

Art Attack

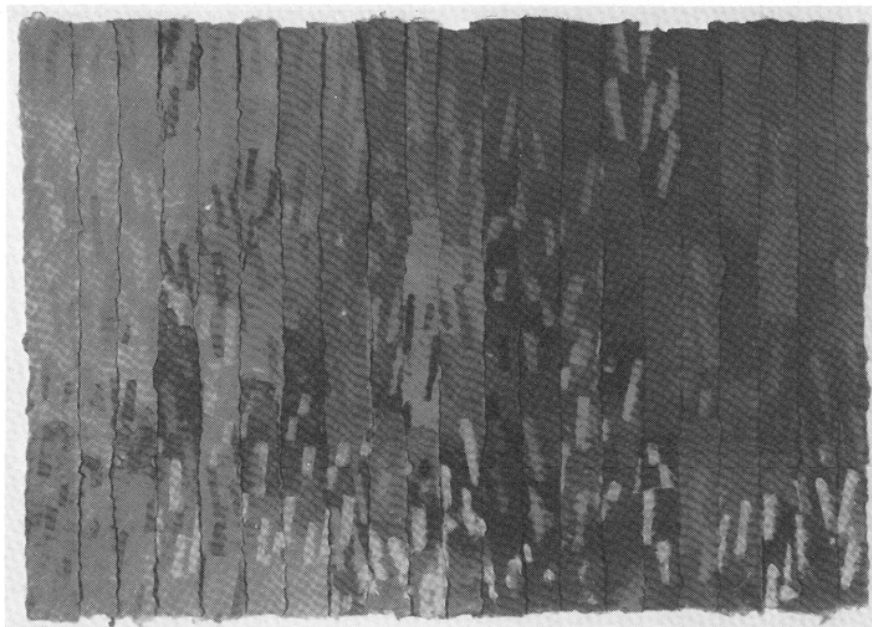
Olshonsky Gallery

443 Seventh St. NW, 202/737-5177

Visitors to the Olshonsky Gallery who were fortunate enough to find it open (the gallery operates on a rather unpredictable schedule) were treated to a complex and highly ambitious architectural installation by Washington's collaborative group, Art Attack. Although Art Attack is more (in)famous for their guerilla-like outdoor installations (the *Used War Lot* of 1985, or *Five Continents/Divide* of 1986—a sculptural project erected on MacArthur Boulevard's traffic islands), this installation was conspicuously gallery-bound. Together with their recent appearance at Documenta 8, it signals Art Attack's growing legitimacy within the art world.

Walking in the front door of Michael Olshonsky's gallery-cum-law office one was immediately confronted by a collapsed maze of old doorways and walls. Tiny hallways trailed off and ended like narrow, Bruce Nauman corridors, the floor tilted at fun-house angles, and patterns of light filtered in through shaped, back-lit openings in the ceiling. On passing through this maze one entered a large room, with a layer of black coal covering the floor. Raised at oblique angles on top of the coal-bed were large square fragments of aged hardwood flooring. One wall of the room was entirely covered in sheet-metal. A row of black steel plumb-bobs

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ELLEN MEARS, "Deep Water," handmade paper, 24" x 33", 1988.

47

hanging along the wall could be "played" against the resonant sheet-metal. A passageway, circling around behind the far wall connected the large room with one of the doorways in the initial maze. Small, black-and-white reproductions, (photographs of architectural elements, perhaps) were taped at intervals along the walls of the close, darkened passageway.

The historical resonance of architectural material has been addressed in a number of styles and idioms within Modernist art and architecture. Implicit in the use of such material is a social and historical "residue" that can easily become formalized, as in the residential architecture of Frank Gehry, in which beams are exposed, and original doors and windows uncovered and re-introduced as design elements. Art Attack managed to avoid Gehry's "House Beautiful" avant-gardism by activating the installation space, which existed as a semi-decrepit building as much as a "gallery." The space provided a range of sensory events: noises (crunching coal underfoot, creaking hardwood floors, sheet metal), textures, views and perspectives, and shifting gravities that aggressively implicated the viewer, calling attention to the experience of architectural space, rather than facilitating the delectation and consumption of architectural style. That Art Attack could produce an installation of this complexity and ambition in the often somnolent intellectual climate of the Washington gallery scene is to be applauded and encouraged.