

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

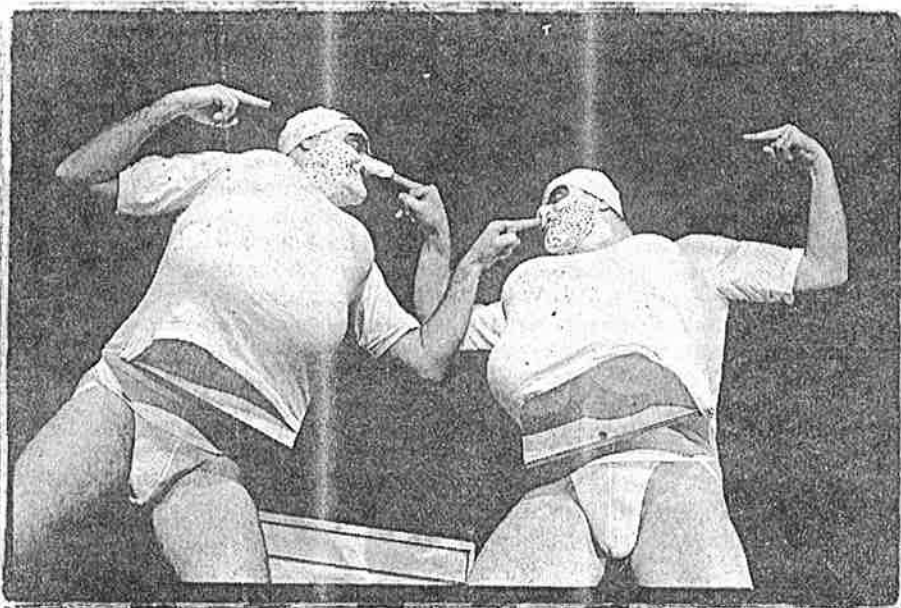
PERFORMANCE

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PAULA COURT

The Kipper Kids: content to do everything and say nothing

The Matter With Kids

BY GORDON ROGOFF

VOICE

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The Kipper Kids were singing music hall numbers in the Men's for a capacity crowd of cameras and mikes. Out in the hallway, I could hear a hearty chorus of "Roamin' in the Gloamin'." I could see the harlequin faces of Harry and Harry on two video monitors. As always, the two Kippers were dressed in shower caps and whiteface, huge noses and thrusting chins, painted stubble and raccoon eyes, but each wore a tire with rope suspenders over the usual jockstrap. This was for HBO, after all, not the Kitchen (where they're appearing this week). Perhaps it was some silly bid for decency. The Kipper Kid is now a character in transition—about to cross over. So hope the Harrys.

But these are still two giant, beefy, baby boys, two pubcrawlers from hell, two pugnacious blokes who combine the no-nos you learn not to do (like smearing food) with the manners that take their place ("nice cup o' tea"). So the Kids in the loo prepared for one of their ritual food fights, incorporating that tension—let's make a mess, but let's be precise about it. Wind the arm carefully to—splat!—smack an egg on the other's noggin. Circle slowly, menacingly—while singing. And dump flour on the geezer. Time that can of Spaghettios, the cranberry aspic, the Corona bottles full of blue or magenta paint.

"Well, it's not everybody's cuppa... raspberries," says a technician watching another monitor in the control room, where the film is rolling. The two Harrys were experiencing uniquely Kipperish difficulties with their finale: the firecrackers kept sinking before they could blow up in the shaving cream atop the Kids' heads. No doubt this had been the hardest food fight of their lives, full of interruptions. On stage they never stopped for anything.

For years, particularly in the late '70s, the Kipper Kids were plenty of people's "cuppa"—in the world of performance art, anyway. They were a legendary Punch and Punch show, gross, hilarious, dangerous, and bawdy. In early pieces done throughout Europe, they performed in a boxing ring, starting silly, taking foodstuffs from suitcases or rigging them up with pulleys, doing their ceremonies, drinking about a quart of whiskey per show, building toward the violent climax when one Kipper would punch himself in the face till he bled. After they dropped the fight finale later in the '70s, they

maintained a certain threshold of outrage with scatological jokes (rubbing each other's asses with chocolate) and penis jokes (biting off a pickle as they exposed their cocks and sang "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend"). They always managed to create an ambience of latent violence.

