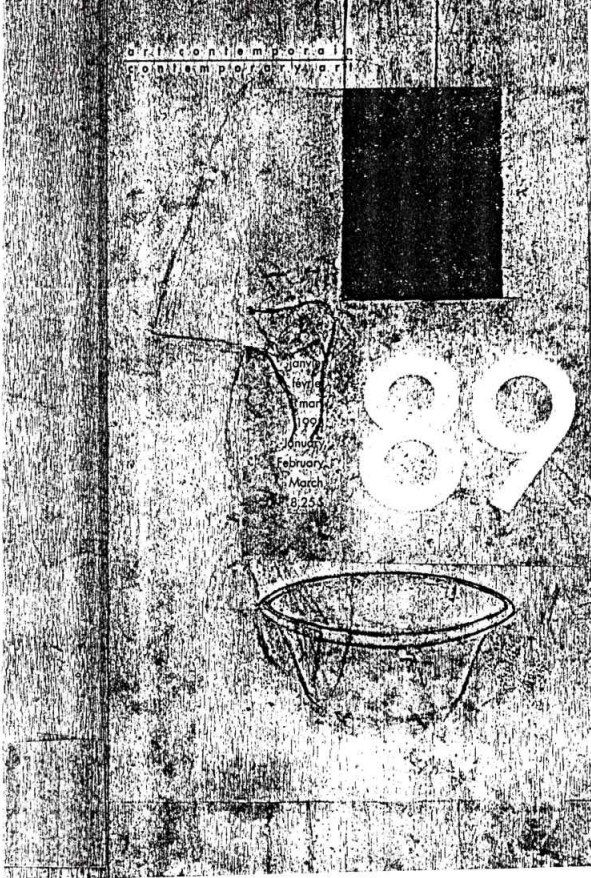


# PARACHUTE

artistic contemporary  
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## LIQUOR AMNII 2

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*Liquor Amnii*, amniotic fluid, suggests feminine nourishment, protection and exchange. "Liquor Amnii 2" was the second phase of a project developed to nurture communication between two groups of women artists – five artists from Boston's Mobius Artist Group and five from Skopje, Macedonia. Unified by the theme of water as a metaphor for amniotic fluid, the entire project encompassed two separate exhibition/performances of site-specific work. "Liquor Amnii 1" took place in 1996 in an abandoned Turkish bath house in Skopje. In "Liquor Amnii 2," temporary installations and performances were situated along Providence, Rhode Island's historic River Walk.

Curator Suzana Milevska described the collaboration as an exercise in *écriture féminine*, celebrating the multiple writings of the female body. For her, amniotic fluid was a

metaphor for in-between spaces – a medium that both links and separates. In this body of work, however, the separations were more apparent than the linkages: the two groups of artists had markedly different interpretations of the notion of feminine art practice, differences that reflected cultural, ideological and generational rifts.

Despite the ostensibly feminist nature of the project, Milevska and the Skopje artists stated unanimously that they were absolutely uninterested in feminist theory, which has not been a part of their cultural heritage. Furthermore, having lived under a rigidly socialist state, they were wary of any kind of programmatic political message. Rather, they approached this project as an exploration of water as a metaphor for the feminine principle. Implicit in their highly suggestive work was a vision of the placental

environment as a space of floating, multiple meaning, and potential alchemical transformation.

The work of the Skopje artists was almost entirely installation, located beside the river or on or under bridges. Gazing at water often inspires reverie – free-floating associative thought – and a river is a common metaphor for the flow of time. All of the river installations referred to time and eternity in some way. In Margarita Kiselicka-Kalajdzieva's *Timelessness*, on the River Walk's south bridge, frames within reflected frames pulled the eye in and out of two- and three-dimensional space. By mixing dimensions and skewing visual and tactile perception, it presented a spatial vision of eternity. In Iskra Dimitrova's *Femina Alba* a crouched,

explicitly feminist project, stressing female cooperation. Their work tended to be rooted in seventies' feminist practice, however, rather than in more recent strategies of examining psychoanalytic/institutional/biological constructs of female identity. At best, this devotion to seventies' practice was an informed choice by the artists to explore aspects that remain meaningful, resulting in meditative and poetic invocation of female mythic figures and local history. At worst, it resulted in simplistic up-against-the-wall style messages advocating universal sisterhood and projecting a view of womanhood as captivity, burden and disenfranchisement.

All of the Mobius artists' work had a performance component and much of its substance lay in the in-

ation – was more than two-dimensional, the identification between a woman in a traditional female role and the condition of the homeless was problematic.

Ultimately it was Marilyn Arsem's work – both mythic and conceptually open, and using both language and artifact – that functioned as an umbilical cord linking the two bodies of art. Her installation/performance, *Rivers of Memory: Oceans*, used time-based performance to foster a perception of timelessness, echoing themes the Skopje artists conveyed through spatial means. A carved ice throne and bench faced each other on a concrete dock overlooking the water. Arsem beckoned to watchers to sit one at a time on the throne, watching ice melt into the river, and talked intimately with each. She spoke about time, asked questions, wondered whether time could be stopped. She then related a little of the history of the River Walk, layering images from the past over the suspended present. Her persona was archetypal, suggesting a sibyl, and her actions had the deliberation of ritual; her use of language and myth tied her to the other Boston artists.

Arsem's piece bridged a wide gulf between bodies of work that were not only very different but were based on conflicting ideas about the validity of the exchange's feminist framework. Of course, the differences themselves were instructive. The gap in political experience between the two groups of artists was obviously wide. The artists who were disenchanted by overt political intrusiveness found ways of saying more with less, always leaving the viewer free to form her own associations. Those who had to make their politics overly concrete – as if to reassure themselves of rightness – often stifled the meanings they meant to foster. Ultimately, in its failure to embody a contemporary feminist practice – in the disagreement about the relevance of feminism as well as the historical dislocation of some of the explicitly feminist work – "Liquor Amnii 2" may have reflected only too well the fragmented nature of contemporary feminist practice.

– REBECCA TODD



MARILYN ARSEM, RIVERS OF MEMORY: OCEANS (1997), PERFORMANCE STILL; PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST.

translucent figure floated in a cavernous arch under the north bridge, glowing in ultraviolet light. An ambiduous looped sound score of melodious female voices echoed under the bridge, heightening an otherworldly play between the seen and unseen. Here one could read the alchemical desire to distill eternal principles from the twilight space between life and death, air and water, light and dark, and the natural and built environments. As in all of the riverside installations, the eye was drawn beyond the recognizable towards the space of the imaginary.

In contrast, the Boston artists interpreted the collaboration as an

interactions between the artists and individual audience members. Mari Novotny-Jones walked through the park area in the persona of Mary Magdalene in exile, as a storyteller, her dress covered in rocks representing the sorrows and burdens of women. She would approach passersby and tell them stories, fables illustrating messages about women's suffering. Meredith Davis' *Bird Woman* was a half-bird, half-crazed-woman persona who protected a nest/installation of meticulously carved grape vines, a solid table and a cooked roast. Although this allegorical representation – woman-as-victim maddened by domestic captivity and urban alien-