

Jerry Hunt, chewing gum, walked onstage at the Alternative Museum February 17 and stomped his feet as if testing the floorboards. Realizing his system, named *Birome (Zone)*: *Cube*, wasn't responding, he adjusted levels on a mixer, and loud, breathy, consonant chords began to pulsate. Two video monitors were responding—brilliantly colored objects slid across a dark field: a heart, a star, some seahorses, a crucifix. Abruptly, yet with a dancer's grace, Hunt made patterns with a small flashlight. He hung wind chimes and jingle bells from his arms, stood on a chair, and clapped his hands; hit blocks of wood together with the music's primitive beat; illuminated a flower-shaped rattle with a cigarette lighter; waved another rattle on a stick at the audience, holding a little basket under it; stuck a light bulb in a wall socket and made shadows with a cane.

Following intermission (and Annea Lockwood's *Spirit Catchers*, which I described last week), Hunt and Lockwood emerged waving bent poles, as if fly-fishing, which had bells and wooden swings attached. Moving intently, they whistled, made swooshing sounds, shook the bells, and occasionally slapped the swings on the floor. A computer system, called *Phalba (Converge)*, responded to the antics with rustling noises.

Your first reaction to Jerry Hunt is, he's hilarious, and he's nuts. His actions are so purposeful, though, so unremittently entertaining, and so consistent in their network of unfamiliar symbols, that you soon decide there's more going on than meets the brain. The atmosphere of his performances is humorous, technologically pragmatic, but hardly relaxed. He's constantly *presenting* something as though we're about to be enlightened, acting out bizarre rituals with matter-of-fact devotion like a Catholic missionary from another planet. Whatever he's doing, it comes from deep inside.

I called Hunt at his Texas farm, an hour's drive from Dallas, to ask how his systems work. He deluged me with technical and philosophical information, but I'll be content to outline a few premises. *Birome* and *Phalba*, he said, are small

Texas towns; he has a whole system of Texas geography whose geometry figures heavily in the structure of his pieces. Two microphones and two light detectors pick up Hunt's sounds and light fluctuations, which a computer decodes for patterns. These patterns become signals—"The meaning of the signals is the only part of the piece that's completely arbitrary, but once it's imposed, it might as well have been sent from heaven"—which indicate positions within 24 hours' worth of prerecorded audio information and 12 of video.

The signals tell the computer to alter the sounds and images by going backwards or forwards through that information. Hunt listens, decides whether he likes the direction it's going, and makes changes by stomping, hand claps, and jingling. In addition, there's a layer of

activity Hunt calls *commentary*: holding his objects toward the audience for a closer look, making motions that seem to stem from the angularity of Hunt's body. "I go through a range of confrontations with the audience. Some of the stomping

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and shaking is a kind of discontented magical ritual, such as was traditionally used to invoke spirits or chase away demons. Dancers are always coming up to me to ask about my stomping patterns."

This leaves the audience (I'm doing my own analysis now) with three levels, two perceived, one inferred: the apparent structure, the motions that are rhythmically related to the music; the underlying

Jerry Hunt Lone Star Voodoo

BY KYLE GANN



Texas stomper

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structure, the preset computer rules we can only guess at; and the commentary directed not to the system, but to the audience. In reality, except for the trivial cases of strict serialism and early minimalism, all music contains these levels, for every composer works with an underlying structure, a perceivable resulting structure nonidentical to it, and surface elements thrown in to direct the audience's attention. Normally, however, composing means creating the illusion that those levels are glued together.

Hunt opens up that space and lets the mind run free in the gaps, and it's an exhilarating experience trying to find the relations and tie everything back together. Unlike so much music that has a discrepancy between inner and outer (American serialism, say), Hunt's surface entertains, because of his skills as a performer and because of the weird sense of half-recognition his theater elicits. I'd classify him (though he certainly doesn't share the category with anyone) as a deconstructionist; a cross between John Cage and Monty Python's John Cleese, Hunt's exposing an irrationality at the core of all composing, one we're rarely made aware of intentionally.

"I hope," Hunt told me, "that after a few minutes some sense of the piece becomes available to the audience; probably not consciously, but on some level. It's not really different from other music, or even from anything else in the world. How much do you really understand the things that go on in the world around you? I sure as hell don't. I became interested in voodoo, but for a long time I avoided reading about it, because I said, it's a broken language, no one understands any more what it's all about. But that's the language of the world." As for religion in his performing, Hunt demurs, "I believe in absolutely nothing. . . I don't know how I got down this road, but I'm too far down it to turn back now. Sometimes I feel trapped by it, as though I was led down the road instead of choosing it. I had an uncle who was in an accident, and was brain-damaged, and he used to repeat, 'It's a long, narrow road that has no turning.' It's a strange world, the one I've ended up being in."