Theatre Experiment

EDITED BY MICHAEL BENEDIKT

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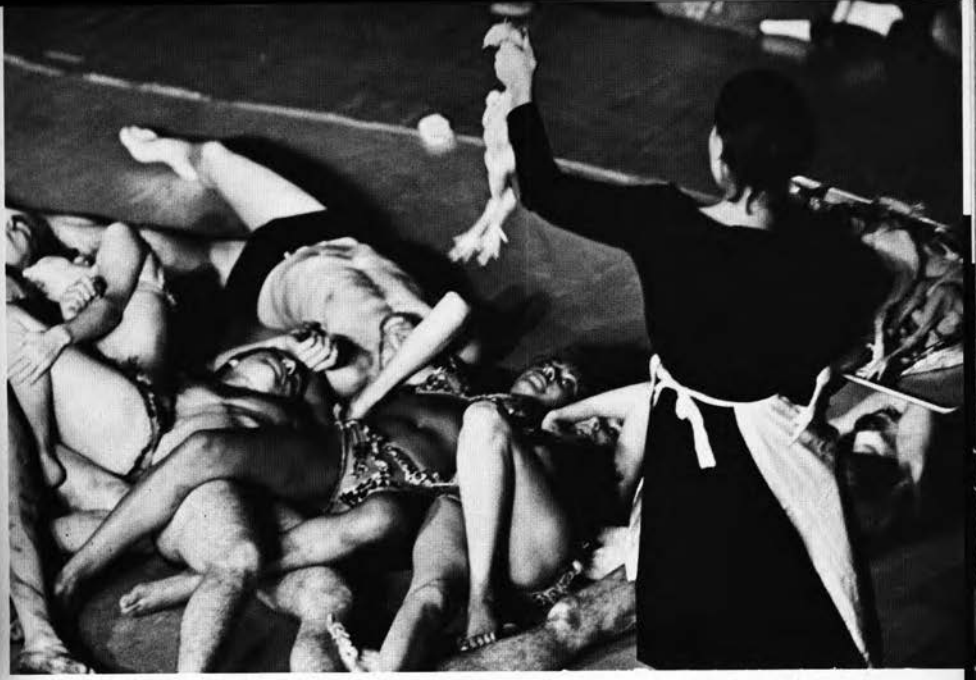

