

Voice Vanguard '79

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By Terry Curtis Fox

It takes about two and a half hours to get from SoHo to Allentown, a fairly stable community of heavy industry and the home of Lehigh Valley farms (J.I. Rodale, the country's biggest natural food concern, is headquartered nearby). By west-of-the-Hudson standards, two and a half hours is nothing—people drive like that all the time. By Manhattan lights, the trip is absurd, especially since I am going to Allentown to see Trisha Brown, one of the mainstays of the SoHo performance art scene.

I'm making the trip with Kermit Smith, who, as part of the arts management agency familiarly known as Artservices, has arranged for Trisha's appearance. More than any other private organization, Artservices is responsible for the creation of a marketable SoHo performance circuit. In the seven years since it began, Artservices has regularly exported performances to places as diverse as Decatur, San Francisco, and West Berlin. Their client list reads like a downtown who's who: composer/musicians John Cage and Philip Glass; directors Joseph Chaikin, Richard Foreman, and Stuart Sherman, dancer/choreographers Lucinda Childs, Douglas Dunn; and David Gordon; and theatre companies like Mabou Mines and the Talking Band. The Dance Umbrella, now a standard part of New York's modern dance calendar, began as a showplace for Artservices performers. The concern even manages a set of videotapes—Robert Ashley's *Music with Its Roots in the Aether*, a remarkable set of documentaries showcasing Glass, Terry Riley, and Pauline Oliveras, among others. Several of these artists believe that their companies' continued existence, as well as their current prominence, is directly tied to Artservices' handling over the years. Not only has the firm given a diverse group of artists a sense of cohe-



Founders of Artservices: Mimi Johnson, Jane Yockel, and Margaret Wood. On the West Coast they're a legend.

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sion, it has managed to successfully sell an avant-garde.

Although their clients are generally regarded as New York artists, the fact is that few, if any, of the companies could survive on what they make in New York alone. They are, in effect, national companies, constantly touring to colleges, museums, concert halls, and theatres throughout the country. Without Allentown, and places like it, the performing part of SoHo could not exist. And without Artservices, it is doubtful whether Trisha Brown could get to Allentown.

Artservices began in Paris, where Mimi Johnson had used family connections to get a job at the now-defunct surrealist Iolas Gallery. The more Mimi saw in Paris, the more she decided that the art which excited her most was the performance art coming to Europe from New York. Around the time she was trying to figure out her best route home, Benedicte Pesle, who ran the gallery, approached Mimi and asked if she would serve as wardrobe mistress for a Merce Cunningham-John Cage tour. During that tour, Mimi says, "I learned the fun of making things happen."

She also learned the hardships artists go through while in foreign parts. "Working in the gallery, we saw all of these artists come through, and they just needed services which galleries couldn't supply." Performers needed special assistance—ranging from technical liaisons who could make sure the theatres they had booked were properly equipped for the performance, to someone who could make sure the tour bus was properly heated. Mimi opened Artservices' first office with Pesle and a third woman, Monsa Norbert. The name itself was suggested by composer Gordon Mumma (as part of the Sonic Arts Union, he is still a client); it was chosen because, besides describing what the organization intended to provide, it read the same in English and French.

A year after Artservices was founded, Mimi left Paris with the intention of starting a New York office of the Paris-based concern. Today the Paris office is a small room open only during the main touring months. And while its European connections and art world origin continue to play an important role in the way Artservices functions, there is no question that just as the avant-garde scene has shifted, Artservices Paris is not nearly as important as Artservices New York.

The year 1972 proved a particularly propitious time for Artservices to set up shop. The SoHo performance scene was only just beginning to make itself felt. Imagistic theatres and new tonal composers found supporters not from their counterparts in the cafe theatres of the Village or the academic musical hideaways, but from the visual artists downtown. Not even Richard Foreman, who in the year he spent booking nonfilm events into Jonas Mekas's Cinematheque gave many of the current group their first showcase, knows exactly how they found each other. "We just knew who we were," he says. Mimi Johnson, whose greatest talent may be that early recognition of talent common to successful entrepreneurs, knew who they were, too, and the organization she formed soon provided the same social function the bookstore Shakespeare and Company provided Parisian artists in the '20s.

