

CONCEPTS IN PERFORMANCE

Robert Whitman: Week 4

MARK SAVITT

Robert Whitman
Nighttime Sky
 589 Washington Street

I've often wondered what it could seem like inside of Kenneth Anger's *Pleasure Dome*. The translucent white-sheeted environment in which Whitman's *Nighttime Sky* takes place provides one possibility. Like Anger's magical film it shares the wish to create an artificial paradise for the viewer.

For the Whitman event, the seating is somewhat like at a planetarium. We look up and around at the sides of the tent-like structure, feeling that any moment a projection is likely to occur. The white muslin-covered projection box in the center prohibits us from seeing audience members directly across, but we do get quite a sense of the presence. Unlike last week for *American Moon*, the spectator community is not compartmentalized.

This time it is the performers who are put into sections. Scooped out of the tent high above us are four little alcoves which at various points in the evening will light up for vignettes.

The captain at his clear plastic control board of blue, painted dials is the first to appear. He completes, coming after a recording of body-swaying Caribbean music, steam whistles, and partying sounds, our sense of being on a voyage. The captain really does very little. He spends most of his time doing nothing more than sitting in a white chair while wearing a yellow rain slicker. He's there as a token presence guaranteeing us a safe passage. Although, at moments, when the women in another compartment, wearing a black raincoat, lies prone on a sled and propels herself across the alcove, I do fear for shipwreck.

If in Anger's film the mythical personages rarely enter the same frame but allude to a larger shared synthetic space by direction of glance, Whitman's figures exist absolutely separate and oblivious of each other. Like pieces in a little child's puzzle they are plugged right into their holes and you wouldn't think of exchanging the slots. They are constellations related only by being in the same sky.

In another alcove a woman listens attentively to a radio playing sounds reminiscent of rain. Whitman keeps us feeling safely inside, sheltered from the storm beyond. Industrial films showing the steelmaking process with fiery furnaces and glowing ingots provide energy to keep the voyage going.

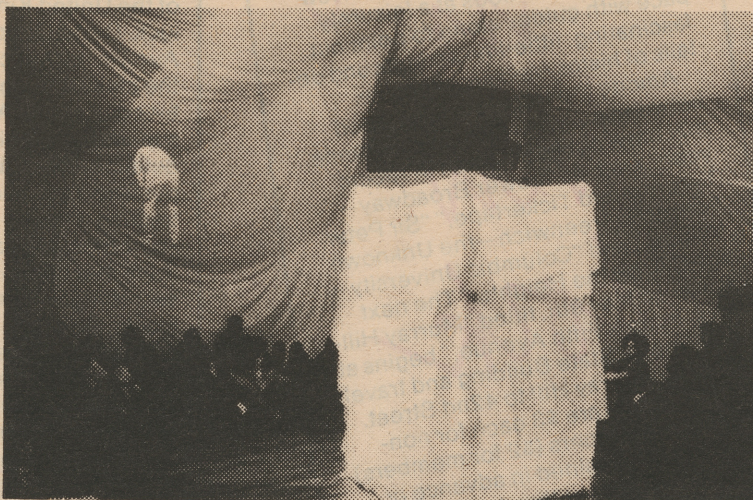
When the radio lady reappears with a silver foil costume (remember the Pop life and Warhol's factory) she begins to strip off piece by piece (putting them up on the transparent curtain in front of her, lining them up in rows reminding us of 60s serial imagery) we sense a rushing to a climax. This is accentuated by the accelerated montage of little bits from the other alcoves.

The figure in the fourth alcove appears only once. She does a strip reminiscent of the fashion show figures from *Flower*. As leotard-

tights costumes of first white, then red, blue and yellow are revealed layer by layer, so too do her wigs and face masks come off, changing colors with the layers.

The show's climax is anal rather than genital. We see, projected almost directly overhead a film of a series of people shitting into a

dream in which only a hidden inner logic held together the seemingly unmotivated appearance of figures looming above. The slowed-down pace of the work, described by Jill Johnston as a "lumbering monumentality," demands rhythms of perception and modes of concentration different from either



From "Nighttime Sky," a performance by Robert Whitman

camera-equipped toilet bowl. This might have outraged the audience when it was first presented in a CBS television studio in May, 1965, but in 1976 when the most adventurous as well as obsessed in the gay community are exploring bars like the Anvil and the Toilet, the implications of release and recycling can be absorbed along with the shock.

