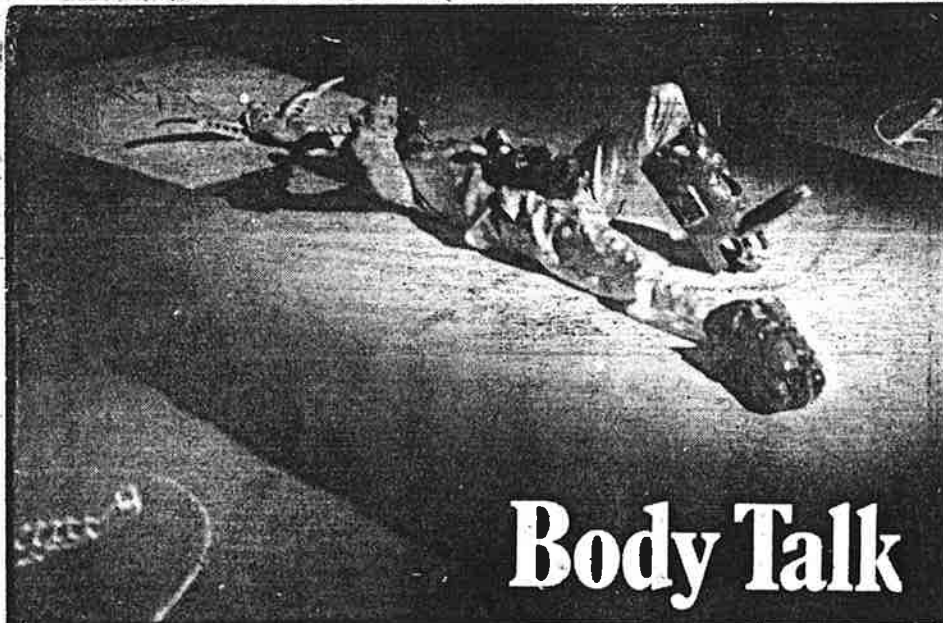


# THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR  
VIDEO, MUSIC,  
DANCE AND  
PERFORMANCE

Village Voice, April 19, 1983



MICKEY MATHIS

## Body Talk

Luigi Ontani

By Sally Banes

... **BAL'OCCHI...** A performance by Luigi Ontani. The Kitchen, 484 Broome Street, 925-3615 (March 30).

**THIS IS MY BODY.** A performance by Cheri Gaulke. Co-sponsored by Franklin Furnace and White Dog Studio, 54 White Street, 925-4671 (April 7).

Human presence is the crux of performance art; the human body is presence. Both Ontani's and Gaulke's works centered on the meaning of that mysterious, inescapable, polysemous entity—the body. But unlike much body art of the '70s, these performances were not intended to demystify corporeality by, for instance, making physical demands on the performer, or presenting physical feats in a matter-of-fact way. Rather, both Ontani and Gaulke used their bodies as the foundation—in a literal sense—on which to construct a set of metaphors about physicality. It was not the body itself, but ideas about the body their performances displayed.

After nearly half an hour's wait in a crowded vestibule, the audience was admitted to Ontani's tableau vivant. He lay on a circular ground, its borders marked with rocks. His body was covered with Balinese masks. One was on his face, a long-nosed red visage with lips that clacked with the regularity of a metronome. But the rest were on less conventional sites. A foot and calf were covered by another red mask that was half boot, half house. Another foot became the pale face of a creature that seemed like a water nymph. Ontani's breathing animated the mask that covered his belly and extended downward to act as a codpiece.

On two opposite sides of the room, enormous slide projections showed two identical eyes in black and white; the reflections of light in their gigantic pupils took on the shape of a room with windows. Smaller slide projections circled the

outspread figure on the floor and embellished each white column flanking the central tableau. These images changed every few seconds, showing delicate drawings of figures and emblems, often expanding the symbolism of the masks. After about 10 minutes, the slides ended, the lights went out, and the performance ended.

Ontani's performance was intriguing even though it was flawed. Some of the problems had to do with its presentation. There were no chairs in the room, yet most viewers sat down on the rim of the circle. But since the tableau was both stationary and circular, the seated audience could get only a partial view. Yet it was impossible, for those of us who wanted to circumambulate, to get close enough to the slide projections to incorporate their significance into the whole piece. Perhaps the piece should have been scheduled as an installation, with fewer people viewing it at one time, and encouraged to walk around and through it. The imagery of the masks was powerfully suggestive, recalling the odd, symbolic disguises of certain Italian Renaissance parades, entries, and ballets. Yet it needed to be buttressed by systems of imagery more assertive than the flowery drawings—physical action, perhaps or competing sets of masks—in order to develop its complex metaphor of the body as house/window/eye/image. In fact, the title, a series of puns on the Italian words for eye, dance, toy, and pretty (and, perhaps, Bali), suggests that antic movement could have enriched the associations.

Gaulke's piece was a series of eight tableaux. Four wooden shelves were attached to a white wall, roughly forming a cross. With the help of a ladder and a hooded assistant, Gaulke in different states of dress and undress climbed onto the shelves, to fit into a series of images projected on the wall with slides. Title slides with quotations from the Bible and from feminist literature and a taped score of autobiographical and other readings as

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