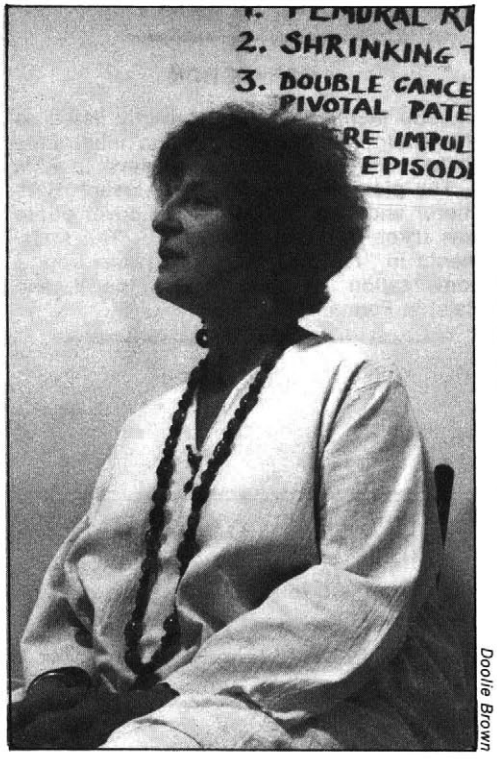
RACHEL ROSENTHAL



Doolie Brown

REPLAYS, 1975

Rachel Rosenthal was born in Paris. In the early fifties in New York, she was an assistant to Erwin Piscator at his Dramatic Workshop, and later danced with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. After moving to California, she founded Instant Theatre (1956-69), and during the seventies worked as a sculptor and co-chairwoman of Womanspace. Rosenthal began presenting solo performances in 1975.

After living and working in New York and Paris, how did you end up in California?

After 1953, I came back to NYC and decided I wasn't going back to Paris. And that's when I got to be friends with Bob Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and continued my friendship with Merce Cunningham and John Cage. I got very emotionally involved with some people in that group—it was a boiling cauldron of seething emotions—and I felt there was just no way for me in that situation. Also, I felt very energized and yet dominated by their charisma and somehow I felt that if I didn't leave this atmosphere, this group, I would never find what I had to give. Which was one of several reasons I went out to California. That was in '55.

What were the beginnings of Instant Theatre?

After I moved to California I started a workshop. At first it was just a simple actor's workshop. I was giving the actors exercises and improvisations—things I was thinking up. They enjoyed them so much that they stopped working on scenes and only wanted to do my ideas, exercises, and themes. One day I said, "We've found a new theatre. I

think we have something very wonderful here, let's do it for an audience." And then everybody disappeared.

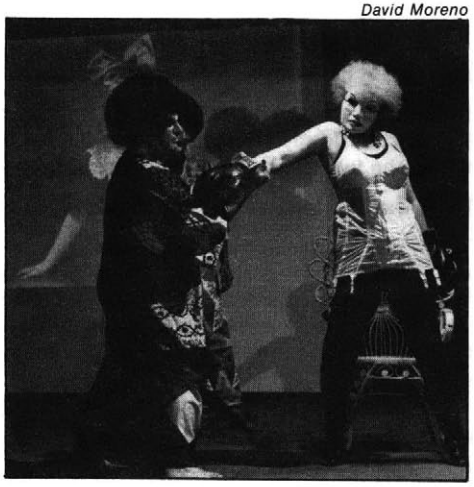
What happened?

The actors were all up-and-coming Hollywood hopefuls—people like Tab Hunter, Tony Perkins, Susan Hallison, Rod McKuen, Vic Morrow, and Judd Taylor, who is now a director. They all said their agents would never allow them to do it, it's just too crazy and way out. So I was left with just a painter, a dancer, and an actor who had been an engineering student at MIT. The four of us decided to hell with everybody, we'll do it all by ourselves. And that's how Instant Theatre was started. It was just a little box space and there were risers and, instead of putting chairs on the risers, I had pillows. That was in '56.

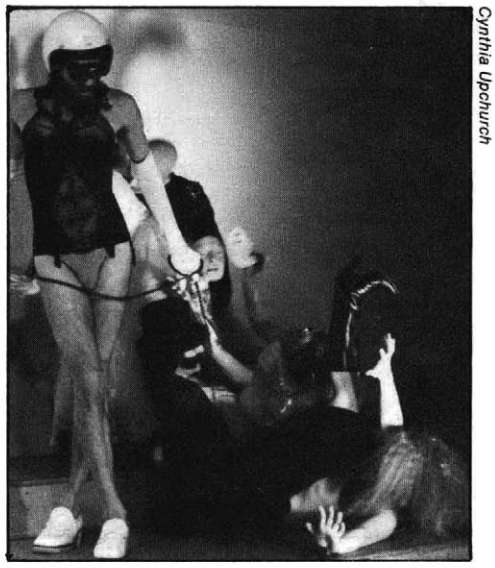
Who was your audience?

