

LIVE performance 5

**“Dialogues”
Just Above Midtown Gallery (October)**

By PATRICIA S. JONES. 1980

Patricia S. Jones discusses a downtown gallery performance series at Just Above Midtown, NYC, Oct 1980 in a late 70s-early 80s annual journal. Article makes special note of O’Grady’s first performance of *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*.

Although JAM/Downtown, a Tribeca alternative arts center, attempted to bring together the diverse and divergent groups that make up the “downtown” just-out-of-the-mainstream part of the art world, few of the participants made use of the theme — “Dialogues.” The performances presented were for the most part “monologues” with passive audience participation.

The lack of communication was most apparent on the program that featured a poet, Native-American dancers/storytellers, a fiber artist and a visual artist. The evening began with great promise. At the door, funny sunglasses were sold for about a dollar and once they were on the faces of the purchasers, the audience looked like a campy photograph of people waiting to see a 3-D movie. After a long wait, the program began with Roberto Ortiz-Melendez. He sat down in the large white space and read a catalogue of wrongs without a whiff of originality of thought.

“Echoes of the Past and Present,” performed by Marie Antoinette Rodgers and Jane Lind, concerned stories of suffering and death as well as affirmations of Native American culture and eminence. Despite the powerful themes, the piece seemed insincere and ill-conceived. As Rodgers and Lind danced, using

minimal props and music, one realized that they were attempting to fuse natural disasters (the Past) with national malevolence (the Present) as if they were one and the same. It was an odd piece, its saving grace the simple yet resonant poetry of Mona B., a blind Native American from Oklahoma. Her twangy recitation had the integrity that the rest of the piece seemed to lack.

The last two pieces were by artists. Mary Ann Gilles is a fiber artist whose large macramé sculpture figured prominently in "Mother Earth." The piece was a slide show of Gilles and her interaction with the piece both in a gallery setting and outside in nature. It worked only because of the cinematic fluidity of the slides.

"Eye Sight" took a long time to set up, but was worth the wait. Susan Dallas Swann works with a variety of media to explore the mechanisms of vision. The piece began in darkness. As she read a text that made her sound like an update of Miss Frances on Ding Dong School, the space was more and more illuminated. The most striking images were of a juggler juggling phosphorescent balls, a simulation of night flying, and the expansion of a curve of light. Her piece wove together a variety of visual elements to make a moving painted space.

Halloween brought out a large and curious crowd of costumed fun seekers as well as friends and fans of the performers. The mood was festive but the pieces were mostly serious, a couple very melancholy. John Malpede — who has the face of a Wendell Corey-type B-movie actor — performed "Too Much Pressure" [see photo]. His deadpan delivery, choice of music, and arch storytelling did center on the dialogue theme. Mostly, his response was to speak of the futility of communication by centering on the manifestations of those afflicted with "hebephrenic schizophrenia"; i.e., laughing when it is most inappropriate. The laughter arises because "the hebephrenic regards the very fact of communication ludicrous and ridiculous." As Malpede stalked in front of an overstuffed easy chair, he gave three versions of a terrifying story of patriarchal manipulation. His piece, despite its brevity, questioned not only the value of communication but the necessity of the family, of ambition, philosophy and art.

Lorraine O'Grady's "Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline" followed. Nefertiti means "the beautiful one has come"; Devonia Evangeline was O'Grady's sister [see photo]. That phrase resonated throughout her piece which connected two women of African descent separated by history, geography, and circumstance. Despite its slow pacing, it filled the space visually and aurally; the slides and the taped narration fused the lives of two women — who both died at 38 under tragic circumstances — through stories about weddings, sibling rivalries, childbirths, breakdowns, deaths. What one learned about Evangeline was that she was loved to death; Nefertiti was hated to death. And yet their deaths were so similar in tone that, in the final analysis, they died because they wanted to change their status as women, as members of the family.

The piece became most evocative when O'Grady stood before the large slide and attempted to resurrect her sister by performing a ritual found in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, but to no purpose. The ultimate passivity of the dead seemed galling to the righteous determination of the living. Then slides show the daughters of the women — the beautiful ones! Like Ishmael Reed in his novels *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Yellow Back Radio Brokedown*, O'Grady uses Egyptian motifs to enhance and explicate the imaginative lives of Afro-Americans.

Unfortunately, Annie Hamburger's piece followed this one. Too long, too slow, ill-conceived. Hamburger is no slouch as a performer. She had a great presence and her props were interesting, but one never knew just why she was mouthing the words she was saying and moving about. expressive gestures were not enough, particularly after Malpede and O'Grady.

The final performance was Stuart Sherman's spectacle, "The Erotic." Here was a kind of Groucho Marx whiz kid whipping out objects with the agility of a Sufi master. The juxtapositions of objects often took on a surreal and unnerving sensibility. At other times, they seemed ludicrous. Sherman was affable throughout, keeping up the patter of tiny objects and engaging the audience. The piece seemed meditative in an odd way and tangential to the theme. For me it was anything but erotic. The objects were too

smooth, too diffident, too cerebral to give a sense of passion or its consequence. On this evening of Halloween a more festive ending would have certainly been more appropriate. But then Sherman did give the audience a smile before he packed his table and stalked out into the night.