

**LIVE 6/7**

\$6

**GLENN BRANCA**



# CALACTS

## L.A. STEVE FRITZ



JOHN DUNCAN ponders his music. As part of a group, he played a jackhammer and ended up riding it like a sled across the gallery floor.

Over a year later, the first Los Angeles performance art festival still reverberates as an impressive summary of California performance activity. The festival, held in May and October, 1980 at the LACE gallery, presented over seventy artists, including shows by noted performers like Allan Kaprow, Barbara Smith, The Kipper Kids, Chris Burden, Suzanne Lacy, Bob and Bob, and Rachel Rosenthal, and other artists like Stephen Seemayer, Johanna Went, and Nancy Buchanan who are gaining well deserved reputations.

Megan Williams, coordinator of the festival, talked about the artist's motivations and the theme of the festival.

I think what's real important is the title, *Public Spirit*. The word spiritual has become a dirty word in the art world and it's terrible. That's the artists' source whether they admit it or not. The title implies that the individual experience has social significance, that it has public significance. I think it's interesting that usually the audience was half artists, half . . . not only non-artists, but people who had never come to an art event. The in-between is the so-called art world, if that exists in L.A. They're not interested. Performance art is much more connected with the music scene and the party scene. The art system can be very vicious and most artists are scared to death because it's so competitive. What's wonderful about performance is you can do it anytime, anywhere. The artist doesn't need support from anybody. It's just them presenting something in an attempt to be completely direct and to the point with their audience. It isn't like

STEVE FRITZ

STEPHEN SEEMAYER trapped in a sea of skylines.



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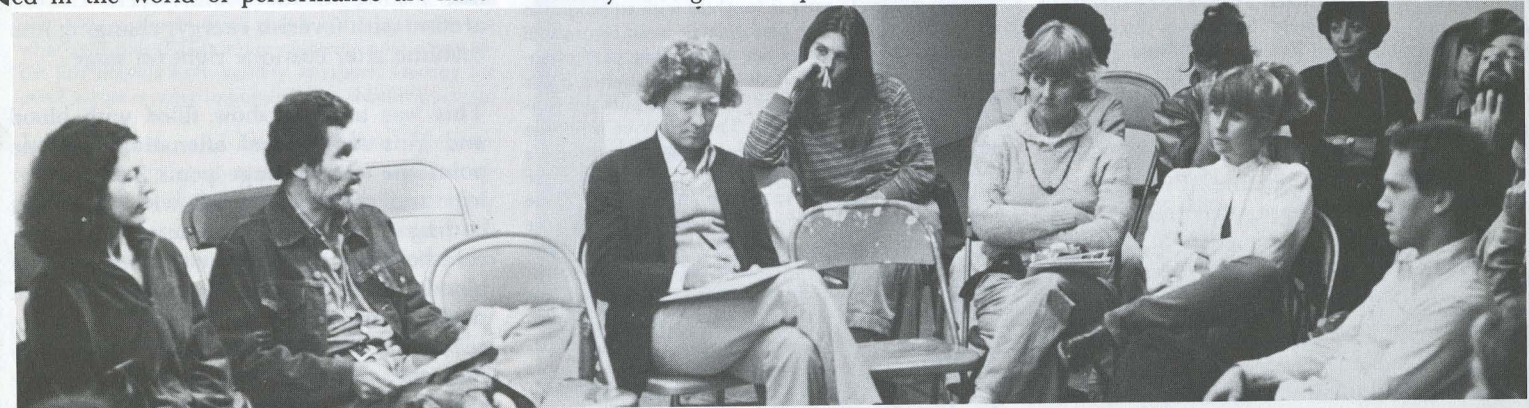
putting up some static piece and walking away, leaving the work to represent you. Most of the artists in this medium don't care what the dealers or the critics think. They've already found their own community. For example, a number of the women who have been involved with the Woman's Building (the women's art collective on N. Spring Street) participated here. They're dealing with social structures, class structures, the fact that lesbianism is still kind of a difficult life style. I think that most of them are doing it in a very direct, unabashed, unashamed, very proud way. Catharsis is the main thing these people deal with.

