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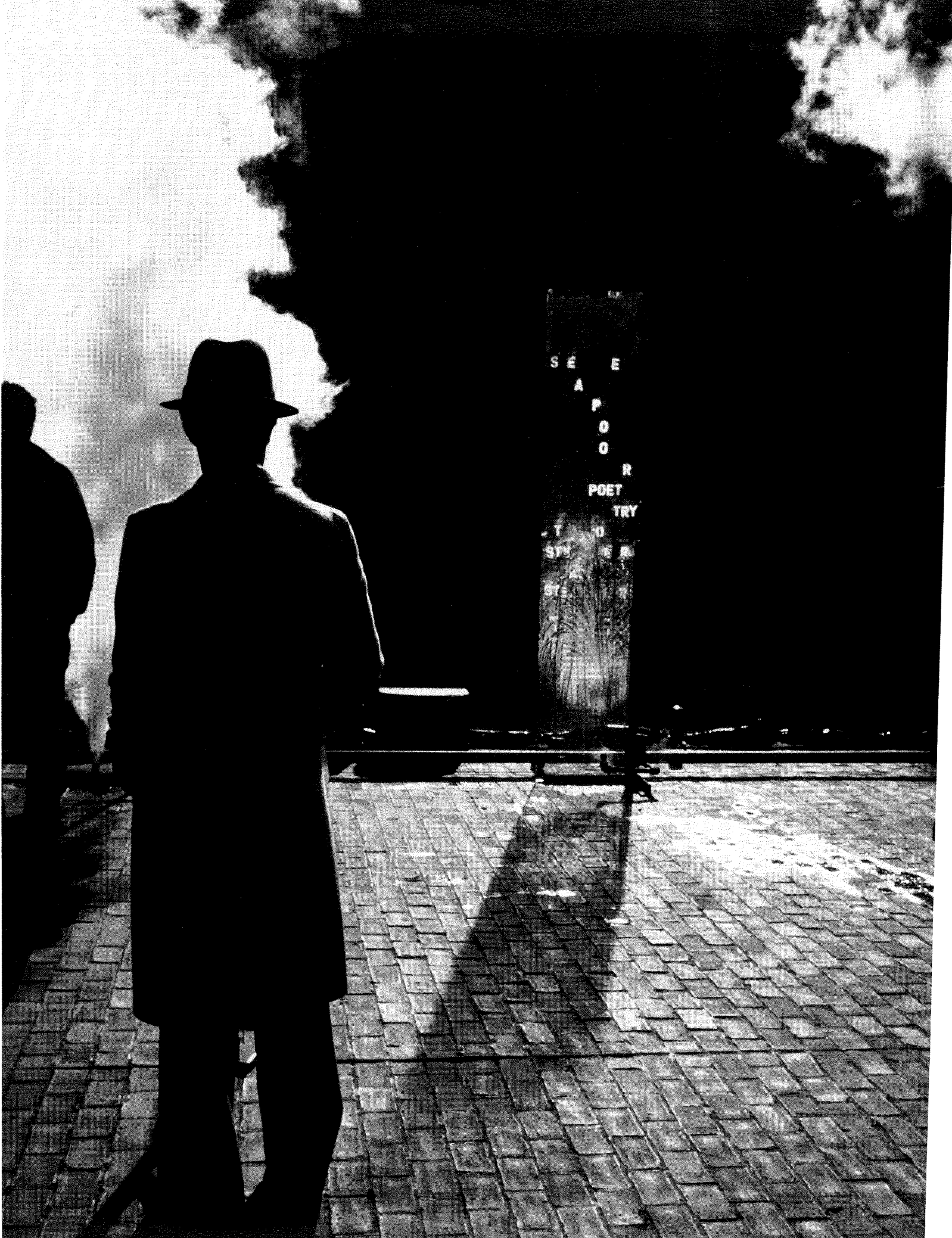
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Steam Heat: Winter Fountains in the City

Steam is a phenomenon of the winter city. It issues from virtually every opening: man-hole covers, grates, roof vents and chimneys. The cities of the Northeast seem to be “cooking”: Canal Street in New York looks like a geyser field in Yellowstone. Oddly, most people do not notice these eruptions, even when the surging steam temporarily blinds them.