Soon after Mimi arrived in New York, she met Margaret Wood, who had been booking Cunningham's American tours

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Clients among the downtown who's who: Philip Glass . . .

for four years, and Jane Yockel, who had left a management post with Merce to become comptroller for the newly renovated Brooklyn Academy of Music. Besides Cunningham, the three women had much in common. They had all entered the performing arts through roundabout routes—Margaret was a housewife in Brooklyn who came to do volunteer work out of enthusiasm for Cunningham's work; Jane had lived in academic environs until the sudden death of her husband. Most importantly, they believe, none of the three was a frustrated artist. From the very beginning, when Mimi first broached the idea, they saw themselves as supportive people whose business work let the artistic work happen.

If their similarities proved congenial, their differences turned out to be complementary. Mimi was the sparkplug. She had the immediate entree into the SoHo art world, the ability to talk to gallery owners and art world patrons in their own language. Jane emerged as the chief financial analyst and mother-figure to the company's clients, a woman equally capable of obtaining the best transoceanic airline fare and arranging for emergency baby-sitting. Margaret, who alone among the original founders can always be seen in traditional businesswomen's attire, emerged as the leading agent and saleswoman. It was Margaret who calmly built Artservices' reputation in the East and West Coast booking fairs (massive congregations of arts organizations who pick a season much as a department store picks its line of dinnerware) until they were afforded the same respect and sales time given to the major commercial agencies uptown. (Margaret is also the first of the founders to have left the organization—moving across the hall in Westbeth this fall to the TAG Foundation.)

Just as the three women gravitated to different functions within the agency's framework, so they found that they naturally divided among the major art forms they wished to represent. Mimi tends to work most closely with composers and musicians, Margaret with dancers, and Jane with the theatre companies. (Happily, the lines never solidified. Margaret's dance specialty did not prevent her having an especially close relationship with Phil Glass, and each of the women pinch-hit in another's art form when one or the other was out on the road). Together they evolved what has since been called "cluster management": by collecting under one aegis a group of avant-garde companies, Artservices was able to provide the kind of professional arts management which had hitherto been available only to large, mainstream companies and extremely well-connected avant-gardists like Cunningham.

All three women believe the Cunningham influence was decisive. "We were all trained in the Cunningham philosophy of management," Jane says, "which means to always think, 'What is best for the artist?' And it works out. Because usually what is best for the artist eventually is best for the sponsor and the audience as well."

Besides giving Artservices its founding philosophy and personnel, Cunningham also gave Artservices its first and perhaps most important client, composer John Cage. There are few people in the circles Artservices wished to move who carry quite the weight and authority of Cage. "He could easily have paid somebody who would always know just what was going on with him," Mimi says, "but he believed in our

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craziness." In practical terms, Cage on the client list meant that from the day they set up shop Artservices had someone prestigious to sell. The other Artservices clients were immediately linked to an avant-garde tradition.

"What happened," explains Mabou Mines' Lee Breuer, "is that we were handled as artists, not as a theatre. It was a way of moving through that first level of political paranoia. It was easy for us to cross over to a relationship where Trisha Brown and Mabou Mines became good friends, and I'm sure that without Artservices we would never feel as close to Steve Paxton's work as we do. It was a way of getting dancers known to theatres and theatres known to musicians. We could cross styles.

"Artists felt they were in their own world. If we had gone to the Public Theatre first, we wouldn't have brought the new whiff we had from working with artists like Tina Giraud, Nancy Graves, Jean Heistein. We'd have gotten designers instead of artists, theatre composers instead of new music composers."

"Through the various interrelations," Richard Foreman notes, "Artservices managed in an almost subterranean way to give people in different arts who shared the same philosophy the notion that they really did belong to a school. I remember these two girls, Jane and Mimi, coming down to where I was working, asking, 'Are you funded?' I laughed at them. Who was going to fund me? Well, they said, I should be funded, and if I'd pay them a small fee, they would see that I got funded. I told them it sounded fine, but I didn't have any money. However, if they would guarantee that they would get as much funding for me as I paid them, then, sure, I'd be glad to have them work for me."

Sometime later, when the organization was only slightly more established, they approached Philip Glass, who had been booking and road-managing his own tours, alternating his work as a musician with endless stints plumbing and driving cab. Like Foreman, the only way he could afford a manager was if the management could produce the income that would make the arrangement possible. Glass, Mimi, and Jane talked inconclusively. Then, one day, the composer got a call from Mimi. Michel Guy, the director of the Festival d'Automne in Paris, had been sent to Artservices by Benedicte Pesle. Mimi was taking Guy to visit various artists. Could they drop by Phil's rehearsal?