Some of the most revolting images produced in the world of performance art have

come from the hands of Paul McCarthy. In one of his tamer pieces McCarthy ingested raw hamburger on a landing between the twelfth and thirteen floors of the Biltmore Hotel during the American National Theatre Conference. During this time he had a doll hanging out of his pants, an Arab mask over his face and a ketchup-covered doll on his head. He hung crucifixes on the railing and at one point tried to put a ketchup bottle up his ass. It lasted about thirty minutes—until the hotel security managed to stop him.

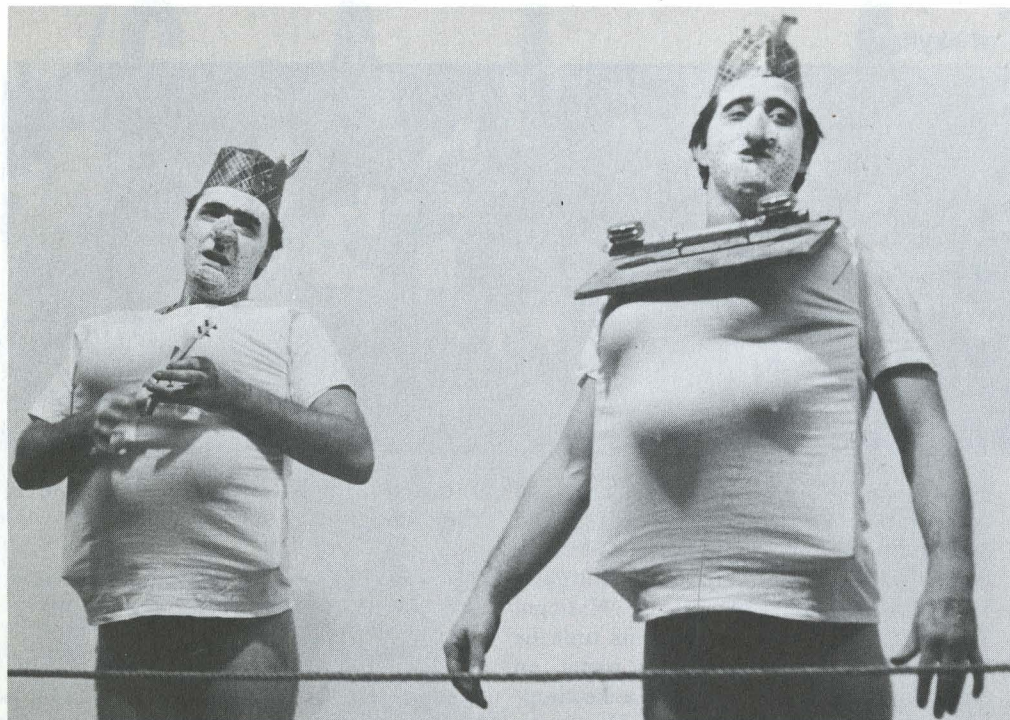
I talked with McCarthy about some of these things.

The whole movement has denied the capitalist art system. It's more political. But it's not really as clear cut as all that. When I work I don't really set up things all that much. The piece tells its own story. I collect things and arrange them in a setting. Then it's a matter of things developing—one thing leads to another. Sometimes it turns out lighter than others. Other things are going on besides shocking images. That's really been sensationalized. Still, doing that kind of stuff is a little risky. You open up things that people don't like to deal with. It isn't just about showing the obvious. The answers don't come that



STEVE FRITZ

ALLAN KAPROW talking down to his audience like a boring grandfather telling dull stories.



**THE KIPPER KIDS** entered through gallery windows blown out by an explosion. They burped, farted, and pinched their way through a show that ended when they threw paint and flour onto the audience.

quick, either. Artists are trying to get at them, but they don't have the answers. There's no clear cut way to do it—it's an experiment. Sometimes you get there and it's possibly scary. But it's a catharsis.

One way many of these live art works transcend the moment of experience is through documentation by the California-based *High Performance* magazine. Produced by editor Linda Burnham, the magazine attempts to legitimize the work of these artists and at the same time preserves work that would otherwise be destined to folk stories and rumor.

