

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SITE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE THEME



Figure 8.1:
MASS
MoCA's
clock tower.

The new Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art is particularly relevant to *50-Man-Machine* due to its long history as a major manufacturing plant in the Berkshire Mountains region of New England. Mass Moca's mill complex has been the site of Arnold Print and Dye Works, 1862-1940, a



Figure 8.2:
The Mill.



Figure 8.3: A fabric
swatch from Arnold.

textile printing plant, and Sprague Electric Company, 1940-1985, an electronic components manufacturing plant, employing more than 4,000 workers¹. Many historical photographs still exist on site and serve as testimony to the high volume of business that went on before the present, much more desolate time in the region.

Mass Moca itself has made a huge economic impact on North Adams and has reportedly brought life back to this city. My North Adams residency during the nearly three week period of *50-Man-*



Figure 8.4: An archival photo showing electrical work at Sprague during the 1940 era.

Machine provided me an opportunity to become acquainted with the area. Most of MASS

MoCA's on site construction workers and staff are local area residents. Friendly talks with construction workers, maintenance persons and the security guards unveiled an area history that I had not expected. What currently appears to be a very prosperous small town with tremendous potential was a very depressed community just a few short years back.

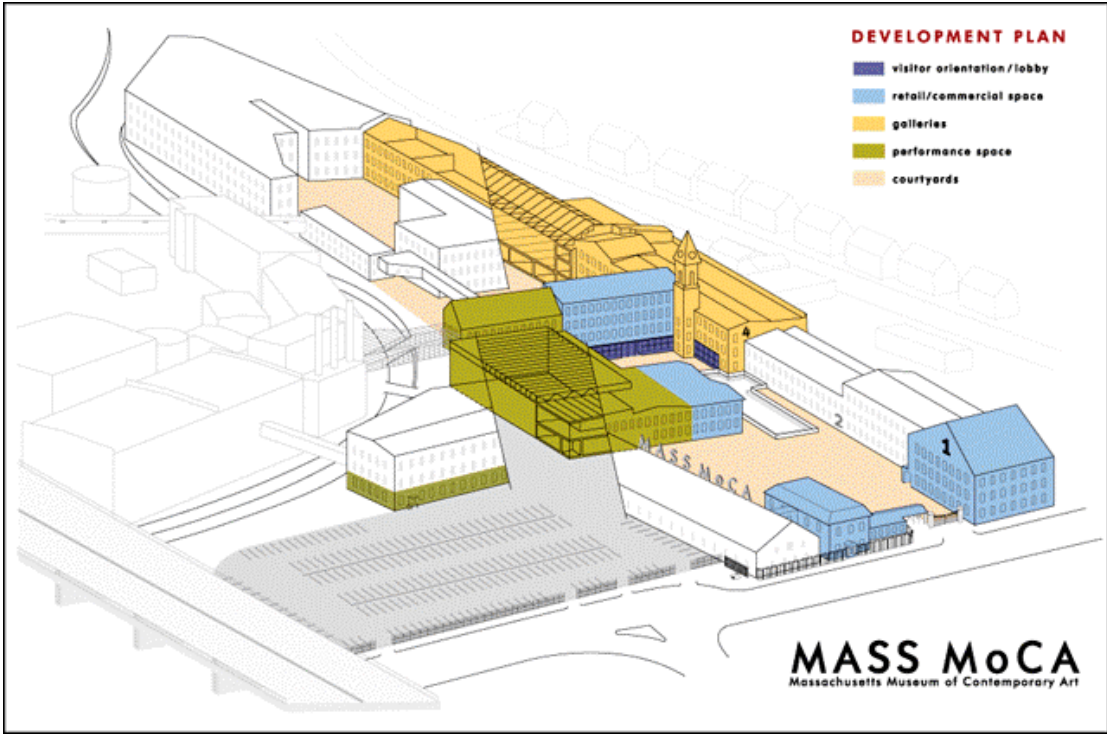


Figure 8.5: Architectural development plan for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

This site's true relevance to the project is not as clear as it could be. *50-Man-Machine* presents the daily worker as a distinctly white-collar worker while the vast majority of the mill complex's workers were considered to be blue collar. In truth, the project represents all workers who are confined to a similar type of repetitive work trap, and does not differentiate between white collar and blue collar. The uniform and

¹ *From Mill to Museum: History and Change at the Marshall Street Complex,*

situational aspects used for this performance were chosen partially due to public familiarity of the corporate businessman icon. One possible supporting comment for this usage is that there has been a shift in work styles in the decades that separate the present time from the mill's peak periods. A larger percentage of young people attend higher education before proceeding to work. This higher education usually leads to white collar jobs. Another factor in this is the automation of modern manufacturing processes, further changing the distribution of job types.

