



...it started out with death...

lewis macadams on boston artist alex grey

The confrontation with death —and the reprieve from it— makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, and to let myself be overwhelmed by it. My river has never looked so beautiful.... Death, and its ever present possibility makes love, passionate love, more possible. I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstasy would be possible at all, if we knew we'd never die.

— from a letter by Abraham Maslow written while recuperating from a heart attack

Above, *WASTELAND*, performed by Allyson and Alex Grey, Vehicule Art, Montreal, Canada May 7, 1982: Mr. and Mrs. X are on their way to dinner when they are surprised by a nuclear blast. They arrive at a dinner table in hell to feast on money. Mr. and Mrs. X seem oblivious to the alarms going on around them. Suddenly, Mrs. X awakens, stands up and rolls back the time. She turns off the alarm and vomits up the money. She leads Mr. X to do the same.

For Alex Grey, it started out with death. "When I was fourteen or fifteen my grandmother died and my grandfather got real sick, so I started thinking about dying. Since then my work has always been concerned with it."

Grey did his first recorded performance, *Secret Dog*, soon thereafter. Accidentally running over a dog on the freeway, he picked up the corpse and hid it in a garbage bag by a river. "Five weeks later," he writes, "I went back, pulled out the dog and took a photograph. Then I kicked the dog into the river."



Life Cycle (Self-Portrait), 1970-71, pastel on paper.

From the beginning a kind of obsession with overcoming his own fear and disgust seems to have animated in the artist a rigor that gives his artistic investigations the precise aura of science. The images that he produces are what make it art, right? But what gives Grey's work its particular authority is its desperation. "Essentially, I feel my art is about metaphysical issues."

For *Brain Sack*, done at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, he ate a plate of spaghetti and cut his hair onto an empty plate, placed a human brain on the hair, took the universal antidote, and vomited the spaghetti onto the brain. Then he put it all in a garbage bag. In *Polar Wandering* he used all his money to fly and snowmobile to the north magnetic pole where he took off all his clothes and ran around in a circle, mirroring the circular action of the compass needle in the magnetic field.

When Grey came back from the north he got a job in a morgue, a job he worked periodically from 1975 through 1979, utilizing the morgue's "resources" for several of his pieces. In *Deep Freeze*, Grey shut himself into an unlit freezer for three minutes with twenty dead bodies. The thing he remembers about dead people: "...there's a stillness to them. When you're living, you're always in motion. Around dead people the space is very still."

In *Life, Death and God*, Grey is shown hanging upside down by the ankle, tied to the ankle of a hollowed-out corpse. A drawing of a crucifix is pinned to the wall.

Perhaps the climax of his death pieces came in March 1976 in a piece called *Necrophilia*. A painting shows Grey making love with a dead woman's body.

Secret Dog, 1973.



"In all the pieces I've done," Grey explains, "there's been an image that sort of assaulted me and compelled me to do it. *Necrophilia* came to me in a dream. I was making love to a beautiful woman. And as she pulled me toward her, she rapidly aged and died. The sides of the bed grew into a coffin and I was sealed up with her. It was really frightening."

During the period of the dream, Grey was reading Elisabeth Kubler-Ross on learning to love life by confronting the fear of death. "If you could love death," he figured, "you could love life more fully." Resolving the fear of death by doing *Necrophilia* "became like a metaphysical yearning."

How did you feel during Necrophilia?

"My state of mind was fear," Grey replied.

Questioning Allyson, Grey's wife and photographer or active participant in his work: *Did you have jealousy about the Necrophilia piece?*

"No," Allyson replied, "because I knew it wasn't about sex, but about



Necrophilia, 1976, oil on linen.

exploration."

In *Necrophilia*, Grey seems to be leaning over the corpse smiling. "No," he insists, "that was just a wierd camera angle or strained expression."

But why did you choose a corpse that was so mutilated? This one seems to have had a lobotomy.

