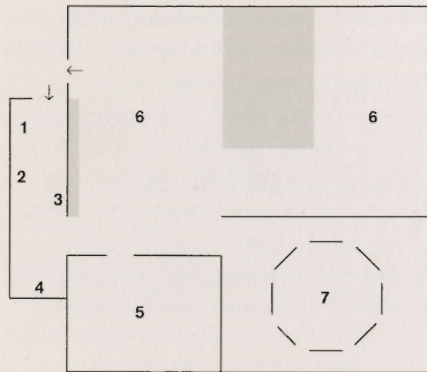


Robert Whitman

Playback

March 5, 2003–June 2004

site map and checklist

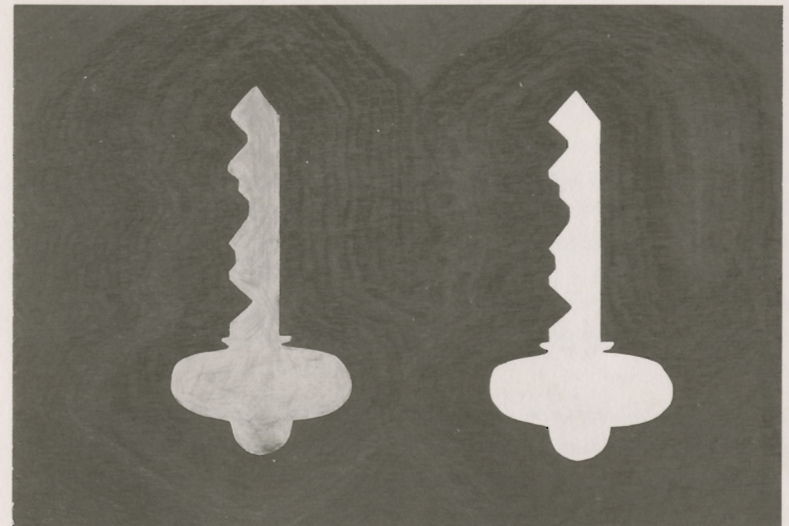


1. *Garbage Bag*, 1964
(2003 reconstruction)
formerly titled *Shopping Bag*
16mm film loop transferred to DVD,
color, silent; projector, paper bag
16 x 12 x 6 1/2 inches
(40.6 x 30.5 x 16.5 cm)
Collection Copley Eisenberg
2. *Bathroom Sink*, 1964
(2003 reconstruction)
16mm film loop transferred to DVD,
color, silent; projector, mirror, sink
8 x 19 x 17 inches (20.3 x 48.3 x
43.2 cm)
32 inches (81.3 cm) from floor
mirror, 30 x 22 inches (76.2 x 55.9 cm)
84 inches (213.4 cm) from floor
84 x 30 x 19 inches (213.4 x 76.2 x
48.3 cm) overall
Collection of the artist
3. *Shower*, c. 1964
16mm film loop transferred to DVD,
color, silent; projector, shower stall
and curtain, water, water pump
80 x 30 x 30 inches
(203.2 x 76.2 x 76.2 cm)
Collection Robert Rauschenberg

4. *Window*, 1963
(2003 reconstruction)
16mm film loop transferred to DVD,
color, silent; projector, window frame,
foliage
window, 96 x 36 inches (243.8 x
91.4 cm)
shadow box, 140 x 96 x 46 inches
(355.6 x 243.8 x 116.8 cm)
screen, 60 x 78 inches (152.4 x
198.2 cm)
Collection of the artist
5. *Solid Red Line*, 1967
laser and mechanics
9 min. revolution
dimensions variable; here,
23 1/2 x 28 feet (716.3 x 853.4 cm)
Collection Dia Art Foundation
6. *Dante Drawings*, 1974–75
27 double-sided drawings
graphite, colored pencil, pastel, wax
crayon, and aluminum foil
each 29 1/2 x 41 1/2 inches (74.9 x
105.4 cm)
Collection Dia Art Foundation
7. *Spyglass (Film Images, 1960–1976)*,
1976/2003
4 16 mm film loops transferred to
DVD, color, silent; 4 projectors, 4
screens,
4 mirrors
mirrors, 96 x 96 inches (243.8 x
243.8 cm)
screens, 96 x 96 inches (243.8 x
243.8 cm)
octagon, 27 feet (823 cm), diameter
Collection Dia Art Foundation

