

Art and Politics

Questions on a Politicized Performance Art

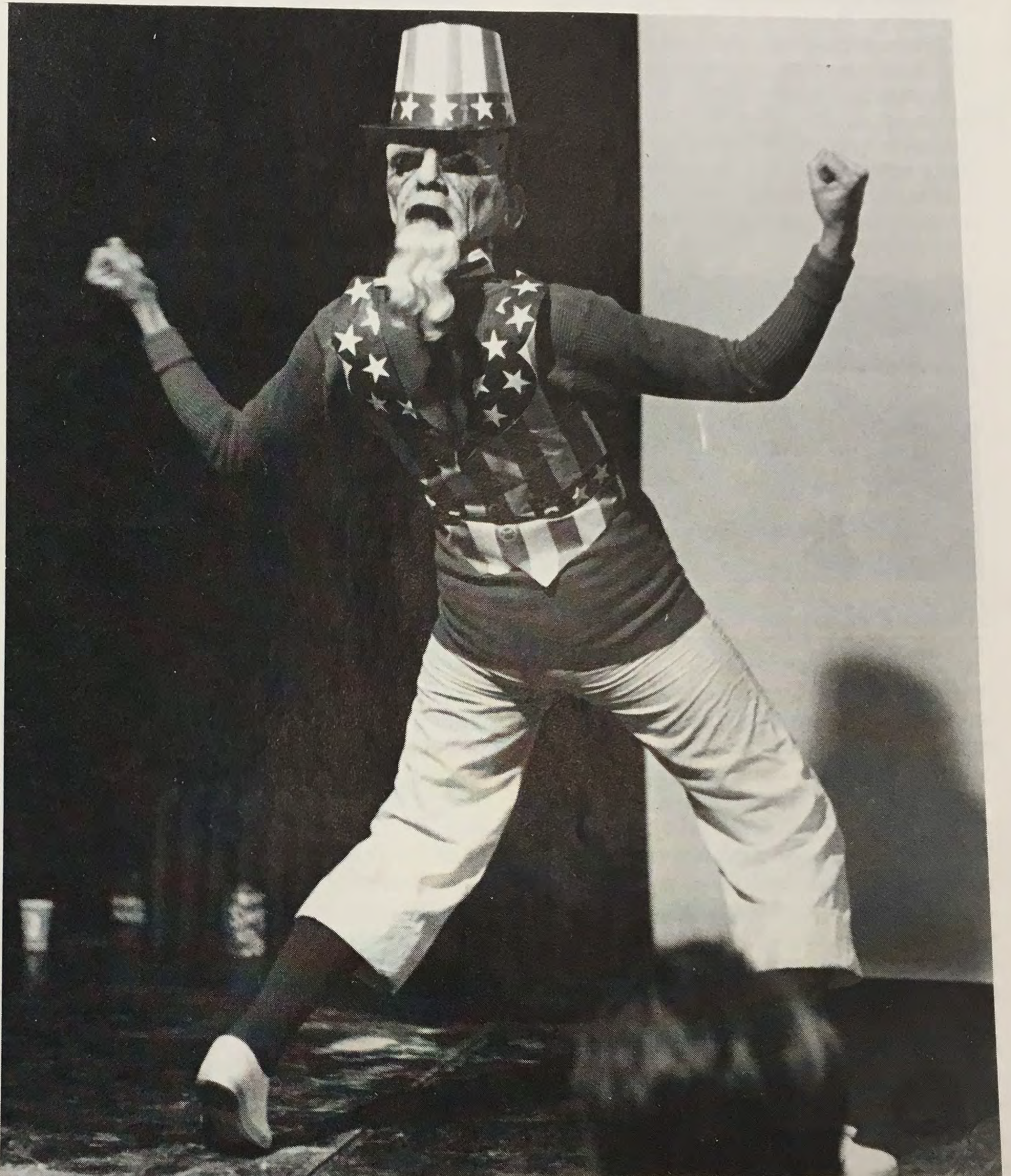
BY LUCY R. LIPPARD

As a postscript to our coverage of last season's Artists Call, the author discusses the performance festival protesting U.S. policy in Central America.

Is it subject matter that makes a performance "political"? What's "political" without looking like it, and what looks "political" but isn't? Do you have to be politically knowledgeable or politically active to make good "political performance art"? Can you just watch TV and read *The New York Times*? If you know too much about the world, is it Art that you're making?