In a monograph published in 1979, curator David Ross of the Berkeley Museum of Art described their work as "actions that at times stress the visual, the visceral, and the violent aspects of social rituals. . . ." The Kipper Kids, whose real names are Martin von Haselberg and Brian Routh, say their work doesn't mean anything. They say they have no statement to make. In a way, the pieces are about the simple relationship between Harry and Harry, eggin' each other on, being bad to/for/with each other. "The Kipper Kid is the part of the personality that does away with all that conventionality," said Brian.

The Kippers-to-be met at East 15 Acting School in London in 1970—Brian, the working-class guy from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and Martin, the aristocratic scion from Germany by way of Argentina. Quickly they became disruptive influences together, and the school ejected them. They went to Germany. "We know the exact moment in time when the Kipper Kid was born," Martin said. "It was about 5 o'clock in the morning in Frankfurt near the railway station, and we were just sort of fooling around in the street with these English working-class accents that we do, joking and pulling faces and posturing, when the Kipper Kid suddenly formed."

They couldn't remember which one of them spontaneously said, "We're our mum's best kipper kids." They couldn't describe how it felt when they realized they were inhabiting the same character. It's like being twins, they say. Twins joined at the name. For almost a year afterwards, they traveled around Germany and then to Paris, incessantly doing the character, *talking* about doing the character, and again doing the character—on the street or kippering down the autobahn "larger than life" and leaving a trail of in-jokes and snorts and pokes and farts behind them.

"We couldn't stop it," said Brian.

"It used to actually get on our nerves because anything would trigger it off," said Martin. "It was like being 'on' without particularly wanting to be 'on.'"

At first, they didn't realize they'd become Performance Artists. But when a friend invited them to play a festival, they decided to "just put the Kipper Kid into a situation." Soon after, they got

themselves invited to the Olympic Arts Festival in Munich by submitting some fake press clips. And the rest is hysteria. From '71 to '75 they lived together. For a couple of those years, they were constantly on tour, driving around Europe in an old German post office van, often living daily life as a Kipper. "We wouldn't be where we are now if we hadn't done that then," Martin said. "We still have the momentum from that time."

In an age like ours, when people are assaulted daily by the most monstrous things without being able to keep account of their impressions . . . all living art will be irrational, primitive, complex: it will speak a secret language and leave behind documents not of edification but of paradox.

—Hugo Ball, Dada performer/provocateur, 1915

The Kippers performed together very little in the '80s. Martin, in Los Angeles, did the occasional "half a Kipper Kids show" and a couple of "Gong Show" appearances. Brian, in New York, did "verbal stuff" at clubs like 8BC and Chandelier, often sharing a bill with performance artist Karen Finley, to whom he was then married. Brian always billed himself "Harry Kipper." As did Martin. Martin says he finally felt "free of the yoke of the Kipper Kids" about a year and a half ago, just before he started working with Brian again. The Kipper Kids are bigger than both of them, not unlike other teams, from Laurel & Hardy to Gilbert & George, who became something more than the sum of their parts, as if the interaction itself were a third presence.

When I spoke to the Kipper Kids in September in their Los Angeles studio, they were weeks away from their first show in years. From a window they pointed to a former beauty-supply shop, now burned-out and roofless, which would be their performance site. They were planning to saw their way out of a box, emerge in silly costumes, sing tunes with ukelele and soprano sax, and do some "messy and energized" ceremony atop the box. Piled in the rehearsal area were suitcases and the usual groceries. The crusty old Scout uniforms they wore back in the '70s for a three-month Munich gig decorated a wall, still stiff with food and blood.

"We're not out to be dangerous anymore," said Brian.

"We've become sort of middle-aged and sedentary," said Martin.

"We got as far as we could go at that

Continued from preceding page level, and now it's time for us to go further," said Brian.

"Performance art is dead anyway," said Martin.

They want to make Kipper Kid movies and enter the mainstream. And that pressured trajectory was much on their minds as they planned the L.A. show. (Do you still rub chocolate pudding on each other's asses if a producer is coming?) "We don't want to ruin our potential careers, but on the other hand, we don't want to make any compromises," said Martin. In the HBO special, now titled "Bette Midler's Mondo Beyondo" and scheduled to air March 19, the Kippers are certainly the most beyondo in a cast that includes David Cale, Pat Oleszko, Paul Zaloom, Bill Irwin, Luke Craswell, La La La Human Steps, and Bette Midler. Martin is married to Bette Midler.

