Incomplete Requiem for W. C. Fields

by Al Hansen



INCOMPLETE REQUIEM FOR W. C. FIELDS

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This work is dedicated to my daughter
Bibbe Anne Hansen
(who in so many ways is just like me)
as was the original performance
at the E'pit'o'me Coffee House
165 Bleecker St.
Greenwich Village
New York City

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Introduction

I have no idea during what week or day or month of 1958 the original performance of the **Incomplete Requiem for W. C. Fields** occurred. The poem – if you could call it that – was written sometime during the preceding year. The coffee shop boom had peaked and the New York backwash from the San Francisco Poetry Revolution was terrific. Kenneth Rexroth was reciting to jazz at the old Five Spot on Third Avenue, and Corso, Ginsberg, Kerouac and Lamantia were everywhere.

Where are Turk and the rug kids who lived in the sub-basement of the Sullivan Street Playhouse?

Three neo-plastic painters – Don (Max) McAree, Lawrence (Larry) Poons and Howard Smythe – ran the E-pit'o-me Coffee Shop at 165 Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village. They rented it from an old man named Pepe who later killed the owner of the Cafe Rafio. (which is now where the E-pit'o-me used to be) in front of the liquor store across the street.

Whatever became of Jaimee Pugliese?

A large number of young artists were going through all the doorways Dada had posited, though no one had called it Neo-Dada yet. Everyone who Hans Hoffmanned at Provincetown was talking about Red Grooms' Happening at the Sun Gallery there. Earlier, the rage had been Allan Kaprow's Happening-environment at the Hansa Gallery on Central Park West. (Ivan Karp and Dick Bellamy worked at the Hansa until it folded, then they landed in Martha Jackson's.) And the Living Theatre was under construction at 14th Street and Sixth Avenue.

Whatever became of Sharon Hurley?

Kaprow almost drowned that summer. Grooms, Karp, Bellamy and others were making a film at Provincetown. It was full of German shots, Russian shots, Italian shots, French shots, Japanese shots. Allan's part was to come up out of the bay made up like the creature from the deeps. He had chains wrapped all around him. He shot up out of the water, it was beautiful, then toppled over backwards and the heavy chains bore him under.

When is lovely Hazel Ford coming back to New York?

Claes Oldenburg and Jim Dine had taken over the Judson Gallery, under Rev. Howard Moody's Judson Church. The assistant minister, Bud Scott, was quite sure that Claes, Jim, Kaprow and myself were devils returned to earth. And there was John Cage's class in composition at the New School, where I met Steve Addiss, George Brecht, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Dick Higgins, Kaprow, Dick Maxfleld, George Segal and many others. Later that year Kaprow and I had a series of intense conversations about a workshopatelier-cum-Happenings gallery. Somehow these wonderful ideas became the old Reuben Gallery on lower Fourth Avenue, where only the surface of the ideas was scratched. I love to digress.

As I was saying, Max McAree, Larry Poons and Howard Smythe ran the E-pit'o-me. All the coffee shoppes at the peak of the boom were featuring poetry readings, so Don asked me to get some poets. Most of the reading cliques were predominantly male, but since we were straight eclectics I went out and got all the girl poets I could find – Diane Di Prima, Hazel Ford, Diane Wakoski and many others. To further pep things up we used experimental performance pieces. One of these was Dick Higgins' **Canzona**. Spotlight on a small table. Higgins is announced, enters, sits down at the table, takes a notebook out of a brief-

case, opens book on table, keeps eyes on book, reaches into briefcase, takes out left glove, eyes still fixed on book, fits glove snugly on left hand, takes another glove from briefcase, carefully fits it to right hand, eyes still on book, then takes off left glove, replaces it in briefcase, removes right glove, replaces it, closes notebook, replaces it in briefcase, closes briefcase, stands, exits.

Larry Poons used to go to the "John Cage" (the toilet of the E-pit'o·me, painted "Op" in red and green stripes) and dress for his performance: plastic bowl on his head, my Harris tweed overcoat buttoned up to his chin, neckties hanging down and the toilet seat around his neck. (Once in a while some timid uptown type would complain that he couldn't use the potty while Poons had the seat around his neck.) Poons would then go to a table, place a chair on it, climb up, sit down and read from the Motherwell Dada book for an hour. That book was our Bible, and we had all been caught swiping copies of it and **View** and **transition** from the Gotham art book archive repository on 46th Street. Poons always ended his readings with "Roar," the Tristan Tzara poem. During one recital, Howard Smythe nailed Poons' shoes to the table. A big policeman entered and ordered Poons down to the floor. "I can't," said Poons. "Why not?" asked the cop. "My feet are nailed to the table."