Performance art—a relatively new and therefore, by avant-garde standards, a "radical" genre—has been described as hybrid and transitional for about 15 years now. While the excitement about its possibilities has worn off somewhat, it is still living off its potential for confrontation, intimacy and accessibility—in other words, its potential for social effect and affect. Yet a politicized performance art is practiced effectively by only a venturesome few, and most of it does not take place on a stage, in a "space," or even indoors. The work that is seen in more or less conventional contexts is only the tip of the iceberg (or land mine) that is performance art for social change.¹ The 70 "indoor" pieces that comprised the eight-night performance art festival for Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America opened up the ranks of political performance to a great many newcomers and offered an unparalleled framework within which to scrutinize the relationship between social responsibility and this still-forming art of performance.²

Whatever the subject matter of the pieces themselves (and I will only discuss some of those which were about Central America or political issues—perhaps two thirds of the program), there was a consistent Central American presence throughout the festival because each night a member of a theater delegation recently returned from Nicaragua spoke, with or without slides, about her or his experiences there. While these presentations ranged from the moving and the informative to the embarrassingly naive, it was



Elena Alexander in Uncle Sam. Photo Dona Ann McAdams.

always shocking to be pulled back from the fun and foreplay of the art to confront images of teenage soldiers, of weeping peasants mourning their *contra*-murdered children, of poverty and the cheerful courage of an authentic popular revolution under military attack—vivid reminders of why the festival existed.³

The art itself tended to approach the subject more obliquely, reflecting the reaction of North American culture when confronted by an unfamiliar task. Fragmented, frenetic, often fearful and politically naive, the performers' dominant strategies were anger, humor, sex and ritual. While a few of the works were downright silly and ignorant of the issues,

I was struck, after seeing all eight nights, by the number of artists who had really struggled with the subject at hand. Because many had not previously incorporated political content in their art, there was an air of true experimentation, even risk, that has been largely absent from recent performance art.

Most of the artists discussed here are trying out ways to work within culture as a political stimulus (to themselves and to their audiences), rather than trying to make culture a political act in itself, outside of the nurturing art context. If the artist's politics are embryonic, or evolving, this condition can itself be an empathetic aspect of the work. The oblique

approach characteristic of avant-garde art can open up obvious issues, re-envision them in unexpected ways. And "acting out" in front of a sensitive, relatively sympathetic audience can speed up the politicization process for a performer, as can collaboration and dialogue among similarly concerned colleagues.

Information—in this case about Central America, or perhaps more accurately about North American responses to the Central American situation—is only effective when it is as carefully selected as the form that carries it, not merely laminated onto its surface. The most successful performances at the festi-



Herb Perr, Marlene Lortev and Irving Wexler in *Blinders*. Photo Dona Ann McAdams.

val worked well precisely because their authors are knowledgeable participants in social movements and their politics, or value systems, are integrated into their art.

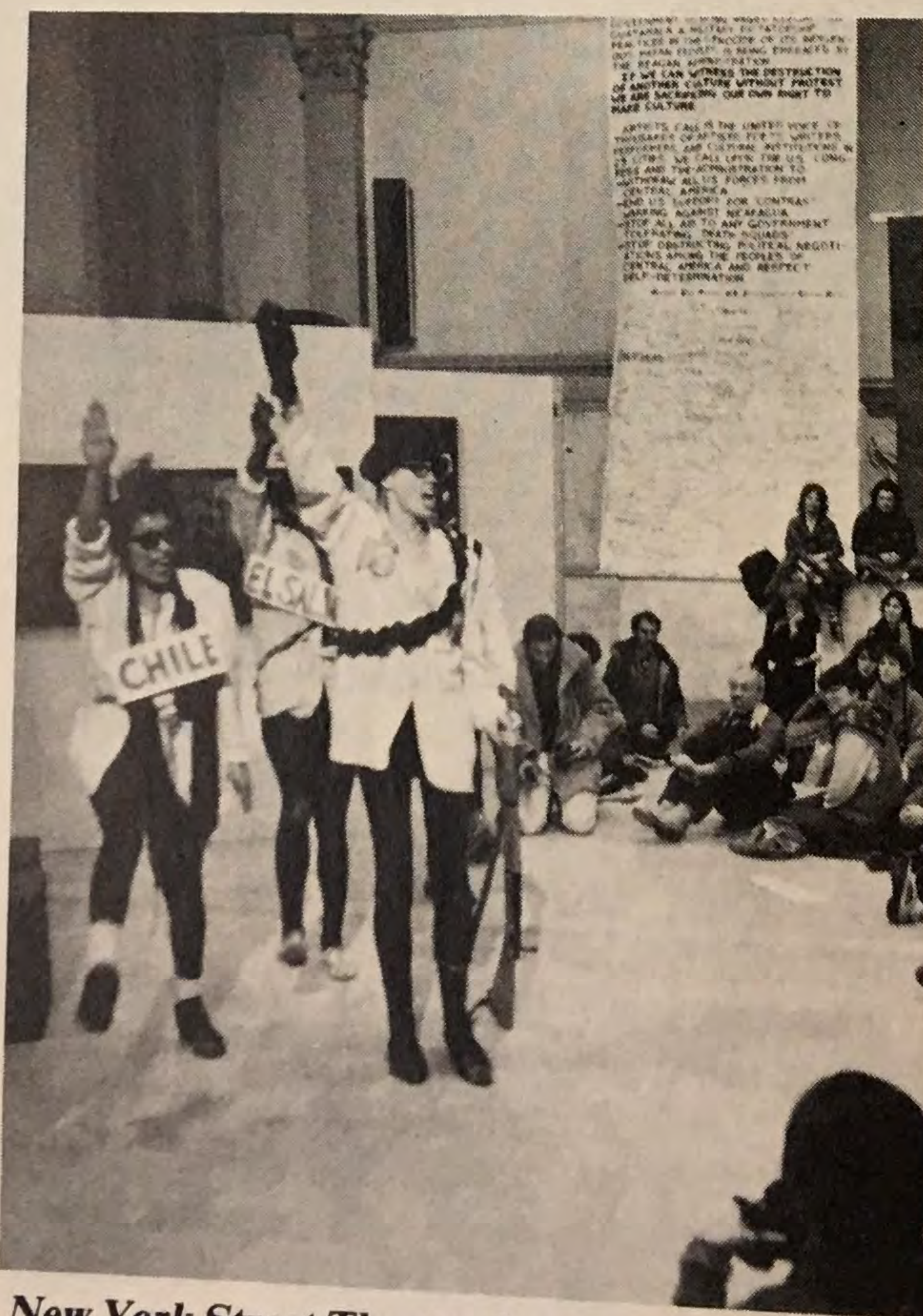
Bob Ostertag is a musician who is editor of the *CISPES Alert*.⁴ His sound piece with tape, narration and several musicians playing stringed instruments took a bizarre news story about a Hollywood star expensively rescuing hundreds of stray cats, repeated it and intercut it with tales of atrocities in Central America. The sounds progressed from a tentative ping-pong to a caterwauling racket interspersed with breathing and moans as though someone were being tortured. Political momentum was paralleled by the building sound, providing an emotional impact lost (or never found) in our reactions to the daily news. The effect was chilling.

