SO THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT?

A stone's throw from Hollywood, performances you're never going to see on the screen...

BY: HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

After tossing bunches of uncooked wienies at the audience, Johanna Went threw herself in a pool of blood on the floor, howling.

Barry Markowitz ate raw meat.

Barbara Smith spent the evening in a coffin.

In the garbage dump area of the Atomic Cafe, Mark Kreisel put up an altar of ten new commandments; notable among them was, "Consider art a guest in L.A."

All this was art.

L.A.'s house guest throughout the month of October was performance art, and the above were a few samples of a medium that runs the unmitigated gamut, from deadening ennui to certifiable insanity.

Performance art is taught in most university art departments and specific styles have come to be emulated by the current generation of art students — a surprising phenomenon in itself, since performance art, by nature, has always been anti-institutional. Yet there is so much of it being done in Los Angeles these days that Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) and the Highland Art Agents (see addenda) co-sponsored L.A.'s first performance art festival, Public Spirit. Part I was held last May, Part II, lost month.

And what is performance art?

JOHANNA WENT

Performance art uses techniques of both shock and boredom to bring about realizations — and sometimes changes — in both viewer and performer. Anybody can be a performance artist, anytime and anywhere, without the support of an arts institution. It's not bankable or blue chip, and, theoretically, it should be relatively uncorruptable — and to some extent is — there are artists who are watchdog rigorous in this regard. But if last month indicates a trend, there are some big changes coming in the public spirit of performance art in L.A., embraced as it has been by the alternative art establishment.

Since some of you are still wondering if this stuff qualifies as art at all, let's consider its origin — which is Dadaism. Dadaism was the name given to an unfettered revolutionary art movement in which the "act" was as important as the final product. In 1916, artist Andre Breton said, "Dada is a state of mind . . . artistic free-thinking." Dada incorporated scandals, some of which seem tame in comparison to last month's events, but at that time an audience was outraged Tristan Tzara's "Vaseline Symphonique" a very non-musical concert played by 20 non-musicians. They couldn't stand the idea of Tzara reading to them from vulgar novels rather than poetry. What were they to think when he demanded the right to urinate in different colors? Dada was more of a spirit than a movement, a process of continuous revolution. It was simultaneously the means and the end, and by definition it was self-destructive. Tristan Tzara explained,

> *It is not the new technique that interests us, but the spirit. Why do you want us to be preoccupied with a pictorial, moral, poetic, literary, political or social renewal? Uninteresting questions of fashion and facade . . . Dada doubts all.*

It was out of this atmosphere of nihilism and iconoclasm that performance art evolved. For the Dadaists, it was the ideal mode of expression: a creative act that left no trace of itself.

The roots of performance art go back farther than the Dadaists, of course. In 1896, Alfred Jarry wrote and directed a play, *Ubu Roi*, that inspired some artists and poets to abandon the limitations of the proscenium. The play, and others that followed, were performed in outdoor areas and in cafes, one of the most famous being the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. Poets and artists obliterated the barriers between art and life simply by refusing to recognize them.

Performance artists Bob and Bob

Forty-four years after Marcel Duchamp signed his first Readymade, "Bottle-Dryer," into being, Allan Kaprow presented "18 Happenings in Six Parts" at the Reuben Gallery in New York. It was 1958, and Kaprow's performance was no longer considered Dada, but similarities and sympathies were apparent.

Kaprow, like the Dadaists who preceded him, insisted that "happenings" or performance art should keep the line between life and art as indistinct as possible. Duchamp had called himself an "anartist"; Kaprow called the new art "non-art." In 1969 he wrote, " 'Non-art' is obviously whatever has not yet been accepted as art, but has caught an artist's attention with that possibility in mind. [Dry-cleaning processes] double as kinetic environments, simply because I had the thought and have written it here."

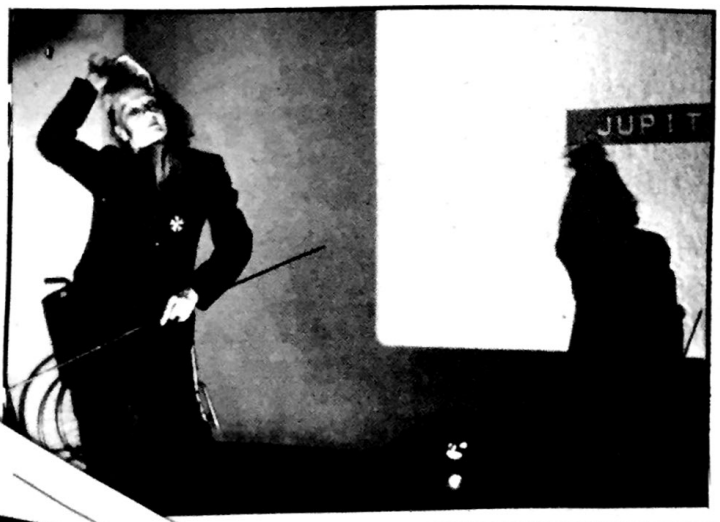
Kaprow has been teaching at the University of California, San Diego, since 1974 and of the 70 artists who participated in last month's festival, he is the individual who has done the most to shape the art form. Throughout the '70s, he did small, *highly-controlled pieces without an audience*, only discussing the work later with *non-participants. They were, and continue to be, simple exercises involving elements from everyday life, believing, as he does, that sources of performance* art *should derive from anywhere except the* arts: "To escape from the traps of art, it is *not enough* to be against museums or to stop producing marketable objects; the artist of the future must learn how to evade his profession. . ."

