

Fotodeath

CLAES OLDENBURG

Notes on the performance *Fotodeath* (*Circus*).

The original title of the piece was *Circus* (referring to its structure, resembling the multiple simultaneous action of a circus). In two parts: *Ironworks* and *Fotodeath*, with an intermission feature: a set of slides, photos, and type, called *Pickpocket*.

Circus was given six times in the Reuben Gallery during February, 1961. The Reuben Gallery is a deep and wide store on Manhattan's East Third Street. The audience was seated as in a conventional theatre (and stood, when there were not enough chairs) facing a deep square stage. Over the stage were hung four strings of weak lightbulbs, producing when lit the sort of dingy light one remembers from circus tents.

In addition there were three individual lightbulbs over different areas of the stage, and a line of lights over a wall which marked the back of the stage, built across the store for the performance. There were thirty-four events in *Circus*, divided into seven sets. *Ironworks* was made up of four sets, *Fotodeath* of three sets. Excepting one set in *Ironworks*, there were five events in each set. Each event was assigned a zone on stage corresponding to a lightbulb or a string of bulbs. Turning on of the light cued the entrance of the event. The sets were separated by periods of darkness, during which colored lightbulbs placed around the theatre blinked.

The effect (from the audience's point of view) when all events of a set were in action was one of overlapping, superimposition. The wall at the back of the stage area was about seven feet high, having two entrances, one at either side. The entrances were hung with strips of muslin. Muslin was bunched and draped along the top of the wall. The

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FOTODEATH, Part 3 (*rehearsal photo*).

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wall and muslin were sprayed red, yellow, and blue in abstract patterns, giving a foggy color effect.

Behind the wall, on a perch to the left, in view of the audience, sat the Operator (Max Baker), controlling lights and phonograph records and projecting the slide sequence during intermission. Above the wall, the store receded into darkness. Dressing rooms were behind the wall. Excepting the entrance of a man with a bag in *Ironworks* I.5, all the players entered from behind the wall. The floor of the stage was of tile, broken in spots and repaired with cement (the store had once been a restaurant and the stage area corresponded to the kitchen).

The left side of the stage, called "the masculine," was painted a flat black and dominated by blacks, greys, and neutrals. At the meeting of the left wall and the wall across the stage was a muslin screen on which a shadow effect was projected (*Fotodeath* I.2). In front of the screen was a large construction of wood and burlap, called the "chimney."

The right side of the stage, called "the feminine," was by contrast brightly colored in dominating pinks and reds. A pink form, made of muslin around a hoop resembling a windsock, jutted out of the wall and hung from the ceiling.

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FOTODEATH, Part 1 (rehearsal photo).

A black wooden settee stood on the left side against the wall and a hatrack and long mirror hung on the right. Other furniture and objects were brought on stage.

Exits of events were cued by a Timer in each set. His departure from the stage was followed by the turning off of the lights over the other events in a determined sequence. When the light over an event was extinguished, the players either went backstage or helped in the darkness to set up props for the next event.

A scrim was hung across the front of the stage and so lit that the actions of preparation for the performance were dimly seen by the entering audience. Music was played before and after the performance. When the piece was ready to begin, the scrim was taken down and slowly rolled on a long bamboo pole in a deliberate action functioning as an event in itself.

THE SCRIPT

I. Fotodeath

- 1. *Pat's light* *Zone 1*
 A man, Lucas, enters from L. in a plain tight fastidious suit. He admires himself in many mirrors he takes from his pockets. He lies down with a tall mirror, posing himself in different ways, projecting himself upside down, etc. **drum record:
Chavez, all
way thru**

- 2. *Scrim lights* *Zone 2*
 The scrim is illuminated in pink and purple from behind. A girl in a military cap saluting and taking various patriotic poses in a shadow dance. Olga.

- 3. *Light bank 3* *Zone 3*
 Cliff, a wrestler, enters from R. in black tights, nude to the waist, with a pink soft baglike object, a wrestler with which he wrestles fiercely. **Bugle sound**

- 4. *Light bank 4* *TIMER* *Zone 4 L*
 A woman dressed as a man in hat, shirt, tie, and baggy suit, Judy, enters from L., goes to dresser and undresses in front of mirror. She wears extremely feminine clothes underneath. She admires herself as a woman then redresses as a man. She leaves L. taking mirror with her.

5. *Henry's light* Zone 4 R

A photographer, Carl, in a shiny black smock and a top hat brings out a camera and leads in a family of three to be photographed: Henry, Chippie and Marilyn. Sets them on a bench and then shows them several landscape samples. They disapprove. Finally he finds one they will accept. He hangs it behind them, gets under the fotocloth but the family collapses. The photographer sets them up again, gets under the cloth. Again they collapse, and so on.

When Timer leaves stage, the lights go out in the following sequence: 4—H—3—Pat's—Scrim, *but let scrim lights and record play a while at end.*

In blackout all leave stage or take new positions.

