

Annie Sprinkle Brings 'Porn Modernist' to California

■ **Theater: Performance artist, appearing at Highways, views sex as her spiritual path.**

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How did a nice girl from Granada Hills grow up to be a prostitute, porn star and controversial performance artist, in the process infuriating congressmen who made her a focal point of the debate over federal arts funding?

Ask Annie Sprinkle.

The New York-based Sprinkle appears tonight through Sunday in "Post Post Porn Modernist" at Highways in Santa Monica. The work charts the star's evolution from her childhood as Ellen Steinberg growing up in a conservative San Fernando Valley suburb to her life in what she calls "the sex industry," making such films as "Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle," to her latest persona as the Goddess Anya, who views sex as her spiritual path. Former Fluxus member Willem de Ridder will direct the performance, her first in California.

It's the latest contribution from this woman who a little over two years ago became the subject of criticism leveled against the National Endowment for the Arts by

lawmakers who objected to federal grants made in support of art with explicit sexual themes.

Unlike other controversial performance artists, Sprinkle does not have a torrent of criticism from the National Endowment for the Arts administration or politicians like Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) who have blasted her and the groups that sponsor her performances. Sprinkle offers the solution she would bring to any number of national disasters: "I'd like to make love with [Helms]. The only way is more acceptance and compassion. I like it that the world is full of people who think differently than I do. Other people are uncomfortable about their sexuality and that's their right."

Sprinkle believes that her fellow performance artists deserve funding from the NEA, but she did not seek federal funds for her most recent video, "Sluts and Goddesses." Instead, she was funded in part by PONY: Prostitutes of New York.

"My allegiance is more with people who are in the sex industry," she says, noting that a percentage of the proceeds from admission to her performances as well as the sale of her artwork (prints made from pressing her breasts against ink pads, also exhibited at Highways) will be donated to L.A. COYOTE (Call Off

Your Old Tired Ethics).

Sprinkle, who considers herself a feminist, is emphatically not an angry woman. "I make a conscious effort not to be judgmental," she says, "about anything."

Rather, she is cheerful, nearly beatific, with the radiant compassion of a novice about to take the veil. Instead of the somber robes of celibacy, she wears come-hither attire—high heels, dangly earrings and a crimson panne velvet dress cut low to reveal ample cleavage. She is heavily made up and her henna-colored hair is piled loosely atop her head. Yet she requests healthy or macrobiotic food, and during an interview at a Japanese restaurant, she talks about having a sex-positive attitude in a sex-negative world.

"For some women, it is degrading to be in porn and prostitution, for some it isn't," Sprinkle says. "There are two sides to everything. I'm glad women are talking about rape, abuse and exploitation but my job is to talk about pleasure, ecstasy, love, joy and orgasm. My motto is 'Let there be pleasure on Earth and let it begin with me.'

"I'm into what I call the new ancient sex," she continues. "In ancient times, sex was sacred and prayer and ritual were a big part of it. With what I call 'post-AIDS' sex, you have to learn to focus on

energy."

Sprinkle, 37, has repeatedly tested negative for HIV. She chalks it up to the same luck that has saved her from venereal disease, rape and violence over a 20-year career in the often dangerous sex industry. Rather than subscribe to the fear and hysteria around AIDS, she is an advocate of creative sexual solutions, including use of condoms.

Her performances are an occasion to pass on carnal knowledge. In the past, Sprinkle has staged "public cervix announcements," inviting the audience to peer through a speculum to examine her cervix. "I want to demystify the female body," she explains. "Do

you know how many women have never even seen their own [private parts]?"

"I'm a sex expert, having had sex with thousands of people in thousands of different ways," she continues. "I teach sex workshops for women like 'How to be a sex goddess in 101 easy steps.' It has to do with unleashing your sexuality. During the performance, I invite the audience to ask me questions. The show is great because after, people go out and talk about sexuality—theirs and mine."

Sprinkle became a prostitute at 17 while working at a massage parlor. Through a friendship with Gerard Damiano, director of "Deep Throat," she started working in pornography. At the time, she feared only that the decision would prevent her from ever going on to

become an art teacher. Ironically, as Annie Sprinkle, she lectures and does workshops at art schools all over the world, a life that little Ellen Steinberg would have envied.

"It's not to say I didn't have a tough time in prostitution. But my experience of sex was positive. I believed so strongly in the power of sex, the fun, the creativity, the healing. I was researching sex because I wanted to, because it was the most fascinating subject.

"All of my experiences, even the horrible ones, led me to a better place," she says in a caressing, thoughtful tone. "I feel like I came out a winner. I surpassed all my wildest expectations. When I was young, I was full of sexual guilt, shame and neediness. Now I embrace my body, my self. I feel blissful and content."

