



RICHARD ALPERT: SYLPH, 1976, performance, at La Mamelle, San Francisco.

RICHARD ALPERT: Illuminating the Art Process

San Francisco

In the performance *Hand Generated Light* at the Museum of Conceptual Art in 1975, Richard Alpert locked himself in a closet and cranked a manual electric generator for three hours, keeping a tiny light aglow on the outside of the door. In *Spent Time, Spent Energy* at the 1975-76 San Francisco Art Institute Annual, he used the generator itself as a means of generating

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drawings as well as electricity. By cranking the motor's handle against large white panels, he was able to record the machine's path. In *Sylph*, Alpert's performance at La Mamelle on November 26, all the elements of generating art became pivotal points within a continuous circuit of energy.

In the darkened gallery space, Alpert arranged a triangular network of focuses. Around two of the corners that protrude into the gallery space, he used green light-ribbon to circumscribe 270-degree circular areas. A small monitor was placed on the floor within one circle. During the performance it showed a close-up view of Alpert's arms laboriously cranking a generator while drawing with it against a white panel. In the other circle, a tiny light bulb connected to the generator behind the wall illuminated the color photograph on Alpert's driver's license. The presence of the artist as a third focus behind the wall was intensified by the whirling rhythmic sounds of Alpert's exhaustive activity.

In *Sylph* Alpert is presenting the activity of making art as a double generative process. He uses the generator as a tool both to make art and to generate light. The audience in the gallery is given a view of the drawn product and of the drawing process. The electricity that is generated as part of this process serves to maintain the illumination of the artist's public image. The flickering light bulb, like a votive candle, keeps Alpert's validated social identity, his driver's license photo, visible during his activity. The visibility of his photograph reinforces the artist's determination that he and his work can somehow be seen. The ecology of Alpert's thinking implies the reciprocity of these parts to the whole. The artist generates work that nourishes the gallery and the audience. The gallery, in turn, establishes the identity illuminated by the artist in the process of generating work. In this sense *Sylph* clarifies an essential aspect of art-making as the process of transmitting and receiving energy. □