"I said sure, and then, because I wasn't used to people coming to rehearsals, forgot about it. At the time, we were practicing in Dickie Landry's Chatham Square loft, which was this black box with exactly one light bulb in it. I'd call rehearsal for eight, people would drift in and eat dinner until nine, then we'd sit down and play until about midnight. Mimi came in with Michel Guy. I said hello, have some dinner, and they went off somewhere in the room, which was so dark I couldn't see them. And I forgot about them again. Then, when we were finished practicing, they suddenly emerged out of the darkness and this Frenchman said, 'Do you want to come to Paris this summer?' I said, 'Sure.'"

The Philip Glass Ensemble had a major European tour and Artservices another client. "Even in downtown terms," Phil says, "there is such a thing as success. And Artservices has chosen to represent a group of very ambitious downtown people. I actually do spend time each day thinking, 'What can I get Artservices to do for me?'"

What Artservices can—and often does—do is more than just book tours.

"Margaret has developed what I call creative management. She has the ability to invent projects. Our conversations always being, 'What do you want to do now?' I'd mention I wanted to do a choral piece. Margaret would then go call the Holland Festival, which was concentrating last year on 'The Human Voice' and say, 'If you give Phil Glass a chorus, he'll write a piece.' Then, when the St. Denis Festival called and said they wanted to book the Ensemble, Margaret said, 'Well, you know Phil is doing a new choral piece for the Holland Festival. If you pay the chorus's expenses, they'll pay their transportation, and you can have that.' When they agreed, she called the Holland Festival back and said, 'St. Denis will pay the chorus's expenses if you pay the transportation, and if you do, I'm sure I can get a radio broadcast.' And then, after she'd arranged for the broadcast, she called me up and said, 'It's all set, all you have to do is have it ready in five weeks.'"

Because of this sort of highly successful manipulation, the client roster is now all but closed. The only way to get on, Mimi admits, is if one of the constituent members pushes an artist "and we really lust after the work." Even so, Artservices gets nearly daily calls from people to whom they open their door and their files, give as much aid as possible on a given day, and occasionally refer to one of the other cluster-management firms that have grown up in Artservices' wake.

"We're famous," a slightly stunned but obviously exuberant Mimi Johnson said at the end of one interview. "I've just begun to realize that. But it's true. On the West Coast, we're a legend."

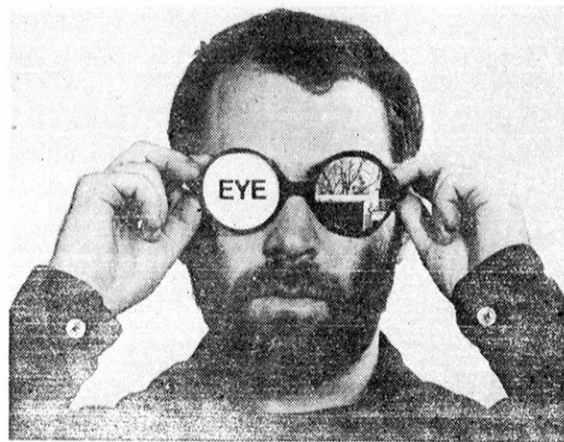
Although he wants to see Trisha's performance, that is not the only reason Kermit is going to Allentown. Like most salesmen, Kermit relies heavily on personal contact. He has just returned from a tour of the midwest and far west, stopping off to see the heads of museums, arts councils, universi-



Richard Foreman



Trisha Brown



Stuart Sherman

ty arts centers—the people with whom Artservices most often does business.

"I discovered that most of these cities are very supportive of their arts, in ways that New York can't be. When there's only one dance company, the business community makes it a point to contribute to the company's existence. I began to think that one of the ways we could help our companies become self-sufficient would be to set up long-term residences in other cities, to give them second homes."

When dealing with the avant-garde, familiarity breeds understanding. Both artists and agents agree that patience has been nearly as important as talent in obtaining success, and most of Artservices' clients are in their early forties. Kermit wants to establish a regular series of long-term gigs that would at once build a loyal out-of-New York audience and provide companies with a substantial source of income. By the time his last trip was completed, Kermit had managed to arrange one three-week residency for Trisha in Seattle and a combined six-week Vancouver-L.A. stint for Mabou Mines that will bring in \$66,000 in fees. Now, as we pulled into Allentown, Kermit wondered what he could sell Monroe Denton, Jr., the arts director of Muhlenberg College and the sponsor of tonight's event.

