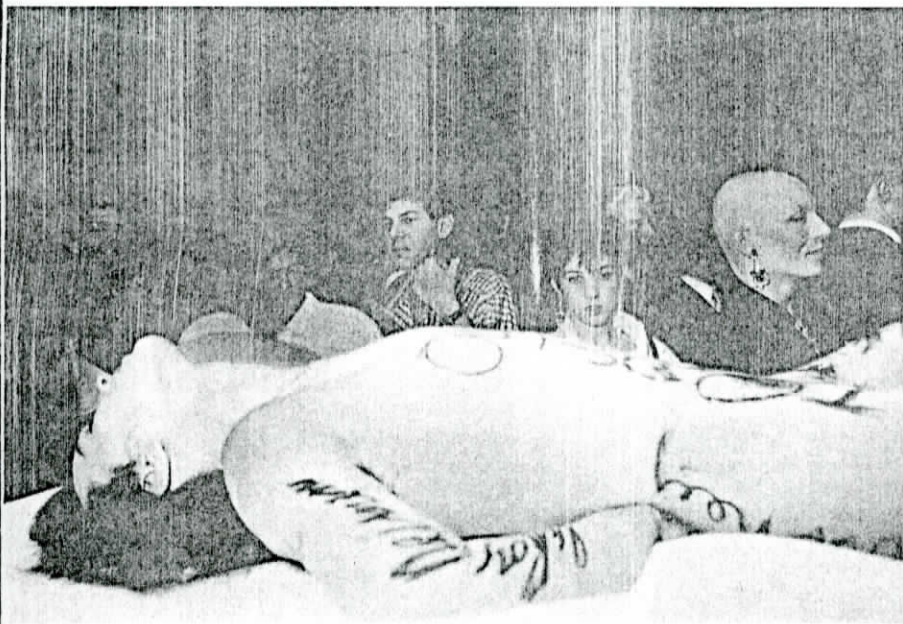
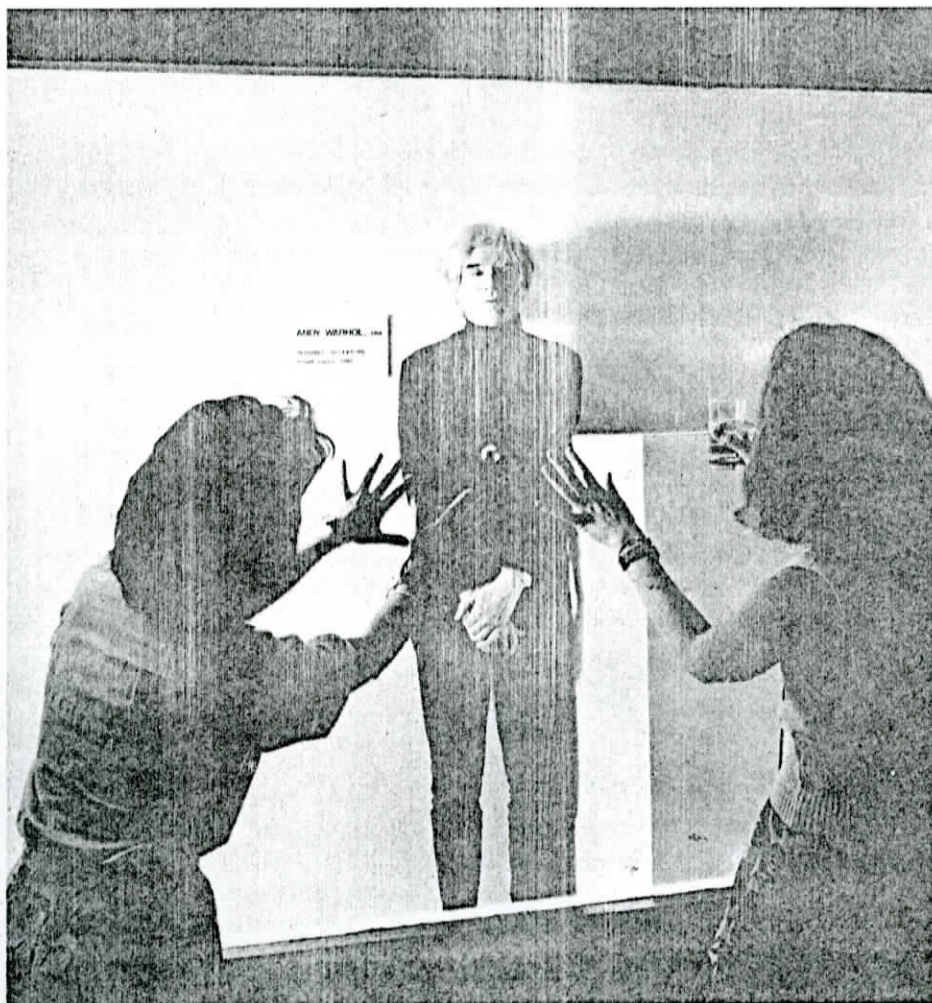
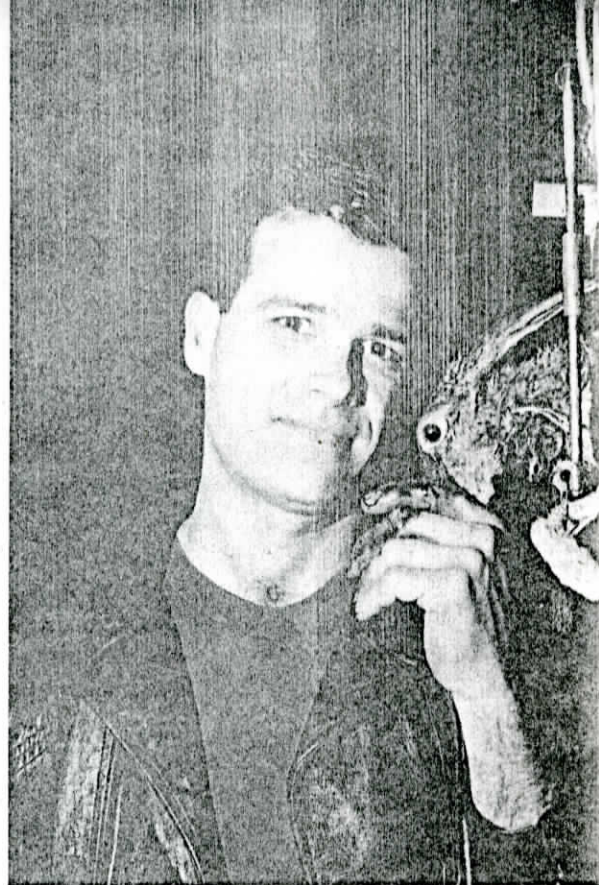


