

VOX

MAGA ZINE

CONTEMPORARY ART & CULTURE

FALL 1991 • SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

\$3.50

IS
IT
ART
?

NEW
DEFINITIONS
NEW
MEDIA

news • views • interviews • what's hot • what's not

Investigating Light and Space

The Work of Gail Gordon –
Evoking an Emotional Response With Natural Phenomena

CATHLEEN BOWEN

The experience of viewing art is very different from a movie or commercial theater where 'it' can be mindlessly gobbled up like a TV dinner. Art is not 'it' Art is 'us.' Art is the striking of a tiny light in the dark of a world that none of us can ever understand. Curiously, it is the contemplation of what I don't understand that brings me the most pleasure. It buys me a brief respite from my own narrowness. It is as close to a

state of grace as I am able to achieve.

Gail Gordon has created an installation of light and mirrors that is seductively conducive to that state of grace. In a converted car repair shop that serves as her studio on Harrison Street in San Francisco, she has meticulously crafted a room where the basic sensory perceptions are challenged. The clamor of car horns, the shouts and the gunning of motorcycles

from the busy Mission neighborhood street recede as you step through her front door. It is suddenly quiet. Threaded through the cavernous space that previously rang with the din of tools and machinery is a corridor that proceeds to two rooms. Hung there are photos, text and preliminary work which chronicle her earlier experimentation with light. Included are some astonishing black and white photographs that capture apparitions of white light which appear three dimensional.

The installation itself is to your right as you leave the rooms. It is at once inviting and alarming, with pale blue-green walls and blue light at the end. As you uncertainly round the corner and proceed more deeply into the installation, the light changes and you are enveloped by what appears to be a thick mist, a disorienting optical illusion that Gordon has cleverly created with computer controlled lights. A few feet farther is the inner room itself, with a seat at one end and an image of two floating stones at the other. Sitting and gazing at the stones through the fine mist, the light slowly begins to vary from bright to dark and

Gail Gordon, *INVESTIGATING LIGHT AND SPACE*, Mixed media installation, 1991
View through the interior of installation showing non-physical 'objects'



back again. Within the quiet and shifting of 30 hidden beams, the effect is of a floating world.

Gordon became fascinated with the properties of light as a medium over the course of her career as a painter and sculptor. She experimented with natural light for two years but was frustrated with the lack of control it afforded and so turned more and more to technical means, which included computers. "But I am interested in the emotional response rather than the technical end of things," she said in a telephone interview from Hawaii where she was on vacation. "For instance, you mentioned that you had noticed a response when the light brightened. (True: I felt a subtle quickening of my metabolism as the light got stronger.) That is what interests me. There was a long gestation with this piece. One day after all the experiments and failures, it appeared before me. I became the director of it. I never tried to Control it."

Committed to coming as close to her original vision as possible, it took a year of patient adjustments to the work to satisfy her. She experimented with sound. Gordon was a professional singer and singing instructor years ago, and not surprisingly attempted to incorporate music into the installation. "I tried to use the music, for instance, of Paul Horn (a flautist) and others but I could never get it right. It always sounded celestial, or too corny, or something. I am meticulous," she says with a sigh, "sometimes too much so. I want it a certain way and I'm willing to wait. It's not talent, but perseverance."

This is her first large scale installation. Since it is in a private studio rather than a gallery, the number of viewers has been modest, knowledge of its existence spread mostly by word of mouth. There is a real ardor in her voice as she speaks of plans for other installations both large and small, her ideas about the possibilities of working with

water, and installations of pure light, with no objects at all.