Robert Whitman's *Prune Flat* (1965)
and *Light Touch* (1976) will be
performed at 7:30 pm, September
10–12, 2003.

cover photo: from the *Dante Drawings* series photo: Cathy Carver



Dia center for the arts
548 west 22nd street new york

Robert Whitman Playback

Robert Whitman's pioneering performances of the early 1960s "alchemically transmuted the most quotidian objects and images into improbably fantastic events [imbued with] a magical, mythic aura."¹ One of the first in a coterie of heterogeneous artists to adopt this nascent performance idiom, Whitman devised a distinctive, signature mode. In contrast to the literal banality of Allan Kaprow's Happenings and the louche ambience of Claes Oldenburg's performances, a poetic and fugitive phantasmagoria distinguished Whitman's works for theater. A statement he made in the mid-sixties succinctly outlines his credo: "I intend my works to be stories of physical experience and realistic, naturalistic descriptions of the physical world. . . . At a certain point, fantasy is an object in the physical world. It is like a street or rain. It is a product of physical events. . . . The fantasy exists as an object, as a central physical entity, and as part of the story that you tell about other objects."²

To distill the illusory and the actual within an oneiric physical world, Whitman employed projections in a variety of media, ranging from cast shadows to slides to film. Together with silent film, ritualistic and atavistic forms of theater inspired Whitman's hallucinatory vision.³ Georges Méliès, Buster Keaton, and Joseph Cornell occupy the highest tier in his (otherwise anonymous) pantheon of the elect.⁴ Lured by cinema's capacity to create a realm of wonder—a waking dream—with structural laws of its own, Whitman, like these predecessors, reveled in film's editorial possibilities for overlaying, suturing, and interweaving discrete fragments of the unexceptional with the uncanny.

Coinciding with Whitman's landmark performances in the early sixties was his production of a group of some half-dozen sculptures, which he termed Cinema Pieces. In these, film projection animates everyday objects. Extemporaneously constructed, they are imbued with a characteristic haphazard grace. Equally indicative is the disarming manner in which they explore visual tropes. In this seminal group, he explored mythemes particular to the realm of painting—namely, the role of the artwork as a window onto a world beyond, or as a mirror held up to nature. In *Window* (1963), a nude can be glimpsed in a sylvan setting through one of Dia's gallery windows. The trompe l'oeil insertion of *Shower* (circa 1964) is that of a woman bathing in a functioning shower. These visions are never, however, uncontested. This is not documentary cinema; the viewer remains unavoidably aware of film modalities, given the artist's adroit use of such medium-specific devices as the jump cut, the close-up, and the lens flare. Wedding cinematic techniques (the close-up and zoom) to bestow intimacy with sculptural means (real space-time situations) to facilitate a direct encounter, Whitman's sleight of hand creates a scopophilic viewer. Voyeurism entails a projection of desire: that very projection is incarnate in these beguiling works. Allure mutates seamlessly from motif to medium, parallel sources of wonder. Fantasy becomes as real as reality in Whitman's hands; it is simply another form of reality, to be confronted or savored like any other.

The vanguard ferment in which these works were first presented was increasingly undercut once mainstream organizations appropriated the movement's innovations, stifling them as they did.⁵ Although Whitman remains committed to creating "theater works" (his preferred term for his performance pieces), he began to gravitate toward collaborations of other types. Turning to engineers, scientists, and related specialists, he explored arcane possibilities for fusing optical effects and reflective representations, which furthered those he had broached in *Prune Flat* (1965), his most renowned theater piece. Among the most elegantly succinct of these was *Solid Red Line* (1967), in which a piercing light traces a horizontal plane across the gallery then rewinds, erasing itself. Soon, his persistent attraction to the transient and mutable effloresced into even more diverse and encompassing installations.

