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—Kirkus Reviews

TWO PERFORMANCE ARTISTS

KIDNAP THEIR BOSS
AND DO THINGS WITH HIM

A NOVEL BY
SCOTCH WICHMANN



**TWO
PERFORMANCE
ARTISTS
KIDNAP THEIR BOSS
AND DO THINGS WITH HIM**

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Two Performance Artists Kidnap Their Boss And Do Things With Him
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This novel is a work of fiction. Its characterizations do not portray actual people, companies, products, or events.

CHAPTER 1

AN EVENING OF PERFORMANCE ART usually began with a pack of intrepid performers renting out an art gallery for a night in San Francisco's seedy Tenderloin district. They'd whitewash the gallery walls to cover up the bits of dirt, paint, fat, or blood left behind by the last show, tape up posters around town advertising an evening of unrivaled avant-garde acts, and then, on opening night, stand proudly at the door to collect a dollar from each patron for admission—and shoo away the winos who showed up to guzzle the free booze that flowed when it was all over.

Audiences were fickle. After years of watching performance artists scream, hurl, shimmy, and screw, crowds could quickly discern cliché from innovative material; they could sniff out the frauds from the talent, and were unforgiving if a piece stank. It wasn't uncommon for an audience to interrupt a show with a jaded barrage of catcalls, flying fruit, and sometimes, fists.

It was November. Rain pounded outside. I shifted in my chair beside a hundred other spectators in a bright white art gallery that reeked of fresh paint, our parkas and umbrellas dripping in the humid air.

The spotlights dimmed. I settled back into my seat.

A performer walks to the center of the floor. He's tall and thin in a black turtleneck and beret. He looks like a poet.

I frown. Occasionally, some joker tries to pass off poetry as performance art. I sigh, but decide to give him a chance. Maybe he'll remove his beret and spit in it—at least that wouldn't be poetry. Come on, man, dazzle us!

The man pulls out a piece of paper and begins reading. His voice is monotone.

It's a Kerouac poem.

I shift in my seat. What the hell is this?

Minutes pass. The poem goes on and on. People in the audience shuffle. I start to sweat. How dare he stand in front of a performance art crowd and read beat poetry in a floppy beret!

After five minutes I jumped up and threw my chair at him. It broke the performer's nose. Blood spattered on the whitewashed walls.

The audience applauded. Finally, there was something to look at.

Kerouac always left me nauseous. I headed for the men's room.

I opened the restroom door. A man was sitting on the tile floor, sobbing. He was skinny with a raggedy mop of hair, bellbottoms, and red cowboy boots. Tears rolled down his face as he scribbled line after line of text on the white bathroom wall in tiny letters with a black permanent marker in each hand. The pens squeaked with every stroke, so with both hands moving, the noise was tremendous.

"You must be a terror alone in bed with those hands," I said.

The man said nothing. The pens squeaked harder.

"What are you writing?" I asked.

“MY MANIFESTO,” he cried, “AND I HOPE THAT KEROUAC RIP-OFF SEES IT!”

I stepped closer and read from the top:

PERFORMANCE ART MANIFESTO

Performance Art should not be confused with the performing arts, namely drama, dance, comedy, circus, or music. Performance Art has its own distinct history that began in the 1950s when civil unrest and the remains of Surrealism and Dada merged with the desire of radical artists to turn the commodity art establishment on its money-grubbing head. Artists began staging Happenings—today called Performance Art—which amounted to informal gatherings where spectators went to watch an artist do something, and each “performance” was considered art simply because the performer said so.

And so, given its unique history, it’s no surprise that Performance Art accumulated its own language, its own rules, and its own clichés that are different from those of other art forms. It is, for example, a Performance Art cliché to throw dishes

against a wall. It is a cliché for a woman to sit on a stage and invite audience members to come up and rip off pieces of her dress while she sings opera and pulls turnips out of her buttocks. It is a cliché to slap oneself silly and wail about how Daddy spent his evenings in the living room snorting lines. It is a cliché to shoot one's friend in the arm or leg, or nail oneself to the back of a Volkswagen. Didactic Performance Art manifestoes like this one are clichés also. All of these things have been done and redone by imitators; thus, imagination and invention are the rare marks of true Performance Art. Reading poetry at an evening of Performance Art is not a cliché—it's just stupid.

"That's beautiful, man," I said. "What's your name?"

"Hank," the man sniffled.

"I'm Larry," I said. "So what else do you do besides watch performance art and write manifestoes?"

"I program computers," said Hank.

"No shit? So do I!" I said.

Hank sputtered a little laugh and wiped his nose. I studied his face, and then his head.

