P-FORM

PERFORMANCE ART NEWS

Summer 1987 Vol.2,No.3

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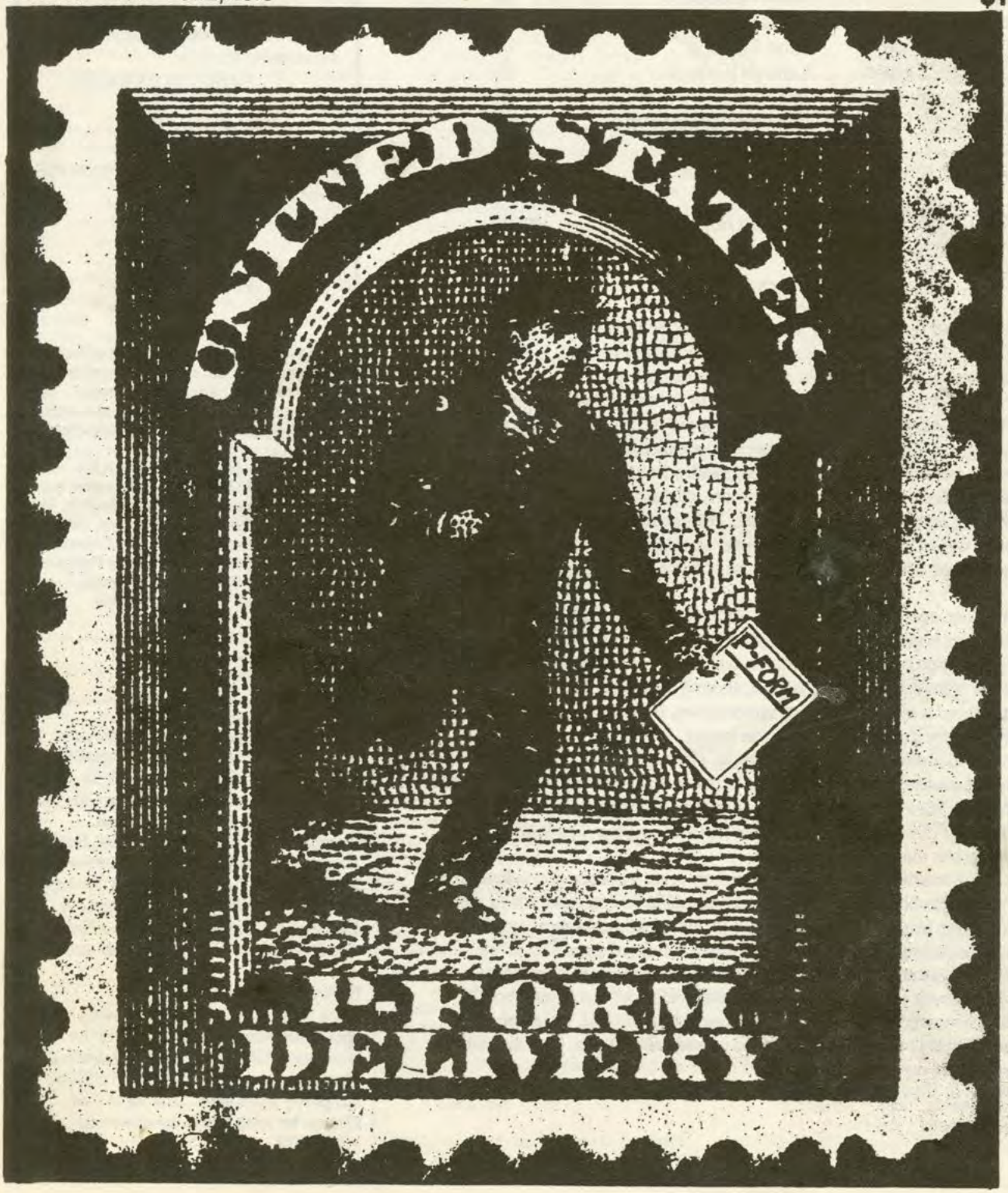

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EDITORIAL

Saints, the beserk and the possessed, speak in tongues and sleeptalkers speak our own language, but with impatient terseness and an alien inflection; so it is seldom that we have extended verbal reports from the domain of ecstatic time...

Several years ago, a man by the astonishing name of Breedlove became, for the second time in his life, the holder of the world land-speed record. He did this thing at Bonneville Salt Flats, in Utah, in a rocket-powered car called The Spirit of America. For two runs over a marked course one mile long, with a five mile running start, this Breedlove averaged a little over 600 miles per hour... slightly faster than the legally established speed of a trans-oceanic passenger jet. Had the ride been uneventful, we may expect that he would have nothing at all to say about it; the efficient driving of an automobile at any speed neither requires nor permits much in the way of conscious deliberation.

But, as it turned out, something did happen. At the end of his second run, at a speed of about 620 miles per hour, as he was attempting to slow down, a brake mechanism exploded, and in the space of about one-and-one-half miles both drogue chutes failed to operate, and the car went entirely out of control, sheared off a number of handy telephone poles, topped a small rise, turned upside down, flew through the air, and landed in a salt pond. Incredibly, Breedlove was unhurt.

He was interviewed immediately after the wreck. I have heard the tape. It lasts an hour and 35 minutes, during which time Breedlove delivers a connected account of what he thought and did during a period of some 8.7 seconds. His narrative amounts to about 9,500 words, which is about as long as this text will be when I have finished writing, and it has taken me all my life.

In the course of the interview, Breedlove everywhere gives evidence of condensing, of curtailing; not wishing to bore anyone, he is doing his polite best to make a long story short. Compared to the historic interval he refers to, his ecstatic utterance represents, according to my calculation, a temporal expansion in the ratio of some 655 to one. Proust, Joyce, Beckett, seem occasionally to achieve such explicatory plenitude.

But perhaps Breedlove's most amazing remark came before all that. Rescuers, expecting to find him mangled as by a tiger, discovered him, instead, intact, prone at the pool's edge, still half in the water. He looked up and said to them, very distinctly: "For my next act, I'll set myself on fire."

- from "Incisions in History/ Fragments of Eternity" by Hollis Frampton

P-FORM

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P-FORM is a bi-monthly publication dedicated to the development and understanding of performance art. We are committed to building critical discourse in Chicago, and welcome your response and participation.

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We would like to extend our thanks and appreciation to all those who helped with our successful Release Party/Benefit on April 4, 1987. They are: Laura Weathered and the Near Northwest Arts Council, Chris Montgomery and N.A.M.E. Gallery, Double Door Liquors, Brigid Murphy, Matthew Owens Robert Daulton, Scarecrow Dick, Shrimpboat, Perry Venson, Jim Thorek, Su Montoya, Bob Whittinghill, Nancy Martell, Wayne Fielding, and Steve Jones. Thanks again to you all!

ERRATA - April/May issue:
In the "Talk Talk Talk" review, Sharon Mesmer should have been noted as one of the founders of Letter eX (along with Debbie Pintonelli). Mesmer is in fact still affiliated with this poetry news letter. Thanks to Carl Watson for bring this to my attention.
- JO PEER

SPOKEN WORD CAFE

LARRY HEINEMANN
GERALD NICOSIA
Chicago Filmmakers
February 14-15, 1987

The spirit of the sixties mingled with the spirit of Macho during February's Spoken Word Cafe when novelist Larry Heinemann read from his recent Paco's Story, followed by Gerry Nicosia with his novel The Spiritual Athlete and a docu-video tribute to Jack Kerouac.

Heinemann's 30-minute presentation was dominated by the section entitled "Good Morning to You, Lieutenant." But first he felt compelled to give what he called a history of James. Since the narrators in his novel (apparently ghosts) address a certain James, the Jameses of royalty, the Bible and so on were called forth ironically -- perhaps even humorously. An admirably pull-no-punches writer, Heinemann's arrogance regrettably overtook him and the introduction ran too long. His self-consciously blase use of terms like "fucking" and "pricktease" foreshadowed a none too generous view of women. (Must men, in showing their toughness, always treat women poorly?)

Heinemann is connected with Columbia College's See It method of writing which insists on evocative language. "Good Morning" describes a Vietnam jungle encounter written with a "Platoon"-esque realism which definitely needs expression. (Paco's Story, his second novel and the second on Vietnam -- Heinemann is a veteran -- has received good press.) Yet why did he choose to highlight a horrifying account of the cruel rape, torture, and eventual murder of a teenage Viet Cong girl by American soldiers? We are by now aware of the many My Lai-sort of terrors from that war. In the context of the entire book, it is difficult to know what the passage might signify; delivered on its own, it reveals sickening racism and sexism. This was a disturbing piece of writing, unrelieved by the redemption of an alternate compassionate viewpoint. In selecting this section, albeit one cloaked in "gritty," well-written prose packed with gratuitously gruesome details, he left an impression of approving hostility. It lent a bad odor to the work.

The power of good literature lies in its ability to rise above human atrocities, not simply savor them. If there were a reason for such a heartless outlook, Heinemann didn't show us. We need to go read the book -- but after this excerpt, who wants to? Heinemann ended up self-indulgent as well as offensive. Still, the clean-cut academic audience listened raptly to whatever this famous author had to say.

Gerald Nicosia's critical biography of Jack Kerouac, Memory Babe, has also been well-received, and so he has gone back to work on the Beat Generation in his humorous look at the San Francisco writing/publishing scene. He gleefully acted out the parts rather that just reading them: Nicosia's down-to-earth narrator tells the adventures of thinly-disguised characters like Lawrence Ferlinghetti (known personally by the author) at City Lights bookstore.

A usually-interesting video on Kerouac was shown after the Cafe part of Spoken Word. "West Coast: Beat and Beyond," seemingly subtitled "25 Years on the Road" and with Nicosia's scripting and voiceover, presented biographies and opinions of writers such as Ginsberg -- who sang, naturally -- Philip Lamantia, and Ken Kesey. The appearance of several significant women was a refreshing inclusion as Bobbie Louise Hawks, JoAnne Kyer, even Kerouac's daughter Jan were featured. And a number of poets read not only their own work but poems on Jack himself. Considering it took a full hour of peering at two TV screens, "West Coast" was successful, if a bit slow-moving and out of time in these relentlessly fast-track eighties. It may have done better on its own, perhaps preceded by a brief opening from Nicosia.

Because a performance is so hard to sustain with novel excerpts, the overall presentation had trouble sustaining continued interest. While Nicosia generated real enthusiasm, Heinemann's smug assurance grated on the growing marathon-like aspect. The reading of a work does not a performance make, so the Spoken Word ultimately had the feel of an undergraduate lecture on two opposing topics, the aggression of war and the tolerance of peace.

JO PEER

EXPERIMENTAL SOUND STUDIO

The Experimental Sound Studio (ESS) is pleased to announce the opening of our facilities this June, 1987. ESS is an artist run non-profit corporation for the promotion and production of Sound Art and Experimental Music. The studio will have two Yamaha DX7 synthesizers, a Mirage Digital Multi-Sampler, two CX5M Music Computers, an Apple IIE computer and other equipment. We plan to establish an 8-track recording and mix-down system in the near future.

If you are interested in becoming a user or supporting member of ESS -- call us! Help expand the forum where artists can work, educate, and interact with each other and the community. Donations are 100% tax deductible.

Contact Eric Leonardson (312-342-5012) or Perry Venson (312-243-2952). Mailing address: ESS c/o Perry Venson, 1524 S. Peoria, Chicago, IL 60608.

------P-FORM------SURVEY------

Welcome to the second installment of the P-Form Questionnaire. We invite not only your response to the specific questions below, but also request ideas for further topics, and comments on the issues we have selected.