Fundamental to Whitman's shift was his growing belief in the imminent possibility of a marriage of art and technology, a belief that in retrospect may seem uncritically optimistic, but one that was widely shared at the time.⁶ The new alliances between artists interested in electronics and scientists attracted to working in interdisciplinary exchanges shaped the aesthetic climate of the latter part of the decade. Such convictions fueled Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), founded in September 1966 by Whitman, artist Robert Rauschenberg, and scientists Fred Waldhauer and Billy Klüver. E.A.T.'s most spectacular program was the legendary "9 Evenings: Theater and Engineering," held at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York in the fall of 1966, which privileged innovative processes over resolved staging.⁷ This multidisciplinary experimentation climaxed in the extravagant pavilion commissioned by Pepsi-Cola for Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan, for which Whitman designed a vast spherical mirrored dome—a site of uncanny apparitions, an evanescent realm of pure visuality.⁸

A related but less technically ambitious work *Untitled (Film Images, 1960–1976)*—only recently retitled *Spyglass (Film Images, 1960–1976)* (1976/2003)—debuted at "Theater Works 1960–1976," a retrospective of Whitman's pivotal performances organized by Dia Art Foundation, in 1976.⁹ "Playback" presents its definitive form, an octagon, whose sides are made from four screens with projected film images alternating with four mirrors. In a time outside time, "a kind of dream with meaning around the corners,"¹⁰ spectators lose themselves, multiplied endlessly in a mise-en-abyme of reflections of reflections, amid the myriad beautiful but lusciously perverse images—traffic slowly gliding backward across the street, a capsicum burning incandescently without disintegrating, glowing lights unearthed from the soil, matches flaring miraculously in water.

In a singular graphic suite, the *Dante Drawings* (1974–75), made just prior to his performance retrospective, Whitman conceived of individual sheets of paper as three-dimensional, six-sided objects, which happened to be flat.¹¹ A complex framing and lighting system has been devised for this, their first showing, in order to enhance their semitranslucency and

to preserve intact this planar physicality—that is, to keep unimpeded the materiality and dimension of all four edges, as well as the front and back surfaces.

Their dense graphite fields generate light: darkness produces luminosity. Highly materialized surfaces, they nonetheless remain permeable to the verso images. Darkness is not merely deprivation of light; it is light's condition, and, therefore, is inherent in it.¹² Whether veiling or revealing, darkness, here, both literally and figuratively elicits the image, just as it can conversely trap that which recedes. The gradual yet tenuous emergence and disappearance of these forms becomes an analogy for Dante's difficulty in recalling his experience of Pure Vision in Paradise:

*In the heaven that most receives his light
was I, and saw things which, to retell,
he lacks both knowledge and strength who thence descends:
because, as it approaches its desire,
our intellect becomes so deep
that memory is unable to go back.*¹³

Memory cannot gel into representation; to Dante's regret, it "cannot go back" or bring what he perceived out of light into darkness anymore than it can illuminate the shadow, the absence left by that which is forgotten or lost. Felt as the presence of an absence, more than as an image per se, Whitman's shadow-stains seem to pulsate and elude fixity. By hovering on the brink of visibility, they engender a negative radiance that figures the difficulty of recollection. The fundamental irreconcilability between what is discerned on one side of a sheet of paper and what is spied on/in the other creates a compelling dilemma analogous to Dante's attempt to convey his vision to his reader.

With an iconography of rudimentary motifs that relate as much to the romantic sublime as to the visions of Outsider artists, this unprecedented suite reprises Whitman's abiding fascination with the speculative, the mysterious, and the wondrous. The fantastical dream world of sublimated desire—sometimes atavistic, sometimes futuristic, always disarmingly simple yet psychically deep-rooted—that gave his early work its indelible eloquence is transformed in this singular ensemble into a mystical meditation. For, as Dante discovered, this empyrean beyond space and time defies not only recollection but the very notion of communicability.

