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This is the first draft of a piece by Noel Carroll, written for Artforum and rejected because of its length.

Though a member of the Grand Union, David Gordon's work, apart from that group effort, is quite distinct. The structures of his independent pieces are strictly delimited in terms of their range of movements and actions in a way that situates their development in an intensive play of elements in contrast to the expansive, accumulative process of a Grand Union concert. Still, between Gordon alone, and the Grand Union as a whole, there persists a recognizable intersection of attributes including not only a predisposition to formalism but also a proclivity for humor, based on puns and absurdities, and a kind of urbanity, based on a self-reflective, self-effacing ambivalence about performance. Though most of Gordon's body is squarely in the artworld, he has at least a toe outside it, supplying a constant pivot for parody.

Gordon's new work, presented at the Paula Cooper Gallery, relies heavily on maintaining an even balance between rigorous, even at times austere, formalism and humor.

The first piece, "Chair," begins as Gordon and Valda Setterfield stand motionless in a pair of boxes marked off with tape in the foreground of the performance space. About fifteen feet behind them, there are two blue folding chairs. "Stars and Stripes Forever" is being played on a tape recorder. Perhaps this particular piece of Americana alerts one to the high-school sweat-shirts Gordon and Setterfield wear as well as to the gymnasium-like floor of the gallery, though, at the same time, two more improbable looking jocks would be hard to imagine.

When the music ends, both dancers drop to the floor, turning clockwise on their rumps, crossing one leg over the other, to swing themselves around. Two turns and they stand up. The tape recorder takes over again. This time Gordon is speaking; he recites an autobiographical monologue about events starting about a month or so prior to the performance. At first one notes how this monologue is laced with color references, colors in fact echoed by items used in the performance like green (sweat-shirts) and blue (chairs). Initially, one's glance follows one's ear until one suddenly realizes that he has been gulled into reading into the monologue a glimmer of the creative genesis of the piece. The rug is pulled from beneath the would-be esthete as



the monologue tears off into a cascading enumeration of colors through direct reference and puns ("I was covered with black and blue marks;" "My account was in the red."). Gordon begins to add emphasis to his pronunciation of color words so that the narrative recedes almost entirely in favor of a compulsive inventorying of color references and puns.

The correlation of punning and obsession is a constant in Gordon. In "Spilled Milk" (summer, 74), for instance, Gordon continuously raises and lowers his arms at the elbow joint, periodically re-orienting his body until he has faced every facet of the performance area. As this movement ritual transpires, a tape recorder, hanging from Gordon's belt, runs through an extended gamut of sentences employing the word "work" in virtually every sense it can have in the English language.

At the end of the color tape, the dancers drop to the floor again, turn and stand. Another taped monologue begins. If the first monologue starts by poking fun at genetic art criticism, the second picks up the satire by way of a parody of the various Cage-influenced procedures for generating choreographic structures from chance elements. Gordon explains how the dance we are about to see was determined according to a grid chalked on the floor outside the door of his apartment. He enumerates how each scuff mark on the grid fell into a category that is tied to a movement in the dance. Scuff marks were evaluated not only in terms of how they were made (e.g. by skipping) but also by who made them (e.g. a resident or a visitor). The system becomes more and more complex as it obsessively attempts to pick out every kind of qualitative distinction that could be made of a mark on the grid. One such differentia, however, is somewhat difficult to capture, namely that one caused by the janitor the day he washed the hallway floor.

Again the dancers drop and turn. But instead of standing still through another tape, they walk to the back of the performance space to the blue folding chairs. They sit on the chairs, fall off the chairs, walk on them, jump on them, jump with them. They put their right legs through the space in the back of the chair and walk with it. They sit on the very edge of the chair-back and tip over backwards, folding the chair in their descent. Like a silent comedian dueling with a recalcitrant deck-chair or Murphey bed, the basis of pleasure here involves not only novel (and for that reason) ridiculous postures but also the



exploration of a multitude of generally ignored aspects of such an everyday object as a folding chair.

For instance, given our utilitarian attitude towards folding chairs who ever bothers to notice the size of the space between the seat and the back-rest. In this dance, however, it plays an important part in a basic contrastive relation, namely in the contrast between the bodies of Gordon and Setterfield. Gordon is a powerfully built man with broad shoulders. It is quite a tight fit for him to slip the chair over his head and lower it along his torso whereas Setterfield, having a much smaller frame, achieves the task with ease. Or again, Gordon and Setterfield crawl along the floor, holding the chairs steady on their backs by fitting their rumps in the space between the back-rest and seat. This is a hard task for Gordon whose narrow hips and small behind don't quite fill in the space. His chair wobbles while Setterfield's is more secure. In these cases, the chair can be used to measure the bodies while simultaneously the bodies measure the chair, thus mobilizing, in the audience, the most basic of aesthetic attitudes, viz. noticing.

This section of dance can be called formalist in both senses of that term. On the one hand, it has a strict structure: there is a temporal lag between the two performers such that Setterfield is usually a phrase or so ahead of Gordon. This structure is rigorous but also functional in that it promotes contrast.

"Chair" is also formalist in the more ideological sense of the term. That is, it is aimed at displaying new movements that stand in radical distinction to habitual movement in both dance and society. Habit is challenged by an exploration of the chair in terms of alternate ways, say, of folding it or of connecting it with the body.