The piece felt like a shared

naturalistic theater or the frenzy of other Happenings. The spaced-out grandeur of visual impression which characterizes the Whitman work provides a background for the type of investigation which would be found later in Robert Wilson's performances. This is not to imply that any historical assessment is needed for the full present enjoyment of Whitman's work in retrospective.

People Improvisation

WENDY PERRON

Grand Union
 La Mama Annex

Ancient Japanese swordsmen would customarily train for many many years to attain one simple goal: to be ready to accept, and counter, a blow from any direction at any time. The swordsman's decision was not permitted to rely on any previously successful strategy. Rather, he was to take into account all the forces of the present moment, and choose the one action perfect for that moment.

The differences between this theory and the theory that the Grand Union goes by is that for the latter, there is more than one appropriate action in a given situation. It is the choice, among the range of possible alternatives, that they, and we, are interested in. When X does this, what will Y do? Or, when Z does this, what will Z then do? Each initiated action opens up a new realm of possible reactions. Each reaction opens up ...etc. Endings are beginnings. The performers create a constantly shifting matrix of joinings and separations, rises and falls, quickenings and trailings off, revelations and suppressions.

The way the Grand Union accomplishes all this is by having near-legendary rapport as a group, and by each member having a strong identity of his/her own. Like the loyal audiences of traditional

Eastern opera, we have come to know each character well; they are varying degrees of real/unreal for us; and we each have our favorites. A brief run-down is in order:

Barbara Dilley is small and soft, wears comfortable clothes that let her comfortable body extend and curl and twine. She is patient and well grounded in manner and motion. She usually avoids verbal contact, and when pressed, responds somewhat too earnestly. ("A leader is someone who has wisdom," she informs David Gordon.)

Douglas Dunn is lean and angular, with a determined look on his face. The black clothes and hat he wore on Sunday night made him look preacher-like, and he played into that by striking stark poses. The intention in his dancing is very evident, and he likes to channel this clarity into weight studies—lifting, catching, yielding to, testing another's weight.

David Gordon has an uncommon gift for monologue. He tops his own brilliant witticisms with more brilliant ones. He banters, puns, weaves tales, plays the prophet, plays the victim.

Nancy Lewis is tall and goofy and, although she has been compared to Carol Burnett, I see more of Holly Woodlawn in her. It is fun to watch her mercurial changes between chic, sulky, and disarmingly sensual. She is a parody of herself, letting us know by a darting glance, by a droop of the

shoulders, that she doesn't believe in this stuff 100%. This creates a contrast to her dancing, which is full and swoopy and emanates from an inner center.

Valda Setterfield, who danced with Merce Cunningham for a long time, is long and sleek, and looks the height of elegance in whatever eccentric outfit she drums up. Her dancing is distinctive for its effortlessly clean lines and the matter-of-fact way she drops into and out of movements.

