

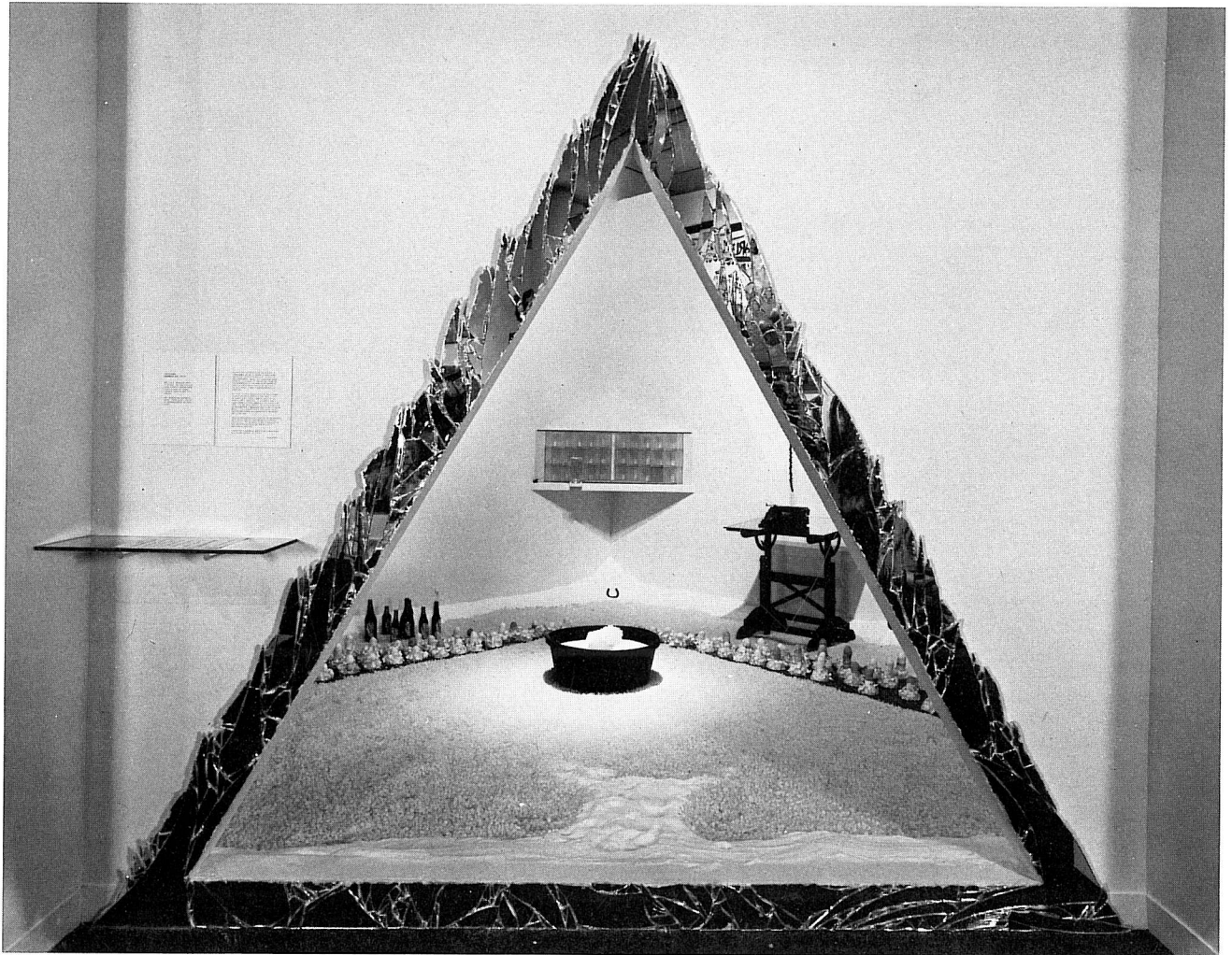
# WorkSpace

January 15 – March 16, 1983

## Jamie Summers

Metamorphic Rite

**THE NEW MUSEUM**  
of Contemporary Art

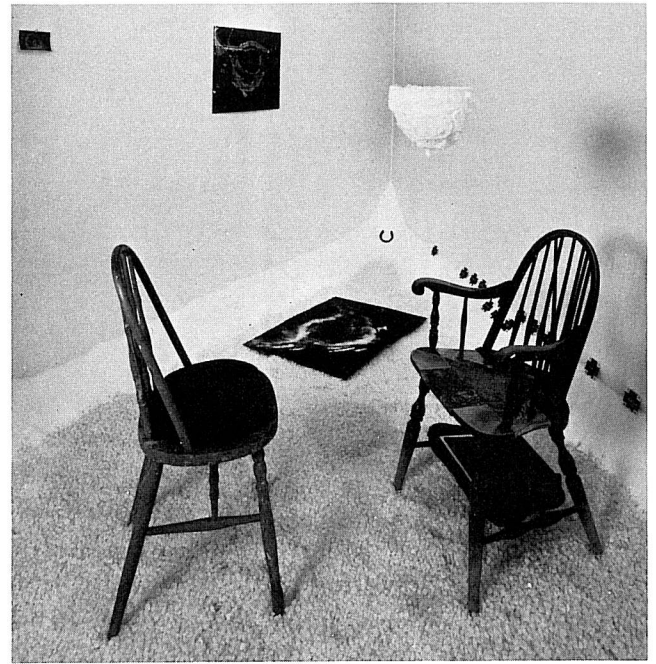


## Jamie Summers / Metamorphic Rite

Critic Thomas McEvilley has observed that “the experiencing of a work of art...is not merely a matter of esthetic taste; it is also a matter of reacting to a proposition about the nature of reality that is implicitly or explicitly shadowed forth in the work.”<sup>1</sup> Jamie Summers, through her art, actively questions the nature of reality as we perceive it. In her installation *Metamorphic Rite* she stated: “Discovery and identification of various states of consciousness and the difference in intuition and intellectual states of attention are the focus of this installation.”<sup>2</sup> The particular intent here and with her work in general is to assist others to reach higher levels of consciousness. Summers explores the inner terrain—that which exists beyond the physical world. The objects she makes serve as vehicles for the transference of energy in order to allow viewers access to different states of consciousness.

This intention, publicly acknowledged for the first time in her New Museum installation, stems from previous work which focused more generally on personal ritual and her own internal development. Her interest in ritual dates back to her schooling at the San Francisco Art Institute. Disenchanted with the politics of the art world, she turned to rituals of other cultures for inspiration. She also learned the art of tattooing, rapidly evolving her own mode. In her practice Summers emphasizes the ritualistic aspect in which the tattoo acts as a talisman, providing a “shock point to the psyche” and allowing internal growth for the subject.<sup>3</sup> Eschewing traditional Western and Japanese designs, Summers works with her clients in order to evolve the design of the tattoo. The formal practice of “merging into the psyche and identifying an image that would relate to that person’s point of attention,” and not hers, she later realized, accelerated the development of her clairvoyant abilities.<sup>4</sup>

It was the recognition of her clairvoyance and her training with California psychologist and psychic Dr. Helen Palmer that enabled Summers to begin to document and develop what she terms “intuition work” with herself and others. To be intuitive can be simply defined as perceiving and acting from a source of information that is distinct from intellect. Dr. Palmer notes: “Intuition training does not create a new set of abilities; instead it



identifies and reduces interferences with an already existing source of information that has been forgotten by the thinking self.”<sup>5</sup>

Summers’ investigations into intuition can also be viewed as part of a larger cultural tendency and interest in alternative states of being. In addition, her belief that the art objects she creates are, themselves, unimportant and should serve merely as vehicles to transmit energy shares certain characteristics with the tendency toward the “dematerialization of the art object” and the events that took place in the late sixties and early seventies when much art work was ephemeral, spontaneous, collaborative, and open-ended. The term “installation art” surfaced at that time to describe work that was “process-oriented and situationally specific...the intent being to create an experience rather than a product.”<sup>6</sup> In choosing to create installations, an artist retains control of the disposition of the objects in order to maximize the viewers’ perception of them. Thus it is the sum of experiences, triggered by the objects deployed in the installation, which is of primary importance. Indeed, Summers herself considered abandoning the object to

direct attention toward the “intuition work.”