Elena Alexander's solo "Uncle Sam" has become an instant classic on the anti-intervention circuit. It is a very simple piece which is both informatively funny and scary. With a background in theater and dance, Alexander brings to performance art a rare ease and skill; as a politically committed artist, she brings an obsession with historical events in Central America. The central image of "Uncle Sam" is the performer in costume—bearded Frankenstein mask, stars-and-stripes top hat and vest. While Uncle faces the audience, Alexander does not. In other words, all her movements are coordinated to look frontal, when they are in fact backwards—a neat metaphor for Reagan's policies.

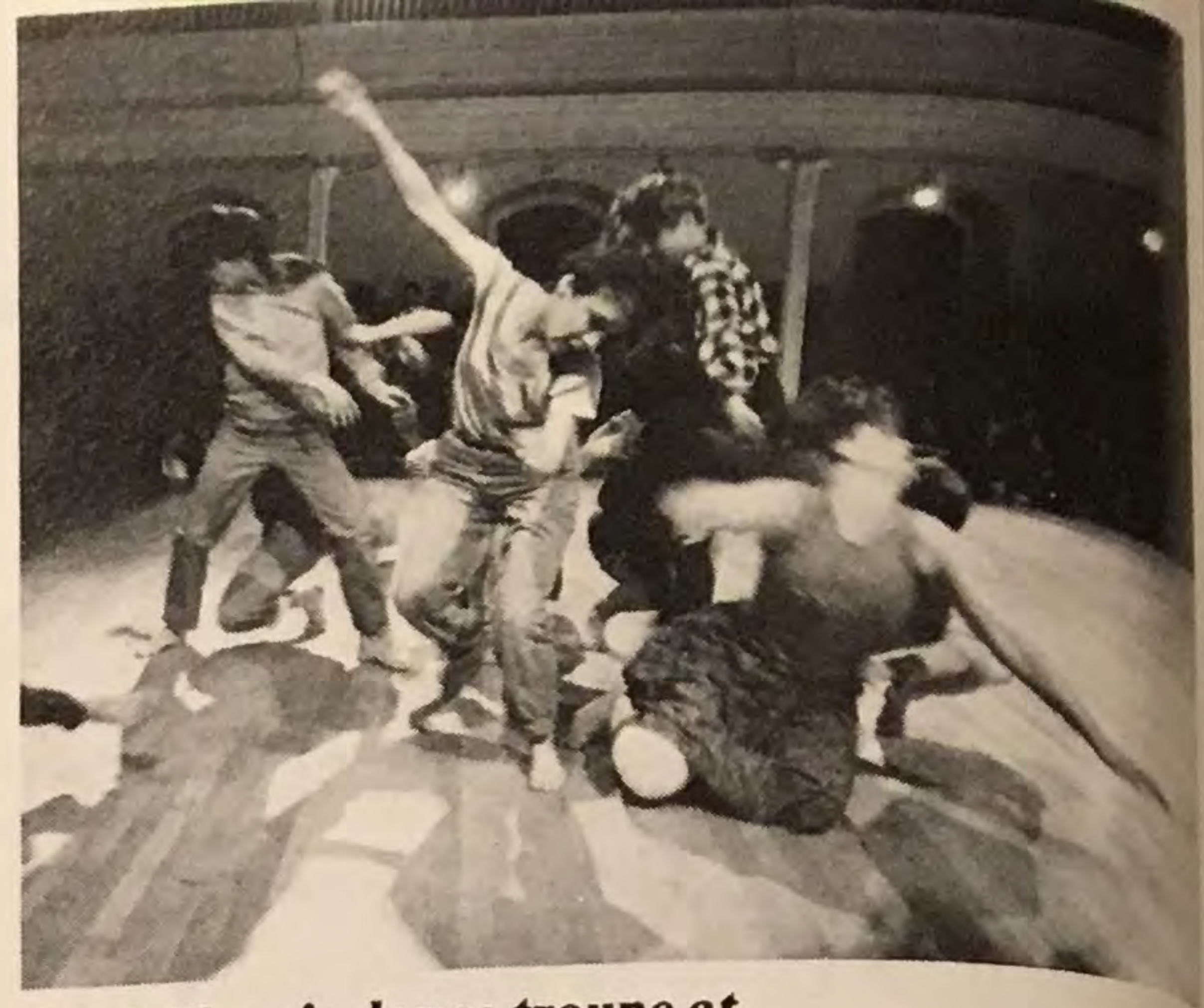
After twirling two big sticks (dumbbells) to a machine-gun-like drumbeat, Alexander's throaty voice (taped over Allan Uglow's rock music) gleefully declaims the litany of U.S. interventions in Central America ("1901 we played in Puerto Rico and we won! . . . 1912 was a big year, we invaded Panama, Cuba, Honduras, and we won!"), leading up to a manic "we won we won we won," a salute, a little march step, and an erotic sigh ("ohhh, ahhh, we love winning"). She ends with an increasingly villainous and frenzied jerkoff to "I'm your I'm your I'm your UNCLE SAM!" Alexander's menacing but elegant diction, and grotesque but sinuous movements perfectly convey certain contradictions—the fear she herself feels, the arrogance of Uncle Sam, and the threat of history catching up to us.

Herb Perr's, Marlene Lortev's and Irving Wexler's "Blinders" was a stylized, deliberately (if ironic) "agit prop" piece contrasting the tourist version of Central America and news reality. Three white-masked performers made parallels between colonization at home and abroad, taking a sophisticated view of the art-and-politics context by making the point that "a converted audience has to do more than just agree in theory." Finally, I'd add to the category of well-informed and integrated performances the New York Street Theater