CROSS OVER ART

1.

By John Canemaker

Kathy Rose is a performance artist who combines dance and film animation, with visually rich and startling results.

A Kathy Rose is a Kathy Rose is a . . .

. . . a Red Grooms Nefertiti; a Loie Fuller flame; a *Metropolis* being in transference; a Brancusi melt-down; a metamorphic arthropod/*Invader from Mars/Them!;* an Oriental swatch of Bakst; a perfumed puff of St. Denis smoke; an Art Deco Dovima; Mary Wigman and Margaret Hamilton in hell; a mini–De Mille extravaganza directed by Max Fleischer; a . . .

"I'm a visual artist," states Kathy Rose, simply.

And simply put, she is a performance artist who combines dance and film animation. But she does so in ways undreamed of in 1914, when Winsor McCay cracked a whip on a vaudeville stage and Gertie, his cartoon dinosaur, danced.

In a recent New York performance of her *Kabuki–Menco Visual Theatre,* Rose smashed barriers between drawn and real movements, while mixing and matching—with the gleeful abandon of a sorceress stirring a pot—dances from Japan, Spain, and Bali with German Expressionism, Denishawn exoticism, science fiction, and cartoons. "Visual astonishments," marveled the New York Times about Rose's flesh-and-blood-and-film fusion celebrating metamorphosis and magical transformations.

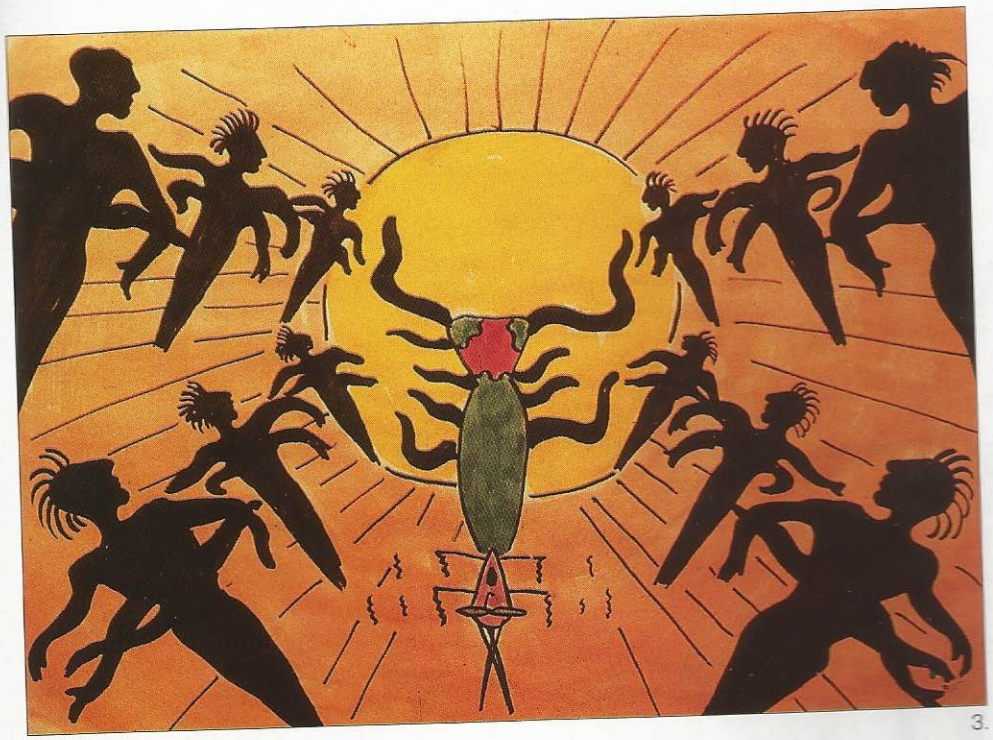
Rose boldly integrates different artistic disciplines in innovative and visually rich spectacles. In seeking "to make a live thing far more visual and a visual thing far more alive," she reveals unexpected beauty in the cross-over of two-dimensional sources, such as graphic design, film animation, and fashion, with the three-dimensional realm of live performance (modern dance and mime). She has taken her controversial belief that "film is a dead end" to its ultimate conclusion: "expanding the image out of the flat screen to become an integral physical part of color and fantasy in a sculptural domain."