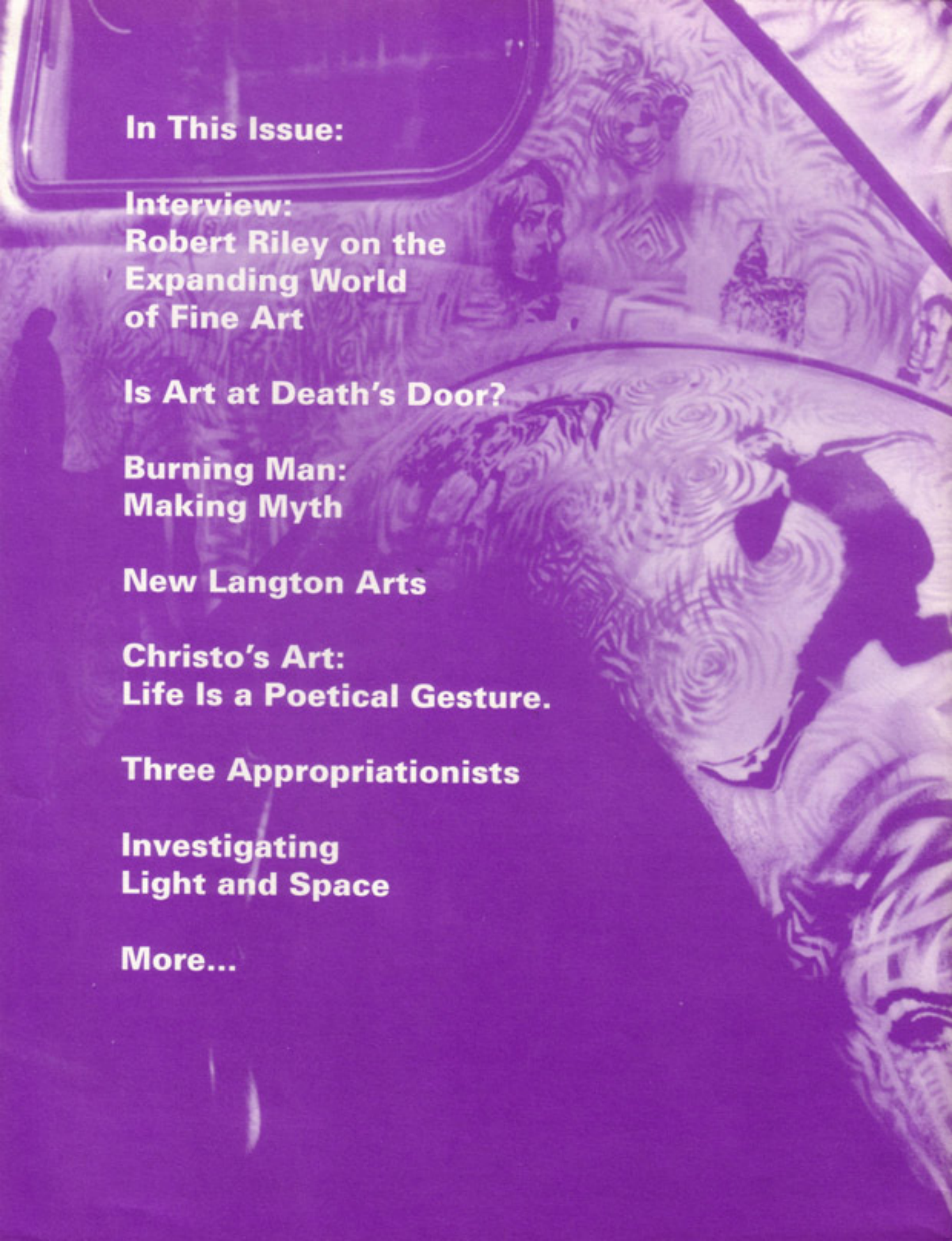
Gordon's work captures a natural phenomenon and manipulates it. The more learned among us might ask if it is art at all. But the definition what is called art has greatly expanded over the last century to include non-traditional media such as text, sound and light installations such as Gordon's. Often instead of celebrating cultural notions of beauty, it delineates its absence, a mystifying phenomenon to a large part of the population. So who can say, really, what is art? To me, it is a pinhole through which, with cocked eye and ear, we can sense a bit of what we cannot describe. Perhaps it is the religion of atheists. "It is a difficult question," says Gordon. "people call almost anything art, from crafts onward. But when it affects you so that you look at the world in a different way, then that is what I would call art."

- Cathleen Bowen

**Art is Not 'it.' Art is 'Us.'
Art is the Striking of a of a
tiny light in the dark of a
world that none of us can
ever understand.**

Gail Gordon





In This Issue:

**Interview:
Robert Riley on the
Expanding World
of Fine Art**

Is Art at Death's Door?

**Burning Man:
Making Myth**

New Langton Arts

**Christo's Art:
Life Is a Poetical Gesture.**

Three Appropriationists

**Investigating
Light and Space**

More...