The nearly abandoned industrial buildings of Mass Moca present a certain desolate mood and feeling to the visitor. This gritty, utilitarian complex set the perfect backdrop for expressing the concepts of the *50-Man-Machine*. Environmental conditions during the period of the exhibition also contributed to a removed feeling or impression. The days and nights had begun to reveal gray skies and a bit of winter chill in the gusting winds. Peak fall colors had just finished, leaving the trees bare. Four thousand ghostly workers poured through the gates at dawn, and I could almost feel their presence repeating menial tasks over and over and over again.

The MASS MoCA organization is replacing industrial work with cultural (art) work. This idea is parallel to my own desire to avoid a corporate or industrial job by working, and succeeding, in an art field. It is in the exchange of mundane daily work for interesting project oriented work that holds my happiness and growth.

- Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989.

CHAPTER NINE

COLLABORATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHOREOGRAPHY

Collaboration holds a very important place in the formation of *50-Man-Machine's* performances. I began the project with a vision and a list of skit ideas. Once Maude Baum, Director of the Electronic Body Art (eba) Dance Theatre, joined the project as choreographer and the process of selecting the eight performers was completed, the performances began to grow with each person's input. The most difficult task was in the organization and transportation of persons to and from a meeting place at Darrin Communication Center, RPI and a rehearsal space at eba Dance Studios in Albany, NY.

Generally, the process proceeded as follows. Skit ideas were introduced and discussed at our meeting place. The group would go through some key motions of a particular piece and begin to get a feel for it. At this stage many ideas were dropped and new ones added. Once this was completed, and all participants had arrived, the group would travel in caravan to meet with Baum at eba. Skit ideas were then presented to Baum for her critique, suggestions and fine-tuning. Rehearsals were as much about practicing an action as they were a way of finding each performer's personal stamp and the formation of his character.

Initial eba rehearsals consisted of Baum running the group through familiarization exercises. One of the very first exercises became the "man-machine" originally consisting of each person doing a repetitive motion in sync with the group and making an individual repetitive sound accentuating that action. The sound idea was dropped. A counterclockwise motion was added, a way to get in and out of the action was added and

the use of noisemakers plus a few other tweaks completed the piece. Another such influential exercise consisted of each person finding his or her own individual walk. This did two major things, the first of which was to balance out the massive amount of non-individual marching techniques, and the second was to develop the individual characters.

At some point towards the middle section of our rehearsals the performances as a whole began to take on a life force of their own. Each person involved began to show his or her enthusiasm. And towards the end, each performer began to truly find his or her own character role.

It is hard to say what each member contributed because the roles of performer, choreographer and director were not totally distinct. At some point the performers became the choreographers and the actual choreographer became an authoritative observer. This is quite unlike my previous experiences with choreographers in which the choreographer maintained control. My role of director included filling in for absent performers, listening, and sculpting the performances. *50-Man-Machine's* vision continued to be mine although the choreographer and performers contributed a large amount to the style of the work.

CHAPTER TEN

ANALYSIS OF PROCESS

The process of creating *50-Man-Machine* has taken many turns. This work started in the vein of several of my other performances pieces in which I am a performer, writer, director, musician, engineer, and prop maker. *50-Man-Machine* became something else entirely each time I hit a major obstacle such as an auto accident and problems with my health. Initial proposals for this project called for an evening of linear performances to happen with an audience seated in a variation of a round. Performances were to be taken from a collection of older works with inclusion of a few new works created specifically for the event. There was no installation environment aspect, but only a few very limited props. Up to that point I had been developing a performance style best represented by *Flagwavin'* and *tic*.

The concept started under a different name. As *the peer project*, it had similar goals and ideas but was not as focused. This title was given to an accompanying enhanced compact disc containing more songs and less multimedia material. The included works were also less relevant to the theme. *Peer project* as a CD had several different design aspects although many of the internal designs and structures have carried over into *50-Man-Machine*.

As I encountered various challenges I was forced to rethink the work. I thought back to the original *50-man-machine-that-rules-the-world* project which was presented as a performance installation in room 159 at the iEAR department. There was something simple yet special about this work. It consisted of a darkened room containing a long low

temporary tunnel with a ladder for a floor. Participants were met at the door by a businessman and then forced into the tunnel to be barraged by eight channels of soundtrack and soundloops, two channels of video, a film projector, a litter of receipts and various painfully directed lights. The participant was to make his or her way through the structure anyway they wished, even destroying its cardboard structure, and possibly come out of the opposite end of the tunnel to be grabbed by the businessman and tossed out of the front doors as a processed person. This experience continued as another participant knocked on the steel outer doors to be welcomed inside, only to be forced through the machine.

