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## Up to the present time and beyond...

This text is a reflection of a conversation with a special lady, who makes you aware of the possibilities of space, who has the ability to sharpen your senses, and touch upon special memories and (hi)stories. Hopefully this positive encounter will not be our last. I am talking about Boston-based performance artist, Mobius, Inc. founder, and faculty member of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Marilyn Arsem.

Marilyn Arsem's first account of her interest in performance art was of the happenings she organized with her friends in high school. Performance art became her passion, her language, and her profession. Since 1975 she has been creating live events, from solo gallery performances to large-scale, site-specific works all over the world.

Over the years the common threads in Marilyn's work have been those of strong physical and political reactions to space. As a child of the sixties and seventies her work – as with many other artists of this period - was deeply influenced by the political events of the Vietnam War and the Pinochet Coup in Chile. These historic and memorable events made her aware of the potential of art as a reaction (in one way or another) to a political state of mind. Up to this day she works with this notion and puts it to use. She is interested in the constructs of memory and history, especially in connection to the history of the United States. Her performances are critical and sometimes controversial, while maintaining a direct connection with the audience. She is honest, precise, and vulnerable in her attempts. This allows the audience to engage with the critical content of the work.

The physical experience of her work is very important, too. Arsem likes to challenge herself and her audience. Endurance is a recurring feature, as if she is trying to test the borders of conscious human beings and to trigger their unconscious to surface. After a performance at a festival in Glasgow where she was buried under an enormous pile of dirt for a long time, someone in the audience asked her if she would do it again, and her reply was:

*No, of course not. It is terrible and scary, but I did it, and now I never have to do it again.*

This response is exemplary in her approach to the physical challenges she takes on in her performances. They seem to be a victory over fear and anxiety. She seems to imply that this is the only way to develop an understanding of the unknown. Her attitude is important in a world that sometimes appears to be ruled by these words, and more of their kind. In this light, her performances can be seen as political acts performed in poetical ways.

Arsem received her BFA from Boston University, where she first enrolled in directing classes. Soon afterward she became involved in interventions in alternative art spaces and other environments. She knew that she was not so interested in the traditional ideas of narrative and spoken word and did not want to stage linear productions with a passive audience. Arsem was much more concerned with an audience participation that was active and direct. Performance art became her terrain to communicate and trigger a direct experience between performer and receiver.

Since the eighties Marilyn Arsem has been connected to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA) in Boston. As head of the performance area she works together with faculty members Mari Novotny-Jones and Tony Schwensen, international visiting artists and lecturers, to provide



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an education in performance... Most performance programs in the United States have a theatrical approach, but not the program at the SMFA. Their performance curriculum has its base in visual art, and has its roots in international art movements such as DADA and Fluxus. In this practice artists turn away from traditional narrative and theatrical plots. Direct interaction with the audience is important, even when the action is mediated by a screen or another medium. Time and space are crucial elements in this live work.

The artists in *Somewhere Felt* were all part of Marilyn's advanced performance project class. Arsem is a big inspiration for them in finding their own voice, their own space, and their sense of community. When Marilyn teaches her class, she tries to find a group of people that she feels can work together well. In the case of the people gathered in *Somewhere Felt*, this approach worked out considerably well.

*I try to generate space where artists un-earth, try out what they really want, and where they are challenged to not get trapped in their own conventions. That is important to me.*

And, of course, every class is a two-way opportunity. She experiences her classes as a dialogue with a new generation of performance artists. It is refreshing for Arsem as well, to be involved with as many different questions, approaches, and solutions as there are people in the program.

Art-making has to do with communication and human relationships, no matter which direction you take. In order to continue to make work it is important to create your own community, where you feel safe and where colleagues can help you develop and reflect upon your work. The last couple of years Marilyn has traveled from Chile to the Philippines, to China and Spain, to do her performances. By doing this she found an international group of people that are her reflectors; they mirror her development as a performance artist. In Boston, already some thirty years ago, she created her own local network. With other artists she formed the interdisciplinary collaborative Mobius, Inc. Mobius started out as a group of peers who would review each other's work and do performances in various spaces in Boston. In 1983 they decided to open their own space out of necessity, because all the other spaces they used to perform in disappeared as a result of growing prices or other economic repercussions. Mobius – which continues to this day - functions as an artist-run center for experimental work in all media. Over the past thirty years they have organized and exhibited an exceptional amount of experimental work with artists from all over the world. Marilyn's advice to the coming generation of performance artists is to actively set up such (inter)national peer networks. It will give artists a structure to stand strong on in a world often driven by economic values which are not always supportive of this kind of art practice, and allow them to pursue their artistic dreams.

For more information on Marilyn Arsem and her work visit <http://marilynarsem.net/>

Femke Lutgerink  
*Associate Curator of Space Other*

*Up to the present time and beyond..* is the accompanying text of the exhibition *Somewhere Felt*, featuring seven artists from the graduate program of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, and Tufts University in Boston: Chuck Chaney, Leighton Collier, Faith Johnson, Sean M. Johnson, Tara Hill, Vasia Markides and Richard Spartos. March 7 – 22, 2008