

ART/ARCHITECTURE

Performances Creative, Not Recreative

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We use the word "artist" in a number of ways. There is the visual artist of course—the painter and the sculptor—but we often refer to actors and musicians as artists as well. And then there are trapeze artists, con artists. . . In fact, anybody who does anything well can be termed an artist in our language.

But there is a very distinct difference between the painter and the actor. The painter, as visual artist, makes his own art. An actor or a musician makes someone else's art come to life. Many of the people who we call artists use talents and skills but do not create or invent their own art. They are interpreters, craftsmen or performers. . . artists of a different sort.

That is one of the things that makes performance art different from theater. The artist is on stage performing his own art and not interpreting a composer's or a playwright's art.

AND SO when I say that two artists gave performances at the Contemporary Arts Center last Wednesday, I mean artists. Theodora Skipliars and Jeff Way are artists in the sense of visual art, and they gave performances of their own creations on stage.

Each performer gave a half-hour presentation and each had a different approach to the stage. Like many young women who do performances Skipliars' art is based on her personal life, a calamaris of Greek heritage. In contrast, Jeff Way's performance aimed at universality. The juxtaposition of the two works made it appear that women's art looks inward and men's art looks outward.

Further contrasts were in a reversal of sequence. Skipliars began her act almost naked and clothed herself in various symbolic

bits of hand made attire. Way entered the stage covered with all of his costumes one over another and dispensed with them in layers as his performance progressed.

FOR SKIPLIARES the stage was the background; a rectangle of space to be composed like a painted canvas. Way used no background but made his movements and his costumes tell the tale in the round, like sculpture.

There are similarities between the two performers as well. Both made many of the objects used in the performance, with the same care that they would put into a work of art. In contrast to Skipliars as painter and Way as sculptor in their uses of space, Way used painted clothing, masks and panels in his act, while Skipliars wears more recognizable as sculpturally crafted.

In her work "The Mother and the Maid," Skipliars posed in front of her wall wearing a belt of dead fish, illuminated by the light of a slide projector. Listening to her mother's voice bewailing her fall, she changed her garb to bridal veil, apron and at one point to a meal apron holding lit candles, as the voices on the tape recorder played out the burdens of her Greek traditions and her family's attitudes.

WAY WAS heaped with dozens of layers of costumes when he entered, and appeared as a massive shaman, masked with a white horned face. He stalked the audience, shaking rattles as if casting spells.

The spells worked well, as character after character revealed itself and Way progressed from ancient rituals to modern jazz dance, with Way strutting to his blues harp. It seemed that Way was snuffing off the rites and the to-bles of mankind, struggling to free himself of the past. At the end, in his final mask, t-shirt and white

trousers, he gathered all of his gear into a market basket and made his way from the stage.

It is different from theater, yes. Sets and costumes are central rather than additional to the performance. But Skipliars and Way are theatrical in their approach. They are conscious of timing and pacing. Their ideas are played out within a context that is familiar to the audience. Both of them artfully accomplished that "willing suspension of disbelief" that is necessary for good theater. Skipliars has experience as a set designer and uses the stage as a set. She does not act as much as she poses and displays things. Way, who has acting and dancing experience (although he is not much as a dancer) uses the stage as a pedestal on which to act and dance.

The Contemporary Arts Center could not have picked a better pair of performers to launch their month of performance art.

DURING THE month of performances and films the Center is showing a selection of costumes and artifacts from performance art works. Two of Way's costumes are on display along with a number of his stunning masks and his rattles. The backdrop of the Skipliars piece is also shown. These works are easily understood by anyone who saw the performance, but the constructions by Delta Doherty and Robert Kushner lack the context that comes from seeing the costumes used, but it helps to know that Kushner and Doherty use the idea of the fashion show rather than the theater as the basis for their performances. CAC Director Robert Stearns' excellent catalog essay does as much as any written description can do to fill in the gaps and reveal the use of the artifacts in the art.

In the Federal Reserve Plaza next to the CAC on Fifth St., the hum of traffic on the Suspension Bridge is being broadcast all month.

24 hours a day, thanks to Bill Fontana, who will give a live performance of his music on Friday Sept. 12. This Wednesday Klaus Nomi and Ellen Fisher will perform at the CAC and films by artists will be shown on Thursday evening. Other events continue to the end of the month.

