



# PRESENT TENSE RITES OF PASSAGE

The words  
made everything seem present  
almost present  
present  
W.S. Merwin<sup>1</sup>

by Michael Nash

Writing about a performance is somewhat like conducting an extispicy. Meaning is severed from the vital moment like entrails from a sacrificial beast, with divination imperiled by the heresy of post-hoc paraphrase. Interpretation of John Sturgeon and Aysha Quinn's July 26 video performance *No Earth/No Earth Station* at the L.A. County Museum of Art is particularly precarious since the preeminent concern is with the mode (improvisation) and meaning (synchronicity) of performing the present tense.

Sturgeon and Quinn are perhaps best known for their individual video works, which according to Sturgeon, constitute "a dual statement proposing new collaborative uses of technology to emulate internal functions, while at the same time reaching back into our primitive past to rekindle psychic and intuitive connections: a double stretch going both directions at the same time."<sup>2</sup> Their most recent tapes evidence the tension in this duality. Quinn's *Excerpts* (1983), accomplishes a seamless integration of the mundane and metaphysical with a straightforward theatrical approach, contrasting Sturgeon's painter/poet pyrotechnics which effect a mesmerizing hejira through time awareness in *Spine/Time* (1982). The confluence of their duality is apparent in the performance which synthesizes video, installation and theater, with Quinn's stage presence and dramatic timing punctuating Sturgeon's conceptual and spatial fix to give the collaboration a distinctive balance.

*No Earth/No Earth Station*, in its second permutation after a rough draft presentation in the summer of 1982 at the University of Iowa's Intermedia Arts Festival, is "about maintaining a minimal status quo when everything is up in the air," Quinn says in explanation of the title.<sup>3</sup> The imaginative premise is that the pair are "keepers of the station" conducting rituals of global significance while, as the audience is told at the beginning of the performance, "we are in a holding pattern."

The station/installation is a high-tech environment, where the partially exposed technology displays three channels of pre-recorded tape and live video on three screens and three monitors forming triangular configurations, the screen triad prominently above the stage, the monitor triad less conspicuously at or below stage level in the foreground. At centerstage sits a v-shaped chroma key blue field, and to either side are two terrariums containing dry ice, gardens that the station keepers must periodically feed.

The station keepers/performancists, dressed in white lab coats, use the technological environment to communicate with different personas, astro-project into a variety of earthscapes, and explore the dimensions of their own individual and "inter" personalities. They have frustrated conversations with their children at home, a mutant woman who seeks their help to breathe, and themselves. In one of the most memorable sequences, a taped segment projected overhead shows the pair having a shrill shouting match, while Sturgeon and Quinn circle each other in a mimetic dance-fight onstage. The screaming war is stripped of objective referents like the dialogue in theater of the absurd, succeeding the way the rest of the performance does, by crystallizing underlying concerns without force-feeding the audience loaded abstractions.

This is particularly the case with the visual symbology. The installation's composition echoes alchemistic iconography, with the screens and monitors constituting squares within triangular constellations.<sup>4</sup> the chroma key

v-shape extending as an open-bottomed triangle to be completed by the intersecting plane of spectator rows. The video channels, screens and monitors form three sets of three, invoking one of the main lines of force in numerology.<sup>5</sup> As the station-keepers astro-project into other environments, sage fields or aspen groves, they struggle for balance in sometimes enigmatic poses, although in one striking sequence they are suspended as the Hanged Man and the Hanged Man Reversed, the Tarot's classic signs of tense expectation and mystical isolation.<sup>6</sup>

All this might suggest that the performance could only work for a convention of semiologists. Sturgeon and Quinn's intention, however, is not to litter the installation with metaphysical illustrations. They are attempting "to construct an arena for stretching, opening up a zone for answers to occur in."<sup>7</sup> Though aware of the archetypal significance of the performance's icons, their approach emphasizes diversity of interpretation, exemplified by the nearly universal triangle/trinity. Various associations are invited, with formulations left to subjective interaction/intersection with the open-ended zone/open-bottomed triangle.

It is from this experiential process that the central constructs emerge. The dazzling array of station activity easily overloads the viewer; there are sometimes six different videos functioning as separate presentations and within the installation's supra-compositional pattern, while the performancists interact with themselves and the electronic environment. This creates a condition central to the experience, the schizophrenic effect of modern information technology. With so much going on it's impossible to separate cause from effect, what the station keepers do, and what is done to them, thus particularizing the modern dissipation of causality, and with it the ability to predict and control.

But displacement from the linear continuum is only a preface. *No Earth/No Earth Station* is executed extemporaneously, forcing the performancists into a spontaneous and instinctive mediation of the technological and symbolic complexities. In saving the moment of creation for the audience, the problematic creative process mirrors what the performance is essentially about: improvising a gestalt when existence is divisively subjective and infinitely fecund in the ever-evolution of the present tense. Sturgeon says, "It's about not getting blown out by the randomness of the apparent reality."<sup>8</sup> Improvisation becomes both parallel and prescription, allegory and rite of passage.