In the production *Oriental Interplay*, animated hats and dresses—projected onto Rose and dancer Columbine Macher (posing as "Chinese Deco bookends")—slip, slide, and drip from one fashion statement to another. Rose's giddy designs combine amusingly with the live dancer's stoic responses (sometimes cartoon "sparks" emerge, as they do in Otto Messmer's drawings of Felix the Cat, from their heads), continuously changing and building upon the previous effect. When Rose and Macher (ultimate fashion victims) gaze downward in wonder at colorful cartoon protozoa swimming on their bodies, their triangular animated dresses tip to a perspective angle to accommodate them. Then black drapery escapes from Rose's body to pinwheel and sweep the stage into darkness, bringing to conclusion a most satisfying visual experience.

In *She*, Rose—wearing a green suit, silly goggle eyes and antennae, looking like Jiminy Cricket on acid—comes to life (or to earth) in a volley of animated electrical halos via Dr. Frankenstein's lab and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. To Balinese bells, Rose and two dancers spin cartoon webs, interact with an animated ant farm, and become multi-limbed Shiva. Rose cocoons herself and emerges as a mime Madame Butterfly, satin wings reflecting multiple abstract patterns. Attracted to the film projector's light like a moth to a flame, *She* takes the heat: Rose burns, an Art Deco Jeanne d'Arc. As multicolored cartoon flames rise, her soul flies out of the top of her head.

"Animation is a change of shape," Eric Larson, a great Disney animator, once said, explaining his art by reducing it to its transformational essence. Rose implies metamorphic changes that are the heart and soul of animation even in dances in which she does not use film projections. The piece *Kabuki-Menco*, for example, contrasts and merges textures—of movement, of attitude and sensibility, and of energy, borrowing from both the stately smooth formality of Japanese Kabuki and the hard staccato urgency of Spanish flamenco. The juxtaposition of dance

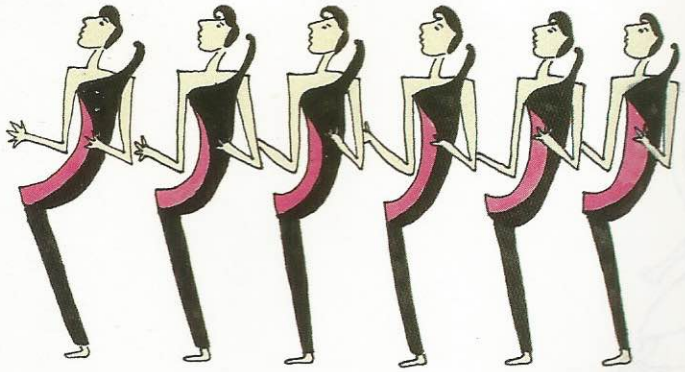
2.



3.

1. Kathy Rose performs *She*, with a little help from her friends.
2. Rose's animated film *Mirror People*, an early effort created at CalArts.
3. A moving background for the dance performance *She*.
4. Rose herself appears as a rotoscoped image controlling her cartoon world in the animated film *Pencil Booklings*, about the fears and joys of creativity.

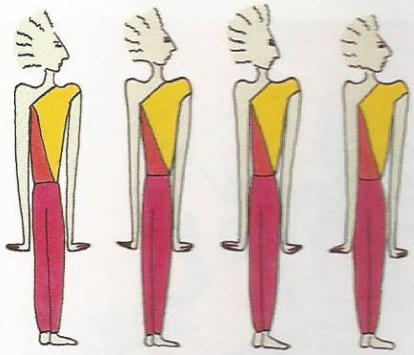
4.