When I arrived in Boston from California I was mesmerized by these earthly clouds. Most people assume steam belongs underground as a public utility; yet, revealed and released at ground level, it can become a public amenity. Making steam visible is somewhat like undertaking an archaeological dig, exhuming what is beneath in order to bring it to light. Just as they peer into an excavation to see history unearthed, people look at steam art as though seeing steam for the first time.

For me steam art is part of the gratuitous gesture that is art, perhaps best illustrated by Duchamp’s Ready-Made, the “Bicycle Wheel.” Now an icon of the Modern era, Duchamp’s piece goes nowhere and carries nobody. The generative idea-energy of the “Bicycle Wheel” has covered enormous conceptual ground by merely going around and around on its axle screwed to a kitchen stool.

While steam art is physically dissimilar from the “Bicycle Wheel,” it constitutes non-work and the medium is just as familiar. This utilization of steam as art rather than as utility embodies some of the irony associated with found objects, whose appearance remains unchanged but whose context bequeaths their artistic significance. In this sense, steam fountains in the city can be regarded as geysers, ordinarily associated with the wilderness, that have been placed within a new context. An “urban geyser” is evocative of Duchamp’s oxymorons: “timid power.”

Steamshuffle.

Such a transformation of context inevitably exposes the city to the mysteries of “untamed nature”: creation myths, superstitions, dark powers and the unknown (and therefore feared). Accounts by the early explorers of Yellowstone National Park include descriptions of the ways that local Native Americans regarded the geysers and fumaroles. Some believed the roarings were caused by infernal spirits forging weapons. Warriors believed that

standing in the spray would make them invisible to their enemies.

I became interested in steam as a human-made element in addition to its presence in nature. Steam’s history as a source of mechanical energy is difficult to research; steam, particularly as clouds, fares better as an inspiration for painters and poets.

Particular aspects of this history have been of immeasurable importance to me in developing an aesthetic for steam. For example, the inventions of Hero of Alexandria (who lived in the first century A.D.) used steam to cause bronze snakes to hiss, temple doors to open and close, and vessels to spin. These magical inventions inspired me to design kinetic glass objects based on the same principles.

In a more fundamental sense, Hero serves as a model because he placed technology at the service of art. Hero’s *Pneumatica* reappeared in translation during the sixteenth century, providing the technology for the trick and joke fountains of Baroque Italy and Austria. Among the extravagant water effects at the Villa d’Este is the Owl Fountain, based on Hero’s description of “Birds Made to Sing and Be Silent Alternatively through Flowing Water.” One of the most amusing accounts

of these water theaters is by Charles de Brosse, who visited the Villas of Frascati in 1739 with a group of friends: “. . . there is an especially good little curving staircase where, as soon as you are part way up the way, the water jets shoot out, criss-crossing in every direction, from above, below and from the sides.”

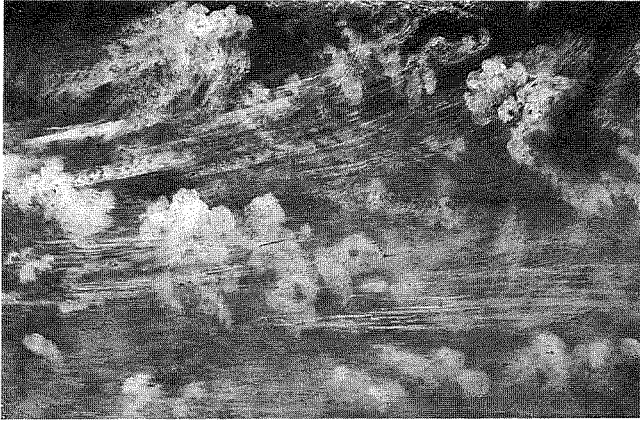
Manet’s painting *Gare San Lazare* (1873) provides me with additional conceptual groundwork. While Victorian England bemoaned the desecration of the English landscape by industrialization, French painters appeared to accept the bridges, viaducts and factories as part of the sun-dappled landscape of picnics and poppies. Only Manet seemed to ponder these changes.

