programming the light changes. I used a four minute loop. The changes were so subtle, you had to be there at least twenty minutes before you became aware of the repetition.

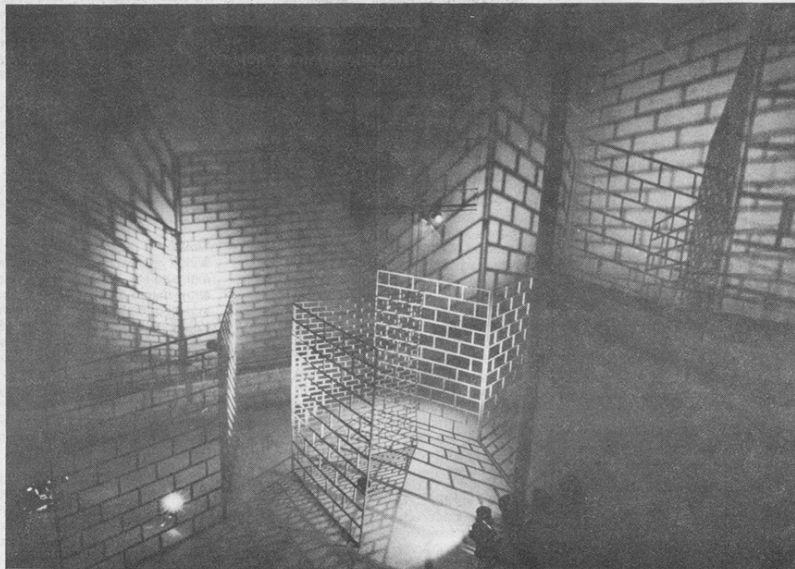
"I've been asked why I don't use colored lights. I have always answered that I'll use them when it's integral. As we speak, I have a piece at the BVAU Gallery in which I've used intense red lights. The space was impossible to make into one environment. It's not beautiful like this museum room. So the red dims the room. There are a few suspended strips and a red line of light that moves across the floor. I think of that piece as a sketch, an improvisation, a drawing with light.

"In the span of ten days, I've set up two installations simultaneously. I worked frantically in both places, and to tell the truth, the installations in both places didn't come together until the last day. If someone had been watching me in this space, they would have thought not much was happening. I rejected my first idea of projecting black and white slides because the effect was totally busy and the imagery wasn't right.



Installation, 1984
Mirrored Plexiglas strips on the floor and suspended, three projectors with red gels, wall and floor reflections.

Photo - Beth Gaston



Grid Environment, installation, 1981
Three pairs of wooden screens, twelve theater lights, manually-operated dimmer creating a sequence of changing shadow projections

Photo - Beth Gaston

"This installation is related to one I did at North-eastern and is the third solution to the motion problem: one was the performers, then the computer, and now the air currents and the moving people interacting with the suspended material. I'm most satisfied with the simplicity of this last solution.

"I look forward to trying out some ideas like working with a choreographer and dancers or perhaps doing theater sets. I would like to collaborate with an architect to give indoor public spaces a new quality, to enliven people's habitual pathways.

"So, in the span of a year, I've done a number of installations, each exploring different aspects of the same material and each producing very different effects. I can't make models of these works because I have to create them in the space. It feels exhilarating to be working that way!"