

Going Public

By **MARTHA McWILLIAMS**

"Art Attack: Dominion Dium"
At 4749 Old Dominion Dr.,
Arlington, to August 1

"Knottyhead: Three Installations"
At Lubber Run Park
to September 10

"Marc Rebarge: Awakening"
At Lubber Run Park
to September 10

Because their pieces are highly visible symbols of contemporary art, artists who work in public spaces carry special responsibility. When public art is weak or inept, controversy can be subtly tinged with aesthetic judgments, which are always difficult to separate from other opinions. There can be no confusion, however, over the quality of three public art projects in Arlington County this summer. The works by the collaborative groups Art Attack and Knottyhead and by sculptor Marc Rebarge are effective advocates for contemporary art.

Public site work and collaborative projects like those executed by Rebarge, Knottyhead, and Art Attack are increasingly the aspects of contemporary art practice that move beyond the narrow limits of the official art world and engage the wider public in aesthetic dialogue. As missionaries or ambassadors, depending on one's viewpoint, such artworks and art workers play an important role in conditioning public attitudes toward contemporary art. This tricky role requires of the artists considerable finesse and of their supporters creative commitment. In Arlington, this complex matrix of imaginative collaboration has produced works combining up-to-date artistic sophistication and old-fashioned magic. Magic may be politically incorrect among some culture workers in the demoralized and cynical '90s, but I suspect that there will be few viewers of *Dominion Dium*, *Awakening*, or the Knottyhead installation who will care.

Art Attack, a group founded in L.A. in 1979, moved to D.C. in the early '80s and to New York in 1990. Born in the era of urban guerrilla art, the coalition created a shrewd but benign way of intervening in public spaces that challenged conventional ways of looking and thinking. Using art to open up imaginative possibilities for urban environments and materials was an action intended to suggest broader societal possibilities, but in spite of the confrontational implications of the name, Art Attack's work has always been somewhat lyrical and tending toward the poetic. Its membership is fluid, with a core that includes Lynn McCary (the only original member still with the group), Alberto Gaitan, and Evan Hughes. Joining these artists on *Dominion Dium* were Edward Owen, Peter Winant, and two Czech artists with whom members of the group have recently collaborated in the Czech Republic, Jitka Anlaufova and Alex Hynek.

"Installation" isn't exactly the right word for what Art Attack has

produced with the remains of an old farmhouse on Old Dominion Drive between its intersection with Glebe Road and Lee Highway. *Dominion Dium* (*dium* means house in Czech) is not a sculpture and certainly no longer a building, and although some of its power relies on pictorial effects, it's mostly an "artistic experience" blending the aesthetic, the sociopolitical, and the conceptual.

The house, now the property of Arlington County, has been subjected to a severe deconstruction combined with whimsical reconstructive elements. The result is something that's a cross between a diorama based on a Magritte painting and a ballet set derived from a carpenter's nightmare. It's also more than a little reminiscent of

wind chimes made from broken window glass in the upper windows that, along with a problematic piano machine on the first floor, add an aural experience to the visual, tactile, and olfactory ones already at work. The original farmhouse was Art Attack's raw material; from it, the group created a work of art.

Such a work is an enjambment of narratives, the historical and anecdotal ones intersecting and interpenetrating the aesthetic and contemporary social ones. Just as the charm of an angular cut or textural juxtaposition catches the eye, the worn edge of a closet door or a windowsill steals it away, replacing the mind's movement toward formal appreciation with a kind of literary curiosity. There is also won-

create them. What lasts, they seem to be suggesting, is this unpredictable creative process that erupts periodically in art attacks (this particular eruption is scheduled for demolition by the end of July).

GALLERY



Darrow Montgomery

Attack Victim: Art Attack turned a once-modest suburban structure into *Dominion Dium*.

Kurt Schwitters' 1923 *Merzbau*. Almost the entire facade of the house has been cut away and the gabled upper portion allowed to fall in where the porch and front door once stood. The porch roof floats inverted in a black-lined reflecting pool dug into the front yard. The sod removed to make the pool neatly fills the north room on the first floor. The floors of both second-story rooms have been tilted at precarious angles (and they are painted pink and red). In the middle of one angling floor, a radiator is bolted at an oblique angle to both the tilt of the floor and the perpendicular frames of the walls. In the other second-story room, the floor seems to respond to an intense upheaval that can be studied from beneath, where 2-by-4's and 2-by-6's display the compulsive irrationality of a sorcerer's apprentice. In both upper rooms, sections of plaster have been neatly and irregularly stripped away from the lathing and the roof has been removed on either side of the ridge beam. A final surrealist touch is added by the staircase, which begins behind the front wall and rises through the second floor and up beyond the roof. There are also

der at the sheer brute effort it took to dismantle the 1910 structure and re-present it with such deceptive delicacy. And, as an advocate for contemporary art's mind-expanding potential, the reconstruction makes a wry comment on the domestic suburban normalcy surrounding it.

Dominion Dium is somewhat reminiscent of Art Attack's 1988-89 rearranging of the house at 427 Massachusetts Ave. NW, executed as an homage to the late Gordon Matta-Clark, the conceptual artist who established the practice of building "cuttings" through his work in Europe and the U.S. But Matta-Clark's works have an angry, critical edge quite absent from Art Attack's projects. In fact, Art Attack's work seems to have turned even more poetic and art historical since its members spent periods of the past five years working in Germany, France, and the Czech Republic. This may have intensified their awareness of art's impermanence and its complex social position, for this new work emphasizes the fugitive, vulnerable aspect of the world—not only of materials and artifacts, but of the individuals and the societies that