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Sound as Sculpture: Observations on John White's Performance Art

Uh . . .uh . . .uh . . . This utterance, which is strictly taboo in public speaking and performance, is, in all its awkwardness, crucial to one of several structural systems John White incorporates in an art performance. Although this sound normally interrupts the narrative flow reveal the speaker's forgetfulness and/or nervousness, making the audience ill at ease. White uses it paradoxically to create a solid bond between himself and his audience. The deceptive informality that the sound itself and the performance in general convey is in fact the result of White's ongoing commitment to a solid structural foundation, regardless of the medium.

White, who through his acquaintance with Joan Hugo at Otis Art Institute in the late sixties was exposed to the vanguard theories of Steve Paxton, Morris Peckham, Yvonne Rainer, Allan Kaprow and others, has always insisted on structure as a key element in his work. In his paintings, structure is itself content, and the works are not necessarily created for informational purposes. In his performance, however, structure becomes a complex multitude of systems, whose formalist bases extend into the expressive realm, with the emphasis shifting to communication and interaction with a second party, the audience. Whereas structure in his paintings is, by definition two-dimensional, in his performance it takes on the added dimensions of movement and time. In addition to movement and time, other key structural systems in his performance works are diagrams, narrative, architecture and sound.

The first and most obvious structural system is the diagrammatic, materialized in two forms: the performance outline written on a board before the performance begins and describing the sequence of events; and the tournament ladder, a structural bracket used in sports to record the process of elimination in competition, until only the victor remains. White uses this structure at the end of his performance to pull out key words from the conversation taped with the audience at the beginning of the performance. By process of elimination, he then reduces the key words down to one or two, which serve as the initial idea of the net performance.

Because White gears each performance to the specific space in which it is to be given, architecture is also a key structural system to his work. White performs in relatively intimate spaces, where greater contact between performer and audience is assured. Additionally, any architectural and / or spatial qualities unique to the actual room are frequently incorporated into the performance, as well as specific artifacts such as furniture, machinery, tools and so on.

Movement is closely allied to the architectural structure. It is specifically in this structural system that White utilizes choreographic definitions of space, not as virtuoso physical feats, but rather as easily recognizable and mundane free-form movement. White deliberately occupies as many different spatial sectors of a room as possible during the course of his performance, in order to define and arouse the audience's awareness of activated space.

Inherent in space activation through movement is a time structure, in White's work, a neatly packaged full-circle in which the beginning of the performance, a taped session with the audience, is replayed at the end, giving the performance a structure

similar to the songform of music. A more specialized aspect of time is timing, essential to music and dance, but in White's case more closely allied to the timing of the stand-up comedian, where delivery of the joke is at least as important as the joke itself. Here White indicates a preference for such comedians as George Carlin and Steve Martin, who through timing can make even bad material sound good.

Narrative provides yet another structure, in this case thematic. Despite the conversational candor in which sequence is frequently interrupted by parenthetical or unrelated discussions, the theme consistently surfaces. The narrative is of course a verbal structure, first written in outline form, then spoken either as a monologue or dialogue.

The spoken narrative is probably the most obvious aspect of the last major structure in White's performances: sound. Sound in White's performances has its roots in psychology rather in physics, and is closely interwoven with the other structures. No one structure predominates; rather they all interact – and the interaction provides each system with additional guises. Taking one such structure, that of sound, and defining its use in a typical White performance may perhaps give greater insight into the artist's success with audience interaction in his work.