

The background is a solid, vibrant red. Overlaid on this are several thick, white, continuous ribbons that twist and loop in a vertical, somewhat chaotic pattern. The ribbons are of uniform thickness and create a sense of movement and depth. The text is positioned in the center-left area, with the dates at the top and the gallery name at the bottom.

January 29—April 20, 2025

or a
repertoire

an archive
and

tufts university art galleries

an archive and/or a repertoire

an archive and/or a repertoire

explores the liminal spaces that emerge between archives and ephemeral new media. Featuring the Mobius, Inc. Records—the administrative archive of the Boston-based Mobius Artists Group—this exhibition serves as a local laboratory for cultural place-making, delving into materials from Mobius’ experimental performances, new media projects, sound works, dances, and installations. Currently housed in Tufts Archival Research Center (TARC), the Mobius, Inc. Records contains organizational records, photographs, and video documentation from c.1968 to 2009, chronicling the early work of individual members and the artist-run organization founded by Marilyn Arsem, who also founded the Performance Area at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (SMFA), where she taught performance for over a quarter century.

an archive and/or a repertoire

questions the boundaries and limits of the archive, through what performance studies scholar Diana Taylor understands as its embodied counterpoint, the repertoire. The exhibition is organized in four research threads that activate a potential remapping of the archive in light of the repertoire—deep time, siting place, horizontal collectivity, and document/residue—featuring photos, posters, newsletters, and other physical materials from the Mobius, Inc. Records at TARC. Presented alongside are embodied contributions from Mobius Artists Group members, new commissions and works by Mobius artists Lani Asunción and Forbes Graham, as well as works by artists Aki Sasamoto and Takahiro Yamamoto. Responses to the archive also include oral histories from artists, activists, and cultural workers adjacent to Mobius, video documentation of the group’s early performance works, and ongoing public programming. Altogether, the exhibition components pose a challenge to the legacy of the material *archive* while also activating the collective imaginary of the *repertoire*—gestures, spoken word, movement, dance, sounds—that might otherwise be lost, erased, or forgotten.

Traces of History

—the Mobius, Inc. Records

Marilyn Arsem

Proto-Mobius

In 1975 I invited a group of artists with whom I had worked in other contexts—performers, musicians, writers, visual artists—to join me in collaborating to create new performances. Three friends and I rented the top floor of a former Legion Hall in Somerville, with large open rooms, tall windows and wooden floors—the perfect environment for developing performances. Once, a group of us stayed overnight—drumming and dancing and making music for hours, improvising with masks and unusual objects, conjuring dream performances in the dark of night.

We wanted to move beyond experimental theater and explore everything that was unique to live performance where artists and audience occupy the same space and time together. Performance art was beckoning, as well as interdisciplinary work, conceptual art, and new dance. Our experiments resulted in performances that were interactive, often with social and political subject matter. And we presented the works in community spaces where audiences and the performers were physically on the same level, in bookstores, galleries, and food co-ops, and also on the streets.

Mobius Theater

As we began to show work publicly, venues asked us who we were; so, in 1977 we chose the name Mobius Theater, referencing the infinity of a mobius strip. It seemed appropriate, because our audience-activated performances lasted as long as audiences stayed, directing the actions of the performers and the outcome of the works. The records of these events remain primarily in participants' memories. The Mobius, Inc. Records at the Tufts Archive Research Center (TARC) contains just a hint of those early activities. There are a handful of photos on contact sheets and some posters of the events.

In 1980 we incorporated as a non-profit, tax-exempt organization at the suggestion of a friend who worked for the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, so that we could apply for funding. Our ethics and methods of organizing ourselves and our activities became more clearly articulated as we took on the obligations of becoming a legal organization. But the heart of who we were was the same, and has continued to remain the same. We are an artist-run organization, a group of artists working in different media who are interested in experimenting and challenging our practices, helping other artists to do the same, and sharing the work and conversation about it with our audiences.

