

**ARTWEEK, March, 19, 1983**

**PERFORMANCE**

**TOLD ON THE COUCH**

**San Francisco / Janis Crystal Lipzin**

John White's *Couch Plus – A Performance Done Once in Los Angeles* offered a strong opening for Gold Coast – A Performance Festival at the San Francisco Art Institute, curated by Linda Frye Burnham. White's late-February performance celebrated the ways in which a veneer of everyday middle-class normalcy can be pierced by exceptional events.

Soon after arriving, the audience was admitted into the comfort and intimacy of what appeared to be White's living room, complete with couch and television (video monitor.) The audience was led past a wall bearing the graffiti: "People died, cried, lied, tried and sighed. I laughed, lost, played, loved, fought and thought, / Shower Lyrics, by an unknown." That wall in the Emanuel Walter Gallery functioned as the outside wall of a residence; next to it, the slide projection of a couch made it seem as if we were looking through a living-room window into the interior.

As White's "guests" followed him up the stairs to the small Atholl McBean Gallery (his living room), they were greeted by his folksy welcome on videotape: "Hi! How are you? Glad you could make it." White himself sat on the couch in silence as the audience settled themselves on the floor and available chairs in front of him. He seemed self-consciously calm and controlled, like a nervous host / performer, or perhaps like a person awaiting a doctor, dentist, or analyst.

As he sat on, stood by or lay on the couch, White talked to the audience. His first words were a list of famous persons recently deceased and the causes of their deaths, told as he slowly rotated a spotlighted log in his hands. Next he announced that he would tell three performance stories, the first of which he characterized as a "victory story." It was a car-crash story which we assumed was autobiographical – a humorous account of an after-performance celebration and some raspberry tarts which, after the accident, were misconstrued by a panicky paramedic as White's exposed "visceral." White recited a string of blundering acts that he later performed in the shock after this minor crash: he poured Shredded Wheat into the washing machine and cat food on his bananas; he wrote a letter to his mother and addressed it to hockey star Gordy Howe. Suddenly, during this story, he diverged inexplicably to make cheek music – rhythmically slapping his face with his mouth open. At some point in the story, it began to become apparent to the audience that cues for the order of his narratives were visible as a series of drawings and objects arranged on the wall behind the couch. Through much of the first story, a card reading "vis a vis" was held in front of his crotch.

The second story involved White and his wife's attempts to conceive a child. The level of humor in that account – about "mercenary" positions and tampons soaked in vodka- did not come up to that of the first story. The final story, which concerned a walk on the San Francisco municipal fishing pier, was sandwiched between two playings of a tape recorded song about the pier, a wino, the couch and a quarter. The first playing of the audiotape occurred before the audience had sufficient information to decipher its relevance to the performance. Then White's story put the song in context and gave it meaning, so that the second playing made more sense.

Through this sequence we became aware of the mental struggle involved in attempting to interpret information presented before its appropriate time. In solving the puzzle of the tape by its later repetition, White provided satisfaction for his audience and also demonstrated that there is no such thing as true repletion of events.

The quarter from the performance story number three led to the finale of the evening: White tossed the coin to determine which of two possible endings he would present. He then began to make a series of random-seeming marks on the wall, which gradually coalesced into the words *THE END*. When the audience still did not leave, he accommodated by presenting the alternate conclusion. Again he drew on the wall. Several sets of competition brackets, like the pairing sheets for athletic tournaments, were drawn side by side. In them he substituted single words for athletes' names. Thus one word eliminated another word and advanced toward the finals. This component, which has appeared periodically in White's work since as early as 1975, evidently stems from his personal interest in golf tournaments.

Through skillful management of audience rapport without sentimentality, White succeeded in creating an autobiographical format which was entertaining, accessible and, refreshingly, free of self-indulgence.