

All Aboard

Charles Atlas' participatory video art.

By Henry Flesh

IN THE EARLY 90s, a novelist friend remarked to me that it never ceased to amaze her how far pretension would get an artist back then. At the time, the art world was groaning under the twin weights of over-conceptualization and obsessive deconstruction—ideas that, while interesting when they first reared their combative heads in the 80s, had been around even in those days for way too long. Surely, I told her, all of this would pass.

I was wrong, of course. Here we are some ten years later, and we've got Yalie blowhard/outre social fixture/Björk paramour Matthew Barney applauded for his ponderously narcissistic one-man show at the Guggenheim, while purple-prose poseurs like Annie Proulx hit the literary bestseller lists and translate into equally high-minded—and mindless—Hollywood Oscar bait. I can't count the number of times I've asked myself if there's anyone out there who actually enjoys this shit.

Perhaps this contemporary love of charlatans comes from the fact that schools no longer appear to emphasize artistic traditions that go back more than 15 or 20 years. I once attended a launch party for a very bad, ostentatiously surreal cyber-novel, during which a group of graduate film students from Brown blithely admitted to me that they'd never heard of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Many of today's art students know shockingly little about pre-80s, 20th-century art apart from a cursory acquaintance with, say, Picasso, Duchamp, Rauschenberg and Warhol. And Oprah fave Toni Morrison is now more widely taught than are Jane Austen or the Brontes. With so many so inadequately educated, it's no wonder they see strained pretentiousness as the only "serious art" and that anything else is condescended to or ignored.

Since Participant Inc. opened on Rivington St. last November, we've seen works like Virgil Marti's gorgeous installation inspired by the webs of tripped-out spiders, Kathe Burkhart's hilariously deadpan chocolate art and other creations that both provoked and entertained. Here are artists who push boundaries without broadcasting their serious intentions, who don't drop gratuitous cultural references like turds in their wake. In other words, as in Shakespeare's plays, Austen's novels and Hitchcock's films, the works at Participant are fun—and you don't have to decipher any arcane code to appreciate them.

Its current presentation, "Instant Fame!" by video artist Charles Atlas, is one of the most exhilarating exhibits I've seen in years. Atlas is anything but an academic; indeed, he dropped out of Swarthmore in the late 60s. Since then he's collaborated on pieces with audacious choreographers like Merce Cunningham and Michael Clark, and created groundbreaking work populated by such personalities as London legend Leigh Bowery and the brilliant, innovative Diamanda Galas. Last year he made a documentary called *The Legend of Leigh Bowery* for French television, which, galvanized by Boy George's upcoming Bowery-bio-musical *Taboo*,

will be distributed in the United States this fall.

"Instant Fame!" can be seen as a gratifying summation of much of what Atlas has done. He has set up a studio in Participant's lower level, where, along with dancer/artist-in-ascendance Katherine Copeland, who provides video-camera work, he mixes live performances that are concurrently projected on a screen in the gallery's second floor. These works-in-constant-progress are on view at Participant through June 29. When the show has completed its three-week run, Atlas will have compiled what he has shot as a permanent record of the event.

**"Instant Fame!" through June 29 at
Participant Inc., 95 Rivington St. (betw.
Ludlow & Orchard Sts.), 917-488-0185.**

In what is possibly the exhibit's signature piece, Atlas' lover, novelist Joe Westmoreland, performs what he calls a "chicken dance," flapping his arms and kicking his feet while poking his butt toward the camera and playfully slapping it—gestures that seem artless expressions of the joy he so obviously feels in what he is doing. Writer/performer Laurie Weeks, on the other hand, strums a guitar with a thoughtful intensity, while a tape of Dancenoise's Lucy Sexton is juxtaposed with images of her newborn daughter. The finished products can be simple (one subject just smokes a cigarette), camp (a man dressed as a slightly off-kilter preppy in a blazer boxes while wearing fluorescent green gloves) or erotic (a live video of a hunky young man stripping was projected opening night). The art lies in Atlas' manipulation of his work in ways that subtly capture some crucial essence of his subjects.

Our noxiously ingrained American puritanism has, I believe, encouraged much of today's lifeless art, and it has also spurred a great deal of self-righteous carping in the media about our "unhealthy" preoccupation with fame, demonstrated, critics say, by the popularity of reality shows. Fortunately, unlike them, Atlas is no scold; instead, Warhol-like, he reveres showoffs. He and Copeland are at the gallery from 3-7 Wednesday through Sunday, creating video portraits of anyone who stops by to make an appointment, simultaneously editing the footage and mixing it with music selected from the countless hours of tapes Atlas has made for the occasion. And it doesn't necessarily stop at the notorious 15 minutes for those seeking fame; some shootings have gone on for as long as an hour.

Some diehard theorists may intellectualize this work by talking about his stretching/questioning the boundaries between art and life, at the same time reading into his work a facile irony about the whole quest-for-fame thing. I don't think he intends this. Truth is, Atlas is creating a participatory art that both challenges and delights, with no irritatingly false affections. And in the end, why should we demand anything else? ■