

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

1000 WORDS ROBERT WHITMAN

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1vk0s0sn>

Journal

ARTFORUM INTERNATIONAL, 49(8)

ISSN

1086-7058

Author

Kotz, Liz

Publication Date

2011

Peer reviewed

NEWS vs **NOISE**

ARTFORUM

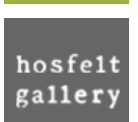
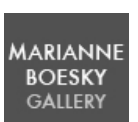
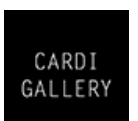
ewkotz | log out ADVERTISE BACK ISSUES CONTACT US [SUBSCRIBE](#) search

ARTGUIDE [IN PRINT](#) 500 WORDS PREVIEWS BOOKFORUM A & E 中文版

DIARY PICKS NEWS VIDEO FILM PASSAGES



links



IN PRINT



[PURCHASE](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

recent issues

- January 2016
- December 2015
- November 2015
- October 2015
- September 2015
- Summer 2015
- May 2015

Archive to 1962

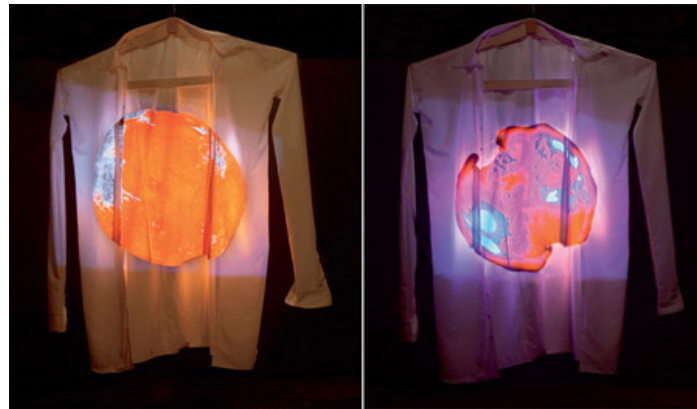


APRIL 2011

1000 WORDS

Robert Whitman

Talks about *Passport, 2011* · Introduction by Liz Kotz



Robert Whitman, *Passport, 2011*. Rehearsal views, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, NY, February, 2011. Photos: Ben Bloom.

FOR MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS, Robert Whitman has been making theater pieces that verge on alchemy. In these works, everyday objects take on uncanny properties, as in *Two Holes of Water No. 3*, 1966, where suburban station wagons wrapped in plastic become mobile TV and film projectors, or in *Prune Flat*, 1965, in which a single lightbulb descends from above, its brightness washing out the piece's projected 16-mm footage and restoring three-dimensionality to the world onstage. In the 1960s, when many artists sought to escape metaphor and illusion, Whitman embraced them, even using stage-show tricks—mirrors, transparent scrims, shadow play, and moving props—that hark back to vaudeville and magic lanterns.

Whitman is also celebrated for his pioneering collaborations with engineers and scientists, the most famous of these being the many projects he undertook with visionary engineer Billy Klüver. In 1966, Whitman, Klüver, Robert Rauschenberg, and engineer Fred Waldhauer founded the organization Experiments in Art and Technology. As a result of their efforts, technologies ranging from infrared cameras to closed-circuit television were used in performance for the first time, allowing artists to explore the shifts in temporality, spatiality, and subjectivity that imaging and communications techniques were bringing about in daily life.

Many artists had, of course, already embraced technology to mount increasingly complex and futuristic spectacles. But Whitman's use of media technologies has always been in the service of something at once more grounded and more dreamlike. His images are fleeting and evanescent, not totalizing; his aesthetic emphatically tactile. Whether projecting film onto performers—a recurring tactic—or inviting viewers to exchange telexes, Whitman uses such devices to layer different times and places, exploring an experiential world that is always occurring both here and somewhere else.

Indeed, Whitman is fascinated by events that can never be grasped in their entirety but may be experienced intensely from particular points of view—a preoccupation evident in such works as *American Moon*, 1960, where he distributed audience members into partitioned "tunnels," and *Local Report*, 2005, for which participants in five locations in four states provided video "news reports" via their cell phones; for the latter work, the artist mixed video and sound reports at the performance site while streaming them online. This piece, in turn, is part of a series of similar

events dating back to works such as *NEWS*, 1972, when Whitman used pay phones to transmit far-flung dispatches, and radio waves to broadcast them.

