

video|performance

BY JED SPEARE

Talking with Marilyn Arsem

Assembling the fragments of history, armed with a map and a set of instructions.

FOR OVER TWENTY YEARS, Marilyn Arsem has been a performance pioneer in our region as an artist, arts manager, and educator. The broad evolution of her work has migrated from black box performance art to site-specific, visually based performances. Over the course of time, one aspect of her work has continually explored new definitions and identities for performers and audiences. Her more current work is also aligned with conceptual art and the artifices and interiors of that genre.

She has modestly and integrally established a career that in the past five years has led to cultural exchanges, residencies, workshops, and site-specific projects outside of New England, in locales such as Macedonia, Croatia, Taiwan, Germany, and Seattle. In June she will be presenting a new work in Toronto.

In *recent: remote* (July 1999), she installed a variety of elements designed to examine our construction of history at a former Nike Missile site in Cougar Mountain Regional Wildland Park, King County, Washington, commissioned by The Center On Contemporary Art in Seattle. As the audience began to explore the site, the piece gradually revealed itself. There was more than one possible reading of the situation, and while audience members may have initially believed that they would function as observers outside of the event, they soon discovered they were part of it as well. It was up to each individual to interpret the information given to him or her (in the form of a map and a set of instructions) and select a course of action. The two-day event was followed by a "Debriefing" for audiences/performers two days later in Seattle. Our conversation focused on the project and some of the choices Arsem made toward its realization.

Jed Speare: In several of your works, you're an agent or a guide for a kind of process that the audience members can experience, and often working with one member of the audience at a time. It's not performance as spectacle—it's a totally different scale and relation. Marilyn Arsem: *recent: remote* in Seattle was that kind of work. It was very layered, and I had many "agents" working with me. Not only were the performers taking the roles of both archaeologist and secret agent, but the audience members [were] as well. Everyone was operating similarly in the work, in that they were all essentially following the same instructions: Their task was to gather information on the artifacts on the site. But each person, performer and audience [member] had different information about the history of the site, as well as secret instructions asking him or her to engage in undercover surveillance activities. It quickly became very ambiguous as to who was audience and who was performer, and who was telling you the truth and who was feeding you disinformation.

So the site was a Nike missile base that had been built over or abandoned? Yes, though now it is in a deserted section of a public park. The site was about a square mile, encircled by a fence from the military era, and paved roads crisscrossed the site. Around the perimeter were wooded areas. All the buildings had been demolished, but there were still lots of fragments in the woods—hunks of cement, weird pipes, and remains of foundations. In the middle was a big open field with an overgrown sand berm where the launch pads and missile vaults had been. You could dig down 6 inches and see the corners of the vault, and when you pounded on the ground, it echoed...very eerie. I embedded additional clues and materials in the landscape that focused on the different histories of the site, but especially the Cold War—recent history that already feels remote. I buried old photographs of

the Nike base that were viewed through periscope windows in the ground; I mounted surveillance cameras and tiny monitors in trees; voices emanated from the bushes, triggered by movement; ticking could be heard from underground; a message in Russian was mowed into the meadow, to be read from the air—oh, and much more.

When you set something like that in motion, especially in this case with multiple performers...do you have in mind a shape of how it is going to occur or is it that the outcome is somewhat random, because you really don't know what the interactions will bring?

I would rather say that there are many branching paths that a piece like this can take. The task is to lay the groundwork, then let it go. I didn't know how the event would unfold, and the reason

other's secret agendas. No one knew the other's covert activity, so they were dying to find out. Actually, everyone wanted to know each other's secret instructions, audience and performers. There were some real surprises—deep-cover missions—that even I didn't know about.

The audience [members'] reflections on their own participation in the event itself were also fascinating: what they thought about while they were on the site trying to figure out the piece, the assumptions that they made, what they thought they should or shouldn't do out there, what they actually did.

Because they were unwittingly performing.

And wittingly! One man brought his own camera there and was photographing everything that he thought was

It quickly became very ambiguous as to who was audience and who was performer, and who was telling you the truth and who was feeding you disinformation.

there was the debriefing was to find out how people engaged with the piece. There were many, many incidents that occurred between individuals throughout the event. No one could possibly see everything or even encounter everyone on the site, myself included.

But it was open-ended because it was about information, the public, and... and how easy it is to get paranoid or misinterpret partial information. The group conversation at the debriefing ended up being about not only their experience of the piece, but about how it triggered their memories of the Cold War. The audience was a combination of young and old, conservatives and liberals, and it resulted in a very lively and at times heated discussion of that era. Did we "win" the Cold War? Was our behavior justified? Is the war still going on?