"Because it horrified me, and that was what I wanted to experience. At the time I didn't know about Shiva and Kali, and I guess I wanted some sort of ultimate acknowledgement of the negative forces I was feeling. It felt very decadent and sick to do the piece, but I felt that there were a lot of decadent and sick things happening."

So, did it help you become less afraid of death?

"Afterwards I did feel less afraid of death," he grants. "But I was more afraid of the moral and karmic consequences of my actions."

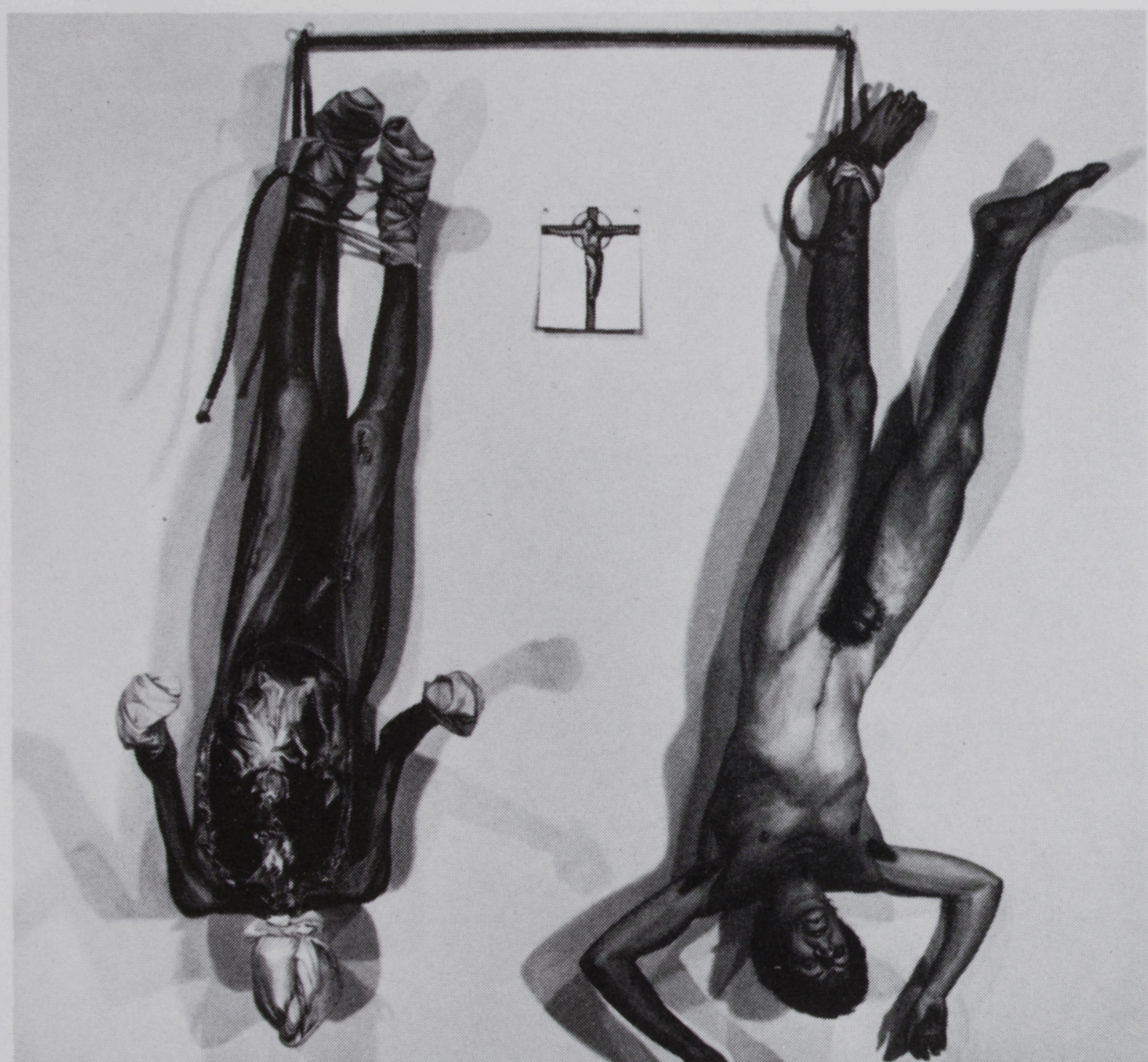
He began to feel terrible, he admits, about the way he was relating to bodies in the morgue, so he started using what he had learned from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. When the corpses were brought in. He'd look up the bodies' names on their death certificates and when nobody was around, he'd get down next to their ear, call the name and say, "There's nothing to fear, everything's all right, leave the body behind and go for the light," several times loudly.