And like that....

I did the **Incomplete Requiem for W. C. Fields** without rehearsals, splicing and editing the films that were to be projected on my chest up to the last minute. No time to memorize the text. I was ready. The lights went out. The projector was turned on. I couldn't read a word of the text, even though it was typed out in capital letters, because it was silhouetted by the movie beam and the light was in my eyes. I kind of held the manuscript overhead, awkwardly twisting my neck and squinting to try to make out the words. Then Poons, with a sense of timing that was beautiful, handed me a flashlight and lowered the projector so that the light was no longer in my eyes, and the **Requiem** began.

— Al Hansen New York May 1966

INCOMPLETE REQUIEM FOR W. C. FIELDS

WHO DROPPED A BUCKET OF NAILS OR MAYBE A SHOVEL ON HIS FATHER'S HEAD AND LEFT PHILADELPHIA

GOD KNOWS WHAT CRIME BE COMMITTED TO GO HIDE OUT IN LONG-AGO AUSTRALIA

HE BECAME A CARNY STIFF A BEEFY GUY HIP TO MITT CAMPS AND NAIL JOINT HURLY-BURLY

JUGGLING CIGAR BOXES DEFTLY

SHARP EYE ON THE MEARZ ID WEARZ AY

IN ALL THOSE GRAPE SUNSET
AUSTRALIAN SATURDAY AFTERNOONS

YELLOW DESERT OUT BACK DEALS ALL HIS HUMOUR

YESTERDAY **BROOKLYN** DIED AND WHEN THE BIG MUSHROOM CLOUD WENT UP

IT SPELLED **DRINK**

AND IN LONG-AGO AUSTRALIA WILLY READ THE MESSAGE

DRANK HIS WAY UP THE BINDLESTIFF

COMICS TRAIL

SAW THE WRITING IN THE SKY

OVER DEVASTATED FLATBUSH

AND THE TWISTED WRECKAGE

OF THE CONEY ISLAND LINE

WHERE SANDPAPER-SKINNED HANDS

SCRATCHED THE SITE OF THE LAST ${\bf A} \ \& \ {\bf P}$

PAYING DUES FROM THE JUGGLER BIT TO THE CANE-SPLIT CLOTH LAWN OF A MILLION BURLY STAGE POOL TABLES DEVELOPING THE SUCKING SICKNESS GETTING FUNNIER ON MILES OF CELLULOID CHARGE

FAT FUNNY MAN FULL OF HELL I DUG YOU

THE DOCS SAID STOP DRINKING OR DIE
AND YOU
YOU **SNEERED**STEERED FOR THE BAR
SNAPPING YOUR FINGERS FOR
"SPIRITUS FERMENTI"

THEY SAID "YOU'VE HAD IT, QUIT!"
AND YOU
CLAUDE WILLIAM DUKINFIELD
THE ORACLE OF PHILLO-DELPHI-A
WRITING FILM TREATMENTS ON
ENVELOPES AND NAPKINS
YOU MIXED THEM ONE FOR THE ROAD

SOME PEOPLE TALK ABOUT DYING YOU DID IT

YOU DID YOUR OLD MAN IN WITH A BUCKET OF NAILS

FROM THE BARN ROOF OR WAS IT A COAL SHOVEL ON SOME POST CIVIL WAR PHILADEL-PHIAN PRE-ATOMIC FARM

AND **BECAME**THE OMNISCIENT
CASTRATED
FATHER OF US ALL

WHEN THE SIPPING SICKNESS CAME YOU SAID "YES!"

WE LAUGHED OUR UNSURE

PARENT-INDUCED HYSTERIA

OUT AT YOU FROM THOUSANDS

OF NEIGHBORHOOD ITCHES

ON BARROOM SUNTAN SATURDAYS

YOU DISMISSED CHAPLIN AS A

SISSY BALLET DANCER

YOU THE FAT MAN WITH THE LONG

SISSY PHALLUS

CANE

POOL CUE

DANGEROUS LOOKING

LIKE A LONG PENAL DAGGER

WHICH BENT IMPOTENTLY

RUBBERLY

WHEN YOU WANTED THE EIGHT BALL

IN THE SIDE POCKET

MENACING BLACK BELT STRAW HAT

CLOWN

YOU SHOWED US THE IMPOTENT

FATHER FULL OF HATE

WHEN WE WANTED TO SEE HIM MOST

AND **WE** DIDN'T FEEL GUILTY OR ANGRY

YOU WORE THE BELLS IN OUR FAMILY

OF MAN

IF THINGS GOT ROUGH YOU JUST SNEERED

AND PLAYED IT A LITTLE DIRTIER

ON EVERYTHING

THEN THE SIPPING SICKNESS WON BUT YOU TOOK A TURN FOR THE NURSE BIG BROWN TEATS FOUR-FIFTHS FULL OF WHISKEY STEPPED IT UP USED YOUR SONOROUS KARATE MONOTONE