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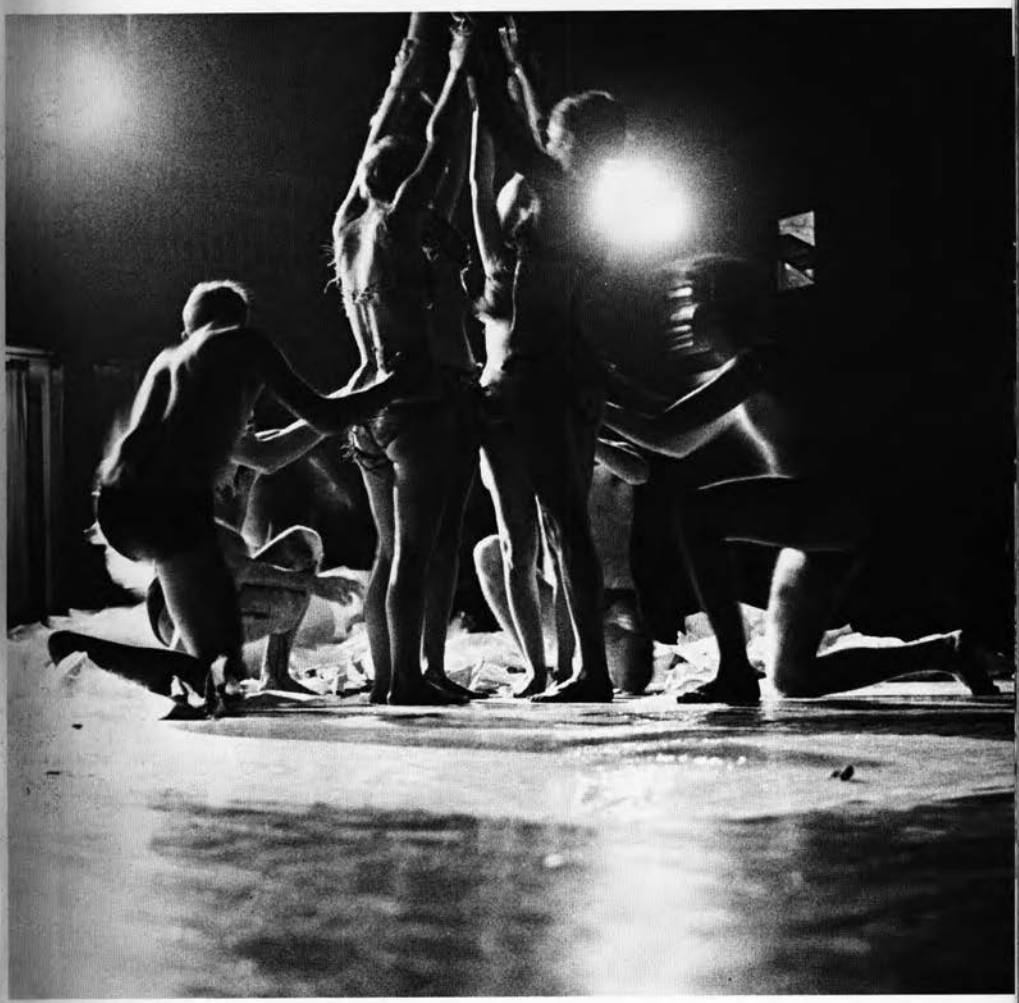
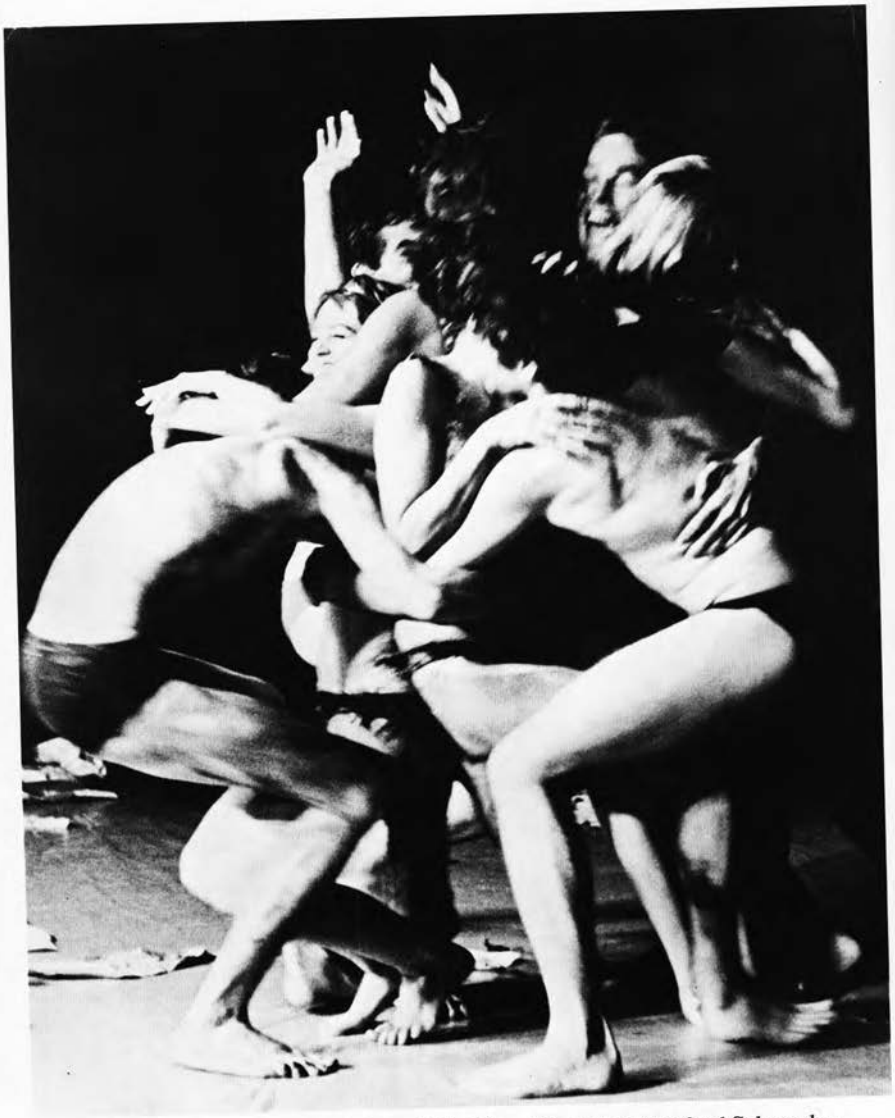


[21] *Meat Joy*. The building of The Tree. Photo by Peter Moore.