After one round of dance without music, Gordon and Setterfield begin to hum "Stars and Stripes." They return to the chairs but the humming adds an important contrastive element to this second sequence of phrasing because we can use the humming as evidence of the degree of exertion this play with chairs involves.

The first time around, the breathing of the performers was covered by the incessant clanging and banging of the metal chairs. One attended primarily to the amazing dexterity of the performers with their materials which evoked, in the audience, the kind of vicarious fascination



one has for the facility of athletes who "as one of us" exemplifies extended abilities of the body. Humming over the same dance phrases changes our focus, making straining, exertion and "catching one's breath" more perceptible, and thus grounding this second sequence as a repetition with telling variation that intensifies the range of contrasts the structure already affords. By the time the dancers have finished, they are sweating and dirty. They return to their first position in the dance and the tape of "Stars and Stripes" starts up again. When it finishes, so does the dance.

Gordon's second new work, "One Act Play," is almost exclusively concerned with language. The first section, "The Lecture," is basically that. Gordon's taped voice begins to instruct us on the transformations we must perform to get from certain words to other words. For instance, "To get from 'art' to 'smart' add 's' and 'm' to 'art.'" Or, "To get from 'dance' to 'motion' get rid of everything in 'dance' except 'n' and add 'motio'." Gordon's transformational rules are almost always puns of one sort or another. One suspects that Gordon's unrelenting commitment to the pun as a major aesthetic mode has primarily to do with the way in which it participates in a general program of subverting the normal way we 'take things', including objects, words and movements.

"The Meeting" follows "The Lecture." This section is an inspired playlet. Gordon and Setterfield walk into the performance space and stand close to each other. Their backs are to the audience. In close sequence, they both say "Hi." Then they turn towards the audience and sequentially utter a softer "Hi." What is depicted is a meeting between two people. In sequence, Gordon and Setterfield both represent the first speaker when their backs are turned and then both represent the second speaker when they face us. Since both depict the same character in a given exchange of dialogue a rich and subtle contrastive system is set in motion. The same character says the same word or phrase twice, first through Gordon and then through Setterfield. In Gordon's version the manner of standing, intonation and glance may communicate discomfort, evasiveness or diffidence. Setterfield with the same line may suggest pride, dignity or straightforwardness.



The discrepancies between the alternate interpretations of the same character direct close attention to every variation in posture and expression between Gordon and Setterfield, and thus display the wide range of variables and contextual information that determine the significance of an utterance. Not only is the polysemic quality of utterances a constantly interesting source of attention for the audience, but it also connects with Gordon's pre-occupation with the pun which is, after all, another version of the same point, namely that the meaning of an utterance depends on its use.

In addition to the fact that the same character is depicted in two styles through different personalities and different sexes, the contrastive format of the playlet is accentuated in virtue of the radical difference between the two characters. One is boisterous and empty-headed; the other is somewhat introverted. The contrastive array becomes quite variegated when one character repeats an assertion of the other as a question thus giving the audience one phrase four ways in order to ponder its vicissitudes.

With each exchange of dialogue, Gordon and Setterfield take a lateral pace across the performance space. The dialogue itself has a perspicuous dramatic structure as the introverted character gradually reveals to the boisterous one that he (the introvert) has been avoiding the other because the other is a phony. This process of dramatic revelation coincides with the movement of Gordon and Setterfield from one end of the performance area to the other. The conclusion of the discussion correlates with the movement across the room. Thus, the last line of the playlet has an added dimension of finality for being correlated with a purely formal process that terminates at the same point. The playlet ends on an arresting note which is even somewhat disturbing since we, the audience, occupy the same orientation as the empty-headed character, and since it is to us that it appears the last "good-bye" is addressed.

"The Confession" is the last part of "One Act Play." It is perhaps the least satisfying element of Gordon's new work. Both performers stand in profile to the audience. Only Setterfield speaks; Gordon stands facing her, periodically nodding. Most of what Setterfield says



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has to do with everyday life in the West Village, its landscape and its problems. However, Setterfield speaks only a word or a part of a word at a time. All elisions are dropped, and a pause is wedged between words and parts of words. As well Setterfield's intonation is monotone. Between the pauses and the tone, one works to comprehend what is being said. The medium of ordinary speech has been somewhat dislocated in such a way that the interference is alienating to the extent that the narrative is constantly interrupted by the format of expression.

Setterfield's story is rambling and discursive with many unconnected threads. At one point she starts talking about a man struggling with a heavy suitcase. She leaves this to talk about going up to a subway cashier with a twenty dollar bill that she knows he won't accept. At the moment the subway cashier refuses the bill, she sees the man with the suitcase. The suitcase breaks open and both Setterfield and the man, as a result of their separate frustrations, utter "shit!" The story ends on the single word "shit!" which has two alternate applications, one for each of the characters in the tale, thus creating a double meaning which is not a pun.

One can see that "The Confession" corresponds to other elements in "One Act Play" both in terms of the way it draws attention to language and to the ambiguity of language. Yet at the same time one has the sense that "The Confession" does not support the same variety of experience afforded by a segment like "The Lecture." It is somewhat unfortunate that "The Confession" ended this evening of Gordon's new work insofar as it introduced a rare note of tediousness into the work of one of the most intelligent, witty and consistently interesting contemporary performers.