THE BODY STARTED TO GO

THE ROUTE
BECAME GOUT

WITH COMPLICATIONS
FEET SWOLLEN LIKE ERUPTING

THUNDERCLOUDS

OF GAUZE TAPE PAIN ROLLING YOU OUT OF BED AT NIGHT SCREAMING

AT THE FIRING SQUAD THEY ASKED YOUR LAST WISH YOU MURMURED CALMLY FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE "I ALWAYS WANTED TO SEE PHILADELPHIA BEFORE I DIE..."

YOU FOUGHT BACK FROM A KING-SIZE CRIB AND BOUNCED AGAINST THE BARS YELLING "ELECTROCUTE THE LANDLORDS!"

BIG DRINKING FUNNY BABY CRYING WHISKEY TEARS

AND GIN-SOAKED SOBS WHITE CAP AND NIGHTGOWN QUEEN VICTORIA IN THE PAIN SCENE

GREAT COMIC GOD OF THE CENTERLESS UNIVERSE

IN THE GALAXY OF ALL-NIGHT
LAFFMOVIE WILDNESS
IN FORTY-SECOND STREET MOVIE JOHNS
AND KETCHUP BOTTLES
ON SALMON-TOPPED WALDORF
MIDNIGHT TABLES

OUR FATHER IN FIELDS COUNSELS US: "IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED TRY TRY AGAIN THEN QUIT NO USE BEING A DAMN FOOL ABOUT IT"

WE REMEMBERED ALL YOU TOLD US ON SUNLIT LONG AGO SATURDAYS AND SKINPOPPED SMACK IN THE NEON RUSTY BALCONY

WE DRANK WINE IN ROW ONE SO WE COULD LOOK UP YOUR GIANT NOSE

THOU GREAT DOUGH-FACED

SNARLING BROTHER

OF GROUCHO
GROUCHO THE PARANOID DADDY MARX
OF THE BROKEN-BACKED
SCUFFLING
SHUFFLING
CRAB WALK
LOOKING OVER FRIGHTENED SHOULDERS
FOR THE CHILD WHO BROKE HIS SPINE
LOOKING OUT FOR THE SON'S RETURN
TO FINISH THE JOB

YOU HATED KIDS LITTLE BABY LEROY CARRIED

FROM THE LOT

PARALYZED

FROM THE GIN YOU SLIPPED INTO

HIS ORANGE JUICE

SNEERING AFTER HIM "THE KID'S NO TROUPER, SEND HIM HOME..."

UNCLE OF BILLY DE WOLFE IN DRAG AND SUMPTUOUS ALASTAIR SIM

GIGANTIC ENFANT TERRIBLE
IN A PAIN TRICKING CRIB
THE GOUT SNEAKS UP
ON THE SLEEPING BABY
SHAZAMING PAIN FROM TOE TO TUSCHE
RATTLES BIG BABY AGAINST THE BARS

THE VALET INSERTS A TUBE
IN THE LARGE LEFT BREAST
FOR THE SLIPPING SOOTHING VELVET
INTRAVENOUS GIN

WITH A HI AND A HO AND A HEE HEE HEE TURN THE TRICK THE TIP IS IN WILLY WAS WITH IT TILL IT GOT WITH HIM

HOW'S THAT, MY LITTLE CHICKADEE?

W. C.
COOL AS MORNING GRASS
WHILE SAFES FALL
BULLETS WHISTLE
AND BUILDINGS TOPPLE
WIMPY'S FATHER BOOSTS A FIFTH
FROM A LIQUOR STORE
DOES THE MARYELLEN WITH A
BYPASSER'S WALLET

ENTERS A FANCY HOTEL CALLING

"TAXI, TAXI?"

HE SNARLS AT KINGS AND KIDS AND MAKES A VISCOUS SWIPE

WITH HIS CANE

AT AN OLD LADY WHO BUGS HIM

THE FATHER OF JACKIE GLEASON AND WILLY MULLINS BELLIES THE BAR AND SPINS A QUARTER

"CHICKENS DO HAVE PRETTY LEGS IN KANSAS – YASSS..."