Burnham talked about some of the issues that constantly haunt these artists.

Performance artists don't get into theater because they want to do their own work. They don't want to

get caught up in a world that's involved with other people's work. Theater is involved with technique in a really huge way. The performance artist controls all the elements himself rather than being part of someone else's concept. It doesn't even matter if it's good lighting or a good set. The artist puts the concept uppermost in the piece. The technique is not the point. If the '60s and '70s have taught us anything it's that the art is not in the paint or the clay—it's in the artist. I trust the artist to get the point across. These artists are absolutely driven to show their work to the public even if it's embarrassing, boring or stupid. The actual creation and presentation can be incredibly difficult and painful. That idea means so much more to me than *Man of La Mancha*. It really touches the artist inside of me. I think it's the purest form of art there is. The ultimate goal of art is to change the way people think. The avant-garde does this especially well. It shakes up the way people see.

We talked about the problem of objective

art versus live pieces. If your piece goes unrecorded and you don't have a finished product like a painting or sculpture the artist's contribution can be very fleeting. Plus you have nothing to sell for your own support. Burnham: "Ultimately the performance artist, if he or she gets famous enough, will get a teaching job. But that's about as far as it goes. I know of only one person who makes a living at performance art. The people who have been involved in performance since the '60s have begun to see that they will never really get what the painters and the sculptors will get for their contributions. There's only the documentation and until I came along there was nothing. Most publications don't know how to handle it."

The LACE festival brought one especially unusual performer into the gallery environment. Usually a club performer, Johanna Went, along with her accompanists, Mark Wheaton on keyboard and Brock Rock on drums, produced a very powerful event which combined numerous elaborate costume changes, a multitude of props, and a musical assault that created a raw jungle-like feeling in the room. Went danced around with feverish energy, changing into costume after costume right on stage.

This was another show filled with blood and guts and sexual alienation. At one point she wore a huge penis between her legs and pranced around with it, finally cutting it up with a machete. She threw cold hot dogs at the audience and pulled a bloody baby from a box covered with plastic arms and ears. Finally, a paper-covered man with balls and a penis kills her, only to be killed himself by her reincarnation. As the paper man dies she cuts open his back and eats the yellow substance which oozes out.

Went explains how she plans her pieces: "What I do is more like a dance and a collage of visual images. I get things together and have an idea what I'll do, but the rest is pretty spontaneous. As far as why I do it, I don't try and make statements. I'm just a mirror of the environment. I'm not violent myself but I see things that are brutal. It's pretty abstract I guess."

Another performance artist whose work has received considerable attention recently is Stephen Seemayer. His new work, where he immerses himself into a sea of tiny skylines, deals with many of the same alienation issues present in other performances. But Seemayer brings it off in a way more digestible to the art public. Throughout Seemayer's other work the images of skyline, fire, and numbers present themselves regularly.

The skyline and numbers just represent a real loss of personal identity—that's why I wear the jumpsuit. It's like a uniform that everybody wears in one form or another. Fire is a focus for people, it attracts their attention and depending on how it's used can either help or harm you. In my work I try to give people a glimpse of reality—like when you are driving in a car and you see a situation on the street for a fleeting moment. You can't really stop or change it but it affects you. You can really freak people out if you want but what's the point? This image of the ominous angry artist just doesn't have validity anymore. Getting the point across is more important than shocking people.