QUESTIONNAIRE PART 2: PROCESS

We have observed differences in approach to performance-art-making, as manifest in the work itself. We would like to open dialogue concerning the effect of the means on the ends.

1) Describe a hypothetical working situation which you might consider ideal.

2) a. What do you settle for?
   b. Why is this, your actual working method, the best way for you to work?

3) Performer A makes no distinction between life and art, and the performances are site and time specific.
   Performer Z separates life from art. The elements of the work are concisely controlled. The work can be recreated anytime, anywhere, to satisfaction.
   Qualitatively graph the difference.
   Plot your position on the graph.

Send your answers, 100 words per question, and comments to P-Form, c/o Randolph Street Gallery, 756 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago 60622, by August 1, 1987.

THIS IS IT

DANI K./ROBERT METRICK
CARMELA RAGO
E. JAY SIMS
MARK WARE

Curated by TOM JAREMBA

Daley College
March 19, 1987

What is it? What is it? Obvious. It is An Evening of Performance Art curated by performance artist Tom Jaremba. "This Is It." Work by Dani K. and Robert Metrick, Mark Ware, Carmela Rago, and E. Jay Sims.

It started early and outside the theater. There was whispered confusion as people craned to see something, which turned out to be E. Jay Sims clad in a black body-stocking (head and all), undulating down a narrow corridor and into a wider one. She reached a suspended floor-length dress of sticks, after which the piece is named, (and which, incidentally, is the most interesting and least clichéd thing about it) and staggered around for a bit. An obligatory video monitor displayed images that mimicked the performance. As the figure began to crouch into the dress some audience member, acting on cue, awkwardly informed us that it was time to enter the theater, thus temporarily ending the piece. As it happened, Sims continued to probe emotional depths, lingering in the viscera of the dress during the intermission and even at the end as people were leaving Daley.

Inside, Carmela Rago enters a bare stage, burdened by a large travel bag. She has just arrived from Fairfield, Iowa, where, she says, residents are preoccupied with meditation, levitation, and self-examination. In a halting monologue she shares notions of life, death, and skepticism about this "age of enlightenment" in which we, and especially those in Fairfield, supposedly live. Her bags aren't her only burden -- Carmela Rago's performance was neither funny nor provocative, both of which it tried to be. Her carefully scripted narrative might have been more effective if not so reliant on gags and if not so obviously delivered. She might even sometime distinguish herself if she manages to exploit her awkward sense of timing instead of using convention to try to conceal it.

Mark Ware's subdued, lyrical "Over The Sea Run The Hares" explores relationships between observation and perception and awareness and knowledge. Questions about how we perceive what we sense, or how we know what we know, are inferred by Mark Ware's taped narrative of his personal stories and mundane, daily activities accompanied by often equally mundane slides. This piece, performed in Chicago last winter, ably and even beautifully "introduc[es] the idea that fate. . . is merely a way of perceiving: what others might consider coincidence we may assign a larger order to" (P-Form, Vol. 2 No. 1).

Ennui, alienation, and emotional distress aren't such a secret. "The Secret Life of Dust" portrays an existence startlingly similar to ours, characterized (for certain dusty bombasts, anyway) by an awareness of dissuasive totalities, ectotubular prosaicisms, and other narcischismatic fetishisms. Dust of, about, and among dust. ("What the hell are you staring at?" Dani K. asked Allen Ross, who didn't even bother answering, and hadn't even been staring, so engaged was he in his Life and Total.) Capable of action, reaction, emotion, intellect, and endless waiting, our inevitable fraternization with dust (or ashes) may not be so bleak. Or it may. Is this "Secret Life" a cynical tract against human existence or a graceful pretense that life does indeed matter? Are these two questions so different? Perhaps the answer, as already suggested, lies less in our heads than in our hearts. Or, more likely, it doesn't lie anywhere at all -- but Dani K. and Robert M. successfully realize the value of using humorous means to ask such questions. ✱

IRENE TSATSOS

vera frenkel

Center for New Television
April 7, 1987

"My work is about demonstrable facts, and things that might as well be."
-- V. Frenkel, 1987

Vera Frenkel's recent videotapes are narratives set in a not-too-distant future where certain seemingly benign aspects of our society have evolved into formidable laws of oppression. In the outwardly sedate environment Frenkel describes in her stories, cultural meaning has been corralled to service institutional and economic concerns, and the concept of freedom of speech has been turned on its head to protect the culture, becoming freedom of censorship.

Frenkel, a Canadian artist who has worked in video since 1974, combined her interest in storytelling with her recent experience with the Ontario Film and Video Review Board, concocting videofables that warn against an Orwellian future. The tapes are not preachy or foreboding, but are light stories starting with the universal "once upon a time. . . " pitch that anticipates romantic adventure and intrigue. Frenkel has previously explored the popular genre of the detective story and the glamorous ideal of the artist-in-exile, trying to unravel the "received ideas inherent in popular formats, the embedded assumptions that inform consumerism of them." By exposing the ideology latent in common storytelling, Frenkel hoped to urge viewers to become aware of and to question the power relinquished by their unconscious assumptions.

In 1984, Frenkel came up against the political reality of the concepts she had criticized. With a new conservative government in Canada the Ontario Board of Censors suddenly became active, during an election year, insisting that all film and video be screened by the board before public viewing. The Censors raided a gallery called "A Space," confiscating equipment and works of art which dealt openly with homosexuality, on the night before Frenkel was to premier a new tape. Her distributor pulled its support "in an ugly way," and she was left to fend for herself. She screened her work illegally, which she continues to do.

From this experience came two tapes: "The Last Screening Room:

A Valentine" and "Censored: the Business of Frightened Desires." The first tape, completed in 1984, is a meandering story, set in the near-future, about an old storyteller who is picked up by the authorities because she has no identifying papers, speaks in a lilting way, and carries an old map from another time "when it was permitted in Canada to tell any story at all." The narrator, Frenkel, who tells the story in voice over, speaks in a soothing manner like a mother telling a story to a child, explaining that she gathered the story from the prisoner while working within the prison system as unmonitored confidant to inmates, a state-instituted position. The storyteller's story is circuitously about some artists in the Western Front of Canada who told stories/romantic versions of their lives which the narrator now feels compelled to retell, though this act is illegal, because "memory is known to be a highly flawed method of capturing data" and "trafficking in undocumented information or the measurably unreliable is suspiciously related to storytelling and is therefore against the law."

"The Last Screening Room" is about romance. Frenkel uses the term Romance to mean "fictive" (from the French: unconnected to daily life) to expose the lure of tourism -- "Vancouver is where lovers met without fear, and departed without pain, and sea captains gave away their contraband goods. It gave meaning to the lives of everybody who did not live there" -- and as seduction. "Romance relies on seduction. It is rooted in projection, the attribution to others of what goes on inside of us. Falling in love is what happens when the projections are mutually useful." Frenkel alludes to media and institutional seduction: "They have sold us a bill of goods" that is economically lucrative and institutionally useful.

And politically useful. Feminist concerns against aggression against women, via pornography, became grist for a Canadian conservative mill which found Mary, a blonde with five children, who was sympathetic with the Ontario Board of Censors, to become their election time spokesperson. Mary took clips from Board-censored porn films into churches and schools and showed them to parents (!) as examples of what they were being saved from. Frenkel maintains that this was a quick, cheap way to get female votes for an upcoming election, legitimizing the censorship campaign and allowing the parents voyeuristic pleasures.

Frenkel's most recent tape directly addresses the censorship practices of the Canadian Government. "Censored: the Business of Frightened Desire" traces the story of

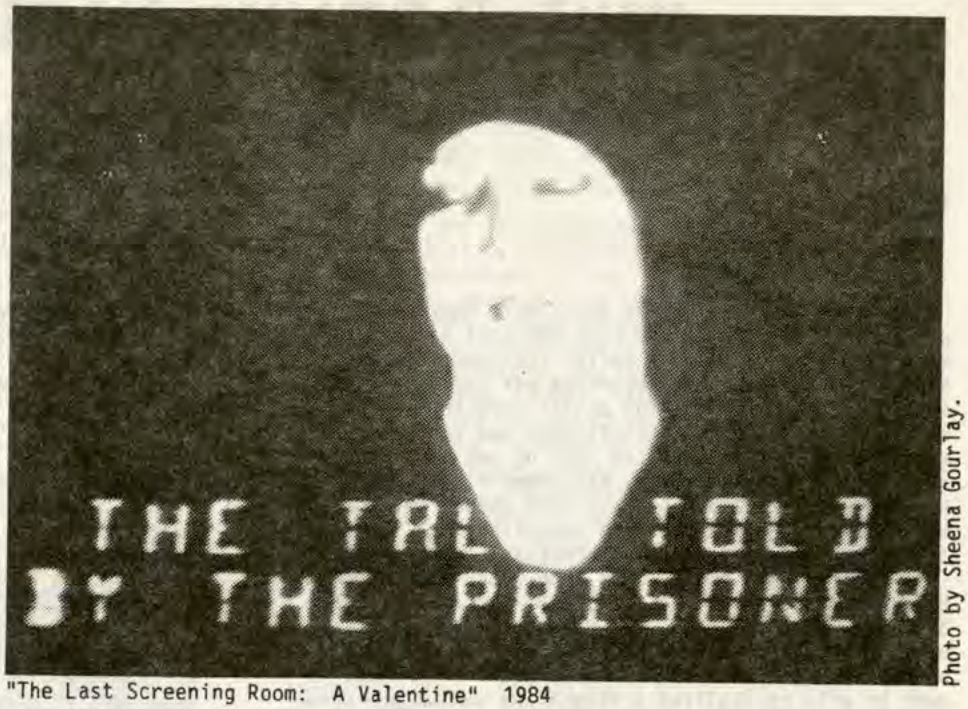

Photo by Sheena Gourlay.

"The Last Screening Room: A Valentine" 1984

a documentary filmmaker who produces a film about fleas. As in the earlier tape, Frenkel is the calm narrator who relates the story of the relationship between the filmmaker and the governmental forces of control. The film could be a benign BBC documentary except that the Censor Board finds reprehensible the footage wherein fleas feed and copulate at the same time: "Any protrusion is suspect, any aperture a temptation." The filmmaker tries to mask the genitalia, unsuccessfully, then decides to reshoot the film, starving the fleas, so that they only fight and kill each other. The resulting footage of murder and carnage is entirely acceptable to the Censor Board, and the filmmaker now understands community standards and frightened desire. He exploits the public sector with the adventure and goes underground with the penetration stuff and makes the real money. Frenkel's scenario must be pretty accurate, because the non-facts reported in the tape, which openly spoke of Mary and the Ontario Board of Censors, were reported as real news in the local newspaper.

Frenkel's irony barely avoids smugness by playing on the smugness of her oppressors. Her stories are so simply clever, her manner so casual, that one wonders how seriously her jibes are to be taken. Through her video visuals she reinforces her narrative criticisms. Both tapes were originally shown as part of installations, and shots of props from these installations are part of the visual vocabulary of the tapes. Frenkel plays on the various processes of legitimization, showing objects in museum cases, scientific drawings, and scratchy art history slides, to point out how easily we accept their authority. She also exposes the authority of mass media dreams, showing palm trees, exotic oceanscapes, and colorful Valentine doilies to entice the viewer to realize the hollow, but accepted, nature of these popular romances. Frenkel uses music much like she uses the visuals, quoting from different genres that are smugly trendy and accepted as art: popular opera, east Indian music, and 19th century waltzes.

