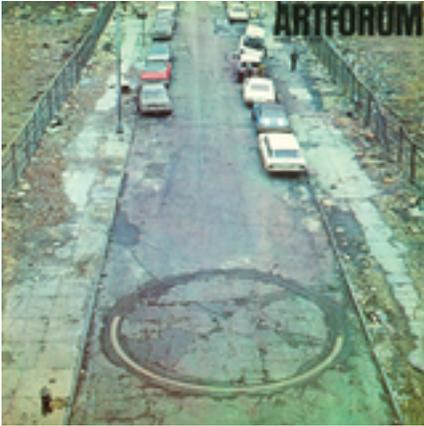


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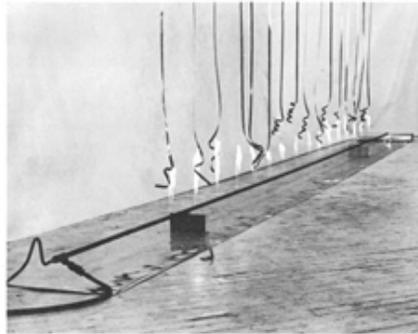
PRINT March 1971

Otto Piene, Hans Haacke, Laura Grisi, Geny Dignac, Alan Sonfist, Newton Harrison, David Lowry Burgess and Robert Smithson

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

All photos from "Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Elements of Art," an exhibition organized by Virginia Gunter for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and presented there from February 4 through April 4, 1971.

C. Sproat, E. Clark, J. Jaroslav, *Fire Piece*, 10 x 21 x 2', propane gas, metal striping, nylon, steel, 8-track stereo system, 1970. The metal striping consists of two metal strips with differing temperature reactions. Hanging in the flames, they curl up from the heat but straighten when they have risen into cooler air. The process is continuous.



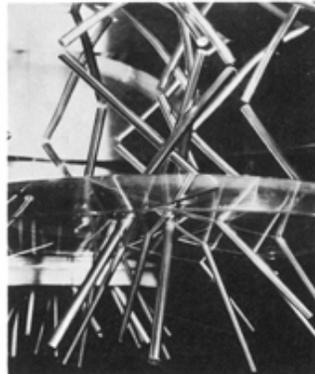
David L. Burgess, *Listening for Light Hinge*, ice, 1971.



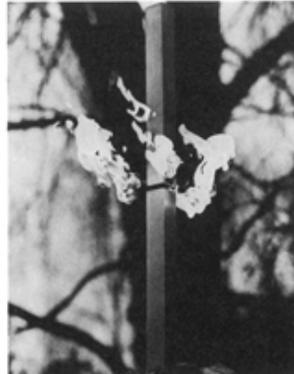
Hans Haacke, *Circulation*, 20 x 40', 1969. A system of transparent tubes spread on the floor in a tributary pattern, through which water and air bubbles are pumped.



Newton Harrison, *Air, Earth, Water Interface*, 10' x 8' x 6'. Seeds of various plants are sown in the earth/compost where they will grow during the exhibition.



Laura Grisli, *Four Studies for a Project of Refraction in the Water of Lake Tchad, Africa*, 11' h., 3'2" dia., each cylinder, 1969. Aluminum tubes float freely at a 45-degree angle in four cylindrical containers illustrating the reflective and refractive properties of water.



Geny Dignac, *Fire Sculpture E.D.M.*, Corten steel, gas flame, 16' h., 1969-71. Six jets of flame issue from the middle of the sculpture up to five feet horizontally.

BOSTON

Some 67 years ago Henry James visited Boston after a long absence from the United States and, viewing the incipient effects of what we have since learned to call "urban renewal," he remarked: "...if I had often seen how fast history could be made, I had doubtless never so felt that it could be unmade still faster." Most people here have become so sanguine about the prospects for "renewal" that James's remark would sound to them like the wisecrack of an ungrateful guest. But the process of unmaking that James saw has really come into its own in recent years, to the point where "progress" has encroached not only upon certain wonderful old sectors of the city which were already like ghettos of sensibility, but somehow upon the concept of history itself. "The New Boston," as it was billed in the early sixties, abounds in such disharmonies of scale as are now being consummated in Copley Square. There H. H. Richardson's Trinity Church is about to be relegated once and for all to the shadow of an enormous skyscraper being erected in response to the Prudential's even less interesting tower. When something of colossal size is put somewhere it doesn't belong, it quickly draws everything around it into a pointless, often inadvertent competition in which esthetic values play no part whatsoever. Boston continues thus to anesthetize itself, and in the process to confer upon its much touted historical "heritage"

a sort of Disney outlandishness of which people are apparently expected to (and in fact do) tire pretty quickly. Those who perhaps have a sense of what is at stake in the conflagration of progress and who work to save at least the visible landmarks of history are usually treated as harmless reactionaries even when they succeed. What with efforts to lure new industry to the city area, legitimate and illegitimate demands for social reform, countless other real and contrived exigencies, and political graft so persistent as to be about the last Boston tradition, there simply isn't time for history anymore; it is decidedly a thing of the past. Boston has caught up with Henry Ford.

The unmaking, the disarticulation, goes beyond the terms of demolition versus refurbishment of the cityscape. The whole public dimension seems to be characterized by a kind of loping confusion, like Keystone cops in slow motion. One thing is certain, that it is very difficult to make determinations in this kind of ambience, determinations of value especially. So one was optimistic at the prospect of the Boston Museum's final show of its centennial year, "Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Elements of Art." After all, if people like Smithson, Serra, Morris, and Haacke can't bring some precision to bear on responses to The Present in Boston or at least connect that with something pre-geographical, then maybe one's discomfiture is only self-induced after all. At least with art history one knew how to operate, concepts were mostly concepts and objects mostly objects and the exchange of categories in this fairly theoretical realm could be quite gratifying at times, whereas seeing it lived out could be quite shattering. But maybe a show like this would offer an acceptable way of seeing that would reinvest a concept like "history" with a palpable, locatable ground. The primitiveness of the four ancient elements was already appealing.

