

HIGH PERFORMANCE

Airplayers: A New Book Form Born of Technology

When Art meets Technology and the marriage works, the magic can hardly be contained. So we have in *Airplayers* by Sara Garden Armstrong a remarkable translation of a large sculptural environment into a book, a video, and a reduced-in-scale sculptural environment housed in a handcrafted box. Just when you thought that everything that could be done with a book has been done, something comes along to make you stand up in amazement. And *Airplayers* does amaze in so many ways.

Time, transformation and movement are consistent in Armstrong's art and to translate these themes into photographic documentation would have been self-defeating. Instead, the artist has sought to translate time, space, evolution, and repetition as well as kinetic sound sculptures into the three-dimensional book medium. To have succeeded in creating a new bookform, one that has the dynamics of all those themes, makes this book experience different from all others.

Designed to turn the viewer into a participant, *Airplayers* recalls Armstrong's original Airplayer installations that incorporated painting, sculptural forms, light and sound and whose movements were generated by a series of air compressors linked to a microcomputer. In the artist's 1988 *Airplayer X* installation at Souyun Yi Gallery in New York City, Kim Levin of the *Village Voice* remarked, "It moves, it breathes, it roars and sighs. Her wispy white sculpture in this sound environment even has painted shadows that dance with the real ones."

In translating her work to a more accessible form, Armstrong has created a highly original limited edition of 65 multiples housed in a handcrafted vinyl and cloth casing. The contents are revealed through translucent screens of sandblasted plastic and optical lenses. As you open the box, you see a videotape, a multiple printed book and, most crucial of all, a miniaturized version of an Airplayer installation. The detachable sculpted landscape is made of silicon forms which contain light and sound generating sources. Housed within an environment protected by sandblasted plastic and lenses, the sculpture contains a microchip that allows the viewer to control



Airplayers by Sara Garden Armstrong

both light and sound and participate in visual meditation as well as a transformation of spirit. It is indeed a form of wizardry, where Armstrong directs responses and the viewer can redirect them by turning the miniaturized installation around. The responses are poetic, with fallen shadows, rippling shadowscapes and consuming sensory tidewaters printed and bound within this most unusual and inexplicable of books.

The book is not only experimental, it is experiential. It requires the active participation of the viewer not only to appreciate the translation of the larger installations into this miniaturized format, but to appreciate the miniaturized version for itself. All senses are alerted to the ambivalence of Armstrong's primal spaces in which both physical and behavioral characteristics specific to her art serve as a kind of euphoric disorientation experienced in the large-scale installations. This project is not the documentation of an art experience but a bookwork with all the ramifications of a work of art.

To realize her vision, Armstrong combined technology, the elements of installation, the efforts of a filmmaker, an electronics engineer, a materials expert, an electronic musician and many others. The teamwork she coordinated to overcome the problems of such a complex work deviates from the process of other artists who conceptualize first and then create. Indeed, the list of credits grew as *Airplayers* was being created.

The Airplayer installations were the result of an evolutionary series of steps in which Armstrong approached normally environmental problems as spatial problems that naturally changed with each venue. *Airplayers* is a remarkable extension of that approach and as

personal an experience as her large installations. In the bookwork, time, space and sound coming from digitized sources make the shadows and the transparencies ever more mystical because of their intimacy.

There is another printed multiple in an edition of 1000. Thus book work has not only the sandblasted plastic, lenses and silkscreened transparent visuals, but also a centerfold that takes your breath away with purple lunglike shapes illuminated by a hidden red light which is turned on by spreading the pages open. Many of us have never imagined a book that incorporates all these elements: motion, light, sound and print.

The installation process of the *Airplayers* bookwork has many of the elements of performance. Each piece is in a state of flux until the final realization, with some elements indefinite until that denouement. Each installation is a type of set, one scene in a series of many, in which the participant is both the artist and the viewer, conceiving the piece dependent upon the materials and the experience desired. The installation becomes both the source and the destination of the work.

This bookwork is a product for 1990's, using all the technological accomplishments available at the beginning of this decade. It is a tribute to Sara Garden Armstrong's ability to orchestrate the team that made this work possible and is a prototype for the collaborative work that the new decade necessitates and engenders.

--Judith Hoffberg

AIRPLAYERS, the book with text and images is available in a hand bound, screenprinted edition of 1000 with optical lens and selfgenerating light-source for \$30 from Printed Matter, 77 Wooster St., New York, NY 10012 and from the publisher, Willis Locker and Owens, 71 Thompson St., New York, NY 10012. The Limited Edition Multiple is available from the publisher Willis Locker and Owens for \$1800.