Caravan's, performed at Judson Church on Artists Call's opening day. Their "Dictators' Rock" was witty, acute popular/populist culture at its best—four female "dictators" belted out hard rock and hard satire by extolling the true exploits of the rulers of Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala and Paraguay.

At the other extreme, a context such as Artists Call, with its largely "converted"



New York Street Theater Caravan performing *Dictators' Rock* at Judson Church, Jan. 21, 1984. Photo Gianfranco Mantegna.



Pooh Kaye's dance troupe at St. Mark's Church. Photo © Peter Moore.

audiences, can lend referential substance to works that would otherwise be totally ambiguous—as happened with Pooh Kaye's dance troupe. Dressed in motley, "ordinary" clothes, the dancers were first seen in a triangular huddle, like billiard balls waiting to be broken. Then heads raggedly popped up and down, random crawling ensued, and they were finally standing, in a clear image of birth and growth, or perhaps of evolution itself. The more structured parts that followed always broke down or out into apparently random animallike movements—lopes and scurries accompanied by squeaks, twitters and eerie electronic music. Funny, endearing—but there was also an extremely ominous section where everyone seemed to be massacred. Was this impression the result of the political context overwhelming the piece, or enriching it? Either way, it was impressive.

Though Fred Holland's performance was obviously made specifically for Artists Call, it still succeeded in maintaining its mysteriousness. He began in total darkness by lighting a circle of candles, opening a bag of plastic toy soldiers, placing them around in the "landscape," then dancing with erratic passion, almost invisibly (black against black, shadow against shadow), to a tape that included the sound of a helicopter zeroing in, a baby crying. The performance suggested that we were all trapped in a jungle night with the resistance, while government forces came closer and closer.

