

Nequette, Anne, "John White: Grinning in Space," Volume 3, Nos 3 and 4, (Fall/Winter 1980), High Performance, pp. 138-140.

There are as many types of art performances as there are performance artists. I am fascinated and intrigued by the manner in which an artist can stand bare (sometimes literally) before his or her audience and express certain exacting feelings, thoughts, fears or joys. It intrigues me that expressionistic art, as a form, could have come to a point that it is no longer necessary or absolutely preferable to create an art object that stands between the artist and viewer. Acknowledging the limits of expression through the creation of art objects, artists and their audiences have begun to express and experience something else; art expression without art objects, performance.

I go to art performances because I enjoy them. I enjoy the didactic, visual, emotive and experiential stimulation of any live/art event. What makes performances so appealing is that they are usually replete with information, visual activity, and deeply personal expressions of experiences from the artist's memory. The facets common to most art performances are similar to those of art objects, and can be observed in the same manner. Structure in performance directly corresponds to composition in painting; it is the larger shape of the work. Similarly, a central theme is as evident in performance as it is in object-art, and the use of motions, light, sound and props in performance again correspond to the use of the elements of form, shape, mass, line, color and texture in art objects. In art objects these qualities result in a total effect or texture though it is rarely called that so as not to be confused with tactile surface quality, but I performance, texture is a most appropriate description for the multi-layering of the audio-visual elements. Time is the one element that escapes in a discussion of art objects to become a primary factor in art performance. What separates expressive object-art from expressive performance art is time. Performance is art that progresses in time. In contrast, art objects exist in a continuum, physically manifest (so far as we know) in the same condition for a longer period of time. Performances happen, are experienced by an audience or documented and so remain in a changed and fragmented form in human experience and record. But no matter how accurate and complete the documentation, it is not the art.

All of these qualities – structure, texture and temporality – come to mind in re-evaluating and reviewing John White's most recent performance, "Grinning in Space," (LACE, May 18) Due to the enigmatic and temporal nature of performance, I have seen this piece but once and was unable at any time to stop the action in order to scrutinize more closely a particular action or an expressive implication. As in real life, where there are not instant replays or built-in cameras, evanescence is in a large part what is intriguing about performance. I am saying this to help to explain why I choose to discuss or describe certain parts of "Grinning" and yet ignore others. Why is it that, beyond an obvious character and structure, only particular memories remain?

"Grinning in Space" is a very funny performance. The general character or temper of the performance is one of emotions common to all, of acceptance or contentment oftentimes transmitted through humor and, in turn, I association with visual symbols or images. The humorous situations or predicaments portrayed are familiar, whether they are absurdly incongruous or ludicrous, personal or social. But there are some other moments in the performance that are not funny, but touching. (Not that experiences which are funny cannot also be touching. They usually are given even

the smallest amount of empathy.) These moments are quite, simple and beautiful expressions of one man's love that, though it starts with his wife and friends, has the tendency to spill over with ease to anyone in his vicinity. Sandwiched in the middle of his treatise on humor, John White supplies us with one on love. The result is an underscoring of the more tender and conscious side of humor as opposed to its darker, more harmful side.

The opening sequence in "Grinning" is a mimed acknowledgment of the audience's arrival, in small groups or individually, as well as an acknowledgment of the mental and emotional state of the performer. White stands on a painted white plywood cube (2' x 2') against the enormous backdrop of a matte black wall. He is wearing tan trousers and a red checked shirt. As the audience files in and observes the performer thus, there are signals, smiles, and hand-waves from performer to observer and vice versa, and finally the record of that silent communication. With white chalk on the black wall, White records the actions and registers the number of times they occur in this fashion: "Wave XII," "Nod II," or "Smile XXIII." At the same time he acknowledges his own feelings with statements scribbled about like, "Performer getting nervous II." There are a few giggles and a feeling of ease starts to settle in the audience. In a subtle transition he put the chalk down somewhere and begins a few moments of bizarre behavior. He starts by scanning the sky and ducking in comic yet frightful motions. Then suddenly he pats and smooths his right thigh. This movement is soon replaced by the action of removing a blue 3 x 5 card from his left breast pocket and replacing it in his right, the whole time surveying the sky for the invisible entity that had him ducking earlier. And sure enough, it reappears. But then White does something that is totally unexplainable and wholly hilarious. With restrained excitement he begins to giggle and make the kinds of sounds that adults make when trying not to laugh at a child who does something that is wrong, but at the same time funny. At this point, the picture of a grown man giggling, acting foolishly and apparently having a very good time is the cue for the audience that it is correct to laugh; that White's behavior is supposed to be funny. These actions continue for several moments interwoven in no apparent order, with the suppressed giggles becoming more and more prominent. Eventually and subtly another shift in mood occurs as White steps down from the plywood cube and addresses his audience with an introduction and explanation of his bizarre behavior. The note of command and informality established in the mime prelude is extended here verbally in tale and punchline form. The anecdotes are as good as the actions. "Flat Flowerpot" is a title that I use to remember White's explanation of the repeated shifting of the blue 3x5 card from one pocket to the other, a visual metaphor of the following event:

"Two sisters live across the street from the performer in separate houses which sit side by side. They share a blue convertible Fiat. One day one sister drives the car. Next day the other sister drives it. One day the sister on the right buys a new Honda car. Sometime soon thereafter, the sister on the left buys a BMW. And the blue Fiat is turned in to a planter."

