

DECEMBER 19, 1980

SEARCH + DESTROY!

Johanna Went's New Wave Performance Art

LOS ANGELES — The first time I saw Johanna Went I was hit by a frankfurter she tossed from the stage of the Hong Kong Cafe. From that moment on I knew I would be hooked forever.

Johanna Went is a rock and roll performance artist. She screams. She kicks. She inserts a knife into a large papier mache eye, out of which flows either mud, hot pus, or chocolate ice cream from Baskin Robbins. She licks it. A synthesizer barks uncontrollably. She undresses. Drums pound violently. She tears apart a pig's head, which she says she "got from a butcher shop in my neighborhood. You'd be surprised at how available they are."

She drops to the floor. She is frightened. Sad. Happy. Mad. Confused. She

does a wig, attached to which are dildoes and assorted french ticklers. Watch her proceed to perform fellatio on a male inflatable doll, moments later brutally pillaging it. She emerges triumphant, a hero. She is Blaze Starr from Planet Claire.

Watch her repeatedly stab what appear to be plastic bags filled with cat-liva. She flails her arms. Spits up chop-meat. Dances. And unloads bags of trash from the streets of Los Angeles onto the stage. She smears paint on her clothing. On her face. She is a deformed schizophrenic running wild through Romper Room. She also likes to break pieces of styrofoam. "It's the most frightening thing ever invented. It can move by itself."

She changes her homestead masks over and over again. She is Mithra after an atomic war or Annette Funicello after lapping up cans of Spam. Watch her place a Farrah Fawcett-Majors doll onto a Buddha statue, then suddenly hatchet the concoction to pieces. Eyes closed, she shakes wildly with plastic foodwarmers and strawberry baskets from Alpha Beta glued to her clothing, along the way presenting the best argument for the return of Supermarket Sweep to our airwaves.

In a better world Johanna Went would have already graced the cover of *Life*. She would have also been linked to a multi-million dollar contract with Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. But Johanna Went is a true star nonetheless

and of Las Vegas she will tell you: "I'm not a mob. I'll play for anybody."

Moving to LA from her hometown of Seattle five years ago, Johanna Went first emerged on the avant-punk scene in the summer of '79 when she performed at the Hong Kong Cafe in Chinatown. Since then she's built a national cult following from her performances at new wave venues in San Francisco, New York and Phoenix. Of her musicians—keyboardist Mark Whetton and drummer Brock Rock, both formerly of China. Comidas—Johanna says, "They're really excited about not having to play what anyone tells them to. They could play anything they want. Anything. Not many musicians have this kind of advantage."

Some eight or so months after first seeing Johanna I invited her to my home for some wine and conversation. Friends advised me to hide all the breakables in sight, given her predilection for destruction. But I decided to take my chances. Johanna rang my doorbell at 2:30 in the afternoon and entered dressed in a sleeveless, summery dress, black fishnet stockings, and red cowboy boots. As the soundtrack to the film *The Shining* played in the background throughout most of the interview, Johanna spoke with the eager intensity of a child. What I discovered was an extremely profound and unpretentious woman who appears to have invented herself. She also has a great sense of humor.

Your performances remind me of early jazz by The Who when they destroyed their instruments. Where does your obsession with destruction come from?

I think things should be used. Look, I know a lot of artists who paint big pictures and don't do anything with

them. Sometimes they hang them on people's walls. But they gather dust. Then they have to store them. Then they end up having to pay for storage. Then they don't sell them.

To me, it makes more sense to take a hammer to it and condense it into a little space and throw it away than just let dust get on it. I've always been upset that people can't climb on things in museums or touch things. It makes more sense than worshipping all these things that dead people made. It seems that we ought to use up things that people alive are making and enjoy them.

During your performances I can hardly decipher your screaming. Actually, what language are you communicating in?

I sing in words! All the time! You just don't understand what I'm singing. More and more people who come to my shows are starting to figure out some of the words. Whether they understand what it is I'm saying, I don't know. I don't plan these words. I'm more excited about my singing. I knew at the beginning I didn't sing like anyone else. I knew I was unique. And a lot of people would tell me that it was offensive and not what they considered to be singing. So at first I was confused as to why my singing sounded like that. Now I don't worry.

I heard you were planning to make a record. What are some of the song titles?

Why not just make them up yourself? People should be given the opportunity to make up the titles. You see, the written word really doesn't thrill me much. Probably because my education and vocabulary are limited. So I'm not that impressed with it.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28

By Mitchell Schneider

Photos by Alan Peak



At your performances I often get the feeling that you slip into a state of semi-unconsciousness where anything can happen. Does that frighten you?
 Sure, I get scared at my shows. But I laugh, too. I like the balance somewhere between horror and humor. That's what entertains me. Sometimes I get into a trance-like situation where I realize I did something that was dangerous but nothing happened.

Your energy is remarkable. Someone told me you take speed before mounting the stage.

I don't take drugs or drink before I go on. I get myself in a trance. I look at my hands, I look at the mirror. And I get a lot of energy. I can't explain what it is. A lot of times I don't see the audience. I don't see one of my props as, say, being a box of Tampax. It changes and takes another form. I kind of don't know where I am. And when that happens, I feel really good. It's something I want to achieve. It doesn't happen at every performance, but it happens a lot. But I trust that I'm going to have control. I don't believe that I'm actually going to kill somebody or cut my hand off by accident.

Have you ever hurt yourself during a performance?

One time I slashed myself real good with a razor onstage. But I haven't used any since. It's because I got too excited. I didn't purposely cut myself.

Many commercial products are incorporated and promptly destroyed in your shows. Are your performances parodies of consumerism?

