

Clothier, Peter, "John white: The Basics of Identity," volume 8, Number 20, Artweek, (May 4, 1977), p. 5, illus.

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John White's April performance at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art was a delight. The temptation for performers to become preachy or heavily confessional is apparently irresistible – and the opportunity for play (in both senses of the word) is too often forgotten. White's performance was playful throughout: the prefatory tape – played out before a largely unwatching audience – of spliced extracts from commercials, 1940's war pictures, thrillers and romances, established a context of social and commercial exploitation to which the "play" would offer us an alternative.

The whole initial movement of the piece was characterized by a deepening return to basics. The TV and its adjacent clock were covered with a dust sheet, and the performer ritually divested himself of all socially identifying possessions – money keys, papers, cards, etc. – into a glass jar, to allow himself to enter the space free unencumbered; and to start, as it were, from scratch: a cheerful and warming mutual massage session with his wife ("Ooh that feels good!"). This action was followed by a series of mimed rehearsals of simple acts: putting on a belt, a watch, a tie, accompanied by muttered, as though forgotten, lines, each rehearsal ending with the call for a cue: "Lines, please!" Each object was then identified in an inventory of personal history. Identity was unproblematically asserted in terms of simple evidence (belt, watch, tie). A watch, first purchased in 1948, first owned by Uncle Bob White, and so on. Regressing still further into the basics of identity, the performer now placed a towel over his head and sought out, with probing fingers, each aspect of his physiognomy, identifying each with words, in a hilarious parody of primitive incantation: "Eee-eyee, n-n-nooose, eyenose, lip, cheelip, cheelip, cheee-eek." Parody or not, the incantation had the effect of achieving a final release, for audience and performer, from the strictures of modern socio-psychological definitions of human identity. An arena had been created for free play.

The game from this point on was essentially an inter-play between language and action, all of it working towards a specific point of resolution in the words: "end the." Two stories followed – the first, a macabre account of a worker losing a finger to a cutting-saw, continuing the chant motif but modifying it on the model of the liturgical incantation of the gospel in church; the second a parody of the archetypal Western: "Big John is coming to town." The linguistic reduction of each of the stories was a chart, accounting for syntactical rearrangements of the sentence: "I tell bad stories" – a chart foreshadowing the more complex score card which was to end the piece.

Slides were presented next, pictures of a TV set, "data" files, projected aslant on the wall. With the nonchalance of a poster-sticker, cheerfully expressively, White slowly blacked out the whole area of the slide, whistling the while, leaving until last the word "data" (in a sly poke at leaving finally, on the wall, after the projector was switched off and the gallery lights on, a black image which was clearly (and surely ironically) a "painting" – shortly to be converted into a blackboard).

The real TV set was then unveiled, the locus for the next game – or, rather, the next phase of the same game: "One cassette family works it out." Dividing the screen into halves labeled "him" and "her," White dodged around the moving figures to outline a him and a her with a black marker on the surface of the screen, to the accompaniment of a sound tape recording a good-natured family dispute over the

definition of "this Sunday" and "next Sunday," keeping score of points for "him" and points for "here" with the marker. Key words were then recorded on a competition score card on the blackboard (the erstwhile painting), and reduced by elimination to the two winning words, "end" and "the," the conclusion of the performance.

What is omitted from such an account, of course, is White's impeccable sense of timing, his brilliance as a comedian and parodist, the correspondence between body and face action and language. What the performance enacted was but one example of the limitless possibilities of the free play of an imaginative mind. Too often, the drudgery of commercialized existence seduces us into accepting the dreary limitations of a habitual and unchanging identity in the social context. White reminds us that nothing least of all "art," is worthy of this kind of demand; and that, in all its senses. "the play's the thing."