

DON'T ASK; DON'T TELL

A WALK ON ART'S WILD SIDE

BY SUSAN F. EDWARDS

METROPOLIS

AT 8 P.M. ON A Thursday night, it's just getting dark on Nebraska Avenue. I love the seedy splendor of the once-charming tourist courts and the rolling river of human flotsam that drifts constantly down this street, lodging briefly at some now raggedy motel or bar or greasy spoon, and then moving on. Something about this place sings to my dark side, in 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 slouching toward a noir state of mind; I'm going to an art happening — something called a microperformance 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 Fiasco'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 Fiasco's in the front and a thrift store in the back has had many lives, most recently a strip club, a crack house and, a bit further back in time, a bar called Corsica Jean and Juanita's Palace, immortalized by Silvia Curbelo in a heartbreakingly poignant poem by the same name.

The parking lot is totally jammed tonight, and college students who have probably never set foot on Nebraska Avenue are descending en masse on the tiny bar. A woman tells me I can't park there because she can't get her wrecker through. 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 edges, trying valiantly to continue their dart and pool games amid the furor. 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 knots of students, hoping to catch some interestingly scripted conversation or maybe be engaged in some sort of performance. But the music is too 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 he 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 Rozalinda Borcila, 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. Rozalinda 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 sidle over to him, thinking 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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good too. Almost had me convinced he was hitting on me. It's a perfect bit of interactive art, that twist on the age-old mating ritual that occurs night after night in countless bars around the world. He runs a hand down my arm, tells me I have nice skin, and that he'll be right back.

It's after 10, and I've found what I came for. So I slip out quietly, before the Karaoke starts.

The next day at a symposium, French and Mottershead explain their process and have the 19 participants stand and tell us about their performances. There's the woman who kissed people, leaving red lip-prints, a student who sniffed himself and others as if they stank, a pair of girls who did everything together simultaneously, someone who cleaned up obsessively, a guy who pretended to be a promoter from a different bar, the

woman who lit people's cigarettes, a guy who played every Led Zeppelin song on the juke over and over, someone who repeatedly violated other people's personal space. They talk about their experiences, what they learned. Nobody stands and says he hit on women wearing glasses all night.

Later, over drinks, Rozalinda talks about her microperformance, slowly emptying her purse over and over again, and how people told her that she needs a purse with pockets to organize her stuff. "Two of my students thought you were a performer," she says to me. "They said, 'she told us she was from the *Weekly Planet*. Why would anyone from the *Weekly Planet* write about this?'"

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