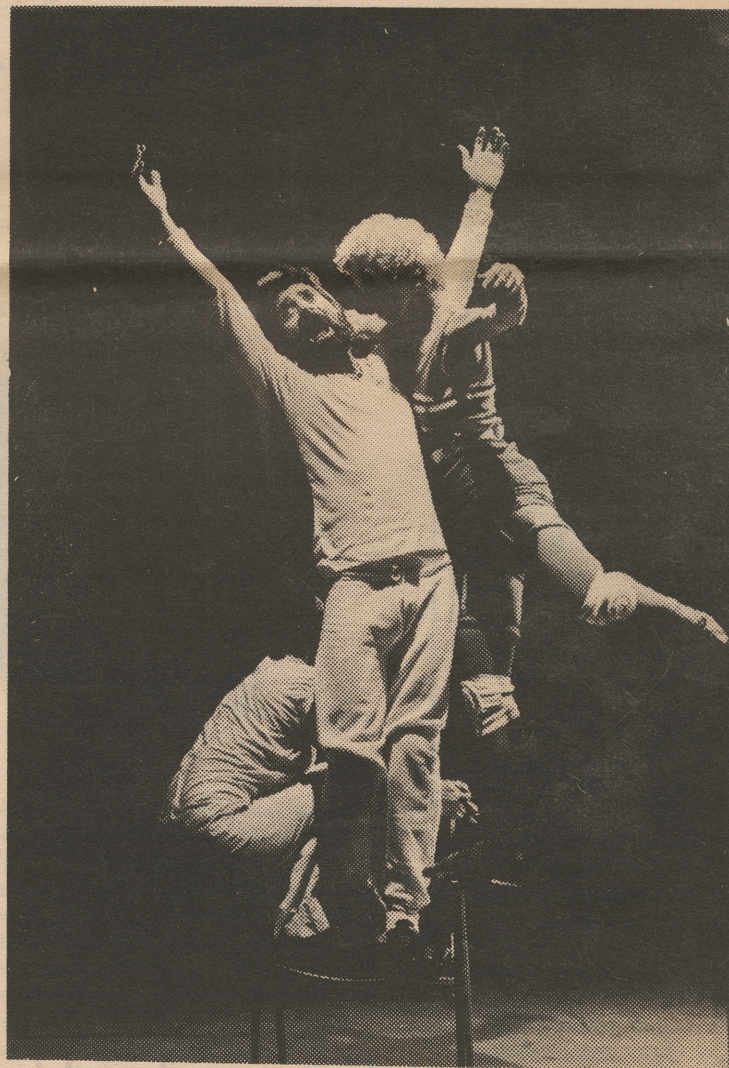
These dancers are such colorful and memorable characters that we are drawn to their performances again and again, as though to a new installment of a soap opera. We follow their triumphs, disappointments, dares, and frustrations almost too keenly to be bearable. We feel the challenge of spontaneity, the chaotic assortment of possibilities as we do in our own lives. We know that *there is no plan*. We witness the trust that allows them to bring their personal doubts into play. On one occasion, Lewis stood at the back of the room with a blanket over her head for a long time and finally, during a pause, asked anyone who would listen, "Am I doing anything important?"

However, the group sometimes relies too heavily on bits, or types of bits, that have gone over well in the past. Each member is, at dif-

dreds of people watch me turn around on top of this chair...This is the best moment of my life." But moment gives way to moment, and exhilaration gives way to misery: "How long will you let me go on like this....You're *making* me turn around on this chair...This is the worst moment of my life!"

Yvonne Rainer, who was a founder and strong influence on the group, has written that "One must take a chance on the fitness of one's instincts." (*She'd make a good Japanese swordsman.*) Part of this means an instinct for play, which might loosely be defined as non-goal-oriented exploration. Most of the Grand Union members have children, and I see evidence of that influence in their ability to play. They even use the word "pretend." Gordon: "We were pretending to be chickens mating and I resent your calling it dancing." ("Pretend"—that magical gateway to endless delights for children, but a word that has been dropped from the adult vocabulary.) This time they even looked like children—children playing dress-up in the morning with their pajamas still on. They all wore combinations of plain and fancy.

"Instincts" also means learned abilities. The instinct that improvising requires includes knowing when to let go of an action and when to forge ahead, when to claim



Grand Union

ferent times, limited by the very illustriousness that makes him or her magnetic.

But the Grand Union is still the best improvisation group around and there are still those moments that stun you by being so utterly in the present. On Sunday, Gordon had got himself standing on a chair, slowly revolving as he told a story of (himself as) a bed-wetting adolescent who joined the circus. The narrative seemed unconnected to anything else going on until he eventually directed it to the moment at hand: "I love having hun-

the focus and when to give it up, and what proportion of personal wishes and fears to lay bare.

Needless to say, these are the same issues we face in everyday living. Perhaps that's why I leave a Grand Union performance not with a declaration of good or bad, but with an emotional fullness, similar to the effect of a highly charged event in my own life.

After one of the performances, a woman told Barbara Dilley, "I've seen dance improvisation before, and I've seen theater improvisation before, but this is the first time I've seen people improvisation."