

McKenna, Kristine. "Beck's First Sampling," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 1998.

Los Angeles Times

If you've been wondering how, in 1992, Beck managed to appear to the world a fully formed genius at the tender age of 23, the story can finally be told: Beck apprenticed at the knee of a master. For those unfamiliar with the finer points of avant-garde art history of the 20th century, that master was Beck's grandfather, the late Al Hansen.

Their artworks are the subject of "Playing With Matches" one of two exhibitions opening Saturday to launch the Santa Monica Museum of Art at its new location in Bergamot Station, and Beck and Al Hansen's sensibilities have a good deal in common. "Al was the first person who showed Beck how to make a rhyme and what that can lead to--it can lead to lyrics, visual poetry, a performative act," says Canadian curator Wayne Baerwaldt, who organized the show.

"Al also introduced him to the idea of how to create a conceptual framework that allows you to include anything," adds Baerwaldt of the musician, whose 1996 album "Odelay" was a huge critical and commercial success. "Beck uses Al's cut-and-paste technique to work in so many different mediums, it's almost as if he's collaging media."

Born in L.A. in 1970, the son of bluegrass musician David Campbell, Beck uses sampling as the central strategy in his music and does indeed cut a wide swath through pop culture. "Two turntables and a microphone" could be described as the aural equivalent of scissors and tape, and Beck's videos are similarly unfettered collages that reference film (from "The 400 Blows" to "Midnight Cowboy"), simple labor (coal mining, gardening, garbage collecting), subcultures (skateboarders, acid casualties) and the entirety of popular music, from Devo to Sinatra. Like his grandfather, Beck has the soul of a junkman and he scavenges through the scrap heap of culture to gather materials.

Al Hansen was a key figure in the Manhattan underground of the '50s that launched the careers of Yoko Ono, Claes Oldenburg and Nam June Paik, among others. Born in Queens in 1927, Hansen helped develop the approach to performance art that's been central to high culture of the last 50 years; such pieces were called "Happenings" when artists first started doing them, and Hansen did hundreds prior to his death in 1995. "There is no plan for living, and my collage theater expresses this," said Hansen, who was the subject of a 1996 retrospective at the Kolnische Stadt Museum in Germany.

A founder of the international art movement Fluxus, in which artists made small, temporal artworks that often were distributed internationally by mail, Hansen also produced paintings, collage and assemblage, and functioned as a central information source. He wrote the first book on performance ("A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art," published in 1965 by Something Else Press); he knew everyone and was always on the scene. Describing his manner of living as "pole-vaulting around," Hansen played a pivotal role in John Lennon meeting Yoko Ono, helped name the Velvet Underground and was at the Factory the day Valerie Solanas shot Andy Warhol.

"Beck comes out of a tradition of thinking across media, and he got that from his mother and grandfather," says art historian Kristine Stiles, whose book on performance art, "Uncorrupted Joy," slated for publication this year by the UC Press, includes a chapter on Hansen. "As to why Beck's had a bigger career than Al, I think it's because he had a stable family--and that is the great triumph of Beck's mother, Bibbe Hansen. [Artist] Carolee Schneemann says she remembers going to events Al was involved in, and there would be Bibbe, this tiny girl asleep on a pile of coats. Bibbe clearly gave Beck a sense of security that's helped him prosper."

Says Bibbe Hansen, whose parents divorced shortly after she was born, and who now administers the Al Hansen archive: "I grew up in an environment with lots of different artistic disciplines happening simultaneously. My father was working with dance companies, designing stage sets, doing happenings, making paintings, collages and experimental music with John Cage--culturally, it was very rich.

