

"ACCEPT THE NEXT JOB OFFER YOU GET"

Review by CRAIG WERNER

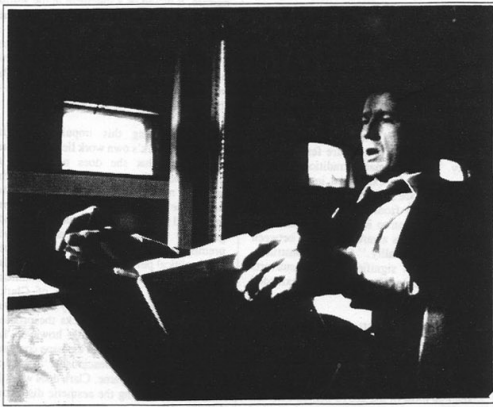
PERFORMANCE ART BY:

LAURIE BETH CLARK

Accept the Next Job Offer You Get, a performance orchestrated by Laurie Beth Clark (presented during February at Franklin Furnace in New York and during May at the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago) raises serious questions concerning the relationship between the politically committed work of art and the social questions it addresses. Confronting the basic economic reality of the labor marketplace, Clark offers a compelling sense of the alienation and confusion which ultimately reduce most job-seekers—secretarial or industrial, male or female—to feelings of helpless victimization.

To call Clark's work politically committed is to make several assumptions about the meaning of politics in contemporary American culture. While no one would mistake it for a pro-Reagan statement, *Accept the Next Job Offer You Get* is not ideological. Rather, Clark adapts a sophisticated approach to the politics of consciousness. By immersing the audience in an experience analogous to that of the job seekers, the piece poses political questions in experiential terms. Given contemporary economic conditions, the individual member of the audience is quite likely to recognize the specific details of his/her experience as an economic entity somewhere in the mass of detail included in the performance. Even recognizing the relative economic privilege of the typical performance art audience—and there was nothing immediately evident in the Franklin Furnace audience to challenge that designation—*Accept the Next Job Offer You Get* attracted an enthusiastic response almost certainly based on a deep sense of recognition.

This response seems particularly significant in light of Clark's conscious decision to stage the performance in a manner guaranteeing that any individual member of the audience would have only a partial experience of the piece. A central performance space—too wide to be seen in its entirety from any seat in the tightly packed house—was framed at the back by a line of video screens and on the side by relatively isolated "changing rooms." Beginning with a minimalist sequence of hamsters on treadmills, the screens presented numerous images of repetitive work. In the right-hand changing room, a man tried on a sequence of uniforms and/or costumes, each associated with a different type of work. In the left-hand



changing room—at the far edge of my own field of vision—a woman did the same. Within these perhaps overly symbolic frames—the significance of which I shall discuss below—the ensemble of amateur actors presented several vignettes related to the work place. Following an opening monolog by a woman in a custodial uniform, *Accept the Next Job Offer You Get* montages the dehumanizing experience of a job interview with the increasingly frenetic activity surrounding a conveyor belt which transfers empty boxes to additional workers who gradually fill the frame of a presumably typical American house. The juxtaposition of the suffering individual, reduced to a cipher by a kind of economically justified inquisition, with the entirely non-personal process of pure production provides the most compelling image of the piece. Clark's use of sound reinforces the rhythm of the performance, rising to a crescendo of industrial noise which effectively drowns out any attempt to reflect on the nature of the experience, before fading to near silence in the final movement, where the male and female workers stand naked as the ensemble slowly leaves the performance area.

There may well have been equally significant activities taking place in areas I couldn't see. The partial experience of the overall structure, however, cannot be separated from the underlying significance of the piece. For Clark, the economic system gains much of its power over the individual precisely from its ability to fragment perception, to create the illusion of a foreground drama—starring each

individual as helpless victim—without any synthetic awareness of the psychological or political frames. The roughness of the performance style—and quite possibly the framing devices which in "aesthetic" terms lack subtlety—reiterates the point. None of us views oneself as an adequate performer on the economic stage; we stumble over our lines, act mechanically, forever fall out of character, obsessively seek a better facade to hide our vulnerability (the costume changers). Meanwhile the system capitalizes (in literal as well as figurative terms) on our feeling of inadequacy, churning out a flow of pure product (Clark's empty boxes) to create the illusion of fulfillment in our lives, which are gradually reduced to empty containers for yet more product (the houses). The entire point, the power of Clark's vision, is that we are all in the middle of the mess all the time.