As the inevitable difficulties arise, the performancists/station keepers invent ways to continue the aesthetic/metaphysical unity, guided by an intuitive grasp of their simultaneous purposes. When a voice delay doesn't kick in during a segment of circular dialogue called "The Meeting," the meeting becomes a colloquium on equipment failure, extending the general concern with solipsistic isolation caused by communication technology into the moment, as Quinn asks with resonant irony, "Could we have a better meeting if we had better equipment?"

The performancists' coping responses thus become indistinguishable from the station activity's figurative meaning. One way of viewing this is that, as Sturgeon joked, "the structure of the piece can take an incredible amount of punishment."<sup>9</sup> Another way is to view the performance as a documentation of process, predicated on the belief that, as Jung put it, "Error is just as important a condition to life's progress as truth."<sup>10</sup>



Video technology is integrated into that process in a way that makes *No Earth/No Earth Station* ultimately a positive statement. It doesn't reject technology despite its consequences, it treats the "Global Village" concept as a given and strives for ancient perspective to balance technology's ahistorical impact. This is evidenced in the performancists' use of video to achieve "purification by abstraction." Quinn and Sturgeon's conception of how video relates to "the alchemical process which separates and then re-fuses the self back together with a new awareness of being."<sup>11</sup> The three video channels, and monitor and screen triads, are used throughout the performance to isolate and re-mix aspects of the station keeper's consciousnesses. On the side monitors there is peripheral imagery, deep memory of wandering in the desert or abstract meditative earthscapes that flow unobtrusively, while the screens separate intra- and inter-personality projections of the station keepers, most graphically in the fight sequence, or mix them into other environments. In this way, technology becomes the means for healing the schizophrenia it has caused.

C. G. Jung's writing on alchemy and symbolism is obviously influential here, and throughout the performance. Not surprisingly then, Jung's postulation of "synchronicity" as a means of dealing with the apparent psychic relativity of space and time presents itself as an insightful subtext. Pop cultural assimilation aside (the *Police's* top selling album that borrows its title and some of its ideas from the concept offers a glimmer of hope for neo-populists), this empirical concept provides a parallel in psychology to the discoveries of modern physics which cast the space, time and causality triad asunder. As the ancient axiom of Maria the Jewess predicted/expressed it: "Out of the Third comes the One as the Fourth." Synchronicity speculates on the transcendence of the causal order by "meaning" in "the continuous creation of a pattern that exists from all eternity, repeats itself sporadically, and is not derivable from any known antecedents." This effort to distill "the quintessence" . . . the ever-hoped-for and never-to-be-discovered "One" that underlies 1,500 years of alchemical quest, clearly relates to the performance's "double stretch" joining intuition and technology in an infinite improvisation of being.<sup>12</sup>

The station keepers create a place/time of passage. The station, as passage, is an alchemical conduit preserving human essence during the survival crisis shift in eras. The keepers, in a holding pattern, seek to retain what Barnett Newman called "the self, terrible and constant."<sup>13</sup> The passage of time is the transition into the ever-present tense of meaning which permeates the temporal illusion, connecting the self synchronistically to origin and destiny.

Concomitantly, the performance seeks its essence in a constant act of re-creating. After a series of anti-climactic meditative water imagery, the performancists exit the installation with only a trembling candle flame and a neon emblem of the Taurus sign overlaid on a triangle to suggest the "Earth Station's" continuance. The audience is momentarily anxious, with things still up in the air. After latent causal expectations dissipate and frustration at the irresolution fades, the wholeness of the performance begins to emerge. The performance is the quintessence of what the performance is about. The hall-of-mirrors expansiveness creates a sense of quantum realization. Sturgeon and Quinn have risked the hour's totality for each moment, pulling off a brilliantly provocative present tense. □

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## NOTES

- 1 From "The Judgment of Paris," *The Carrier of Ladders*, NY, Atheneum, 1970.
- 2 Interview with author, 1983.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 C. G. Jung, *Dreams*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1974, pp 199-200.
- 5 Cheiro, *Cheiro's Book of Numbers*, Garden City, NY, Garden City Publishing, 1932 p 56.
- 6 J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, NY, Philosophical Library, 1962, pp 131-2.
- 7 Interview with author.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 *Freud and Psychoanalysis*, NY, Pantheon Books, 1961, p 200.
- 11 Interview with author.
- 12 *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, NY, Pantheon Books, 1960, p 421-531 *Dreams*, pp 198.
- 13 Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, NY, Harry N. Abrams, 1978, p 21.

Previous pages: Aysha Quinn (Hanged Man Reversed) and John Sturgeon (Hanged Man) in performance of *No Earth/No Earth Station* (1983) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Right: Neon Taurus on a triangle by late Jaime Summers, to whom the performance is dedicated. All photos: Tom Vintz.