5.

6.

7.



8.

9.

5-9. Animated faux-Deco designs become an animated cartoon background for live dancers in *Primitive Movers.*
10,11. Rose performing *Primitive Movers* with cartoon chorines.
12. Rose's shimmering Brancusi-like solo, *Precious Metals.*
13. Rose performing *Az-Tech.* Photographer: Michael Lengsfield.

10.

11.

forms is startling, irritating and amusing, all at the same time.

Rose's solo *Precious Metals* uses a simple costume, her body, and theatrical lighting to showcase her limitlessly inventive morphing. Dressed in a shroud of shimmery, ultra-flexible material (similar to the tricot tube Martha Graham wore in *Lamentations*), and underlit so that her twin shadows add depth and a mysterious dimension, Rose is transformed by her slightest movements. Subtle isolated head tilts, finger pokes, and pelvis swivels turn her into molten gold, a sleek silver ghost, and ultimately into the regal Brancusi sculpture which inspired the dance. *Precious Metals* is one of Rose's simplest and most effective presentations.

Rose was born in 1949, in Manhattan, into a family involved in the arts. Her father, Ben Rose, was a commercial photographer specializing in stroboscopic effects. Her mother, Miriam, was an arts administrator and organizer of Concerts for Young Audiences (a national organization devoted to bringing concerts to public-school children), and her brother, Peter, is an experimental film- and videomaker.

"I was drawing when I was three," says Rose, "making little books about mice featuring a character named Mrs. Madle, with furrowed brows, who was always angry. I felt ignored as a child, the pipsqueak who was not listened to. I wore loud colors to be noticed." Rose enjoyed playing in her father's studio near Sutton Place, where there were always live models, sets, and costumes and hats hanging on the catwalk. It was "a magical world, the world my father offered," she recalls.

When she started working in live-action film in high school, her father encouraged her. "He bought me a Bolex camera and really pushed my involvement. He understood film, and I talked with him a lot about it," she says, "but he didn't feel connected to dance, which I began doing at age 19 at the Philadelphia College of Art. I started working with Group Motion, a German company started by two students of the renowned dancer and choreographer Mary Wigman." She also took a workshop in 1970 with experimental choreographer Alwin Nikolais. "I loved it," she says, "and I related to it because of his use of media and his transformational, rather than step-step, dancing."

After three years, Rose quit Group Motion, unhappy over the company's attempts to suppress her "individualistic way of moving." Having lost interest in dance, Rose returned to drawing and film, and decided to animate her sketches. Again sparked by his daughter's interest in film, her father contributed $1000 to her first animation effort, a three-minute film of stilted figures called *Pluto People*. "I'm entirely self-taught," she says. "I had no clue in the world how you animate. I was taking storyboards and making the movements between them smaller, shooting them at six frames each. Then I gradually realized, Oh! it's moving!"

Movers, her next three-minute film, was made from happy memories of dancing. The energetically writhing figures animated on a series of sketch pads catapulted Rose into the California Institute of the Arts in 1972. She graduated two years later with a master's degree in animation. By 1978, she had independently created ten award-winning animated shorts.

