

ARTS

RECENT REMOTE CHANCE pg39

Research, inspiration, imagination: Marilyn Arsem brings old sites back to life. BY TONIA STEED

VISUAL ART

by Meg Shiffler

MUSEUMS AND ART CENTERS

CENTER ON CONTEMPORARY ART, 65 Cedar St, 728-1980.

Land/Use/Action—A wide-ranging project of visual and performance work that encourages viewers to consider the relationship between people and land in both intellectual and experimental terms. The Center for Land Use Interpretation from Los Angeles shows the results of their investigations into Washington's ports, nuclear facilities, and industrial sites. *Here and There* features 10 local artists who have created site-specific work around Seattle. Marilyn Arsem, a Boston-based performance artist, has been commissioned to produce a site-specific work. Through July 31.

RECENT REMOTE CHANCE

MARILYN ARSEM'S INVENTED HISTORIES by Tonia Steed

LAST SUMMER, DRIVING NORTHEAST WHERE Okanogan and Ferry Counties abut the Canadian border, my now-husband Vic and I slipped into the spoon of the Methow

Recent: Remote

CoCA, location TBA, call 728-1980
Sat & Sun July 24-25
at 12, 2, 4, & 6
Debriefing: Tues July 27 at 7

Valley, looking for ghost towns. We saw little beyond open farm land and rural route signposts. Suddenly the remains of a split-rail fence and a log shed—caught in waist-high weeds, splintered and grayed by passing winters—grabbed our attention. Later, we pinpointed the location of the shed on a map and discovered that we'd stumbled on the remains of Bodie, Washington—a thriving mill and gold-mining town from 1900 to about 1940, when the mill shut down and people moved on. Just giving a name to the place prompted activity: As we drove by the site on our way back, we projected a whole, vibrant town onto its surfaces.

When I share this story with Marilyn Arsem, she smiles and nods vigorously. "If you find a lilac bush in the middle of the New Hampshire woods," she counters, "you know it was probably once just outside someone's front door."

But "you know" only with a little information. Assembling fragmentary clues—a lilac bush, a decaying fence, a dot with a name on the map—and collectively building on them to create a story (or history) of a site is Boston-based performance/installation artist Marilyn Arsem's forte. "I'm interested in bringing a natural site *alive* in a way. As soon as you think the whole thing is art, you read everything in this new context."

Her current performance experiment plays on this idea. *Recent: Remote* was commissioned by the Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA) as part of their Land/Use/Action series. While exploring potential sites for the piece, she and CoCA programming committee member Ken Thompson happened upon a former Nike missile base—an eerie, fenced-in field strewn with rubble and old foundations. The place spoke to her. "The site has a lot of nooks and crannies that feel completely isolated from each other but are actually quite close. We even discovered a little booth with a sign reading, 'Nike Missile History.' It was empty. I felt like the piece was already there!"

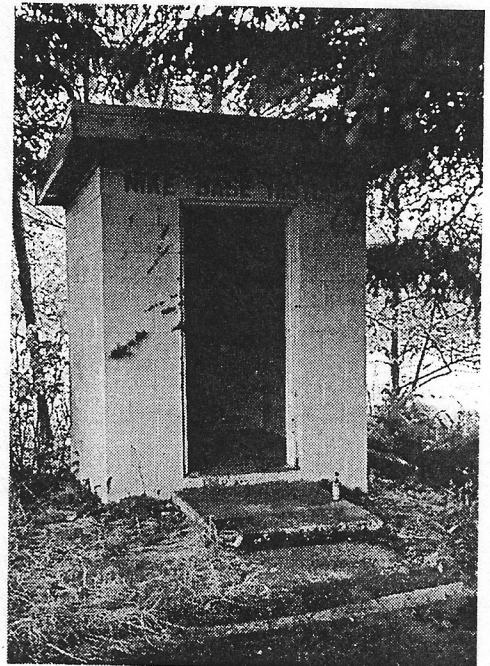
An abandoned missile site might seem an unusual place for performances, but Arsem prefers to find and create theater through unusual means. Although Arsem was educated in a traditional theater background in the 1970s, a desire to test the boundaries of that tradition came early in her artistic career. Like many who experiment with the well-made play model, she found linear narrative, characters, and a single viewpoint restrictive. She also wanted to situate audience and performers on the same level, to avoid the power dynamic implied in conventional performance, in which a "passive" audience watches performers on an elevated, well-lit platform. I point out that no theater audience is ever really passive, since we're constantly projecting our conceptions and preconceptions into a scene, and we can disrupt action if we so desire. Arsem agrees: "In the theater, an audience has an influence on how an event unfolds, even if it's just a loud snorer in the back row.... So my notion back in the '70s was to try to construct performance events that actively worked with an audience. At that time, it was the performance art community that came and stayed, and the theater community that came and walked out."

Arsem began to create installation and performance pieces in galleries, where the playing field was level, and in 1979, she founded Moebius, a multidisciplinary group of artists interested in creating collaborative work. Twenty years later, Moebius is still on the Boston scene, and Arsem's artistic

objectives of 20 years ago still inform her work. As soon as she decides on a place to bring to life, she embarks on extensive research, and encourages her performers to do the same. In this case, she flew home to Boston to unearth everything she could on Nike missiles, the Cold War, and Russian and U.S. military strategies. Once back in Seattle, she delved further into the site's history, digging through county records and interviewing local old timers who recall the communities and land uses that predated the Nike base, and see its dim future in encroaching townhouse developments "waiting to pounce" on the land. "I'm getting contradictory stories," she tells me, "which I just love. A lot of my work has been about how difficult it is to really know what happened in the past... and how much we fill in the blanks. It's about how differently people read the same set of fragments and put them together into an entirely different narrative, depending on their own inclinations."

To this end, Arsem has constructed a performance in which she casts audience and performers alike as both archeologists and agents who can affect the performance and its outcome. When audience members buy their tickets, CoCA will give them directions to the as-yet-undisclosed site, as well as a set of instructions—fragmentary clues to start them thinking. On the day of the performance, these audience members will assemble at the site. Arsem notes that "the performance will provide enough information—enough contradictory information—to trigger inquiry on their part." But it will be left to them to explore the site on their own terms and gauge their responses. "No single person, not even the performers, will be an authority out there. All of us will have pieces of information, so the real activity of *Recent: Remote* is to try to assemble this information into a history of the site."

Although the final portion of *Recent: Remote*—a debriefing session for participants two nights later—is optional, Arsem considers it the real end of the performance. "I want the audience to come back and report on what they believe the history of the site was, and what they believe is going on there now. What's going to be fascinating is to discover what other participants were up to, what was happening.... Things are not always as they seem." ■



Nike Missile Base: An "abandoned" art installation.