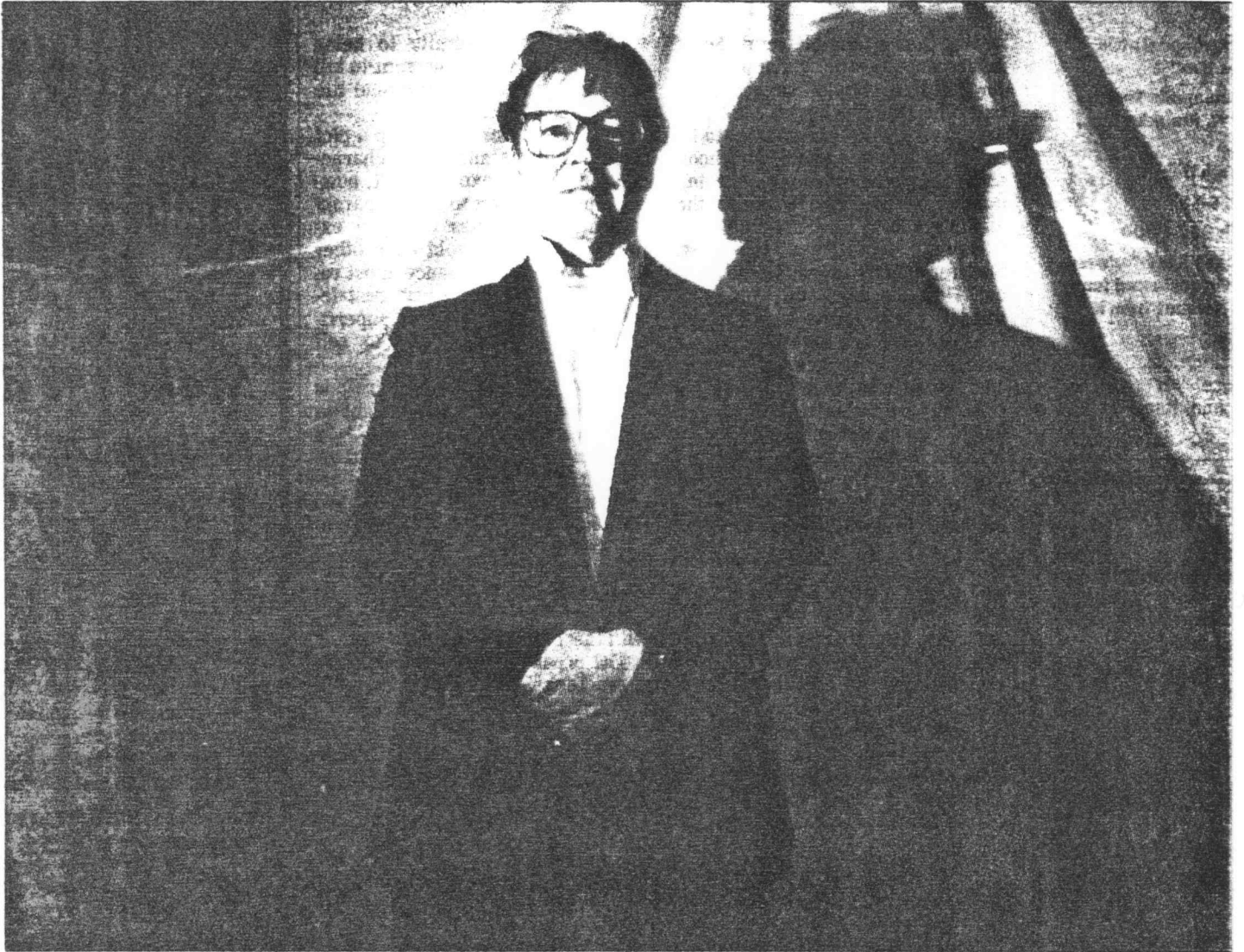


# Pioneer Spirit



CHRIS POLYDOROFF/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Robert Whitman, on the set of "Black Dirt," his newest performance-art installation.

