



**1983. Now!, with Father Peter Jacobs and Carol Hall.**



**1983. West Broadway.**



**1983. Major Ed Koch and Muse.**



**1983. National Studios, Tableau by HA Schult with Leo Castelli, Mary Boone, Bob Rauschenberg.**

# HA Schult and New York City.

the village

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VOL. XXVIII No. 46 THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF NEW YORK NOVEMBER 15, 1983 90c



Trashing the night away: litter as the ultimate urban art experience

By Kim Levin

On the last weekend of October, H. A. Schult staged a lavish weekend-long "action" for a planeload of German collectors, curators, cultural officials, journalists, photographers, TV and radio crews, and other art lovers including a butcher, all transported here as part of the event. I'm not sure if they knew it was Halloween. It involved a 747, four dinky yellow schoolbuses, 48 sleek black limousines, 600,000 pages of *The New York Times*, a grand piano, a Lancia sedan, a sanitation sweeper, and the city itself. It all happened under the unsuspecting nose of the New York artworld: very few people here even suspected it was taking place, much less had any idea of who H. A. Schult is.

H. A. Schult is a German artist of a generation somewhere between Beys and the neo-Expressionists, who a year or so ago moved to New York with his wife Elke Koska—who wears a toy car or a slice of plastic pie as a hat and is a work of art herself. They fell in love with the city and explored it passionately, discovering things most of us never see. They made friends with the firemen at a firehouse in Harlem, and with a priest who runs a boys' school there. They came upon a platform under the Brooklyn Bridge with a postcard perfect view of the Manhattan skyline, and a huge deserted Brooklyn warehouse with a wire mesh elevator and an even better view. H. A. Schult decided to share these "pictures" of New York with his friends—as art.

He had been staging strange conceptual-theatrical events and participatory "actions" since the late '60s. In 1969 he filled a museum in Leverkusen, Germany—a center of the pharmaceutical industry—with live growing bacteria, a weird kind of ecological scatter work. He also filled a Munich street with crumpled newspaper, and ended up in court convincing the judge that art was as important as the local obsession with cleanliness. By 1976 he was filling the whole Piazza San Marco in Venice with newspaper, with the cooperation of the mayor, the bishop, and the chief of police. "He wants to put the poem of our time in the piazza," innocently explained Elke, who does the organizational work.

How could they refuse? It was a spectacular gesture, an urban earthwork of litter and waste—the other side of consumerism—but we never even heard about it here. Our tradition at the time was the artist-worker in hardhat and overalls, supervising bigger-than-life Tonka trucks in the desert. This European mixture of Conceptualism,

Earthwork, Performance Art, old-fashioned Happening, and grandiose theatricality, had a totally foreign sensibility that was more concerned with making a spectacular symbolic gesture in the world than with escaping from the artworld. Think of Christo or Yves Klein as opposed to Smithson, our native son. Orchestrating a stupendous venture, being a showman rather than a workman, had an element of the ridiculous that often undermined it in American eyes. Manipulating media and public was, until recently anyway, suspect here.

H. A. Schult believes garbage is the invention of our era, the true subject of the modern world. After all, the collage aesthetic depends upon throwaway bits juxtaposed, like Schwitters' Merzbau. Schult has a point: disposability is the core of modernity. Les Levine said it too. Conspicuous consumption is at the heart of our culture. Easy come, easy go. Mobility relates to this too: he also did pieces in Germany using cars, and tour buses full of greenery that transported participants to events such as a concert on a garbage dump or an amphitheater full of wrecked cars and refrigerators.

Art that can't be contained in a frame, bought, or hung is unfashionable right now. Schult's "Now!" was billed as "a psychological trip into the presence of New York." In other words, a guided tour for the cream of the German artworld—through the eyes of a German artist living here, staging the whole thing as a sort of paracultural post-Pop *gesamtkunstwerk*—or total artwork. It was also a thoroughly out-of-date mode of art brought up to date—an elaborate three-ring Happening for the '80s. The underlying theme was wealth, waste, and contrasts between luxury and poverty, glamour and trash. It was also, on several ambiguous levels, a comment on elitism and privilege. It cost half a million dollars.