Frenkel's video stories about storytelling try to undermine the authority of the storyteller. But fighting propaganda is a]ways a tricky business. Frenkel understands this: "There is a delicate balance between passionate commitment and propaganda." She knows the pratfalls of any sort of orthodoxy, be it feminism, linguistics, or democracy, and continually dances around theoretical confinements. However, she can exploit the genres which she criticizes, unravelling in a narrative way that expands itself to include doubt. Frenkel remains an active skeptic: "Skepticism can serve as an aphrodisiac, suggesting the infinitude of desire."

Frenkel uses the video medium to underscore the power of television in our society. If something is aired on the 6:00 news, it might as well be a fact, for TV is the most influential medium in the shaping of modern belief systems. In her videotapes, Frenkel astutely presents an examination of culture, which encourages the audience to continue the examination on a personal level, to question his or her individual contribution to the maintenance of the culture. *

KATHRYN HIXSON

WHITE PUNKS ON FILM

BY STEVEN L. JONES

RICHARD KERN
Randolph Street Gallery
February 27-28, 1987

Ten long years ago there was a buzz that became a noise called punk rock. Rock-and-roll had matured musically and developed a social conscience in the sixties, but by the mid-seventies was degenerating into a bland, multi-million dollar industry -- the domain of ambitionless mini-talents and dinosauric mega-bands. Rather than sit idly by and watch the only communal art-form they had compromised and tamed by rich rock stars and big business entrepreneurs, kids who cared tried to scare some life back into it with a series of noisy, amateurish young bands (the Sex Pistols, the Ramones, the Clash -- you remember) who disregarded the commercial presuppositions of taste, taboo, melody, and mass-success. At its best an audacious breath of fresh air, at its worst a self-indulgent monument to shock/schlock excess, punk briefly revitalized a stagnating medium and created a new vocabulary of confrontational sounds and imagery that violently expressed the alienation of a post-hippie generation. A loosely-defined ideology of social protest through the desublimation of middle-class values was unleashed on young people, by young people, and the hysterical reactions of parents, congressmen, and the House of Lords was unlike anything anyone had seen since those primordial days of Elvis' censored hip-shake, or White paranoia over the proliferation of "nigger music" on God-fearing U. S. radio waves.

A decade hence the original punks are pushing thirty and the fury has long since been tamed; the visceral sounds and imagery enthusiastically exploited (in drastically watered-down form) by the corporate machinery the punks despised. Predictably, a stubborn contingent of true believers carry on, cranking out "post-punk" music and art. Some keep the faith like pathetic hangers-on, like aging hippies trapped in a counter-cultural time-warp. Other more imaginative souls find new variations on the old ideas, fighting the lethargy of nostalgia with fresh innovations and nary a backwards glance.

Richard Kern

The sheer bulk of punk-influenced material still produced today indicates that many feel the questions raised in '77 about (popular) art, politics, and the end of the world, are hardly resolved in '87; or at the very least that to many young people the punk aesthetic seems the only stance left that promises them any sort of collective voice to (honestly) express the anxieties of life in the late 20th century. That the most effective and powerful post-punk work largely repackages the old ideas demonstrates the ideas' continuing relevance. Subversive art in the modern era, whether high-brow or low-brow, varies little in content, but wildly in form.

My first thought when Richard Kern walks into Randolph Street Gallery to show his infamous movies is: Christ, this guy looks young. Kern is the most interesting and prolific member of the "Cinema of Transgression," a group of young New York filmmakers who apply the punk ethos to sound and celluloid. It takes a modicum of audacity and a moderate dose of naivete, even for post-punks, to call yourselves the "Cinema of Transgression" in this day and age. One wonders what sort of cinematic concept could possibly make the grade, shocking viewers and breaking barriers. The cynic might suggest a slew of excellent films that are marvelously successful. Richard Kern would disagree. He would posit the following: boobs, blood, blow-jobs, and bondage. Really. No kidding.

Nicknamed "Scumbag" in some of the xeroxed film'-zines I've read about him, Kern makes no-budget Super-8s and videos that focus on depravity -- good old-fashioned lechery, molestation, perversion and rape, sifted through a sieve of surrealism and guaranteed to gag the consumer with equal parts revulsion and laughter. His sleazy sex-and-gore epics are short, look like shit, and are designed in part to offend older and more sensitive viewers. They are brilliant, stupid, funny, sick, ugly, beautiful, boring, captivating, important, and deserve to be ignored. They are punk movies, as webbed in contradiction and destined for under- and over-scrutiny as their musical predecessors, and Richard Kern is a punk from his working philosophy ("The only philosophy I have is to try not to be boring") to his leather jacket and (denied) junk habit.

In Kern's punk vision the bombastic, irrelevant rock stars of the seventies -- the Led Zeppelins and Pink Floyds -- are neatly replaced with the long-winded old farts of experimental film -- Brakhage, Frampton, Kubelka, et al. -- while Kern and his cohorts are the new Pistols, Buzzcocks, and Clash, dedicated this time to re-inventing the experimental film. Having no use for the rigidly composed montage and transcendental/intellectual themes of the old school (anymore than the Pistols and company had use for musicianship and hippie-mysticism), Kern substitutes a near total disregard for technique and subject matter culled from his kinkiest daydreams and nightmares.

Visions of the absurd and grotesque file through Richard Kern's movies like a procession of the damned. It seems the man just can't get through one of his semi-narratives without somebody being dismembered, killed, fucked or sucked, always in the same artless, deadpan manner. Watching two or three hours of Kern movies in a row is like watching late night television on acid. Reruns of "Charlie's Angels" and "Combat" fragment and merge with the latest atrocities on the late news, or some moldy Roger Corman horror film. The combined effect is a weird, shifting unreality of the id and the libido, provoking always-changing and often inappropriate responses in the viewer. It's as if all the moral pretentions of popular culture

are stripped away and we get to see what's underneath -- unprotected and unadorned -- in free association.

"At first you may find it strange/but do not go away/ The darkness holds a power/that you won't find in the day." -- The Damned

---

The value of punk was mostly rock-contextual. Punk represented the vulgarity of rock at its most extreme, guided more by anger than the usual narcissism. It was an art mostly of atmosphere, a youthful proletarian reflection of the times, as helpless in the face of pragmatics as all art. The early punks' contempt for the pop music hierarchy (and, by association, all hierarchies) did, at the time, accomplish some small reform within the industry. The Sex Pistols, passionately reviled by the polite society of their native England, made best-selling music that was controversial and marketed by the enemy. Their second single, "God Save the Queen," was banned in Britain but reached the #2 spot in the charts (listed as a blank) nonetheless. Their success forced record labels to sign performers who wouldn't have had a prayer for a contract a year before. The hypocrisy of the industry was never more eloquently demonstrated than when those in power, fearful of missing out on profits, signed up bands in droves who (openly) despised them. Such small victories in an industry as crass and superficial as the music business are inspirational, but what was most moving about the Pistols was, ultimately, not their blows against the empire but their music, particularly that moment when the listener could sift through the visceral attack enough to see the idealism underneath.

THERE IS HUMOR IN RICHARD KERN'S FILMS. Yes there is, and at times it's pretty riotous. Witness "You Killed Me First" -- an unrelentingly stoopid melodrama about post-pubescent angst in a suburban home -- in which a young punkette (Lung Leg) is menaced by the banality and pig-headedness of her loud-mouthed father, her hamster-brained mother (played by Karen Finley whose vulgar good humor seems influential here), and her bimboish sister. After a series of ludicrous spats and disciplinary actions (at one point Dad punishes his daughter by hammering her pet rabbit -- actually a stuffed one, and Kern knows we know -- to death) Lung takes decisive action, completing this parody of punk rebellion by shooting her family at the dinner table, shouting the film's title in her defense as she pulls the trigger. All that, complete with some of the funniest bad acting ever filmed.

"King of Sex" lampoons sexual fantasy and machismo. A foppish punk (Nick Zedd) cavorts in menage-a-trois with a harem of two, all shot in typical boring porn style, while a testosterone-overdosed male voice sings over and over again "I'm the king of sex. . . "

One of the more curious facets of the punk revolution was its squeamishness re: sexuality. The irony is outrageous because rock-and-roll in any guise is ultimately rooted in the sweaty, sexy sensuality of bodies in motion. Its roots in (Black) blues, jazz, and r & b would seem to predetermine that all rock music would be sexy, and the music of the punks was -- certainly not in the same way James Brown or Al Green or Elvis Presley were -- but its beat was big, maniacally so, and girls and boys shimmied and shook to it. But the punk stance of desublimation required that sex be demystified along with love, family, capitalism, and everything Western culture held dear. So Johnny Rotten dismissed sex as "fifteen minutes of grunting and groaning," and penned only one tune, "Sub-mission," that touched on this human tradition of procreative and recreational passion. That tune, the slowest song the Pistols ever played, is a vague, timid affair, the s & m connotations of which are actually non-existent -- the title is a punning reference to a "submarine mission for you, baby" and the only statement really made in the song is "I can't understand your watery love."

THERE IS SEX IN RICHARD KERN'S FILMS. Lots of it, in every film. Sometimes it's even sexy, but it's never wholesome. Film is, of course, the most erotic of all media, the most voyeuristic and fantastic. If you're a creative type and you want to turn somebody on (or gross them out, for that matter) you don't make a painting, you don't write a poem, you don't choreograph a dance, you make a movie, and filmmakers have been turning us on (and grossing us out) in the peep-show darkness of the movie theater for a century. In Kern's work, sex is portrayed as kinky kick, as banality, as an act of violence, as a prelude or postlude to death -- but never as anything mysterious. Ironically though, sex becomes mysterious by virtue of its demystification. Kern's obsession with it, which mirrors our own, seems inexplicable.

All of his sexual scenarios and imagery are cliched, from the tableaux of writhing sex-slaves in "Submit To Me," to the film noir pastiches of "The Manhattan Love Suicides." The saving grace of the former film is its spectacle. Bright colors, loud music, trip-film editing, and a cast of wild punk creatures combine to create a cinema vérité freak-out atmosphere reminiscent of Jack Smith and Ken Jacobs. "Love Suicides" is a nutty affair, four consecutive tales of obsession leading to death. The atmosphere of the film, which has no dialogue, reminds me of the great E. C. comics of the fifties (a lot of Kern's films do), and even more so of the barren, expressionistic sets and film-stock of "The Honeymooners." Sexual energy is, once again, violent and destructive, but the parodies of film cliché (the dreaded wet-shot, straight out of every porn film, is performed with a ludicrously enormous phony phallus that spews at least a quart of seminal fluid) and the absurd, surrealistic twists (the severed arm of an art groupie is used to bleed on an artist's canvas) add humor to the morbidity.

The weakest of Kern's films, "The Right Side of My Brain," fails because it goes nowhere with its appropriated sources. With one dramatic exception, it's just a porn film -- dreary, slow, and predictable -- and soft porn at that. Lydia Lunch's voice-over narration isn't particularly funny, insightful, erotic, or shocking. It's just dull.

THERE IS VIOLENCE IN RICHARD KERN'S FILMS. Kern has probably been accused of misogyny more times than he remembers. Anyone who's audacious enough to shoot films about women who are raped, beaten up, and abused by wicked men is certainly asking for it. But I found his misogyny less disturbing than that lurking in a lot of Hollywood movies, Hitchcock's "The Birds" or "Marnie" for instance. Kern himself skirts the issue, denies it in interviews, points the finger at Lydia Lunch, who scripted the most misogynistic of his films and is, of course, both a woman and a tough cookie to boot -- not a likely victim of nasty lecherous woman-haters like Kern (?). Most of the violence is so phony, so contrived, so korny with a kapital kay, we laugh at it. But there are moments that are not funny at all, moments in between all the horror-show grue that are disturbing. Sometimes the effect is achieved through surrealistic incongruity, like when a dancing Lung Leg pulls a knife from between her legs and becomes the vagina dentata personified. Other times, and this is where the "Transgression" in the title rings truest, the effect is achieved when the unreality becomes too real.

