
Over His Dead Body

The following article appeared in *The Village Voice* of March 28, 1968. It was written by Jill Johnston, whose permission to reprint it here we acknowledge with thanks.

I was privileged to be present Friday night, March 21, at Judson Church, at the most unusual manifestation of a performer-audience situation I have witnessed in a decade of attending a theatre in which the performer-audience relationship has been pushed in every conceivable direction. Unusual is a mild word for it. It was a kind of psychological trauma involving two principals and the rest of us in a spontaneous drama expressing the agony and the comedy of the condition called human. The occasion was the Destruction in Art Symposium preceded by Destruction events in Judson's back yard.

The atmosphere in the yard was a bit like a bazaar—the spectators milling around passing from one set-up to another: an excerpt from Hermann Nitsch's Orgy-Mystery theatre; Lil Picard with plastic bags full of feathers set to flaming on a charcoal burner; Steve Rose standing by a frying pan on a hot plate cooking an orange and a banana; Bici Hendricks handing out ice picks to anyone wishing to hack at a large vertical hunk of ice surrounded by raw eggs. Preparation for Ralph Ortiz's chicken-killing event was the first presentiment of a rumble nobody expected. The two live chickens were strung up from trees several yards apart. John Wilcock calmly cut the chickens down and, assisted by Michael Kirby, made off with them to an adjoining yard to release them over a high fence. Ortiz later said he was delighted the chickens were rescued. He accepted the frustration of his plans as a worthwhile event in itself and reprogrammed himself by subsequently attacking the two trees (he climbed one, Jon Hendricks the other), sawing a limb off each one after a preparation (pouring) of the cow's blood originally to have been part of the chicken scene.

The attitude Ortiz assumed about the interference in his thing became relevant to the amazing drama that ensued inside at a scheduled

panel of the artists involved. A soap-box orator from the yard, whose hysterical blather was punctuated by a few brilliant remarks, threatened to dominate proceedings in the lecture-room. Hendricks, Ortiz, and [Al] Hansen accepted him without relinquishing their own purpose and somehow finally integrated him in the total situation.

Hendricks announced a performance by Charlotte Moorman of Nam June Paik's *One for Violin*, a piece dating from 1961. I knew the piece from Paik's performance of it in 1964 at a Fluxus concert. In a rather disorderly atmosphere Miss Moorman assumed the appropriate concentration and a courteous hush fell over the room. The piece entails the destruction of a violin after a long preliminary passage in which the performer raises the instrument in slow motion from a position at right angles to the waist to a position over the head in readiness to smash the thing on impact with a table.

Miss Moorman got maybe one minute into the act when a man from the back tried to stop her. She dispatched him with a push and resumed the performance. Another more determined spectator approached the table and the war was on. Charlotte was angry. She demanded to know who he was (translated: who the hell do you think you are?). He said he didn't want her to break the violin. "By breaking the violin," he said, "you're doing the same thing as killing people." And something about giving it to a poor kid who could use it. Attempting to go with the piece she said, "this is not a vaudeville routine" and "this is not an audience-participation piece." But he persisted and I think Charlotte slapped his face and suddenly there was a tragedy in the making and shock-waves in the air and terrific agitation all around. Someone suggested he give her his coat in exchange for the violin. He removed his coat but she wouldn't have any of it. I was inspired by this suggestion and found myself hollering in the din: GIVE IT TO HIM. Charlotte accused her intruder of being as bad as the New York police. He announced that "we are sitting down and refusing to allow this violin to be broken." He forthwith stretched himself out on his back on the table in front of her. As Ortiz said later—she had to over his dead body. It happened very fast and there are probably as many versions of the climax as the number of people who were there. As I saw it, Charlotte's tormentor sat up and was sitting on the edge of the table and at some moment turned to face her at which point with malice aforethought she bashed him on the head with the violin and the blood was spilled.

PHOTO NOT
AVAILABLE

Charlotte Moorman, Jon Hendricks (center), and Saul Gottlieb argue during the performance of Nam June Paik's One For Violin. Copyright © 1968 by Fred W. McDarrah. Reprinted by permission.

My description can't do justice to this extraordinary situation. The ramifications are extensive. It wasn't so much who was right or wrong (I thought, if pressed, both were right and wrong), but what might have been done to avert the inevitable. That seems the ultimate political question so brilliantly posed by this little war right in the ranks of those so violently opposed to the war at the top.

The victim introduced himself as Saul Gottlieb. Charlotte was contrite and ministered to his wound. She explained the point of the piece is to show that we think nothing of killing people in Vietnam and we place a higher order on a violin. She said she didn't mean to hit him but he was in her performance area. Speaking of the therapeutic value of such actions Ortiz said Charlotte was trying to displace her hostility onto an inanimate object and Gottlieb wouldn't let her do that. Our soap-box man said that if "we the people want to come into the government" (represented here as artists) "we should be able to." He also told Gottlieb he was sick because he stood there and let her hit him with his back turned. Gottlieb said

that Charlotte was determined to break the violin regardless of what happened and was unable to deprogram herself.

The adjustment Ortiz made in his chicken event became instructive. What were Charlotte's alternatives in the face of being robbed of her artist thing? Blowing her cool she was left with a literal destruction. The irony of a symbol converted into a reality. Yet why didn't Gottlieb honor her appeal for attention? "I request the honor of your presence at ... ," etc. At what? At the daily level, let's say, how we take turns in a conversation piece.

Many more things were said at the Judson gathering. The last thing I saw was a touching demonstration by Steve Rose of a simple exchange based on respect. He requested the indulgence of his audience in a piece he wished to perform. He said it would begin when he finished talking and it would end when he sat down. He stood as he was and looked round slowly at the people there gathered, with some slight perplexity, I thought. And that was the piece. And the audience expressed their appreciation at a point well taken.