

BY PATRICK FINNEGAN

Washington Project for the Arts, the D.C. area's main alternative art space, returned to its newly renovated facility on Seventh Street in December with an inaugural exhibition, *Recollections: Washington Artists at WPA, 1975-1988*. Curated by executive director **Jock Reynolds**, the show shrewdly addressed a number of recurring criticisms directed against the institution, most notably that it serves poorly the interests of local artists. *Recollections* featured works by sixty-two artists who have been included in shows at the WPA since its founding fourteen years ago. A subsequent exhibition, *From the Potomac to the Anacostia: Art*

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although her focus generally hasn't been local. This season AFR cooperated with the Phillips Collection in celebrating the career of British painter **Victor Pasmore**, and then performed a 180-degree turn with its installation of Manhattan-based street art from the Rivington School. **Amr G. Shaker**, a co-curator of the Rivington School exhibition, shares Ruggieri's penchant for diversity. *Life Death Eternity*, a group show of paintings he assembled at the beginning of the year, presented three artists—**Michael Blodgett**, **Pizzi Cannella**, and **Juan Usle**—with sensibilities far removed from the raw urban statements of the Rivington band. Ruggieri promises a solo show of Blodgett's haunting landscapes next season.



Krzysztof Wodiczko's monumental projection on the exterior of the Hirshhorn Museum.

and *Ideology in the Washington Area*, made a valuable cultural point by stressing that contributions to the arts scene by the city's vast black and Latin populations are all too rarely solicited.

Of course, artists who live in Washington *have* succeeded in making careers, as the continuing presences of **Anne Truitt** at Osuna Gallery and **Sam Gilliam** and **Jacob Kainen** at Middendorf confirm. Meanwhile, there is gallery representation for

younger artists now approaching mid-career, such as **Kevin MacDonald** at David Adamson, **Ruth Bolduan** at Anton, and **Martin Kotler**—whose handsome cityscapes, though never “fashionable,” are never out of style, either—at Fendrick. Events like the Washington Art Week, organized by the Washington Art Dealers Association, in which twenty-three member galleries will participate this month, dramatize the possibilities for those who wish to work here.

Insularity poses a far-greater danger to creative life in this city than the inevitable restrictions of its commercial marketplace. Robert Brown's show of prints by the Soviet émigré **Oleg Kudryashov** last fall fits nowhere into the immediate community agenda, yet it is difficult to understand how such a perfect—and important—exhibition kept such a low profile.

Andrea Ruggieri's track record at her gallery, AFR Fine Art, stands second to none,

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden continues its commitment to exploration of contemporary art by way of short-term installations. These include a show of **Mel Chin's** beautiful sculptures, on the theme of Eastern and Western cultural myths, in the *Directions* series, and last fall's monumental projection (for three evenings on the museum's Mall-side exterior wall) by **Krzysztof Wodiczko**. In the spring, the Hirshhorn presented a more sustained

view of its concerns by showing an impressive display of recent acquisitions.

Aside from the Hirshhorn's exhibitions, the activities of a union of four artists—Lynn McCary, Jared Hendrickson, Evan Hughes, and Alberto Gaitan, collectively known as **Art Attack**—represent the most exciting developments on the Washington arts front. Art Attack, a multidisciplinary group using visual, aural, and performance elements in its work, captured the public's imagination when it transformed a house slated for demolition into a piece of urban sculpture, cutting a diamond from the front of the structure and suspending it in what had formerly been a vestibule.

The international observance of the sesquicentennial of photography has been observed with numerous retrospectives, and this city, too, has enjoyed remarkable exhibi-

tions of "classic" photography. The elegiac trend of most of the anniversary celebrations was countered strongly by the pathfinding approach of **Joshua Smith and Merry A. Foresta**, who have brought an extraordinary display of the "next wave" of photography to the usually dour National Museum of American Art. *The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s* makes a good case for a new direction in nontraditional photography, free of both excessive fact and formality, adept in responding to a range of aesthetic issues, and able to blend the values of photography and painting by relying exclusively upon photographic processes.

