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COUCH PLUS, a Performance by John White
By Sydney Hayes

John White utilizes humor in performances. His personal, comfortable, autobiographical style tends to draw the audience in immediately, to get them on his side. This is not coincidence. By the end of the performance, one is left with the pleasant effect of having experienced something funny. Yet, during the performance the viewer gets the overwhelming feeling of being an integral part of some mysterious scheme that will unfold. White works hard to choreograph the sequence of events in order to put the audience at ease.

In his most recent performance COUCH PLUS at Espace DBD, the audience initially enters an anteroom where they are met with the projected image of a couch. Also, the words, 'People died, cried, liked, tried and sighed; I laughed, lost, played, loved, fought and thought,' scrawled on the wall and signed 'Shower Lyrics, by an unknown.' Upon entering the main room people are welcomed by White, not in person, but on videotape which is set at eye level. "hi ya, hi ya, how are you, hi, glad you could make it, hi, oh hi ya, long time no see . . ." The performance space is arranged with props that serve as a sort of visual script for the audience to follow along. There is an elegance to the arrangement, with attention to detail and visual impact. An ominous abstract shape, large and black, leans against the wall. A string delicately tied to the wall meets a small plant on an adjoining wall. The "hi" jacket that White wears in the videotape is hanging on the wall, "high" above him. It resembles the shape of an airplane – the words "high, higher" are scrawled next to it. To his left and right are various props that White alludes to during the performance. It is the viewer's responsibility to unravel the significance of the props. It becomes a puzzle, some aspects more obvious than others. For example, as White relates a story of a car accident and its after-effects, he mentions a period when he was suffering from disorientation. He had taken a box of cereal from the cupboard, and poured it into the laundry. On the wall was White's altered version (painted black with Xerox image) of a box of Nabisco Shredded Wheat. Slightly more obscure, might be the allusion to a carrot dangling on the wall. Aside from the subtle interference of it representing the relationship he is trying to set up with the audience, the carrot is a significant symbol of the cruel joke that was told to him about Reagan's press secretary, Brady, becoming a vegetable.

This performance represents a major stylistic departure for White who had been performing publicly since 1969. Although one of his primary concerns has always been his relationship to the audience, never has it been so essential. This entire performance basically revolves around White talking to us from a couch. He leaves the couch only once to place keys on the wall all the while telling a story about misplacing his keys (a three dimensionalized version of his story, if you will.) One can only presume that it is difficult to hold the attention of an audience for an hour while reminiscing and telling bad jokes. But what White does is far more complex. He manipulates the audience by creating situations of great tension which alternately draw us in, and then release us with the laughter from a corny joke. White loves bad jokes – not the kind that will give you a good guffaw, but rather the ones where you grin and groan. This performance was no exception, the evening was filled with them. They serve an important function. If the jokes were too good, one might mistake the evening for a relaxing interlude with a comedian. White wants the audience to work, to discover levels of meaning as he visualizes a joke – three dimensionalizes the experience. As he retells a joke he heard from a critic in New

York, he casually pulls an orange and an apple out of a bag. Soon we discover each fruit has been labeled L.A. and N.Y. respectively. Later, these props feed into another joke and so on.

By far, the most moving part of the performance was the beginning. We see White on the couch holding a log on his lap. The room is dimly lit with a spotlight on the log. As he slowly rolls it, he mentions names, first names only at first. Then, he calls last names only (log roll/roll call.) At some point before he finishes, each person has made the connection that all these people are dead. Superficially, and perhaps coincidentally, another play on words, another play on words "wood" and "Natalie Wood." But more meaningful is the relationship of the wood log to life, representing a symbol of age and aging. Throughout the performance White expresses concern over his own aging. He describes himself as "pushing 50," and questions the dignity of what he is doing. Perhaps this is an acknowledgement of the new wave younger performance artists, or simply a statement about the statement itself, and how it has changed in the last 10 years.