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SHARON EVANS
Candyland: The Saga of Helen Brach and Her Pet Poodle Sugar

Organic Theater
April 9-25, 1987

Inside the theater, we were all waiting for the show to begin: for the lights to recede to nothing and then slowly fade back up, and in the strange halflight, I was taking in the details -- the room's size, its proportions, and especially its funny vaulted ceiling, which reminded me of the inside of a whale's head. At that moment I have to admit I felt like Jonah. The theater does that to me because of its utilitarian quality. All that residue in the walls can be a little overwhelming at times. Just sitting there staring at all the stage machinery wondering what is going to happen. I have to admit I have a preoccupation with space; I equate everything with shoes to feet or hands to gloves -- "the perfect fit" syndrome. Everything boils down to the infantile fairy tale notion, best expressed in Cinderella -- the truth is always in the fit. If the shoe fits wear it. I don't believe in the "one size fits all" school, which is why I felt like Jonah. I was beginning to wonder if that feeling was ever going to subside, and then the lights went down and the people moved onto the stage to perform. When the lights did fade up on them, they seemed so far away. The room was getting larger by leaps and bounds, and as each word came out of the performers' mouths the story itself started to recede into the background. It was becoming, in a sense, a kind of mime of something theatrical -- an imitation of theater: that essence, that smell from inside the shoe was just never there. This was bingo inside a church, or religion inside a stadium. The story just kept getting thinner and thinner and threatening to return to the scripted page and possibly back to the typeset tabloid from which it came. It was in a sense dissolving before my eyes back to its mysterious origins. The center of that mystery is Helen Brach, candy empress and lover of animals, played by Sharon Evans and accompanied by Catherine Evans in the role of Helen's pet poodle Sugar. Evans attempted to use Helen Brach's saga in Candyland as a vehicle to comment on eccentric outsiders, yet never seemed to really have a grip on what it is that allows outsiders to remain so detached, and worse yet, how to do that theatrically. She simply never transported Helen out of her Alice in Wonderland reality and into the theater world where eccentrics have been known to survive and even flourish on stage. The whole affair had the quality of reading the National Enquirer while standing in the grocery store checkout. She neither fitted the story to the space nor the space to the story. It was kind of a shame because Helen Brach really sounded like she would have been a good match for Citizen Kane. "Candyland: The Saga of Helen Brach and Her Pet Poodle Sugar," with Sharon Evans, Catherine Evans, David Csicsko, and Mark Richard. Lighting by Jim Card and set design by David Csiscko. Directed by Judy Morgan.

KEVIN HENRY

MICHAEL MEYERS
Reconstructing (the Temple) From Memory

Organic Theater
April 10-May 3, 1987

The "almost all new" version of Michael Meyers' "Reconstructing (the Temple) From Memory" is, in many respects, a performed summary of everything Meyers does so well. It is visually clean and elegant; the texts are elliptical and lyrical; the characters cover a range of physical types unequalled in much Chicago performance work. I have a special fondness for "Reconstructing (the Temple)." I've seen it in its two previous incarnations, the first in April, 1986 at N. A. M. E. Gallery, and the second, the weakest of the three in my opinion, also at the Organic in July, 1986. This third and I think best version seems more controlled, less wacky and glib, and broader, deeper than the earlier two.

Paradoxically, this third version of "Reconstructing (the Temple)" becomes deeper as it becomes more explicit, less ambiguous, and less overtly mysterious than the other two. Meyers as the mercurial Story Teller opens the piece by explaining that it is "a meditation with illustrations on the notion of remembering and forgetting, not only an individual life, but everything else." The task, both for Manny Jacobson "The Dreamer"/builder and for the audience, is to reconstruct coherence out of the shards of experience presented in the piece. In the earlier versions, these shards were presented as images with a glaze of "high culture," as excerpts from Waiting for Godot for example, or as an opera singer singing her text. These have been replaced by more general, more neutral images. Waiting for Godot and any other overt allusions to "a play" are gone. In their place are fragments of dialogue that seem Beckettesque but without the "high culture" tag. The opera singer has been replaced by Kay Reed, "The Singer with the Ironic Voice" who repeats simple yet elliptical phrases like "Repeat to me. . . report to me." Also in this version there is little of the wackiness that appeared earlier, especially in the second revisioning of the piece. This new piece seems quieter and more controlled which is, I think, exactly right for a piece which revolves so tightly around the issue of introspection.

Once again, Meyers has included children from the Franklin Arts Center. They are used, not as children, but to signal a shift in perspective: they make certain moments seem psychologically farther away, certain texts more like echoes. Manny Jacobson, here labelled "The Dreamer," is as before the locus of the piece; it is happening, we are told, inside his head. Jacobson and Meyers are amazingly compelling when they are together on stage, and in this production Meyers makes the most of these moments. One especially haunting example is Meyers' explica-

LINKS HALL IMPROV

DANIEL SCANLAN
JOSEPH CELLI
LADONNA SMITH
DAVIE WILLIAMS
Links Hall
March 3, April 10-11, 1987

Chicago has for a long time been home to music improvisors. When Andrew Cyrille was here recently, he remarked that half of the musicians with whom he plays are from Chicago. And it would be true that if a list were made of the finest jazz improvisors half of them would be from Chicago. Although jazz was the first improvised music to gain wide attention, and is still the most popular improvised music, improvisation is no longer the sole domain of jazz. In the past ten years improvisors have emerged who play a new kind of sound/music which has a very different feel from jazz but which is rooted in that tradition. This new music, which is flourishing all over the country, has a home here in Chicago at Links Hall. For over a year they have been presenting adventurous programs of all sorts of improvised music. Recently there were three concerts which illustrated clearly what this music is about.

The first of the three happened March 3 when Daniel Scanlan brought a quartet of Chicago players to Links. Scanlan, a veteran Chicago improvisational artist, plays violin, trumpet, and slide guitar. He presented a well-balanced evening of improvisations with some high peaks of creative playing tempered by a few less than stratospheric moments (which is really true of almost all improvised music concerts). Playing with him was Bill Barnes, a fascinating trombonist whose personality vacillates between Jim Morrison and Jack Smith (if you can imagine that); Erik Neuman, a cellist who plays basic industrial cello and is an up-and-coming comedian; and that high-school-geography-teacher-look-alike, Steve Hunt, who plays his percussion instrument collection brilliantly and with great abandon.

The quartet pieces ranged from a slightly contrived late-sixties free jazz "cop" to a wonderfully open and interactive piece which gave each player a solo spot. It was this piece that was most enjoyable, as each improvisor pulled different tricks out of his bag to make a solo statement. Barnes, in a proto-reckless style, wandered all over the stage (nearly falling off twice for added effect) looking like a lost member of the James Brown horn section while he played short but sweet licks which resolved into a funky collage. Scanlan played his violin like he was trying to scare Paganini, and came up with some interesting melodic textures as well as enough loose horse hair to make a nice wig or two. Neuman played a fuzz tone cello from which he ellicited a swirl of harmonics and resolved mid-point into a slap-stick routine which found him somehow playing his cello everytime he thought he had stopped, and not playing it every time he went to do so. No one could quite figure it out, least of all Neuman. Hunt, who had a consistently brilliant evening, stole the show with the solo he played using teeny-tiny metal drum sticks. He blazed away at double piano, creating a whirlwind of virtuosic but heartfelt sounds.

The other high point of the evening was the duet between Scanlan and Michael Zerang, who played the Dumbeg, an hourglass-shaped ceramic drum. With amazing fluency, Zerang played a whole carload of different sounds with Scanlan's intriguing melodic flights.

The second recent improvisational music event, on April 10, featured Joseph Celli, a veteran improvisor for twenty some years and a fairly recent convert to multi-media pre-

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Photo by Susan Anderson.

tion of characters and "what they sound like." This gets rather manic until he gets to Jacobson, The Dreamer. "He sounds," Meyers indicates, "like THIS. . . :" and Jacobson begins very softly, "You need your nose. You need your hands. You need a piece of string and a place to put your things. . . You need an unimpeded view of everything." He seems like the gentle voice of timeless wisdom.

As with all of Meyers' work, the language in this version of "Reconstructing (the Temple)" deserves special attention. It is cool, clean, very sparse. There is little clutter in the visual imagery of the piece as well: scenes seem, in general, more focused, less diffuse, more clearly defined than in either of the two earlier productions. On the whole "Reconstructing (the Temple) From Memory" seems, with this third production, refined, finished, and psychologically and aesthetically satisfying.

JUDITH HAMERA

BONNIE BLANCK, *Coming Into the Closet*

Randolph Street Gallery
April 10, 1987

"Coming Into the Closet," a performance by Bonnie Blanck, was about "issues" she said concerned her. The achievement of the performance was most vividly illustrated in its final sequence. The issue was "ambiguity," and in the sequence she demonstrated the discrepancy often encountered between overt messages and their covert implications, and the ensuing confusion. In the piece as a whole, Blanck left us with the impression that, in many ways, it is futile to attempt to communicate ideas because seldom is one able to get across exactly what one means, one is often misread or misunderstood.

Blanck tackled a number of complicated issues such as "breath," "world hunger," "mother," and "control." However, through her charmingly clumsy persona and often cliched movements she undermined her avowedly serious intentions. From her entrance ("Hi, I'm Bonnie"), to her loose manner of presentation ("No, I don't think I'll do ambiguity yet"), to her sound system (three boom boxes set around the space), Blanck's tone was pervasively casual. Although this attitude seemed occasionally forced and underdeveloped, indicating a need for further growth and experience, Blanck was, on the whole, an engaging performer.

Many of the sequences were movement-oriented. Blanck's movements all seemed to have as their purpose a certain exaggeration, a tongue-in-cheek self-consciousness. For example, in the section on "world peace," she performed three different cowering poses to sound effects from a record entitled "U. S. Air Force Fire Power." The poses were the same -- a duck to one side, a duck to the other, and finally to the center. Then she choreographed the three into a dance in slow motion to the sound of a nuclear explosion.

In another section -- "time management" -- Blanck completely avoided any direct attempt to communicate with the audience. She told the tech assistant to play a record on the subject, explaining that she had to pee really badly, and told us to listen to the record and she'd be right back. She was gone a couple of minutes and when she returned said "that's enough" and went on the the next issue.

Blanck also avoided the problem of closure. At the end of the section on "ambiguity" she confessed that she was uncomfortable, that she had gotten us into ambiguity and couldn't get us out. Therefore, she opted for a technical ending: she had all the lights and sound turned off, then the houselights came up and she took a bow. The end.

"Ambiguity" was the catchphrase for the whole evening. In expressing dismay that she had "gotten us into ambiguity and couldn't get us out," Blanck was saying that her own attempts at communication could be nothing in the end but ambiguous, that we couldn't understand exactly what she meant, nor could she explain it. Thus, she implies, is the situation with most communication. In the post-structural, post-modern era where the author has been pronounced dead, or at least very ill, and the reader bears all or at least a crucial part of the responsibility for the realization of the text, meaning, per se, becomes elusive. No one, it seems, has the authority to dictate meaning. What one says is left open to individual interpretation on all counts, thus leaving everything subject to the sort of ambiguity Blanck finds herself unable to resolve except by extrication. Ironically, it was this dilemma of communication that Blanck communicated to us.

