DON'T ASK; DON'T TELL
A WALK ON ART'S WILD SIDE

BY SUSAN F. EDWARDS

AT 8 P.M. ON A Thursday night, it's just getting dark on Nebraska Avenue. I love the seaside splendor of the once-charming tourist courts and the rolling river of human flotsam that drifts constantly down this street, lodging briefly at some row raggedy motel or bar or greasy spoon, and then moving on. Something about this place sings to my dark side, is the gravely voice of Tom Waits. Being here at night always makes me feel wicked, uneasy and a little blue.

But tonight, I'm not just sloshing toward a noir state of mind; I'm going to an art happening — something called a micropersona performance by a London-based artist duo called FrenchMottershead. Pretty much all I know is that they — Rebecca French and Andrew Mottershead — are leading a group of USF graduate art students in a project designed to breach the wall between art and real life by doing some sort of performance in a newly opened bar on Nebraska called Pisco’s. Part of the idea is that you don’t know who’s creating art and who’s just hanging out.

The building that houses Pisco’s has been a boys’ school and a music store. It’s been an art gallery and a restaurant. It’s been a bar and a club. And it seems to me that this is the performing art. I don’t see a wrecker, and that makes me wonder if this is part of the performance.

At the door French and Mottershead politely stop each person, explain that art is happening here tonight and pass out stamped envelopes containing feedback forms. Inside: Led Zeppelin blares from the jukebox, and the bar is packed with college students, some faculty and a few Crackers wedged in at the stools, trying to continue their dart and pool games amid the furious. At first glance, it seems pretty clear who belongs to which group, but I’m hoping to be surprised, since this is art.

I get a drink and wander through the crowd, looking for something out of the ordinary. Several of the college people have red lip-prints on their faces, but I don’t see anyone with red lips. I stand near knobs of students, hoping to catch some interestingly scripted conversation or maybe be engaged in some sort of performance. But the music is so loud, more Zeppelin, and I can’t hear anything. The students pretty much ignore me and seem for all the world to be doing what students normally do in a bar: drinking, talking and posing for each other.

I find a seat at the bar next to two young men. I tell them I’m writing about the event for the Weekly Planet. “Are you part of the performance?” I ask them. No, they say, just observing. They’re taking a class from Rozalind Borcia, and she told them about this event. Has the performance started yet, I ask. What am I missing? Don’t you think it’s kind of strange that there’s a teddy bear on the bar,” one says. He points out another student who’s perching a digital camera on a glass and shooting pictures. That’s about all I can get out of them, so I pick a quiet corner table and hunker down on a stool to watch. I see a woman lighting people’s cigarettes. Rozalind stops by to say hi and pulls out a cigarette. She then proceeds to take everything out of her purse, slowly placing it on the table, in search of a light. I tell her there’s a girl lighting everyone’s cigarettes, but she doesn’t seem to hear me.

As we talk, I make eye contact with a man across the room, who is also talking to someone else. He’s one of the few people whom I can’t easily categorize — too old to be a student, too clean-cut to be a local or art faculty. I hear someone ask him if he’s the owner, but I can’t hear his reply. I haven’t been able to get any locals to talk to me about their impressions of the event, so I sit down to think, I might get something out of him for this column.

He’s not the owner, he says. He’s playing in the pool tournament and will probably do some Karaoke, which they’re starting to set up now. He asks me if I’m married, tells me he likes smart women, says sex is a mental thing for him. But it’s when he launches into an eloquent soliloquy about how sex is and should be a dark thing that it hits me. Here at last is a performer. He’s

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