

# Founder departs for art; color her Sushi career brilliant

By ANNE MARIE WELSH, Arts Critic

Before the Old Globe went professional and the La Jolla Playhouse was born-again, before San Diego saw much contemporary dance or UCSD artists had turned their faces toward the city, a self-facing painter named Lynn Schuette decided to take a chance on downtown.

She leased the second story of a Salvation Army building on Eighth Avenue, named it Sushi (as a lark, mostly) and formally opened it in July 1980 with an avant-garde happening called A Sushi Soiree.

Artists staged events all over the space: comics Whoopi Goldberg and Don Victor, the late writer-former Phillip Dimitri-Galas, performance students from UCSD, painter-performer Gloria Poore, Schuette and a couple of young girls on pedestals. The next year Rachel Rosenthal performed. And soon after that, Karen Finley.

"I was pretty fearless at 31," Schuette says. She is still fearless now, at 45, having just turned over Sushi to her protege, Vicki Wolf, and turned herself toward a new life as a full-time painter.

During 15 years of presenting, Schuette quietly and firmly made her mark on an ostensibly conservative city. She brought in local and nationally ranked provocateurs, supported the work of offbeat San Diego performers and offered a clean, well-lighted place to artists needing one and to audiences looking for the new.

At a goodbye reception held by Sushi's board of directors last month, toasts and testimonials came from Victoria Hamilton, executive director of the city Commission for Arts and Culture; from William Purvis, founder of the San Diego Theater League; from Shirley Day Williams, founding director of the Museum for African-American Art; and from choreographer Cate Bell — the range suggesting the broad nature of Sushi's programming.

Schuette looks back over presentations of such now-famous performers as Goldberg, Eric Bogosian and Culture Clash, such button-pushing ones as the NEA "defundos" Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, John Fleck and Finley, such top-drawer choreographers as Bebe Miller, Donald Byrd and Joe Goode, such rising ones as Memo Sander, John Malashock and Lorry Wilson, or such border-crossing MacArthur "genius" persons as Guillermo Gomez-Pena, and says, "When I think of the whole history, I don't want to single out any artist."

How could she, when she's presented well more than a thousand in performance, dance, theater and the visual arts?

As risks go, she said, "Certainly Karen Finley's work, more than anything, was the work I took a chance on. Sushi was the only place on the West Coast that would take a chance on her. She was in our first Neofest (co-sponsored with UCSD's Center for Music



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**Full-time artist:** *Founder Lynn Schuette has stepped down as director of Sushi Performance and Visual Art so she can paint full time.*

Experiment in 1983) . . . Her work was almost all incantation then. It was very scary. She perfectly mimicked a schizophrenic in her state."

Many people walked out, Schuette says, "or just didn't stay for that cathartic stage of the monologue when she brought you back, cleansed."

"Some of the work certainly upset people, and changed them," Schuette adds. "It transcended the usual kind of emotional place art or theater takes you to and put you somewhere else inside yourself where you'd never been . . . So much of (Sushi's) work is about challenging our own boundaries."

"Not all of it of course," she says, smiling warmly and puffing on a cigarette. "Nor could all the work be that way. We'd all be wrecks."

In 1980, there was little precedent in San Diego for what Schuette wanted to do. A gallery run by Community Arts in the Knights of Pythias Building presented

some performance art, as did the owner of the Patty Ande Gallery.

Schuette had learned arts administration at Community Arts, an inventive arts outreach program headed by June Gutfleisch and funded by the now-defunct Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). When Community Arts collapsed (the building eventually was razed to make way for Horton Plaza), Schuette formed Sushi and signed a lease for the Eighth Avenue space. For its first seven years she lived there, too, her living room doubling as an office for the 120-seat performance space and gallery.

There she presented what she calls "horizontal programming" on a shoestring budget, originally sharing the take 50-50 with the artists. She focused on artists in different disciplines who shared social and aesthetic values.