● He continued to work outside the morgue, too. He did a piece, *Apex*, in which he had himself suspended in mid-air from a triangle set up on the roof of an eight-story building in downtown Boston completely cut off from all sight and sound. For two hours on two consecutive nights, he swayed quietly in the wind while spectators came out on the roof past a sign reading, "During *Apex*, I will leave my body and touch you."

● Grey reports that several people said they were touched during the performance. Some reported something unseen brushing up against them. Others reported being touched by an invisible hand. Of his own experience, Grey reports, "One night I just dissolved in a network of light. The other night I seemed to be out of my body in astral form, walking around and touching people."

● But Grey's researches were interrupted by what he says was a vision. He suddenly found himself in a courtroom of souls, and he was on trial for the necrophilia piece. "There was the soul of the dead woman there; and, like, a jury of other souls. I couldn't see the judge's face, but he was there, too."

"They were sort of indicting me," Grey continued, "saying 'why have you done this?' And I really couldn't offer an excuse, I was so sorry and



Life, Death and God, 1975.

disgusted at myself for using her body. I cried and begged the woman to forgive me, that I didn't plan on doing that kind of action again and that I was extremely sorry I had offended her."

The woman refused to forgive him. She screamed at Grey. Didn't he know he had violated her? Didn't he know she was a person?

"So," Grey concluded, "the judge put me on probation for the rest of my life and told me to do good works. That's where it ended — 'You're not forgiven. Do good works.'"

● *So what are good works?*

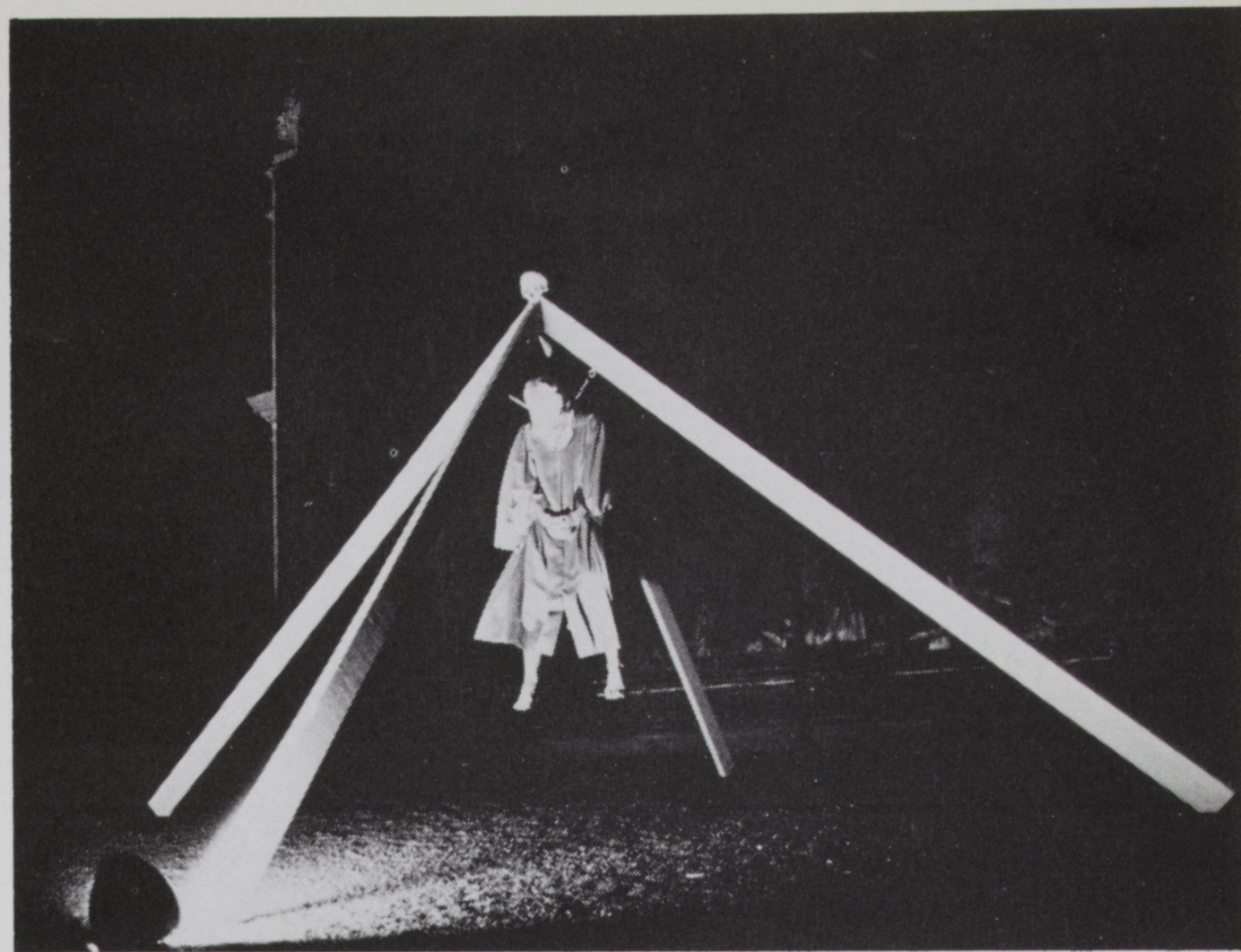
"Positive works. Works that I think acknowledge the spiritual significance of life..."