Evocative and solemn, Joan Jonas began by singing a sad but deadpan rendition of a spiritual. She donned a mask and with two long poles in each hand performed a sinister rattle music; then she waved and slowly twirled two large white banners, which caught, rejected and caught again slide images of Latin graveyards. The mood was ritualistic, tragic. This was perhaps the most beautiful piece of the festival—though Layne Redmond and Glen Velez's drumming and slide work was also ominously enchanting, and Theodora Skipitares's plaintive little song accompanied by Buffalo-faced puppet was a moment of pure understated theater.

Such mournful lyricism was one antidote to the risk any political art runs of rage defying transcendence and disconnecting the audience from political reality. Many of the pieces in the Artists Call festival authentically represented the experience of trying to believe in something in a context in which pervasive government and media disinformation makes all belief suspect. Outside of alternative theater there are so few respected models for a developed political performance art that it's no wonder many of the festival pieces were sincere but awkward, and often apologetic. There was a valid sense of "how do I deal with this stuff? I know it's important, but what does it mean to *me*?" The dilemma of esthetic liberalism is exposed in a climate where clearly stated opinions are perceived as rhetorical, propagandistic, or, god forbid, prescriptive. To artists stuck in the role this society imposes on them—a permanent state of adolescence—nothing is greater anathema than being told what to do. As Richard Schechner wrote in 1969 about the relationship of political radicalism, sexuality and performance:

Each in its own way . . . is hostile to authority, particularly authority derived from age or inherited privilege; [each] delights in revealing, or even better, exposing "the enemy"; [each]



Jerri Allyn and Debra Wanner deliver simultaneous monologues at Franklin Furnace. Photo Lona Foote.

somewhere between war and speech. They stake out a new area not mapped by either traditional politics or aesthetics."⁵

A Latin friend watching the Artists Call performances asked me why North Americans can't deal with politics without dragging in sex. As the festival progressed, I began to wonder too. In one guise or another—in narrative, body language, suggestive humor and innuendos—sex reared its head as often as imperialism. Its use ranged from throwaway lines stuck in to get a laugh (apparently North Americans, like high school hygiene students, still think sex is generically funny); to Bonnie Sherk sashaying coyly back and forth in a music-hall Statue of Liberty costume in front of a banner reading "Be Disarming, Choose Life"; to the Smith Brothers' folksy, raucous improvisations on the pathos of the male/military identity crisis. One of the most successful pieces in the series was Jerri Allyn's; backed up by Debra Wanner, she did a high-intensity simultaneous monologue about homosexuality and revolution in Cuba and Nicaragua: "Who is hip and who is square? All she can talk is what she knows. She *likes* Castro but why should he spoil things? Certainly to jail homosexuals is to queer one's revolution."

The most disturbing of these performances was Tannis Hugill's bitter juxtaposition of sex and violence. Appearing almost nude in a glitter bra and G-string, carrying a rifle, she alternated between a sexually threatening dance and a simulation of brutal hand-to-hand fighting, while singing in a harsh but trained voice, "Hush Little Baby, Don't You Cry . . ." Her beauty and professionalism made the contrast all the more cruel.

Certainly U.S. policy in Central America is obscene, but I suspect the phenomenon noticed by my Latin American friend has more to do with North American reality. Sheltered as art is here, our primary brushes with the politics of power come under the heading of "relationships" of one kind or another. It also seems that sex is regarded as less threatening, certainly more fashionable, than politics. But since desire is always a major component of revolution, the parallels are not so far-fetched. This generalized sexuality was best expressed in an exquisitely intense and sensuous Indo-Latin solo by Myrna Renaud of the Barrunto Dancers, accompanied by her own ankle rattles. A volcanically emotive sound and movement piece by Jana Haimsohn was as primal as it was sexual. Accompanied by two talented black children drumming in Latin/Afro rhythms, she gradually moved into an exotic squeaking, squealing, moaning dance in which body and voice became a single instrument climaxing in near violence. (I'm told this is a technique used in Grotowskian theatrical exercises, but it certainly went beyond practice.)