"It was meant to be different from a mainstream stage; it provided an open space, nondefined," she says. "We didn't want to be a poor man's theater," adds Schuette, whose programming often tapped multicultural, gay and feminist themes.

She proved adept at fund raising, knowing from her work at Community Arts that it would be two years before she could get a California Arts Council grant. UCSD's Department of Visual Arts helped by funneling money to her. When Sushi was eligible to apply to the National Endowment for money, funds were approved by three programs: dance, visual arts and inter-

Sushi also became a member of the National Performance Network (NPN), a project of New York's Dance Theatre Workshop that subsidizes presenters of touring dance and performance. "We had to fight to get into that because with San Francisco and L.A. in the network, they thought California was covered."

As a result of the NPN alliance, Sushi often presented such up-and-coming choreographers as Seattle's Lorry Wilson before they hit New York. Schuette found other artists through a coast-to-coast word-of-mouth network.

"I'd also go to New York and scout around," Schuette says. "I'd ask at P.S. 122 (a downtown, artist-run space) who's doing good work? Tim Miller told me about David Cale. David told me about Holly Hughes. Whoopi told me about (San Francisco dancer-writer-performer) Rhodessa Jones. The nicest thing was I just became friends with these artists."

As her associate Wolf, an SDSU dance grad, took on more responsibilities, programs expanded to include more dance. The fiercely talented African-American choreographer Donald Byrd gave a solo show before his company began its national touring. L.A.'s body-slaming Memo Sander Dance Company performed here several times before heading East.

And by joining with artist-run spaces in San Francisco and Los Angeles, Sushi presented three San Diego installations of Black Choreographers Moving Toward the 21st Century, each a thrilling showcase for the range and diversity of black dance in America.

## Lean and mean

With the 1990s, though, came leaner, meaner times. The much-publicized defunding of writer-performers Hughes, Fleck, Miller and Finley by Bush-era NEA chief John Frohnmayer made good copy, but ultimately hurt and, for a time, distracted them from their creative work.

By 1992, Sushi's government funding was down 15 percent. And two years ago, when the Salvation Army evicted the organization so its Eighth Avenue building could be demolished for low-income housing, Schuette and Wolf found themselves not only homeless, but in debt. They announced their first cancellation in 14 years — the promised premiere of "Dirty, Dishy, Divine" by alumni of the stellar dance collective Urban Bush Women.

The debt's now gone. And Wolf has made finding a new home one of her priorities.

Still, Schuette acknowledges with no rancor, had the climate for fund raising been different here, she might have stayed on.

"In the beginning," she says, "there was a protective thing about innocence and naivete that kept the frustrations at bay."

Not lately, though. Fifteen years of begging is a long time. And shrinking NEA grants now are threatened in their entirety by Newt Gingrich and Company's contract on America.

"There's nothing very hopeful to say about the NEA's future," she says. "They've been reorganizing internally, doing what we said we would never do — self-censoring. And they're getting rid of programs



# Schuette

Founder's talent at fund raising proved vital

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that give money to independent artists; this means in effect no public money for emerging artists."

Locally, in the private sector, things are little better.

"The fund-raising problems are systemic to this community," Schuette says. "A community whose largest employer was the military and whose major businessmen are developers and speculators is not one with deep roots. So there's a lack of long-term vision of what it takes to build philanthropy. In Minneapolis and San Francisco, there's a century-old tradition of supporting the arts.

"Here you have to go back to square one and persuade donors that the arts are important. Even then, the donations to us were pitifully small."

Artists always will make art, Schuette acknowledged, but creating a culture that respects artists and helps them lead lives conducive to creative work is another matter. "This culture is still puritanical, still immersed in a middle-class work ethic that views (noncommercial) artists as subversives, or as fools and dreamers," Schuette says.

She's quick to point out that, in fact, artists have exactly the high tolerance for ambiguity, for *not* being in control, that this fermenting, turn-of-the-century moment needs.