Whitman's new work, *Passport*, is the latest exploration of this spatial dispersion and recombination. *Passport* will take place on April 16 and 17, transpiring simultaneously at Riverfront Park on the banks of the Hudson near Dia:Beacon in New York and in a theater at Montclair State University in New Jersey. At each location, performances will be combined with projections of prerecorded video and a live feed from the other site. Linked by wireless transmission and real-time image streaming, the park and the theater will be in constant dialogue. In contrast to this dematerialized exchange, the performative actions are determinedly physical and material: Boxes are moved, dirt is shoveled, a fire burns, glass is broken. In the theater, three giant shirts are raised and lowered, and animated by projected images. In fact, *Passport* would seem to bring together the literal veiling and projection of the artist's early theater pieces and the layering of networks in the later telecommunications pieces. Via both theatrical and technological means, Whitman's latest work will generate a sense that the performance extends into the ebb and flow of events that occur around us all the time. As Whitman notes, "That reach of space is what I wanted." —Liz Kotz



Robert Whitman, *Passport*, 2011. Rehearsal view, Hudson River, Beacon, NY, November 11, 2010. Heidi Sorger and Curtis Harvey. Photo: Ben Bloom.

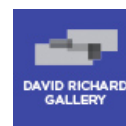
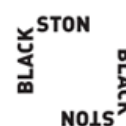
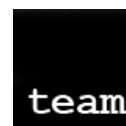
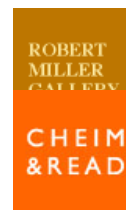
IN OCTOBER, WE DID A TEST RUN of the rowboat for *Passport*. It was a totally unique event—the weather conditions were perfect. The river was at high tide, dead high tide, so the water was absolutely still. There was no wind. In the photograph of the boat on fire, you can see ripples, but they were caused by a giant tanker that had just passed. Wouldn't it be cool if we could get that tanker to show up for the actual event? But there will be other things going on. There's a train station at Riverfront Park, so I'm trusting that there will be at least one train going through during the piece. And it's probably going to be raining. It's April, right? You never know.

Of course, that's not a consideration at the Montclair State theater, where the performances will be indoors. That was the impetus behind *Passport*—it began when I started thinking about doing a piece that would happen in two places at the same time. I wanted to transmit images from one place to the other, as a way of combining events or actions that couldn't possibly occur on the same site.

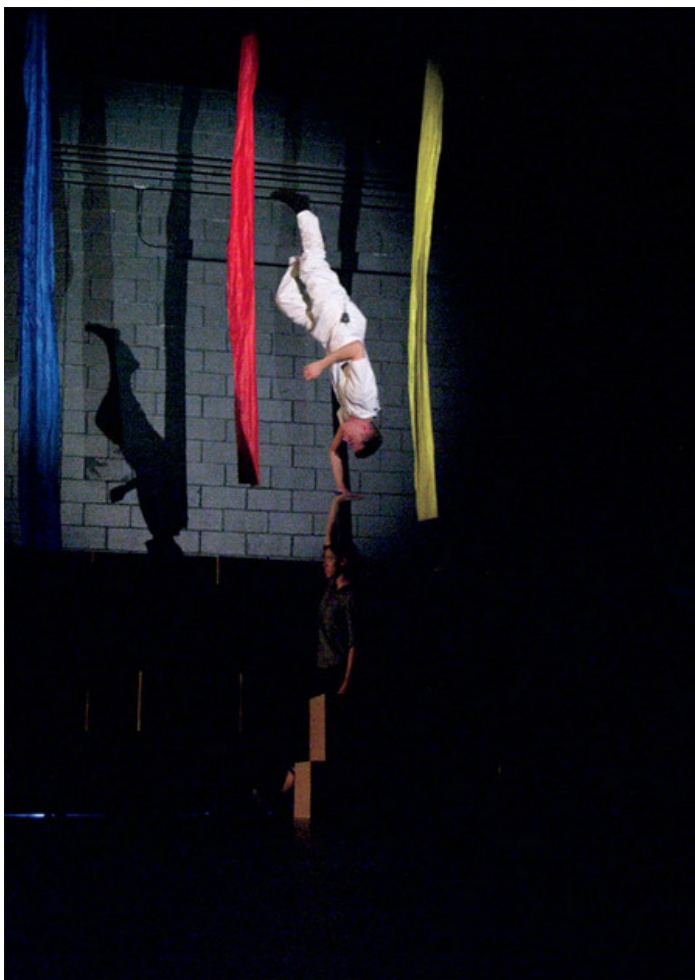
So at Riverfront Park I'll be doing things that you can't do indoors. The rowboat will float down the river. There'll be a horse and rider, and a backhoe doing what backhoes do: moving earth, arranging the dirt. There will be video projections, both prerecorded footage—a series of hand gestures, an egg frying, a faucet with flame coming out—and a live feed, in both the theater and the park. Performers will carry out actions that will be more or less the same in both places: crashing through cardboard boxes, jumping over piles of dirt. I want the performances to be different from each other, but there will still be a coherence—the same pace and rhythm, the same sort of vocabulary.