This powerful sense of experiential immersion leads to the central tensions raised by *Accept the Next Job Offer You Get*. On the one hand, Clark's work raises several familiar theoretical issues concerning the nature of interpretation, of meaning and its discontents. On the other, it raises what from my perspective are, under current conditions, more compelling questions concerning the possible relationship between the work of art and the world. More specifically, Clark's concern focuses on that part of the world represented by the non-intellectual, non-artistically inclined workers who live out the issues raised by Clark as intensely (but not necessarily more intensely) than her performers or audience.

► Clark's work could certainly be described in terms of any number of theoretical structures. With only minor adjustments in vocabulary (and not entirely coincidentally), my description of the performance could be read as a Marxist polemic against surplus production as it exists under late bourgeoisie capitalism. Clark's style, which resists totalization, could be discussed as a manifestation of the deconstructive anti-Oedipal energies invoked by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The equal attention accorded men and women attests to a secure feminist sensibility. The performance tradition in which she works can be explicated in terms of a politically aware Brechtian post-modernism. Like everyone from Jacques Derrida and Frederic Jameson to Karen Finley and Run D.M.C., Clark is aware of the gap between the word and "reality." Clark deconstructs; she plays with signification; she subverts political rhetoric. The list could be extended indefinitely.

And, for the most part, irrelevantly. Reducing *Accept the Next Job Offer You Get* to a theoretical proposition—as I have done in my plot summary above—contradicts the source of its power. This is to say—and it should be noted that most of the above-named theorists are clearly aware of the point—that theoretical discussion as such has become a means of neutralizing the impact of any aesthetic statement, perhaps any statement at all. In underlying impulse, *Accept the Next Job Offer You*

Get is not intended primarily as a statement about the world. In the world it seeks to nurture, it would be a statement in the world, an act supporting a wide range of individuals attempting to improve—and it would be a mistake to subject the concept of improvement to a theoretical analysis which would serve only to further the despair which is the primary problem raised by Clark's work—their connection with the world.

Acknowledging this impulse—and the strength of Clark's own work lies in great part in the fact that she does not evade its implications—does not, however, render the problem more tractable. The fact is that *Accept the Next Job Offer You Get* has communicated primarily with an audience already generally of its theoretical and aesthetic premises and, for the most part, sympathetic to its political purposes. Yet its potential value rests precisely on its ability to communicate with a wider audience. Some of Clark's previous work—most notably a billboard project in Milwaukee—attacks the problem directly. For the time being, however, her primary confrontation with the issue continues to take place with a consciously "aesthetic" frame. Within this frame, Clark does what she can do, challenging the aesthetic distinction between "frame" and "piece" in order to redefine the cultural relationship between audience, performers and piece. The program notes for *Accept the Next Job Offer You Get* attest to Clark's awareness of the problems linking the traditional mode of artistic production to the economic system she criticizes: "We were interested in developing a mode of production and planning which allowed all of the people involved to have a primary investment in the piece. We were dissatisfied with the hierarchical modes of art-making found in both theater and in the visual arts in which participants give deference to a single artistic vision with which they may or may not sympathize... We would like to emphasize that *Accept the Next Job Offer You Get* is the product of a sustained group effort." The energy of the performance suggests that this group effort was in large part successful. While such issues have become familiar over the past decade, Clark's approach does not simply reiterate the obvious. Her specific contribution to this most ancient and revered of modernist/post-modernist endeavours lies in her determination both to redefine the collaborative process and to alter our perception of and participation in the world in which the theoretical questions raised by *Accept the Next Job Offer You Get* are most definitely not theoretical.

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