As it became more obvious that I could not do many of my original plans due to injuries sustained in the automobile accident, it began to dawn on me that a version of the above experience held many answers to my problem. I had to make an experience that might communicate some of the feelings and messages created by the original piece. At this point *50-Man-Machine* was on its way and soon I'd procured the use of a Mass Moca space. Mass Moca offered its own set of challenges. Most importantly all aspects of the work had to meet code. This meant that the tunnel could not be a crawl space. It would have to be a minimum of three feet wide by seven feet high. All electrical uses had to be approved by the local inspector as did the objects using the power. Each sculpture had to undergo a series of safety modifications. This was all for the best, although it had a major influence in the final outcome of the piece. The piece became very site specific while maintaining the ability to be installed and customized in other locations.

With the museum, I had attempted to make contact seven months before the eventual event date. An actual presentation meeting was scheduled approximately three

months before the final performance date. At this meeting I made a multimedia presentation of the nearly finished Macromedia Director based CD-ROM and a Microsoft Power Point computer presentation of the installation including placement of performers, sculptures, audience navigation and etc. At this time the tunnel was very different and the main gear did not revolve. During this planning stage a prototype sculpture with multimedia programming made three public appearances including The Kitchen, NYC, an iEAR MFA show and finally at the RCCA Gala event in Troy, NY. This final showing included the introduction of two host and hostess character performers and an early version of the questionnaire entitled “advice to the student.”

Overall, *50-Man-Machine* has been very successful. Museum representatives reported the attendance of over one hundred persons to the opening event. The project had an above average turnout for both the opening performances and the installation period that followed. It has been very rewarding to observe *50-Man-Machine's* visitors and their many reactions to the work. The project has generated an amazing amount of the support and understanding that I had hoped for.

There are distinct differences in the perception of the performance event from the perception of the exhibition. The performance event is an active experience that allows for some audience exploration, but it is more focused on lightly confronting the audience. The exhibition is much more passive and allows for the audience to explore elements at their leisure without manipulation. This difference is something that troubles me a bit. It is as if the peak or climax of *50-Man-Machine* happened before a natural growth phase. After having lived in the space for the eight-day period, I feel as if the exhibition became an aftermath to the performance. I do not feel that this is a failure of the project, in fact it

has given a strange archived museum-like quality to *50-Man-Machine's* main concepts, as if the visitor was looking into the past at a way of life that is extinct.

This project has great potential for growth and further presentation. Its framework is structurally sound and any technical difficulties will be overcome with time. Data recovered from questionnaires and the guestbook/comments interactive sculpture will be assembled and included in future performances of the event as database info. Each individual element can be successfully presented as a finished work. I would like to see the sculptures serving as kiosks at galleries and similar venues. The "main gear" is destined to be used with a video work designed specifically for it. The CD-ROM is to be released independently in April 1999. I am currently working with promotional organizations to make the best of this release and to build a career on this product.

I am actively pursuing new venues for viable presentation. At present there is a possibility to present at Brussels 2000. If this becomes a reality it will be interesting to see how the project adapts to a European environment. International presentation is very interesting for me due to my background. Two notable International artists doing work somehow conceptually related to *50-Man-Machine* are Momoyo Torimitsu, Japan, and Mike Stubbs, England. Torimitsu's related work is called *Miyata-san In Action*². It consists primarily of a crawling Japanese businessman robot with the artist in attendance dressed as a nurse carrying a fresh supply of batteries. Miyata-san has tirelessly crawled through the business centers of Japan, in Shinjuku and Ghinza, and in the Rockefeller Center and Wall Street, Manhattan, New York City and he is slated to continue to invade many more cities promoting the power of Japanese corporations for artistic purposes.

In England, at Hull Time Based Arts, artist Mike Stubbs has created a very influential video work called *Man Act: The Sweatlodge*³. This piece consists of a large number (up to 15-20 performers are visible at a time) of trained performers dressed as businessmen performing various scenes such as courtship dances between the older established businessman and a young rookie, a stylized death scene, and individual repetitive box stepping dances. The work was choreographed and performed for video and is edited to a musical soundtrack. Besides Stubbs' subject matter and his thought provoking presentation of this subject matter, there is an interesting play between performance work designed for a performance environment, and performance designed for video or film.