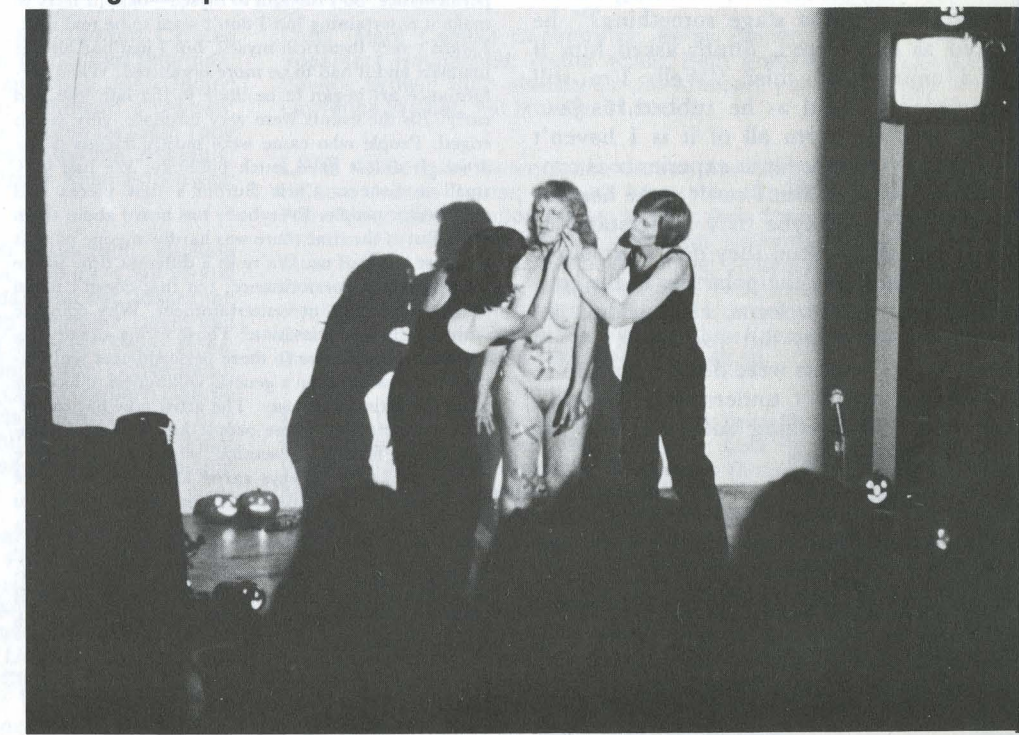
John Duncan, and his friend Paul McCarthy, have created some of the most controversial work in the Los Angeles performance art scene. Duncan has been both praised and censured for his explorations of sex roles, violence, and self-destruction.

In the name of art and self-exploration Duncan has put himself into potentially violent situations where he narrowly escaped attack while dressed as a woman street walker in the pick-up areas along

Santa Monica Blvd. He has done a photo narrative piece exploring his own suicide and confronted friends at their door with a gun to communicate to them what it felt like to be attacked.

Most of the people I know who are currently doing performance started doing painting or very composed-type pieces. They bring that training into what they're doing in performance and it shows. But rather than using performance as an end in itself, it just becomes a more fluid medium, like a different tool. The point of performance is what people are saying. I've gotten into a lot of trouble with a couple of my pieces. But for me it's a way to be really direct. The *Shoot* piece came out of an actual situation in which I was attacked. At one point I was sure that I would be killed. I wanted to learn more about the psychology of violence and death and attempt to com-

**RACHEL ROSENTHAL** was unbound from a wheelchair and stripped naked by assistants who tried to repair her imperfections. She was then covered with frosting and sprinkled with nuts.



municate that fear to people that I knew. There's a kind of exhilaration present in performance that is missing in static work. It's also a tool to learn about yourself.

One of the most respected and articulate practitioners of performance art is Barbara Smith. Her explorations into being, both in life and death, have a very ritualistic quality. Her piece for the LACE festival involved a private performance in a small room of a residence hotel. In it she put a long narrow box much like a casket. A short statement on the wall outside the room read in part, "I believe that there is no body which, though violated, cannot be made whole nor any matter that is not infused with spirit." On the walls she encouraged

people to respond by attaching a drawing pad and providing pens. It occurred to me that this was part of the piece too, like correspondence between unknown friends.

When we got together in the lobby of the hotel to talk about her piece Smith began telling me about her version of the origins of art. "People began making art in ancient times as a way of preserving and communicating with people after they had died. They began making impressions of the face and later developed masks that were used in ceremonies and became the first objective art pieces. It was a way of preserving their lives."

