

Avant Garde Festival

Down to his last mouse

by Fred W. McDarragh

AT exactly noon on Friday, November 19, at the 69th regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue and 25th Street, an enormous shiny black chauffeured limousine pulled up to the curb and out jumped sculptor Joey Skaggs in an immaculate white suit. Wild applause greeted him as he entered the building with his friends. One minute later, arriving in a tiny red Datsun, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, both in dirty dungarees, quickly slipped into the building, unannounced and unnoticed.

These Entrance Events marked the opening of the 12-hour marathon Avant Garde Festival, the eighth and most spectacular of all Charlotte Moorman's wild events. In the past, the festivals have marched up Central Park West, taken over a ferry boat, and camped on Ward's Island in the East River. Hundreds of artists representing every art persuasion have been in these festivals.

But none have included all this—multi-video art, instant paintings, documentations, environments and happenings, earth and air art, kinetic light and film art, electronic music, synthesizer and computer art, projections, inflatables, and life tableaux.

The Armory looked like a combination trade show, circus, and high school Christmas fair. There was a real ferris wheel, a glider plane, giant inflatable palm trees, concession booths, and at least six dozen out-of-focus, out-of-tune, out-of-sight television receivers.

There was no delay in starting. John and Yoko went to a blank screen and drew body outlines of each other. They proceeded to inspect Yoko's "Coin Music" contraption. Each dropped pennies into a standing plastic container criss-crossed with lead pipes. The coins made a tinkle as they dropped to the bottom.

John then described his "Wind Peace" for full orchestra. The musicians, on the Armory balcony, he explained, play from pages that are randomly flipped by a battery of fans. It was a chaotic score.

Alice Neel walked by, very excited at the sight of the superstars. "I wanna paint your picture," she said. But neither responded. John and Yoko then left.

Les Levine, in a flaming red jacket and pants, came from behind a booth where he was making voice prints. I stepped up to his microphone, struck the tuning fork, croaked a long note, and then Les took my picture with his Polaroid. He said I now had the ultimate in identification.

A gallery of lost mixed-media souls showed up. The Late John Brockman, Aldo Tambellini, Richard Kostelanetz, Tiger Morse. She told me she was going to Hong Kong to become a disc jockey. Where was Kusama? Nobody knew.

Barbara and Howard Wise came with their film-maker son David. Howard told me he helped raise the money to put on the festival this year. Charlotte got the Armory directly from the Colonel in charge after she agreed to no nudes, no sex, no politics, no dope, no nothing.

go upstairs?" I replied, "I always go backwards." The paper tiger of the avant garde was down to his last mouse.

I saw a coffin, one end open, the other closed. When I looked inside there were two feet where the head should have been. The artist inside was Dave Martin. A radio antenna stuck out of the closed end and Dave was listening to WPLJ. He stayed in for six hours and then his partner Dennis Brennan took over. It was an unusual contribution.

The afternoon drifted by. When I went outside to get some air, six Cooper Union art students were holding frozen poses for 30 minutes at a time. They were "using this site to activate a space." Soldiers stationed at the Armory showed no interest, and passed by.

I looked at my watch and decided it was time to ask the soldiers the standard what-do-you-thing-of-this-stuff question. The answers were predictable. One said it looked weird. Another made a vomit gesture. And a veteran of all the wars who was covered with stars, badges, ribbons, buttons, and braid summarized his feelings: "It's ridiculous, stupid, the whole damn thing. All those people smoking marijuana back there. I saw them. And using a federal building too. A bunch of kooks. I could blow them bastards to hell. I'd go up in the balcony with a machine gun. I even saw some naked. I'm glad I'm being transferred out." The soldier disappeared into the middle of the afternoon.