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"I take no credit for Beck's creativity--he came into the world with it, and I recognized early on that he was gifted," she adds of her son, whose collages were the subject of an exhibition last year at Plug In, a gallery in Winnipeg, Canada. "But I did create a similar environment for him. Beck's father is a musician, I worked in film, photography and in bands, and when Beck was a child Al lived with us. He used to sit in the backyard making art, and because he was involved in L.A.'s punk scene, there were always people at the house playing guitars. Al and Beck have very similar sensibilities, and the reason Beck's reached a broader audience than Al did is because they're based in different fields. Fine art rarely gets the kind of audience pop music gets." Art of the sort Hansen made has a particularly hard time crossing over. His favored materials were candy bar wrappers, matches, cigarette butts, feathers, imagery torn from magazines and various odds and ends. "The first time I saw one of Al's works I thought, 'Isn't there at least supposed to be a layer of shellac on this?'" Baerwaldt recalls. "It was very raw."

Heike Hoffmann, who curated Hansen's 1996 retrospective, once said to him, "So, you worship junk and garbage?"

"No," Hansen replied. "I arrange it so it can be worshiped."

Says Claes Oldenburg, who's lent works to "Playing With Matches" (as has Jasper Johns): "Al was an outsider playing by rules he made up himself. But even if you questioned his sense of form, you couldn't resist his energy, humor and his love of art, all of which he generously shared with others."

"I grew up with the sense that our family had a really rich history," says Beck during a conversation at his home in Los Feliz. "Al's grandfather was a Norwegian sailor who jumped ship in New York harbor, swam up to the Queens side, and built a shack he eventually expanded into a three-story house. I knew Al's father--he lived into his 90s--and he was a tough World War I vet who ran a garage and was heavy into motorcycles. Al met his first wife, Audrey, in 1950 in New York--she was doing a cabaret act and she'd painted herself green and dyed her hair green. She walked into a cafeteria with two black guys dressed as eunuchs, and Al took one look at her and said that's the woman I'm marrying."

In 1958, Al Hansen enrolled in a class taught by John Cage at the New School for Social Research. Hansen was the only student in the class--which also included George Brecht and Allan Kaprow--with no background whatsoever in music, and Cage was impressed by Hansen's confidence that he could nonetheless contribute to the class.

"Al's sensibility was fairly well developed by the time he met Cage," Beck says. "During World War II, Al was stationed in Frankfurt where he came across a bombed-out apartment building with a piano poised at the edge of the fourth floor. He wanted to know what it would sound like when it hit the ground, so he pushed it off. He called that his first piece and later re-created it, naming it 'Yoko Ono Piano Drop.'"

"The first time I saw Al he had a mustache and full beard which he'd shaved off half of his face," he recalls. "I was a few months old and I remember him kissing me--then, of course, I immediately became part of one of his performances. He thought my head looked like a grapefruit, and wanted to get a Sunkist stamp and stamp my head."

As a child, Beck was regularly taken to galleries and museums, and as a teenager he toyed with the idea of a career in art. "I tried to get into art school but was thoroughly rejected," recalls Beck, who quit school in the ninth grade and spent the next six years knocking around L.A., New York and Cologne.

"When I was a teenager, Al tracked me down to this awful rooming house where I was living in New York. It was a horrible place--junkies, welfare cases. Al had talked this Italian gangster who was laundering money by buying art into 'flying in his grandson who he hadn't seen in years.' He called and said 'I'm sending you a ticket, you're coming tomorrow.' I went from the dead of winter in the dregs of New York to southern Italy, having dinner with the art elite and Mafiosi of Naples.

"In 1980 Al moved to Cologne, where he lived above a bicycle factory, and there wasn't room for me there," Beck continues. "In Naples he'd met all these young artists and brought them to Cologne to attend his school, so I lived with these crazy guys above a bar where Al hung out. Al was an amazing talker who could spin the most fantastic stories, and he spent most of his days in bars and cafes, surrounded by people, just holding forth.

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"I'd fooled around with collage since I was a kid, but I hadn't done anything as an adult, so the stuff I made in Cologne was the first work I made," he adds. "Al was building furniture out of matchsticks then, and I used to help him. Al made tons of work using matchsticks and was a big-time smoker. Cigarettes aren't what killed him though--it was his lifestyle. Al lived very hard. He was hitchhiking around Europe and sleeping on floors when he was in his 60s."