For that reason, he figured, some people would be coming to see the Kipper Kids who would have never seen the like. "I think that a lot of them are going to be pretty horrified, and it's quite possible that my wife will also be . . . uh, hopefully, she won't feel disgraced when she really finds out what I do."

The Variety Theatre destroys the Solemn, the Sacred, the Serious, and the Sublime in Art with a capital A.

—F. T. Marinetti, Futurist performer/provocateur, 1913

What the Kippers do is related to a most ancient and popular form of theater—the carnival, the dizzying, vulgar, Rabelaisian "fayre," where every propriety went topsy-turvy. Reading a while back in a book called *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, I came upon a description of the "grotesque body" that carnival celebrates: a body defined by impurity, masking, protruberant distension, disproportion, clamor, a focus upon gaps, orifices, and symbolic filth, physical needs



The Kippers get slimed in 1979: but can they wear it into the mainstream?

and pleasures of the lower body, parody. . . . T'would seem to describe a Kipper Kid.

Since medieval carnivals grew out of earlier Dionysian rites, it isn't surprising that the Kippers feel an affinity for the performance artists of the Viennese Actionism group—notably Hermann Nitsch, who has consciously re-created such rites since the '60s. They've participated in at least one of his gory rituals, in which, typically, naked humans are covered with the blood and viscera of dead animals. Nitsch believes these performances result in catharsis for the spectators, an exorcism of repressed violence.

In comparison, the Kippers' work is a vaudeville act, if a perverse one. Vaudeville (in England, the music hall or "variety theater") is what carnival came to be in more prettified times, and they share some of the same bizarre acts—Armless Wonders, Human Blockheads, Singing Mice. Both Harry Kippers love music hall. And their character is certainly a clown, not of the benign floppy-shoed variety or the melancholy Chaplinesque, but a coarse and knowing clown, whose costume and affect give him permission to be rude, excessive, and unpredictable. His act might spill, literally, into our laps. Critic Kay Larson once observed that the Kippers perform an "exorcism by anger." Or perhaps by fear.

The Kippers say they don't feel influenced by anyone in the art world. (For example, they started kippering before they ever heard of Nitsch.) "That's not to say we don't greatly appreciate the work," Martin said, "particularly, of Gilbert & George and all the Viennese people and Allen Kaprow. If anything, we're really much more theatrical and juicy, and just somehow strayed into the art world without any particular intention to do so."

There they found an appreciative and

relatively unshockable audience. But then, carnival is the subtext to each new bohemia, which has to consort with the "low" almost on principle. In one of his umpteen manifestos, for example, F. T. Marinetti praised the Variety Theater as the "only theatrical entertainment worthy of the true Futurist spirit." Futurist productions often included clowns and acrobats.

A case can be made for dating the avant-garde from 1896, when the clownish and horrific Ubu character uttered the word "Merdre" ("shit") and sparked a near riot. Today we say ho hum to that word, which only proves that it's possible to train an audience. Certainly audience tastes have changed in a mass culture that now includes the likes of Pee Wee Herman and The Fat Boys. The Kippers had already dipped a toe in the mainstream during the '70s. Nearly got booked onto *Saturday Night Live*. They opened once for The Bay City Rollers, once for Public Image—the whole gamut of pop, right? But someone wasn't quite ready for crossover then. Maybe them. Maybe us.

The fact is that as the avant-garde disintegrated, the mainstream got quirki-er. We now have a mass bohemia, antennae up for the Next Big Thing. The Kippers aren't the first, won't be the last, to slip over the now-fluid boundary between art and entertainment. But they're so much more outrageous than, say, Spalding Gray or Ann Magnuson or any of the New Vaudevillians, that I for one feel a twinge of anxiety—or loss—when I hear they've just signed a deal with Cinemax for a half-hour narrative film.

I think it's the anxiety you experience when the boundary breaks. More of that "center will no' hold" business. What was once center flirts to the edge, and vice versa. Everything flattens. And the freaks aren't happy in the sideshow anymore. ■

The Kipper Kids are performing at the Kitchen February 3 through 6.