The Photography of Invention and the recent Man Ray retrospective suddenly rendered the Museum of American Art competitive with its more glamorous Smithsonian colleagues—telling evidence of



From *Photography of Invention: Sandy Skoglund's 1987 A Breeze at Work*.

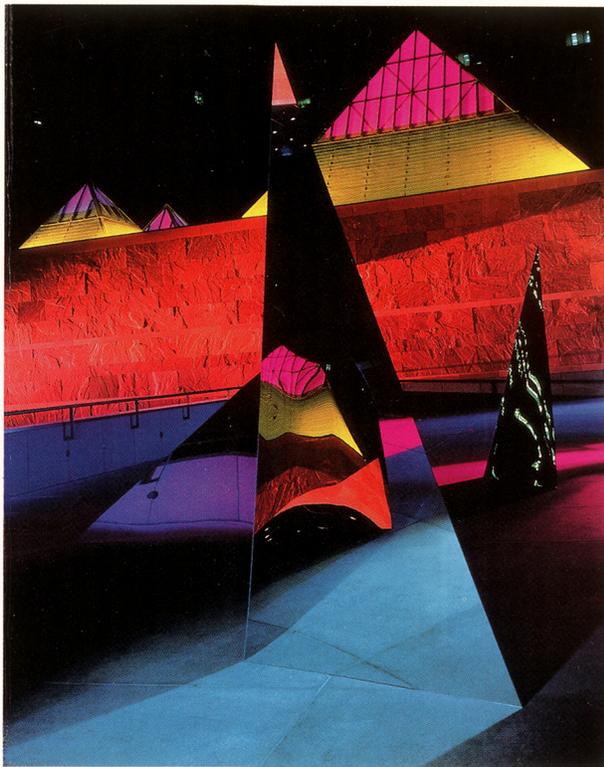
the impact that individual curators can have on an institution. Similarly, **Helaine Posner's** initial exhibition at the National Museum for Women in the Arts, a bountiful installation by **Judy Pfaff**, made the fledgling organization's point more vividly than any statement of purpose could hope to do. Subsequent representation of work by ten contemporary Greek women artists—all of it technically accomplished, and often philosophically bleak—was the antithesis of the brightly chaotic show that Posner curated. Taken together, these exhibitions quickly and decisively expanded the domain of Washington's newest museum.

The absence of a print dialogue about the arts scene in Washington—where the *Washington Post* holds a monopoly on what is widely read and is addressing itself to an increasingly general audience—may be a problem for the visual arts, but for performance it's a tragedy. Dim reviews in the *Post* twice jeopardized the reincarnated New Playwrights Theatre, now called American Playwrights Theatre, and turned Studio Theatre's adaptation of *The Bacchae* into a laughing-stock. Indeed, **Joy Zinoman's** exciting treatment of Euripides might serve as a model of the virtues of "deconstructing clas-

sical text." Most successful experimental theater and performance visited D.C. under the auspices of Dance Place or District Curators.

For establishment theater there were a few authentic highlights. The Washington Opera's production of the **Stephen Paulus** opera, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, enjoyed enough success to prompt the company to fit another contemporary piece, **Dominick Argento's** *The Aspern Papers*, into its repertory next season. **Liviu Ciulei's** production of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* at Arena removed a seminal work of modern theater from the library shelf and found fresh comic avenues to explore in Pirandello's ribbing of the stage conventions of his era. Ciulei reaffirmed that the play, despite its influence on the "existential" theater that it anticipated, is fundamentally comic. The Kennedy Center has yet to hit its stride under the new director, **Ralph Davidson**. The Eisenhower Theatre, one of its five auditoriums, was often vacant in recent months, but the brief mid winter appearance of comic mime **Bill Irwin** and the announcement of several Eisenhower bookings for the summer proved encouraging.

A space is a terrible thing to waste.



Architectural Site 10, December 22, 1986, by **Barbara Kasten**, also included in *Photography of Invention*.