

Ms Moorman's Water Music



BY MARY BREASTED

NEW YORK, N.Y.—On October 28 the retired Hudson River Day Line cruiser *Alexander Hamilton*, whose berth these days is at the South Street pier at the tip of Manhattan, was packed from stem to stern with what was undoubtedly the weirdest cargo of its history. In addition to a complement of some 100 artists and a steady stream of spectators and/or listeners, the *Alexander Hamilton* had on board roughly 140 television sets, some of which served as parts of a bed; forty-odd videotape recorders, used for all sorts of bizarre purposes; tuna fish sandwiches displayed in jars together with such unlikely condiments as motor oil, cranberry juice, and stove bolts; electric spaghetti; a Free Store; and much, much more.

The occasion was New York's Ninth Annual Festival of the Avant-Garde, an

Mary Breasted, who writes for the Village Voice, says she plays the guitar and the piano but has never played either instrument underwater.

event that has been held in a different location and in a different manner—in 1968 it was staged as a parade—each year since its organizer, Charlotte Moorman, conceived of establishing a festival for artists whose works are too zany to be heard in conventional concert halls or exhibited in conventional galleries.

Ms. Moorman, a short, spunky cellist, is herself a sort of one-woman vanguard. She is known and loved in New York for her crazy cello concerts, which she likes to give in unlikely places and in unusual attire (or none at all). Last summer in London she played an ice cello—in the nude; the concert ended when the instrument melted—and Ms. Moorman got frost-bite of the breast, which was not part of the score.

"I would give a concert on the moon, if they would let me," Ms. Moorman said to me aboard the *Alexander Hamilton* some hours before she donned a diving suit to play a plastic-coated cello in a Plexiglas tank filled with water. Ms. Moorman went on to explain that the two talents required of all artists invited to participate in the festival were inventiveness and the ability to perform in public. As I strolled about the ship, however, it struck me that quite a few of the artists must have been chosen for their lack of inhibitions, a character trait that was not always accompanied by much creative talent. A notable example was the man who, dressed in a gown made of wire and strips of wood, stood blindfolded in front of very hot spotlights, foaming at the mouth and hanging vegetables on ropes with clothespins—for something like eight hours straight—while another artist, sitting on a throne-like seat and wearing a multihorned wooden helmet, read aloud what he said were his dreams.

Almost all of the exhibits were either electrical sculptures or conceptual events (the fancy term artists use for happenings, or pieces of living sculpture, such as the piece conceived by the man who foamed at the mouth) or a mixture of the two. So many of the works depended upon electricity that Con Edison had had to set up a special generator on the pier next to the boat. Everywhere you looked you saw television screens playing video film or showing live the milling crowd on board the ship. And everywhere you went you heard the squeaks and vibes and unintelligible sci-fi sounds of electronic music.

A typical sculpture was Nam June Paik's *TV Bed*, which consisted of eight TV sets, six of which were lined up under a thick piece of glass to form the mattress and two of which formed

the head of the bed. A video camera fixed above the bed was focused in such a way as to show on all eight of the TV screens the face of anyone who lay down on the bed.

Shigeko Kubota's multivideo-screen show, *Video Birthday Party (60th) of John Cage*, was made up of a collection of TV sets playing video tapes of Cage and others performing Cage's music. Elsewhere, five television screens showed moving abstractions that pulsed in conjunction with music. (Later in the day the same five screens showed rock star Tina Turner giving a concert that drew the biggest crowd of any exhibit save Charlotte Moorman's underwater *Unterwassernachtmusik*.)

Down in the ship's galley Elizabeth Phillips, a Bennington senior, stood by a table wired so as to make it very sensitive to the touch. Having strewn garlicky spaghetti across her tabletop, Miss Phillips encouraged spectators to pick up the spaghetti, which, when moved, made weird ululations over her electrical equipment.

In another section of the ship Dr. Franklin Morris of Syracuse University had set up an elaborate multimedia display that featured three simultaneous slide shows, grotesquely costumed people who acted like characters out of de Sade's madhouse (one girl fried eggs, using a saw as a spatula, and cackled as her crooked glasses slid down her nose), and odd bits of sculpture, including a smiling dummy that seemed to be hung by the neck and looked like President Nixon. Dr. Morris's show, which was accompanied by the unmelodious sounds of electronic music, was titled *A Moog Synthesizer, Oscilloscope, Kinescope Event*.

My favorite electrically powered exhibit was set up in a small cabin on the top deck. The door to this cabin bore a sign that read Do Not Enter, and the single window opening out onto the corridor was boarded up to about eye level so that you had to stand close to see what was inside. A huge noise that seemed to come from the cabin blared in the corridor, and people crowded up to the window to see what was making all that racket. They came away laughing—the noise-maker was a tiny electric train going around a track laid out on a table.

One rather clever piece of nonelectrical art work was staged in the purser's office. There, several people dressed up in Twenties costumes posed as Day Line clerks. Frozen in their poses as they pretended to man the sales windows, they said nothing for long periods of time. When they actually did talk to passers-by, they spoke and moved in ghostly slow motion.

One purser, wearing a green eyeshade, was in the process of selling me a Day Line ticket when another, abruptly and without explanation, slammed down the ticket window.

There were, in addition: avant-garde films, an *I Ching* fortune teller, a Ken Dewey memorial slide show (Dewey, who had been a regular at the festivals, was killed recently in a plane crash, and some people were saying that his death was his last and ultimate conceptual event), and photographs of the huge, orange banner that the artist Cristo had designed for a gap in the Rocky Mountains near Rifle, Colorado. (The banner itself blew down from its mountain site a few hours after it had been hung. Cristo gleefully remarked, "The fact that it no longer exists makes it even more interesting.") In fact, the *Alexander Hamilton* was so crowded with such a variety of sights and sounds and absurd goings on that a tour of just one deck could exhaust the mind of the observer as thoroughly as could an entire day's tour of an old-fashioned blipless museum.

At intervals throughout the day I stepped into the Free Store—two alcoves stocked with an assortment of odd objects, including pears, coverless paperbacks, a Teddy bear, and a vitamin E pill—to check out its Interaction Book. Visitors were supposed to write their names and addresses in the book and also to record what they had left in exchange for whatever they took and their feelings about the store. Most of the signers lived in Greenwich Village or the SoHo section of Manhattan, the neighborhood south of Houston Street where New York's artistic community is now concentrated. Random comments from the Interaction Book were: "Good pears (looking)"; "Took copy of *Tarrantula* (Why not?) and two posters. Love"; "EPHEMERE THING?"; "Xchanged sunglasses for God"; "Leave confession take hope." "Took a brown rabbit all over the boat we enjoyed it very much . . . I gave gum."

One Lower East Side resident made fun of the whole business, writing: "I took a pear and didn't put anything back because my psychiatrist says that I have to learn to accept things without feeling that I have to give something back. P.S.: Just took another pear."

Con Ed's generator gave out for half an hour in the afternoon, but it was in good working order when Charlotte Moorman gave her underwater cello concert that evening. Her five-minute concert drew the largest audience of the day—even though no one could hear her water music over the generator's avant-garde din. □