Gare San Lazare appears to be a casually posed picture of contemporary life in Paris. A woman and child are seated outdoors. The woman is looking toward the viewer with an open book in her lap; the child, with her back to us, is looking at an enormous cloud of steam made by a passing locomotive, itself just outside the picture. The natural cloud has been replaced by a machine-made one and is presented here as a fit subject of human interest.

This concept—that a non-natural phenomenon could be a subject of inter-

In the winter, steam clouds issue from manholes, grates and other openings.





est to people—was developed and nurtured by writers, artists and critics in the '60s and early '70s. Of particular importance to me were steam projects by Robert Morris, who created art works by using “non-art” materials and forms. In *Steam Project* (western Washington state, 1971-1972) Morris explicitly de-emphasized the possibility of steam as having meanings associated with art objects. Instead, he emphasized that steam should be understood as pure phenomenon.

Morris not only changed perceptions of what art is, but also examined the contradictions in the way we perceive the physical environment. He used steam—white, powerful, billowing and finally dissipating into the atmosphere and becoming invisible—to pose questions central to our perceiving both art and life.

Steam fountains and works are seen against and within the space of their settings; they make the space visible, giving it dimension. Steam envelopes the space: The elements in the space and

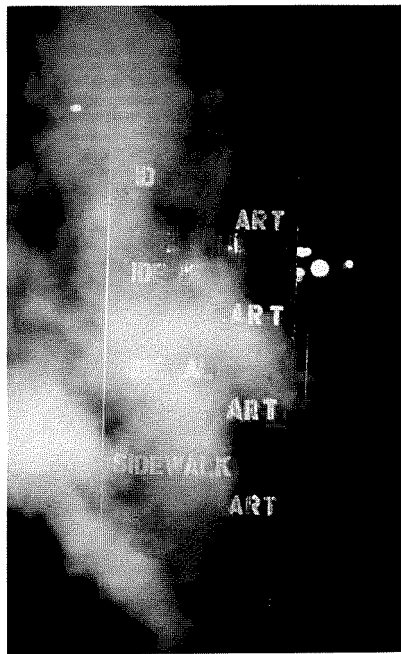
the behavior of the people there become interconnected and sometimes indistinguishable. Yet tension is created between steam's large scale and forbidding presence, which keep the public at some distance, and its capacity to be penetrated bodily.

While public art has assimilated the Minimalist canon by using natural elements as phenomena, it has expanded the meanings these elements can convey to include references to specific sites, histories and uses. What differentiates my work from Morris's has to do with intention: Morris presented steam as pure phenomenon; for me, steam has a potent capacity to evoke meanings gathered from the circumstances of its place and time.



***Centerbeam*, created by the Fellows of the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies and installed on the Mall, Washington, D.C., 1978.**

Season-specific fountains, such as *Winterbreath* and *Galaxy*, offer a complete gestalt: the geyser followed by the spring, both with their origins in the natural world and both available in the modern city. The geyser connotes power, mystery and the sublime; the spring connotes beneficence and gaiety. They together can create ritual places within the city where the public might meditate, fantasize and play. Such fountains are not commemorative of great events or individuals but rather of the site and the culture of the people surrounding them. They celebrate myths of reaffirmation and seasonal renewal that more fully integrate us within ourselves, our lives and our civic spaces.



