Photo of Harry and Harry Kipper by Thomas Ingalls
Through actions that at times stress the visual, the viceral, and the violent aspects of social rituals, the British team of Harry and Harry Kipper perform in a fashion that combines the zany theatrics of Spike Jones with a kind of scatological slapstick that is all their own. The viewer emerges from a Kipper Kids performance with a feeling for the relationship between ordered social rituals and conventions and the festering violence that lies beneath the facade of mannered behavior.

In the string of untitled actions that the Kippers performed in galleries and bars in Europe and North Africa between 1971 and 1975, the essential character of the relationships between the two characters was formed. Cartoon like, with their clean-shaven heads, bizarre costumes, drawn-in beards, and exaggerated motions, the Kippers portray two battling geezers who might have escaped from a Krazy Kat comic strip. In nearly every piece that they have performed, the following scenario takes place: first a ritual is introduced (high tea or a birthday party, for example); second an array of props (mostly found objects whose repeated use gives them nearly equal status with the performers) are arranged on a small tabletop; finally, the tableau is utilized as the scene disintegrates into a morass of restrained violence, punctuated by monosyllabic grunts and wordless sounds of gastric distress. It is this wordless language that both links the Kipper works together and allows them to be successfully understood as easily in Tunisia as on the Sunset Strip.

Although the Kipper's work strikes a blow at the kinds of formal performance that embrace a minimal aesthetic, there is a formal structure to their major works that can be traced. For as these small plays unfold in succession, all situated in the center of what appears to be a rudely constructed boxing ring, it becomes clear that there are two main correspondences in their actions. First, the works start off quite silly, though precisely coordinated. The audience thinks that they are being put on. As the work progresses (and until recently, as they consumed more and more beer and liquor during the piece) the level of precision decreases and the corresponding level of frustration turned to violence increases in inverse proportion. The audience begins to get uneasy at this point. Finally, the work becomes "hog-wild" often with real violence (usually self-inflicted) replacing the mock violence of the earlier sketches.

The key to the work is that all relationships are brought into question: the internal relationship between the performers, the relationship between the performers and their action ("act"), the relationship between the actions themselves (as the pattern becomes apparent), and finally the relationship between the performers and the audience who grow increasingly queasy and aware of the violent voyeurism into which they find themselves trapped. The Kippers have also been known to engage their audience directly, generating a spirit of mayhem that lasts through the piece and sometimes well after the work is "finished." In this sense, the audience is left with a charge tempered by a kind of pervasive anxiety that sets the experience off from most theatrical entertainment.

The Kippers can be seen as occupying a place somewhere between the kind of formal antics of Gilbert and George, the British artists who pioneered the field of "living sculpture," the Living Theater of Julian Beck, and the Austrian performance artist Hermann Nitsch, whose Orgy-Mystery Theater produces a similar cathartic experience through the execution of bloody Dionysian ritual performances of sacrifice and rebirth.

In their current works the Kippers have concentrated on the visual aspects of the performance, and have begun to see the end result of the piece as the accretion of food and debris on the canvas flooring upon which they perform. Their performances seem to have become, in this instance, a parody of action painting where the process is not only revealed, but is literally reveled in.

Harry and Harry Kipper are portrayed by Brian Routh and Martin von Haselberg. Routh was born in Gates Head County, Durham, England in 1948. Von Haselberg was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1949. Both artists attended E. 15 Drama School in London, and began performing together in 1971. They currently reside in Los Angeles.

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Works in MATRIX:

Performance: two consecutive performances on October 18 and 19, 1979 in Gallery A.

Objects: documentary photographs and props of University Art Museum performance.

Video: Up Yer Bum with a Bengal Lancer, 1976, b/w videotape.
Selected performances:
Chelsea School of Science and Technology Arts Festival, London '71; Bath Arts Festival, Bath, England '71; Spielestrasse, Olympic Games, Munich '72; Reading University Art Department, Reading, England '72; Lamb & Flag Lunchtime Theater, London '72; Oval House Theatre, London '72; Melkweg Theatre, Amsterdam '72; Paradiso Club, Amsterdam '72; Surrey University Art Department, Surrey, England '73; Shausspielhaus, Frankfurt '73; Luverne University, Belgium '73; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam '73; University of Munich '73; Galerie Rudolf Zwirner, Cologne '73; Vondelpark Festival, Amsterdam '73; Melkweg Theatre, Amsterdam '73; Das Exil Restaurant, Berlin '73; Festival Tabarka, Tunisia '72; Royal College of Art, London '74; Institute of Contemporary Art, London '74; Avant Garde Festival, NY '74; University of California, La Jolla '74; Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art '74; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston '75; Otto's Boathouse Restaurant, Cologne '75; Space Electronik Disco, Florence '75; Acme Gallery, London '76; Slade School of Art, London '77; Fire House, Venice, CA '77; Janis Gallery, Venice, CA '77; Barnsdall Park Theatre, LA '78; Whisky Club, Hollywood, CA '78; Z Club, Vienna '78; The Kitchen, NYC '78; Otis Art Institute, LA '79; Gallerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, Austria '79.

Selected bibliography about the artists:
Ross, David. Southland Video Anthology (Long Beach: Long Beach Museum of Art '78).
Taubin, Amy. "...Kippers," Soho Weekly News (Nov. 23 '78) p. 34.

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