Summers’ emphasis on ritual and object as vehicles for the transference of energy was made explicit in *Metamorphic Rite*. All the objects in the installation were deliberately employed to invoke a sacred space which was also “safe,” one that would allow viewers who so desired to perceive a higher level of consciousness and, at the same time, one that would be conducive to exchange between Summers and participants. A statement by Summers posted just outside the installation explained her interests and intent: “Moving into a clairvoyant state allows me to see people as they are unto themselves. This presentation of inner work is not intended to conduct psychic readings foretelling the future, nor is it merely to analyze characteristics in personalities.”<sup>7</sup> A questionnaire was provided for potential participants to fill out. Then Summers conducted private counseling sessions with those who responded, mainly artists, in which she clairvoyantly identified general issues aiding the participants to develop and trust their intuition. Summers’ work thus lent itself ideally to the “Work-Space” concept of an exhibition that encouraged experimentation, change, and active participation with the audience.

The objects and forms in *Metamorphic Rite* evolved from Summers’ personal rituals and experiences. The shape of the room itself was triangular and was the form Summers had first used to focus on in formal meditation. Likewise the entry portal was also triangular and was embedded with shards of broken mirror which fractured the viewers’ reflected images as they approached the installation. The fragmentation served metaphorically to shatter the external and intellectual perception of one’s self in order to view the internal self. Interestingly, Franz Marc made a similar analogy when he noted, “...The goal of art is to reveal unearthly life dwelling behind everything, to break the mirror of life so that we may look being (*Sein*) in the face...”<sup>8</sup>

Another major component of Summers’ installation was rock salt crystals, both coarse and fine, which made up the floor of the installation. Symbolically, her use of salt works on several levels: traditionally salt is used to cleanse and purify; it is the basis of saline solution in which life grows; and it crystallizes with humidity,

thereby metamorphosing. During the course of the exhibition, Summers, by now very aware of its properties and potential, induced the salt to crystallize and actually climb and etch into the walls by spraying it with a fine mist of rainwater.<sup>9</sup> Formally, along with the white and essentially blank walls, the expanse of salt created a sensation of purity and glowing light. Stepping through the triangular doorway onto the rock-salt floor indicated, in no uncertain terms, that one was entering a special space, emphasized literally and physically by the salt foundation on which the viewer stood.

The triangular motif was repeated in seven discarded windows found on New York streets and cut in the shape of triangles. Suspended imperceptibly by monofilament, the windows appeared to hover magically as they ascended up towards the right corner. For Summers, the moving triangle served as a fundamental and powerful symbol for nonstatic energy, inward growth, and lifting “veils.” Wassily Kandinsky used a similar metaphor in his 1912 essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*: “The life of the spirit may be graphically represented as a large acute-angle triangle” that “moves ahead, slowly but surely with irresistible strength moving ever forward and upward.”<sup>10</sup>

Another prominent element was the two elongated, triangular clay arrows which flanked the centrally placed mound of salt in the shape of a fetus. On top of the clay arrows were towers made from egg shells, re-used from a previous exhibition, *Transpersonal Crystallization*, where 365 of them symbolized stages of the solar cycle.<sup>11</sup> They, as well as the fetal salt mound, referred here to the birth of a body of work based on intuition. The symbolic reference to life was made more tangible with the addition of bees, in a triangular wooden hive fronted by glass, mid-way through the exhibition. For Summers, the bees provided both a connection to natural forces and a living presence vital to the installation.<sup>12</sup>

The inclusion of a mirrored table and an Underhill typewriter inserted a formal note of elegance and intellect and signaled the new direction in Summers’ work. The typewriter had been used by Summers when she began to write out her observations, documenting the evolution of her understanding of intuitive and psychic

processes. The mirror simply underlined the fact that with such writings she also looked into herself.

That the installation housed an ongoing ritual emphasized Summers' belief that formal practices are necessary for furthering psychic development. On the days Summers worked on the installation, she would "clear the space by raking and adding salt to the ground/floor and up the walls."<sup>13</sup> She also refilled a bowl and two champagne glasses with rainwater. The number of days she worked in the space was indicated by square cards with an abstract design—in reality, "mastitus" cards Summers had previously used to test for purity in goats milk—placed along the floor of the installation.<sup>14</sup> The two chairs on the left were used to seat Summers and the participants who had answered the questionnaires.