EVERYBODY'S HAD IT
THEY PUT THE WHOLE FREE LUNCH
ON HIM –

FIND OUT HE'S **NOT** THE MAYOR

OF LONDON

CHASE HIM DOWN THE STREET
THE BARTENDER'S GORGEOUS WIFE
MEETS HIM ON THE CORNER

ALL THE MONEY FROM THE TILL
PINCHING OUT OF HER BOSOM
W. C. FIELDS GRABS THE DOUGH
KNOCKS HER DOWN
FACE TWITCHING
HE HOPS A STREETCAR
TO SOME ROCKAWAY IRISHTOWN BAR

BIG WILL LEFT HIS MONEY IN EIGHTY
GOD KNOWS HOW MANY
U. S. BANKS AND ELSEWHERE
UNDER FALSE NAMES
SO NO RELATIVES COULD GET THEIR
HANDS ON IT

SAID IF HE COULD BUT KNOW THE HOUR DEATH WOULD ARRIVE HE'D STACK HIS DOUGH IN BIG BILLS ASSEMBLE HIS KIN AND TEAR IT TO CONFETTI JUST AS THAT FELLOW IN THE

BRIGHT NIGHTGOWN

STEPPED OUT OF THE CHECKER CAB FROM HELL

THE DOC SAID "YOU'RE DYING, DAD"
W. C. FIELDS SAID
"LET ME FIX YOU ONE FOR THE ROAD, **CHUM.**SOME PEOPLE TALK ABOUT DYING –
I'M GONNA DO IT."

LAFFRIOTS IN HEAVEN, STARRING

W. C. FIELDS

TEXAS GUINAN ROTATES HER BELLY IN A SLOW-MOTION TWIST AND HOWDY-SUCKERS EVERYBODY

MARILYN MILLER IN A BILL

AT THE PALACE

DIKE'S TEDDY ROOSEVELT'S SISTER FRED ALLEN IN HIS ALLEY AL JOLSON ON ONE KNEE NOSEDIVES BY FATTY ARBUCKLE

THE ICEPACK KID

JOE PENNER AND HIS CELESTIAL DUCK SLOW-BURN KENNEDY SONGS BY FANNY BRICE

THE LITTLE GIRL ON THE PIANO IS HELEN KANE
MAKING BOO BOO BA BOO

SANFORD WHITE SAYS
"I DON'T MIND YA FOOLIN' AROUND
BUT IF YOU MARRY THAT GUY
I'M GONNA SHOOT YOU RIGHT OFF
YOUR VELVET SWING

ONE OF THESE NIGHTS"

ALTERNATING RHYTHMS BY GLENN MILLER AND HAL KEMP

W. C. FIELDS ON A LADDER OF LOVE CLIMBING UP A LADDER OF LOVE ("GOT A DATE WITH AN ANGEL") TO FIND AN ANGEL'S **ASS** TO PINCH

OR A KID TO KICK

W.C. FIELDS SITS UP IN A FUSTY
DRUMMERS HOTEL BRASS BED
LOOKS AROUND FOR HIS SOCK

DIG IT, HE CAN ONLY FIND ONE SOCK

SO DIG IT: HE SAYS

"THAT DAMN ONE-LEGGED MAN HAS BEEN THROUGH HERE AGAIN"

Al Hansen

was born in 1927 in Queens, New York, and educated publicly from an early age in the ways of filling stations, Norwegian sea-families and heavy machinery. From 1946 to 1948 he served in the U. S. Army, during which period Sam Turnbull, artist and bohemian extraordinaire, recalls the pioneer of Happenings pushing pianos off third stories of openwalled buildings in bombed-out Frankfurt.

After he left the Army in 1948 he attended as many schools as possible on the GI Bill, including Brooklyn College, the Art Students' League, New York University, University of Miami at Coral Gables, Tulane and the Hans Hoffman School of Art. When his taste for education slaked in 1951, he joined the Air Force and became a special communications parachutist.

In 1955 he was back in New York, working in commercial art and graphic design. In 1958 he founded, with Dick Higgins, the Audio-Visual Group, and launched his first happenings, multiscreen projections and pre-pop constructions.

In 1962 Hansen founded the Third Rail Gallery of Current Art.

A one-man show at the Judson Gallery in the winter of 1964 and a second at the New York Six (which first featured his Hershey Bar wrapper collages) established his reputation as a pop artist. His work hangs in the Chrysler Museum and in many private collections. Hansen is the author of A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art (Something Else Press), a chatty, copiously illustrated document that has been called a "journal by the chieftain of the art underground." He is currently at work on a new book, New Trends in Art Today, manages a New York gallery, and remains the most active practitioner of Happenings in America.

