

John White – Performance – LAICA – May 25, 1975
By Pat Trimble

John White's humor was radiating through his relatively short performance at LAICA Sunday night, May 25, 1975. Dealing basically with formal issues in an informal style, he is primarily concerned with the way we perceive space and ourselves in that space. He also involves himself and the audience in the intricacies of sound and language.

The performance begins with the audience observing a solitary audio recorder hanging on the wall. White enters and stands looking at the recorder – first on one side, then the other, then in front of the recorder with his back to the audience. He starts the machine and the interaction begins. The recorder proceeds to give White instructions for personal location and situation. It's a reversal of artist and material role. The artist ordinarily molds the material into a work of art. Here the recorder acts as the artist programming or molding the material (in this case, White). There is no interplay of dialogue between white and the machine – only a simple process of ordering and assembling. The recorder instructs white to move ten paces back and face the audience contorting his facial expressions. White reacts obediently to the recorder's requests for antic gestures. The space separation has now been set up – recorder to performer/performer to viewer. At this point the recorder begins to relate a story of the extended space on which LAICA presently stands. He relates the story of a man struck by a billy club in this area in the past – giving us a situation almost similar to what Beuys would identify with counter space and counter time. The story then proceeds to bring us back to the prevailing structure and space in which we presently find ourselves – energizing through awareness various areas of the room down to an awareness of the personal space we the audience as individuals are occupying through acknowledgement of our own physical being at that moment in time.

As one becomes lulled into an extremely personal awareness, White makes a smooth transition into a sound sequence – using inherent and extrinsic sounds. He moves to the wall and draws a pair of glasses on it. He then smashes against the glasses a melon on which he has drawn a face. Then placing his head against the wall, with hands behind his head he moves slowly across the wall making sounds and repetitive flapping motions like a chicken. When he reaches the other end of the wall, he peers down a long postal tube. Both of these gestures seem to be defining the particular linear space.

He then places a sheet over his head with a rubber band around his neck. While emitting coughing, spitting and choking sounds, he makes various movements with his arms over his head. Next White brings forth an athletic support in which is hung an Idaho potato. He removes the potato with one hand, he pulls on his cheek repeatedly with the other causing a wet slapping sound and relates "John, if you keep playing with yourself, you might begin to look like a potato". He then puts down the potato and begins snapping his wrists over his head, then cracks his knees. The next sound is an extrinsic sound as he unsnaps the front of his shirt revealing an envelope taped to his chest. The sound of the tape tearing at the hair on his chest is the final part of the predominately sound section.

He opens the envelope, removes several cue cards, and moves to a blackboard on which he begins to draw random interpretations of the stories related to him on the cards, and related to us verbally by him. White's manner is relaxed and natural as

he recounts five or so stories forming the last section of the performance. While relating these stories, all of which individually deal with definite behavioristic patterns, a woman in a man's hat stands behind White peering over his shoulder and mimicking his gestures – the familiar sensation of feeling someone or something there but unable to find a cognizant reality.

The stories all seem to have a metaphoric overtone with a floor/wall relationship interwoven into them. One is "a note about commissioned work" in which he talks about his first commissioned painting created for an office space in which there was a very thick carpet (i.e. floor). Having completed the painting, which was unable to fit into the specified space, it was suggested by White that they trim the carpet at this particular section of the wall making room for the painting. However, at a later point in time, it was discovered by White that, in fact, the painting was cut off at the bottom – illustrating a classic expected/actual result theory. It deals with the way two individuals interpret one situation and behavior followed through individual personal comprehension and understanding of the situation.

Another story is about a wall mural done by White for a woman's home. A study was conducted by White of her small child's crawling (floor) movement patterns. Using these patterns for composition he creates a mural for the wall. At a later time, upon an accidental meeting with the woman, he discovers that the small child has "pissed" on the wall and there is a yellow stain in the middle of the mural. White returns to the home and with a small amount of calligraphy is able to incorporate it into the mural.

Another story tells us of a floor plan drawn up by White and later upon arriving at the home of the owner found it displayed on the floor. Here again we find the expected/wall and actual/floor reversal.

In all the stories he is also dealing with point-in-time correlation of expected/actual result. The raconteur interrupts himself long enough to make spit balls of several of the cue cards and shoots them into the audience with his suspender strap – again keeping the audience/performer space interacting – then returns to more stories.

The addition of the element of the girl in the hat who stands behind White throughout the stories, unfortunately, has not the conceptual clarity of the other sections. There is a slight correlation with the expected (i.e. feeling someone or something is there) and actual result (nothing), which acts as a supplementary and connecting agent. She also acts as an invisible tool by placing a boulder in the middle of the room over which White trips upon completion of the blackboard series. As he falls, he positions himself in front of the recorder which he starts and then leaves the room. The recorder relates a statistical report pertaining to "an inanimate object (that) can be given energy by an external force acting upon it". The viewer is left staring at the inanimate activated boulder – a finale structurally echoing the commencement of the performance.

Throughout the performance White plays with a progression of language (or interpretive communication) – first dealing with no sound (only gestures) from him, then indistinguishable sounds, and finally groups of words forming coherent patterns. However, the groups, seeming to have no obvious unity, become linguistically confusing – continually forcing his audience into alternative states of awareness. The understanding of these states of awareness comes out of his background in

therapy which he uses as material for a formal art structure – creating a nexus between art and behaviorism.