

Sushi Gallery . . .

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members of the audience inviting them to spear her wrists with two fish hooks. No one in the audience would oblige, so the job was done by her assistant. Rosenthal quipped: "The sadist always gives up before the masochist." The performance included poetry, prose, dialogue, soliloquy, the printed word and body movements.

It's the kind of material that has its roots in the art movements of Dadaism and Futurism in the early 1900s, yet in its rebirth it's brand new and quite experimental. This concept of live performance has made Sushi gallery an exciting, viable alternative art space.

Sushi is the brainchild of artist Lynn Schuette, owner-director. Soft-spoken, with tremendous energy and organizational skills, Schuette has been a major force in the downtown art scene since she joined the Community Arts program in 1978. Her concern for exhibiting contemporary art led her to organize a two-part exhibition in downtown studios in 1979 of both studio art and performance art.

"The Artists Work Here' project was primarily a need I felt to see contemporary art work in the downtown area. I didn't feel there were any galleries, even in La Jolla, that were showing contemporary art by locals. Unfortunately, we have to make a reputation in New York before we get shown here in a good gallery. There simply wasn't enough exhibition space for contemporary work.

"Approximately eight or nine months after the 'Artists Work Here' series I found this particular space, which happens to be an old union hall, and looked at the ballroom and realized it was an ideal place for performance art or experimental works rather than real gallery space." She negotiated a three-year lease, financing it with her own savings.

In July 1980, Schuette moved in. Part of the ballroom was divided by an eight-foot wall to accommodate a bedroom and studio where she slept and worked and the place was freshened up and painted white.

"The name," Schuette says, "is a pun on my own name. Schuette (Shootee) and Sushi. After I moved in I wrote a series of stories about all the calamities that had happened in my first week in the space. But I wrote them as Lin Sushi, a Japanese woman artist living downtown. It's kind of silly, but it does have a foundation in my name."

Performances began in November 1980, and in one year Sushi hosted 40 to 50 performances with anywhere from 25 to 100 in the audience.



The San Diego Union/Rick McCarthy

Lynn Schuette

"Things have happened a lot faster than I thought they would," Schuette reports.

"It's been so strongly supported by people. It really did fill a gap in the community. It's such a unique community with UCSD — the Visual Arts Department being one of the few schools in the country teaching performance art and the Center for Music Experiment and Research at UCSD being one of the few institutions of its nature in the world — you have a whole resource in this community that goes untapped."

Artists from UCSD, local performers as well as performers from Los Angeles and San Francisco have appeared at Sushi. The quality is uneven, as would be expected when the spectrum of performers ranges from students, to professionals like Rachel Rosenthal, well-known performance artist from Los Angeles.

Schuette is well-aware of the unevenness. "We wouldn't be able to afford excellent performance every weekend, and that's not what we're designed for," she says. "We're designed to be pretty much an experimental space. It's a hard situation. We want to be fair and we don't want to close the door to experimentation. It's really important for the young performing artist in this community to work in front of a real audience."

"I think most of the audience understands that and supports that concept and they stay away when they know it's going to be terrible.

I've never had any real complaints about the inconsistency. People understand that's the nature of space like this. As much as we'd like to have all excellent work, it just can't be."

However, Schuette does ask that people approach live performance with an open mind.

Sometimes the Saturday-night event at Sushi departs from the performance aspect and becomes more of a happening.

Several months ago people were turned away at the door, so many had come to hear the Big Jewish Band. "It was a wonderful mix of people," Schuette says.

But another event promises to be just as enticing. People can get out their formals and dust off the ol' tux; everyone's invited to a "prom." Saturday, Feb. 13, 9 p.m. to 1 a.m., dance to the music of the Nightfighters. Performer Delbert Lee will be the master of ceremonies while architect Rob Wellington Quigley will create the decor. Awards will be presented for King and Queen, Best Dancers, Dress and Corsage. Tickets are \$5 with a no-host bar.

The "prom" is a fund-raiser for Sushi, for like all art organizations, money is scarce. Schuette gets some money from the rental of two offices, renting space for outside receptions and the ballroom floor to dancers upon occasion, but that just balances the bills; that's without Schuette taking a salary.

So after one year of "going it alone," Schuette has decided to incorporate, and Sushi is now in the process of becoming a non-profit organization. A board of directors consisting of performers, artists and museum people has been established and a membership program will be offered.

Schuette is hopeful the expanded community support will ease the financial burden. The value of a space like Sushi and its role in the art community should not be underestimated. An important thing is happening there. San Diego has been put on the map performance-wise and a communication has been established with other cities.

Only 1½ years remain on Sushi's lease in the building Schuette would love to keep forever. "I would hope to extend the lease, but it may not be possible with the redevelopment of downtown. We're at a funny point right now with redevelopment. There's very little real support for a lot of us and we'll be kicked by the way-side very easily, I think. No one who is redeveloping is sensitive to the needs of artists or feels that there's any economic value to what we're doing."

"I love living here. This is a good neighborhood. We have the library and post office and a 10-story parking building. At 5 p.m. the place closes down. I feel there's a real energy downtown, I just love it, it feels like a real city."

Wasserman is a free-lance art critic.