SUSAN SLADEN

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sentations. Or so it seemed. Celli is a classically trained player and unfortunately exhibits the most common pitfall classical training offers. Although he is a virtuoso of the first rank, as an improvisor and a creative player Celli lacks the imagination and free spirit which is the heart and soul of this risky way of making music. His playing was lovely to hear, but was never captivating enough to warrant his presentation of a solo evening. The one interesting moment was his duet with bass-clarinetist Marty Walker, who is a fine player and an interesting improvisor.

The third concert happened the next night and was one of the most remarkable evenings I've experienced in some time. Ladonna Smith and Davie Williams, both hailing from Birmingham, played beautiful and inspired music. Both are well travelled and experienced players, having worked together for more than ten years. They have developed a tight ensemble which reflects a long association. As improvisors and sound makers, their skills are second to none, and it was unfortunate that there wasn't a packed crowd to witness such wonderful playing. Williams plays a sawed-off guitar using not only his fingers but everything he can lay his mitts on, including a baseball glove fitted with electric motors, a set of false teeth, and the edge of a table he used as a guitar pick. Smith uses her bow and fingers to play the viola and violin with the same kind of careful attention to the strings that a good dentist pays to that tiny bit of plaque on your furthest right molar. She knows her instrument inside-out and gets every imaginable sound out of it. And if that's not enough, she also has a tiny mike attached to her chinrest into which she makes amazing vocal sounds as she plays.

The high point of their evening was their solo spots. Williams revealed himself as a wonderfully humorous player who has a tremendous sensitivity to sound and a dry sense of comic collage. Smith prefaced an extended viola solo with the statement "Now we'll have a short talk about love with an inanimate object," which showed precisely her love for the viola. She constructed a powerful moment on her instrument, flashing varying episodes of sonic drama until she touched down like an illusive dixie bird to play some of the most lyrically beautiful music I've ever encountered.

All in all these three concerts portrayed quite clearly the reality of improvised music; that it is an immediate and intimate meeting with the inner feelings of the artist. And whether they be joyous, poignant, stern, or anything else, we always hear who it is behind the sounds.

PERRY VENSON

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"When there's no future how can there be sin?/We're the flowers in the dustbin/We're the poison in your human machine/We're the future, your future."
-- The Sex Pistols

"The Right Side of My Brain" has one very revolting moment. Lydia Lunch, who lives out all the typical rape/submission fantasies in the course of the film, is at one point held captive by big, brawny Henry Rollins (of Black Flag) in the bedroom of a seemingly abandoned house. Rollins throws her on the bed and begins pounding her head on the headboard until she's unconscious, then leaves. A little boy appears, approaches Lunch cautiously, stares at her shapely, victimized body, and reaches out to feel her -- then flees from the room, terrified. The violence in the sequence is not funny, but still very phony. But the child is very real, and his archetypal dilemma is intense. Lunch becomes Mother -- desirable but unattainable; Rollins becomes Father, who abuses Mother, rapes and beats her; the child, watching it all from a distance is trapped in the horror and eroticism of the moment. But it is too much for his young mind to take, and he stifles his sexual curiosity, running away from this dangerous vision and its implications. It is a scene reminiscent of Bunuel ("Los Olvidados" comes to mind), and it is one of Kern's most powerful moments. It is also one of his sleaziest, in more ways than one. In an interview Kern explains that the kid he used in the film freaked out during the shoot. He was supposed to really feel up Lydia but he kept crying because, it seems, his own father was a wife-beater, and the whole scene was just too close to home.

Punk was at heart a romantic movement. Beneath all the scare-tactics and carefully cultivated cultural contempt lay a simple cry of protest: a plea for sanity and tolerance in a mad, mad world. The bleakness of vision, communally experienced, represented a strategy of redemption through cruelty (the forced awareness that, as Brecht once said, "man is shit") as old as Dada. The punks just took it out of the museums and put it on the radio. Dwelling on the seediness, stupidity, and hypocrisy of the human race is not always an exhilarating or liberating experience, it can grow as tiresome and reactionary as endlessly praising mankind's virtues. In the end, if the strategy of jarring the complacent by making them wallow in their own shit is to be valuable, it requires an ideology with a clear set of goals; or else an artist whose strength of vision creates evocative work, whether the goal is art as politics, as social reflection, or as a call-to-arms. And whether the vision is described by music, art, words, actions, or film.

Kern's vilest triumph is "Fingered," another collaboration with Lunch, his most recent and most polished film. For all its vulgarity it is remarkably subtle, surprisingly so after its clumsy predecessors, and there is a sense of focus that is new.

"Fingered" chronicles an afternoon in the lives of a bitchy phone-sex queen (Lydia Lunch) and one of her customers, a psychotic, macho creep (Marty Nation). Together they are grotesque parodies of male and female sex roles. Both are tough and obnoxious, united only by their mutual passion for abuse, violent sex, and sexual violence. When they set off on a road trip in Nation's beat-up car, a filmic rhythm develops that matches the rhythm of their performances. The two fight and swear at each other. Lunch is a horny cunt who just wants a taste of Nation's big dick. Nation is a fucking macho pig who couldn't get his tiny dick up to fuck Lunch if he wanted to. They taunt each other to the point of violence, and Lunch ends up getting what she wants/deserves each time. She is roughed up, fingered (of course), sodomized, and fucked with a gun. The cycle repeats itself again and again, and each time they both get off on it. At the end of the film they pick up a frightened, battered girl (Lung Leg) who breathlessly explains that she has narrowly escaped being raped. Lunch tries to comfort her but when the girl will not calm down she begins to scream at her and slap her around. Finally Nation, fed up with the girl, stops the car and drags her outside where he proceeds to beat her and grind her face into the gravel and dirt. The film ends as it opens, with the promise that "Fingered," a Richard Kern film, is "Coming Soon."

The film does not translate well into words on a page. It sounds stupid and trashy, and it is. But it is a riveting piece of trash. The repeating cycle of verbal and physical abuse becomes dizzying, grotesque. We want to know where Kern is taking us, where it will end, what it might mean. But it goes nowhere, it simply ends. Ultimately, in "Fingered," I think Kern chickens out. He finds himself in the middle of a well-paced, revolting film, guaranteed to have offended just about everyone, and doesn't know what to do with it. So he abandons ship, signing off with a taunting promise he will not fulfill. Nihilism offers him no ideology to pursue, no point to make beyond the cynical satire and antagonistic assault he successfully creates. He's kept his promise, he hasn't bored us, but we want more.

While Kern was setting up for the show at Randolph he asked to see what the Reader blurb said about him. I showed it to him and he read its description of his work, stopping at one point to ask what the word "scatological" meant. My girlfriend told him it meant "preoccupied with excrement." He laughed and I asked him if he had ever used shit in a film before. He said something like "no, that's about the only thing I've never used." Later this struck me as ironic, and not because I think all his films are shitty or full of shit. I kept thinking of "Un Chien Andalou," the original transgressive film, made by a man, Luis Bunuel, who fervently believed (at the time) that an aggressive artistic revolution might foster a less oppressive world. The most infamous scene in the film is, of course, its opening, where Bunuel himself watches the moon pierced by a sliver of moving cloud, and then slits the eyeball of a woman sitting still beside him with a straight razor. For all its metaphorical significance (blinding the eye to induce "real" inner vision) it's always seemed to me that the power of the image results mostly from the montage itself. Bunuel shows us the moon and the cloud; then Bunuel, the woman, and the razor; then the moon being pierced by the cloud, and for a moment we think he's going to spare us the reality of the metaphor. But the next cut is the close-up of the eye-slitting, the fluid spilling out. The viewer is repulsed, but the briefness of the shot doesn't allow us to look away. After this there is no need to shock us so graphically again and Bunuel doesn't attempt to. Instead, what follows is a stream of anxiety-ridden dream imagery, a simulated unconscious state that, symbolically, expresses liberation through non-repression.

Kern's films contain no sequences as abrupt and shocking (or artful) as the eye-slitting in "Un Chien Andalou." Instead they present a contemporary variation on the poetry of images that is the remainder of Bunuel's film: a series of bizarre, erotic, and violent images, some real, some semi-real, some surreal, lewdly voiced in a spiritual vacuum. I couldn't help but indulge in a little word-play and conclude that, for better or worse, Kern's real, unspoken philosophy is to follow the eye-slitting with the eye-shitting. Slit the eyeball. . . then shit on the eyeball.

Scatological, indeed.

SPOTNACHT CABARET

Randolph Street Gallery
March 13-14, 1987

"Spotnacht" was a benefit for Randolph Street Gallery's new lighting system. It consisted of two nights of performance by 36 different artists, emceed by Tom Jaremba. Because of the cabaret nature of the evening, P-Form decided to do a cabaret-style review. Consequently, we handed out envelopes to various audience members containing the name of one of the artists and a request for a brief review. The response follows. Unfortunately, due to the tenuous nature of this method, we did not receive a review for each performer, in which case we have tried to include a photo.

NANCY FOREST BROWN

BERTHA HUSBAND

. . . I'm puttin' on my top hat. . . toss me my cane boys. . . straighten my bow tie. . . step to the left, two, three, four. . . step to the right, two, three, four. . . paddle turn left. . . paddle turn right. . . next line coming up, two, three, four. . . Burlington Bertie, Burlington Bertie. . . little finish with a bow.

H. D.

SEA MONKEY VENGEANCE

The sixth performance of Friday night's "Spotnacht" at Randolph Street Gallery, "10050 Cielo Drive Luv-In" by Jones, Lang, and Tollefson, held my interest as much as a bad commercial television comedy. It was devoid of content and full of stark sensationalism and one-line jokes. I found this to be the case with the majority of performances that night and also with most popular art exhibited at Randolph Street Gallery.

ANON.

BRENDAN deVALLANCE

Let's face it, Robert Daulton is hot. So there he was, onstage, wearing this tight black outfit with his big sledgehammer in his hands. Who cared about the performance? Fortunately, there wasn't much to care about. It seemed to me that the piece was about Brendan deVallance and Robert Daulton's competition over who is a better penis/performer. Obviously the question was not resolved that night.

ANON.

OONA NELSON

All photos by Jan Ballard.

MARK ROTH

BONNIE BLANCK

Seeing Bonnie Blanck perform is a bit like watching a NYC bag lady carefully maneuver her way into an overcrowded train during rush hour on Friday. With all their baggage, these beings find the most interesting, efficient, and hilarious ways to move despite obvious physical obstacles. Blanck's bodily hindrance was a red bag, slung over one shoulder, that insisted on interrupting the various ridiculous and intriguing movements in 2 short dance pieces entitled "World Hunger" and "My Relationship With My Mom." The titles could have been interchanged, as each piece contained identical choreography, suggesting the absurdity of art that trys to solve the problems of the world, or art that trys to solve the problems of our little daily lives, . . . or, what's the difference between the two anyway,. . . and, hasn't this topic been overdone already? Get rid of the excess baggage.

MARIE GRUDZIEN

JAMES GRIGSBY

Rocks from God! Get them right here, sign your name on this little tract before it's too late, because Jeeesus said so! Open up your hearts to God, open your checkbooks! Ask and ye shall receive; seek and ye shall find; knock and the door shall be opened. Send more money so that I may be your servant, from my Palm Springs mansion. I wish Jim and Tammy had been there.