In those days the audience was mostly poets and artists.

David Moreno



THE HEAD OF O.K., 1977



Cynthia Upchurch

CHARM, 1977

Did people associate it with Happenings in New York?

One of the problems we had is that we associated ourselves with theatre instead of with art. It was always affiliated with theatre because there was, at the time, to me anyway, no other affiliation possible. It suffered from that, because people's expectations of theatre were such that our theatre was considered totally way out. A lot of people just didn't accept it or understand it, and the artists for some reason stopped coming, possibly because of the affiliation with theatre.

What kind of performances did you do?

I'm sort of embarrassed really to tell you about what Instant Theatre was. Because it sounds very self-serving and I'm making really high claims, and there's no proof—there's no mechanical or electronic documentation, but there are a lot of eyewitnesses. It was a theatre that was the precursor of Happenings, Action Art, art performance, and Theatre of the Ridiculous.

How have the history books passed your theatre by?

Because we did it in California, and because I was maybe personally afraid to come out. I think that if it had come to New York it would have been very important theatre. Over there it was really buried. For awhile it didn't matter to me because in those days I had very Zen ideas—it's very ephemeral, it's for now, and so on. Then later on, I was very sad because I had nothing to show and everybody was getting recognition and credit for all kinds of things that I had done long before. So I say I'm embarrassed because it really sounds like sour grapes in a way.

Rachel Rosenthal

INSTANT FAIRY TALES, 1977

(The Devil with the 3 Golden Hairs — Bros. Grimm)

Rachel Rosenthal

INSTANT THEATRE, 1977

How about now—do you find a theatre audience or an art audience for your work?

Now I'm very happy that historically the two have come together, in what is now termed art performance. I do my work in galleries. I want to branch out and do things which are really between the two—between theatre and art—because I think my work is very theatrical actually.

What was the theoretical basis of Instant Theatre?

The whole premise of Instant Theatre was that you could create theatre spontaneously, and collectively, and I assure you that it didn't come from theory. Because first of all I'm not a theoretical person, I'm an action person, and I never would have had the chutzpah to come out with such a theory if I hadn't seen it happen first. I saw it on stage. Then I started to codify my training methods in such a way that about nine months of training would enable the performer to do it.

Can you describe the training approach you devised?

There were two things that were important in Instant Theatre. One was the development of a free creativity in the individual, and a certain style, a certain form of work that would kind of push them into an aesthetics which was my aesthetics really, and then also the ability to create with others, to be subservient, to the whole. In training we used a lot of movement, a lot of vocal stuff, awareness exercises. In the beginning, I even used massage. I did everything to get people loosened up, to bring things out.

When you got together to do a piece, what exactly did you do?

There were four ways of doing pieces. The whole company would do pieces which would last a whole act, like 45 minutes to an hour, that were completely free and that would start simply from a set. And the set would be a big assemblage on the stage. The aesthetics of the period were very much an influence. They were found sets—things that we would find in back alleys or that people would give us—old chairs, old window screens, tar paper.

So we would start out in this set, and the space and the mood of the set would get things going. One person would start and, very much like action painting in a way, would set the first touch of paint if you will on the stage and then other people would come and bring things and build a piece, the idea being that you had to be very aware, very sensitive, to what was happening, enhance what was happening, or bring collision. Surprisingly enough, these pieces had tremendous form, they always achieved their own kind of inner logic and had a beginning, middle, and an end, not in a narrative way, but somehow in a formal way.