Mobius, Inc. & Mobius Artists Group

In 1983, Helen Shlien, who exhibited contemporary art in her gallery on Congress Street in Boston's Fort Point, asked if we would be interested in taking on her lease of the space when she moved her gallery to Newbury Street. She had regularly shown not just the work of Mobius, but other Boston artists presenting performance art, video, and installation. We were already part of a community of like-minded artists who were congregating in Fort Point, a nearly deserted area of nineteenth-century brick warehouses on Boston's waterfront. Our performance of Orpheus in June of 1983 was our migration to the new space, beginning at our studio in Chinatown and moving across the city to finish on the fifth floor of 354 Congress Street. That September, we opened the public performance and exhibition space calling it simply, Mobius. We did not want to signal any particular artistic discipline with our name. The two large rooms were open and flexible, and could be configured by the artists however they wished. We not only showed our own work but also invited other artists to present work in the space.

As Mobius became known as a venue, it was important for us to clarify that it was not simply an empty space administered by a staff. It was the home of a group of artists who ran the space and also made work there. So, we called ourselves Mobius Artists Group. Mobius, Inc. is the legal name of the organization. We operated the Congress Street space from the fall of 1983 until June of 2003, with something different nearly every week for 40 weeks a year, from September through June. We focused on experimental art, including performance art, new music and sound art, dance and movement work, video, and visual art installations. We maintained that level of activity through the rise and fall

in public funding for the arts and the culture wars of the 1990s. Hundreds of events were presented, and thousands of artists came through Mobius during those twenty years.

Mobius, Inc. Records

The activities from that era make up the bulk of the materials that now reside in the Mobius, Inc. Records at TARC, due primarily to the fact that nearly all of our records were in paper form. While we were beginning to use computers, we were still producing printed press releases, newsletters, posters and programs. At the end of each season, we assembled all the folders of events, all the extra copies of posters and newsletters, everything from the filing cabinet, and put them into a labeled box, and relegated it to a closet. We had enough space to save everything.

But it was administrative papers that we were putting into boxes, not artwork. So, while there are posters and programs, newsletters with artists' writings about, photographs and video, actual artworks are not in the archive. It is not possible to preserve ephemeral work! Even though there are a few random artifacts and relics from events, the materials that were used in performances were either discarded or repurposed or taken home by the artists.

Eventually we began to keep more information on computers, and also assembled a website with information about events rather than mailing printed newsletters. That is when archiving became more difficult. While it is easy now to just back up information and images to the cloud, earlier eras of the Internet required transferring information to floppy disks whose size and formats went through rapid transformations. Early improvements of floppy disks increased their capacity from 400 KB to 1.2 MB. But just think

about that for a moment, and then estimate how many disks it would take to back up a year's worth of material. And who now even has the machines or software to look at that data?

Archives & Memory

I am reminded of how random the contents of archives really are. What materials of an organization actually survive multiple moves? After operating at 354 Congress Street, Boston for 20 years, we moved five times into smaller spaces—some public spaces at 725 Harrison Avenue, Boston, from 2008 to 2011; and then 55 Norfolk Street, Cambridge, from 2011 to 2016—some simply studios, and one just an office. Each space was smaller than the previous one, and then finally we occupied no space at all. Who decides what should be saved? How do you decipher different people's systems of organizing? What is easy to store? What gets lost? Who keeps a record of which member's basement contains what materials? And are the boxes even labeled with enough information to give them context, so that they make sense to someone in the future?

At this point I am the living memory and the only through-line of the organization, having been with it since the beginning. But I can't remember everything. There are events that I never witnessed, artists who I never met, and some who I no longer recall.

Mobius's practice of saving records was due in large part to longtime Mobius Artists Group member Bob Raymond, who photographed and videotaped Mobius work for more than 30 years, from when he joined Mobius Artists Group in 1983 to his death in 2012. He and I spent hours every Sunday organizing and labeling slides and videos that could be cross-referenced to lists that he made of the events, their

dates, and their participants. Bob also maintained the office computers, constantly reminding us to back them up.