L. B.

MATTHEW OWENS

True to form, ever-loving Matthew Owens, always tasteful, cradled his baby and bounced it on his lap. . . just before he carefully cut off the top plate of its skull. But don't worry, he shared.

V. I. U.

DANI K.

(She carries him on her back.)
(She repeats after him:)
The difference is marginal.
The offense is subliminal.
The sin was original.
(Without his prompting:)
The reverse is critical.
This is not too literal.

A. Z.

KATHY MALTESE/ STEVE ROSEN

Irene: Fred -- did you do that review yet?
Fred: Uh. . . no. I don't remember which one I'm supposed to do.
I: It was the one with Kathy Maltese where she came out dressed like a white coyote with these sort of nails coming out all over, and there was a guy dressed in drag who put a collar on her, or something.
F: Oh. . . yeah. Well, I guess I could say it was forgettable, since I don't really remember it.
I: I think a coyote is supposed to be symbolic of something in Indian mythology.
F: Oh. . . I didn't get that.

FRED HICKLER

JEAN PARISI/ LIONEL BOTTARI

"Untitled" performed by Jean Parisi and Lionel Bottari was an amusing and satiric piece that seemed to poke fun at the everpopular male/female/female/male juxtaposition of the sexes, and of their expected behaviors.

This "wrestling" type of performance had some very funny and witty attachments, namely the usual wrestler running out into the audience making everyone "cry for their mothers."

It seemed to me to be a rather "cute" piece that fit strangely into the night's repertoire. I might have liked to see something a little more gutsy at the end of the piece when it is revealed that Jean is a woman and Lionel and she embrace. Just wasn't what I was. . . maybe that was the point.

PAUL STEGER

RANDY ALEXANDER

MARY BROGGER

BRIGID MURPHY/ ELISE FERGUSON

"Bitchy," "narrow-minded," and "arrogant" are the words that immediately come to mind. Making fun of female stereotypes such as the barefoot-and-pregnant type or the independent, fitness-crazed type might be well-intentioned. But when it's done in such an obnoxious and crass manner it only makes me wonder "If not this, then what?" A question, I'm afraid, these girls are unable to answer.

SUSAN SLADEN

RANE ARROYO

If indeed "we need both hard and soft things to make art," a plug for RSG's new Fresnells and Ellipsoidals, then Rane Arroyo's performance had a severe deficiency. For, although his entire piece, "Blind As A Bat, In Memory of Desi Arnaz," was lit by that single hard ellipsoidal spotlight, it was one of the "soft" moments of the evening. As student in his student/teacher solo, Arroyo proposes that Puerto Ricans are good for "washing dishes and their own personal thing." His is poetry. And since all Latinos look alike, he is Desi Arnaz. That is to say, when he dons his silver cape and wig, he becomes Desi Arnaz. He recites and dances to a line from Emily Dickinson until, as teacher, he pronounces, "You're an interpreter."

Arroyo's views of being Latino and a poet were utterly confusing. The audience needs no interpreter to point out racial generalizations and pretense to poetry. And it

VERA FRENKEL *Trust Me, It's Bliss: The Hugh Hefner/ Richard Wagner Connection*

Hefner Hall, SAIC
May 2, 1987

"Trust Me, It's Bliss: The Richard Wagner/Hugh Hefner Connection," by Canadian multi-media artist Vera Frenkel, is a site-specific performance designed for the Grand Ballroom of Hefner Hall, the former mansion of playboy Hugh Hefner and current dormitory for the School of the Art Institute. The intentions of the piece -- to invert and subvert the product of Hefner Hall, that is, images of women as romanticized, glorified doll-faced bunnies airbrushed for male consumption and female emulation -- were admirable. But this overdirected work stands in wild contrast to Vera Frenkel's videos, which reflect a calm, rational awareness and criticism of her (our) role in the maintenance of this culture.

(The act of being seated was special. Members of the cast, dressed in uniform trenchcoats and carrying flashlights, approached members of the audience as they entered, welcomed them to the performance and escorted them to seats in a gracious manner that befit the glorious, grand Hall.)

Vera Frenkel, acting as narrator, emerged from the audience to tell of her discovery of a secret found on the back side of some peeling wallpaper in her room at Hefner Hall. The reconstructed message proved to be a translation of segments of the diaries of Kosima Wagner, wife of Richard. The diaries, apparently recorded by a desperate, victimized Bunny, described Kosima's unending devotion to and consumption by her possessive husband. This story set the tone as the piece unfolded in a series of vignettes that portrayed an heroic Wagner and his wife Kosima and the Hefner couple (as well as a couple of others).

The piece set up a potentially amusing and slightly provocative contrast between Bunnies and rabbits and women as seductresses. That contrast was nicely illustrated when Dani K. rose from her seat in the audience and approached Hefner (who at that moment was being portrayed by Fred Hickler) while singing "My Heart Belongs To Daddy" in a clear, unaccompanied voice. The two then snuggled on a couch while the rest dressed a compliant, passive Kosima, played by Deborah Hellerstein, in a rabbit (read: mock-Bunny) costume.

Later a Hefner Hall tour guide, eagerly played by David Selsley, related the history of the Hall, emphasizing its galas and the glittery celebrities that graced them. As the romantic tales were being told they were at the same time being undermined by members of the cast, who were striking parodied tableaux of Wagner, Hefner, their wives, their paramours, and their bunnies.

The intentions of the piece... are admirable. Unfortunately, the effort fell way short largely due to too much extraneous stuff. The layers upon layers of text, usually simultaneously delivered, and the confusing activity all over the stage seemed designed to create narrative but in fact became disparate, competing components that canceled each other. This was the opposite of synergism -- instead, the individual parts were of greater value than the sum total.

Also confusing and never satisfactorily clarified was the Hugh Hefner/Richard Wagner connection. Blissful or not, I'll never know. Both were megalomaniacal, but plenty other men I know share that trait. Why Wagner? Hefner obviously tried to market bliss, but I wouldn't exactly classify "The Flight of the Valkyries" as a calculated attempt to sell pleasure. And society's learned patterns of behavior involving women's subjugation did not start with Kosima Wagner.

Vera Frenkel's efforts to reduce and deconstruct romance and romantic fables in favor of clarified, critical examinations and conclusions are worthy and at times truly insightful. Ironically, this piece would benefit from editing to clarify and, indeed, render visible the potency of her juxtaposed imagery.

IRENE TSATSOS

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continued from page 13

is doubtful that Desi Arnaz could possibly feel memorialized by Arroyo under a hard light.

CELIA FORSTER

ELHAM JAZAB

I think I shall never hear
a poem that inspires such fear
as one from Elham, to my ear.

But of her reading she should be proud
for it did not cloud
my beer.

IRENE TSATSOS

GREGORY GREEN/ PAUL COFFEY

WOODEN KNIGHT WALLOPS OPPONENT IN QUICKEST DUEL OF DECADE! SLUGGER DEFTLY WIELDED ROYAL STAFF BLUDGEONING ADVERSARY'S ELECTRIC EYES IN DEATH-DEFYING SHOW OF POWER!
Ah! the pageantry of bravery! the glory of the fight! Mine own true love has proven his faithfulness to me in his consummate delivery of uncontested strength. Will he carry my scarf again?

KATHRYN HIXSON

KAPRA FLEMING

FRIED BANANAS

5 bananas
1 cup cornmeal
¼ cup soy flour
honey
oil

Mix cornmeal and soy flour. Add enough honey to moisten. Slice the bananas lengthwise and in half. Cover with cornmeal mixture and saute in oil until brown.

IRENE TSATSOS

LAWRENCE STEGER/ SASHA SUMNER

Larry Steger enters the spotlight wearing white, white gloves, white mask, long white ribbon tied to his waist. He walks round and round, doing some kind of dance, some kind of crazy circle dance, and warns of trouble with a capital t, which rhymes with p, which stands for pool, and that spells TROUBLE. . . That white ribbon winds round Dr. Larry, who's soon all tied up with Sasha Sumner and the saxophone she keeps playing to drown his sanitary proscriptions.

IRENE TSATSOS

ROBERT DAULTON

Bob Daulton generously extends, on behalf of all performance artists who weren't always as good as they are now, or who are still bad, a black, tight-fitting, rose-in-the-teeth, closed-quivering-eyelids-on-the-highnotes, fuck-you-a-cappella, apology. The audience knows what he's talking about, including those whom he's talking about. We are all sad remembering all the bad performances we've seen or done. We are happy again when he calls it a thank you to those who helped make it happen.

DANI K.

Some Bad Writing about the "Bad Actors Series" by Kevin Henry, "The Uncomfortable Man" by I. Moore/B. Tanner, and "Stray Parts Return" by Vickie Hoch

Organic Theater
March 13-14, 1987

PROLOGUE

". . . language is a corpus of prescriptions and habits. . . a kind of natural ambience. It enfolds the whole of literary creation much as the earth, the sky and the line where they meet outline a familiar habitat for mankind. . . a horizon, which implies both a boundary and a perspective; in short it is the comforting area of an ordered space. It is a field of action. . ."
-- Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero

INTRODUCTION

". . . everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. The trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm. And so, with that crisp, whipcrack sound, it all began. I shook off my sweat and the clinging veil of light. I knew I'd shattered the balance of the day, the spacious calm of this beach on which I had been happy. But I fired four shots more into the inert body, on which they left no visible trace. And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing."
-- Albert Camus, The Stranger

THESIS SENTENCE

Literary form, theatrical form being a subset thereof, merges with the subject's consciousness, in a way, when successful, simultaneously causes the subject to transfer his/her personal experiences onto the embodiment of the form while distancing him/herself from the merging of the public/imaginary and the private, allowing the viewer to at once subjectively empathize and objectively criticize.

DEVELOPMENT OF ARGUMENT USING EXAMPLES

Kevin Henry in his Bad Actor Series of performances takes familiar literary forms, naming them with slides projecting their names: Prologue, Tragedy, Comedy, Melodrama, Epilogue. After each slide is a short vignette that exemplifies its named form: The "Prologue" was simply raucous music playing from an old radio. "Tragedy" was a vignette of two people coming across a woman splayed on the floor, seemingly dead. They steal her purse. Henry crosses into theater from performance, using developed acting techniques to create characters, especially in the "Comedy" in which a pair of prison inmates plot to make a million dollars, when they get out. Tom Henry and Jeff Barnett, playing the inmates, do this bit in 40's movie style, bantering back and forth, hilariously scheming a phone solicitation scam which grows from 2 phonecallers and 500,000 calls, each getting a dollar, to a million phonecallers, raising the money in one minute flat. The "Melodrama" featured an hysterical Susan Anderson trying to break off with her boyfriend K. Henry, who seems to be a raving psychopath. These vignettes of bad acting depend on the mass cultural experience of the viewer, laying bare the forms for scrutiny. Or maybe just to pass the time. The forms maintain their power, because Henry respects them, their underlying pathos, uncomfortable humanism, desirable in their lightness.

KEVIN HENRY

Photo by Susan Anderson.

Moore and Tanner's piece also stepped over the line into theater, using a well-written script, actors in character. The central character, played by Kevin Henry -- "The Uncomfortable Man" -- was just a guy, a little businessman whose monologue centered around his paranoias and fantasies in the elevator going to and from his office. He timidly explained how one of his colleagues daily accused him of passing gas in the elevator, he is always the brunt of crude jokes. Then he fantasizes about the pretty young elevator operator, what would happen if the elevator broke, he would protect her by cushioning her fall, his body would save hers in an heroic sacrifice. This man's fantasies, delivered so tenderly by Henry, seemed foolish, petty, sexist, products of his oppression, yet they were glorious, beautiful, charming, engaging. Faith in, and hatred of, the common man.