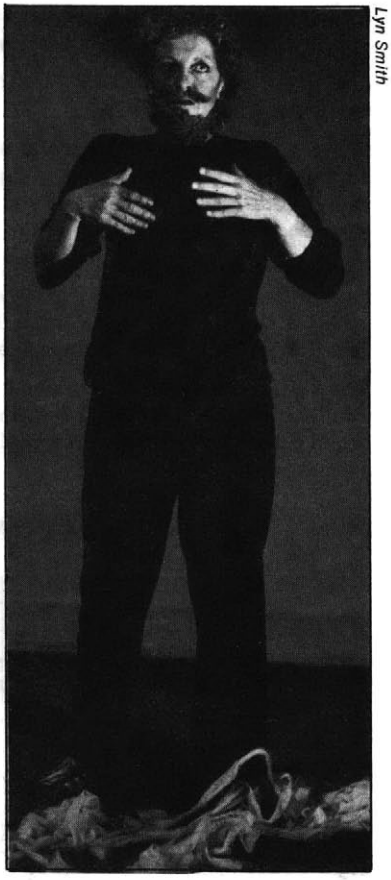
Another way was what we called a point of departure. Very often we asked the audience to give us either a word or a phrase or a mood or the name of an artist or the name of a

Lyn Smith

THE AROUSING
1979

Lyn Smith

(SHOCK,



Lyn Smith

THUNDER)

writer or whatever, and that would be the point of departure. We also had what we called forms, and the forms were very much like in music, where you have say, in classical music, sonata forms, symphonic forms, or whatever. They were set forms which were always different because the content would always be different. Finally, we would do structured improvs, but we would do very few of them, because, simply, there was very little time.

Were you influenced at all by Viola Spolin's theatre games and techniques?

She came to my theatre. I was never influenced by her. She only became prominent in the beginning of the sixties and Instant Theatre was long before that. To tell you the truth my influences were really John Cage and my painter friends. I was also influenced by Artaud.

What about the Black Mountain people? You were working simultaneously, or maybe a few years after them.

I was influenced by Black Mountain only in a roundabout way, because I knew John [Cage].

There are precedents in artworld performance, even going back to the Bauhaus or Black Mountain Happenings. But in theatre, the only avant garde group that was know at the time was of course the Living Theatre. Were you aware of them?

I knew the Living very well, and, as a matter of fact, King Moody, my then husband and partner, had worked for them in New York. They asked me to come to New York to teach in their theatre. That was in '60. It just didn't seem possible then.

They were still doing plays; avant garde theatre was literary then. And improvisational theatre has always been literary in the theatre world context. So you really were doing art world stuff.

David Moreno

THE DEATH SHOW
1978

Doolie Brown

CHARM, 1977

Cynthia Upchurch

GRAND CANYON
1978

Exactly. You see this is why we had so much trouble. Because people just did not understand. They enjoyed it, because it was so visual, so beautiful, but we also broke down space and time, we broke down personality components, and we used objects in a very dematerialized way. This is why I become very jaded sometimes. I see so much theatre which bores me because in the years we did Instant Theatre we did so much of that stuff in such a fabulously beautiful way. Sometimes we bombed but there was always something exciting about it because of the fact that we worked with so many different things.

How did you move then from group performance to solo performance?

In '66 I quit doing Instant Theatre because of trouble with my knees.

How many years have you been doing solo performances?

Since '75.

Are your solo performances self-consciously autobiographical?

The way I've been functioning with those performances has been to sort of try very truthfully to get to the bottom of different phases of my life, so that by the time I die all my performances, end to end, will recreate my life. I've found lately that the end result of the honesty and truthfulness I try to put into recreating my life is a total mythology. That was really an interesting discovery for me, to find out that this structure of recreation had become a myth and runs parallel with me. It's made up of the same ingredients, and yet it is a complete fabrication.

Has the women's movement and feminist politics influenced your work at all?

I owe a tremendous amount to the movement. I think they brought me out. For about 5 years, I was totally isolated. I was doing my sculpture and living in the Valley. I stopped Instant theatre in '66 and I got involved with the women's movement in '71, '72 I think.

Did your performance work change?

It didn't change, it began. I think the movement enabled me to accept myself and my life because up to then I felt that my life had been a complete waste and a mistake. I was very harsh on myself, very self-destructive, and I felt ashamed of most everything that had happened to me or that I had done. Through the women's movement, and my own growth, I was able to take a whole new appraisal of my work and change it around to work for me, instead of my being smothered. I got very involved in establishing a woman's space and in several of the galleries that were women's galleries. I started to see a great deal of women's work. At that point I started to do performances which redeemed my life by turning it into art.

There are always surprises when people use very directly autobiographical material, aren't there?

My main surprise, I'll tell you, has always been the response of the audience. When I prepare a piece, I always think it's just terrible, that it's going to bomb, that it's completely narcissistic, and so personal that nobody's going to accept it. Now, I know that that's how I am, so I just don't pay attention anymore, no matter how negative I get. Then I do it for an audience, and my big surprise is always their response, which is completely personally involved and with them going through a certain private catharsis of their own. With each piece, although now I'm expecting a bit more, it's still an incredible experience.