Phrenology—the study of head shapes—was codified in the late 1700s by Franz Joseph Gall, an Austrian physiologist who believed that a person’s race, psychological tendencies, latent intentions, and future fate could be known by examining the shape of his or her skull. Gall’s science was abused over the years as a profiling tool, first by Viennese quacks, then later by the Nazis, but Victorian showmen did well by it, adding it to their palmistry, fat lady, and snake oil acts that traveled in wagon caravans across England and North America in the nineteenth century.

Ringed by carnival tents, folk musicians, and sword swallows, the phrenologist talked up the supernatural and medicinal benefits of his art with pomp and circumstance until the crowds that had flocked from nearby towns were begging to have their heads read. A student of psychology, astrology, telepathy, scatoscopy, necromancy, and numerous other mystery sciences, the phrenologist would take off his top hat, twirl his handlebar mustache, roll up his sleeves, and take their money fast, rubbing his hands over their skulls, feeling their warts, their bumps, their scalps, eye sockets, brows, noses. Despite the hoopla, phrenologists’ cranial

divination was terrifyingly accurate; they had the power to see inside people's heads.

Seeing inside a man's head isn't easy—it requires steady nerves and a detailed mental topography of the subject's facial features, but I certainly had the genes for it. I'd inherited the skill from my father, who'd inherited it from his father, who'd inherited it from my great-great-grandfather, who'd run a traveling show out of Kentucky called Professor John's Medicine Show which featured jugglers, tattooed nymphs, and The Mystery Man from Virginia. So it was with some authority that I could say that anyone with a decent phrenological eye would have taken one look at Hank's head and concluded that he fell somewhere between high-strung and sheer lunacy. First there was his skull's overall shape: rectangular and long, suggesting intellect and extreme creativity, but with a proneness to unhinged manic flights. A tall forehead descended to a classic Cro-Magnon brow, symptomatic of sexual anemia and a tendency toward jealousy. Thin lips on an oversized muzzle signaled narcissism, cyclical depression, and various impulse-control disorders. A blocky-toothed overbite betrayed wanton co-dependency. Miniature feline ears warned of epileptic seizures. And

then there were the eyes: colossal, forward-set orbital sockets under a permanently furrowed brow that hinted at protracted bouts of nihilism, depersonalization disorder, hysteria, pubic fungi, constipation, acne, hemorrhoids, acrophobia, and crying.

The man was obviously a genius.

“THIS is really what I should be doing,” he whispered, caressing his manifesto. “Performance art. I have a lot of ideas—”

“I’ve always wanted to do a performance with roller-skates,” I offered.

“Or meat,” said Hank.

“Or both,” I said.

Smiles slid across our faces.

And that was how we started.

CHAPTER 2

HANK AND I BOTH LIVED in the Tenderloin, San Francisco's decrepit maze of rat-infested alleys, litter-strewn streets, low-rent flophouses, strip joints, and massage parlors. Overrun by passed-out bums, toothless whores, pickpockets, two-bit dealers, and psych-ward escapees, the hilly neighborhood had been named in the 1920s by cops who'd gotten fat on bribes from the Loin's pimps and hustlers; if you were on the take, it was a choice cut of meat.

In a breath, the Tenderloin was San Francisco's cheap seats. If you wanted angel dust, acid, or smack, you went to the Loin. If you wanted a bar with a jukebox and

jug wine for a buck, you'd find them there. Straight, gay, or transvestite hooker? He, she, or he-she was there. Alleys reeking of vomit and piss? There. Scads of mentally ill who defecated on the sidewalk while panhandling you five blocks straight before pausing to retrieve a flattened cigarette butt from the gutter that could be re-lit for a short-lived-but-pleasurable smoke? They were there too.

Sherry, Hank's wife, didn't believe two computer programmers could randomly run into each other in a restroom at a performance art gallery in the Tenderloin. It was too coincidental . . . it was suspicious . . . and it didn't help that the Loin was San Francisco's hotbed of underground gay action.

One night Hank invited me over to dinner.

I walked to their apartment on O'Farrell Street. The building was a tall wooden Victorian job, dingy gray and spitting splinters with rusty fire escapes, broken windows, and graffiti.

I rang the buzzer. Sherry came down and opened the lobby door. She was a bony blonde with long legs and crooked teeth. A half-empty wine bottle dangled from her hand.

"Hi, I'm Larry," I said.

“You’re the one who’s going to perform with my husband,” she said flatly, taking a slug of wine.

“I—yes.”

“With meat,” Sherry snapped.