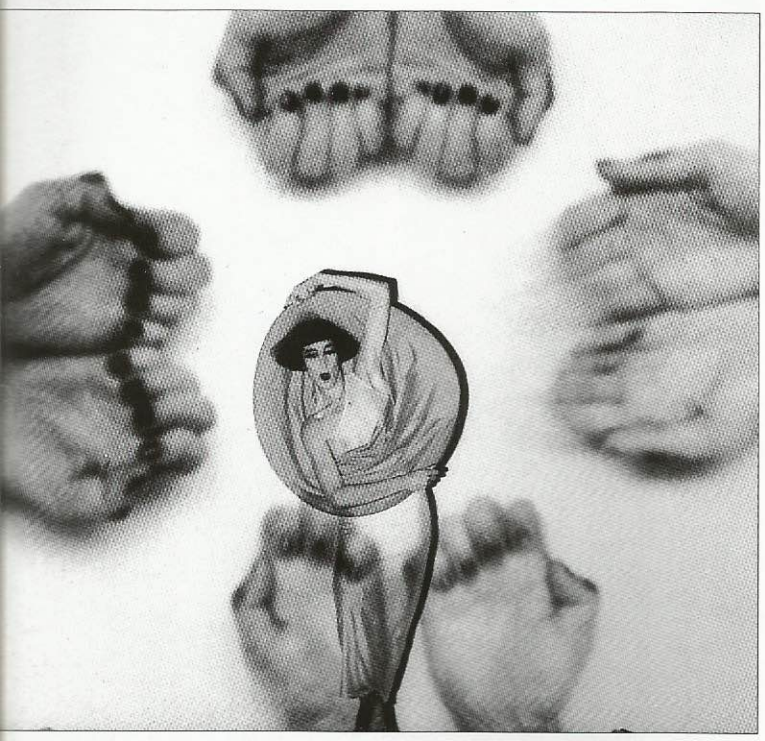
Rose's films are all highly metamorphic and self-referential. Images of her strikingly angular face and lean body constantly slip into and out of characters and colorful abstract designs. "I went as far as I could by actually appearing in *Pencil Booklings*," she says of her 1978 film about the fears and joys of creativity. She emerges as a rotoscoped image (a frame-by-frame tracing of a live-action film of herself) and as a caricature of herself interacting with tiny cartoons that she created.

Winsor McCay cartooned himself riding off on the back of his dinosaur (a poetic visualization of his taming of the creative spirit). In *Pencil Booklings*, a cartoon Rose literally bleeds her creations from her sides, a

12.

13.

14.



15.

vivid metaphor of the life-giving (and consuming) creative process.

Ben Rose died of cancer in 1980, at a time when his daughter found herself in a creative cul-de-sac. "I was wandering around, lived in Boston and Paris for a time; I didn't know what to do, had no lodestar," she recalls. "Then I saw a book of photos of Martha Graham by Barbara Morgan. They were so visually decorative, graphic, and beautiful. I loved the way Graham held up her hands in *Primitive Mysteries*. I was attracted to the image." Also important to her ideas about combining live performance and film was the 1980 Radio City Music Hall screening of Abel Gance's silent film *Napoleon* to background music supplied by a full orchestra. She remembers that it astounded her, especially the way the live music "gave the film another dimension."

During this period, Rose won an NEA media grant that she had forgotten she'd applied for. With permission to use the funding for a new project combining both animation and dance, her interest in the art she had neglected for so long was rekindled. She started from scratch and learned by doing, as she had with animation technique. "I was interested in 1920s dance, Art Deco, Bauhaus dance, Diaghilev, painters like Sonia Delaunay, Egyptian art, and Martha Graham's persona," she says. "I am nourished by other forms of dance from different countries, rather than classical ballet or even modern dance. I've studied African dance at Alvin Ailey's and flamenco with Victorio Khonjhan. I also come from an animation background, where one is free to do anything, and you work with transformation. I wanted to put all that into the new project."

Primitive Movers, completed in 1983, was the first Rose dance/animation combo, and it featured the artist and her shadow dancing with a chorus line of cartoons that resembled (surprise!) her. Within three years *Strange Ditties*, an almost abstract piece, followed, and then came the beautiful, hypnotic, erotic 50-minute *Syncopations*. In this work, Rose wears a slinky white sheath with a pink hoop attachment, and looks first like a phallic tulip that eventually "blossoms" into, well, a rose. The rose teasingly undulates like a skirt up and down her body and over her head, as film dancers, or rather their hands and feet painted with stripes, repeat patterns projected over Rose's rose. There is also a lovely section in which filmed dancers projected backwards and in slow motion appear to catch large scarves, as live dancers counter the gauzy sensual movements. It looks like sex underwater.

