

DRUMMER FEATURE ARTICLE

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How Your Sex-Life Is Art...

HIGH PERFORMANCE (Or, Sex Without A Net) by Jack Fritscher

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AUTHOR'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT INTRODUCTION



DRAFT VERSION



Written October 22, 1978, and published in *Drummer* 26, January 1979. I wanted this article to widen the concept in the *Drummer* readers' minds of what it was they were all doing at night: it wasn't just sex; it was art. I also wrote this article because I wanted to justify *Drummer* printing the nasty, tasty photographs from *High Performance* magazine (as well as one from David Sparrow of Ed Dinakos). Totally by accident I prefigured the 1989 Mapplethorpe fiasco with the United States Senate over grant money for gay art: I wrote—ironically even then—a punning sex caption on page 21 for this article re S&M as performance art: “What You Do After Midnight May Merit You a National Endowment.”

Magazine reading was a mainstay of my life as a boy, and by age 16 I was submitting movie reviews for publication to magazines. My first actually published review was of the film about the “Scopes monkey trial” and evolution vs creationism, *Inherit the Wind*, *Josephinum Review* DATE. Magazines reflect popular culture more immediately than books. As venue, magazines have an assured circulation of thousands, even millions of readers, which is more than a book can be assured of when it is published.

Magazine writing was once literary and glamorous. In 196XX, *Look*??Life published the entirety of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. In the 50's, *Esquire*: *The Man's Magazine* published authors_____. By the 60's, *Playboy* legitimized itself by publishing established writers with intellect and style. As a senior in high school, I began a six-year stint working with the twice monthly national Catholic magazine, *The Josephinum Review*. Film and book reviews lead to copy editing of fiction and features and then to the writing of fiction and features, including some photography, that extended freelance to a dozen other magazines like *The Catholic Preview of*

Entertainment in whose DATE issue I coded a spinning gay feature on James Dean with whom I like all of us at the time was in love, mournful, romantic love.

By the time *Drummer* came along to me in the gaystream, I had logged twenty years of experience in magazine culture of both popular magazines and literary journals, so I wanted *Drummer* to rise up and distinguish itself in the new context of gay lib as a legit and sophisticated mag of gay pop culture, intelligent sex, and bold entertainment that took the men's magazines, like *Saga* and *Man-to-Man* and *Argosy*, and brought their subtext of bdsm homomascularity out of the closet. Consequently, I extended *Drummer's* scope to include reviews off other magazines from *Sports Illustrated* ("Reviewing Straight Magazines," *Drummer* 23, July 1978) to *High Performance*, because it dared to publish photos and write articles that it could get away with as a straight magazine.

Drummer was constantly "censored down" by every cunt (in the British/Irish sense) from the printer ("religious objections") to the distributor and to the magazine store owners who feared raids by local law enforcement. An extra bonus issue of *Drummer*, titled *Son of Drummer*, September 1978, in which I introduced Robert Mapplethorpe, suffered particular censorship from the printer. See *Drummer* 26, January 1979, page 6, for a narrative of some—just some—of what went wrong with that special issue. Articles had to be yanked at the last minute, including an article I had written about a Vietnam vet's hostility to a college student titled "Scum That I Am." (The hilarious thing is that only the first page of "Scum" was pulled and replaced by photos by "David Sparrow"; the partial last pages remained half there without explanation.) Additionally, publisher John Embry, who was really quite accepting of all my cockamamie concepts for *Drummer*, drew the line at blasphemy when I presented him with an anti-war poem that explained that Jesus was crucified because the Roman soldiers were jealous that he had a double-jointed back and could blow himself.

I liked the concept of "performance art" because it seemed immediately applicable to define what S&M leather ritual had been about all along. Also, I had since the 60's been a particular fan and devotee of performance artist Chris Burden; I mean, any guy who gets himself shot in an art gallery (premonitions of the shooting of Robert Opel in his Fey Way gallery) and has himself crucified on top of a running Volkswagen is my kind of date in the world of male-aggression sex.

I always loved performance art. In Manhattan. On Good Friday, 1970, I participated in a little happening that was—most certainly—performance art, to which I was already dedicated from inside my S&M background. I wrote about this incident in my nonfiction book *Popular Witchcraft* which was quite explicit for the time on leather, S&M, and gay culture vis a vis satanism. Long before there were radical faeries, I participated in this darkside sensibility—which I shared with S&M author William Carney in *The Real Thing* (1968)—and which I purposely brought as subtext into *Drummer*. That's one of the reasons Robert Mapplethorpe came to my bed: it was that old black magic that had him in my spell, because he sniffed my dropping it into *Drummer*. One of Mapplethorpe's first photographs I published is of a bloody set of cock and balls crucified to a board.

As I wrote in *Popular Witchcraft: Straight from the Witch's Mouth*, 1972, page 114:

On Good Friday, 1970, American artist Carlin Jeffrey reconstructed his award-winning sculpture at an elaborate townhouse party on New York's East Side. For four hours Jeffrey was crucified nude to a cross in the brownstone's gothic chapel. His living sculpture, designed as a tribute to homosexuals who died in American wars, was a

variation on the inverted-Christianity theme: Jeffrey was crucified (chained) backwards, face to cross, buttocks mooning the gallery. After his four-hour gesture-comment, Jeffrey descended from the cross, collected his \$1000 fee, and three days later was back at the popular Gallery of Erotic Art, crucified by appointment only. Jeffrey's backward positioning of the crucified victim typifies the inversion of Christianity common to homosexual algolia and the demonic occult. Carlin Jeffrey explained that as society has for so long turned its back on its victims, so now he feels the victims are turning their backs on society. After his appearance at Rutgers University, Jeffrey left his wooden cross for the use of the student body who regularly stripped down, male and female alike, to mount the cross as a continuing war protest. [In 1970, as well, David Sparrow and I both mounted Carlin Jeffrey's cross, naked and backwards, for symbolic reasons, as well as because it was a turn-on to be naked in a New York art gallery. After twenty minute minutes, crucifixion got boring.]

My friend and collaborator, David Hurles/Old Reliable, consented to let me by-line this feature review with his name. –Jack Fritscher, March 9, 2002

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How Your Sex-Life Is Art...

HIGH PERFORMANCE (Or, Sex Without A Net) by Jack Fritscher

Have you ever passed a news stand and had a magazine yell out to you: "Buy me!" The cover grabs your gonads, and a quick flip through the pages twists your nuts until you part with the lousy bucks. You skulk off, with the rag under your arm, ready for a heavier look-see back at your place. You know those "dirty magazine blues." That's how *High Performance* accosted me, got my adrenaline in gear, and lead me down the primrose path to a scene—if not primal, then certainly, Neanderthal.

BLOODY GOOD

So what's this new rag, and what's its scene? *High Performance* is a new LA magazine about "performance art." Performance art is probably a bigger part of your nightlife than you realize. Besides, a magazine cover showing a man blindfolded with hospital surgical gauze, bound, and covered with entrails while blood is poured onto his face and into his mouth can't be all bad.

SOCIALLY REDEEMING BULLSHIT

Are you ready for this? Performance art is a contemporary art form which serves up social, political, and philosophical ideas through some *action* (the operative word) conceived and produced, or experienced, by the artist on one hand; and by any audience present, with or without their consent, on the other. Got it?

High Performance documents this action, which is by nature often utterly bizarre,

and—to the middle-class mind—totally uncategorizable. I mean where exactly can you shelve shit like this?

In the words of the *High Performance* editor: “Performance art is temporal. When the performance is over, the art has disappeared. It exists only in the memories of the artist and the audience.” (Just like *Oklahoma!*) “Performance pieces do not hang in galleries and museums where the public can examine and savor them. Performance pieces thrive on hear-say, rumor, and, most often, opinion and misconception.”

Some artists thrive on this throwaway attitude toward outrageously breaking cultural taboos.

SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER

Most familiar to Americans is Venice, California’s Chris Burden. To earn his MFA, Chris spent a cramped weekend locked inside a 50¢ locker in the LA bus station. (That’s performance art.) Chris has had himself shot in the arm for a museum audience. Just a flesh wound. He has been bolted to the floor of a gallery, neck and wrists and ankles, next to an exposed electrical cord. Nearby, a bucket of water stood available for any playful member of the art establishment who wished to end the movement.

Chris has also had himself crucified, with nails through the hands, to the top of a running Volkswagen. He has crawled nearly naked through glass on LA sidewalks and then bought time during the 11 o’clock news to show the videotape of his bloody crawl. He is, perhaps, an authentic saint in the true Christian lineage of fleshly mortification.

WHAT I DID FOR LOVE

Burden demonstrates that the flesh is just that: flesh. So have punk rockers like Iggy Pop. Iggy takes drug-crazed bellyflops onto ground glass and fights with front-row toughs. Punk “new wave” performances are full of assaultive behavior. Although High Performance confines itself to intentional creations less commercially plotted than Iggy, the parallels between these performances and contemporary society as a whole are profoundly evident.

Even the pathetic extremist Sid Vicious, stabbing his punkette girlfriend—good old what *was* her name?—is a kind of performance artist. Those who live by the shiv, die by the shiv.

SERMONETTE

Art, despite the stained-glass school of twisting art into a fundamentalist service of morality, has nothing to do with morality. Art in its pure state is neither moral nor immoral. Art transcends morality. (Try and sell *that* to the middle class!) Art is, by essence, simply amoral. It has nothing to do with morality as such. This frees art into universality. Art stays open-endedly the same in essence, while morality itself is relative, changing from age to age, culture to culture, and class to class. The richness of Art as a concept, despite the impoverishment of would-be artists who try to milk it for all it’s worth, surprisingly, always maintains.

WHAT DID YOU DO AT THE BATHS, DADDY?

So what does all this artsy-fartsiness have to do with you as a gay creature of the night? Chances are you are already a performance artist. You probably create performance art regularly if you are the average *Drummer* reader.

Let's back into it. How often have you been a part of a "scene" at the baths, or the Catacombs, while others watched? Have you ever taken your slave, or been taken the way San Francisco's Arena Bar takes slaves to auction, in order to create a scene for interested voyeurs? The possibilities, like the scenes, are endless.

Excluding "abnormal" normal passion, much of any leatherman's behavior after sundown is, in fact, performance art.

To carry your mighty act a step further and to reflect on what it "means" could well get you into the pages of *High Performance*.

Joyfully, what your behavior "means" is fairly much up to you and your mutual partner. After all, you're the artist. No sanction is required other than that, before the act, you intend to make a statement—no matter how incomprehensible to others—through your performance.

COVERED ALL OVER WITH SWEET VIOLENCE

Getting tattooed is definitely performance art. Fisting, bondage, sculpture, scat, and watersports certainly qualify as legitimately as do boxing, wrestling, and assorted street-style exhibitionism. Performance art is truly a democratic form. A street-mugging can be performance art. Just as in San Francisco, an artist and his wife slapped each other repeatedly before an appreciative audience. How is this different from, or the same as, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In Rio, an artist asked the audience to link arms with him in a darkened room. Then, he stuck his finger in a light socket.

RUMBLE AT MOMA: VIOLENCE AS ART

The most self-indulgently violent of all was the creation of a New York (where else?) artist who persuaded two street gangs to hold a rumble at the Museum of Modern Art. Without warning, the gangs turned on the audience and beat and robbed them.

"What started out as a minor piece developed into a major work, an experience that forever altered the consciousness of that audience," said the artist.

No shit!

Most performance art, however, is not so unpredictable. It rarely delivers such a tasty message/massage to art patrons who love to be rolled by glib artists on the make.

Although not all performance art is violent, violence has caught rather naturally the imagination of many international artists. Commenting on the violent nature of life, from the shock of birth to the possible pain of death, one artist said: "Who can fail to see the art in a blackened eye or a bleeding nose. If an artist ignores violence, he ignores life."

If you've ever had a black eye, you may well understand him. A "shiner" can be so beautiful that it becomes masturbatory. And how about the beauty in a pierced tit, or a welted ass, or a good healthy bruise? The achieving of these experienced body states and the intention to experience them, fits neatly into this artistic movement.

ORGIES MYSTERY THEATER: NITSCH RHYMES WITH FRITSCHER

High Performance (Vol. 1, No. 3) seems of special interest to *Drummer* readers, due to its interview and companion pieces on Hermann Nitsch, Viennese director of the

Orgies Mysteries Theatre. Nitsch of the 60's artistic school known as "Wiener Aktionismus," is actively pursuing performance art. This school of artists became well-known for use of the body as a sculptural medium, especially for their attention to taboo sado-masochism, hedonism, pain, and death. That tradition is articulated by Nitsch: "...that feverish, erotic sweetness, where the extreme will of expression rises to erotic cruelty but is always mastered aesthetically, combined with the enjoyment of form."

Says Nitsch: "For me it's important to come out of the laws of our society. We live very lukewarm, very lukewarm. Most of the people don't exist, really. They are living in a dream. Everything is okay, and nothing is really dangerous, but nothing is really great, and they're not happy and they're not unhappy. I learned with my work that we bring to them *real* existence. Some things are painful, and some things shall make them very, very happy. I enjoy a very intensive life, and this I want to create with my work. There's cruelty and death also about it. Many people are afraid to live and afraid for death. When you live very intensively, society comes out against it. It is always a little bit dangerous to be very strong.

"...it's not necessary to be aggressive any more in the normal ways; it's not necessary to make war. It's better to do such things in the theatre than in reality. It's a very basic idea.

"I want that all our depressed things come out of our subconsciousness and that we bring it into our consciousness during the performance, because I'm using art and I'm using form; and form brings our repressed things into our consciousness. Let me explain it better: we all have a lot of power, a lot of energies and our society does not allow us to bring out all our energies. The energies become depressed; human society likes cruelty."

NITSCH NEVER DOES ANYTHING NICE 'N' EASY

Nitsch starts out strong: people have to pour blood on a white tablecloth; then it becomes stronger and strongest. His recent Los Angeles performance, accompanied by a cacophonous brass orchestra, included twenty actions whose elements were the pouring of blood onto animal intestines and carcasses as well as onto human genitals and mouths; manipulation of entrails by stuffing them into and pulling them out of carcasses; crucifixion of nude males next to crucified carcasses; and the playing of musical instruments into animal carcasses to catch how their meat echoes.

The blood was intentionally rancid; the intestines stank; the music hurt the ears. The entrails were always stuffed back into the carcass with a nude male underneath—entrails, blood, and mucus falling on him. In the final action, two people held up a third who viciously stomped the entrails out of a carcass and onto the floor, whereupon they were replaced and the furious stomping went on.

ART AIN'T MIDDLE-CLASS

Nitsch plans a version to run six days and nights, probably in Austria, and hopefully with human cadavers. It will contain: trenches filled with blood and guts; tanks lobbing shells at slaughtered crucified cows; consumption of alcohol for a mass intoxication of the audience; recorded speeches by Hitler; hacking of carcasses; wallowing in entrails on blood-soiled beds; and lots of noise. The feature bit is the crucifixion and disembowelling of a corpse while a chorus watches and sings on the sidelines.

DON'T ASK

HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE THIS MATERIAL

www.JackFritscher.com/Drummer/Research%20Note.html

Sorry, but I can't get you tickets. But you can keep up on the latest in performance art by reading *High Performance*. It is quarterly, and costs \$2.00/copy, or \$8.00 for a year's subscription. Individual copies can be ordered for \$2.50/each from the publisher: Linda Burnham 240 S. Broadway, 5th Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90012. Tell Linda I said, "Hello" and then duck for cover!

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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