



# Notes in the Dark

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## Sturgeon and Quinn's L.A. Performance is "Up in the Air" By Michael Nash

In unabashed bewilderment, an L.A. newspaper editor quotes from a profile of John Sturgeon and Aysha Quinn's latest video performance, to specify its objectionable esoterica: "... creates a zone for particularizing the dissipation of causality." Our readership isn't familiar enough with 'video jargon' (sic) to understand what you mean."

Clearly this isn't the stuff of mass media. This is "No Earth/No Earth Station," which was performed by Sturgeon and Quinn on July 26 before the vanguard of the fine arts community at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in conjunction with a retrospective of the museum's Young Talent Awards, which Sturgeon received in 1978.

The performance, in its second permutation after a rough draft presentation last summer 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. In an introductory flyer prepared by the L.A. Louver, the collaborators describe it as "a metaphor for a state of suspension, global and individual... during extraordinary and trying times. Survival is the concern. Investigation, growth, healing, relationship and consciousness are the keys."

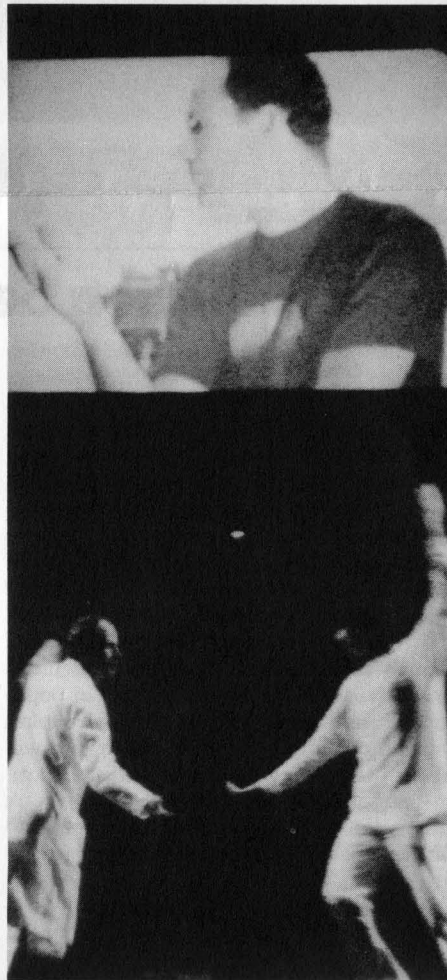
High flown rhetoric perhaps, but this is a level of description compatible with the emerging fine arts medium of performance, and earned by the work itself.

The use of performance as a definitive label is misleading, because as music performancist Laurie Anderson explained, "the most valuable quality of (performance art) as a term is that each time somebody does something and calls it that, they fundamentally redefine it." ("Electronic Dog," *Art Com* No. 21, 1983, p. 66.) Sturgeon and Quinn's performance style synthesizes video art, museum installation and theater. It's like a painter theatrically interpreting his work as he lays down the brush strokes, except that the tools are state-of-the-art electronic technology.

In "No Earth/No Earth Station," three channels of pre-recorded tape and live video are displayed on three screens and three monitors forming triangular configurations, the screen triad prominently above the stage, and the monitor triad less conspicuously in the foreground. (Triangles and three groups of three: the alchemistic symbology is apparent, though not intended to be illustrative.)

The imaginative premise is that Sturgeon

and Quinn are "keepers of the station" conducting rituals of global significance while "we are in a holding pattern." The station keepers use the exposed technology of the installation/station for relating to a variety of personas including their children and a mutant woman who needs help breathing. Sometimes, through the magic of a v-shaped chroma-key blue field, they project themselves into other environments, earthscapes like a sage field or aspen grove, where they physically struggle to maintain balance, assuming poses of enigmatic purpose. In one of the most memorable sequences, they circle each other in dance interpretation of a taped shouting match they are having on the screens overhead. The vitriolic squabble is stripped of issues like the dialogue in a Beckett play, succeeding the way the rest of the performance does, by crystalizing the



basic dilemmas without force-feeding the audience loaded abstractions.

The dazzling array of presentations overloads the viewer; there are sometimes six different videos, plus on-stage activity. This creates a condition central to the performance, the schizophrenic effect of modern communications 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. The work thus creates a zone for particularizing the dissipation of causality, and with it, the safety of prediction and control.

This is related to its larger meta-content. Adding to the performances technical complexity is the demanding improvisational structure, which attempts to save the ephemeral moment of creation for the audience. If everything was pre-packaged, "it would be a roadshow, rather than a performance," Quinn suggests. The design stretches the artist's execution abilities, as well as the audience's capacity to perceive.

In this way, the difficulty of presentation mirrors what the performance is fundamentally about improvising unity when reality is deviously subjective, and infinitely recast in the present tense. Sturgeon says, "it's about not getting blown out by the randomness of the apparent reality."

When the inevitable problems occur, the station keepers invent ways to keep the station and the performance going, guided by an intuitive grasp of what their mission, and the performance, is about. This is epitomized in a segment called "The Meeting" when the circular conversation is supposed to be channeled through an overdub delay to intensify the cyclical pattern. When the delay doesn't kick in, the breakdown becomes new content as Quinn asks ironically, "Could we have a better meeting if we had better equipment?" in a typical display of stage presence.

The performance has been brilliantly conceived to anticipate its difficulty and allow the performancist's coping response to become indistinguishable from the work's figurative meaning. As Sturgeon joked, "the structure can take an incredible amount of punishment."

"No Earth/No Earth Station" is a classic structural statement for "what you see is what you get." The performance's spontaneous demands on the artists and audiences are the reality that the performance is about.

When the station keepers exit the instal-

lation at the end, with only a trembling candle flame and a mysterious neon emblem left to suggest the "Earth Station" will continue, the audience is anxious, with things still "up in the air." It's not until after a pregnant pause, when frustration at the irresolution fades, that one realizes how artfully this post-modern state of humankind has been wrought. The performance doesn't tell us about improvising unity, it is an improvisation of unity, and a singularly provocative present tense for those privileged to experience it.

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## QUICK TAKES

### In Print

The **National Arts Jobbank** is a bi-weekly newsletter full of job openings in the field of arts and media arts. Cost is \$15 for 6 months or \$27 per year. Contact: National Arts Jobbank, 141 East Palace Ave., Santa Fe, New Mexico, 87501.

ACT, the Action for Children's Television organization, is offering three new publications. **Exploring the Arts: Films and Video Programs for Young Viewers** is an illustrated guide to more than 500 existing films and tapes about the arts that have not been aired on TV. The book's aim is to familiarize broadcasters and cablecasters with the wealth of material ready and waiting to be shown to young audiences.

**Arts for Young Audiences: An ACT Handbook** and **Editor's Choice: A Look at Books for Children's TV** seek to stimulate new arts programming geared to children and teenagers. Arts for Young Audiences provides an overview of the problems behind TV's lack of arts programs for children, while **Editor's Choice** is a guide to books selected as good material for children's television programs.

ACT also publishes the magazine **RE:ACT**.

continued on page 3