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Meat Joy

BY CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

Some of the impetus of the Happening, as Kaprow has noted, is derived from the style of avant-garde painting that was dominant in America during the 1950s; Abstract Expressionism or, as it is sometimes called, Action Painting. "I was concerned with the implication that Action Painting—Pollock's in particular—leads not to more painting, but to more action," Kaprow once wrote.

Meat Joy is a striking example of the way one author of Happenings—a painter and sculptor who once worked very much in the Abstract Expressionist vein—improvised the form almost entirely within the framework of Action Painting. It deserves to be termed a classic example of the Happening—if only because, when the average interested individual considers the Happening, he is apt to characterize it in the sensual terms of this particular piece, which was performed in New York and Paris, and which has ample "underground" fame. Its basic idea is also one of Abstract Expressionism's: that, in the context of a sufficiently active and gestural painting style, virtually any subject can serve to fill an essential abstract gesture or painting stroke with the necessary element of content. Schneemann's contribution to both a later phase of Abstract Expressionism and the Happening was to fulfill these gestures with an element that has seldom been treated as anything *but* abstract in both painting and theatre: the human form.

Like *Flower, Meat Joy* operates in a fundamentally plotted, "informational" way. It is structured around a progressive reduction or stripping-down of the flesh; but it is a stripping-down in largely conceptual terms—although elements of the actual and visual are obviously involved. The painting of the bodies that follows the actual undressing represents a step beyond mere stripping-down through removal of clothing; it is an ultimate reduction of the flesh to the status of any ordinary object. Thus, its climactic section, in which butchershop

debris is flung amid the dancers, is simply a logical continuation of this reduction, to the point where animal flesh and human flesh are equated.

The serving-maid who effects this flesh mixture, in her formal black-and-white garb, might be considered a kind of priestess. Indeed, as its title suggests, *Meat Joy* is intended as a celebration of the flesh or, as its creator notes, as a kind of exorcism against the evil of "non-sensuousness—both in the theatre and out." Although the source of Schneemann's theatrical inspiration is Action Painting, its result is close to rite.

Meat Joy

Notes

Meat Joy began to evolve from dream sensation images in journals stretching as far back as early 1960; by February of 1964 they constituted a more elaborated series of drawings and notes. I was becoming increasingly aware of the possibility of capturing certain interactions between physical, metabolic changes and their effect on dream content, as well as on my sensory orientation upon and after waking; in capturing their releasing of random memory fragments (as well-defined sound, light, weather, and environment kernels from the past) in the immediate present.

At this time I made a photographic study called *Eye Body*. It involved the use of my body as source of collage transformations—its juxtaposition/extension to constructions, kinetic light boxes and the constructed environment I had been making in my studio generally; ambiguities both spatial and tactile; change of flesh forms by paint, grease, water, oil, powder, crayon, transparent plastic, combined with forms of the glass, wood, motors which I had been using in my work. The intention of *Meat Joy*, like all these images, was the visual transformation of the naked body-as-environment.

Then I received an invitation from Jean-Jacques Lebel to make a Happening for his first "Festival of Free Expression" in Paris, to occur in May. There was no financial possibility then of managing the trip, but the images which were to become *Meat Joy* increased with the provocation of the unknown, highly charged city—Paris:

In February of 1964 I wrote to Lebel:

> There are now several works moving in minds-eye towards the possibility of an extreme time/space change (that is, being in Europe), tentatively identified as *Meat Joy*, and

Divisions and Rubble; . . . Meat Joy shifting now; relating to Artaud, McClure, and French Butcher Shops—carcass as paint (it dripped right through Soutine's floor) . . . flesh jubilation . . . extremes of this sense . . . it may involve quantities of dark fabric and paint drawn from performance area outward into audience to become inundation of all available space—action and viewing space interchanged, broken through. Smell, feel of meat . . . chickens, fish, sausages? I see several girls whose gestures develop from tactile, bodily relationship to individual men and a mass of meat slices. Specific sequence of collision and embrace . . . rising, falling counterpoints to bodies . . . very dark (very bright). Hand held lights spotting color cover movements.

My Visual Dramas (Kinetic Theater . . . Concretions) can take substance from the materials I *find* to work with: this means that any particular space, any debris unique to Paris and any "found" performers (picked off the street!) would be potential structural elements for the piece. I've been working a great deal with the Judson dancers for love of their non-dance movement and their aggressive, expansive interest in changing the very physical traditions which have given their bodies extraordinary scope and strength, and my pieces for them impose space relations, provoke personal responses which will work inclusively with any chosen or found environment; so that I do not require or want any specially predetermined "set-up." What I find will be what I need.