For Whitman, issues relating to vision, whether figurations of visuality or modalities of perception, are not historically delimited but are always available for reexamination. "Optics is age-old, the Greeks knew about optics," he stated in an interview in 1979, when reflecting on his governing concerns.¹⁴ Consequently, technology has only ever been a means to an end. It is never significant whether an individual work employs

advanced "hardware," makeshift second-hand materials, or simply paper and graphite. What counts are the underlying abstract relationships that specify and individuate an experience—color, form, rhythm, structures of time and space—all condensed and distilled into Whitman's definition of the implicit "image."

Surveying the rarely exhibited works of this influential period of Whitman's career from the early 1960s through the late 1970s, this retrospective claims not only their historical prescience but their currency and timeliness in an aesthetic climate riven by the introduction of yet newer technologies. However, "Playback" has an additional, more charged impulse: it offers Whitman's practice as a paradigm for a mode of invention that ultimately relies less on technical wizardry than on an ingenious poetic resourcefulness.

L.C.

notes

1. Sally Banes, "Dream Time in a Warehouse," *Village Voice* (23 November 1982), p. 105.
2. Robert Whitman, "Statement," in *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology*, by Michael Kirby (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1966), pp. 134–35.
3. Parallels have been made with Antonin Artaud's theories on theater. For example, Toby Mussman argued—partially quoting Artaud—that it is similarly "addressed first of all to our senses" and abides by "the visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures." (Toby Mussman, "The Images of Robert Whitman," in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Gregory Battcock [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1967], pp. 155–59.) Whitman did not read Artaud until much later, but the playwright's book *Theater and Its Double* (1958, first American edition) was widely acclaimed by Whitman's friends and colleagues, notably David Tudor, whom it strongly influenced.
4. See Mimi Crossley, "Artistic Image-Maker: Robert Whitman," *Houston Post* (26 November 1977), p. 12G. Note that Crossley misattributes the silent film *Automatic Moving Company* (circa 1912) to Cornell; the film is by Emil Cohl, a French pioneer of animation; it is also known as *Fantasmagorie/The Automatic Moving Company*.
5. See, for example, Alan Solomon, "Is There a New Theater?" *New York Times* (27 June 1965), p. 12; also, *Tulane Drama Review* 11, no. 1 (Fall 1966), which was devoted to this question; also, Eleanor Lester, "So What Happens after Happenings?" *New York Times* (4 September 1966), pp. D9, D17.
6. Exemplary of this position is John Perreault's article, "Faith and Fire," *Village Voice* (31 October 1968), p. 16.
7. See Doris Hering, "The Engineers Had All the Fun," *Dance Magazine* (December 1966), pp. 36–40; also, "Jammed Doors," *Newsweek* (31 October 1966), pp. 101–02.
8. See *Pavilion: Experiments in Art and Technology*, ed. Billy Klüver, Julie Martin, and Barbara Rose (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972); see also E.A.T.'s journal *Techné* 1, no. 2 (6 November 1970). In general, Whitman seems to have picked up ideas and inspiration from direct per-

sonal contact with colleagues, friends, and associates, the most important being John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg, whom he met in the late 1950s, and Klüver, with whom he has maintained a lifelong friendship. However, Whitman is less a studio artist than one who gravitates to open-ended collaborations, whether in his theater pieces or with engineers and other technicians. He and his colleagues worked collectively to construct an experience intended for the solitary individual; in diametric contrast, Dan Graham and his peers, who matured in the late 1960s, worked individually to create public experiences for viewers.