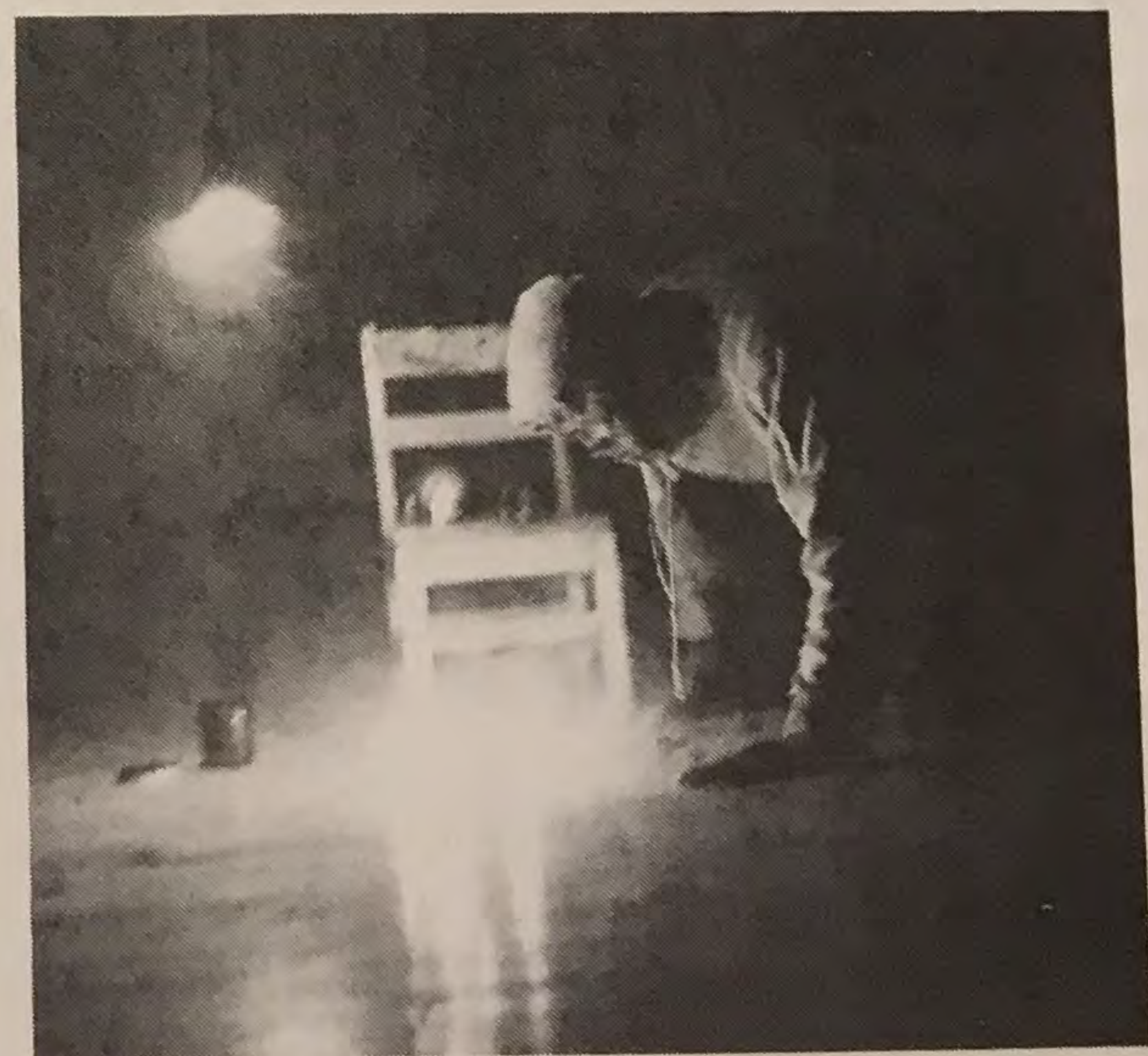
Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton has pointed out the note of desperation reflected in the multiple selves and the louder and louder images and words of today's artists who have "reached a point where it's impossible to find meaning or words that express life's continuity in the face of extinction."⁶ Various strategies were tried in the performance festival. Eric Bogosian did a moving dramatic reading from a book of horrifying, first-person accounts of Vietnam. Stephanie Skura (and others, less successfully) made something pathetic but humorous of the search for a bridge between personal and political. Joe Lewis cut off his dreadlocks one by one in another somehow pathetic ritual, connected to Central America by the only spoken line—"Viva la Revolución!" Steve West desperately threw all the metal chairs at the Taller Latinoamericano in a heap during a terrifyingly noisy and violent five-minute finale to the festival's opening night.



Theodora Skipitares manipulates a buffalo puppet with human face. Photo Dona McAdams.

works most efficiently when organized in small interacting groups or communes, and aims at enjoying here and now what pleasure, or wealth, or energy an action yields.

In the '60s, "repression" meant not being able to do one's own thing in the U.S., being arrested for performing nude or using four-letter words. In the '80s, the revolutions are taking place elsewhere, but jokes, dreams and desire continue to express the hostility that oppositional artists share with colonized countries. Activist art still runs up against unspoken taboos. "Radical actions," says Schechner, "are often codes—compact messages falling



Fred Holland kneels over toy soldiers in his performance at P.S. 122. Photo Dona Ann McAdams.



Tannis Hugill juxtaposes sex and violence. Photo Dona Ann McAdams.



Ishmael Houston-Jones in a talk-dance about art and politics. Photo Dona Ann McAdams.