Shirley Clarke started up her fantastic ferris wheel. It glowed in the dark Armory. Shirley said her piece was the Ultimate Trip. Each seat has a tv monitor hook-up. One open camera was stationary on the ferris wheel and another was operated by a cameraman who created instant replay sensations of falling, flying, and rotating in the air. The spin-in-space was seen on the individual monitor by each rider as the ferris wheel turned. "You get

Continued on next page

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One artist fulfilled the Colonel's wishes. He was sitting on a high mound of dirt protected by a velvet rope that entirely surrounded him and the dirt. It was Geoff Hendricks in white tie and tails. He passed the time by writing in his diary. His relatives Bici and Jon stood by watching him while they ate chopped liver sandwiches with pickles. What was Hendricks up to?

Robert Brer's piece crawled by, a huge rug of mylar that pulsed and quivered on the floor as though it were a square stingray. Fred Stern computerized the whole thing on a typewriter that rat-a-tat-tatted away but printed nothing on the paper as it rolled out of the machine. The afternoon dragged on.

Somebody was offering a feast at a table set with oysters, olives, canteloupes, eggplant, and mixed fruit. The food whistled when I touched it with my fork. Elizabeth Phillips had created an Electronic Banquet where the oscillator frequency was changed by body presence. Charlotte walked by loaded down with her clipboard directions and said, "Tonight at 10 I'm coming out of the cake." Could I last that long? It was only 2 o'clock.

Lil Picard drifted by in her paper cape and hat. David Numemaker was getting ready to present his surrealistic life tableau, a dream-like womb environment with lots of candelabra, veils and lemons all over the floor.

I heard "The Star Spangled Banner." It was the one and only ultra-sophisticated Tosun Bayrak in absentia. His contribution was sprawled out on a Rinso-white tablecloth—a loaf of Sicilian, chunks of tripe, skinned and bloody lamb heads with popping eyeballs, a piss-filled urinal and bedpan full of fresh, stinking shit. Not very many could get close to his historic avant garde contribution.

Ken Dewey nearby protected his section with a huge canvas cnaopy. His simulated glider fight had a line-up of would-be pilots waiting for a ride.

Some Pulsa people went by with a child's tinkling pull-toy. The Colonel in charge of the Armory refused to give them a phone so they could do their "Local Loop." Dick Higgins handed me a poem, furtively opened a valise filled with tiny white mice, and wanted me to fill out a boring questionnaire. He asked me, "How do you

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His last mouse

Continued from preceding page

stoned up there," she said. Lots of familiar faces showed up—Edith Stephen, Larry Calgano, Rose Slivka, Bridgit Mur-naghan, Irving Sandler, Ruth San-segundo, Calvin Tomplins, Lenny Horowitz. Lots of new faces too—Cárey Fisher, Jo-Ann Cross, Frank Gillette, Leonard Dworkin, Ellen Thomas, Michael Cooper. But where were Tom Hoving, Doris Freedman, Leonard Harris, Tom Hess, Andy Warhol, Ivan Karp, and John Canaday? Oh, well, they couldn't be every-where.

Anyway, Howard Smith came with his entourage: a pho-tographer, a writer, a sound engi-neer, a wardrobe mistress, an art interpreter, and Cass, a 10-year-old inventor. Howard looked around and said the festival needed a frankfurter stand. "They could call them Art Dogs."

Charles Henri Ford invited me to Greece. He didn't have a film or even a poem in the festival this year. Rosalind Constable inter-viewed me and then I interviewed her. It was only fair. Nam June Paik called me over and put me on color tv. I stood there and stared at myself. Everybody was on tv.

Gregory Battcock was in his ex-pensive cashmere suit from Jean Roll of Paris. He put on a demon-stration of mayonnaise making. Gregory cracked an egg and slid it into the mixing bowl. He wiped his hands immediately. Then he poured the olive oil, wiped his hands again, stirred, wiped, cut and squeezed the lemon, wiped again, stirred, wiped, more stir-ring, more wiping, and then

presto—Avant Garde Instant Mayonnaise.

It was 5 o'clock. I thought maybe when Metropolitan Life got out the place would fill up. The East Village Theatre group put on its show. They were all in mime costumes and clown make-up. They bowed heads, meditated, huddled together with the audi-ence, did acrobatics, and filled in the gaps with Love, Peace, Touch, Liquid Theatre bullshit, a great group if you were deep into 1964.