Trained in anthropology, Bob was always curious about how people perceived their lives. He steadfastly believed that the work of contemporary artists, including those in Boston, was significant, revealing unique perspectives on their worlds. He was especially committed to documenting live work, particularly because of its ephemeral nature. He didn't want the evidence of the existence of these artistic activities to disappear. It needs to be remembered, to have a place in the history of contemporary art.





Nancy Adams and Slavčo Sokolovski, *Wall Fall Down (and get back up again)* at Mobius 25, Mobius, Boston, MA, June 7, 2003. Performance, dimensions variable. Photo: Bob Raymond.



Marilyn Arsem, *The Beginning or the End*, at Mobius, Boston, MA, November 1989.
Performance, dimensions variable. Photo: Bob Raymond. Image courtesy of Marilyn Arsem.



Tom Plsek in collaboration with Joanne Rice, *Corvus Corax 5* at Quincy Quarry, Quincy, MA, March 2005. Performance, dimensions variable. Photo: Bob Raymond. Image courtesy of Mobius Artists Group.

MOBIUS THEATER

FINALLY GEORGE (3-D, 3-D, 3-D!)

VIDEO VS. MEMORY VS. MEMORY

BF/VF

Sat. March 7, 8:00 p.m.
Members: \$2.00
General Public: \$3.00

1126 Boylston St.
Boston
536-1540

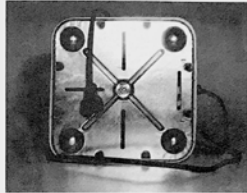
HELEN SHLIEN GALLERY

Sat. and Sun., March 14, 15.
8:00 p.m.
Admission: \$4.00

354 Congress St.
Boston
482-9866


← Mobius Theater, *Finally George (3-D, 3-D, 3-D!)*, *Video vs. Memory vs. Memory*, at Boston Film/Video Foundation and Helen Shlien Gallery poster, 1981. Image courtesy of Marilyn Arsem.

Mobius Theater's
Playabout




Playabout

March 1 – March 17
Thursdays – Saturdays
8:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m.



at **MOBIUS**
354 Congress St.
Boston (Fort Point)

Tickets \$5.00
Reservations 542-7416



Paul Miller Photos

Funded in part by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, a state agency, and by a City Arts Grant, from the City of Boston.

MOBIUS THEATER

A WEEK AT THE HELEN SHLIEN GALLERY June 1-6

| | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>A Room With Grapefruit</p> <p>Performance by Gail Moeller Sally Randolph</p> <p>Tuesday and Wednesday June 1 and 2 8:00 pm</p> | <p>Little Mysteries</p> <p>Meditation Pieces Written by S. D. Lydenberg With Jude Aronstein Denise Ethier Chris Falada Joan Gale Dan Lang Pat McInteer David Miller</p> <p>Thursday and Sunday June 3 and 6 8:00 pm</p> | <p>Persephone And Hades</p> <p>Third Annual Performance (Audience Activated) Written by S. D. Lydenberg Directed by Marilyn Arsem With Mari Jones David Miller</p> <p>Friday and Saturday June 4 and 5 8:00 pm</p> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

354 CONGRESS ST. (fort point channel) one night \$4; two \$6; three \$8 (542-7416)

↑ Mobius Theater, *Playabout* at Mobius, Boston, MA poster, 1984. Image courtesy of Marilyn Arsem.

← Mobius Theater, *A Week at the Helen Shlien Gallery* poster, 1982. Image courtesy of Marilyn Arsem.

Archives as a Performance Portal

Wenxuan Xue

Gliding my fingers gently on the rough surfaces of the papers, I felt the weight of history calling my attention. The original typewriter typeface of newsletters, meeting notes with pencil handwriting that still remains legible, cuts of newspaper reviews clipped together along with performance flyers, and physical letters of invitation that were once the main mode of communication before the Internet—somehow these materials from the manila folders could suspend and stretch time, facilitating an encounter with dispersed moments from the past. I surrendered to this collation of papers—this archive—as a magical portal; and I wondered, what memories, stories, and lives are in store, awaiting to be revealed? What might otherwise risk becoming disappeared, effaced, and forgotten?