"I'm kind of a crackpot," says Mark Pauline (right), beside his mechanized work, which was the show's big grossout: a dead rabbit on a spinning hanger.



An Area performer, Bernard Zette, lies immobile on a guest book on opening night. He let the artists sign their names on his orange body stocking.



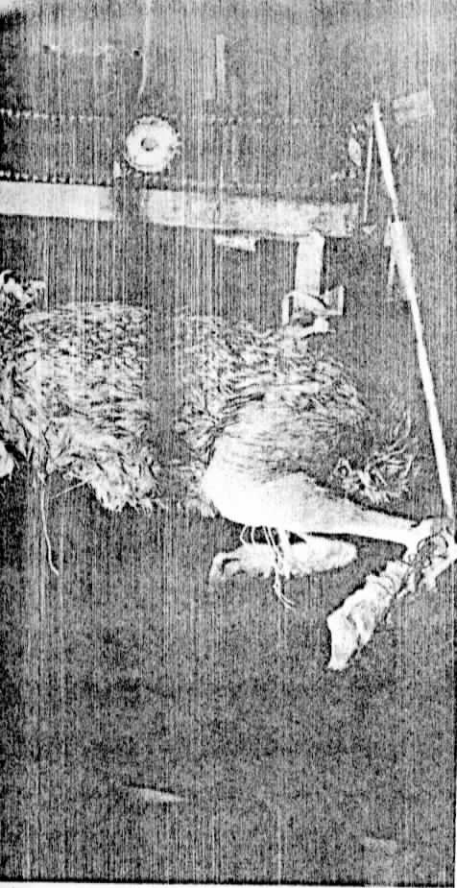
Despite the confusion of some clubgoers, that's no dummy behind glass in Andy Warhol's *Invisible Sculpture*. It's the artist playing it straight faced.