They're the result of consumerism. I didn't make those little green plastic strawberry containers. I just found them!

Do you have a close relationship with your props?

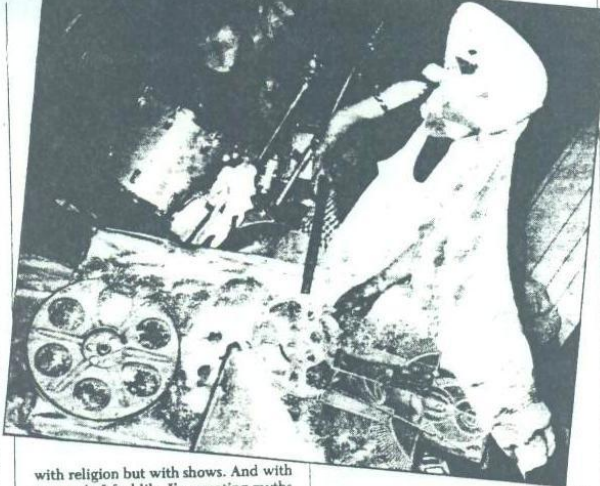
I feel indifferent to them. I know they're toys and I like to use them up. I don't like to have stuff sitting around forever, no matter what it is. I like to get rid of stuff. A lot of times I put my shows together by going around on the streets and finding trash. Other times I check in my house and see what I want to get rid of—whether it's all the pantyhose I have that have holes in them or I go through my cupboard and see some pancake mix I've had for three months. People are always giving me stuff. There's always something you can get rid of. People have more stuff than they want.

Is there any religious significance to your fascination with wearing masks?
 I don't think so. I connect masks not

product selection with a raincoat. I buy things that I don't necessarily eat. You can always pretend you're not going to eat what you buy. I can go into the store and maybe buy 20 loaves of white bread and then maybe four or five packages of Kotex. I don't eat this. I take it home and use it for my show. You can pretend that you're going to take your waffles home and lacquer them. I don't think you should feel guilty about all of this.

Where were your first performances?

For about four years I performed on streets and colleges throughout the country with my friend Tom Murrin and another man. We called ourselves "The World's Greatest Theatre Company." We played New Orleans, Los Angeles, New York, New Orleans, Baltimore, and London.



with religion but with shows. And with my masks I feel like I'm creating myths of today or for our times. I think myths are important. My masks are like creatures and mythological heroes and I feel a degree of possession when I put them on. I feel like they're not necessarily primitive but into the future or simply right now—really pop.

In a recent show you destroyed a male inflatable doll, then ripped apart the head of a pig. Two female friends of mine believed the act to be an indictment of male chauvinist pigs.

It wasn't. No. No. That's very funny. I never thought about it at all. But it's fair if that's what they saw. That's okay. It's like a dream. People who interpret dreams can only interpret them for themselves. You can't tell me what my dreams mean. So what your friends saw was what they saw. It came out of themselves.

The possibilities for performance art seem endless in places like supermarkets. Ever take advantage?

I perform in my shows, not really when I'm out at the supermarket or going to the post office. But it's not that I'm not silly!

I'm really offended by shopping in supermarkets. I do not like the idea that a stranger has to know what I'm eating. I feel it's an invasion.

So why don't you cover up your

(L-R) Johanna Went, Mark Wheaton, Brock Rock. Photo: Alan Peak.

to do that. Something has to appeal to me in a simpler way.

As a child what kind of toys did you play with?

I didn't usually have toys. I made my own dolls—they were odd-looking. I can't remember naming my toys. I think I was pretty impersonal with them. In Seattle, my family was poor and my mother died when I was young. So I didn't have much supervision. I always made my own toys—puppets, paper dolls, all that kind of stuff.

Some would say that your act is offensive and ought to be censored.

I use powerful images. However I use them is my business, and however people interpret them is their business. I try not to make myself a target for any government or any censorship. In this country we have a weird kind of censorship. There are all these weird sexual innuendos on TV sit-coms but you can't show a tit, a little innocent tit.

Do you prefer performing at a rock club to an art gallery?

I like to play in clubs because I've always thought of myself as a rock and roll artist, since that was the first art form that ever touched me when I was a little kid. I listened to everything—Elvis, Ricky Nelson, anything on the radio; I didn't have money to buy records. It was always important to me. I feel at home in rock clubs. People who come to see me at a club wouldn't come to see me in a gallery. And I really don't blame them because a lot of stuff in galleries is horrible.

Your performances strike me as hallucinatory experiences. Do you dream much?

Constantly. I get specific instructions from my dreams. I talk to certain people who live in my dreams. I know who they are, what they look like. I've been seeing these people since I was a child. I always count on my dreams.

What's really sick about our culture is that we're taught to fear things like dreams when we shouldn't. They're valuable. A long time ago, before people had television, they would talk about their dreams and use them in their daily lives. But now people encourage their children to be afraid of their dreams. It's absurd. Because you can do anything in a dream. You can KILL somebody you don't like and wake up the next morning and the person's not dead. But you can get a lot of satisfaction from chopping them up into a lot of little pieces and flushing them down the toilet. You feel so much better.

What do 1980 and Johanna Went have in common?

People are ready to see new things. I feel like I'm right for these times. There will be more technology—stuff like video. I always felt that after cameras were invented, paintings became less photo-like, more abstract. There were more possibilities. Film will change. People will be more excited to see collage kinds of film rather than what we're seeing now. I like unstructured art. I wish my show was even more unstructured.

Your shows make me laugh. I think you are the new Totie Fields.

Oh no! I'll have to cut my leg off!

Would you die for art?

Did Totie? ☐