At this point I should make it clear that my traditions are non-literary, non-verbal—"Kinetic Theatre" is my particular development of the "Happening." It is probably precisely my lack of connections with traditional theatre which left me free to evolve a new theatrical form. I am a painter, which means that even though I may not be working with paint on canvas, my sensibility is shaped in visual worlds and these are strongly tactile, plastic, concretely dimensional. I can trace three basic formal conditions which led me from painting to theatre:

1. The unlimited range of materials (in Kinetic Theatre)—objects, people, lights, sounds, etc.—all acting as an extension of the more gradually broadened range of materials which I

had used in my collages, painting-constructions, light-boxes, kinetic constructions, etc.;
2. The moving body in space (formal unit of Kinetic Theatre) as an extension of the eye-to-hand gesture that generates the paint-stroke;
3. The fluid, actually present environment (of Kinetic Theatre) as a metaphorical extension of an environment relatively fixed in painting by visual selection or inner-eye imagery.

Meat Joy was the first Kinetic Theatre piece I did in which I used performers almost entirely without previous experience in theatre. First in Paris, then in London and New York, I did actually pick (as I had suggested to Lebel) potential performers from crowds in bars, restaurants, concert halls, and streets. In Paris it was difficult and amusing, since I spoke only a few words of French. (The subsequent rehearsals were exceedingly strange; communication usually depending on hand and body gestures, facial expression and a raft of freshly memorized French words strung together to—hopefully—indicate my essential ideas.) I looked for people whose presence I responded to: simplicity, intensity, a self-contained yet open quality. In common they had a natural sexual presence—unself-conscious and vital and "untrained" bodies which moved integrally, rhythmically in commonplace actions. They might be shy or exuberant, plump or skinny —I found contrasting types, a spectrum of qualities.

The performers had to develop a rich and freely expressive responsiveness to one another. In choosing them I had always to sense that those who would provoke my conception of the piece would in turn be complimentary to each other and that the affinity they might feel for one another would develop through the nature of our work together just as the relationship between any of the performers within the context of their instructions would freely transform and intensify the quality of those instructions. My sense of the total quality of the piece was clear from the beginning—in some very internalized way—but was never explicitly imposed, because the performers had to slowly discover and reveal all those detailed experiences which would realize

my images. It was like a journey we embarked on together. Only I knew the destination, but they would discover it for themselves.

The performers approached the work, not by assuming characterization or predetermined attitudes, but with what was spontaneously available and expressive in their own personalities. To maintain this the actions had to feel good to them, yet carry them beyond their own expectations of what was likely or possible, remaining clearly unique in the context of our associations. The performers transformed as well as realized the imagery of the piece. At every stage it was a collage process.

Since all the movements of *Meat Joy* take shape by sequences of bodily contact between the performers, we had to establish trusting and pleasurable feelings among ourselves. It involved what Lee Baxandall (describing his performing experience in Water Light/Water Needle) called "putting ourselves in one another's hands." (Literally and figuratively this was true.) A certain amount of surfacing intellectual and psychological trash had to be cleared for performers to feel free. This would necessitate leading them into actions, physical movements which would in themselves answer questions of feeling and response and relationship—the experiences of the body would re-form/inform their mental stance. Early rehearsals began with wrestling sessions: all eight of us on a small mat going through "exercises" of pinching, poking, rolling, tumbling, and crawling. We did other exercises of catches and carries, jumps and falls in which one person assumed responsibility for the weight, direction, and reactions of another: men to men, women to women, as well as men to women. We disposed of conventions of reserve exploring these modes of contact while concentrating a responsive attentiveness on one another. We conscientiously recognized the relation of muscular response and emotional engagement—handling, feeling, carrying, learning each other's weight, muscular strength, type of gestures, and rhythms in action. While these exercises centered on the entire body, I also made exercises for the hands, working with objects in preparation for the materials of the work to come: we made fish and chicken shapes, stuffing plastic with paper; we juggled, threw, kneaded, tossed, and drew on each other. The

primary focus for all actions was the immediate animate environment, our relation to the immediate present.

It was important to avoid literal explanations of motive or circumstance to the performers. All "motives" grew directly out of their *physical* engagement with each other and our materials. The performers were free to explore a metaphoric scope of vesture as their own embodiment of tactile-kinetic sensation. The areas of actions moved between dream and banality, rooted in our particular present. Presence rather than interpretation. I told the performers: "The focus is never on the self, but on the materials, gestures, and actions which we generate and which involve us. Sense that we become what we see, what we touch. A certain tenderness (or empathy) is pervasive—even to the most violent actions: cutting, chopping, throwing chickens, for instance. Our senses—tactile, visual, aural—should be completely identified with our immediate environment; either in action, or simply sitting and not moving."