Rose has toured extensively in Europe and throughout the U.S. She has performed at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Maine, and in New York both at MoMA and as part of the "Serious Fun" series at Lincoln Center. In May 1994, she was a key attraction at the International Animation Festival in Cardiff, Wales. She currently lives in New York.

The technical requirements for her presentations are actually quite simple, but Rose always travels with a stage manager to insure perfect coordination of two projectors, a couple of tape recorders, and lighting cues. Her animations, she says, are scaled a foot to an inch "especially if the imagery has to be body specific. If it is more abstract or for the background, I can animate more generally on a small 6-field [the area of a drawing that the camera photographs]. If the projector lens is wide, I can come forward and the image gets smaller," she explains. "There's a bigger shadow and a lot more fun. A long lens is not so interesting. If the projection comes from an angle, that's a whole new set of problems."

Only two dance pieces in Rose's current production—*Oriental Inter-*

Continued on page 111

John Canemaker designed and directed animation for Break the Silence—Kids Against Child Abuse. *He is the author of four books on animation history, and heads the animation program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.*

16.

17.

18.

14,16,17. A topsy-turvy chorus in *Syncopations*.
15. Rose whirls in the middle of a *Syncopations* projection. Photographer: Wolfgang Kirchnov.
18. A film-like contact sheet reveals a variety of colorful patterning during a live Rose show. Photographer: Barbro Homeyer.

Cross Over Art

Continued from page 95

play and Syncopations—use soundtracks that are integrated on the films. The rest of the show uses music played on separate tape recorders that are loosely synched to visual and sound cues. "I animate generally, sometimes using a drum beat for timing. Things always appear to fall into sync sooner or later," she notes. "I work out all the timings for the music and show rough concepts to the composer. The music is usually done before the animation is completed."

She has her critics: Dance purists dislike her blurring the lines between the arts, and some reviewers have complained that her choreography is skin-deep and lacks emotional complexity. "I disagree," says Rose. "Painters like Kandinsky are not required to have a narrative or literary work. I read a lot, but unlike Graham, I don't have a literary connection. I'm a visual artist. *Syncopation* really is visual art. Why judge my work on the basis of expecting an emotional output that you wouldn't require of sculpture or painting? I'm taking animated film and putting it into theatricality, putting it on a stage and making things move. It's like watching an abstract painting at MoMA come alive."

"As for the dance world," she continues, "it's always a problem because they figure if you're using a body, you need to tell a story that works with reality. I don't work with reality! It's almost impossible to categorize me, and it's been a major problem with finding venues. I get a lot of flack for having interesting costumes. So what? Fashion is a very creative form. I'm forced to break down a lot of barriers because of the nature of my work. The problem is that people look at something that is a visual wonderment and refuse to allow themselves to go with it because they're expecting a drama—when drama is for straight theater or literature."

The only emotion Rose is interested in is "the unearthly kind that brings chills up and down your spine." She is fascinated by death. "The black fire section of *She* is related to my mother's death in 1992," says Rose. "I was with her when she died of cancer. That section is very much related to the moment of death in which you see someone who is breathing with more and more space in between the breath, and then—it's all space. The end of *She* is about that very moving and terrifying and yet wonderful moment of death, which I watched."

Kleopat'ra, a work in progress, will further explore what Rose calls "a special kind of emotion." In the last third of the dance, Rose as Kleopat'ra will move through a pyramid that "represents her having died, speaking to the remaining dancers from beyond. I find this supernatural emotion thrilling and chilling. I don't know why."

In May 1994, a Rose performance in New York helped advertisers launch Catalyst, a new men's cologne. She has ambitions to move into more commercial arenas, to perform in and/or choreograph music videos, to work with fashion designers in staging their collections, and to appeal to a more widespread popular audience by "integrating dancers into pageants, like the Olympics, like De Mille films. I'm a spectacle producer in many ways," she asserts. "I come from an animation background. Animators are free to do anything they want."