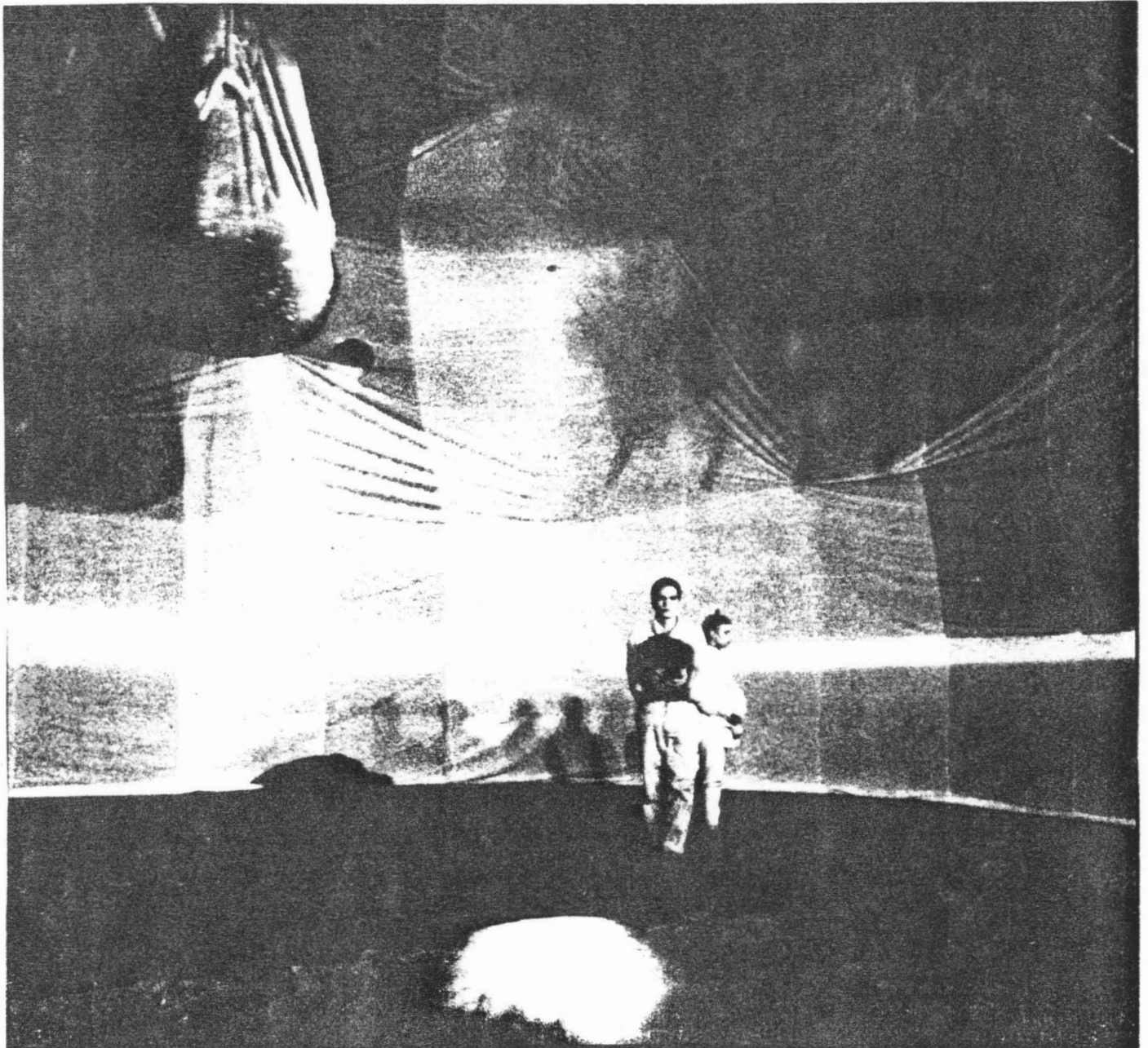


BOSTON AFTER DARK

THE BOSTON PHOENIX

APRIL 13, 1990

# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



*Afterward, it crystallized into pictures that I kept on seeing.*

## Whitman sampler

*Black Dirt is a Happening for the '90s*

by Rebecca Nemser

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**BLACK DIRT.** By Robert Whitman. At MIT's Experimental Media Facility, Wiesner Building (20 Ames Street, Cambridge), through April 14.