The Artservices office is run with an informality bordering on chaos. Performers and artists both on and off the client roster wander in and out in search of coffee and advice; phones are answered by whoever happens to pick up and messages shouted across several rooms. Nobody holds one job. People join the staff as interns, acquire various skills, and eventually discover what they want to do. As their clients have become more active, the staff has grown. Now it consists of nine full-time managers, two interns, and two cats.

One of the agency's most critical, if least glamorous, functions is keeping financial records of each constituent, paying out salaries, making sure of unemployment eligibility, and, when grant time comes around, setting out the artists' proposals in financially and graphically pleasing form. This can be of enormous importance. A friend who worked for the National Endowment once told Richard Foreman that one member of the theatre committee had voted to give Foreman his first grant not because the panelist knew Foreman's work but because "the proposal looked so good."

Artservices itself is dependent on funding for the bulk of its budget. Client fees account for only 25 per cent of Artservices' income. A National Endowment grant accounts for another quarter, the New York State Council contributes 20 per cent, with the balance made up from smaller grants by private individuals and foundations. It is one measure of how their clients feel about them that, when the New York State Council threatened to shut off funds last year, both Lee Breuer and Richard Foreman went before the Council and stated that their theatres would fold if Artservices did.

Muhlenberg College's Center for the Arts is one of the contradictions of the road. Among Phillip Johnson's recent mock cathedrals, it is a technical marvel. In fact, until Trisha danced at the Public Theatre a few months later, she had never had a space in New York nearly as good.

Monroe Denton comes out to greet us. A large man with almost prissy manners, he is terribly aware of how important his building can be. Unlike many sponsors who pick their attractions out of the National Endowment's list of subsidized companies, Denton makes regular trips into SoHo. He knows that Allentown has no clout of its own, just as he knows that his superiors at the college would be quite content if he stuck to performances by the Pennsylvania Ballet. With only limited funds available, Denton looks upon his role with a certain ironic detachment. He has cultivated self-deprecation as a defense, permitting him to be at once superior to and responsible for the structure he runs. At the same time, Denton knows that Kermit's clients need him just as much as he needs the kind of clout which a significant avant-garde event could promote. And he knows that the physical plant at Muhlenberg is his one decisive edge.

"How do you like the space?" is the first question Kermit asks when we run into Trisha after rehearsal.

"I love it," she says, "You know, when we were rehearsing, I thought, this would be a wonderful place to do old work."

That is exactly what Kermit wants to hear. A Trisha Brown retrospective, Kermit knows, would be very attractive to Denton. When we meet the sponsor at the Charles Inn, a red brick box adjacent to the local A&P, which Denton assures us is Allentown's best restaurant, Kermit has something to sell.

As it turns out, Kermit doesn't have to wait for an opening. Denton has thought of it himself. "I said to Trish, 'You just look at this space and tell me, you just tell me, you no longer walk on walls.'"

Kermit pounces. "What would you say to a three-week residency here this summer?"

"I'd love it," Denton replies. "But I don't have the money."

"We'll work it out," Kermit says as the appetizers arrive.

The idea of a summer residency for Trisha and her company proved to be too expensive for Denton's budget. But the idea appealed to him as much as it did to Kermit, and together they began arranging for a less expensive workshop to be given by Douglas Dunn, another Artservices client. It is, Kermit notes, one of the advantages of cluster management that sponsors who find they can rely on Artservices will often book clients on the strength of the last performer to appear.

Artservices, meanwhile, has undergone major changes of its own. Kermit has resigned in order to devote more time to Lovely Music, a record company he and Mimi founded as a sort of downtown Nonesuch, producing many of the composers with whom Artservices is associated. Margaret's move to the TAG Foundation, where she is once again producing the Dance Umbrella series, has left Artservices with two of its major dance-oriented people absent, not to mention the loss of one of its founders. For two months, according to Mimi, "it was very rough. I was glad Margaret wasn't further away than TAG." "I wouldn't be leaving," Margaret said, "if I thought Artservices couldn't survive as an institution."

It's an odd and disturbing idea—an avant-garde agent as institution. But then, the firm's primary goal has been reached. In eight years, their clients are no longer an avant-garde but The Avant-Garde. That perception has something to do with talent—and not a little to do with sales. ■