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Hansen, Al(fred) Earl

(b. 5 October 1927 in New York City; d. c. 21 June 1995 in Cologne, Germany), Fluxus artist, writer, and composer, and one of the first Happening artists.

Hansen, whom fellow artist Allan Kaprow once described as the quintessential "wandering artist [and] the hobo avantgardist," was born in the Richmond Hill section of the borough of Queens, New York, to a working-class family that he referred to as "upper lower class people." One of three sons of Nicholas Hansen, a crane operator of Norwegian descent, and Katherine Lynch, descendant of an Irish Scottish family, Hansen made art and improvised plays in the garage of his Queens home from an early age. He contributed comic strips to a handmade newspaper, *The Daily Flash*, which he produced with his brother Gordon and the future columnist Jimmy Breslin, his friend and next-door neighbor. Hansen, who later called himself an existentialist, believed that, like his parents before him, he alone was responsible for the meaning he brought to his life, and this belief informed his art.

In 1945 Hansen was drafted into the U.S. Army and served in the famed Eighty-second Airborne Division in Europe, where he remained until 1948. While stationed in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, he executed in 1946 what he considered his first "Happening," a form of theater and early example of performance art in which plot is abandoned for a more spontaneous vignette that stresses movement and chance. The 1946 Happening involved pushing a piano from the top floor of a bombed-out building during an armed forces show. Later, Hansen repeated this action in numerous performances around the world, closing the gap between life and art in a dadaist fashion. Ultimately, he called his Happening, "Yoko Ono Piano Drop," referring to his friend and fellow Fluxus artist. (The Fluxus movement was an extension of dadaism launched in the United States during the 1960s. It stressed "conceptual" rather than material or formal aspects of art.)

Between 1948 and 1951, Hansen peripatetically attended art classes at various places, including Tulane University in New Orleans and the Art Students League, New York University, and the Hans Hofmann School of Art, all in Manhattan. He had his first show at the Arts Students League with Jan Groth in 1949. Hansen and Audrey Ostlin Hansen, an actress, model, and bon vivant, had a daughter who later appeared in Hansen's performances.

In December 1951 Hansen reenlisted in the U.S. Air Force, where aside from his regular duties he wrote articles for a military newspaper and painted signs. Meanwhile, he married Marvyne Levy in 1954; the couple had no children and were divorced in 1962. After leaving the military, he returned to New York City late in 1955, supporting himself mainly by working as an art editor and graphic designer for McGraw-Hill while attending evening art classes at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. The composer John Cage's "Experimental Composition" class at the New School for Social Research in New York City, which Hansen attended in the late 1950s, exposed him to experimental music and performance art as well as to Zen philosophy. Growing tired of traditional art practice, Hansen and a number of other young artists who studied with Cage, such as Kaprow, George Brecht, and Dick Higgins, launched the Happening movement and joined the Fluxus movement.

Hansen's debut as an influential member of the Happening movement was a music Happening called *Alice Denham in 48 Seconds: Percussion Piece* (1958), which was presented in April 1959 to a larger public, along with works of his teacher, John Cage, at the "Concert of Advanced Music." It caused considerable consternation among the more traditional part of the audience at the New York YM-YWHA in April 1959. It was performed with handcrafted rattles following unorthodox musical notations that matched sounds and their duration in seconds to numbers. The same year Hansen, with Larry Poons and Higgs, who called themselves the New York Audio Visual Group, took

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Happenings to the streets, and Hansen exhibited with Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, and Kaprow at the Reuben Gallery in New York, the cradle of Happenings in the early 1960s.

By that time Hansen was a major Happening artist in New York City. As Kaprow stated in his "Untitled Guidelines for Happening," Hansen kept the line between art and life "as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible." For Hansen, the fusion of life and art was crucial for the thinking of the "Happening people"; probability and chance were guiding forces for their creative endeavors. In *Primer of Happenings and Time/Space Art* (1965), Hansen, a true child of the sixties, stressed the unique potential of the Happening to generate "love" that "is going not only from the stage to the audience but from the audience to the stage and back and forth between the people in the happening to each other."

