

The Happening Of a Lifetime

YOU GO WAY over 50 years in a neighborhood and only one person is different. Al Hansen grew up next door to me at 134-10 101st Avenue in Queens and he stepped into the sky.

From the start, they tried to hold onto his legs and keep him like everybody else.

When he was 4 or 5 he saw a picture of the president in the newspaper and he drew it. "My first appropriation," he said.

He began drawing everybody he saw in the newspapers and he learned to spell their names while he was doing it. On his first day of school at PS 55, the teacher filled out a small card with his name and address and inserted it into a seating plan. Each card was held in place by a piece of elastic.

Al sure loved that.

The teacher began to lead the class in the alphabet. He was amazed to find that all the others could not spell or read. He raised his hand and said he had to go to the bathroom. He went downstairs in the boiler room and sat with the janitor, who gave him a pickle from his lunch. Then Al went down to the empty lots on 134th Street.

"He likes to draw," his mother told the teacher. "And he already can read and write."

They gave him crayons and he drew while the others learned the alphabet. When nobody could spell a word, she would call, "Alfred Hansen. Can you spell horse?" Still drawing, he called out, "H-O-R-S-E."

His father operated a crane that he rolled home in each night. He kept it in the side yard of Al's house. The boom was high in the air. Al and I grew up with the shadow of manual labor falling across the bed each morning.

His mind was on puppet shows in his basement. Pinocchio was the favorite. Al had built a stage and had us talking with a hand over the mouth. He directed the shows. He even had a good side show. Artie Brooks showed his mastoid operation. Al left 101st Avenue and went into the paratroopers. He then went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and studied music with John Cage in New York. He couldn't read a note or play an instrument. "I can remember," he told Cage.

He was on Union Square on this day in June of 1968, going to Andy Warhol's Factory, where he put on happenings. Coming off the elevator was a friend, Valerie Solanis of SCUM, the "Society to Cut Up Men." She reeked of gunsmoke. Warhol was upstairs on the floor with two bullets in his stomach. Al Hansen ran into the office and found Warhol on the floor.

"Andy, what happened?"

"Al, don't make me laugh. I'm hurt." Warhol lived.

Al skipped like a thrown stone around the art world of New York.

He explained a happening as this: "If you turn on a flashlight while you're looking for your keys, that's nothing. When you turn the flashlight off and on 50 times on a stage, that's art."

In those years, I was in a crowded elevator at the Time-Life Building one day to see an editor over money. The elevator was crowded. Al stepped on. He was hugging a robot of some kind. The business suits in the elevator barely glanced at it.

Then the belly of the robot popped open and machine guns came out of it and began to chatter and lights went off and the people in the elevator jumped.

"Wait until he steps on a landmine," Al said.

Then Al got off at the 20th floor. I think, and went to see his friend, Steve Balkan, who was doing some graphic designing. He suggested that Balkan give him some money and he would go down and bring up lunch.

He had a studio in Brooklyn, near Pratt Institute, that he called "The Third Rail Gallery of Current Art." It featured "The Hep Amazon," a vacuum cleaner, an upside down chair and a lot of sparks. It was in the Below Zero Show at the Reuben Gallery and again at the Living Theatre in the lobby area.

He was out of lofts and basement rooms of the East Village. He left five or six black and white paintings in the apartment of a friend on the Lower East Side. The friend decided to spend the summer in a teepee in Vermont and the place was turned into a shooting gallery for junkies. They helped themselves to his paintings. Suddenly, Al saw junkies walking all over town, holding up his paintings for sale. "What do I need a gallery for? I just invented the Walking Show," he said.

He thought Hershey bars were a phenomenon because they didn't advertise and were highly successful. He began a series of collages with words cut from Hershey wrappers. You get a lot of "she-she" and "her-her." The first half dozen collages had Charlie in the name. "Charlie Chaplin, Charlie Chan."

He decided to make his Hershey bar wrappers as his signature pieces. He came close. There was a gallery showing on Avenue A and his friend, Steve Balkan, remembers that it went all right. Afterwards, Al had about 20 people in combat boots for steak dinner. Then he went somewhere else. To Miami. To Germany. Lord forbid he should stay in one spot and be a success.

Al Hansen, who just died of a heart attack in Cologne, Germany, was 67. He tried every day to put something bright and different into the lives of people trying desperately to live like each other. He was one of the first in FLUXUS art, which is a show with art and motion. Yoko Ono and John Lennon were around his loft in Chinatown when he began it.

He went to Cologne 15 years ago because a gallery owner there liked his work. When his father was ill in Brookhaven, on Long Island, the family decided that they couldn't count on him. He came back for two years and nursed the man until he died. Show them all.

Once, he went out with two grandchildren, Beck and Channing, who carried plastic shopping bags and scoured Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles for cigarette butts. When they had three bags full, all he needed was glue for his work.

Grandson Beck, in his early 20s, has a group that does alternative music. His album, for Geffen, "Mellow Gold," was well reviewed. So the Hansen blood remains on the outside.

A memorial service for Al Hansen will be held at the Ultimate Academy in Cologne. It will be followed by a Viking Funeral complete with burning ship.



Jimmy
Breslin