Kaprow has always discouraged working "live" and has expressed concern over the morality of performances that "manipulate" their audience. Yet if anything may be said about the peformance art festival this year, it is that performances are veering away from this stripped-down, somewhat esoteric approach. While only about 50 people came to hear Kaprow discuss his performance at LACE, hundreds packed the house to see Rachel Rosenthal, a narrative performance artist whose work is the absolute opposite of Kaprow's.

What follows is an overview of events that have transpired as art for the last month.

"BONJOUR, DR. SCHON": Rachel Rosenthal

Rosenthal's performances are autobiographical and theatrical, some say histrionic. The creator of the improvisational Instant Theater in the '50s, Rosenthal pulls out all the props, tricks and hokum she needs to get her message across. A lesser artist could never pull it off.



Her performance, "Bonjour, Dr. Schon," was staged the last night of the festival, the eve of All Hallows' Eve. A video monitor was set up with tapes of Rosenthal's friends complimenting her in the most gushing terms. After a full 15 irritating minutes of that, she was brought out in a wheelchair by assistants. Then she stood up and stripped herself of everything except a gold paper mask. Now Rosenthal is a 54-year-old woman, not a nymph or a sex symbol. Behind her lone, naked figure, a slide of the white pocked surface of the moon was projected, the lunar skin a stark and shocking echo of her flesh.

In the three "acts" that followed, Rosenthal was brought through the seasons of her life, first as the two-dimensional woman who, like the moon, passes through life afraid to show her dark said to anyone. Without protest, she allowed assistants to tape creepy rubber spiders and snakes to her body before they covered her with a squishy, pumpkin-orange pulp and sprinkles of candy corn. A formal confection, she was helpless until . . . the phone rang. Like something from a Lucille Ball skit, she looked down to find herself covered with sweet gunk; swearing violently, she cleaned herself up.

For the second "act," Rosenthal dressed in an old black suit of her father's, adding a silver vampire-like mask. She then told the audience how she had adored her father and wanted to emulate him but didn't because she feared losing his favor. Little girls of good family weren't supposed to crave power or independence. She confessed these "dark" aspects of her personality to the audience, she said, so she would be able to accept and therefore exorcise them in the third "act."

Still on stage, she changed costume in Act Three, becoming the real Rachel Rosenthal, though she still wore a mask, now one of flesh-toned paper. Through both declaration and allegory, she demonstrated loving acceptance of her own death that, she indicated, had enabled her to embrace all aspects of her "self" for the first time, including the saccharin compliments of the videotape.

The performance lasted an hour, and in spite of some technical lapses toward the middle, the SRO audience seemed captivated. This was partially due to theatrics, but also because Rosenthal tapped into the fact that an artist gains power in proportion to the commitment to risk. Her performance may not have been perfect, but, despite her fears, she put herself into it 100 percent. Both she and the audience were affected in kind. As Rosenthal herself has said, the more personal a performance, the more universal its application and appreciation. Her performance was a painfully sincere self-purge before strangers whose strength was that it came off as provocation rather than self-indulgence. ■

"STARDUST MEMORIES": Alexis Smith and Heidi Hardin

Rosenthal's brave commitment was especially apparent when compared to a performance of equally lush production values staged two days prior. "Stardust Memories," by Alexis Smith and her former student Heidi Hardin, involved a nine-person cast that stood behind attractively painted headless prop figures, the kind you might see at the photo gallery of an amusement park. The props were turn-of-the-century painted costumes, except for the one child and one black woman there to provide Butterfly McQueen-like comic relief. All the so-called "characters" were stereotypes, as flat as the scenery.

In snappy cadence, the cast spoke and sang a cute, trite account of the life of Isadora Duncan, with side remarks on the cultural climate of these gay days. Parts of the dialogue were quite clever, as they should have been since they were lifted verbatim from some of the finest writers of the era. But parts were also boring, like "I have always relied on the kindness of strangers," a vintage Tennessee Williams that has been through the wash so often it's bleached of all significance. And "If all