Humor, irony, mockery and satire remain, nonetheless, the most tried and true means of sugaring the didactic pill of outrage in art. There were enough good one-liners in the festival to make an anthology. (Sample: Michael Smith enthusiastically describing his bank's Run for Freedom Marathon with tax-deductible entrance fee: "We truly support the need in less fortunate countries to have what we have here.") An expert in this area is Paul Zaloom. He delivered with disarmingly casual brilliance a series of skits on "The World of the Future," using found voices and found objects in consistently surprising ways. In the Library of the Future, a Kissinger-like mind cop (or maybe it's Hilton Kramer) takes out the banned books, including *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Brave New World*. Finally the Statue of Liberty librarian says, "Oh well, I guess I'll just take the rest of the day off, and maybe I won't come in tomorrow."

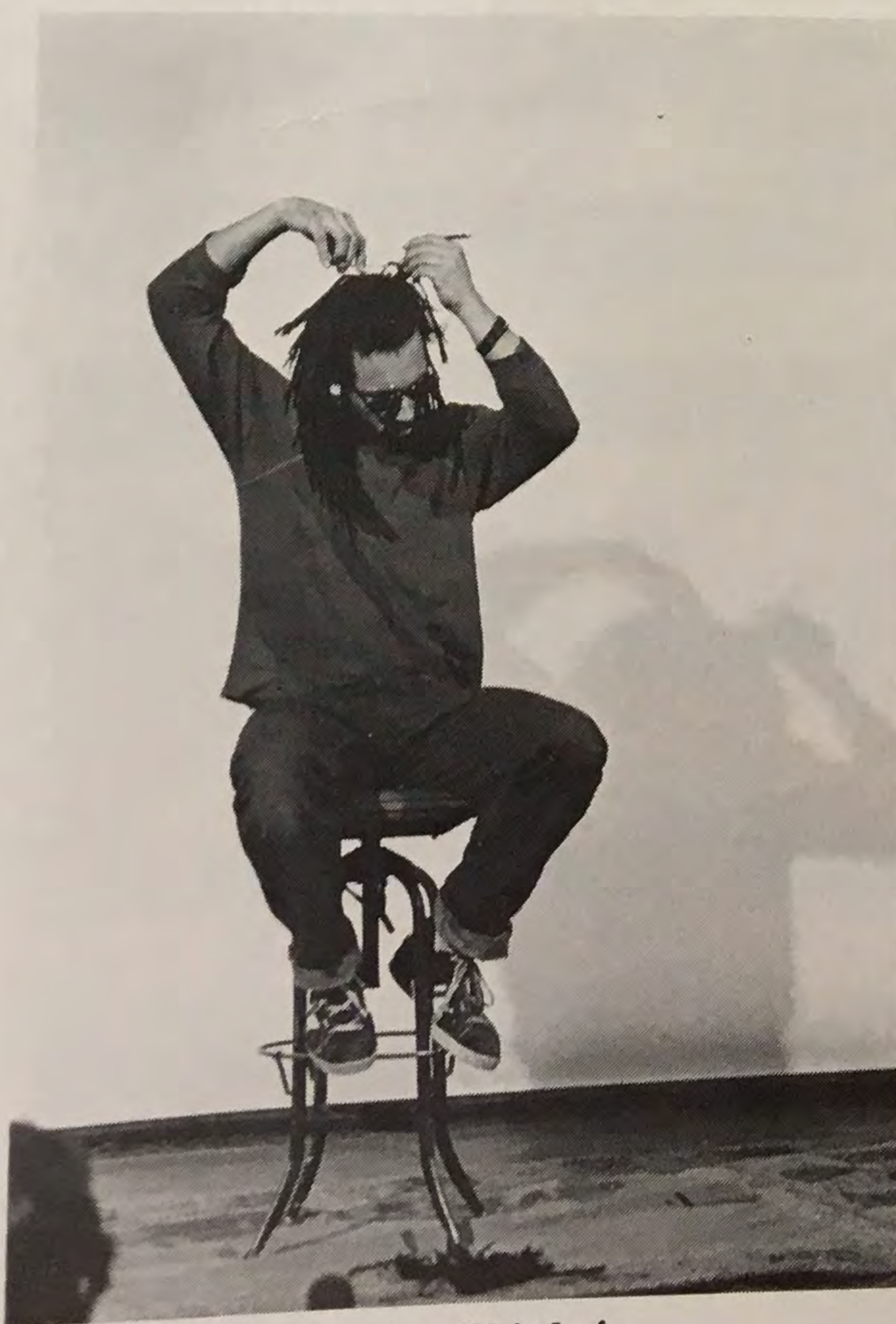
While Zaloom is an accomplished stand-up performer who plays clubs as well as art venues, Martha Wilson's intentionally amateurish Nancy Reagan could be found only in the art world. Wilson's combination of witty and arrhythmic lyrics, almost tuneless voice and cheerful parody conceals more teeth than the lipstick

might indicate. Nancy appeared on stage mummified in plastic wrap. When freed, she was revealed in white gloves and fancy dress, singing "Enter the glad gap . . . just ignore everything you don't want to see"—an appropriate anthem for U.S. sponsorship of Salvadoran death squads. Noting that "Ronnie is the first synthetic president" ("the picture stays, the facts fade . . . we are the news so we don't get the blues"), her cheap shots at the obvious are nonchalantly countered by direct hits: "People should not think of themselves as hungry if they have pains down here. They should think they're on a diet."