“And roller-skates,” I said, forcing a smile.

Sherry snorted, turned, and led me up nine flights of stairs to their apartment.

The three of us sat down at the kitchen table to wine, beans, and rice.

“So, you got a girlfriend?” asked Sherry.

“Not currently,” I said.

“I see.” She shot Hank a look.

“How’s work?” I asked Hank.

“Gone,” said Hank. “Budget cuts. They laid me off yesterday—”

“BECAUSE ALL YOU TALK ABOUT IS PERFORMANCE ART!” Sherry yelled, then she turned to me. “So. Where do *you* work?”

“I don’t.”

Sherry’s nostrils flared.

“I mean—not right now,” I said. “I’m in-between gigs.” I looked at Hank. He exhaled. “Sorry to hear you got

laid off,” I said. “My timing is terrible. I was going to ask you for a job—”

“You mean a blow job?” Sherry sneered.

“HOLY SHIT, SHERRY!” Hank screamed, spitting beans out of his mouth.

“Come on, Larry.” Sherry jumped up and waved her dinner fork at me. “I know you’ve been getting into my husband’s pants. ADMIT IT, YOU LITTLE FAIRY!”

I laughed and took a gulp of wine. “I knew you’d understand. What can I say? Your husband’s got a great ass.”

She stabbed her fork into my hand.

It took ten stitches to sew up the gash. Sherry apologized at the hospital, but I knew she’d never fully trust me after that.

CHAPTER 3

HANK AND I DECIDED to make performance art our careers. Sherry didn't like it, but since she didn't have any legally marketable skills herself, she reluctantly agreed to let Hank have a go at his dream.

We began putting on performance art evenings. We rented storefronts. We whitewashed walls. We pasted up flyers and posters.

Our shows took off. Although Hank and I typically performed on stage together, sometimes we'd mix it up with a solo piece, or even invite another artist to join us. Before long we were making enough money for rent and more. Hundreds of people showed up each night to see what we'd do next. Art critics called us "inspired" and

“prolific.” The Tenderloin was ours. We avoided Kerouac like the plague, and nobody ever threw a chair at us.

We lived like kings for two years—then the economy began to sour. Crime was on the rise. Drugs and prostitution spilled into the streets. Junkies were mugging tourists in broad daylight. Performance art audiences dwindled—our fans were afraid to visit the Tenderloin for shows. Locals still came, but mostly only hookers and druggies; they loved our work, which we genuinely appreciated, but they could never afford to pay more than a few cents for admission.

We started drinking. I drank because our dream of living performance art lives was slipping away, and Hank drank because Sherry was driving him insane.

* * *

Hank and I stripped down to our underwear. After months of performing little pieces on street corners for tourists’ extra change, we’d managed to book a paying show. It was a five p.m. matinee gig, but we didn’t care.

We were backstage at Linoleum, the Loin’s oldest performance art gallery, and the name was fitting: the

stage was nothing more than a square of yellow and brown kitchen linoleum glued to a concrete floor. Ten feet away was Julio, Linoleum's owner. He was struggling to control the leash of a barking black dog named Bitch. The animal was a Presa Canario—one hundred and twenty pounds of muscle from the Canary Islands with an engine block for a head and a maw of jagged teeth.

Holding onto Hank for balance as I pulled off a sock, I looked up at the ceiling. It was covered with show posters from all the famous acts that had graced the linoleum before us. There was Mary's Singing Tilapia . . . Sam Sammy's Seminal Flying Sauces . . . and even Ling-Ling Johnson, who'd impressed San Francisco's mayor with his somber act, Shaving My Ling-Ling to Pomp and Circumstance.

Hank wriggled into a sticky vest he'd made out of duct tape. Chunks of raw steak dangled from it on little pieces of fishing line.

Julio made a face. "You're really going to wear that?"

"Do you like it?" asked Hank, modeling.

"The smell is driving the dog crazy," said Julio, gripping the leash a little tighter.

“I hope so,” said Hank. “We’ve been wanting to try this piece for two years.”

Their banter made me chuckle. I jammed my feet into a pair of roller-skates, adjusted my tighty whities, then checked myself in a mirror. A wiry, gap-toothed forty-year-old man with bloodshot blue eyes, dirty blond hair, and an overbite smiled back. Not bad.

I opened a bottle of wine, took a swig, then handed it to Hank. He guzzled it, then parted the curtains and peeked out at the crowd. Six prostitutes, three junkies, and a kid reporter waved to him.

“That’s the audience?” Hank whispered.

“That was all I could get,” said Julio. “Regulars are still staying away—civilians are getting mugged left and right. You’re lucky I got ten people out there.”

