

THE VILLAGE
VOICE



Pursuit of Happenings (Theater, page 103)

Time Less

By Erika Munk

Black Dirt
 By Robert Whitman
 The Kitchen
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"The thing about theater that most interests me is that it takes time," said Robert Whitman in 1965. "Time for me is something material. I like to use it that way." (Sometimes the thing about the '60s avant-garde that most interests me is the carefully artless, affectless, transparent prose in which its makers described their work.) Now, a quarter-century later, Swedish art historian Ulf Linde says in the program for Whitman's new happening, *Black Dirt*, that Whitman "produces sequences—speed, movements, changes in states and condition, a drama—as in *Eden: Reality as it must have been BEFORE TIME.*"

These two statements seem to contradict each other, but they don't. One of the essential experiences in any Happening is intense awareness of duration (sand falling from above, water seeping slowly across the stage) in a theater free of plot, character, and the conventions of narrative development. Time as usually sensed disappears, but now that

story it becomes palpable, like an image or a sound.

At the Kitchen, time is present in another way, too. I wrote "a quarter-century later" instead of "25 years later" because a quarter-century sounds like history rather than just years, and I was very aware of history while I watched *Black Dirt*—of the time that has passed since I first saw Happenings, the almost unimaginable differences between now and then, and the ways in which Whitman's work and Whitman's audience had both stayed the same and changed.

We walk into a circular tented dome, glowing white, with two Christmas trees hanging high up and a projection of a large onion moving around the circumference. The audience sits in a semicircle. A plastic runner, splashily painted red, green, and blue, crosses the playing area. Behind it lies a heap of sandy gravel. The sound of tree frogs piping. This is a magic space, outside all conventions of theater.

The sparse dialogue—Esperanto mixed with Chinese?—comes from a man and a woman behind

the walls of the tent, lit as if seen through a scrim. The only other performers are an elegant and extremely dispassionate couple, so twinned that when they separate for a while—he to saunter around with his hands in his pockets, she to do ritualized dance movements—the effect's almost startling, and comes perilously close to an interpretable idea.

Such ideas are scrupulously avoided, however. Much more important than any human image are the way the lights modulate from cool to warm, the mysterious coming to life of a piece of cloth, and a sequence when the entire tent starts to breathe, moving peristaltically over our heads. People are just things among other things. Perhaps they are worse: a film of a huge pale mouth and eye fingered slowly by a nail-bitten hand makes my skin crawl, but the sand heap, the plastic runner, the way the floor covering

falls into baroque folds when it is gathered up, make ugly industrial artifacts beautiful.

The end of "humanism" predates postmodernism; Happenings took it for granted, and didn't bother to make their work didactic by deconstruction or any other form of homage. But of course this particular piece doesn't predate postmodernism, it only seems to. Indeed, it seems to exist out of time. The sack suspended from a hook goes back to Whitman's earliest work, as does the creation of a special, enclosed space, and attentiveness to objects, lights, silence. *Black Dirt* is almost a historical re-creation. (But not a predecessor—its differences from contemporary performance art are more notable than any similarities—no use of popular culture, no autobiographical impulse.)

The mark of our own times is

clear, however, and don't imagine for a moment that it's good. Eroticism and spontaneity were a mark of Happenings—not just taking your clothes off and rolling around in the leaves, though sometimes that, but a kind of reveling in materiality. The old performance photos show a lot of movement, mess, laughter. Participants and spectators alike concentrated furiously on completing actions that had no ostensible point but were unpredictably satisfying and inexplicably enlightening. This audience, though interested, was disengaged—perhaps because bohemia and the experimental community are long gone, perhaps because *Black Dirt* seemed scripted to the teeth and cold as ice. To re-create the freshness of the past is impossible; it has to be re-invented. ■