It is not your typical pre-curtain scene, even way off Broadway. In a dimly lit Manhattan loft, about two dozen people scutter frantically around large, strange objects. A workman steers a floor-waxing machine past a pedestal topped with a meteorite. A man on a ladder untangles a maze of lighting wires that hangs above a cinder block playhouse. A curvaceous woman in a flesh-color body stocking steps into a giant papier-mâché clamshell and, rehearsing her night's assignment, poses like Botticelli's *Venus*. A man with a bucket of brown paint races to trace a frame around an abstract slide projection on the wall. "Come on, hurry up!" yells someone running by. "We've got to open now!"

So begins another opening, another show, at Area—the juicy and occasionally seedy hot spot at the core of nightlife in the Big Apple. For the nearly two years it has existed, Area has been New York's most popular hang-out for the hip, from Eurotrash to elegantly shabby artists, and they keep coming back for more. Area has discovered a unique antidote to nightlife sameness: Its four co-owners totally redecorate the place every six weeks, and when Area unveils new themes—which have included fashion, natural history and sci-fi—everyone wants to be there. This time around,

THE BEAT GOES ON, BUT FAMOUS ARTISTS ARE THE TOP DRAW AT AREA, NEW YORK'S SUPER NIGHTCLUB

by Michael Small

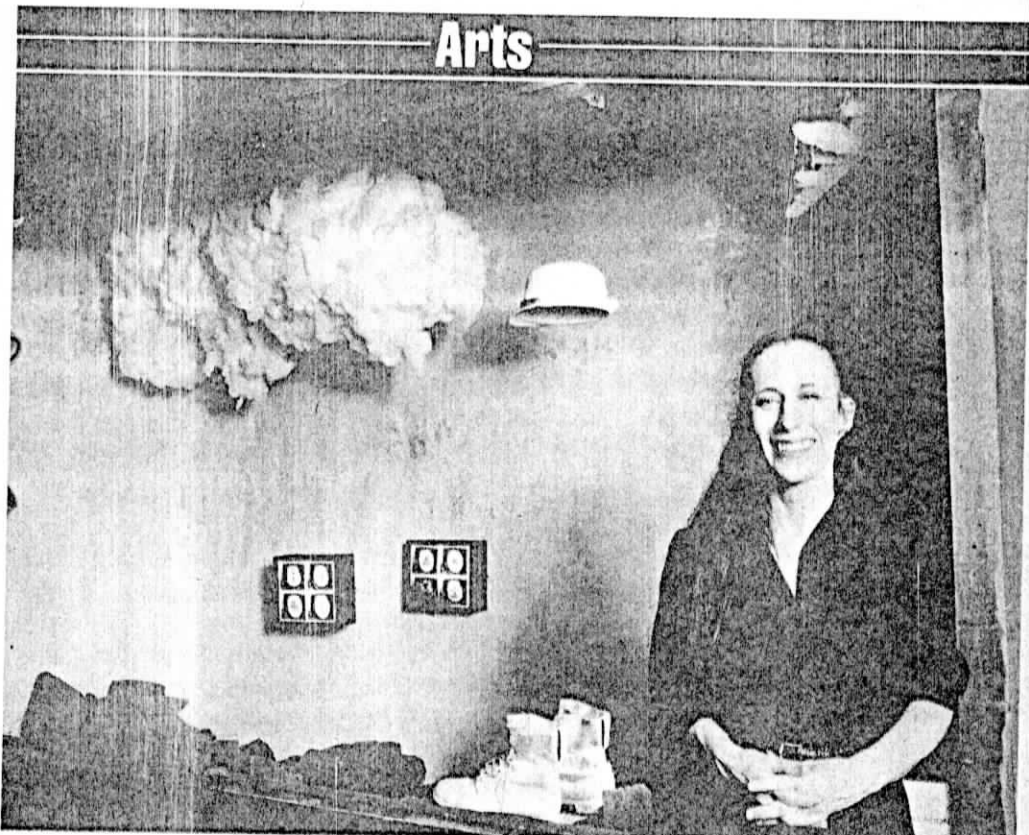


Area has gone extra chic by gathering a gang of the country's top artists as decorators. The result is an art show many museum directors would hang themselves to have—beautiful, shocking, fun, trashy, camp—and, on the first night, one heck of a party.

