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ART & PLAY

THE PURSUIT OF RICHARD APERT



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Somewhere in the twilight between art and play is creativity. A serious thing, it holds whimsy and expectation, stresses reason and wonder. It is a preoccupation, a point of departure and a return gravity: something of a circular route. Add discipline to creativity and you have art, add caprice and you have play. It is this twilight that Richard Alpert, a media artist, has been exploring, making sharp forays through the tension of creativity into the illuminating realms of art and play.

Richard Alpert's formal education began at the University of Pittsburgh. A student of the natural and computer sciences, he was attracted to the rigors of scientific inquiry, but quickly found that the rigors had suffered a touch of rigor mortis. The process of discovery and proof had been reduced to drills performed in monotonous labs.

Searching for a discipline that still bathed in the light of wonder, Alpert found himself split between philosophy and fine arts. It was a perfect union of form and idea, of scientific order and aesthetic fancy. He would receive a B.A. in Fine Arts then go on to the San Francisco Art Institute for an M.A. in Sculpture.

In the process of receiving his education, Alpert became fascinated by the "art process" itself. Years later, one critic would say, "Alpert's interest in performing actions grew out of his focus on the way things are done rather than on the result." The result was a body of work—some drawings, some performance, some video—that displayed a "natural

curiosity" about itself. But it wasn't merely narcissism. Alpert's work is serious stuff: thoughtful, sincere and often elusive. "It's sophisticated play. My post-education."

Alpert's first exposure to video was back in 1971. Still at the Art Institute, he completed a series of videotapes that were self-documentation of his performances. The concern here was not with the medium, but with a record of the transient process.

For the next four years, Alpert explored various types of physical transition and the spatial experience that emerged. In *Probe*, he kicked a ball against the back wall of the gallery, moving from darkness towards the wall and into light. The area of the performance was delineated by the energy he expended and further defined by the progression of sound created by the ricocheting ball. The following year, *Hand Generated Light* featured Alpert concealed behind a door cranking a manual electric generator, keeping a small light bulb aglow, outside. The light pulsed with the rhythm of cranking; reverberations of sound in the room enhanced the effect.

By 1976, Alpert began incorporating video into his performances. "Sometimes I use video. It is used to focus on something, to mask out the unnecessary." This masking allowed Alpert to evoke a sense of intimacy. With *Sylph*, he once again employed the hand generator, but this time the audience could view the art process on a monitor, breaking down the barrier of the concealing

wall of *Hand Generated Light*. *Artweek* would say, "*Sylph* clarifies an essential aspect of artmaking as the process of transmitting and receiving energy." Part of that transmission was the secret creation, transpiring beyond the wall.



A remembrance of things past: circular voices from *Shibboleth*.

In a more complex performance piece, *A Circular Route*, Alpert again used video, but with greater sophistication. Here, a dancer whirls about a room upon a circular grid that has verbs of emotion scribed upon it. The image of a spinning bicycle wheel on a monitor commingles with the dancer's movements. As the bicycle wheel slows, it becomes apparent that there is an inscription on the wheel rim: "Emotions move from one feeling to the next in a circumferential manner..." Rather than realtime video, the images have predetermined meaning and design. In this way, they act as the disciplined partner to the caprice of the twirling dancer.

Continuing his explorations, Alpert began indulging more in the video medium. He appreciated what he called the "private/public aspect" of the medium: a quality that allows the viewer a private audience with the work though it may be a public presentation. Where he was once content to

document, he now began transforming work through video. *Circular Route*, *Shibboleth* and *Fracture*, previously performance pieces, became strongly visual, autonomous tapes, redefined by the medium.

Further, video provided a medium that allowed Alpert "to couple thoughts and the thinking process with visuals." In *Post Time*, a bowl of water changes color as globules of some substance fall into the liquid. This image interplays with a parable of arbitrary forces at the race track. Another, *Fracture*, has a series of circular images—a hubodometer, a potter's wheel, a spinning toy—illustrating thoughts on the centrifugal pull of creativity. In each tape, Alpert was able to select the image and direct the viewer's gaze. This directness and control strengthened his ability to say things as he would



This wheel's on fire: roundabout with the *Circular Route*.

like, "clearly and succinctly." Again, we have the order of form and the fanciful nature of content: art and play expressed.

In *Opacity of Order* a long tracking shot of trees reveals an unexpected symmetry. In fact, rows. In contrast, a voice-over tells an anecdote about order as the apparent folly of disorder. The narrator explains, "If I am scattered and sense it, order is

around somewhere." Yet it is the inexplicable balance drawn between order and chaos that is the source of Alpert's wonder. "I hold onto play as a very cherished item," Alpert says with due control.

relationship to the videotape. Rational and precise, Alpert constructs the videotape's framework.

Art and Play finds its consummation in the denouement. Long traveling shots follow railroad tracks through the city. Each track finds its end before some barrier. To complement this, Alpert reminisces about a shoreline where he played as a child. He explains that he never viewed the beach as a whole, but saw everything as a "changing exhibit of details." It was the minutia, not the whole, that fascinated him. The orderliness and rectitude of the tracks, each with its destination, is juxtaposed



Spinning to unfold: bringing forth vision in *Facture*.

Bringing his creativity to an apex, Alpert has fashioned a new tape tentatively called *Art and Play*. Four distinct sections chronicle the evolution of the creative mind. In the beginning, we see a spinning bicycle wheel. A familiar metaphor, it represents what Robert Atkins would call "spiralling energy and the archetypal feminine." Or more specifically, emerging consciousness. Running a stick along the spokes, Alpert plays the first song of creation.

Observing a child at play comprises a second chapter of growth. Here, the child is presented an array of colorful blocks. His interaction is random as he grasps at one cube, then another: pure play, unencumbered by order or theory.

A library room appears with Alpert seated at a table. He is discussing the present videotape with a friend. Alpert is puzzled by the proper title for the work. It is about art and play. But is that an appropriate name? Perhaps it is too simple? He then recites a number of other possible titles, listing the intended meaning, its references, and its



The perpetual exchange: accents and stress in *Shibboleth*.

a playful mind gathering random detail.

The perpetual theme come around again. Manifesting itself as the order/chaos of *Opacity of Order*, the physical forces at play in *Facture*, or the tension between monitor and dancer in *A Circular Route*, Alpert has always dwelled on that twilight zone of creativity. He is an optimistic artist who has clutched to that "cherished item," play, but always with the temper of a disciplined artist. At the end of *Art and Play*, we see railroad tracks ending abruptly in urban cul de sacs. A pessimistic image, an image of termination? "No," says Richard Alpert, "some things are dead-ends, but there are many discoveries there to be made." These are the discoveries of art and play. ○