Steamshuffle

Steamshuffle is a temporary installation, presented in Cambridge, Boston, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia between 1981 and 1987. As pedestrians walk past each of the eight glass panels, they activate photocell beams that activate a dramatic eruption of steam and sound events. Visitors can read poems, written by Emmett Williams especially for *Steamshuffle*, through the condensation that forms on the panels and can hear voices reading them, as

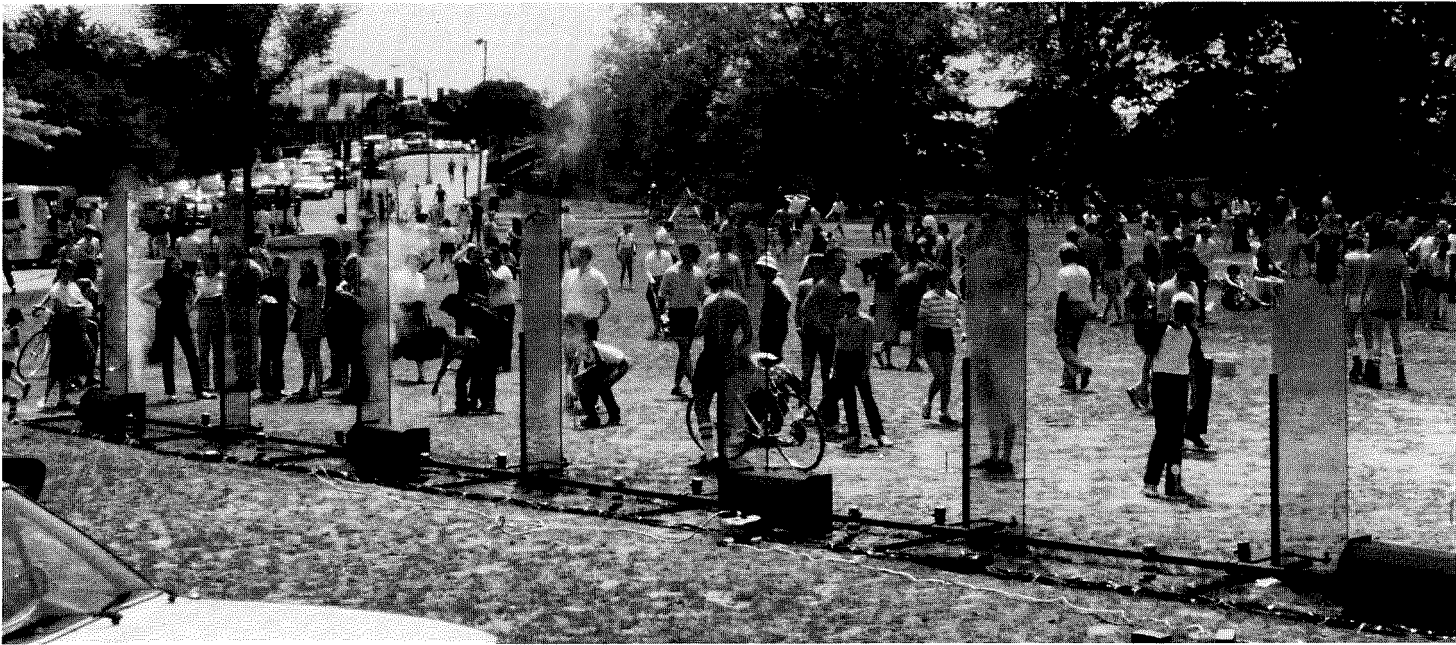


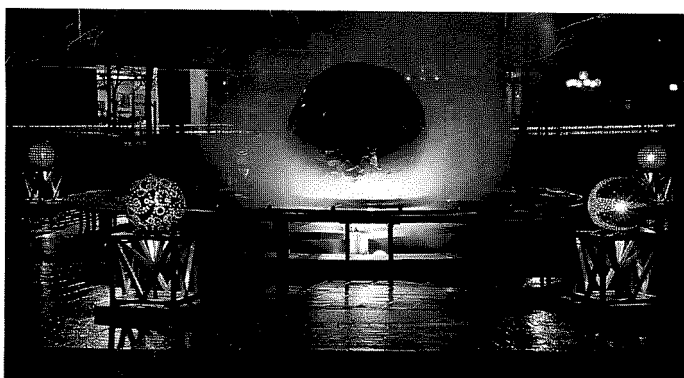
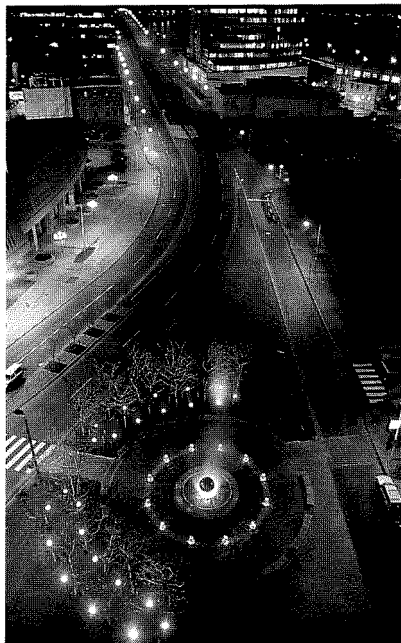


well as tones, chords and live radio broadcasts. During the evening, strobe lights pulsate on the panels, “freezing” the clouds momentarily and changing the mood of the work.

One of the most rewarding aspects of touring *Steamshuffle* has been to watch the crowds discover the work for themselves. While some quietly read the poetry, others become exuberant upon discovering that their movements activate the steam and sound. The

electronically controlled response to people’s behavior sets up reciprocal interactions among art, the public and the surrounding spaces. Language from commercial signage and radio, steam and electricity from public utilities, all systems available in the urban environment, are re-ordered to form an art experience that can be understood and enjoyed by a wide public audience.





Galaxy Fountain

A small, intimate fountain in which steam and water operate seasonally, *Galaxy* was completed last fall in Kendall Square, Cambridge, Mass. The fountain celebrates the natural elements of earth, air, fire and water within a sophisticated steel and chrome setting. The concept and design were by Otto Piene, Director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The “Earth Sphere,” fabricated by Joe Davis, floats on a cloud of steam during the winter and water mist during the summer. Illumination is through 12 “Moon Lights,” which encircle the basin and are designed to resemble the phases of the moon. Lights below the “Earth Sphere” illuminate the clouds upon which the sphere appears to float. A compass is set into the plaza flooring.