As Malcolm McLaren's disco version of Bizet's *Carmen* blares from the dance floor, hundreds of night owls push into the club when the doors open at 11 p.m. In the entryway they are greeted with dioramas by art-world wunderkind Jean Michel Basquiat, 24, and, from the other end of the age spectrum, elder statesman Andy Warhol, 55. Basquiat's diorama is a mad, eight-by-eight-foot jumble of hieroglyphics; Warhol's is a stark white cubicle with a white pedestal inside. From here some guests head over to the club's tiny pool (where swimming is not encouraged) to see the blue bottom with white squiggles painted by David Lockney as the latest in his famous swimming pool series. Others flow directly to the bar, which Alex Katz has adorned with reproductions of his signature. "In our club the emphasis has never been dancing," notes co-owner Eric Goode, 27, in a Budweiser hat, who mingles with commoners prowling for the sight of a real-life artist.

This night, at least, they aren't disappointed. Larry Rivers stands next to his

Photographs by Peter Serling



Performer Meredith Monk collaborated on a psycho-diorama filled with rocks, a floating hat, chest X-rays and other items.

blatantly sexual sculpture of two naked men, one with a red neon penis. "I already showed this piece in a gallery," Rivers says. "But where would it be more interesting to see than in a public place like this?" A little farther on, Peter Max of pop-poster fame gawks at a hanging sculpture of a giant, two-faced bug by hot, young Kenny Scharf. "It reminds me of something from the *Twilight Zone*. It's fabulous," Max enthuses. "If this exhibit was in a 57th Street gallery, it would be considered a major show."

Still farther along, Keith Haring, who soared to fame by filling New York City's subway stations with his chalk drawings, examines a pyramid-shaped wall he has installed on the dance floor. On one side he painted a monkey worshipped by a crowd, on the other, a crowd grabbing for burning money. "Both of these images are jokes about the art world," says Haring, who has

CONTINUED



Whitney Museum Director Tom Armstrong (right) horns in on the second night party, chatting with sculptor Michael Heizer.

just finished a 25-by-32-foot mural for the Palladium, the brand-new club of former Studio 54 co-owner Steve Rubell. And, of course, there's Andy Warhol, who never misses a good party. "I think it's the '80s—disco art," Warhol says. "When you call the kids up now, they're doing club art. They're fighting to be in it."

By midnight artists and gawkers alike are squished into corners, as wildly flailing dancers jump around the sculptures. Warhol, who briefly spotted his pals Bianca Jagger and Cornelia



"It's okay if the dancers bump into it, as long as they don't break it," says Kenny Scharf of his bulbous creation.



Having shown his art at Japanese nightclubs, pop artist Peter Max happily exhibits his *Palm Beach Lady* in Area.

Guest, complains, "It's the only night I didn't find many people I knew. It was just too crowded." The men's and women's rooms—where both sexes mingle—are packed so tightly that privacy of any kind becomes irrelevant and conversations merge.

"Look at all these ugly people they're letting in," snips one man in Buddy Holly glasses.

"Steven, your bra is showing," says another.

"Usually discos are for sex," observes Kelly Newlin, 20, a George Washington University student who makes her way from Washington to Area a couple of times a month. "But here I don't even bother looking for an attractive man. The art is just as beautiful, and I look at it instead."

Three San Francisco artists, who call themselves Survival Research Laboratories, steal the show at 1 a.m. with a performance piece. "There are really heavy victim-aggressor themes to our shows," declares the group's founder, Mark Pauline, 31. He spent three months building a four-foot metal spider that crawls across the floor shooting out flames. Powered by a guinea pig named Stu that has been trained to step on switches in the machine's head, the spider then

tussles with a writhing metal opponent that wields a long spike. Above them all hangs a mechanized poster of the 1961 assassination of a Japanese socialist leader. The attacker's knife plunges in and out of his prey, which spurts out diluted cow's blood. "This show is our reaction to all this other art around us," explains Pauline. "We see ourselves as professional pains in the ass."

Much like the palookas who guarded Studio 54's golden gates in the late '70s, the burly doormen of Area decide who in the swarming mass outside will gain the privilege of paying \$15 for entrance. Invitations or not, if you don't look familiar or hip, forget it. By 2 a.m. the doormen, trying to guard the 125-year-old Pony Express building that now houses Area, face a desperate throng. "Do you have an invitation I can have?" begs one woman. "I came all the way from Holland to get in here."

Another, in a black-and-white feather dress, hangs back nonchalantly, waiting to catch the doorman's eye. Finally she can't stand it anymore. She dives through the crowd, elbowing people aside, and fights her way into Area. She just has to see the art. □

Armand Arman, who likes to make sculptures out of everyday objects, used 60 bicycles in various states of disrepair to create his free-wheeling *Rush Hour in Shanghai*.

