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The New York Times

Art in Review; Al Hansen

By Roberta Smith
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Emily Harvey Gallery
Thread Waxing Space

Al Hansen, who died in 1995 at the age of 67, got his start in John Cage's influential music-composition class at the New School in the late 1950's and went on to become one of the founders of Fluxus, an orchestrator of some of the first Happenings and a precursor of Pop Art and even appropriation art. His esthetic attitude was strictly laissez-faire: art could be made of anything, by anyone, under any circumstances. He once explained that if you turned a flashlight on to find your keys, it was nothing, but if you stood on a stage and turned a flashlight on and off 50 times, it was art.

Hansen's approach is evident in a sprawling show at the Thread Waxing Space that includes videotapes of his performances and lectures, writings and vitrines full of notebooks, multiples and objects used in Happenings. But the free spirit had an anchor. The most lastingly engaging works here -- and in a more focused display organized by the East Village art dealer Gracie Mansion at the Emily Harvey Gallery -- are the potent Venus figures that became Hansen's signature motif.

Obsessive, beautifully made from materials that signal additional fixations (Hershey bar wrappers, cigarette ends and matches) and other cast-off materials, these collages and assemblages reflect an unrepentant admirer and objectifier of women, but one with a passionate, distinctive and solidly traditional sense of materials, touch and language.

At the Thread Waxing Space, these qualities are thrown into relief by the amateurish collages and a few videotapes-in-progress by his grandson, the award-winning rock rapper Beck (identified here as Beck Hansen). Hansen's thinking and creative use of found materials may have affected his grandson's talent for creating songs out of pre-existing styles, tunes and refrains, while maintaining a high degree of musical originality.

But even in these multimedia days, talent is rarely guaranteed free passage from one art discipline to another. Beck should stick to music, or let his art develop in private.

Meanwhile, Hansen's art, more widely known in Europe, deserves a thorough American retrospective. -- ROBERTA SMITH