It was financed privately, partly by sales of the artist's "picture boxes" (symbolic 3-D cityscape collages colored by anaerobic bacteria) and partly by the 80 or so European participants, most of whom paid \$3,000 for the privilege of being part of an artwork—and for an unusual weekend in "the capital of the 20th century." Given a choice of staying at the Chelsea or the Plaza, the wealthiest chose the Chelsea, where they were greeted with polybeers, soft drinks, and plastic flowers. Those less used to luxury and "who didn't want to give up their luxes" opted for the Plaza, where champagne and real flowers awaited them.

They were all bused to Harlem in the yellow schoolbuses to eat a fireman's workday meal on paper plates in the firehouse on Friday, and feted at a black candlelight banquet for 200 with cysters and other high-class people in the rough empty warehouse Saturday. From Harlem at midnight the first night they were taken to the base of the Brooklyn Bridge, where a shiny black Steinway awaited them, along with a portly pianist and a tuxedoed tenor who sang lieders, accompanied by the humming bridge overhead. After the banquet the second night, and a desert of rich chocolate cake and five breakers from the South Bronx performing on the warehouse floor, they were whisked in a long line of limousines to another secret location to view "the picture of the night." This turned out to be Washington Street, being filled with crumpled newspapers—600,000 pages of *The New York Times*—by the boys from Father Peter Jacob's high school in Harlem.

They also breakfasted at Burger King, had two-minute tours of the Vogel's art collection ("the Vogel's became a piece of art"), saw graffiti in the subway, and blitzed through Soho. H. A. Schult, looking like a cherubic ringmaster, acted as genial tourguide throughout; as he had, it seems, on the flight over. "Hir beginnen Schwartzem Harlem," he announced over a loudspeaker as the schoolbuses passed 110th Street on Lenox. "Das is die hauptstrasse von Harlem," he said at 125th. "No lights, no lights," insisted a security guard on the bus, so the quartz lights went out and the German TV crew filmed in the dark. The Germans stared



A warehouse by candlelight

out at the source of their fantasies of Black America with wonder. The people in the streets stared back, hid their faces, or made hex signs. It was a pretty uncomfortable experience. This is the worst spot in the world," muttered the nervous security guard. "He's got to be out of his fucking mind."

Most of the Americans invited to attend the banquet seemed more interested in the food than the art event afterward. One wealthy collector left in a huff in the middle of dinner, muttering that the Germans at her table were stealing her meat from the fondue pot. Holly Solomon refused to ride to Brooklyn in a school bus and rented her own limousine. "It's a night out," shrugged critic Donald Kuspit. But the visitors trooped through the paper like kids who had never seen snow before, kicking at it in order to experience it fully, while the kids from Harlem charged purposefully down the street, spreading paper as they went. "A good artist, very efficient," approved a man with a monocle. By morning the "river of paper" was several blocks long and knee deep, a vista punctuated by the world trade towers, symbol of capitalism, at the end of the street.

There was a third "action" Sunday, which I missed. Called "The Cathedral," it took place at the Gansvoort sanitation depot on West Street, where ships are loaded with garbage. In the center of the garbage hall was a car that had once belonged to Pope John Paul I, and I'm told that the strains of a Haydn symphony wafted through the space. Father Jacob spoke movingly about how the car came to be a work of art by H. A. Schult, and a street cleaning machine (no doubt previously trained by Mierle Laderman Ukeles) danced around him. It was very moving, I'm told, people wept.

For sheer size and ambition, high spirits and outerness, this three-day litter-day Happening was definitely an event. It was political, poetical, populist in intent, disturbingly classicist in effect, and comically absurd. It was a bizarre combination of trite symbols and glorious visual spectacles. It was also, perhaps first and foremost, a media event. On Monday, all of West Germany's 12 radio stations would have coverage of it. By Tuesday, a one-hour special would be beamed via satellite to German TV. And as for photographic documentation, the flash bulbs popped nonstop. It must have been the most photographed event since Beys opened at the Guggenheim. Everyone who participated became an instant celebrity. It's the ultimate Euro-American Happening of the '80s is *The Grand Tour*—the artist as ideal travel agent and entrepreneur, speculators part of the picture, watching themselves on TV the day after they return home—what does that portend in this age of instant information? I'm not sure how many participants got the point. I'm not sure what extent H. A. Schult knew what he was doing, but it was a vision of New York as alien as the one in *Liquid Sky*.

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