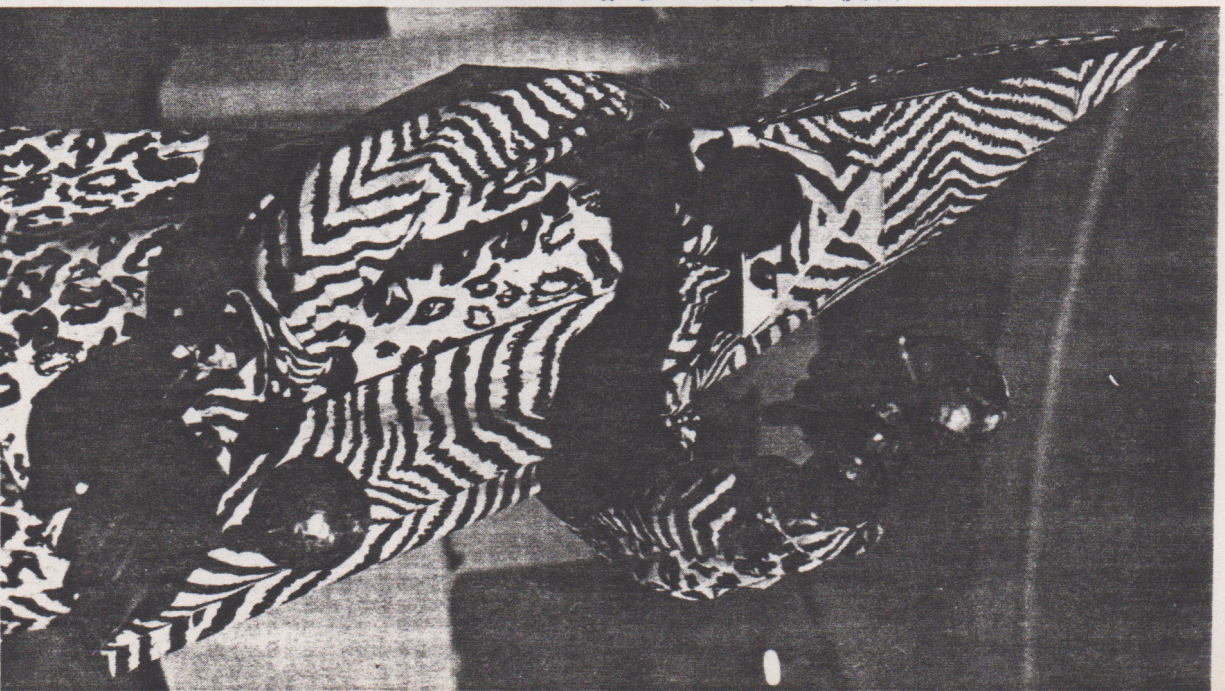
A Wednesday afternoon concert by the Cincinnati Composers Guild was not an exceptional performance and the audience was invisible. Fontana's bridge sounds appear to be unnoticed by passers by. Whether the result is worth the effort is questionable. On Thursday the first of the month's films, "Making Dances" was shown. It is a fine film worth showing and seeing again.

WITH THE exhibition and the series of performances, the Center is doing a fine job of bringing current performance art into focus for Cincinnati. No longer do we need to feel left out because we can only read about performance works elsewhere. If you're not into performance art by the end of September, it's your own fault.

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THE CINCINNATI Artists Group Effort (CAGE) will be supplementing the CAC's performance series with three evenings of performances in their new gallery space on the fifth floor of 706 Walnut St. in downtown Cincinnati. The performances will be at 8:30 p.m. Sept. 26, 27 and 28. The performers will be Hudson and Thom Middlebrook, whose work is titled "What Do You See When You Close Your Eyes?"

The first exhibition in the gallery is the CAGE 2nd annual Invitational drawing show. These are all small and intimate works with the exception of a room installation by Bevo, which is large and largely chaotic. Gallery hours are noon to 4 p.m. Wednesday and Saturday and 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday.



JEFF WAY'S costumes, some of which are now on display at the CAC, form the basis for his performance art.