“The crowds will come back,” I said, stretching my hammies like a veteran. “You should’ve seen our last performance, Eating Mud on Stilts. There was this newspaper reporter—”

Bitch lunged and ripped a chunk of steak off Hank’s vest.

“I can’t hold her,” Julio hissed, wrestling with the leash. “Start the show!”

“Ready?” I whispered to Hank.

Hanks nodded.

“GO!” I yelled.

Hank runs onto the stage and lies down on the floor beside a tattoo machine and a microphone. He flips a switch and the tattoo needle begins buzzing. People in the crowd laugh and cover their ears—the noise, picked up by the microphone, is deafening. Hank takes the needle and begins tattooing a line down his forearm.

Julio stumbles onto the stage with Bitch, ties her leash to a steel plate that’s screwed to the floor, and beats a sweaty retreat.

Bitch growls, walks to Hank, and sniffs the meat dangling from his vest. Food. She tears off a hunk. Her movement makes Hank’s tattoo line waver. He pauses to steady himself, then starts the needle going again, scrawling out a shaky letter D in black ink while the microphone broadcasts Bitch chewing.

Bitch pulls off another hunk of meat—but this time a piece of the vest rips off with it, exposing Hank’s left nipple. Hank whimpers. The hookers in the crowd clap and hoot.

I skate out on stage in my underwear, stumble,

wheels clacking, regain my balance, and begin circling Hank and Bitch. As I come around, Bitch chases me, then lunges at my ass. I tense, ready for the pain, but her leash snaps taut, jerking her back. The audience howls.

Bitch returns to Hank and tears another piece of meat from his vest as he keeps the needle moving—he's inked the letters DE so far.

I skate faster. Julio steps out from the behind the curtains and waves his arms to get my attention. He yells something like, "HEY—MAYBE THAT'S ENOUGH!", but over all of the tattoo-buzzing and Bitch-growling it sounds like, "HEAT—A MEATY HAT'S ROUGH!" It makes me laugh and I skate faster.

Bitch clamps down on Hank's vest. Hank tries to push her off, but she takes a step back and discovers she's able to drag him across the linoleum. She retreats again—Hank slides across the floor. Reaching the end of her leash, she rails against it, digging in, jerking her muzzle—then there's a clang of metal. Hank lifts his head just in time to see the steel plate rip loose from three of the four screws anchoring it to the concrete. Bitch sees it too. She throws her head against her leash again and tosses Hank like a rag doll. I circle and try to grab his hand, but it's too late—the

metal plate spins on its one remaining screw, then tears free. The bitch is loose.

She lets go of Hank, raises her head, and curls her dark-pink lips at me.

“Hey, I think she’s smiling!” I laugh.

Bitch lunges at my crotch but I dart right, skating around Hank and the stage in widening concentric circles as the crowd screams and scatters for the exit. Teeth snap at my knees, calves, then clamp down on a skate. I stumble and fall on my ass, sliding. The bitch is closing fast.

“THROW SOME MEAT!” I scream, and Hank does, ripping off some steak and hurling it across the stage. Forgetting me, Bitch chases the steak down, snatches it up with her canines, chew, chew, swallow, then keeps on chewing, down to the linoleum. She finds a curled piece of flooring, pulls at it, tearing up a three-foot section, and starts eating it.

Julio emerges, waving a broom for protection. “GET OUT OF HERE! ALL OF YOU!” he screams. “YOU’RE FUCKING CRAZY!”

I grab Hank and we dart for the exit, trailing meat.

The kid reporter was outside scribbling notes. “I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it!” he said, giving

us a thumbs-up.

Hank cried tears of joy and showed us his tattoo. It said DECOYY in scribbly letters. I doubled over laughing.

Julio came out. "WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?" he yelled.

"Performance art!" I sang.

"When do we get paid?" asked Hank.

Julio slapped himself in the face, pulled out some change, threw it at us, spat on the sidewalk, then went back inside while Hank and I scrambled to pick up the coins.

Suddenly, Hank froze. I looked up. Sherry was standing across the street with her arms crossed. She ambled over to Hank on her clacky heels and held out her palm.

Hank dropped the coins into her hand.

Sherry looked at them. Her nostrils flared.

"You're getting a fucking job," she slurred, drunk. She turned and clacked away down the sidewalk.

Bitch walked out of the gallery with a hunk of steak dangling from her maw. She looked at us, sniffed the air, then trotted off.

"What should we title tonight's piece?" I asked.

“Decoy Tattoo with Meat—and Bitch,” said Hank.
Perfect.

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