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RICHARD ALPERT

Washington Project for the Arts
400 7th St. N.W., 202/347-8304

A bicycle wheel, a lead ball, an airplane, words chalked in circular patterns on the floor—these are some of the key elements in the work of Richard Alpert, conceptual performance artist from California.

Several years ago, Alpert's interest in action and process rather than product prompted him to move his art into real space. *Gyro*, the piece

he performed at the Washington Project for the Arts in December, was described as "landing an airplane through drawing and narrative." It is a short work for performer, part of an airplane propeller, and an audiotape.

Silence begins and ends the piece. Alpert switches on the tape, and there is about a two-minute space before the audio begins. A man (Alpert) describes his attempts to fly a new and unfamiliar airplane. The narrator details the mechanics of flying, the skill and concentration involved, and the attention to many fine points necessary to the art of flying.

Alpert has meanwhile faced a white wall, his back toward the audience and quietly begins spinning what looks like part of a propeller slowly against the wall. As Alpert moves from left to right, the hub is pulled into small, spiraling circles. As he progresses, the circles become larger in diameter, and as they do, the sound increases in volume until the narrative on the accompanying tape is barely understandable. The narrative continues as a catalogue of steps, techniques, and variables involved in the flying of a plane. Soon, however, the pilot finds that his uncertainty and miscalculation send the plane out of control. It surrenders to the wind and only by chance does it regain equilibrium. "Inexperience had outweighed artfulness and a delicate balance had fallen in my favor."

In a 1974 piece, Alpert played with a linear progression. Standing in the darkened half of a room, he kicked a basketball against a wall in the lighted half. With each kick he moved closer to the wall and the sound became more intense. He then reversed the action until he was back at the original place in the dark half of the room.

In another early piece, *Strategy for a dance*, the activity was more complex. Alpert was alone in a room hammering and chipping away at a suspended metal ball which disintegrated (fragment by fragment). Complementing the dissolution of the sphere was the disappearance of statements about the nature of the piece chalked on the floor; these were smudged away every time Alpert moved to hit the ball. The disintegration was both physical and philosophical.

Spirals as a recurrent motif in Alpert's work mesmerize the viewer and keep him within and cognizant of the pattern in art. Process, the salient feature of Alpert's work is not linear but circular.

Alpert also showed videotapes—some too recent to be titled. These, with the exception of two, lack the substantive impact of the performances. The most successful of these tapes begins with a spinning bicycle wheel played by Alpert with a stick. Unexpected richness of sound develops. Light bounding off the rim creates a kaleidoscope of color. Section two shows a young child sitting the floor surrounded by toys and objects. He randomly picks up the toys and creates a loose pattern of noise and curiosity. The third section, a discussion between Alpert and a woman about the relationship between art and play, seems to undercut the sensual simplicity of the preceding sections.

Conceptual works often translate imprecisely from one medium to the next. As video, some of Alpert's works lose the real-time liveliness of the performances with their motion, sound and corporeality. The performances by comparison seem to have evolved complexity that continues to turn and inform like one of Alpert's wheels which reveal a message inside the rim only when the spinning dissipates.

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