Typically, I like having a piece under way when the audience arrives at the site—I don't want there to be an obvious beginning. At Montclair, stagehands are going to be bringing in hundreds of the cardboard boxes, which will be stacked to form a wall onstage, and in the park the backhoe will already be digging when people get there. There won't be an official ending, either. We're not going to have a curtain coming down in the theater—none of that stuff. The piece will just stop, and the same thing will happen at Riverfront Park. I like the idea of people walking out of the space without there having been a clear-cut termination, so that whatever happened during the piece will still be in their heads, not as a memory but as something that's still going on.

Language will be part of the mix too. As a matter of fact, the words in this piece are going to be from the dictionary definition of *word*. It'll be read aloud and will last about ten minutes. I've used language this way before—where the voice comes from another place. In this case, the voice will



come from behind the audience at Montclair and it will be quite a bit off to the side of the audience at Riverfront Park. Using language helps remind the audience that this experience is something that's made. Even if it doesn't fit any of the regular categories, it's not random; it has a structure.



Robert Whitman,
Passport, 2011.
Rehearsal view,
Alexander Kasser
Theater, February
2011. Photo: Hedi
Sorger.

In the theater, people will be seated in a conventional auditorium-type setting. I can't help that. I'm trying my best to imagine that it's a found space, which is typically what I've done in the past—either using an architectural site specific to a piece or finding a space that has its own unique character and making the piece in that context, using the architecture as part of the vocabulary—for instance, in *Light Touch* [1976], which was done at a truck depot with a loading dock, or *Architecture* [1972], in deserted buildings on Hudson River piers. Spaces can evoke so much content already; they give you so much to work with.

At Riverfront Park, the only way I could imagine doing it was to have people seated and looking at an area that we're calling a stage. I've done things outdoors before where people wander from one place to the next or array themselves as they will. But it's too hard to contain it. In this piece, I want to direct people's attention to the other side of the river, to create an expanded horizon of space that people are drawn into. So the audience will be seated looking at the river and, God willing, they'll be looking across the river. They'll be able to see the traffic on the Newburgh–Beacon Bridge and boats on the river, or whatever's passing by.

When we were developing the piece, Julie Martin, the coordinating producer, went to see Jed Wheeler, the director of arts and cultural planning at Montclair State. It was great when Jed gave us the green light, because it put the piece in the context of New Jersey, where Bell Labs was located, and that connected it to my experience with Billy [Klüver] and Bell Labs and the work we did with Experiments in Art and Technology in the 1960s and '70s. All of that stuff. Then Dia got on board, which was also great. I'm glad both sites are close to where I live, which makes it very manageable. But originally the scheme I imagined was much more ambitious, with lots of different institutions involved. I had an idea that you could have the actions transpiring in different time zones.

I'm hoping that because of the video feed, people in the theater will know that some of the things they're seeing are happening in this other place, a park, and people in the park will know that some of the things they're seeing are happening in a theater. So they'll have a sense of pull between the two parts. It's a way to describe a lot of what we do normally. We know that something is going on at the other end of the telephone line. When people have this sense of simultaneity, it broadens the space that they operate in.

I also like the idea that no two people have the same experience. With *American Moon*, people told me that they felt as if they were in their own little tunnel or cave, a private community with its own point of view. I like that idea. Nowhere in scripture does it say that everybody has to see the same thing all the time. But either way, I can't tell what kinds of experiences viewers will have because that's not something I really think about. I'm much too involved in trying to bring everything together. That doesn't mean I'm inconsiderate. But I don't want to make a piece specifically to move or affect an audience. That's a manipulative kind of thing.

In terms of process, I begin with what a friend, a lighting designer, called storyboards—drawings that function as sketches, or almost as scripts or scores. Then I make a little collection of stuff, of ideas and images, things I want to film. I try to make the elements fit together—there's only one way that they *can* fit together. That is, sooner or later they fall into place, and it's very hard, once they decide where they're going to be, to rearrange them or substitute anything else. It's a matter of physics, almost. Something has to come first, and then that thing has to get out of the way, and so on. You get to a certain point where the piece begins to form itself, and you're just along for the ride.

[f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [v](#) [p](#) [e](#) | PERMALINK | COMMENTS

DIARY | PICKS | NEWS | VIDEO | FILM | PASSAGES | SLANT | ARTGUIDE | [IN PRINT](#) | 500
WORDS | PREVIEWS | BOOKFORUM | A & E | 中文版

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY