

Anderson, Simon. On Al Hansen's Performance, *Histories and Theories of Intermedia*, September 2010.

"I always did art. I was always a performer. I acted out movies, I was the stand-up comic, the Skandinavian standard storyteller"[1]

Al Hansen was a restless and tireless creator—of live art, found-object art, of situations. Active for nearly forty years in the marginal and experimental arts, his articulate energy and the ephemeral nature of his particular aesthetic combined with a peripatetic life-style to construct an almost mythic character.

Alfred Earl Hansen was born in 1927 and grew up in New York, from Norwegian stock, part of a close family living under modest circumstances. His metropolitan neighborhood inculcated in him an abiding fondness for both city bustle and local community. As a boy he drew constantly and without reason. Intellectually—and otherwise—precocious, he was bored by school, and his drawings seem to have acted as voluminous notes to himself about life in the world, in which he was acutely interested. At a tender age he collaborated with his brother Gordon and another friend Jimmy Breslin [later to become a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and author] to produce a hand-hewn newspaper *The Daily Flash*, for which he provided comic-cuts. A voracious reader, a prodigious talker, and an endless joker all his life, his anecdotes reveal boyish traits such as delight in destruction, hilarious pranks, exploring the locale for hide-outs—from which to watch and adore women: all elements which he acknowledged found their way into his later work.

As a soldier in Europe after WWII, he was struck by the surreal contrast between domesticity and devastation and his taste for gratuitous destruction developed. In bombed-out Frankfurt, billeted amidst the ruin, he became obsessed with a piano he saw in a fourth-floor apartment standing close to a gaping hole in the building. "I thought about that piano...while drinking and eating. I thought about it while fucking. I thought about it while jumping out of airplanes, while shooting machine guns, while on guard duty." Finally finding courage and opportunity to push the piano off the edge, the spectacle of its fall and the sound of impact—"Tschwauuuunnngha! —It was wonderful" stayed with him and became a 1970 happening [Yoko Ono Piano Drop] and part of the growing legend of Al Hansen[2].

For nearly a decade after the war, Hansen worked an apparently endless series of jobs and took advantage of the G.I.Bill's guarantee of college tuition fees to study Art at Tulane University in New Orleans, the Art Students League and other places. A father by the mid-1950s, to help support his wife and daughter he re-enlisted in the military—this time as a paratrooper giving daredevil public displays of parachute expertise.

In the summer of 1958, almost on a whim, he signed up for a course in experimental composition to be given by composer John Cage at the New School for Social Research. This famous class was a springboard for fluxus and for happenings, and Hansen made life-long connections with many of the well-known artists who dropped in. Although classmate Dick Higgins has described Hansen as dozing off through a discussion of one of his own pieces, according to George Brecht, [whose course notes have subsequently been published in facsimile] Hansen wrote down every word Cage said during the lessons. These notes were later lost, but for thirty years Hansen never ceased to paraphrase and proselytize the ideas of his greatest teacher. As part of his plea to get into this course on composition—for he had no musical training—he told Cage he wanted to make music for films, and quoted Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein's dictum that 'all the arts meet in the film frame'—although by the end of the summer session he realised rather that all the art forms meet "in the head of the observer, for better or worse"[3]. This idea served as the formal inspiration for many of his subsequent happenings.

There is no coherent theory of Happenings. From the first rumblings of neo-dada and expanded theatre in the 1950s, live art has been contingent upon individual understandings and attitudes, which vary as much as the makers. Happenings for Hansen encompassed the spectrum of human endeavor; closely connected to primal urges yet inescapably bound to present sensation, they were a celebration of freedom as well as an opportunity to act responsibly, a way to create chaos and also to find form in the formless. Hansen, in a conversational style that may belie his sincerity and depth of knowledge, sought to define and explain the new medium in his 1965 book "A Primer of Happenings and Space/Time Art"[4]. In this text, laced with humour and unapologetic opinion, he laid out his own ideas, described the art and aesthetics of his fellow happeners, and gave some hint of the variety of approaches it is possible to take with regard to this rediscovered form of expression.

Al was prone to naming his every venture, whether it was Panic Button Gallery Maintenance—[a service crew for the Leo Castelli gallery—among others, whose Ivan Karp dealt Hansen's collages out of the back room], The New York Audio-Visual Group, the Octopus All-Stars, the Third Rail Gallery [a pun on the concept of 'current', which was any space that Hansen happened to use to exhibit or happen in] or The First World Congress of Happenings. Heralded by printed announcements, this latter, with Higgins, Alison Knowles and Eric Andersen as co-conspirators, took place in the summer of 1965, occupying the bars and streets, squares, and beaches of the bourgeois sea-side Provincetown[5]. It typified the mix of careful preparation and casual performance that Hansen specialized in, and, as a 'World Congress' also pointed to the international nature of the happening movement, spurred, perhaps by the worldwide mix within Fluxus. Hansen's thoughts on Fluxus were acerbic, hilarious and accurate; he once described it as 'like a chicken bone the world art dog cannot cough up' [6]. Notwithstanding differences with designer George Maciunas,

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Hansen is central to any reading of this shifting alliance, and successfully collaborated with most Fluxus artists from Wolf Vostell to Joe Jones to Yoko Ono, before, after, and in spite of Maciunas' administrative efforts.

In 1966 Hansen traveled to London to participate in Gustav Metzger's Destruction in Art Symposium, and here again he worked and played with artists of many nationalities, helping to define and spread this radically fresh approach to creativity. He introduced Raphael Montanez Ortiz [a fellow student at Pratt, where Hansen was studying Art Education] to the scene, and collaborated with Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche to carry an ongoing festival of Destruction in Art to the US—later abandoned on the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King.

It seems like Al knew everyone, and everyone seemed to like Al, even those who found him on occasion 'challenging'. He hung out with the abstract expressionists at the Cedar Street Tavern, discussing painting and fluxus with Franz Kline among others; he encouraged many of the younger pop artists—Red Grooms, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg etc.—to push their work into performance. He was concrete in his views, positive, highly articulate, even goofy—in a good way, and when accidents occurred and blood was spilled, or violence threatened in his happenings, most people forgave him because his commitment shone through.

In the mid-60s a relationship with Valerie Herouvis drew him closer to Andy Warhol's crowd, and his daughter Bibbe became the littlest of Warhol's movie Superstars. Warhol had been a subject of Hansen's since 1963, in a happening titled 'Silver City for Andy Warhol' and twenty years later, he returned to him in a 1985 exhibition ANDY WARHOL ATTENDAT including an action, artists' book and sound recording. The piece mixes memories of the day in 1968 when Warhol was shot and severely wounded by Valerie Solanas; muses on murder, mystery and the marvelous beauty of co-incidence; and also revisits the classic Hansen stream-of-collage technique, even using the name of his 1950s New York City Audio/Visual Group.

To celebrate the first decade of Happenings—at a time when the novelty had dissolved and few of the original happeners continued to work in the medium—Hansen staged a number of new pieces under the guise of Viking Dada, including his version of Gertrude Stein's Hamlet.

Happenings as a medium churn up a wealth and variety of physical material in the form of notes, plans or sketches; printed ephemera such as announcements, directions or scores; props, set fragments, costume, or similar detritus resulting from activity. Hansen's spontaneity demanded an unconventional, even laissez-faire attitude to this material, resulting in hand-lettered announcements and unusual choices of talent and materials, including the employment of sometimes ill-prepared performers and frequent use of toilet-paper, neither of which is easy to control. His informal aesthetic should not, however, be considered as merely expedient: utterly pragmatic, Hansen nevertheless decided deliberately to mix chaos and the casual as the tint and hue of his palette. In addition to being a highly gifted draughtsman Hansen was at one time or another a professional graphic designer and a painter of geometric abstractions [this despite being color-blind!]: he lacked neither skill nor discipline and indubitably applied these with rigor in his happenings as much as in his collages.

Who could imagine that a candy bar—one often better known for nostalgia rather than flavour—could contain such a wealth of linguistic potential; could map the body and its desires; could describe the ambiguity of our fears and emotions? In the early 1960's, Hansen began a series of collages using the wrappers of Hershey Bar chocolate. Beginning as a simple but brilliant exercise in anagram, Hansen rapidly developed the possibilities inherent in the ubiquitous label to create shapely paeans to women: She, her, eyes, yes, hey. He cut and pasted a curvaceous caricature of female form in the familiar colors of kid's candy; the wrapping transformed into skin, and the elementary graphics into an increasingly complex investigation and adoration of the goddess. Once again, as with the primal urge of his happenings, Hansen reached back to man's earliest impulses—the Venus of Willendorf was an initial template—to reveal their continuing and contemporary power.