Finally, after intensive work on action/reaction spans, use of material, placement, time duration, co-ordination of movements, cue systems, the performers understood the work as a process combining my need to "see" it and their ability to realize it—that the piece belonged to them to enjoy, rummage in, recast. If their actions were unpolished, crude, sometimes amused or bewildered, then that was what they experienced and projected and would be aware of, rather than some imposed attitude outside of what they actually felt and experienced. All mechanical, intellectual, predicable notions of movement and relationship were behind us, and at this point I would vary materials and instructions to sustain a certain tension; to create an off-balance quality to ensure responses which were totally engaged—that is, both spontaneous and accurate. Just *before* the performers were comfortable and secure about procedure I would change sequences and instructions to keep them diverse, complex, and surprising so as to provoke not only the kind but the quality of involvement I wanted.

In *Meat Joy* I needed a natural, uncontrolled flow between physical action and facial expression, and this had to be learned —to work with a natural, unset fact; that they could laugh, grimace, screech, stare blankly, say ouch and even fart or belch.

My original intention was that we perform naked; I visualized the natural bodies in action—clear and present. The bikinis we wore were a reluctant compromise.

Certain parameters of the piece function unchangeably; others vary with each performance. Sequences, light, sound, materials are developed in rehearsal and co-ordinated with one another during each performance. Attitude, gesture, relationships between performers and performers and objects are structured in rehearsal and left to freely evolve in each performance. The fish, chickens, and hot dogs were never used before actual performance. The Paint Attack which occurs at the conclusion of the piece we rehearsed as a projective exercise with brushes, dry sponges, working with ideas of contour, mass, color distribution, and energy impulse being directed by the action of arm and body movements, as in painting.

The idea of using particular popular songs throughout the main sections of the piece was clear to me in the very early stages of co-ordinating fleeting or insistent images and motions. *Meat Joy*, in its over-all rhythmic structure and physical layout is circular in form—cut through by shafts of diagonal, vertical, horizontal movement and action; circular clusters of figures are a recurring element. And the rock-and-roll songs are not only circular in their very disk-spun nature but in their own thematic and rhythmic form. I planned on their regular three-minute durations and to break into the songs and between them with overlapped, faded, and dominating sequences of street sounds (which I intended to tape in Paris): a transposition of the current, permeating sound environment of the two cities—the sound ambiance that would persistently surround and move into my senses as I was making *Meat Joy*.

The popular songs I chose to use were mainly current American ones (with some English, Italian heard in Europe) and whether rock 'n' roll, Mersey sound, or Detroit sound, they formed a motley and rather "funky" selection. Most are full of speed, propulsive rhythms, sexual energy—no wilting, nostalgic, slow vibrato for lost, glimpsed, idealized, future-promised "romance"; songs about "making It"—without sentimental hypocrisy or artificial misery. What the gray ones found shocking and objectionable in The

Sound when it first appeared (and I remember the outrage and moral offensiveness older people felt) was its fervent, emotional intensity (often couched in "secret," metaphorical language or "nonsense" innuendo), explicit sexual vigor, and the movement this released in the new dances—crude, raw, energetic, "ungraceful"—which could involve the entire body—not just fancy footwork or a pattern of stylized leading and following—and which, further, might involve the entire culture.

The Rue de Seine sounds which intercut between each song are composed mostly of the cries and shouts of street vendors who were selling fish, chickens, sausages, vegetables, and flowers under my window—these cries dominate noises of street traffic—cars starting, stopping, honking, screeching—and often resemble bellowing cows, crying birds, humming animals. These noises are rich and strange; they induce a displacement of the sound continuity I have set up—enlarging, confounding the associative range of the songs.

I made a separate score for each aspect of the piece—one, for instance—in which the rock-and-roll Rue de Seine sounds and actions are related to lighting. Within certain areas of agreement the lighting technician and the sound technician were free to improvise, to vary and adapt their "scores" throughout the piece. They followed formal aspects of the piece, but were also responsive to subtle energy changes of both the performers and the audience. As with everyone else involved in the performance, they had to be very carefully attuned to the nature of the choices they were free to make; delicate balances in the over-all relations of the elements could be destroyed by wrong choices.