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- ROBERT WHITMAN: A history of performance art
- LAMBERT: "48 Hours," "WIOU"
- COMIC RELIEF: Pat Bucher **12C**

**O**ne of the founding fathers of performance art is in the Twin Cities this week, doing what he has done for the three last decades: making art out of images, sounds and movement.

Robert Whitman, whose multimedia performances helped launch the "happenings" phenomenon of the late '50s and early '60s, is now 55 years old. Unlike such contemporaries as Robert Rauschenberg, George Segal, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg and Red Grooms, all of whom were involved with happenings early in their careers but went on to fame and fortune as painters or sculptors, Whitman has remained faithful to performance art.

He lives modestly and in relative obscurity in Warwick, N.Y., a small town about 90 minutes from Manhattan. He works sporadically; performance art has never attracted a mainstream audience, and despite his acknowledged influence, commissions are few. "Black Dirt," his newest work, is only the third large-scale piece he has created since 1984.

"Black Dirt," which opens a four-performance run tonight at Southern Theater under the auspices of Walker Art Center, promises to be vintage Whitman in its use of film — projected images have been part of virtually all of his works since the early '60s. But it is "the first piece I've done in years," he says, "with language."

Not dialogue, for the notion of expressing his ideas through conventional stage dialogue lost its appeal to Whitman while he was a student at Rutgers University in

- **WHAT:** "Black Dirt"
- **WHEN:** Tonight through Saturday
- **WHERE:** Southern Theater, 1420 S. Washington Ave., Mpls.
- **TICKETS:** \$9-\$7
- **PHONE:** 340-1725

*Robert Whitman has been creating multimedia art works — fusing sound, movement and images — for 30 years. Yet, by its very nature, the art form remains ever fresh, invigorating and surprising.*

**BY ROY M. CLOSE**

STAFF WRITER

the mid-'50s. Although he had intended to major in theater, he was won over completely by modern art.

"As far as I was concerned, the visual art world was much more exciting than the theater world," he recalls. "But I wasn't an art major, I was an English major; I was totally clueless about art."

But he was soon drawn into a small circle of artists interested in blurring the traditional boundaries between visual art and theater. After graduation, he moved to New York and helped found the Reuben Gallery, which sponsored both performances and exhibitions. It was at the Reuben that Allan Kaprow's "18 Happenings in 6 Parts," the piece that introduced the term "happenings," was performed in 1958.

Whitman, incidentally, has never de-

scribed his pieces as happenings. "I felt it was misleading," he explains, because it suggested spontaneity and improvisation. "My pieces weren't improvised. I don't think anybody improvised. What people thought was random stuff wasn't random, it was just unfocused."

For a few heady years, happenings were not only popular but wildly fashionable. Then the fad died, and within a few years, Whitman was one of only a handful of artists interested in multimedia performances.

These days, however, performance art occupies a small but growing niche in the arts world. Locally, Minneapolis' Intermedia Arts Gallery frequently offers performance art. So does the Southern, where "Black Dirt" will be presented. And Walker, sponsor of Whitman's visit, regularly hosts performance artists.

Those who attend "Black Dirt" will find themselves inside a large white muslin tent suspended from the Southern's lighting grid. The tent walls will serve as screens for various filmed images. Among the projectors will be one protruding through a hole in the center of the tent's roof; a revolving mirror will cause its images to appear to spin, like reflections from a mirror ball.

There will be four performers: two "movers" — Whitman stops short of calling them dancers — inside the tent and two speakers outside. The latter, who will recite texts from writers such as Virgil, Pushkin, Dante and Melville, will be seen only as shadowy forms.

What does it all mean? Whitman is reluctant to say; performance art, he confesses, is an unpredictable medium. "What you decide to do isn't necessarily what you end up doing. In this piece, I had the idea of injecting a certain kind of emotional context. Well, I find that it exists, but not in the way I'd thought."

But doesn't that make it hard on the audience?

"I don't see why anything should be easy," Whitman replies evenly. "The harder it is, perhaps the closer you are to some kind of vitality. And fun."