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Pitching indoor tent for performance art

By Miriam Seidel
Special to The Inquirer

The performance work of Robert Whitman, though recognized in Europe, is rarely seen outside New York in this country. Whitman, a central figure in the art happenings of the 1960s, has continued his spare, affecting performance investigations while such peers as Robert Rauschenberg and Jim Dine have returned to painting. Ironically, he has not attained the star status of the later generation of performance artists that includes Laurie Anderson and Eric Bogosian.

Whitman's *Black Dirt*, which had its Philadelphia premiere at the Painted Bride Art Center last weekend and continues there today through Sunday, builds up from its creator's distinctive elements: an enveloping space, silence, and a slow, rhythmic flow of images and events. The result is a cumulatively intimate, dreamlike experience of primal strangeness.

The Bride has been veiled for the occasion, with the performing and audience space enfolded in a gauzy white tent. This and other fabric elements were produced with the Fabric Workshop, which co-commissioned the piece with the Painted Bride and other experimental venues. The tent seems a kinder, gentler version of Whitman's earlier, more confrontational efforts to bring audience and performance together.

A projected image of a slowly twirling onion moving, planetlike, around the tent wall sets the mesmerizing pace. Soon after, a film of

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two people appears in ghostly projection on a large pile of dirt. Just as one is adjusting to this scale of illusion, the dirt begins to shift and two real people emerge from underneath. They show the audience obscure organic images printed on their white clothes, which later act as screens for further projections.

All the projections take place in a disconcerting silence, which enhances their mystery and directness. Whitman's work has always hinged on such nuanced orchestrations, which, like the magician's artifice, aim to disarm expectations and stimulate wonder.

Interspersed with other odd intrusions and extrusions are a series of miragelike scenes. A couple appears and reappears in glowing spaces behind the scrim of the tent wall, engaging in archetypal speaking situations — a newscast, a cafe tete a tete, a telephone chat — in what sounds like tongues but actually is altered foreign languages. Like theater artist Robert Wilson, Whitman uses opaque walls of words to break down the usual function of theater as speech and throw the audience back on the images he creates.

Light becomes a palpable actor, with atmospheric fogs of blue or red filtering through the tent cloth. Toward the end, these slow shifts of suffused color, along with the in-and-out "breathing" of the tent, trigger a total visceral experience.