## Big hearts

Never self-promotional, Schuette did allow herself one congratulatory moment during this interview in her airy studio on Island Avenue.

The first of her two solo shows at the David Zapf Gallery was called "Bloodstorm." Its canvases, featuring large, anatomically detailed, well-muscled male torsos, had the sport of boxing as a central theme; her later show "Meridian" (1994) floated images of torsos and the human heart in loamy natural landscapes.

Two years ago, while his company was performing "Drastic Cuts" here, choreographer Byrd mentioned his art collection to

# Shows that helped define Sushi

**T**wenty-five notable nights at Schuette's Sushi: **Tim Miller's** "Postwar," April 1984 (performance).

**Jerome Rothenberg and Bert Turetzy,** "That Dada Strain," April 1984 (music and theater).



FILE PHOTO

**Biggest risk:** *Before anyone else on the West Coast took a chance on her, Karen Finley first performed at Sushi in 1983.*

Schuette, adding, "I don't collect (the works of) white people." Later he turned up in her studio, where he stood for a long time in front of her painting titled "Save Me, Joe Louis," in which a very large image suggesting the legendary heavyweight as an angel hovers over a black man strapped into an electric chair.

Byrd was crying. "He got it," Schuette says, "the way that this culture gives the boxer the right to his body, even to let it be killed in

the ring. He understood that one basic right for the poor black man." He intuited, she said, the link between the boxer fighting with his body for control of his life and a woman fighting for control of her body through abortion rights. Byrd bought the Louis painting and another from the series, shipped them to his New York apartment and since has become a fast friend. Donald Byrd/The Group will be back for a Sushi-sponsored appearance one night only, March 27 at the Lyceum

Theater.

The honest, full-hearted quality of her relationships to other artists helped Schuette create an exceptional, ongoing institution. It's that quality she'll surely carry with her now into her own creative work.

Of her future here, she says only, "I'm gonna paint." And sounding completely relieved that one chapter of her life has closed and another has opened, she says: "I'm gonna paint and see where it takes me."

**Joseph Chalkin** reading Sam Shepard's "The War in Heaven," December 1985 (theater).

**Rachel Rosenthal's** "Gaia Mon Amour," January 1984 (performance).

**Eric Bogosian,** "Fun House," October 1984; "Drinking in America," May 1985 (performance).

**Cultural Odyssey,** "The Legend of Lilly Overstreet," December 1985 (performance).

**Kei Takel,** sections from "Light," May 1985 (dance).

**Luke Theodore Morrison** "Legacy of the Four Horsemens," April 1986 (theater).

**Ethyl Eichelberger,** "Leer," June 1986 (theater).

**Tim Wengert** "Bone Cantata," August 1986 (dance).

**Guillermo Gomez Pena and David Schein,** "Border X Frontera," May 1987 (performance).

**David Cale,** "The Redthroats," November 1987 (performance).

**Bebe Miller Dance Company,** May 1988 (dance).

**John Malashock, David Keevil and Terry Sprague,** "Some Couples," December 1987 (performance).

**Karen Finley,** "The Constant State of Desire," February 1988 (performance).

**Los Angeles Poverty Department,** "LAPD Inspects America," May 1988 (performance).

**Shrimps,** "The Mind Body Problem," November 1988 (performance).

**Holly Hughes,** "World Without End," May 1989 (performance).

**Llory Wilson,** "This Cordate Carcass" May 1990 (dance).

**Joe Goode,** "Remembering the Pool at the Best Western," March 1991 (dance).

**Rhodesa Jones,** "Big Butt Girls/Hard-Headed Women," September 1991 (performance).

**Pomo Afro Homos,** "Fierce Love," November 1991 (performance).

**Carla Kirkwood,** "Bodies of Evidence," May 1993 (performance).

**Joan Spittler, Christine Berry, Adrienne Houels,** "Women Who Kill Too Much," May 1992 (performance).

**Black Choreographers Moving,** Fall 1990, 1992, 1994 (dance).