

White, John, "Grinning in Space," *High Performance*, Volume 3, No. 3 and 4, (Fall/Winter 1980), pp. 110-111, illus.

One of the primary goals of this performance was to educate the audience to the process of performance. One of the ways I do that is through humor – what I've found to be the least threatening way of dealing with the audience's fear of not understanding. But my first concern was dealing with the space. I wanted the audience to trust me; and one way I do that is by being physically close. I chose to set up the space as kind of a classroom, a place to be educated. The performing wall, 20' x 50', was painted black, like an oversized blackboard. I stationed myself on a 2' white sculpture stand and began by greeting each person as they walked in. I would say "hi" and record their response, with chalk, on the black wall – a nod, a wink, a wave, whatever. Each time I do this piece I get an unexpected return. Once a person came in and gave me the finger and I recorded it. This part of the performance, the "high wall" (pun intended), acknowledges the audience, relaxes them, and lets them know their presence is important to me. It also functions as a way of integrating latecomers, because the audience anticipates each new response.

I then broke into some abstract dance movements that relate to common events that occurred within a few days of the performance. One was a telephone call, another was a car I saw drive over a child's balloon, another reference was to a neighbor's dog that loses control and pees because he's so excited when he sees us. After the dance movements, I step down from the sculpture stand and start playing with blocks of wood that are painted black. Eventually, the letters "U" and "H" on the blocks are revealed to the audience. With the two blocks in my hand, I explain the stories that relate to the dance movements, and these stories are frequently interrupted with my use of "uh..." The play here between my storytelling and the blocks, lets the audience know that I am aware of my speech patterns. At the same time, I make fun of myself but do it in a three-dimensional form.

I then led my way into a series of terrible jokes – the kind of sexist or racist jokes I hear at the golf course, on a bus, or in the market. The jokes were typed on cards and placed in sealed envelopes. I invited 3 members from the audience to read the jokes aloud while I wrapped a towel around my head. As the audience responded to the jokes, I responded with embarrassment from under the towel. The towel became a mask that protected me from facing the audience, and forced the audience to anticipate what my actual responses were.

As I unwrapped the towel from my head, I reached for a pole that I broke over my knee, creating two poles. This was a way of introducing another dumb joke – a Polish joke, about two Poles. I repeated the joke several times, not giving it a variation in the words themselves, but in my gestures. Finally, I made a diagram on the wall of the movement pattern of the joke. The joke didn't have much meaning in itself, but the two- and three-dimensional ways I told it became the important experience.

The next part of the performance was my homage to painting. The lights were turned out and a slide was projected on the black wall. The slide was barely visible, but the audience could still tell it was my 1955 high school graduation picture. I started painting the wall white, revealing the slide, as if painting it. A tape played of my wife and I discussing a letter I just received in the mail. The letter was an invitation to my 25th high school reunion. Sylvia goes on to talk about her experience with her 10th reunion. And, still on tape, I reminisce about experiences I had in high school. At this point, it's as if the audience is in our livingroom, eavesdropping on this conversation. As a recollection would come up about a particular person, I would take the white paint and paint out their face in the picture – making that image visually stand out. (One story, for example, was about Jacqueline Miller. She had given me the answers to a test and let me cheat off her paper, but when she turned in her test, she told the teacher. Consequently, I flunked the class.) As I completed painting the slide, the tape stopped, the lights went on, and the audience was left with a large meaningless white shape, painted on a black wall. I proceeded to make something out of that white shape, diagramming into it, literally taking an illusion and making it reality, then taking that reality and making it into something else. (Illusion/Abstraction)

The next part of the performance dealt with word associations. One prop I used for this is a bingo cage. I selected bingo numbers, popped them in my mouth, and, as if they had great significance, I wrote the numbers on the wall. Also noted were any word associations that came to mind. (For example, competition with the audience hearing my mental process. At the same time, I am keeping track of the uh's and personal observations.) (“Performer made a mistake,” “Performer getting anxious”) There is a whole wall of dialog that involves the audience in the process and goes on continually throughout the performance.

Ultimately, through a process of elimination, there would be two words left. In this case, “wet” and “book.” I write on the wall that “Wet/Book” is a future performance situation, thank the audience, the performance is over. As the audience applauds, I go back to the wall and record the number of claps. It's a soft way of ending a performance. As I stand there, still making comments, the audience slowly comes up and we fade into another kind of social event.