I smelled that unbearable five-and-dime incense coming from Jeni Engels's teepee in the middle of the Armory. It didn't bother Geoff Hendricks, who seemed stoned on silence on top of his mound of dirt. It was 6 p. m. and he still hadn't moved, hadn't eaten, hadn't gone to the toilet. How could he endure such self-torture?

Finally Jill Johnston and David Bourdon of Life arrived. The fes-tival was then declared an official event. The orchestra in the bal-cony struck up "Hail to the Chiefs," but the fan flipped the pages to "My Funny Valentine." David cleared his throat and spoke. "I'll have to look into this more carefully. Life is not a frivo-lous publication. We don't do stories on just anything. We're serious."

Everything was in full swing by 8. The place was jammed. Neighbors from my building showed up with their kids for a free ride on Shirley's ferris wheel.

Alex Gross, with a telephone dial around his neck, greeted every-body at the entrance with a copy of the Art Workers News-let-ter. Ely Raman handed out money from an orange crate. Gary Rieveschl watched his ice melt. Woody and Steina Vasulka twirled the controls of their 15 tv monitors. Jackson MacLow shouted his word event. Jud Yalkut stared at his propane flame through the looking glass. Dominic Capobianco stuck his head into a silver-covered box and listened to all the AM stations at once. Steve Reich sat cross-legged in the corner and mixed his "ohms" into the abysmal hum and drone of 1000 sounds. Geoff Hendricks, joined by all of Higgins's white mice, continued his painful plight into numbsville. And Willoughby Sharp walked in-visible.

Time passed and tension mounted. It was the Second Coming of Charlotte Moorman, her great big birthday party. Every-one gathered around a 20-foot plywood cake decorated with real frosting and a few real cakes on top for the ceremony. I went up on the balcony and stood directly over the cake. Here was the ideal picture. It would be a master-piece. I stood, I waited, I prac-ticed aim. Had I waited only 10 hours for the picture, I asked myself? What could go wrong? The film would jam. The pictures would be blank. The film wouldn't advance. I would forget the lens cap. I began to sweat.

A split second later it was all over. Like a jack-in-the-box, Charlotte had popped up and out of the cake just as the cake lights blew out. There was turmoil, con-



CHARLOTTE MOORMAN emerging from birthday cake.

fusion, cake was flying, screams of "lights, where are the lights?" I panicked. Cake flew everywhere. "Charlotte," I shouted, "stop, come back, don't go back into the cake. Wait, I'll be disgraced." People were climbing all over the cake by then. The air was filled with fuchsia day-glo icing. I ran downstairs, yelling "Charlotte, it's me, Fred, wait, the picture. Have sympathy."

It was 11.30 p. m. Everybody was leaving. The floor was covered with chunks of cake and paper and wire and dirt and lemons and egg shells and coat hangers and broken electrical gadgets. I found a cap from one of my lenses. It was all covered with icing. Billy Kluver walked out with his EAT chairs under his arms. Al Hansen left with his silver-coated zoot suit.

The clock struck midnight and I thought I saw the Colonel. I think he was in his best dress uniform smothered with rewards of his heroic past. He marched briskly out onto the balcony, stood front and center, clicked his heels, saluted a mythical flag, looked skyward, and pleaded in his loudest bellow to all who would

listen, "Oh, Lord, forgive them all, for they know not what they have done."

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CREDIT CARDS

My Back Pages

Continued from page 16

Gordon Chase took over responsi-bility for prison health from the Correction Department. Since then he has been slowly im-proving the medical system, one jail at a time. He has already "greened" the Tombs and the Brooklyn and Queens Houses of Detention. By all accounts, Chase has moved in competent doctors and nurses, improved the physi-cal examinations all incoming in-mates receive, and recruited much better psychological staff. But he has not yet had a chance to reform Rikers Island, or the new women's prison. They are next on Chase's agenda.

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—DAPHNE DAVIS

"They should hold those peace conferences over my dinner table."

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