Throughout his life Hansen devoted himself to teaching, regardless of whether there was a classroom or a paycheck involved. In 1987 he established the Cologne-based Ultimate Academy, an unorthodox art school that's presented more than 100 exhibitions and continues to operate.

"Having spent time with Al in Europe I know how respected he is there, and he's definitely been given short shrift in America," says Beck, whose mother and younger brother, Channing Hansen, are preparing to open an L.A. branch of the Ultimate Academy.

"There's a conspiracy here to control the history of Fluxus and Al tends to get marginalized in Fluxus shows organized here. Al was an originator of ideas, but he wasn't the sort of person who cleaned up after himself. Most Fluxus artists were incredibly anal about documenting everything they did, but Al was only concerned with the moment and felt documentation didn't matter. Whatever the reason, I was disappointed Al was relegated to a lick on a postage stamp in MOCA's 'Out of Actions' show," he adds, referring to an exhibition surveying artifacts of performance art on view through next Sunday at the Geffen Contemporary. Paul Schimmel, curator of the show, explains, "Al's work is very much in keeping with the spirit of 'Out of Actions,' but there's one crucial difference: The show focuses on artworks created in the context of performance. Al did performances and he made artworks, but his artworks weren't made during his performances, nor were artifacts from his performances preserved."

"It's true Al didn't preserve much," says Bibbe Hansen, "but it's also true that America's definition of Fluxus is more narrow than the one in Europe. Al's basically been disappeared from Fluxus history here, but he's very much a part of that history in Europe."

Many people agree with Bibbe Hansen on this point. In an interview on the subject of Fluxus conducted with John Cage shortly before his death in August of 1992, Cage concluded the conversation with journalist Ellsworth Snyder with the question: "In our discussion, why have we not heard the name of Al Hansen?" Stiles speculates that the dearth of material on Hansen could have to do with the fact that his performances were so wild. "Carolee Schneemann told me the end of a Hansen Happening looked like the toilet in the restaurant had flooded," says Stiles. "To his credit, Al always remained unmanageable, and this is the very quality that's made it difficult for historians to include him in narratives about the period. "Everybody loved Al, but people tended to perceive him mostly as a personality," adds Stiles, who struck up a correspondence with Hansen in 1979 when she contacted him while researching her doctoral dissertation on the Destruction in Art Symposium of 1965, which he participated in. "People were reluctant to accept him as somebody who followed through and created a body of work, but in fact he worked tirelessly, produced a huge body of work, and raised his daughter."

Toward the end of his life, Hansen was represented by Gracie Mansion in New York; for the most part, however, he never had much luck with art dealers.

"Al had a reputation for of being one of those artists who methodically antagonizing anyone who could advance his career--then, of course, he'd turn very sweet once the damage had been done," says Baerwaldt. In his unpublished memoirs, Hansen said, "because art is heavily involved with nonverbal feeling related to the magic beginnings, there's no reason art should be about money at all."

"Al had no interest in the spoils of a successful career in art, and he didn't stand for a lot of the bull that walks in that world, the gaming and intrigues," says Beck. "In a way, he was kind of innocent, which is something that must run in our family--we're so worldly in some ways and completely clueless in others. For instance, for

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most of his life Al wore leather pants and big boots, and it wasn't until he was in his 50s that he started wearing a proper suit. It took him 40 years to realize he'd get more shows if he was presentable."

Adds Baerwaldt: "Al's fallen through the cracks of history partly because of his attempts to remain independent. There was a streak of anarchy in Al and he was committed to the idea that being an artist demands a high level of integrity--and I think he transferred that belief to Beck."

"I was never formally tutored by Al, but he transmitted an optimism to me," Beck concludes. "That side of the family is very industrious and has a lot of spirit, and although Al went through some unbelievable things, he kept pushing on. The most valuable thing I learned from him was a certain work ethic, and to be persistent in what you're doing. Al toiled away making art for decades, and there were never any trumpets blaring."