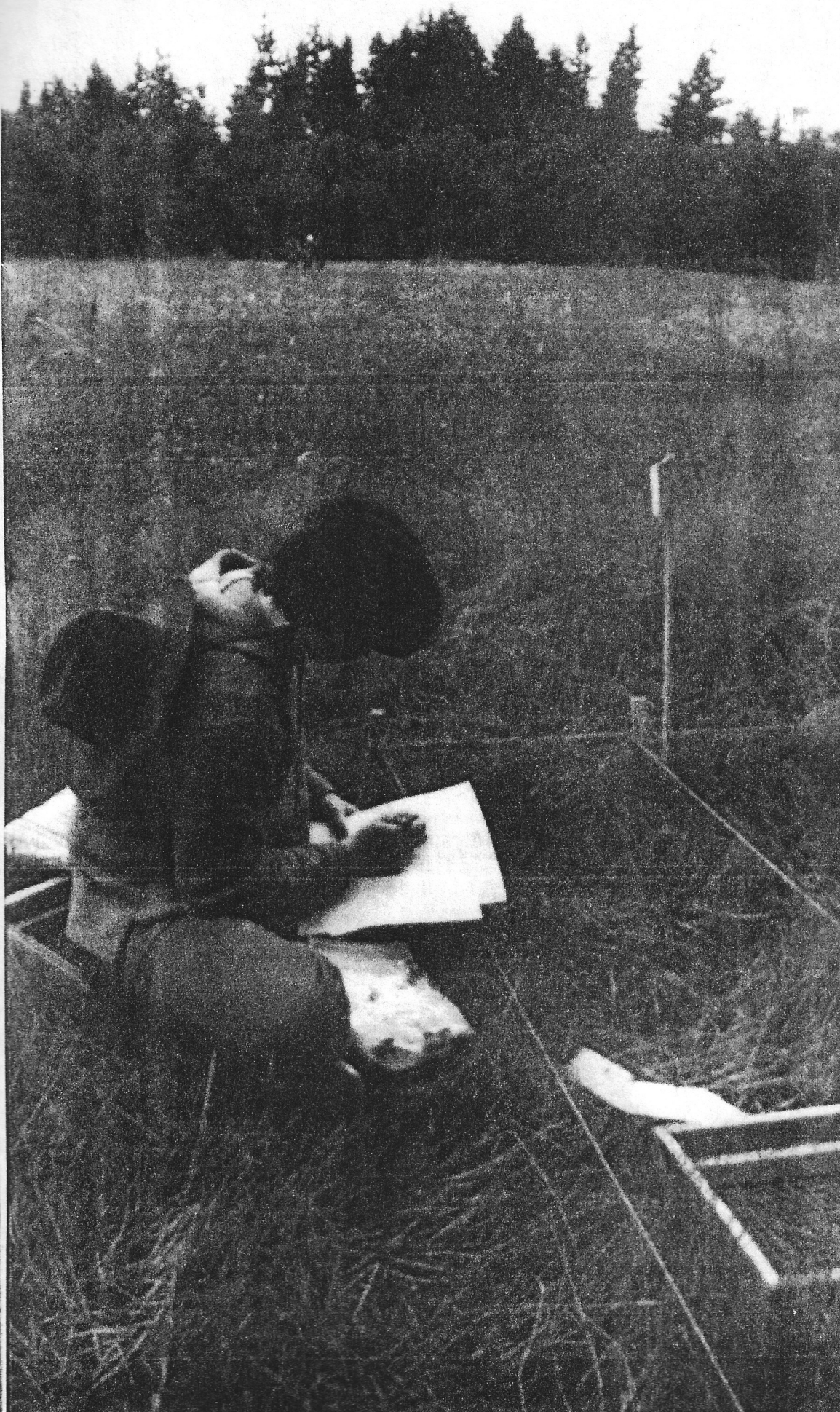
The debriefing was also a chance for the performers to find out each

suspicious activity. You'd be surprised at what looks suspicious...

In one way, you would say that for an artist, an audience always completes the piece, but in your work the audience is participating in it and providing feedback afterward.

recent: remote is literally that problem of reconstructing history out of fragments. People went through the site with paper and pencil trying to identify artifacts that they were finding in the woods—what they were part of or had been used for. And if they had information on the mining history of that site, which some of them did, they read those fragments differently than the people who had the information about the Cold War history, which was different than the people who had the Native American history of the site. Each of the performers researched one of those histories, so that his or her archaeological activities had a specific orientation. If the audience happened to encounter them and engaged them in conversation, they would discover that the performers were interpreting the artifacts from that particular perspective.

LEFT AND BELOW: Marilyn Arsem—*recent:remote*, Seattle, Washington, 1999. Courtesy of Mobius, Boston.



You do a lot of research about a site in preparation for the work, informing the work.

The site begged for it. When I first saw the location, it was very mysterious, seemingly empty, with so much lurking just beneath the surface. I had to find out its history. I interviewed residents in the area. I acquired old photographs, military and mining site plans of it. I reviewed Native American land claim cases for the region. I also did more extensive research on the Cold War in general. I interviewed more people, including ones in the defense industry. I scoured used bookstores on both coasts to find Cold War material published in the 50s and 60s. It's very curious to read now.

PHOTO: BOB RAYMOND



I could have spent years doing research for this piece, and actually I am thinking of doing another version of this project somewhere else. Nike missile bases circled every city, and many have reverted to public use. I love researching, definitely. Why do a project if it isn't something you want to learn about? But I also want to learn about it with others, to design a piece so that I can invite the audience and performers to engage in the same practice that I am engaged in. I may have started ahead of them and have already assembled materials and images to contemplate, but by no means have I finished thinking about it.

I am still struggling with how to represent *recent:remote* in a document. In keeping with the nature of the event, my material on it is fragmentary. I think that the documentation will have to continue the question of how to assemble meaning out of the fragments of history. Perhaps it should be in the form of a Cold War spy's report on undercover activities. [1]

JED SPEARE IS A MEMBER OF THE MOBIUS ARTISTS GROUP AND MOBIUS'S DIRECTOR