

DOUGLAS DUNN, 308 Broadway:

The basic strategy of DOUGLAS DUNN's performance piece is to reverse that convention of performance that keeps the audience stationary and sends performers moving. That is, the focus of attention is not directed at what Dunn does with his body, but rather toward the way the spectator acts or reacts in the situation.

One enters the exhibit through Dunn's apartment. The exhibit itself is a wooden maze structure about 13 or 14 feet high, fully occupying a space of approximately 2,000 square feet. The initial passages, through the maze, run north-south and open eventually on two east-west passages, both of which lead to a window overlooking Broadway. The whole structure is rectilinear in layout. The basic building materials are cube-shaped box frames, about four feet by four feet, which are stacked three tiers high.

The plan of the maze is straightforward not labyrinthian — no one could get lost in it. Passage through it is so easy that, at first, one senses he has moved through it too quickly. Initially, the passages are regarded merely as corridors to a performance. Once one is at the end of the maze, the question arises as to where this performance is located. One retraces one's steps — has something been missed, overlooked? No performers arrive. One settles down to exploring the maze, regarding it as a sculpture.

The structure is attractive. It has a satisfying geometry, and the wood, a rough, pleasing texture. One gives the structure a few pushes and pulls to gauge its sturdiness. Perhaps the temptation to climb on it arises. Perhaps I am the performer?

One theme of the piece emerges from this first encounter. The absence of a performance, through an initial reversal of expectations, results in changing one's relationship to the environment. At first, the maze was taken as the housing of an event; its function was utilitarian and our regard for it peripheral. The sequence of events that makes the maze the center of attention is not only interesting in virtue of the way it shifts and esthetically refocuses attention, but also in the way that it promotes reflection on the motives and intentions that sent one through the maze heedlessly. In this sense, the piece is not only about the spectator's movement through the structure, but also about the decisions, preconscious and conscious, socially and individually determined, that condition movement in the maze.

Exploration finally yields one sudden discovery. There is a man lying on top of the structure, his eyes closed, his body quite motionless. One watches him from the floor, from several vantage points, retracing one's steps. How did I miss him? Again, the situation thrusts one back on an examination of ingrained perceptual habits.

The situation, by now, is reminiscent of a mystery story. The body has been found. Douglas Dunn has staged one of the all-time favorite fantasies, being witness to his own death. The situation evokes a wake with Dunn laid out like a Parsi on a rooftop. The imagery in and of itself is eerie and tantalizing. So one pauses to reconstruct the discovery and

its vicissitudes.

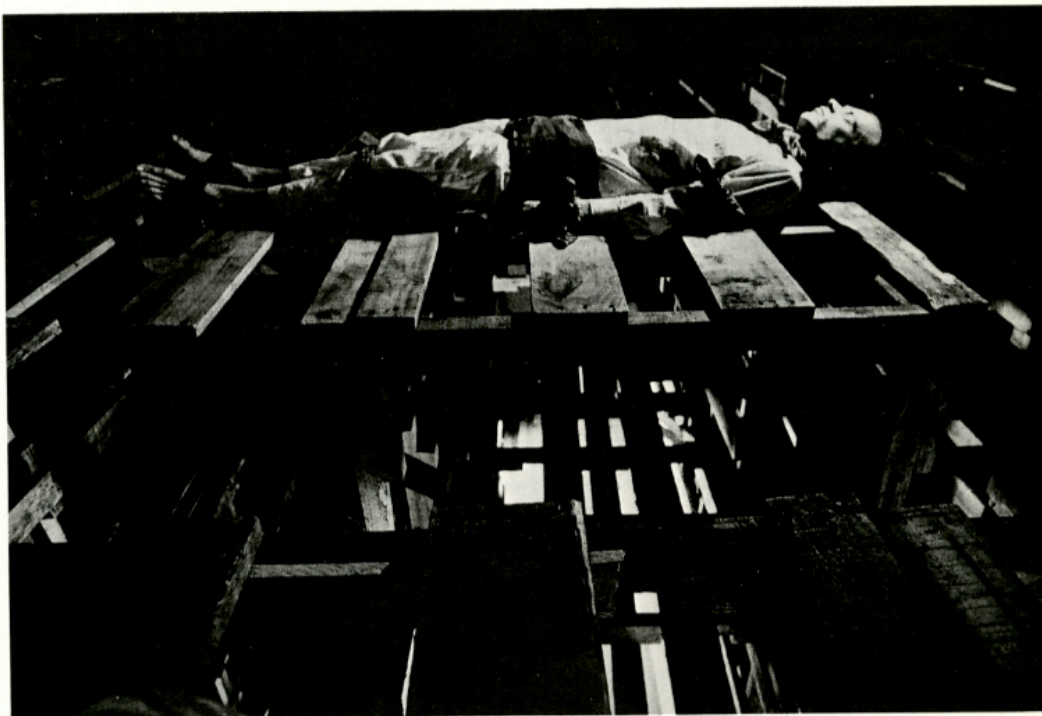
Curiosity develops — one wants a close look at Dunn. But can I climb on art? And private property to boot. The disposition to move higher is momentarily arrested by a complex preconscious set of beliefs suddenly brought to the forefront of consciousness.

It turns out that the maze has a vertical passageway. So maybe you're supposed to climb up. Once on the top a whole new set of questions develop: how close to Dunn should I approach and what is the proper distance? One may feel constrained by the necessity to maintain the culturally determined perimeter of personal space around Dunn or may feel the necessity to establish some semblance of

the virtual boundary between stage and spectator. The impulse to move closer triggers a conscious examination of the beliefs that determine everyday movement. And then more questions: shall I talk to him; can I touch him . . . ?

What Dunn has achieved in this piece is to arrange an extraordinary (in the sense of not everyday) situation, one whose lack of established protocol leaves the spectator to evolve his own. Movements, generally automatic, are now mediated by conscious decisions while, in turn, the decision-making performance reflects upon and makes evident the motives, beliefs, and manners that automatically determine movement and behavior.

—NOEL CARROLL



Douglas Dunn, Performance, 1974.