Vickie Hoch's "Stray Parts Return" stayed on the side of more traditional performance, using unrelated actions, poses, sounds, and smells to convey something about the dismemberment of the female body, though she used some theatrical quotes concerning seduction. This performance was scattered but well choreographed, and left a glimmer of hope for the female who can find her voice.

PROVOCATIVE INSIGHTS

The respectful use of theatrical form in the work of Henry, Moore, and Tanner is a welcome development in the course of performance art, increasing the chances for crossover to a larger theater audience.

If the work can maintain the seductive capabilities of character development, engaging plotlines, which entice audiences to willing suspension of disbelief, while still keeping a critical edge, perhaps it can satisfy desire while naming it.

There is an underlying sense of anger in the work, not at the restrictions inherent in the forms, but at the restrictions placed upon them by conservative mass culture, and by the snobbish art world. A cocked revolver is ready in the wings.

EPILOGUE

Clytaemnestra to Aegisthus:

"These are the howls of impotent rage; forget them, dearest; you and I have the power; we two shall bring good order to our house at least."
-- Aeschylus, "Agamemnon"

"Oh, what a relief to fight, to fight enemies who defend themselves, enemies who are awake!"
-- Andre Malraux, Man's Fate

KATHRYN HIXSON

LAWRENCE STEGER / SUZIE SILVER

La Vida Loca (The Crazy Life)

Cabaret Metro
March 6, 1987

Theatrical narrative ain't what it used to be. Indeed, ever since Bertholt Brecht told us NOT to "suspend disbelief" and to look at the events on a stage from an "alienated" point of view, traditional ideas about narrative in the theater have never been the same. Combine that with decades of film going, where narrative is subjected to jump-cuts, collage, and other distortions of time and space continuity, and it's not surprising that plays with a clear-cut storyline seem somewhat dated to us.

Lawrence Steger's new work, in collaboration with video artist Suzie Silver, is a good indication of how far we've come in terms of confounding the need for a narrative story in a work of theater. Although there is ostensibly a "plot" to "La Vida Loca," any attempt to follow it is constantly confounded by the authors' constant recontextualization of performers, actions, and text.

Consider the opening of the work, where a "Prompter" narrates the basic plot and introduces the principle performers. We are told that the story involves the relationship of Gloria Wilcocksku, a Russian-Polish immigrant, with an Hispanic street gang. This same Prompter goes on to frame the piece in an impossible historical context, saying that it was written in 1942, and first presented at the Berlin Opera House under the direction of the late composer Frederic Chopin. Considering that Chopin died in 1849, he would have been very late indeed for such a production.

This bit of historical twisting parallels the larger themes of the work; indeed, this is the overall theme of the work. The live actors are both framed and dwarfed by three video projection screens, so that "real" people are constantly given meaning by their filmic (or video) context. In this sense, the entire work is an extended allegory of how we are defined by our past experiences, and by our relationship to media. At one point in the work, Gloria's maid, Norma-Jean (wonderfully played by Angela Cole), looks at the audience and says, "Now look, we all know what this is. It's a film. And it comes from right behind you." In that statement, she neatly summarizes Steger and Silver's work, and describes the audience's own lives, as they struggle to make meaning out of their mediated perception of history.

In many ways, "La Vida Loca" is one of the most relentlessly intellectual performance pieces presented in Chicago in some time. The audience is not only asked to remain intellectually removed from the work, but to keep track of a variety of misinformation about the work as it proceeds. In addition to Gloria (portrayed by Yvette Brackman) and her maid, there is also the Hispanic Boy (played by Nancy Bardawil) and the Prompter (David Bussell). The Prompter, who exists on the stage as a disembodied talking head (another media reference), frequently confuses the action by telling performers to "Start" or "Begin" when they are in the middle of an action. In other moments, he takes the role of narrator, explaining the convoluted actions. His role is to frame the stage action in meaning.

David Bussell as The Prompter.

Photo by Jenny Knowlton.

Several of the most stunning moments in the piece involve texts running across the video screens. At one point, as Gloria stands motionless on stage, the screens call out the contrasting thoughts in her mind in parallel texts. "She cannot remember the exact sequence of events leading up to this situation. . . She wonders if she can ever go back home. She wonders if it is safe there." Below these words, there is a quasi-Biblical text: "And Gloria said, my soul doth magnify and it shall produce. He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts." Not only do these texts give a stunning, non-linear portrait of the main character, but they read like a text book on deconstructive analysis, and how it can be applied to theater.

Yet lest my description make the work seem like a brainy exercise, let me emphasize that the impact of the work was often in the sensuous beauty of its visual elements. As Gloria fantasizes about the Hispanic boy, she is surrounded by vivid, erotic black-and-white images of herself and the boy. At another moment, she stands before a screen showing blue sky and rolling clouds. Silver's video work is always an apt match for Steger's text, and there is never a moment when it falls into the terrible trap of making love to the special-effects generator. Rather, like the music, Silver's video provides a perfect background to the action.

There are many other stunning moments in "La Vida Loca" but it seems almost unnecessary to comment on them. In a work as self-analysing as this one, criticism becomes de trop, as the French say. My only gloss is that the work evidences a powerful, though never stated, gay aesthetic. Not only in the fact that Gloria's Hispanic "boy" is played by another woman, nor in the sexy rub-downs she gets from her maid. Rather, "La Vida Loca" talks about the "Crazy Life" of the gay man or woman in American society. As the Hispanic Boy puts it (simultaneously in Spanish and English): "Still, you consider me dangerous. Still, you consider me amoral. Still, you consider me with all your stereotypes you have built up like armor around you. When you take off that armor you will be light enough to float to the heavens. You will reach your God, but perhaps he will no longer be wearing what you expect him to be wearing. Perhaps he will not even be a he." This is not a riddle to those "in the life," but rather, as Olive Schreiner put it years ago, "The method of the life we all lead."

JEFF ABELL

100 THINGS ABOUT BRENDAN deVALLANCE

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29.

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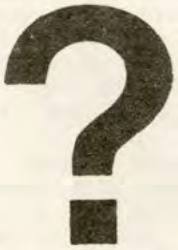

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95.

1. See his lousy smile.
2. This is his warning.
3. This is not his art.
4. Each piece blown to smither.
5. JOLTJOLTJOLT JOLTCOLA (poptop)
6. HOLT, a familia of menacing tools.
7. You are the art.
8. He is a reader from the book of Death.
9. Wears headstone on his sleeve.
11. This means you.
12. This is business.
13. In a MAN'S suit.
14. "100 Dates" w/Alex MacDonald--Noise Factory.
15. 8 dead guys, 8 floating boats
16. Notice the size of his shoe.
17. Notice the size of his head.
18. Eyeglasses, milkglasses
19. Cardboard.
20. Carcrashes coffined collisions...crunch of lunches.
22. Launches garbage can rockets.
23. Right down the middle of the alley.
24. Watch him drop, an exploding grenade.
25. He's on the ground!
26. Rock'em sock'em convulsions of limbs.
27. Stutters, "FELL DOWN STAIRS"
28. Expect mechanism.
30. Plugged up and pullied down.
31. An appliance is nicer as a hat.
32. Suitcase face.
33. "Cardboard Skirt"--Smart Bar 8/83
34. A POP Tart.
35. Helpless as toast.
36. FIRE he burns in our heads.
38. TIME LAPSED REALITY
39. Offs a MATCH bigger than life.
40. THE TICKING CLOCK.
41. A stereo rocks on top his block.
42. Clock'em.
43. Alice Cooper.
44. Extension cords of his current.
45. His propane torch, his big eye.
46. Toast is making.
47. Burns him up.
48. Faster than a fizzing JOLT.
50. A good scout gone mad.
51. He's not screaming it, So there.
52. SWEATING BULLETS
53. Shoots out at the corral.
54. Snaps shots of the pieces.
55. He wasn't screaming at you.
56. He's sorry.
58. Rumbles from the speaker (his back)
59. A stutter of ruts.
60. A rutterer of stunts.
61. LOUDNESS DRUMMED IN.
62. Bang, bang you're uh...
63. Man, that makes me mad.
64. Will say: SHIT FUCK DAMN HELL
65. "...-.-. .-. . .- -- .. -. --. - ..." Bedrock Gallery 7/85
66. Won't say: CUNT PUSSY PRICK
67. Duct taped to.
68. Through his misuse of the wheel.
69. The wheel barrow. The cart. The bullet.
70. Tried by streamlined punishments.
71. "Please don't take offense."
72. This is a tape.
74. The speakers are fake.
75. "This, this is ah Brendan Talking."
76. The man running the lights is a member of the audience.
77. Where does He park his car?
79. Here, try a slice of this...
80. Cement sandwiches set against the brick of a suit.
82. Mud bucks--to dunk in.
83. PAYS WAY, FREE OFFERS, GOOD VALUES
84. MAD (MAN-MADE) $ buys you.
85. Bite the gun.
86. You're dead.
87. I BUY AMERICAN.
88. The confusion of a govt. audit
90. That's somebody else's job.
91. 1/2 grenadier 1/2mustache
92. Bowling time bombs.
93. Strikes conversations...
94. He's gonna blow!!!
96. Packaged kool-aid grenades.
97. A product of his hundred times.
98. "Why 100?" on exhibit South Bend,IN 3/87
100. "The Edge of It" 4/24-25/87 RSG

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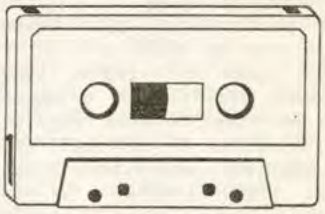

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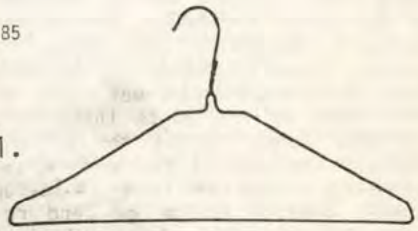

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Su Montoya and Bob Whittinghill

CHRIS SULLIVAN *The Old Mill*

N.A.M.E. Gallery
April 9-10, 1987

The experience of Chris Sullivan's latest performance work is much the same as boarding a bus and noticing that the only seat left is next to a garrulous old woman who is talking to everyone on the bus, and everyone on the bus is intent on ignoring her, and why do I feel this sense of dread when her eyes light up as she sees me approach, and why do those people studiously staring out the window not even blink when the bus passes an old man eating out of the garbage. And why did I not want to be project partners in the seventh grade with the girl they called "worm eater" even though I knew she really didn't eat worms and I felt sorry for her?