II. Fotodeath1. *Light bank 4* Zone 4

A woman enters L., Pat, in long dragging plumage and wings, very colorful and bizarrely made up. She walks slowly and artificially, only interested in herself. She pulls herself up and down the ladder in R. center taking poses, sticking her leg out slowly, etc.

2. *Light bank 2* Zone 2

Two girls in summer white costumes suggesting 1913 and a summer day on the ferry in the bay, Claire & Judy enter from R. One has a parasol. They walk slowly laughing and chatting to each other. There are bells on their ankles or under their skirts which jingle as they walk.

3. *Light bank 1* *TIMER is Gloria* Zone 1

A man in a coat and a woman in a coat with a happy birthday tiara. She carrying a piece of fresh ice and one arm in a black sling. Enter R. Henry and Gloria. She remains in the center, looking blankly. He knocks on door L. It opens showing a packed party in progress. Squeals and talk, etc. He retreats. He reconsiders. He



FOTODEATH, Part 2 (rehearsal photo).

knocks again. Again the view into the party. He does this again and again. Finally he enters without knocking. The woman then leaves the stage.

4. *Light bank 3*

Zone 3

Two men stumble in from L. Lucas and Edgar. They are drunk and make foul noises. One falls, the other picks him up. Then he in turn falls. They go back and forth then both fall and remain still. Another man enters from R. corner Zone 4 with a bag of black cans. He falls over the fallen men and the cans are thrown out on the floor. A fourth man enters with an empty bag and slowly picks up the cans. The other men lie still. The picker makes noises with the cans.

When timer gets backstage, the lights are cut in the following sequence: 4—3—2—1 slowly so as to emphasize silhouettes. Actors stop when lights go out. Blackout. All leave or take new positions.

III. Fotodeath1. *Strip lights**Zone 1*

Lights begin moving. After a while Majorette steps out from R. and saluting approximately at same rhythm moves by single steps back and forth across the stage. She does this throughout, always smiling. Chippie.

2. *Light band 2**Zone 2*

A man with a bandaged head and a white chair comes out from wall L. Lucas. He sits down gingerly but it hurts. He grimaces. He picks up the chair, moves it, tries sitting again. But it still hurts. He grimaces, etc. back and forth across stage.

3. *Light band 4**Zone 4 L*

A woman in a derby hat, mannish, dressed all in black with a patriotic band across bodice something like a Salvation Army woman. Gloria. Enters from R. She carries a black bag like a sample bag and a big can full of viscous liquid. She stops behind table center Zone 4, and takes out of the bag one by one, putting them on the table, numerous different objects of many colors but all marked clearly USA. It is as if she is demonstrating a product, but she has no expression on her face and says nothing. After piling up the objects, she pours from a huge can marked USA a viscous liquid which runs over the objects and on the floor. This she covers with a cloth marked USA. She remains standing over her work until blackout and forms a silhouette.

4. *Henry's light**Zone 4 R*

A man, Cliff, informally dressed, shirt open but wearing a jacket drags in as if dead a woman, Olga, dressed in sweater and skirt. He sits her in a chair by a table on which a meal is set. He props her up. He sits down to eat. She falls forward on the table and keeps doing this until

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FOTODEATH, Part 3 (rehearsal photo).

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the eater loses his patience. Each time he props her up. Finally he reverses the chair so that she will not fall into his food. But now she slides down on the floor. He ignores her and having finished his meal he wipes his mouth and leaves R.

5. *Light band 3* **TIMER**

Zone 3

Two men bring out—from behind the audience, down the aisle—a topheavy, tied together, mass of boxes painted black. It is a big object which they manipulate with some difficulty into the center of action and leave there. Carl and Edgar. Then they exit, like movers.

**Billboard
march
begins
quietly**

When Timers come off, the lights go out in this sequence:

4—Henry's—3—2—Strip

But very slowly, silhouetting first Gloria then object and finally on all alone the strip lights for a time. The music continues softly until strips off, then off abruptly.

Blackout and all leave stage.

Light band 3 on, over object.

House light.

Notes on and changes in the existing script:

Fotodeath

- I. 1. Drum record was Carlos Chavez' "Concerto for Percussion."
2. The "scrim" referred to in script was the above mentioned screen of muslin at stage left.
3. The bugle sound was eliminated. Cliff wrestled with a white stuffed laundry bag.
4. There was no dresser. Judy hung her clothes on the hat-rack. Under the men's clothing she wore cotton stockings and an old fashioned baggy frilly yellow slip.
5. The landscape samples were fragments edged in black, ripped from a large photomural of the Battery (which appears whole in rehearsal photographs).

- II. 1. The plumage was made of long tinted strips of muslin. The wings were eliminated. A sound effect record of cannonfire was played by the Operator.
- III. 1. The “strip” lights were the above mentioned lights above the wall across the stage. They were wired to a knob, the turning of which lit one bulb then another in traveling effect such as in electric signs.
 2. Lucas also wore an oversize G.I. raincoat.
 3. The “viscous liquid” used was wheat paste.