A bowl, suspended between chairs, symbolized Summers' belief that intuition and inner work should be offered openly, that the ancient oral "secret techniques are surfacing throughout humanity," and that her participation in the exchange is indicative of the larger "development of human consciousness."<sup>15</sup> In acknowledgment of the participants who willingly "placed themselves in a vulnerable, painful position in order to grow internally," Summers offered each a bottle of beer she had brewed herself.<sup>16</sup> This exchange was also symbolized by the two champagne glasses, themselves objects often used in celebratory rites in our culture which, like the bowl, contained rainwater and salt which had crystallized during the course of the show.<sup>17</sup>

A Braille label, added during the last week of the installation, both symbolized and summarized the nature of this particular exhibition and Summers' art in general. Its addition, indicative of the nonstatic, changing nature of her work, also asserted that we, like the blind, can "see" with senses other than just our eyes the more we develop them. Braille also serves as an important symbol of tattooing for Summers, since that ritual, she claims, can enable metamorphosis and thus "can be a vehicle one uses to move through surface veils to invisible fields of perception founded in various states of consciousness."

Summers' work bridges the distance between art and life. For her, art objects are vehicles for realizations. Absolutely vital to, and an integral part of, her art are the collaborations with others in which she indicates areas

and means for them to develop their intuition. The installation was indeed a rite in which Summers clearly heralded the direction in which she hopes to move.

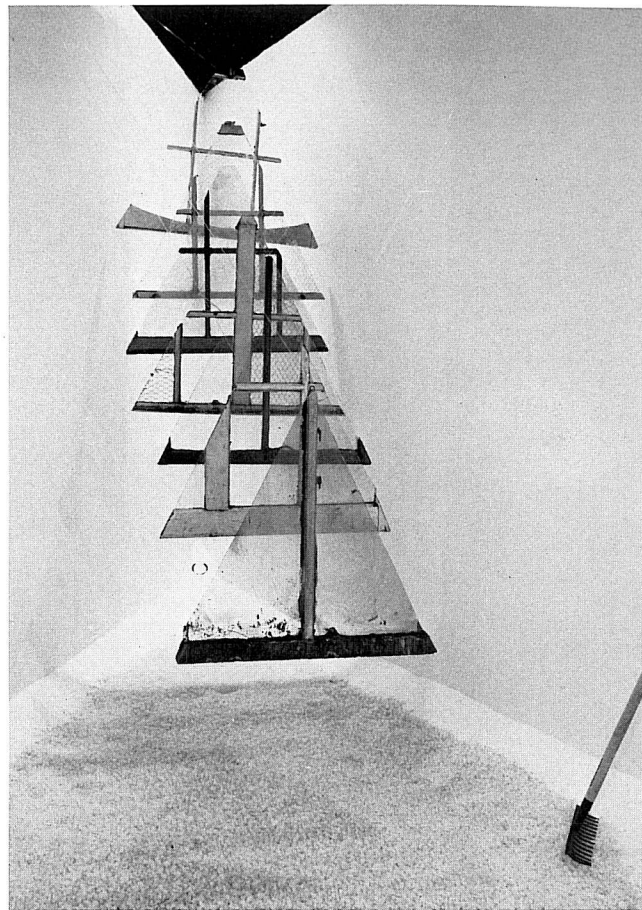
Lynn Gumpert

*Jamie Summers was killed in a tragic accident shortly after this essay was written. It is dedicated to her work and her memory.*

