

Art comes to life on Vancouver stage

MICHAEL SCOTT
SUN VISUAL ART CRITIC

It began, of course, with Jackson Pollock flinging gobbets of paint across a blank canvas. A clever critic called it action painting and a new art movement was born — what went on the canvas was not so much a picture as it was the record of an event.

Soon afterward, artists were orchestrating nude models smeared with paint, locking themselves into rooms with wild animals, pounding nails into bits of wood, masturbating under the false floors of commercial galleries, having sex with female cadavers purchased in Mexico and then undergoing vasectomies, pushing their heads into beehives and purposefully undergoing cosmetic surgery — all in the name of performance art.

In the 50 years since Pollock and his comrades began to explore the medium, performance art has become an important part of contemporary art-making. Like a Zen koan on the fleeting nature of life, performance art reminds us that darkness underlies our days and that creation is utterly fragile.

Since the 1970s, Vancouver has provided an eager audience for performance art. Mr. Peanut's mayoral campaign and the threat to crush Sniffy the Rat made international headlines. Maybe it was our advantageous location, perched midway between New York and Tokyo, the two global centres of performance art. Maybe it was our West Coast, anything-goes attitude. But when Hermann Nitsch pinned a sheep carcass to a wall in Vienna in 1963, gutted it and used its entrails as paint brushes, or when Raphael Ortiz hacked a piano to pieces in London in 1966, or when Chris Burden had himself crucified to the top of a Volkswagen Bug in Venice, Calif. in 1974, no one in the Vancouver art scene so much as

blinked. We cottoned easily to the disruptive, punning, prank-playing world of performance art. We loved its slight edge of danger and its marginal place in the wider world. The Vancouver Art Gallery gave the new medium its first real home in a series of now-famous Intermedia Evenings in the early 1970s.

The Western Front artist centre followed shortly after and a generation of performance artists enlivened our thinking. Evelyn Roth, Paul Wong, Anna Banana, Eric Metcalfe, Gathie Falk and Tom Graff challenged and tickled us in equal measure.

Beginning this week, Vancouver artists are celebrating performance art here with a series of exhibitions, cabarets and others actions, collectively entitled *Live at the End of Century*. Organized by Glenn Alteen and the grunt gallery, the festival includes participation from Dynamo Gallery, Or Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery, the grunt, Western Front, Video In Studios, Havana Gallery on Commercial Drive, Belkin Art Gallery at UBC, Contemporary Art Gallery, Artspeak and the Charles Scott Gallery at Emily Carr. It's a damn hard thing to program, Alteen says.

Performance art tends to just happen, like a teenager getting



Performance artist Evelyn Roth in 1988.

out of bed, only when it's good and ready.

According to Alteen, himself a long-time devotee of the medium, Vancouver performance is more light-hearted than the dark, blood-spattered European scene. We love costumes here and humour. Public processions are also big. Alteen says he's not sure performance was ever really encouraged here by either of the city's major art schools. "But it just never goes away," he says.

Its primary importance is its lack of linear thinking.

When performance challenges audiences to explore new paradigms, the entire intellectual life of the community benefits. Mr. Peanut got us thinking about the theatrical aspects of politics long before the irony-drenched media pundits of the 1980s ever did.

The full schedule for Live at the End of the Century, which runs until Nov. 6, is available from the grunt gallery and other participating venues. Contact the grunt at 875-9516 for more information, or via

the Web at www.vcn.bc.ca/grunt/. The festival kicks off with a cabaret-style evening Friday at 8 p.m. at the Vogue Theatre. Tickets are \$10 and \$13 through Ticketmaster, 280-4444.