But there are negative spiritual experiences, too.

"I know there is a satan-worshipping element. I wouldn't want to be seen as not acknowledging the dark side too. But my intention is not to harm others. My first criterion now is to consider whether I'm just going to create more suffering."

● Although Grey cautions, "I don't want to sound as if I've been reversing my directions," the necrophilia piece and the dream that ensued were a turning point for Grey. "Not a day goes by since then that I haven't thought about the necrophilia piece. It was probably the worst thing I've ever done. I'll be working out that karma forever."

● Rather than reversing directions, Grey insists it's just a question of



Apex, 1976.

opening his work to more positive content. In Grey's work the "positive content" was influenced by his experience of LSD.

When it comes right down to it, most mystical traditions, Dr. Leary notwithstanding, hold to the belief that no true insight comes through drugs. But on that question Alex Grey comes down squarely in Timothy Leary's camp, sitting around a campfire with most of the native peoples of the Americas. "I painted an image of a spiral that goes from black to grey to white. The image comes from an experience of a tunnel I was going through during my first trip on LSD. It was a like a spiritual re-birth canal."

At the same party where he first drank the psychedelic kahlua, Grey first met his future wife, Allyson. The day after the party he called her and asked about her trip. They went out together that night and have been together for seven years. Within one spin of the earth he had transformed his consciousness and fallen in love, so LSD means a lot to him, to them both.

"It was amazing," he remembers, "because before I'd been pretty depressed. I couldn't find any meaning to life."

The direction Grey was to take in his painting came as a result of an LSD vision. One winter day, Alex and Allyson were tripping in bed with their mindfolds on (mindfolds being a device for blocking out sight and sound, "a black screen intended for observing the art of the mind," which the Greys manufactured commercially). The couple was accelerating normally when, as Grey remembers he "burst into an omni-directional network of energy cells. I became sort of a fountain and a drain, and I interlocked with all the other energy cells in the network."

Alex found that Allyson was having the same experience. "I felt like the veil had been lifted and this was the actual energetic scaffolding

Polar Wandering, 1975.

