

White, John, "Second Stories," High Performance, April 25, 1986
Created by John White
Performed by Gwendolyn Dean, Martin Kersels and White
Music by Michael Monteleone
LACE, Los Angeles

Performances by John White and Eleanor Antin on consecutive nights at LACE offered the opportunity to examine shifts in direction by two respected artists who have chosen to devote a major portion of their careers to performance. Both White and Antin appeared to have grappled with the question of where to go with their work after all these years. Between them they have selected the two most common answers. Antin has chosen to hire a director, theatricalize her performance and (I assume) use the performance space to showcase her work for the potentially more rewarding venue of traditional theater. White, on the other hand, announced his "retirement," telling the audience that this was his last performance.

White's *Second Stories* was promoted as a celebration of LACE's new downtown facility. It began downstairs in the gallery portion of the space with a dual slide presentation showing images of the building under construction juxtaposed with scrawled first names of construction workers. White moved to his trademark format, the blackboard lecture, only here he used felt markers on a building panel. Heading the lecture with, "This is how my mind is working at this moment." White then drew out a set of tournament brackets, filling in the competing pairs with images gleaned from observing the audience, i.e., "belt," "belly button," "tap shoes," etc. He proceeded to play the words off each other, choosing his favorite in each pair until he was left with two words (obviously ringers): "2nd Stories," indicating not only the title of the piece, but the location of the remainder of the performance.

White opened the second part of the performance with his announcement that this was indeed his last, and used the opportunity to return a number of borrowed items to friends of his in the audience. ("I knew that three-quarters of the audience would be my friends.") He then used props to illustrate a series of atrocious puns on the movie "Out of Africa", ("Sidney's Pollack," "Robert's Red Ford," "Kenya dig it?") and, with his co-performers Gwendolyn Dean and Martin Kersels, launched into a half-hour of visual slapstick that had the audience roaring. White and Kersels ended up performing random construction operations on a piece of wood that lay across the top of a bed frame ("making the bed?" while Dean performed balletic maneuvers on top of the surface.

The thing that was most noticeable about the entire performance was its intimacy. Some of the humor would have been lost on anyone unfamiliar with LACE, the local art community and even White's recent fatherhood. It was an intimacy that was reminiscent of early performance art. The kind that critics loved to claim was produced by friends for friends. They were right. But as outsiders these critics had failed to see that when the artist knows his audience, he doesn't have to limit his reference to Ronald Reagan and television.

Perhaps that is why John White has announced his "retirement." Perhaps he lacks the desire to develop a more generic commentary for the masses to take advantage of performance art's greater public acceptance. Perhaps a Bogosianesque guest spot on *Miami Vice* is not what he perceives as a career direction. Whatever, after

seventeen years he has become historically important to the field and his audience will miss him.