In the last twelve months, TUAG curator Laurel V. McLaughlin and I spent long hours on Fridays reviewing carts of heavy boxes—the Mobius, Inc. Records—housed in the Tufts Archival Research Center (TARC), with the support of TARC staff Alex Bush, Sari Mauro, Yunzhu Pan, and Dan Santamaria. Through our research, I learned that it was the one of the first art groups working in a collective manner that centered performance and new media work in ever-expanding interdisciplinary ways in the U.S. and a community-based non-profit that continues thriving today. In my performance studies training, I had come across the seminal works of Marina Abramović, Yoko Ono, Adrian Piper, John Cage, and Tehching Hsieh, most of whom gathered in downtown New York and Europe across the 1960s and '70s, pushing the boundaries of art and expanded performance, music, sculpture, and installation, but I had not encountered Boston as a site of investigation. As we dwelt in the Mobius, Inc. Records, I wondered, how might we (re)tell a history of contemporary new media by focusing on Boston as its center? How might the ongoing legacies of the current Mobius Artists Group reorient us towards a process-based sense of horizontal collectivity as an anchor for experimental art practices?

1 See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2001).

2 See Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 100–108.

3 See José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 8, No. 2 (1996): 5–16; Martin Manalansan, "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives," *Radical History Review*, No. 120 (2014), 94–107; Paul Soulellis, "Bad Archives," *JCMS* 62, No. 4 (Summer 2023): 181–187.

4 For more on decolonial oral history methods, see Crystal Mun-Hye Baik. "From 'Best' to Situated and Relational: Notes Toward a Decolonizing Praxis," *The Oral History Review* 49, No. 1 (2022) 3–28; for intimacies with the archive, see Olivia Michiko Gagnon, "Tender Archives and the Closeness of Cheryl Sim's The Thomas Wang Project," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 31, No. 1 (2021): 1–25.

The exhibition *an archive and/or a repertoire* is indebted to genealogies of performance studies' engagement and experimentation with the archive. In her seminal scholarship, Diana Taylor questions the assumed legitimacy of the archive (i.e., texts, documents, and objects), often thought as unmediated and resistant to change overtime, over embodied ways of knowing (i.e., oral tradition, memory, and ritual), seen as rather ephemeral and disappearing.¹ Situated within the colonial context of the Americas, Taylor pushes us to consider how not only colonial archive is subject to change, but also performance, or "repertoire," plays an important role in transmitting knowledge, tradition, and cultural identity. Echoing Taylor's caution against framing performance as vanishing, performance scholar Rebecca Schneider asks, how might we pay attention to what remains after a performance, or performance remains?²

Laurel and I approach the Mobius Inc. Records as a living laboratory, a site of change, experimentation, and practice. We want to reflect the expansive modes of gathering that Mobius has stewarded: their Works-in-Progress series, international artistic exchanges, anti-censorship campaigns, and advocacy for artist-run organizations. The archive collection of Mobius consists of perhaps what queer theorists José Esteban Muñoz, Paul Soulellis, and Martin Manalansan might call more "makeshift," "messy," and "unruly" materials of counter-cultural memory, distinct from the more sanitized, ordered, and authoritative forms of institutional documents.³ From designed protest flyers to the scrawled cursive writing of animated meeting notes, these rather more ephemeral materials reflect Mobius's constant negotiation with the state, institution, and the increasingly neoliberal economy of Boston as an artist-run organization. We could get a glimpse of the experimental history of Mobius and that of contemporary art at large, thanks to years of dedicated stewardship of the archive by Marilyn Arsem and Bob Raymond, along with other members and staff of Mobius, lawyer Matthew Yospin, Assistant Director of SMFA Library Darin Murphy who was at that time President of the Board of Mobius, Inc., former Director and Archivist, Anne Sauer, the Mobius Board, and the TARC staff and archivists.