9. Whitman's approach to performance was exceptional in that period in that he scored works to permit subsequent presentation; few were site-specific. The frenetic, almost violently aggressive, spirit of such early works as *American Moon* (1960) was replaced in *Prune Flat* with a lyrical reverie. *Light Touch* (1976), a commission that concluded his 1976 retrospective, revived *Prune Flat*'s spare vocabulary of simple props and costume, while instilling a novel immediacy into its poetics. Once again, he drew inspiration from his location—a truck depot in this instance, and actual cinema in the case of *Prune Flat*—making it integral to the staging and the thematic of the piece. Projected images of commonplace objects—a brick, a cup, a burning paper bag—are “unloaded” from the back of the real truck pulling into a loading dock. They were “carried” through the space and “stacked” neatly nearby, as, shortly after, were their physical counterparts. In this work too, Whitman's abiding precept was to collaborate with the space, neither to hide it nor to be governed by it as in site-specific work: “I either find some place to perform a piece [which requires] specific architecture, or I make a particular space consistent with the image of the work,” he declared. For the 1976 retrospective, *American Moon*, *Prune Flat*, and the four additional works on the program were adapted to the temporary location in anticipation of their future relocation to a dedicated performance venue, which was eventually purchased and converted by Dia, at 512 West 19th Street, in Chelsea, today the home of the Kitchen Center for Video, Music, Dance, Performance, Film, and Literature.
10. Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh coined this suggestive phrase, with respect to *American Moon*, Whitman's first important performance, which they found “mysterious out of all proportion.” (Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh, *Collage: Personalities, Concepts, Techniques* [Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1967], p. 276.)
11. Whitman had first conceived a project involving Dante's *Divine Comedy* while still a student at Rutgers University in the mid-1950s. When his close friend Rauschenberg created a series of drawings based on Dante's *Inferno* in 1959–61, he indefinitely shelved his plans. The *Dante Drawings* were made by laying each sheet of paper onto a clear Plexiglas sheet placed above a light source. (Whitman, interview by the author, 30 July 2002.) He felt that intimacy was crucial to their reception—that is, each drawing should be looked at by only one person at a time. Because they were double-sided and semi-translucent and assumed this meditative aspect, the artist found it difficult to devise a suitable presentation format, hence until now the drawings were not exhibited.
12. Michael Newman, “Sublimations, the Death Drive, and the Trace of the Other,” seminar presentation, Brunel University, 2001, p. 13. I am indebted to Newman's illuminating study for this discussion of the shadow-stain. “The term *Gegenlicht* [backlight] was originally used to describe both painting and taking a picture against the light,” writes Amy Colin. “Through this technique the contour and the context of the object to be painted became visible, while its particular features recede into the shadow. Such a mode of interpreting reality exposes the darkness inherent in light or rather defines light as the absence of shadow.” (Amy Colin, *Holograms of Darkness* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991], p. 97.)
13. Dante Alighieri, “Paradiso,” Canto I, Tercets 2 and 3.
14. Whitman, interview by Barbara Rose, in *Robert Whitman: Palisade* (Yonkers, N.Y.: Hudson River Museum, 1979), n.p.

Robert Whitman was born in New York City in 1935. He studied literature at Rutgers University from 1953 to 1957 and art history at Columbia University in 1958. He began in the late fifties to present performances, including the pioneering works *American Moon* (1960) and *Prune Flat* (1965), as well as to exhibit his multimedia work in some of New York's more influential experimental venues, such as the Hansa, Reuben, and Martha Jackson galleries. With the scientists Fred Waldhauer and Billy Klüver and artist Robert Rauschenberg, Whitman cofounded, in 1966, Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), a loose-knit association that organized collaborations between artists and scientists. His one-person exhibitions include such venues as the Jewish Museum, New York (1968), the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1968), the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1973). Dia organized a retrospective of his theater works in 1976. Several theater projects have also toured to various European venues, including the Moderna Museet, Stockholm (1987 and 1989) and the Centre Pompidou, Paris (2001 and 2002).

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Tom McDonough will lecture on Robert Whitman's work at Dia on Thursday, April 17, 2003, 6:30 pm.

Tony Oursler will lecture on Robert Whitman's work at Dia on Thursday, May 22, 2003, 6:30 pm.

Brandon W. Joseph will lecture on Robert Whitman's work at Dia on Thursday, October 23, 2003, 6:30 pm.

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