NICHE

performance 1978

Architecture considered as reflection and extension of body.

A network of ropes and pulleys translates the performer's position into the shape of a canvas tent. A feedback system, instigated by the tent's creaking, detects and reveals in sound the changes in the acoustical character of the space that accompany any motion of the canvas. The performer walks, creating a sequence of personal architectural spaces.

Preparation

Acquire sails, awnings, tarpaulins, drop cloths, old tents, or any other large pieces of canvas or similar heavy, tightly woven fabric. Join the pieces together to form a single sheet approximately the size of the performance area. Spread it out and center it on the floor. Tie ropes to each of the corners and to any number of points on the surface of the sheet. Fasten a pulley to the ceiling directly above each rope.

Pass the ropes through the pulleys and raise the sheet to form a tent. Attach additional pulleys to the ceiling, walls, and floors, wherever needed in order to run the ropes from the sheet, up to the ceiling, out to the walls, and back into the center of the space at floor level without obstructing the raising and lowering of the tent. Arrange the ropes and pulleys with radial symmetry, so

that the paths from the walls to the center resemble the spokes of a wheel.

Fasten one-inch iron or brass rings to parts of your body (for example: tie one to your belt, lace one onto a shoe, strap one onto a wrist). Tie a snap to each rope. Clip one snap onto each of the rings. When you walk through the space the tent will "follow" you as the ropes raise and lower its various sections. Adjust the lengths of the ropes to maximize both the accessible walking area and the excursion of the tent. You may tie off some of the ropes at the ceiling or at the base of the walls to create fixed points of support, but leave at least four lines moveable. Disconnect them from your body and snap them all onto a single 2"-3" ring. The tension of the ropes should equalize so as to center the ring and support the tent at a median height.

Attach a contact microphone or phono cartridge to one of the pulleys. Mount a shotgun microphone in a desk stand near the center of the floor and aim it at an angle up towards the ceiling of the tend. Connect the microphone cables to a 7 1/2 i.p.s tape head delay with compressors or limiters. Mix the outputs of the delay and send the signal through an amplifier to a tweeter speaker. Place the tweeter face up under the tent at least six feet from the shotgun microphone. Place the delay unit and amplifier at the periphery of the space where they can be reached when you are

attached to the ropes.

The creaking of the miked pulley "seeds" feedback between the speaker and the shotgun microphone. The response of the tweeter limits the feedback to mid-range and high frequencies only. At these frequencies canvas acts like a solid wall which reflects and absorbs sound. Movement of the tent effectively changes the size of the room as "seen" by the feedback. By locking on pitches whose wavelengths are integral to some dimension of the tent, the feedback will monitor closely any such change. The directionality of the shotgun microphone increases the system's sensitivity to small movements.

Prior to the performance tune the gain controls carefully so that the feedback is not continuous. The contact microphone should trigger both sustained feedback and damped ringing, depending on the shape of the tent. Then shut off the electronics and begin the performance out of silence.

Performance

Walk to the center ring. Detach the ropes. Snap them onto your rings. Move to the edge of the space. Turn on the electronics.

The position of your body at any moment is reflected in the shape of the tent, which is in turn described by the sound. Use

your kinaesthetic and aural intuitions to guide the construction of a personal architectural space or the evolution of a series of spaces that together form a comfortable architectural "rate of change".

Walk slowly across the floor. Move that part of your body connected to the miked pulley only in order to initiate feedback--do not move it while feedback is sounding. Generally move slowly enough to be able to detect and evaluate the slightest change in the acoustics of the tent, but occasionally perform sudden, disjunct actions. Generate difficulty by turning and tangling yourself in the ropes, leaning to the point of losing your balance, crouching beneath low portions of the tent, working at the limit of a rope's movement, etc.

Follow a pre-determined path across the floor or devise one as you go. Terminate the performance at the end of the path. Shut off the electronics. Disconnect the ropes from your body and snap them back onto the center ring. Leave the space.

Alternate Performance Realizations

Two or more persons attach themselves to the tent and attempt to construct their mutual image of an ideal space.

The tent weighs as much as the performer, who works suspended in mid-air beneath it.

Use other sound systems to detect and describe acoustical changes within the tent.

Photographs by Mary Lucier of a performance

of NICHE at the Kitchen, New York City, April 1978