Countering these visual and physical documents, Laurel and I approach oral history as another important tender, aural trace of history, an archive of memory work through dialogue and listening.⁴ Over

the course of the past year and in collaboration with Marilyn Arsem, Laurel and I conducted oral history interviews with nineteen former and current Mobius members, in addition to Boston artists, activists, and curators external to Mobius who remember their times together with Mobius from 1970s to early 2000s. Each unrestrained laugh, sudden quiet moment, and tearful voice during our conversations were filled with love, joy, and, at times, nostalgia. Many folks described Mobius as a home for them. As my connection grew with the group, Mobius has also become an intimate, loving, and intergenerational community that has bestowed me and by extension, TUAG, with trust. For me, this trust is embedded within values of reciprocity and ethical responsibility. By lingering in the closeness that interlaces me, Mobius members and their audiences over the years, and perhaps you—our audiences—we all extend ourselves to one another. But somehow the boundaries between us as cultural workers in institutions, audiences, and artists might fall away as we hold each other closer, without the pressures or desires to fully know each other.⁵

Today, the community around Mobius has continued to grow, strengthen, and transform. In organizing a series of performances of both Mobius and non-Mobius artists, we hearken back to Mobius' international exchanges and the radical welcoming of artists outside the group into their performative approach. By framing the live performing body, installations in public space, experimental musical interventions also as archives, we explore how artists produce and reenact an "ongoing inventiveness," an incomplete, creative process to hold memory, tradition, and history.⁶ In witnessing these performance activations, I wonder, how might we notice our own relationships with liveness, as they inevitably continue to change?

The portal of the archive stages a performance encounter between the present and some versions of the past, just as I once unfolded the documents of Mobius from the slightly dusty, worn-out manila folders. In the afterlife of a performance, what then do our bodies hold? As we exit the gallery, what might still linger with us? How might we tend to the seemingly intangible "archive" as we continue our ongoing "performance" of living? Perhaps it's an exhale, a tingling sensation, a warm touch, or an elusive memory of once being close together.

⁵ For more on curation as a relational process, see Laura Kina, Alexandra Chang, Lawrence-Minh Bui Davis, and Thea Quiray Tagle, "A&Q: Curation as Decolonial Practice," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 8, No. 2 (2022): 46–64.

⁶ See André Lepecki, "The Body as Archives: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances," *Dance Research Journal* 42 (2): 28–48.



mobius performing group presents the ninth annual performances of

PERSEPHONE AND HADES

an audience-interactive event


friday-sunday, april 15-17, 1988
mobius, 354 congress street, boston
8 pm, tickets \$7. (617) 542-7416

photos: Bob Raymond

Mobius, Inc. is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Mass. Council on the Arts and Humanities, the Boston Arts Lottery Council, and generous private support.

Persephone and Hades poster, 1988.
Image courtesy of Marilyn Arsem.

exhibition programming

- january 29** **Exhibition Opening & The Dance of Functions**
A performance by Forbes Graham, co-director of Mobius
- january 31** **Undoing the Archive**
Mobius Artists Group interventions
- february 13** **Hollow Center**
A performance by Takahiro Yamamoto
- february 20** **BLOODLESS: BLOOD, BONES, ALOHA!**
A performance by Lani Asunción with Magdalena Abrego and Matthew Azavedo
- march 28** **Horizontal Pedagogies and Research-Creation**
A panel on Mobius Artists Group with Marilyn Arsem and Natalie Loveless, co-moderated by Laurel V. McLaughlin and Wenxuan Xue
- april 11** **a desire to learn**
Performance in practice with Mobius Artists Group, curated by Jasper Sanchez 



Scan to learn more about TUAG programming

Tufts University Art Galleries

**an archive and/or a repertoire
january 29–april 20, 2025**

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Laurel V. McLaughlin**

**Graduate Research Fellow
Wenxuan Xue**

**Copyediting
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**Brochure Production
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