Of course there were also practical aspects to the collages: Hershey Bars are cheap, easily available, and both he and daughter Bibbe ate them habitually. Large numbers of the wrappers fit into the plastic bags he always seemed to carry, and he was able to—and did—cut and paste wherever he could sit down. Inevitably, these considerations led to other collage materials, most notably cigarette-butts [free and omnipresent], but also disposable lighters, toilet roll tubes, the detritus of his every-day life. Hansen made hundreds of these collages, many portraying pre-historic fertility symbols, but occasionally featuring guns, fractured narratives or abstract compositions.

Throughout the 1970s, he taught part-time at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey [where fellow happeners, fluxists and performers like Kaprow, Robert Watts and Geoff Hendricks had, or still were, working] and the academic calendar allowed him to travel widely through Europe; "From 1974 till 1982 I was...living for months in different European capitols learning the art world there by bar life, osmosis, and, for an American, overexposure. Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Oslo, Trondheim, Bergen, Haderslav in Jutland, Berlin, Vienna..."[7]. Like many of his American friends he found a wider welcome and better market for his ideas and work in Europe than the States, and, although he found regular support elusive, he felt at home and was able to flourish in foreign climes. Settling in Cologne in the 80s, he

searched in vain for a professorship that would insult neither his principles, his talents, nor the young people who everywhere adored him. Although he studied at Pratt towards a degree in Art Education, he was forced to leave when someone took offense at spray-painted blasphemy that appeared during one of the many happenings he organized there. He was able to apply his strong principles and clear ideas about teaching art in later years, particularly with Lisa Cieslik in the Ultimate Akademie.

It requires cool nerves to set oneself free in performance, and even more to set others free with friendly encouragement. Perhaps the sense of panic that overtakes many folk in the presence of chaos is somehow similar to the free-fall feeling, which Hansen clearly enjoyed and had experienced innumerable times. He also relished the piquancy delivered by risk, averring; "I think an important part of success is to be a little defect. A great work of art for me is one that gives me butterflies in the stomach and hackles on the neck at the same time. Nothing verbal needed. Feeling. You feel it. To me a great work of art is not sure whether it is great or not." [8]

Where chaos for most brings fear and uncertainty, for him it was a productive and thrilling circumstance; where empty wrappings and smoked cigarettes are normally the abject detritus of consumption, for him they marked the beginning of his art; where people and places are the recipients and markers of progress, for him they were the process and material of his life's work.

Whether avoiding the law, looking for a job or delving as deep as he could into foreign cultures, Hansen kept moving until the last years of his life. Many think of him as a drifter—homeless for the thrill of it, but actually his travels were deliberate and purposeful. Likewise his status as 'outsider' is belied by years in art education; decades completely connected to various art-worlds; and thousands of works performed, constructed or conceived in the conscious context of a deep historical and intellectual knowledge-base.

Al Hansen understood the psycho-social nature of art as clearly as he saw the contemporary emphasis on experiment; he relished both, and sought to capitalize on his abilities—to be articulate, funny and persuasive; to network, and to take risks. As he said of himself; "Al Hansen is a phantom always a bit beyond." [9]

1. Al Hansen text "I have always been in search of the goddess" reprinted in "Al Hansen: An Introspektiv" Kolnisches Stadt Museum, 1996 [p.101]
2. Al Hansen text 'Al Hansen on Fluxus' reprinted in "Beck & Al Hansen: Playing with matches". Plug-In Editions/Smart Art Press [Vol.IV, No.40] 1998 [p.84]
3. Al Hansen, 'A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art' Something Else Press, NY. 1965 [p94]
4. *ibid*
5. I am grateful to Eric Andersen for this tid-bit of under-researched history.
6. 'Al Hansen on Fluxus' reprinted in "Beck & Al Hansen: Playing with matches" *op.cit.*
7. 'Cologne Rap by Al Hansen' reprinted in "Al Hansen: An Introspektiv" *op.cit.* [p23]
8. 'The famous Dennis Hopper Interview' 1990 reprinted in "Beck & Al Hansen: Playing with matches" *op.cit.* [p115]
9. Al Hansen text 'Makers and Lookers' 1990 reprinted in "Beck & Al Hansen: Playing with matches" *op.cit.* [p124]