

LINKING DREAM STRUCTURES AND IMAGES

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The structure of Guy De Cointet's performance at LAICA resembles a work he performed at Cirrus earlier this year. In the LAICA piece a young woman narrates a bizarre tale which corresponds with an object composed of abstract symbols. John White's performance, also at LAICA, unfolds in rambling, loose format which seemed to characterize an earlier piece by White I saw in early 1973 at Cal Arts. There are some rather striking differences between Cointet's and White's pieces, and the attitudes toward performing embodied by each. In this review I want to talk about these differences and, more importantly, the similarities which lie beneath the apparent surface dissimilarity. Ideally, and because of my desire for symmetry, difference is reconciled on a conceptual level to correspond with the actual resonances between the performances themselves.

In Guy De Cointet's performance a lithe woman recounts a fantastic adventure which goes something like this: The narrator's dying father bequeathes a booklike object, his "diary," to her. He dies and war erupts. The narrator's fiancée hastens off to battle, leaving her alone with the book. Escaping to the street amid exploding buildings, our heroine is forced into the crush of evacuees fleeing out of the city. After an all-night march, the rabble arrives in the threatening countryside. Miraculously, at daybreak, the war ends. Troops disperse, and the narrator is reunited with her lover. The tumultuous and contracted force of events imprints itself into the pages of the book, and the entire performance revolves around this farcical telling and showing. A burning timber singes one page; bloodstains mar, but improve, a drawing on another. Enemy bullets complement a design. The construction of plot is much like connecting numbered dots to arrive at a pattern; here the pattern is in time — and continuously providing explanations for the localized appearance on each page. The implausible glosses move the narrator from one page to the next. The book is seemingly acted upon by the same figurative events that propel the frantic narrative.

What is most obvious about Cointet's performance at LAICA, as well as with other performances by the artist, is its theatricality. The story is, first of all, absurdly far-fetched. (But in light of recent events in Asia, the theme of war and evacuation isn't unprepared for. And as seen in White's first section on a demonstration and police riot, the image of war is intended.) And then the story is played out in the exaggerated style one associates with acting. In the use of theatrical supports Cointet's entire *mise en scene* offers a significant alternative to much performance work by artists. Interestingly he reintroduces these techniques which performers overtly avoid; this appears to cloud the issue of artist's performance vs. theatrical performance. Cointet's use of technique accomplishes a different end than in theater, but the difference between one and the other is slight. Somehow this is art and not theater, and I suspect a possible explanation might be found in the self-reference of the performance. Where most theater operates as allegory, Cointet's theater, and performance

art in general, deflects obvious meaning and consequently entertainment in favor of a more intransitive experience.

John White's performance goes something like this: A tape recorder instructs White to stand before the audience during a description of a demonstration and its subsequent disruption by police, which took place near the LAICA site. This is followed by a description of the physical sensations of boredom, during which White appears to nod off and fall asleep. The tape recorder then shuts off, and White begins a series of actions and subsequent diagrams which relate to eyeglasses; melon heads; headlessness, a bird



GUY DE COINETET: Performance at LAICA, May 1975. Photo: J.D. Lawrence.

with no head; a sheeted, ghostlike costume. Following this disjointed series of skits, White seems to lose his place. Yet he retrieves a set of instructions elaborately taped to his chest, and this paper guides him throughout the remainder of the piece. Moving to a blackboard, White reminisces on childhood experiences, and early experiences with the sale of his works and their unconscious alteration by owners, and lastly he offers a rumination on his feelings about winos. Throughout this last section, White is shadowed by a woman in a hat, recognizable as the performer of Cointet's piece. She stealthfully enters with a boulder (I missed this; the audience obscured her placement of the rock). After the wino sequence, she silently exits — White never notices her — leaving the inevitable collision between boulder and performer. White stumbles out, and a taped "moral" on boulders concludes. After the initial taped instructions — how to stand, how to look, what to think about (the demonstration against the war) — the performance collapses around White's falling asleep following the discourse on boredom. It didn't occur to me *then*, but now it seems that the rest of the piece could be interpreted as John White's

dream. He didn't *really* wake up — it was all a dream — bracketed on either end by taped commands and morals. As explanations go, this one is plausible, but it doesn't satisfy. Explanations never do. And for that matter, dreams can't be explained satisfactorily either; we experience them and they haunt in memory. Equating the performance with dream structures, however, fails to elucidate the events. White could be seen as one-who-dreams-during-parts-of-the-performance, and such a model, on certain levels, is appropriate.

Continuing the dream image or motif, Cointet's and White's performances manifest oblique attitudes which intersect in the area of unconscious structuring. Borrowing from the French philosopher Jacques Lacan, performance is structured like the unconscious, and performance is the unconscious. This assertion is a gigantic one, and I can't begin to offer anything concrete about it except for some surface thoughts. Both Cointet and White are, I think, using, very consciously (whatever *that* means; it's impossible not to structure something, are engaged in, an exploration of the fabric of narrative, of intentions and of structures. Cointet's story and plot reinforce each other and turn inward on themselves in self-referencing, becoming intransitive beyond the completely opaque symbols, or signifiers, at hand. In a peculiar form of short circuiting, the force which connects the nodes of the story (in continuity and explanation) is the displaced intention which originally set out the dispersion of events in the first place. Control is absolute. White, on the other hand, barely manages to remember his purpose. He forgets what he's doing; he falls asleep for a second. He follows instructions. He meanders, programmed, slowly, aimlessly, the apparent Tyrone Slothrop of performance. And you might be left with this feeling as a lasting one if it were not for the backwards-reaching concluding tape section where ineptitude and clumsiness are incorporated as *part of the plot*. And this intention, in both performances, visibly apparent or working just below the surface, approximates the diminishing lines of sight which converge in the act of performing. □