The "persona" device used by Wilson, Smith and many others is another way artists admit the difficulty of saying certain things directly. It allows them to test the waters by letting "someone else" say these things. At the same time, such distancing techniques as using others' experiences, or one's own in the third person, are accepted and often effective strategies for dealing with touchy subject matter; they need not exclude the "confessional



Paul Zaloom in one of his skits on "The World of the Future" at Taller Latinoamericano. Photo Benito Abrams.



Joe Lewis silently cuts off his hair. Photo Dona Ann McAdams.



Myrna Renaud of the Barrunto Dancers in her Indo-Latin solo. Photo Lona Foote.



Steve West in his Blind Robin America performed at Taller Latinoamericano. Photo © Peter Moore.

tone." This is particularly evident in the increasingly popular genre of the "talking dance"—the casual solos that are the middle-class answer to rap music and break dancing. Leonora Champagne's piece in the festival struck a note of lyrical disorientation, evoking an American tourist lost in a García Márquez story. She is a better actor and writer than most performers specializing in the talk dance mode, using her husky Louisiana accent and wry vernacular wit to offset the oblique and poetic circumstances she describes. Her dance movements are almost, but never quite, pantomime; they exist at an angle from the story she tells. Champagne's piece was a half-dreamed, half-recalled account of an American couple's visit to an almost fictional Central America—"a country where there were no more trains and no more planes and no more buses, where people only went as far as they could walk and they couldn't tell you how to get anywhere." It ranged from fun to facts to fantasy: "In America we have pets, but here the animals are all wild"; a Guatemalan Indian woman won't sell her blue beads to a tourist waving a sheaf of bills; a river crossing takes on epic symbolic proportions.

Another master of the genre—Ishmael Houston-Jones—did one of his miracu-

lously limber talk dances about how his Nicaraguan trip affected him as "an East Village dancer in New York concerned with formal questions and structures." It was typical of his work in its coolly amused, slightly self-denigrating tone, questioning what the artist could or should do about Central America, and if he were to do anything, would it just be "revolutionary jerking off? . . . It's easier to care for people who are alot further away in places it's nice to go and visit and be in the sun. . . . My work has no apparent relationship to the outside world. I questioned that. I've got no answers."

No answers" might be an appropriate epitaph for the current state of politicized performance art. No answers to the questions with which I began this article, questions which many of the performers are asking themselves. Perhaps performance artists, working in a still evolving art form with an audience less rigidly preconditioned than the one for object art and legitimate theater, do stand a chance of subverting and empowering by empathetic communication, of making a *timely* performance piece adaptable to context, audience and current events, without being less "timeless" than high art is supposed to be. Ironically, history seems more accessible to this ephemeral medium, which leaves only traces of its own history. □



Donna Henes in Tempt Fate: Hello World! Hope your there tomorrow at Taller Latinoamericano. Photo Benito Abrams.

1. I have written elsewhere (in *Performance as Social and Cultural Intervention*, Bruce Barber, ed., Toronto, Coach House Press, 1983) about the possibilities of intervening in "real life" structures, incorporating performance elements

in long-term projects sometimes called performances because there's nothing else they can be called. Some artists do both stage pieces and projects that blend into work and social life. Others learn from what they don't do, as well as from what they do; others are isolated from ideas and innovations made outside of the art-world context.

2. The festival took place in New York City last January; videotapes of it were shown in March and April at Franklin Furnace during the "Round Two: Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America" documentary show; they continue to be circulated. The performance festival was organized by artist Bill Gordh, assisted by Jerri Allyn. See *High Performance*, No. 25, 1984, for Arlene Raven's article on the festival, and *Art in America*, May 1984, for general coverage of Artists Call exhibitions.

3. Each night there was also an installation or participatory "pre-performance" piece—by Donna Henes, Betsy Damon, Kim Jones, Helene Aylon and Amy Trompeter.

4. *Alert* is the publication of the national Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, 19 West 21st St., NYC.

5. Richard Schechner, "Speculations on Radicalism, Sexuality & Performance," *TDR*, v. 13, no. 4, Summer 1969, pp. 98, 106.

6. Robert Jay Lifton, interviewed by Bonnie Maranca in "Art and the Imagery of Extinction," *Performing Arts Journal*, No 18, 1982, p. 53.

Author: Lucy R. Lippard is a free-lance art critic. She was a co-organizer of the Artists Call exhibitions.

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