"The Old Mill" is the latest performance by Chris Sullivan, a filmmaker and performance artist from Minneapolis. It is described as a performance about sympathy and empathy in mutated life forms and the power of passive tyranny. The piece begins when a woman appears in robes behind the stage, which consists of a small table-top puppet set, and starts a musical chant, gregorian-like in melody and deliverance, but with wacky lyrics describing how Danny came to be known to the Salvatore/Celibatory family. The family consists of Christine, a clubfoot, Mr. Salvatore, a mechanic, and Danny, a grubby, frantic, stuttering creature with an inexplicable wet spot on the front of his pants that seems to grow larger during the performance. The pace of the performance is manic, jumping from table-top puppet theater to garage band rehearsals to (the three principal characters have their puppet incarnations) a marionette Thanksgiving banquet, but most action takes place in the garage, which is represented by a large, painted backdrop of a garage with a car, its hood open, and in front of this painting a suspended engine made of corrugated cardboard. There is a wonderful handcrafted looniness about the set and props reminiscent of a sort of colorful claymation. The central narrative imbalance is Danny's love for Christine and Christine's apparent deafness and unconcern on the subject. The insensitivity works both ways though, and during a touching and hilarious sequence Danny "spills his guts out" to an unhearing Christine and Mr. Salvatore, who are too busy mourning the family dog whose death Danny inadvertently caused and to whose passing he is equally oblivious. Some of the dialogue exchanged: "Joe, Joe, remember that day when you had that party, that little get together, and I had that little vomitory accident in Christine's room? Okay sure she cleans it up and everything, but you know what I really wanted? For her to get down on her knees for a moment and just hold me. . . (then Joe speaks). . . and then I put the I heart dog head sticker on the truck. . . " The performance is full of these masterful creations of moments with people who are so out of tune with their own lives that they are completely unable to connect with each other. It is poignantly and excruciatingly vivid in its portrayal of these "misfit" characters, such as when they are in their puppet manifestations eating Thanksgiving dinner discussing farting and noisily eating (there is a strong scatological element to Danny's dialogue, he begins the performance by asking "Did someone have some sort of gastric disturbance in here?"). A comparison could be made with Saturday Night Live creations Tod de la Muca and Lisa Lupner, but with an important difference. I always felt that the comedians on the SNL's skits telegraphed a knowing, sneering superiority about the characters they portrayed, in effect negating any threat these characters might possible convey; any strong message was drained of its possible insight by making the viewer privy to the information that Bill Murray was in no danger of being an individual. The viewer is not spared this uncomfortable comparison in "The Old Mill." Its awkwardness is not so mindful of an otherness that we can feel superior to, but hits uncomfortably close to home, reflecting those self-centered qualities in all of us.

An important part of the expression in this piece is the music. There are rehearsals for a garage band, "Danny and the Phantoms," doing such songs as the "Ballad of Danny." Again, the songs are presented with much enthusiasm and integrity, extending the use of multiple sources such as jazz-like, medievallike, and garagelike song structures with a wacky naivete.

And so until the performance reaches its climax with a wedding. But first, Mr. Salvatore must instruct Danny in the facts of life according to baseball (first base, second base. . . home run). During the instruction Danny is a limp ventriloquist's dummy, who gets thrown about during the course of the game. Then he is ready for marriage, which was all he ever asked for. Again, I was struck by the poignancy and blindness of Danny's "need" and his absolute disregard of anything outside the catalogue of his self-awareness. Emotionally, Danny was an arrested two year old, but then maybe that's why people like Danny are shunned. They are the too raw, too crude form that we would like to forget we were, or are.

As Danny tells Joe, "I'm going to be there for you, everywhere you go in life, just look behind you, about three steps behind you, I'll be there with my hand held out, reaching out for more." That was an earnest promise of friendship -- a declaration of need, not support.

> "In the beginning God created my family and Danny. And Danny was without form and void. . . and the spirit of Danny moved about -- his face in the water. And Danny said let there be shelter and there was. And he saw the porch and it was good. . . "

The performance begins with a chant and ends with verse in French, about love and life, in between is the ballad of Danny, his misapprehension, misunderstanding, and his yawning void of need. There was an extremely loony, threateningly sensual, threateningly too close quality to the raw self-absorption and presentation of this performance. It was as if these cartoon people climbed out of the safely passive, distanced hilarity of the television set and were now raiding my fridge and challenging my safe superiority. Oh, and I don't want this smelly guy bumming my cigarettes and panhandling, right? In "The Old Mill," Chris Sullivan refuses to permit a cool, passive observation, and uncomfortably does not allow the audience to feel superior to his characters, because we ourselves are those very human, very primal characters.

NANCY MARTELL

SUSAN MOGUL
News From Home - The Condensed Version

Randolph Street Gallery
April 4, 1987

Susan Mogul told us some things about her mother. She showed slides and she read a lot of letters from her mother. Her mother is a Long Island Jewish mother. I've known quite a few. The type who is interested in art and brings it into the home via perpetual home redecoration. The type who lays guilt trips and threats on the rebellious -- or even non-rebellious -- child. And, as many mothers do, she manages to include complete menus of the previous day's meal in her correspondence.

This mom's familiarity is funny. Her power is scary.

The stage is blank, save a red podium, a glass of dark beverage, and a plastic bracket full of letters.

Mogul enters, talking to the announcer. She patters about a Holiday Inn mixup involving (or not involving) Jeff Abell. She obviously enjoys the story. She segues into telling us a little bit about herself.

Mogul shows slides of herself in grade school, and speaks of Chuck Zak. She wanted to look like Chuck Zak in first grade, so she posed for a school photo, sucking in her cheeks to emulate his deep dimples. The next year, she wanted to look just like the most popular girl in school, so she adopted the girl's sullen look for the next school photo. Nowadays, Mogul supposedly looks just like her mother and Mom looks just like Jawlensky's Dreaming Head, and Mogul bought a poster of the Dreaming Head because it looked just like the painting. Keely Smith, who sang with Louie Prima, looks just like Mom, according to Mogul -- and Keely Smith looks just like Lena Horne, according to Mom.

The slides Mogul shows us to prove the resemblances are stunning, funny, and eerie -- as is the theme she seems to be developing.

Then the correspondence begins. It starts with newspaper articles and obituaries Mom sent to Mogul. Then come the letters, beginning with a 1966 letter from her home: "Dear Broken Arm. . . " -- meaning, Mogul's lack of letters to Mom must be due to some injury. The letters continue for the next several years, spanning Mogul's stint as a young revolutionary at University of Wisconsin-Madison (student strikes, be-ins, Vietnam) and moving on through. . .

Mogul as a character loses her focus here, and we see more of what Mom is doing. Mom writes a lot about redecorating the house in general and a certain living room wall in specific. She sends Mogul floorplans. She rushes home from the latest MOMA exhibit and covers the rooms with mylar, fluorescent lights, or (who's afraid of) red, yellow, and blue. Mogul's mom writes of the dress that she is going to wear to son Sandy's bar mitzvah. Turns out Mogul is wearing it at tonight's performance. When Mom saw her daughter model the dress, she said, "You have my old body."

1972: Mogul's mom gives Dad a copy of Sexual Politics, simultaneously admonishing dear Susan for arriving braless at a seder. We see a slide taken at Mogul's brother's wedding; Mogul wears a black dress, displaying bountiful cleavage -- much to the dismay of her mother, who writes, "See how horrible you look." The tag line of the piece consists of showing the salutation of a letter from Mom. Mom has found out that Mogul is using her letters in performance, so she puts a copyright sign next to the salutation. Mom is pretty funny. Mogul really isn't.

Photo by Sondra Ward.

Mom has selected pieces of art and interpreted them into her life via interior decoration.

Mogul has selected pieces of life and interpreted them into her art via this performance.

Mogul comments profusely on the ironies, audacities, and idiosyncracies of her mother, yet she reveals very little of herself. Her mother remains exposed and defenseless. Mogul seems to be delivering her mother a rather backhanded compliment by making her the centerpiece as well as the buffoon of the work.

What is ugly about this is that I feel like doing the same thing to Mogul as she does to her mother. I would be willing to cast more insight into the topics of Susan Mogul: Performer, or Mrs. Mogul: Mother, but I don't believe that the psychoanalysis, perceptual philosophies, and hypothetical improvements I turned over in my mind regarding the last 3/4 of the performance were inspired by the art of the piece; rather they were supplemental pastimes.

I do wonder, though: If Mogul has a daughter, will the child select this piece and interpret it into her life via some other female form of expression? If so, will the result be characterized by a lack of respect for the material?

LOREL JANISZEWSKI

BEACON STREET GALLERY
UPTOWN HULL HOUSE

presents

CARNIVAL

June 6, 7:30 PM

$15.00 ($7.00 after 10:00 PM)

all donations benefit artists' and childrens' art classes

(reservations for performances required)

Performances By:

Rachael Milder

Pat Olesko
(as seen in Artforum)

Nancy Forest Brown

Vicki Hoch

Jeff Abell

Susie Hansen

Brigid Murphy

Bagpipes

Composer:
Laurie Lee Moses

Sculpture Installation by
Marshall Carbee

Costumes by:
Elise Ferguson

Huichol Indians

Outdoor Cafe with Poetry Reading

Beacon Street Gallery
Uptown Hull House
4520 N. Beacon St. 60640
561-3500
769-5199 for reservations
Call Pat Murphy for information

HEAT and WATER

Listen to what the fish have to say:

F1 Is it not warm out?

F2 Yes, it is warm out.

F1 The air or the water?

F2 Now the air and the water are both warm.

F1 Then everyone is happy?

F2 Yes, everyone is happy.

F1 I have noticed this. And I have noticed that everyone is talking to everyone. People sit beside each other on the beach, drawing pictures in the sand, explaining themselves to each other.

F2 And there are drums that must be in the distance. Some are coming this way and others are leaving. There is a woman among them who plays a thick flute. She plays low notes and holds them very long. It sounds like the beach.

F1 And the drummers?

F2 They drum and move their knees in circles, grinding their feet slightly into the ground. Some jump straight up and down. Drumming. They drum very hard, so hard that they do not really know where they are. A few think of their relatives, picturing their faces in their minds.

F1 And are they hungry?

F2 Oh yes, everyone is hungry, the drummers, their relatives, and the friends they would like to make. Everyone eats together.

F1 And the air and the water are warm.

F2 Yes.

-Matthew Buckingham

P-FORM

CALENDAR
SUMMER 1987

June 6	CHRISTIAN MARCLAY Links Hall Sat 9p	Since 1978 Marclay has used turntables to create a unique form of sound sculpture. Two of his videos will also be screened.
June 12-14	JAN BARTOSZEK/PATRICIA PELLETIER JACKIE RADIS/BOB EISEN MoMing Fri,Sat 8:30p Sun 7:30p	This program, "Making Collaborations," will feature discussion of the creative process by each pair of artists, and then a presentation of actual work: "Flight Distance" by Bartoszek/Pelletier, and "Silent Partners" by Radis/Eisen.
June 26	LYDIA LUNCH Randolph Street Gallery Fri 8p	This new monologue/rant, "Incriminating Evidence," premiered at the Performance Garage in New York.
July 17	FREAKOUT DAY Organic Lab Theatre Fri 6:30, 8, 10:15 p	3 plays by George Freak will be read as one part of the Chicago Dramatists Workshop's "Play in Progress Marathon" which runs July 14th through 19th. Call 327-5588 for more info on the other events.
	N.A.M.E. GALLERY	Events to be scheduled in June in July. Call 642-2776 for info.
	CABARET METRO	Events to be scheduled throughout summer. Call 549-0203 for info.

CONTINUING

Through June 13

	FRIDA: THE LAST PORTRAIT Blue Rider Theater Company Fri, Sat 8p Sun 7p	Fantasy theater piece based on the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo.

July 11 through Sept. 5

	MILWAUKEE AVENUE STREET FAIR	Lots of Chicago performance artists and installations will be showcased on the 1200 block of Milwaukee Avenue, just south of McDonalds. Sponsored by the Near Northwest Arts Council.

Link's Hall	MoMing	Randolph St. Gallery	Organic Theatre	N.A.M.E. Gallery	Cabaret Metro	Blue Rider Theatre
3435 N. Sheffield	1034 W. Barry	756 N. Milwaukee	3319 N. Clark	361 W. Superior	3730 N. Clark	1822 S. Halsted
281-0824	472-9894	666-7737	327-5507	642-2776	549-3604	733-4668