Just about this time the hotel's manager, a man in his fifties named George, came into the lobby. He had worked with many of the artists during the festival, including Smith. "You folks gonna stage something?" he asked as he entered. Smith asked him if he'd enjoyed all this? "Well, I'm still puzzled," he said as he rubbed his jaw. "My reaction from all of it is I haven't gained anything as far as experience is concerned. I view it. But I can't make head or tail out of it. Maybe they understand it, but I just don't. And they don't explain it to me." Suddenly the polarities of the controversy came into focus. He couldn't get anything out of it. But you could tell all these artists' events were disturbing him in a way he couldn't understand. It didn't seem to mean anything but it was working on him nevertheless.

Getting back to ancient art Smith went on, "These people lived in small groups and really had no conflicts until tribes began to run into each other and battle. The whole ecology was broken up and the conflict produced the need for identity because identity grows amid uncertainty. That's the tragedy of consciousness and the history of

human beings—the tragedy of uncertainty and not being able to keep in touch with your spirit. It makes the human journey more difficult. For me we're caught in that process and that's what the tension is all about. The political statements come from people who get caught in a cause, but it all arises out of the conflict that produces uncertainty."

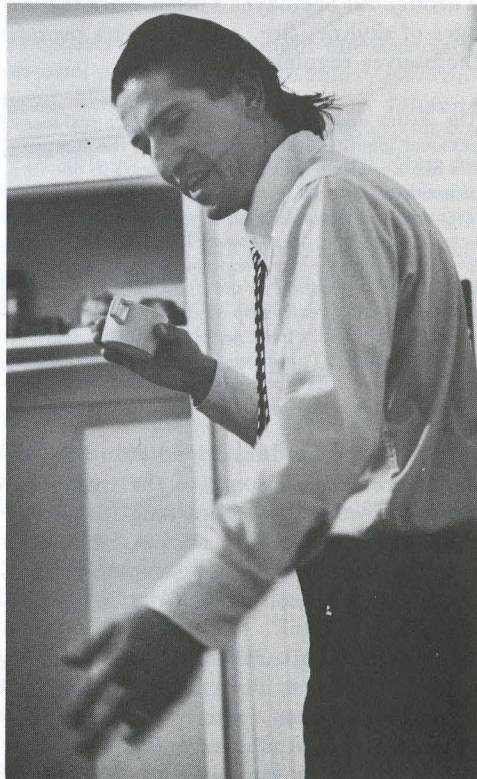
Nancy Buchanan's show at LACE dealt with the political issues of unchecked power in organizations like the CIA. She used a multitude of theatrical elements and presented a highly organized piece with both light-hearted humor and high drama. "My pieces usually aren't that theatrical," she told me.

There's been a lot of emphasis on the theatrical in performance. So I thought to myself—okay, I'll try to make it entertaining but I don't want to be real slick. I wasn't very theatrical myself, but I just had all this material and it had to be more organized. When performance art began to be done in the late '60s and early '70s the events were very intimate, very rough edged. People who came were mostly friends of the artist. It didn't have much publicity. We had very small audiences. Chris Burden's first pieces had about eight people. Everybody has heard about them now. But at the time there was hardly anyone in it. It was just a few of us. We're in a different time in the development of performance, but that doesn't mean that it should go into entertainment. Why compete with theatre and television? Those forms already exist. Still people come to these performances with expectations rather than a general willingness to look for what the artist has to say. The artist now has to get people's attention. Some people are more entertaining. Like Rachel Rosenthal who has a theatre background. I've always cared about the audience but I don't want to just entertain them. What I'm after is kind of a psychological connection. That's why I got interested in it in the first place. The immediacy of performance and the more deliberate creation of your work in the presence of your viewer is what really interests me. I think it makes a much stronger connection.

The personal nature of this medium also makes it a grab-bag for all sorts of self-

indulgent expression. Under the guise of experimentation artists feel free to assault, re-arrange, and harass the viewer without consideration of how the message will be received. However, like George in the hotel lobby, some of the artists' intentions don't seem immediately apparent. The experience may not seem like much at the time but somehow a couple of days later it's still stuck in your mind. The image of Richard Newton, locked in the hotel room with white bread and TV tubes didn't strike many of the viewers in the hotel lobby that night. People kept wondering what he was doing for his performance. But it stuck: TV tubes and white bread. It stuck.

Steve Fritz lives in and reports on L.A.  
RICHARD NEWTON



STEVE FRITZ