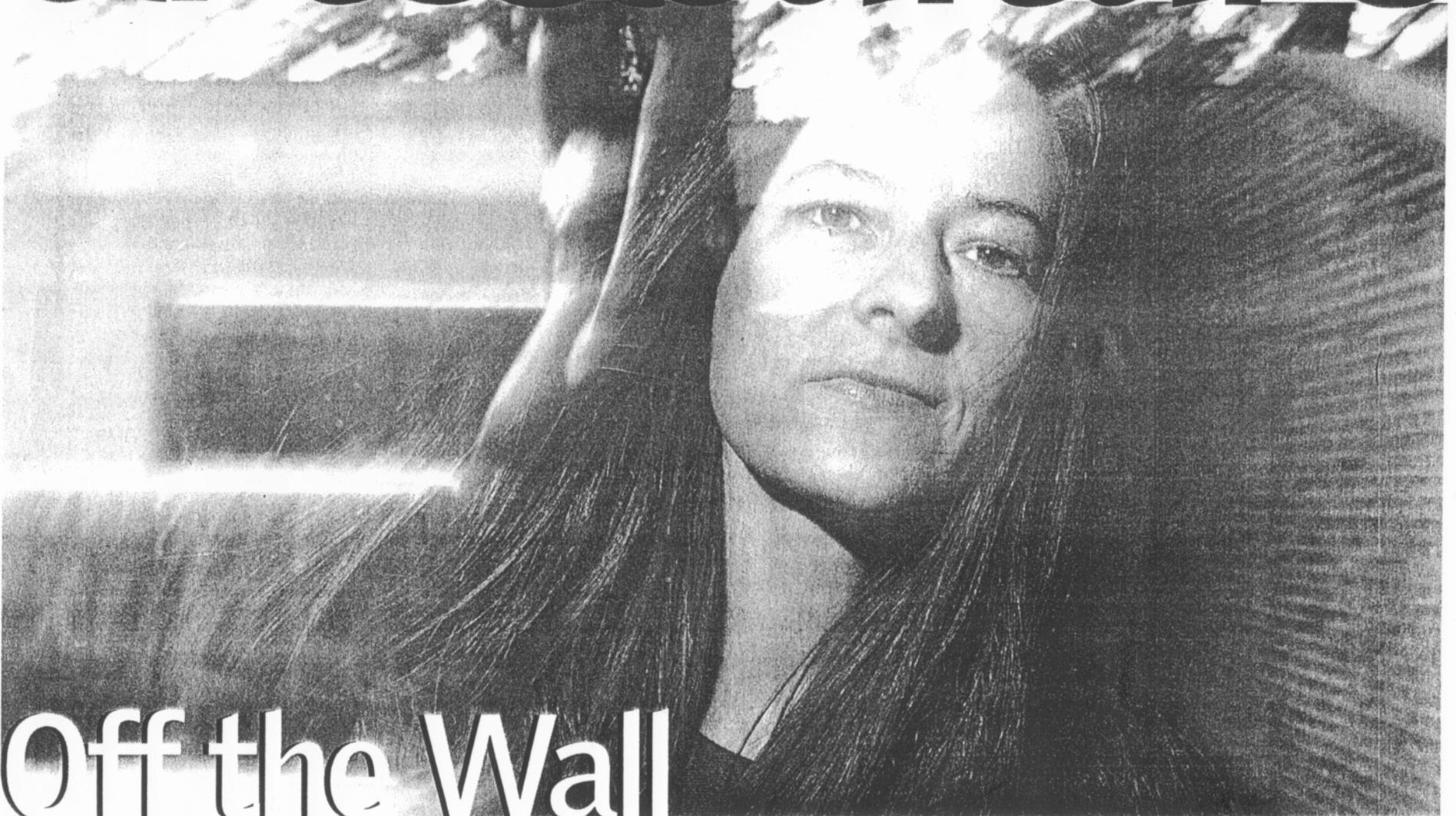


# arts & culture



STEPHEN SALPUKAS

## Off the Wall

The Virginia Museum's Fast/Forward series proves that art isn't just something you hang on the wall.

by Cheryl Pallant

Margo Crutchfield, the Virginia Museum's associate curator of modern and contemporary art, has overseen the Fast/Forward series since its inception in 1984.

