

# Performance Art: The Kipper Kids

**P**ERFORMANCE art has always lurked in an eccentric netherworld, at least insofar as mainstream journalism is concerned — partly because it's still new and partly because it causes terminal interdepartmental confusion as to what sort of critic should cover it in the first place. Still, performance artists seem to revel in their underground neglect, and a lack of attention has hardly hindered their proliferation.

This weekend the Kitchen held something of a minifestival of performing artists. There were Anne Bean and John McKeon and the Kipper Kids from England, both in their New York debuts, and the Western Front Society from Vancouver. Of these, the best known are probably the Kipper Kids, who appeared Friday and Saturday evenings; this intrepid reporter caught the Saturday show.

Performance art is closest to theater, but it differs from conventional

theater not only in its happy willingness to make use of any medium at hand, but also in its genesis out of the world of the visual arts. Like much interesting new music of the late 1960's and 1970's, this kind of work comes from artists or art schools and finds a home in galleries and museums rather than theaters or concert halls.

But given the fascination that SoHo artists of all stripes (and their equivalents worldwide) show for one another's work, Saturday's audience was a provocative mixture of performance artists, poets, video artists, composers, punk rockers and all-purpose scruffy trendies.

The Kipper Kids consist of two men who call themselves Harry Kipper and Harry Kipper, one born in England in 1948, and one in Buenos Aires in 1949. They have performed in a number of avant-garde and fashionable spots in London (including a Rolling Stones concert) and in California. On Saturday they appeared dressed in colored jockstraps and commedia dell'arte

makeup with false noses and white-face. Their 45-minute routine consisted of a series of deliberately silly skits and rudimentary musical numbers, full of infantile games (pouring paint on each other for the grand finale) and gravely elaborate rituals.

The antecedents for their work are many. There were earlier British performance artists like Gilbert and George, of course. But also satyr-plays and medieval cavortings, lower-class scenes from Shakespearean plays, British music-hall comedy, the Goon Show, Monty Python and the more witty manifestations of punk rock.

Whether it was all really funny is another question. Many in the audience seemed to find it so, but a good many others (and remember, this was an in-crowd all the way) walked out. If you have a taste for low-comedy vaudeville that suggests the decline of the British Empire as enacted by a kindergarten class, then the Kipper Kids may well be for you.

JOHN ROCKWELL