

Artists Space
COMMITTEE FOR THE VISUAL ARTS, INC.
105 HUDSON STREET, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10013
(212) 226-3970

VOICE DECEMBER 12, 1977

A Look at Performances

By Tom Johnson

I sometimes advise readers to take a chance on composers and groups they've never heard of, so that they can listen with fresh ears, open minds, and no preconceptions. At the same time, I frequently find myself gravitating to familiar contexts, where I'm fairly sure I'll enjoy what I hear. This inconsistency sometimes bothers me, so this fall I made it a point to try to investigate artists I've never even heard of. Generally, when I found myself with a free evening, I just turned to the Free and Under \$2.50 page and selected one of those events nebulously described as "performance."

It turned out that out of six events I've come across in

this way, four have had to do with different ways of presenting verbal material. A lot of poets are looking for ways to make their readings more vivid, artists from other disciplines are showing interest in manipulating words, and a whole genre seems to be evolving. None of the events I've attended could fairly be described as readings or concerts or dramatizations. "Performance" really is the best term, vague though it is. I would not say that any of the four young artists I encountered are completely in control of what they are doing, yet in each case their approaches seem unique and promising.

Continued on page 82

Johnson

Continued from page 79

Larry Miller presented an evening of his work at Franklin Furnace, an extremely active place on Franklin Street, which currently presents two performances every week. Miller began by documenting a project that began with letters he wrote to the *Times* and *The Voice*. He was attempting to place a personal ad stating "I am looking for a thrill, I think." The saga continues with the rejection of his ad by these papers, the acceptance of it by the *New York Review of Books*, and the deluge of responses he later obtained from sex entrepreneurs, perverts, lonely souls, and kooks. The story is told in a combination of casual narration, slides, actual documents, recorded readings, and live readings, all of which dovetail around one another in effective juxtapositions. In another piece Miller discusses the fashion photographs shown on one screen, while ignoring slides of badly scarred men projected on another screen. In another, partly dedicated to Frank Perdue, he plays live congas in duet with prerecorded congas, while a series of slides depict a man dancing with a chicken tied to his leg. I sensed that Miller wanted some messages to emerge out of all this more strongly than they did, but the evening offered a good deal of dry wit, some first-class photography, and only a modicum of technical foul-ups.

Ann-Sargent Wooster presented a gentler evening at Artists Space, another extremely active forum located on Hudson Street only a couple of blocks away from Franklin Furnace. Her *Meditations on the Alphabet* is essentially a

Artists Space

COMMITTEE FOR THE VISUAL ARTS, INC.
105 HUDSON STREET, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10013
(212) 226-3970

VOICE DECEMBER 12, 1977

A whole genre is evolving around different ways of presenting verbal material.

long poem, with a section for each of the 26 letters of the alphabet. But the presentation went far beyond the mere delivery of the text. As a prelude, two performers, dressed in white, attached the letters of the alphabet to the wall. Then one of them began walking around the periphery of the room, spreading sheets of typing paper out on the floor in a nice neat line against the wall. One word was written on each sheet of paper. The audience was seated in the center of the space, and after the performer had been around the room five or six times, you could read whatever fragment of text happened to land on your side of the room. Meanwhile, two readers presented the complete poem from opposite corners of the space. One reader was always well ahead of the other, so you could hear the same lines twice if you wanted to, or try to take in two passages at once. From a cassette recorder at another corner someone read a sportswriter's report of the Ali-Shavers fight, and a few voices chanted various letters of the alphabet. I'm not quite sure what the sportswriter had to do with the other activities, and the poetry itself didn't do much for me, but I enjoyed the interplay of live reading, recordings, and sheets of paper.

Janet Sternberg's *His Journal*, also presented at Franklin Furnace, turned out to be a relatively conventional reading of a relatively conventional novel. A male narrator is writing in the first person about his deceased wife, who also wrote journals in the first person. *His Journal* reveals a good deal about her, and perhaps more about him. Here too, however, there was a performance element, in this case a very simple one. Every time Sternberg came to the end of a chapter, she reached down to a dimmer next to her and faded out the lights. After a moment of total darkness and silence, she faded the lights back up and read another chapter. At first this convention seemed gimmicky, but after a few chapters I began to notice that those moments of nothingness in between chapters really did help me to focus my attention on the material, as well as adding a touch of mystery to the characters. It doesn't take much to turn a reading into a performance, and sometimes a performance element as simple as fading lights up and down can do much to draw listeners into the material. Come to think of it, given a work of relatively conventional character development like *His Journal* in printed form, I would probably not be motivated to read more than a few pages, but in this context I became quite involved.

Bill Hogeland presented verbal material in still other ways at the Kitchen. I remember several pieces for two and three voices, with the part writing and the rhythms so carefully controlled that the "poems" essentially became musical compositions. I remember another piece in which he read a text rather straight, and then drew a drastic contrast by delivering the same text from memory in a highly theatrical style. I remember another piece in which he crossed a little stage in many different ways, always to the accompaniment of the same text. Curiously, however, I can remember almost nothing of the actual verbal content of the evening. Hogeland apparently has had some acting training, and all of his presentations on this short program came off with a certain theatrical flair, but the content somehow got lost in the shuffle, at least for me. That is a potential problem in any kind of performed poetry, I think, but Hogeland seemed particularly prone to letting the presentation overshadow the words. ■