Miyata-san In Action and *Man Act: The Sweatlodge* are similar in form and content to *50-Man-Machine*. Although *50-Man-Machine* extends beyond individual genres, these two works make me feel perhaps that this is the direction my work is heading towards. In any case, *50-Man-Machine* has been very important in my personal growth as a way of focusing and making plans for my future as an artist.

² Ganahl, Rainer. "Momoyo Torimitsu: Miyata-san In Action 1996," http://www.zingmagazine.com/zing3/reviews/041_momoyo.html, Nov. 1998.

³ *Man Act: The Sweatlodge*, video directed by Mike Stubbs, performance directed by Phillip Mackenzie and Simon Thorne, London Electronic Arts Distribution, 1991.

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- ¹ Disney, "It's a Small World," <http://www.disney.com/Disneyland/explore/index.html>, Nov. 1998.
- ¹ Further info on MASS MoCA can be found at <http://massmoca.org/>, Nov. 1998.
- ¹ *Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory*. dir. Mel Stuart. per. Gene Wilder, Jack Albertson. Wolper Pictures, 1971.
- ¹ A Thai epic story based on the Indian Ramayana.
- ¹ *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. dir. Nunnally Johnson. per. Gregory Peck, Jennifer Jones. 20th Century Fox, 1956. This film, and the book by Sloan Wilson, immediately became an icon of the post-war 1950's.
- ¹ Referring to L. Frank Baum's original novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* written in 1900.
- ¹ "Marshall McLuhan Gets Processed," *Ideas*, CBC Radio, Dec. 2, 1969. Taken from the CD-ROM *Understanding McLuhan* by Southam Interactive, released by The Voyager Company, 1996.
- ¹ Visual Dhamma is explored in *Ten Thai Contemporary Artists: The Spirit of Siam in Modern Art* by John Hoskin, Bangkok, Graphis Co., LTD, 1984.
- ¹ "Acme" is the fictitious gadget manufacturing company portrayed in Warner Brothers Pictures' *Bugs Bunny* and *Road Runner* cartoons.
- ¹ *Bladerunner*. dir. Ridley Scott. per. Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Daryl Hannah. Warner Brothers, 1982.
- ¹ *Wizards*. dir. Ralph Bakshi. per. Mark Hamill. Bakshi Films, 1977.
- ¹ *Gattaca*. dir. Andrew Niccol. per. Ethan Hawke, Uma Thurman. Columbia Pictures, 1997.
- ¹ *Citizen Kane*. dir. Orson Welles. per. Joseph Cotten, Agnes Moorehead. RKO Radio Pictures, 1941.
- ¹ *Soylent Green*. dir. Richard Fleischer. per. Charlton Heston, Edward G. Robinson. MGM-UA, 1973.

- ¹ Jam Handy Organization films as presented in the “The Rainbow is Yours” and “Capitalist Realism” on *Our Secret Century*, a CD-ROM series by Rick Prelinger and released by The Voyager Company, 1996.
- ¹ Imagineers are Walt Disney World’s exhibit designers, manufacturers and engineers.
- ¹ The Epcot Center, Orlando, Florida is a Disney themepark with a strong technological slant. Epcot is the acronym for Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow.
- ¹ An in depth discussion of *The Arts of Thailand* can be had in the book of the same name by Steve Van Beek and Luca Invernizzi Tettoni published in Hong Kong by Travel Publishing Asia, Ltd., 1988.
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- ¹ *Saltimbanco*. dir. Jacques Payette. per. Cirque du Soleil. Productions Telemagik Inc., 1994.
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http://www.merce.org:80/repertory_chronology.html, Nov.1998
- ¹ Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986) 118-119. This quote is originally from the journal “Offset, Buch- und Werbe-kunst” Leipzig, 1926, No. 7.
- ¹ “Cats eye” is the local term for the portal covering of a specific sea snail shell. This looks like a bulbous green eye with one flat side that attaches to the living organism.
- ¹ *Logan’s Run*. dir. Saul David. per. Michael York, Jenny Agutter, Peter Ustinov. MGM, 1976.
- ¹ *From Mill to Museum: History and Change at the Marshall Street Complex*, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989.
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http://www.zingmagazine.com/zing3/reviews/041_momoyo.html, Nov. 1998.
- ¹ *Man Act: The Sweatlodge* by Mike Stubbs (1991) is unavailable in print. A European PAL video tape of this work was introduced to me by Professor Kathy Rae Huffman. Hull Time Based Arts are available online at <http://www.htba.demon.co.uk/> as of November 1998.

APPENDIX