So ends the first half of the first of three parts. The second half includes "Public Service Jokes" and the killing of a joke that is no longer appropriate for performance. Public service jokes – those which are particularly inane or dumb – are read by volunteers in the audience at White's cue. By way of introduction and preparation he completely covers his face with a towel, attempts a posture that is erect and poised, and announces that he thinks that he can "face it now." I find this need to

acknowledge the existence of dumb humor an enjoyable "public service." Part one ends as quietly as it began.

The tone of the second section is more intimate and revealing than that of the first section. Although the subject (whether or not the one should go to one's high school reunion) is one rife with humorous possibilities, there are some extremely touching and delicate moments in the taped conversation between husband and wife. A reflection on, and study of, an individual's deep-seated emotions toward his unique position as an artist in society is prompted by this societal ritual: the reunion. White's audio/visual assemblage includes his shock at the number of years gone by, a monologue of memories, reassurance and laughter, and at one point, a painful experience remembered with much hilarity. In the now-blackened room, the audience sits quietly and listened attentively to the taped conversation, and contemplates sides of White's old classmates projected life-size on a bare section of the black wall. (Slides projected on a black wall are readable but faint. The tonality is dark because the normal lighter range is eliminated.)

This familiar "yearbook" image returns us to high school days, to past youth. It makes us look at ourselves and how we have weathered time, and in a subtle and instantaneous moment, recalls our own mortality. White, very carefully, with white paint and brush, applies paint to the area where his own image is projected on the black wall. It is a most startling and beautiful visual effect. The projected image remains grey whereas the painted part is so purely illuminated that it suggests other worldly perfection, free from things like fear, doubt, and criticism. The slides and images change twice more and the white-painted area is enlarged to compensate for the boundaries of new images. The second image is a class of girls, with one of them singled out – lovingly, yet painfully remembered with humor – a certain bright student named Jackie M. It seems that Jackie M. was a sure bet to pass the college entrance exam, and surprisingly kind enough to let White her answers over one shoulder. Upon concluding her own exam, and to white's surprise, she walked straight to the front of the class and informed the examiner of his mendacious behavior. But the combination of the third and final image (a current full-figure portrait of John and Sylvia white a la the notorious prom pose) and the care and ease with which the artist lovingly "paints" and illuminates the image, just about brings the house down. Almost abruptly, the classical background music stops, the lights flick on, and the beautiful image turns into a unsightly white area on the black wall. Though this transition seems a little shocking, it serves to give the final section a certain punch. Again, as in the first section, white chats with his audience, explaining and introducing the forthcoming elements. A new movement, under consideration for the "Grinning" repertoire, is taken through a test run. The performer silently acknowledges a mistake by going over to the chalk board wall and tallying, "Mistake I." Slowly at first, White begins to consider the chalk board, and to reconstruct the moments of the performance to this point in an improvised diagram. The particular beauty of this section is that it is a fast-action, free-form word association that is verbalized and drawn by the performer so that the audience can follow the associations. The diagram is arranged in a hierarchy with the "winner" of the associations coming out on top. At the same time one realizes that the sequence and outcome of the word/thought/symbol diagram must be different for each time the performance is given. Though there are a few moments yet to go in the performance, there is a sense at this point that it is complete. White's stated preference in this performance is for a "soft ending." So although "Grinning" could have ended with the completion of the diagram, it did not because the fast action created tension and White probably wanted to give his audience a chance to relax

and the opportunity to applaud the performer (which they heartily did). Then White turned himself over to the audience, destroying the division between audience and performer.

To the extent that performance tends to be an autobiographical medium (the performer's experience as subject), rarely is the subject totally personal, rather it is presented in relation to its social myths (Joan Jonas, Stephen Seemayer) or study the relationships of society and religion to the individual (Joseph Beuys). Sometimes the questions raised are of our common social disorders (Chris Burden). And finally, there are those who use humor either to express their distress toward, or an appreciation for, the absurd or idiotic situations and human actions that are an inexorable part of the human experience (Eleanor Antin, John White). Performance artists have a habit of turning the mirror on us and asking, "What do you see?" If we are fortunate, we will observe our situation and find ourselves "Grinning in Space."