**W**hen it comes to the arts, some moan that Richmond lags behind the cultural offerings of cities like Paris and New York. But

Richmond also shares a trait with these much larger metropolises, and maybe even surpasses them with a world-class program of cutting-edge performance art. Like New York's Brooklyn Academy of Music and Paris's Centre Georges Pompidou, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts offers Fast/Forward, a provocative performing arts series that challenges genre distinctions and perceptual boundaries. And ticket prices here are one-half to a third less than these reputable art centers, making the shows accessible to a larger and more diverse audience.

Since 1984 when Fast/Forward began, its list of artists reads like a "Who's Who" of 20th-century art. Meredith Monk, Philip Glass, Trisha Brown Company, Spalding Gray and Matthew Barney shine as examples. Some of these artists had already carved national and international reputations for themselves when they appeared in Richmond, while others, like choreographer Rennie Harris, were early in their rise to renown. Discontented with previous definitions of their disciplines, these artists set out to transcend expectations and understanding, redefining their fields in the process. The result is work that is frequently provocative and sometimes difficult to appreciate. This year's series opens Nov. 4 with the Seattle-based dance/theater company 33 Fainting Spells presenting a new work, "September September." The season's lineup also includes appearances by Uri

Caine, Oliver Lake, Claudia Stevens and Ron Brown/Evidence. (See sidebar for complete season schedule.)

Margo Crutchfield, the museum's associate curator of modern and contemporary art, has overseen Fast/Forward since its inception. The program began during the construction of the museum's West Wing, when many galleries were temporarily closed. "We had a year between having new galleries and having no galleries," Crutchfield says. "During that time, we decided to move off the wall.... Expanding into the moving arts made a lot of sense because in 20th-century art, there's been a huge fertilization between all the disciplines, between dancing, painting, sculpture, for instance. All these different boundaries have been challenged, expanded, fused and broken into new forms.

"It makes all the sense in the world for a

museum to showcase the expanded horizon of contemporary art. It wasn't available anywhere in Virginia, and there are so many incredible artists doing incredible work, we felt the museum was in position to bring them to an audience here."

The Fast/Forward audience, which Crutchfield describes as "sophisticated," comes out in numbers sometimes surpassing a New York audience. "We've brought obscure New York musicians here who in New York may get 45 or 60 people to come, yet we can bring in 350 people," she says.

Local musician and composer Cory Blake says Fast/Forward is "the coolest thing in Richmond. "... It's one of the few places in town and elsewhere where you get to see where art's headed. It's the germination of new art, and we get to see the sprouts," he says.

*continued*

Identifying the art as "new" is far from the sole measure in choosing artists to participate in the series. Crutchfield is not a proponent of what she calls "the cult of the new." "Artistic excellence," she says, "is the first criteria. They're doing the very best work out there, challenging boundaries, doing things differently, doing the unexpected, reaching beyond. There's other criteria too, for instance, building on the past."

Because the work presented by Fast/Forward often rattles definitions, audiences sometimes struggle to enjoy or appreciate it, a reason why the museum regularly offers "Meet the Artist" sessions, an opportunity for artist and audience to converse.

Local dancer/choreographer John Bailey doesn't always agree with the artist's vision or execution of the work. He readily admits, however, to having "some of the most stimulating conversations" as a result. "Great art ... changes the face of art, but it takes a while for it to get to the public and become

reference for new work. Great thought happens in quiet places and sometimes in public...This series tests people's expectations and challenges them conceptually."

That's precisely the reaction Crutchfield hopes to elicit through Fast/Forward. "It's fascinating work, but it's not necessarily easy," she says. "It's rewarding because it makes you think. It makes you look at traditions differently and see in new ways.

Margaret Freund, co-owner of Richmond's Fulton Hill Studios, had that very reaction after seeing Kazuo Ohno, grandfather of Japan's *butoh*, during a Fast/Forward performance. "Kazuo Ohno changed my life in an indescribable and meditative way," she says. "[This series] is one of the top three reasons to live in Richmond, the river and the proximity to the mountains and ocean the other two." **S**