Winterbreath Fountain

As a permanent fountain, *Winterbreath*, designed for Boston’s Government Center Plaza (next to City Hall), will use some of the ideas developed in *Steamshufffle*. The site is a brick-faced amphitheater, nearly 6,400 feet square, whose water fountain is to be refurbished. The steam and sound components would be installed for winter operation.

Christopher Janney (a sound artist who also collaborated on *Steamshufffle* and *Galaxy*) and I felt the shape of this site and its use as a performance space should be underscored by the steam and sound. Fan-shaped jets of steam along the two right-angled sides will form a curtain. In the wedge-shaped raised center area, eight individually valved tall jets will create a fast-paced display. Both systems will respond to pedestrians stepping on a series of pressure-sensitive panels set flush with the brick walkways.

The sounds will include a synthesized composition of spoken texts from Boston history: vendors’ cries, political speeches, songs, excerpts from diaries and music from the Scollay Square era before the site was razed to build Government Center. The fountain will also mark the hours with a brief steam and sound event, including a five o’clock whistle.

Our intention is to evoke history as oral tradition, in contrast to the abundance of figurative sculpture commemorating great men and events of the past. We hope to dignify popular culture and to make public participation a necessary part of the fountain’s operation.

Winterbreath will enliven the enormous plaza during the winter months; with its participatory element it will extend democratic principles, particularly significant to the symbolic meaning of its site.

Left:

Galaxy Fountain.

Landscape Architect: The Halvorson Co., Boston.

Engineer: Fay, Spofford and Thorndike, Inc.

Urban Designer: Monacelli Associates, Cambridge.

Water Fountain Consultant: CMS Collaborative.

Right:

Winterbreath Fountain.

