

Burnham, Linda, "John White, Second Stories," *Artforum*, (October, 1986) pp. 140-141, illus.

Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions

John White unveiled his latest adventure in screwball structuralism, *Second Stories*, 1986, by informing the audience that it was his last performance. The veteran performance artist, who has worked in both live and static art since 1969, presented a fascinating farewell piece, both wacky and poignant, that was perhaps designed to dovetail his stage work with his new real-life "job", that of harried and dedicated father. *Second Stories* parodied and skewered both roles.

White is well known in California for his quasi-logical word games and nutty choreography, solo performances in which he appeared to grab language and images out of the air and cobble them together into a coherent statement. *Second Stories* proceeded in such a way, loosely structured around the remodeling of a building in industrial downtown L.A. newly inhabited by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). That White's farewell coincided with the opening of LACE's new digs almost seemed to herald a new era for the local art scene, perhaps one in which performance art as it was known in the '70s will no longer have a home.

The piece included recognizable White devices like reductive word diagrams, painfully farfetched puns, and casual improvised remarks to the audience. At the outset he revealed his coming retirement as well as the presence on stage of a prop that ostensibly had no part in the piece: a wicker trunk holding items he had borrowed over the years from various performance artists, many of whom were in the audience. He called these people by name and notified them that their slides, books, etc., were in the trunk waiting to be picked up. He said he had known that three quarters of the audience would be acquaintances of his, and even though the place was packed, he was right. In this gesture he took his first jab at performance, painting it as an elite club of artists and their friends a milieu that cannot, perhaps, embrace a larger public. In dismantling the collection of souvenirs, he might have been dismantling L.A. performance art circa 1969-85. Performance was further trampled on by the 300-pound dancer Martin Kersels, whose mundane gestures comically juxtaposed with exaggerated movements elicited a sarcastic congratulatory critique from White. The genre was finally trivialized beyond repair with the entry of Gwendolyn Dean, who seemed to stand in for White's infant daughter Rachel. In his interactions with Dean, White put performance art on the level of a child's nursery game.

The significance of this farewell to performance art lies in the fact that White was one of the first of LA's performance artists to gain broader recognition, and he has instructed others in the discipline for years. Underneath his familiar nice-guy pose, White wore a sneer, belittling and infantilizing the art form as if to say his 17 years in the field were not only finished, but a waste of time, even an embarrassment. His reference to the limits of his intimate audience seemed to say that the time is past for putting effort into small performances understood by an elite few. The statement smacked a bit of sour grapes; like many "well-known" West Coast performance artists, he is approaching 50 and his rewards don't include riches or a tenured teaching position. His comic skill will be missed by his audience, but perhaps, as *Second Stories* seemed to say, 17 years of hard labor is enough.

From my perspective, White, as a practitioner of an art form increasingly geared toward show-bizzy effect, has made public the sentiments of a number of his peers, serious artists in a trendy world.