Robert Whitman was one of many artists in the early '60s who participated in Happenings — loosely structured events designed to break down the boundaries between painting and theater, artist and audience, art and life. Happenings were theater without drama, painting without pictures, music without melody. They opened up the world of art to daily life by letting random sounds and actions take the place of narrative and exposition. Happenings went on for hours, sometimes days. They took place in storefronts and studios and parks. The world was their stage.

Most of the artists associated with Happenings — Jim Dine, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg — eventually went back to the studio, but Robert Whitman kept on creating Happenings-like performance pieces. He has spent the last three months in Boston working on *Black Dirt* with local artists and students from MIT and the Massachusetts College of Art.

I was eager to see *Black Dirt* because I've always regretted that I never saw a Happening (though I did go to a Be-In in Golden Gate Park). On the way to MIT, I stopped for ice cream at Toscanini's, and they were playing Jefferson Airplane. The pulsating sound of Grace Slick singing "Don't you want somebody to love? Don't you need somebody to love?" seemed like a good sign.

But Whitman's *Black Dirt* wasn't hot and psychedelic; it was cool and meditative. It wasn't about embracing the rush and tumble and sensory overload of contemporary life. It was about retreating to an inner space where light, poetic images could just drift up and float slowly by.

The whole Experimental Media Facility — the Cube — was hung with billowing white cloth, and everything was caressed by soft white light. A few trees were suspended from the ceiling, and so were some ropes and hooks and

pipes. On the floor was a long strip of canvas splattered with black and red paint. In the center of the room was a pile of sand and something wrapped in black cloth. A picture of a balloon floated by. Then it was dark. A picture of an onion floated by. The lights turned red, then white. Then it was dark.

I saw the outlines of trees, and a few dreamy pools of light. I heard the sound of wolves growling, then footsteps, then a crunchy sound, like walking on dried pine needles, or sand, or rain. The soft white cloth undulated and began to descend, then stopped. The light turned green. The pile of sand seemed to move. Behind the cloth, two people began to speak in a strange, imaginary language. The light turned blue.

The pile of sand began to move and two black shapes crawled out. A man and a woman, both dressed in white,

## Performance

climbed out of a mound of black cloth. They wrapped the sand in the cloth and tied it to one of the ropes hanging from the ceiling. It lifted up slowly and hung in the air, twirling slowly.

The light turned pale green. The dancers took a series of pensive poses — holding their foreheads, hunching over, staring out. Lights appeared in the ceiling, pale green and pink. They took off their shirts and hung them on the wall. Now they were wearing white shirts, with some black paint on them. They walked in slow, graceless steps.

I thought of Laurie Anderson's "Strange Angels": "Strange angels — singing just for me/Old stories — they're haunting me/This is nothing/Like I thought it would be.../I looked up and there they were:/Millions of tiny teardrops/Just sort of hanging there/And I didn't know whether to laugh or cry/And I said to myself/What next, big sky?"

The lights turned blue, then dark blue. Something moved through the canvas on the ground, rippling like an impulse or a wave. The light turned pale green. The

dancers took off another layer of shirts — one more step in their intellectual strip tease. Something about the streaks of black paint on their shirts reminded me of the big brushstrokes in Robert Rauschenberg's paintings, and I realized that I was watching an Abstract Expressionist tableau vivant. Dancers and images were moving through the white space like brushstrokes and pieces of collage moving across a canvas or a picture plane.

The light turned pink. A black cloth began to rise from the floor. It was a square, like the black paintings that Ad Reinhart and Frank Stella painted in the '60s. The dancers disappeared behind the black cloth, and then their forms moved, rippling behind the cloth.

A talking mouth was projected onto the cloth, without sound. Behind the billowing white curtains, two persons began to talk to each other across the room, in the imaginary language, on red telephones. The dancers folded up the canvas, the sky billowed. The light turned pink. The canvas was lifted up until it curled back like a white wave. The light turned red. An open eye floated by. Behind the cloth, I saw the silhouettes of trees and the dancers. The light turned cool, bright white. The ceiling rippled and billowed.

Silence. White light. I was taking notes, and the only sound I could hear was the sound of my own writing. It was over.

While it was happening, I wasn't sure whether *Black Dirt* worked, but afterward, it crystallized into pictures that I kept on seeing. I took a walk along the river with a friend, and the reflection of city lights in black water reminded me of *Black Dirt*. So did some low street lamps shining on a patch of grass, and the whir of cars zooming by.

Throughout the performance, everyone in the small theater was in a state of anxious expectation, waiting for the Happening to happen. There was a big white pipe hanging from the ceiling, and I kept expecting black dirt to fall from the sky onto the floor. But it never happened. In the end, there was no black dirt — only white light. □