



Art in action: "Death of an Era" by Dustin Shuler.

Moving Pictures: Performance Art

by John Kehoe

A man locks himself in a bus station locker for three days without food or water; another man chains himself and a coyote to an art gallery wall; a 20-foot nail is dropped from 115 feet in the air to pierce a Cadillac right between the seats. There is an increasingly active performance art scene emerging in the South Bay, and it is becoming so public that it's hard not to notice.

Performance art is a generic term for temporal art works created by fine artists. A stepchild to the art world "happenings" of the early '60s, performance art is sometimes created by artists active in painting, sculpture, film or video and is sometimes created by artists who specialize in performance. A piece can last for minutes, hours or weeks. Some pieces are videotaped as part of the performance, others are not. A few artists take

care to document their work while other performance artists prefer their work to exist only in the minds of those who witnessed the performance.

In contrast to the fairly well ordered world of painting or sculpture, where work can be purchased, held and viewed, performance art is a world of ideas, concepts and wild action where the initiated can revel in cross-references and jokes and the casual spectator can become involved in the aesthetic insanity.

The currents in the South Bay performance art circuit of late have indicated a healthy scene. Late last year performance artist Dustin Shuler executed a piece he called "Death of an Era" on the campus at Cal State Dominguez Hills. Shuler fashioned a giant, one-ton nail which was hung from a construction crane positioned on the lawn of the Fine Arts Building. The nail was suspended over the great white hulk of a 1959 Cadillac, which was itself held three feet in the air on (symbolic) oil drums. At a signal from Shuler, the crane operator released the nail, which plunged to the ground to impale the car neatly at midsection, like a butterfly on a pin. The

large crowd which had gathered to witness the event cheered for almost a minute, and then watched as Shuler directed the crane to topple the stuck car onto its side. It was one of the largest crowds yet for a performance piece, and by that token one of the most successful.

A different kind of performance piece took place recently at the Only Open Sometimes Art Gallery in Manhattan Beach. Notice of a show of conceptual art environments by Lawrence Knack, a mysterious figure who was supposedly declared legally dead in 1980 after disappearing in 1973, told of how Knack never physically realized any of his work but kept his ideas alive through diagrams and schematics. His wife, Sarah, donated piece #7 to the Gallery specifically for the event. The public viewing time was given as 9 to 11 p.m. on the notice, but when early viewers arrived at 8:30 they were greeted with a padlock on the gallery door.

At precisely 9 o'clock the lights went on inside the gallery and it became apparent the windows were painted over except for a series of tiny, quarter-inch squares at chest level. Bending to see through the squares, specta-

tors could see the figure of a man dressed in black clothes lying on the floor of the all white room. The angle of view through the squares and the spacing of them gave the impression of precise measurements. At 11 o'clock the lights went off, keys to the padlock were produced and the crowd outside went in. Once there, a tape recording of the crowd at the beginning of the piece was turned on and a bucket of black paint was thrown into a corner of the gallery, ending the piece.

Steven Lee and Habib Kaheradyar, the artists who produced the piece, may have also produced the legend of Lawrence Knack. Knack, described in the show notice as an art thinker outrageously ahead of his time, is undocumented outside the Only Open Sometimes Gallery. The use of humor and irony is a longstanding tradition in performance art, and many of the better-known artists make extensive use of humor in their work. William Wegman works with his dog Man Ray and produces witty performances in the vein of a paint-smattered Robert Rauschenberg.

Other artists work in a more elemental form. Harry and Harry Kipper, Venice residents known professionally as the Kipper Kids, smear themselves and sometimes their audience with food and refuse. An article by Linda Burnham told of when the Kids, in a grandiose finale to a 1979 piece, sprinkled cleaning powder on their bodies and down their jockey shorts, punched each other, squirted shaving cream on each other's heads and then blew the cream off with firecrackers.

A few performance artists are extremely sophisticated in their approach. Bob and Bob are artists who became slightly famous by performing a piece they called, "Oh great, now what?" The piece consisted of Bob and Bob ordering expensive meals at Beverly Hills restaurants, pretending to discover they were broke and saying, "Oh great, now what?" Bob and Bob's art aesthetic combined with their Saturday Night Live sense of humor creates a type of Picasso vaudeville.

The deadly serious performance art of Chris Burden, who like the Kipper Kids and Bob and Bob lives in Venice, is completely different in aims and intent. It was Burden who performed the notorious *Shoot*, where he was intentionally shot in the left arm by a friend with a .22 caliber rifle. Burden is the most unpredictable and provocative American performance artist, one of the few with international stature.

The performance scene in Venice and Santa Monica is moving into the South Bay. Bob and Bob, Burden and the Kipper Kids have all recently performed at the Tortue Gallery in Santa Monica, and there are plans to bring artists of their caliber into the South Bay through the Only Open Sometimes Gallery. There is also consideration of the active pursuit of performance art through the gallery at Cal State Dominguez since the well received, heavily publicized Shuler piece. Picasso vaudeville, Dali drama, whatever it is, it's coming. ■