Shortly before this writing the show was installed, that portion of it that could be contained. The press preview culminated in a panel discussion among four participating artists, Otto Piene, Alan Sonfist, Newton Harrison, and David Lowry

Burgess, which was also open to the public, to judge by the number of people who walked out. Toward the back of the auditorium on this occasion were a small group of ideological hecklers who spoke sloganese in very loud voices and exhorted Otto Piene to remove his tie as a gesture of solidarity when he said something that sounded for a moment like it agreed with their posture. It was like a happening at times: one just knew that certain members of the audience had been briefed on what to say and when; even the grimacing little old ladies, who were probably genuinely shocked by the few casual obscenities thrown around, even Vera Simons who jumped up to answer a heckler's attack on "plastic" art, seemed like performers in a student filmmaker's scenario. This was the time to recall that Robert Smithson had planned to make a "juggernaut" for the show; if only it hadn't been squelched by logistical problems.

All the time one is wondering how it will be possible to write about this show. What good will description do here? "Elements" is no mere challenge to criticism, it is an incitement to silence, it is making all the provinciality and latent anti-intellectualism of the Boston art scene perfectly manifest. The question raised by the show is the question James was on the verge of uttering: what is the relation of a sense of history to the notion of quality? Obviously Alan Sonfist's plexiglass containers in which chemical crystals vaporize and condense can be justified logically by the right construction of art history, but how is their mindlessness to be reconciled with the very notion of justification? Clearly work like Sonfist's is going to go on getting done whether it can be justified or not, but it's certainly not what Boston needs. What is needed are reasons, substance, risk, quality; then, spectacle, novelty, entertainment, and amaze your friends. People like Sonfist and Ravi Puusemp, who has another high-school physics project, a viewer-controlled, motorized ripple tank, have reversed that order and stopped short of entertainment.

There have been a few occurrences of real beauty and interest though. David Lowry Burgess did the

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premier event of the exhibition, an ice piece on the frozen surface of the Charles River. Burgess arranged large blocks of ice, amounting to some 24 tons altogether, on the surface of the river and set crocus bulbs in them which will eventually drift to shore and take root. Time, temperature, and states of matter were connected in this piece in a somewhat poetic way, but the beauty of it came with the use of the light, particularly evening light, which the river seems to attract, and the use of that peculiarly inviolate space just above the river's surface. Burgess's piece didn't remain intact for long; the night after the blocks were disposed on the river, vandals came around and altered the form of the piece with a sledgehammer or some such implement. One of them at least had the courtesy to leave his phone number. Several people at the panel discussion referred to earlier seemed to prefer the decisiveness of the vandalism to the suggestiveness of the event.

Robert Morris had proposed to do a piece on the Museum lawn which was to involve dragging a 10,000 pound steel plate through \$8,000 worth of concrete spread in a long mound. All the materials and workmen came together, but the piece resisted being done. At first the steel plate, which was being maneuvered by a giant crane, was pushing too much concrete in its path for it to pass to the end of its course. A second cable wound on a windlass at the base of the crane was looped around the base of the plate to give it more horizontal force. But the weight of the steel and concrete proved so great that the horizontal cable began to be severed with gushes of sparks by the edges of the steel plate. Next, Morris set heavy wooden beams at the edges of the plate to keep the drag cable from being cut by the steel, but the cable simply split the beams in half or squeezed them away from the edges. Then, after a few more passes with just the vertical cable attached to the plate, one of the eyebolts suspending the plate gave way and the giant metal square plunged into the mass of concrete, causing the latter to heave menacingly. The whole day was taken up with such obstacles and ended with an alterca-

tion between Morris and the contractor who had supplied the crane. Morris walked out; on his way out of the city he called the exhibition curator saying that he would still like to do a work for the show. At this writing financial difficulties are forestalling any commitment in the matter.

Though Morris's piece was never realized, the efforts at executing it provided an interesting choreography of different states of matter. The steel plate seemed to gain in weight as it neared the earth; the crane lifted it about like a playing card, but as soon as one of the workmen touched it, to stop it from rotating for instance, it became incredibly massive and threatening. I asked the crane operator what he made of the event: "It's a day's pay."

"Elements" manages to avoid being a success or a failure simply by its intractability, but initially it has been a disappointment that tempts one to begrudge someone. But the strange thing is that there doesn't seem to be anyone back there pulling the strings. I have sympathy for Virginia Gunter, the organizer of the show, for she seems to have been placed in the position of the sorcerer's apprentice, and blame for the results of untoward circumstances will probably rain down on her; but the exhibition was out of hand as soon as the vandals got to Burgess's piece. There is something in common perhaps between the gratuitousness of vandalism and the gratuitousness of certain art actions including some taken in this show. That, unfortunately, is the level of sense that the whole exhibition makes. The real issues are probably further from articulation than ever now, as the installation of the show hovers somewhere between a gathering of objects and a random sequence of events. "Elements" is mostly a show of names. Lowry Burgess, when asked to comment on the relation between art and nature, said that the whole question bespoke such a conceptual backlog that a comment would really be impossible; only a very lengthy analysis could make a *comment* meaningful. Something like that could be said in respect to "Elements" as a whole.

—KENNETH BAKER



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