

VOICE CENTERFOLD

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Adventures of the Shamans and Other Unnatural Acts



SILVIA PLACHY

Richard Gallo

The lights in the Kitchen are the only sign of life on Broome Street. It is 11 o'clock on a Wednesday night and Soho is as sleepy as Main Street in some corn belt burg. There's a fresh breeze lifting up papers, carrying the smell of something sweet.

Upstairs, on the second floor of this dowdy cast-iron building a man rests on a ladder, three workmen stand by white panels sets angled to a window wall, a child sleeps on a black leather cushion, and two young men leaf through the pages of a pornographic magazine.

The men holding the panels are waiting for the approval of the man on the ladder before nailing the boards to the wall.

"The angle isn't right," he says. "It isn't right. I don't want to see the pigs, just the cables coming out."

"We're little piggies," one worker squeals, "and you can't see us."

The reason for all this activity Richard Gallo's theatre piece, *A Killer's Loose but No One's Talking*, involves the use of suckling-pig corpses. The pigs ascend cables worked by pulleys. The pigs have not arrived. The pulleys are not hooked up. Gallo is in rehearsal, too frazzled to come and talk. But someone has a beer and a plastic booklet for me to read. It is a prospectus, a slickly professional outline, and from it I learn that Richard Gallo is a "spectacle greater than Marlene Dietrich" (Andy Warhol), that he has performed with Robert Wilson in Europe, that his piece is part of a larger work called *The Tip of the Iceberg*, and that the expensive props for this two-evening event include:

Gray Gravel	\$200
Black Net Box	\$30
Lamb Carcass	\$50
Cut Crystal	\$30
Fresh Lobsters	\$35
Smoke Machine (rental)	\$100
Photomural of a Fly	\$500

And other things. If you did not know that Richard Gallo is a performance artist you might think, reading this, that you had come across a necromancer's grocery list.

For the brief life of Gallo's performance, the Kitchen floor will be decorated with lava rocks arranged in triangle,

a smooth bed of plaster rutted by tire tracks, and Sheryl Sutton hanging from the ceiling by her heels. Sutton is a sweet-faced black woman who played a main role in Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach*. For this spectacle she will be unrecognizably encased in a chain-mail suit of Gallo's design, so it helps to know in advance that it's her.

I first saw Richard Gallo in 1972. He was then called Lemon Boy. I met him at a party. I say met but encountered is a better word. In those days, Gallo only ventured into public costumed in leather or rubber bondage clothes. He was always masked and he was always accompanied by a woman interpreter. Although Gallo is from Brooklyn and speaks fine English, he never talked. This was just as well, since in the dark at parties he could be a fairly spooky sight.

Then, dressed like that, Gallo performed art pieces on the steps of the New York Public Library, 42nd Street branch. Lemons were his main prop. Starting with a truckfull, he arranged the fruit in greengrocer's pyramids or in precisely arranged grids. It is probably safe to say that in 1972 no one who watched these midday performances had much idea what they were about. Neither, for that matter, did Gallo.

"I don't know why I was doing it," he says, coming out of rehearsal. Without his mask, his interpreter, his lemons, Gallo is disarmingly sweet, open.

"In those days I just followed whatever I was doing to the limit. A thousand lemons two feet apart, or whatever. Then that guy Beuys gave me a big piece of felt. He liked me. So I made a costume out of that and wore it for a while."

"The costumes were a natural thing. I've done it since Pratt. When we were both there Bob Wilson and I would take turns trying to top each other. He would do a piece and say, 'Everyone wear khaki,' and I'd show up in a red tuxedo with 200 yards of chiffon. When I worked with him in Europe, he never directed me. He'd just say I'm doing 20 minutes of green and then leave a space in the piece for me. It's my unconscious I go by."

"In this piece I *knew* I needed little suckling piglets with their feet like this." (He imitates an attitude of prayer.)

"And brains. I don't know why. I don't have a thing about guts. But the kid had to be standing in brains."