#### Notes

1. Thomas McEvilley, "Heads It's Form, Tails It's Content?" *Artforum*, vol. 21, November 1982, p. 52.
2. From artist's statement included in the exhibition.
3. Jamie Summers, in a taped conversation with the author on March 21, 1983.
4. *Ibid.* Summers has also been researching tattooing as ritual in ancient cultures and was recently invited to participate in a symposium of anthropologists, sociologists, and art historians entitled "Art of the Body," held at the University of California, Los Angeles, January 1983 (papers to be published by UCLA).
5. Dr. Helen Palmer, from brochure published by the Center for the Investigation & Training of Intuition, Berkeley, California, n.p. Dr. Palmer is founder of the center. It is also interesting to note that clairvoyance means literally "to see clearly."
6. Jacki Apple, "Introduction," *Alternatives in Retrospect: An Historical Overview 1969-1975*, exh. cat. (New York: The New Museum, 1981), p. 5. See also Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973).
7. From artist's statement included in the installation.
8. Franz Marc, *Briefe Aufzeichnungen, und Aphormismen*, quoted in Frederick S. Levine, *The Apocalyptic Vision: The Art of Franz Marc as German Expressionism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 14.
9. Although Summers has used the crystallization of salt as an element in much of her previous work, one example of where it played a principal role was in *Braille Tattoo*, an installation in the second-floor bathroom of an abandoned massage parlor, the site of "The Times Square Show," June 1980, 41st Street and 7th Avenue. Due to the building's disrepair and the humidity of a New York summer the salt crystallized rapidly over all available surfaces.
10. W. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* for *The Documents of Modern Art*, vol. 5 (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1972), pp. 27-29.
11. *Transpersonal Crystallization* was installed at White Columns, New York City, May-June 1981. Summers often reuses many of the same elements in her installations.
12. Anthroposophist Rudolph Steiner remarked on the similarities of the bees' colony to the human mechanism in *Nine Lectures on Bees* (Spring Valley, N.Y.: St. George Publications, 1964). In the White Columns exhibition, the living presence was provided by silkworms which spun cocoons during the course of the installation. Both these "living presences" served as substitutes for Summers when she herself was not able to be at the installations.

notes continued on back page



Cover: Entrance to *Metamorphic Rite*,  
1983. All other illustrations are interior  
installation views.

Overleaf: Statement by the artist in Braille

notes continued

13. Here, and where otherwise not indicated, quoted from unpublished writings by the artist, 1983.
14. In 1980, Summers lived for a year in a rural area near Santa Rosa, California, where she raised a number of animals. The daily routine and maintenance imperative to the raising of animals reaffirmed for her the importance of ritual in daily life and is retained by Summers in her daily upkeep of installations.
15. Summers also indicated that the bowl contained rainwater from California, where the source of the intuition work began, but that the actualization of the work was taking place in New York.
16. Associations in Summers' work are almost always very personal in nature. In this case, however, Summers was inspired to brew and offer beer by a ritual of the Northern Tupi tribes of South America that she had read in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 145-47.
17. Other objects included in the installation likewise were replete with personal meaning for Summers. One drawing, along with the rose thorn suspended in front of it, spoke of a painful dissolution of a relationship. Two postcards—one of fictional Robin Hood's daughter, arrow poised, and one of tunnels—were found at the time of a major psychic breakthrough. Horseshoes, at each corner, served as talismans, clearly identifiable to the viewer as objects that held additional significance. The enlarged electron-scanning microscope photograph of the sensory cells of silk moths was acquired seven years earlier when Summers began to investigate scientific knowledge of sensory perception. The Dr. Pepper can, corroded with salt, was found by Summers when driving across the Great Salt Lake and led her to investigate its properties as a medium.

### Jamie Summers (1948-1983)

Born in Salinas, California. Attended San Francisco Art Institute (B.F.A. 1972, M.F.A. 1975).

#### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1977 *Images*, Cuesta College Gallery, San Luis Obispo, California

1981 *Transpersonal Crystalization*, White Columns, New York

#### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1975 *First Artist's "Soap Box Derby"*, San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco

*Graduate Exhibition*, Emanuel Walters Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco  
Lester Gallery, Inverness, California

1976 *Conjunction*, Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach

1977 *Sculpture*, Lester Gallery, Inverness, California  
Zara Gallery, San Francisco

1978 *New Work*, Mills College Gallery, Oakland

1979 *Permanent Dermagraphic Painting as Wearable Art*, Julie: Artisan's Gallery, New York

1980 *Times Square Show*, 201-5 West 41st Street, New York (organized by Collaborative Projects, Inc.)

1981 *Alumni Exhibition*, Emanuel Walters Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco

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#### TELEVISION

1979 *Aspekte*, interview by Dr. Wolfgang Ebert, syndicated by ZDF Television in West Germany

1980 *Aspekte*, interview by George Paravanana i, syndicated by ZDF Television in West Germany

*Today's Woman*, interview by Glenda Baugh, syndicated by Newsweek Broadcasting, New York

#### RELATED ACTIVITIES

1983 Delivered paper for symposium, "Art of the Body," University of California, Los Angeles (Papers to be published by UCLA)

Founded *Center for Investigative Studies of Intuition*, New York, NY

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## THE NEW MUSEUM

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