

PERFORMANCE

Art on Stage

What would theater and dance performances be like if visual artists were in charge of their production? The Brooklyn Academy of Music decided to find out.

BY JANET KOPLOS

Metallic polygons dangling from strings in the main hall of a historic building at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island; dancers in unitards covered with the words "I want" performing in the Grand Lobby of the Brooklyn Museum; strips of red cloth—"blood ties"—being knotted together by audience members in the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Majestic Theater: these disparate occurrences marked radically different productions last fall by three visual artists—Jene Highstein, Rona Pondick and Albert Chong—who created performance works in the second year of BAM's "Artists in Action" program.

In this experimental project, which will conclude this fall, BAM invites visual artists to create a production of some sort by collaborating with performers of their choice. An essay in this year's program magazine noted that visual artists and performing artists do not conceptualize performance space or time in the same way. BAM is apparently curious about what this different perspective might mean on stage. For the artists themselves, the program can present an opportunity to express a favorite theme or preoccupation in a new way and to explore the possibilities of collaboration. This season's three "Artists in Action" productions reflected the nature of the artists' own work, the performance medium they selected, and the type and degree of collaboration they chose.

Rona Pondick's typical themes (appetites both physical and emotional, possessiveness, security) and carnal forms (body parts such as mouths) were everywhere apparent in her production of *Mine* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. She designed the set, which remains on view as a



Performance scene from Mine.
Photos this page courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery.

Mine involved the staging of Rona Pondick's sculpture itself, and its translation into movement and sound.

sculpture installation in the museum's Grand Lobby. It consists of an angular, stonelike wooden bed 3 feet wide and a dramatic 22 feet long, completely covered with her cramp-lettered mantra, "I want," hand-written thousands of times, along with a blanket repeating the words in larger scale and a pillow on which they are larger still. There is also a portentous freestanding door 10 feet tall and just over a yard wide. A clothesline that appears out of the darkness of the high-ceilinged space (actually running from a column to the wall) is draped with darkly transparent garments. These shadowy shirts, dresses, trousers and tunics were taken off the line and worn variously and interchangeably by one male and four female dancers over the unitards repetitively lettered with that same declaration, "I want." Another major component of the set is a field of 350 sculptures of ears cast in urethane and paper pulp, which are piled around the foot of the long bed. Each is a foot or so in length and a dirty-wax color, and some are lighted with electric bulbs that emerge from the ear canal. Another element, which was wheeled in during the performance, is a huge set of red-gummed dentures large enough to climb into (similar teeth appeared across the seat of each dancer's unitard).

Mine involved a collaborative exchange with the painter Robert Feintuch (Pondick's husband), as well as contributions from the choreographer Sara Rudner, the composer William Matthews, the dancers (including Rudner) and lighting

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designer Jennifer Tipton. While *Flatland* consisted of a literary work staged with a sculptor's sensibility, *Mine* could be said to involve the staging of Pondick's sculpture itself, and its translation into movement and sound, two mediums she has not previously used.

The dance was more a matter of sociological events and psychological conditions than plot per se. The action occurred in two realms set apart by the great door. These two aspects might be described as private and public, inner and outer, or self and other, but given that the ears were on one side and the giant teeth on the opposite one, they could also be called aural and oral. Three women interacted successively or competitively with the man; the fourth woman (Rudner, who looks something like Pondick) was mostly self-absorbed or engrossed with the wheeled teeth. But she finally pounded on the door, demanding to join the crowd. In the performance, the humor that people sometimes miss in Pondick's sculptures—her recognition of the absurdity of her manias—was very clear, supported by the recurring musical motif of Spike Jones's version of *You Always Hurt the One You Love* (complete with buzzes, whistles and other silly sound effects). It was also conveyed by the slapstick and self-dramatizing gestures of the dancers.

All Pondick's sculptures and installations have been primal and obsessive. Her first sculptures were excremental piles. She later produced fetishistic arrangements of old shoes, baby bottles lashed to mattresses, and quasi-figural chair constructions. More recent works include installations of waxy or hairy, fist-size lumpy balls, each an elemental being centered on a gaping mouth lined with big yellow teeth. She has also produced boxes, drawings and books scrawled with a two-year-old's vocabulary—words such as "No" or "Mine." (A book with her characteristic elements was on view this fall at Susan Inglett Gallery in SoHo.) *Mine* succeeded as an engaging and expressive dance performance in its own right and provided a special delight to admir-



The set for the performance of Rona Pondick and Robert Feintuch's Mine, 1996, at the Brooklyn Museum, on view as a site-specific installation through September. Photo Liz Deschenes.

ers of Pondick's work, because it was surprising to see her imagery and tone realized so effectively in other mediums.

Black Fathers and Sons needed the indulgence that the Artists in Action program offers to each of its productions by billing them as works-in-progress. The production never achieved dramatic coherence. Problems can be expected in a work outside a visual artist's area of expertise. Pondick's and Highstein's greater success may have been due to their primary reliance on a single professional performer and to their use of that performer's medium—that is, Sara Rudner's dance and Hanne Tierney's abstract theater. Nevertheless, there were moments in Chong's production that burned themselves into a viewer's memory.

The series as a whole raises provocative questions about collaboration in art, primarily the matters of billing, credit and responsibility. Highstein has known Tierney for 20 years, and their work together grew from this familiarity. He insisted that the program magazine give them equal billing for conceiving and directing their production. Pondick credited her husband as co-director; spousal collaboration is difficult to evaluate, as recent art-world instances have demonstrated. Feintuch's contributions (like Rudner's and the others') were seamlessly integrated through a continuous-adjustment process of development in which Pondick had the final say, and thus were not specifically visible in the production. (Although Feintuch's paintings featured ears for several years, the ear sculptures here were Pondick's idea, and are consistent with her focus on body parts.) Chong's piece, with no evidence of an ultimate decisionmaker, shows the dangers of creation by committee.

And what about the visual artist's conception of space and time, which BAM meant to explore through this series? All three productions offered

striking imagery as part of the performance, whether through color, space, action or pose. When they were most engrossing, this visual aspect was an inseparable part of the whole. There have long been performance specialists, such as Robert Wilson, known for creating stunning stage pictures. The three visual artists of BAM's series in essence became new performance directors, differing from the established practitioners in experience more than in basic nature. BAM's experiment introduced new voices, not new forms. But only in the future will we know whether performance time or space can somehow influence these artists' solo works. □

The first round of Artists in Action performances, in 1995, consisted of works by Vito Acconci, Ilya Kabakov, and the team of Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel. The third and final round, this coming fall, will showcase works by Beth B. Nayland Blake and Kerry James Marshall.

Pondick's installation remains on view in the Brooklyn Museum Grand Lobby through September.