Each performer also had a "score" for make-up; there were certain colors, tones, and structural effects which I saw for each face. I worked out a make-up for each performer—almost painting the face, but without letting it become precisely like-a-painted-face; finally the performers were encouraged to adapt this further for themselves.

My lighting ideas are always difficult to realize, and I've had to have patient and imaginative lighting technicians to work with. I will know that I want "a muddy light in a pool over here which then turns to diffuse gold . . . in another area something

blue and wet looking and a blast of green turning up over there." I make an elaborate painted light score, with diagrams of possible movement and duration, and then I find out what is actually possible. I've never wanted dramatic or "theatrical" lighting; the color focus must be integral to the work and must be on the performers themselves—that is, not so as to turn them green, but rather to have greenness come from them; not to dramatize a fixed space, but to provide a pacing of color in this particular environment. The lighting in *Meat Joy* was keyed to the larger rhythms of the piece in subtle washes, with concentrations of strong illumination for certain energy clusters, and so as to focus intensities.

There are four black-outs in *Meat Joy,* which I use to compact or shatter a sequence—to concentrate in the eye the sensory effect of actions and gestures usually aiming for a total sensory receptivity on the part of the audience; actions and gestures setting up an intensive demand on visual, aural, and kinetic response. The audience is assaulted with moving lights, colors, textures; shifting directions, lines of actions in space; units of small, contained gestures—any and all of which carry the essential character of the work, which contains them in this compressed time and space. To break this, then, is suddenly to insert a "blank" in which perception is halted, the imagery settling into the mind, fusing, spreading.

The figure described as Serving Maid functions in a way related to the function of the rock-and-roll sounds. She becomes an image of continuity—repeatedly moving in and out of the action to fulfill her banal tasks; her reappearance becomes as predictable or likely as the occurrence of another rock-and-roll song. It is as if this figure and the songs are some skin or envelope which enfold the action. The sound is conceived as almost a drone, with particular songs and particular sections of songs used for an intrusive, disruptive quality (in-gathering aural sense, provoking connections of popular culture and breaking these connections in the context of the pieces action—often ironically, humorously. *i.e.*: "My Boy Lollipop," as the fish, chickens, and hot dogs are thrown onto the fallen performers; "Anyone Who Had A Heart," during the "undressing walk."). The Serving Maid moves flat-

footedly, efficiently, endlessly from task to task—dealing with fantastic refuse, rubbish, props, and then introducing materials matter-of-factly which will unleash the most extraordinary excesses and indulgences on the part of the performers.

I wanted *Meat Joy* to follow the direction which its formative drawings and notes had indicated: to be excessive, indulgent, a flesh celebration with all sorts of materials as extensions of flesh (the fish, chickens, hot dogs, paper-strewn floor, wet paint, transparent plastic, brushes, ropes); a propulsion toward the ecstatic; an emotional range shifting precariously between tenderness, banality, wildness, precision, and abandon—with these qualities so juxtaposed as to be ambiguously mixed—simultaneously comic, disturbing, exhilarating.

These interior processes which have become visions—which have become enacted imagery—assume a receptivity, a viewing response which is also fluid, engaged, open, enlarging; an unlimited possibility for perceptual continuities and juxtapositions in the viewer. I wanted my audience to be an energy complement enclosing and corresponding to the energy stream of performance. I placed the audience as close as possible to the performance area, surrounding it like a skin. My over-all conception is that of a sensory arena. Performance allows me involvement with changing metaphors, including every possibility of sensory ambiguity: the transference of aural to tactile, taste to feel, gesture to taste, shape to gesture to action: an inundation and intensification of sensory information.

Audience reaction to all this can be violently antipathetic: the pleasures of the body in free, energetic motion, erotic physical contact, may be considered "disgusting" or "boring" or an "imposition" or confused with an outright sexual act. On the other hand, and as I hope, the audience may take the action into themselves because it is present, immanent, and "real." Or, they may even become involved with dream/wish material: they may wish that would happen to them some time (they always wanted to be slathered with paint, to roll in piles of papers), they wanted to do that too, they could have imagined all this themselves. (And some, I have even learned, actually find emotional levels set off

in them which lead them to change or enlarge some aspect of their own lives.)

The creation of *Meat Joy* was one way my own energies could be cast against fragmentation, depersonalization, and, in general, inertness, non-sensuousness—both in the theatre and out. I'm pleased when audience response to *Meat Joy* is: "Yes! —life is really like that . . ." For me it is. I'm not interested in "fantasy."

Meat Joy is dedicated to James Tenney.