In the past two years, Cee Brown has created one of the major resource archives on performance art. Presently employed in the Department of Education at The Museum of Modern Art, Mr. Brown established this archive in the library of the Museum in 1978. The following interview was conducted by Daryl Chin on June 19, 1980, in the Sculpture Garden of The Museum of Modern Art.

What type of material did you concentrate on for the archives? Is it what Barbara Moore (Backworks) would call "the memorabilia" of a performance; that is, flyers, posters and press release? Or do you try to get full documentation?

Both, actually. I definitely try to enlist artists and institutions to send me as much material as possible, such as resumes, bios, bibliographies, notices, and flyers. The archive definitely has a collection of what you've called "the memorabilia" of performance art.

If it's possible, I do try to get as much documentation as I can. At times we get actual objects and props. For example, the Swiss Mime Company Mummenschanz donated several of the large rolls of paper which they use as part of their costumes. Federica Marangoni (as part of PERFORMANCE III) donated the painting of wax which she used in her performance. By and large, though, I try to discourage that sort of donation, only because there really isn't enough space in the archive. Of course, many artists have utilized a variety of media in their work. Many artists have made films, videotapes, audiotapes, records. Laurie Anderson is a good example. Perhaps at some point it would be possible to have a file on Laurie Anderson which would include her records as well as some of the objects, such as the tape-bow violin, and the documentation on her performances.

How many artists are documented in the archive?

Now it's close to 2,000 artists. These artists cover a wide number of fields: music, mime, theatre, dance. I've recently gotten a lot of mailings from Carnegie Hall on their concerts and recitals, and it's hard to know where to draw the line, or if there should be a line. How do you define "performance art," and should you exclude certain types of performance, such as symphony concerts? I guess when I began the archive, I had a certain definition of performance art in mind, but as the archive has grown, and more and more material began to accumulate, I found it harder to hold on to my initial definition. There are certain music concerts that can be classified as "performance art" just as there are certain choreographers who do "per-

How did you start the archive?

It started in June, 1978, with about 20 artists. By Christmas I had over 600 artists on file. I started by contacting a few people that I knew, like Jane Crawford at Performing Artservices. I asked her to send me information on the various artists that she handled. Most of the organizations that I contacted were places which sponsored performances, such as LAICA (Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art) and the Walker Art Center, and the ones in New York City like The Kitchen, P.S. 1, and Artists' Space. I also try to be in on as many artists' mailing lists as possible: in this way, there's actually very little cross-filing in the archive. I can keep separate files on each. This has made organizing the archives easier.

You mentioned that you did have documentation on some artists. Could you give me some examples of artists whose files are virtually complete in that sense?

Well you see, that's very difficult, because I'm dependent upon the artists. It depends on what they send me. Julia Heyward is an example of an artist whose work I'd like to have more material on, but the material that I have is rather minimal: just a few flyers and announcements. I've tried to contact her, but we haven't been able to get together to discuss this matter. But there are some artists whose files are virtually complete. Francesc Torres is one. Helmut Schober, a performance artist who works in Italy, is another. When Federica Marangoni donated some material from her performance, she also brought over a lot of documentation on her work. I have a large file on Cindy Lubar and Christopher Knowles.
How did you get interested in performance?

Well, when I was living in Seattle, I did performance. I kept extensive files on my performances, as well as other performance work being done. Once you've done a piece, it's gone. It's a very ephemeral art form, and I liked the idea of having something that I could refer to in the future. For that reason, I was always very conscientious about documenting performances. As an artist, I had an archive of my work. I assumed that most performance artists would have similar archives. The summer before I came to New York City, I took a course in archival management at the University of Washington Library Science School. When I came to New York, my first job was working on “Projects” here at the Museum. I had a lot of time to organize material for those shows, and I began to think of the fact that many of the artists also worked in performance.

Aside from direct contact with artists, what other sources of information are there?

Other important sources of information are institutions which sponsor or present performances. In New York City, there are the well-known ones like Franklin Furnace, The Kitchen, Artists' Space, P.S. 1. Another important source is the Center for Art and Communication in Buenos Aires: I find their publications very helpful. I think that conferences and symposia are vital in this area, because the field is becoming so widespread. Last year, I attended a conference on performance in Venice, Italy, that was cosponsored by the Center for Art and Communication and NYU. I thought it was an illuminating conference as I was able to meet with performance artists from many different countries. Many Italian performance artists have since been in touch with me, and that's how a lot of the documentation has grown.

How extensive are the archives? For example, many artists have been doing performance works since the late 1950s. Do your files go back that far?

As more and more artists began to submit material, I found that it was getting overwhelming. So, rather arbitrarily, I've tried to eliminate the archive work from 1970. You see, the important point about the archive is that I'd like it to be a living archive. I'd like it to be a clearinghouse for information, as well as a resource, not just for scholars, but for artists as well. For example, when an artist come to see me, I always try to make sure that there's some information that I can help him with. Frequently, I get artists from other countries who are donating some material about their work. Often, I can help them by giving them names to contact, places to go to.

In conjunction with the Junior Council (at the Museum), you've been involved in presenting performances. I was wondering if there were possibilities to extend the function of the archive, so that, for example, you would hire a photographer to document a performance.

Of course, that would be the ideal situation. Not only that, but also having artists create works for videotape. I don't mean just videotaping a performance, but works created for video, which would be archived. Ideally, I'd like to have space so that we could get media equipment, such as videotape decks and monitors, or stereo record players, so that someone doing research could just come in and be able to see or hear the artist's work. Of course, all this equipment is dependent on funding. Right now, the archive has to be run on a small scale. This summer I've been lucky enough to get a volunteer who's working full time on the archive. The archives can only be open during the hours that I can spare to be there, so the artists coming in have to work around my schedule.

Also, I think that performance art is very vital: there's so much going on in the field. I try to see as much as I can. When I first came to New York, there were times when not much was happening, but now there's always something going on. I think that the archive is one of the ways that the Museum can recognize this activity, and I hope that funding can be provided to expand it.

And finally, I'm sure that there are many artists I haven't been able to reach, or who haven't heard of the archives. If people want to contact me, they can do so by calling me at the Museum or by writing to me. I'd really be interested in having artists send me material on their performance work.

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