Typical multimedia Happenings by Hansen include *Requiem for W.C. Fields Who Died of Acute Alcoholism*, included in Claes Oldenburg's *Ray Gun Spex* (an evening of Happenings) and performed at the Judson Memorial Church in New York City in 1960. Hansen described his performance in *A Primer of Happenings*: "I projected W. C. Fields movies—flipped upside down and backwards—on my white shirted chest. The movies were spliced with newsreels and different things." Hansen took part in a number of early Fluxus events, both in the United States and Europe. In the Yam Festival ("Yam" being the anagram for "May"), which took place at the Hardware Poet's Playhouse in New York and at the sculptor George Segal's farm in South Brunswick, New Jersey, in May 1963, Hansen staged a Happening by festooning trees with toilet paper. His volatile Happenings were often performed in a number of alternative art spaces in New York City, including the Café au Go Go, Epitome Coffee Shop, Yoko Ono's loft on Chambers Street, and the Judson Memorial Church.

Hansen's gallery, the Third Rail Gallery of Current Art, opened in 1962 and existed in various incarnations and locations until 1969, showing his and other artists' works. In the heyday of his artistic activities, Hansen also frequented Andy Warhol's Factory, the nightclub Max's Kansas City (known as a favorite nightspot for Warhol and Lou Reed), and appeared on television talk shows hosted by Johnny Carson and Merv Griffin. Throughout the 1960s and during most of the 1970s, Hansen had a reputation of being an innately rebellious bohemian and was a fixture of the neodadaist artistic community in New York City, which included Nam June Paik, John Cage, Yoko Ono, and La Monte Young.

The art dealer Gracie Mansion remembered Hansen as an artist who constantly made art from whatever was at hand and then left it wherever he happened to be. As a result, many of Hansen's early works were lost. Satisfied with making art in a small format, he called himself a "shopping bag guy." Perceiving the process of staging Happenings as analogous to cut-and-paste collaging, Hansen produced a large number of works made of recycled "junk," such as cigarette butts, plastic razors, crushed Coca-Cola cans, burnt matches, and most especially Hershey's chocolate bar wrappers, which Hansen appreciated for their common and perishable qualities that he was able to elevate to the level of a material for making art; the wrappers became known as his "signature material." In the 1960s he incorporated popular imagery into his paintings and made erotic collages using photographs from girlie magazines. He used images of Venus, which took central stage among the motifs in his art, executing them in various forms and materials during the last thirty years of his life.

Hansen taught at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, from 1967 to 1974. Dissatisfied with the lack of attention paid to his art in New York City, starting in the mid-1970s he spent an increasing amount of time in California, where he was involved with the Los Angeles punk scene,

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and in Europe, where he enjoyed considerable popularity as an artist, particularly in the Scandinavian countries and Germany. Hansen experimented further with performance art after he permanently settled in Cologne, Germany, in 1987, and he and Lisa Cieslik established an art school called the Ultimate Akademie. On 21 June 1995 he was found dead of a heart attack in his Cologne apartment. His body was cremated.

Hansen remains relatively little known in the United States, overshadowed by other members of the neodadaist community in New York City. His pioneering role in launching the Happenings movement and performance art and his contribution to the Fluxus movement await critical examination.

Documentation of Hansen's work, along with his personal papers, is kept in the Archiv Sohm at the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, Germany; the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter near Oslo, Norway; the Getty Institute for the Arts and Humanities, Santa Monica, California; and the private archives of Francesco Conz in Verona, Italy, and his daughter, Bibbe Hansen, in Los Angeles. Among his major exhibition catalogs are *Al Hansen, Oeuvre/Flashbacks* (1995) and *Al Hansen, An Introspective* (1996). Hansen's grandson, the musician Beck Hansen, edited *Beck, and Al Hansen: Playing with Matches* (1998), which is filled with collages, letters, photographs, interviews, and handwritten notes. An obituary is in the *New York Times* (27 June 1995).

MAREK BARTELIK