The kid in question is actress Cookie

Mueller's son, Max. His part in *A Killer's Loose but Nobody's Talking* is to stand in the small pile of pink brains, a shadowy figure in the pool of light cast by a spotlight on Sutton.

"What am I supposed to do?" Max asks, fidgeting at his mark on the edge of the scene.

"Just remember there is a pile of brains over here," says Gallo, "so get in a possible position and hold it as long as you can."

See Kay Larson's review of Gallo's performance piece on page 78.

Jeff Way

Walker is one of those trick streets that seems to belong in another city, some Babbitty place Out There. A block below Canal in Tribeca, it's the matrix of a Perfect Synthesis neighborhood: many of New York's costume and performance artists live here in loft buildings owned by fabric jobbers. During the day trimmings workers pile leftovers into dumpsters. At night, the artists come out to scavenge and the perfect city symbiosis is achieved. Jeff Way is one of the artists. He lives on Walker Street, around the corner from the Baby Doll Lounge (Wild and Woolly. New Girls Every Day). It may be coincidence, of course, but the colors of the masks he has hung on his walls are the same color as the walls of the Baby Doll Lounge: cheap yellow and pink and hard reds. And chalky plaster white.

For some years Way, a painter who shows uptown, has presented intimate "transformation" performances to small gallery groups. He announces them with postcards of himself "in process": obscure, but pleasing pictures of a shadowed torso wearing a bullhorn mask, or a glittering phantasm blurring past a brick wall. Little dream images, flash-card mnemonics. When I heard that Way was going to be performing one of these pieces and that it might be his last, I decided to pay him a visit.

"I come from a small town in Ohio. Waverly, Ohio. My mother ran a dance school there. The Jean Way School of Dance. My sister is Jennifer Way. She dances with Twyla Tharp. Her husband Tom Rawe dances with Tharp, too. My name is Welsh, but people usually think it's Chinese."

"I danced until I was old enough to

resist. Then I played football. I was a fullback in high school, a defense man in college. They were small schools so my height didn't matter. I was hardly Big 10 material.

"I went to Kenyon College and studied art history. I got my masters from NYU, a thesis on Rothko and Still. When I came to New York I decided to paint. I was in an artists' collaborative with Ree Morton and some other people and the mask workshop we did got me interested in performance.

"I was intrigued by the work of George Catlin. He was an ethnographer, an artist, a historian, a visionary. I wanted to do a piece about him but not 'An evening with Hal Holbrook,' type thing. Studying Catlin, I got interested in shamanism. Scientists define shamans as religious magicians: those who transform spirit into matter. That always seemed to me a perfect definition of an artist.

"I was also influenced by a guy from TV, from *The Ed Sullivan Show* and the Sealtest Big Top. Bananaman. Every once in a while you run into someone who remembers him. He would come out on stage—a clown in a huge coat—and do this act based on transformations. He'd pull stuff out of these huge pockets, become a woman, a dozen characters. He'd produce these folding bins, which made up into little cars, like a train. In the end he got into one and drove it off the stage.

"In my performance I'm like that. Wearing all these layers of masks and robes, my pockets full. It's funny sometimes and sometimes its scary. I perform to Professor Longhair's *Ball the Wall* and Captain Beefheart's *Do the Low Yo Yo*.

"I used to do pieces that lasted 10 minutes. Now they're nearly an hour long. I have so much on, costumes and props, that I couldn't carry much more, physically or psychologically.

"I call the performances *Transformations* and sometimes when I do them, it's like crossing over into a dream. In his journals Catlin describes these medicine men who went into the woods in search of visionary experience, to assemble their magical personae. One of them, Yellow Bear, came out after a long period of absence draped in a grizzly-bear skin with toads and shit hanging all over him. Catlin said he made the Witch of Ensor look tame."

Jeff Way will perform *Transformations* May 22 at P.S. 289, 900 St. Mark's Place, Brooklyn.



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