

## AL HANSEN (1927-1995)

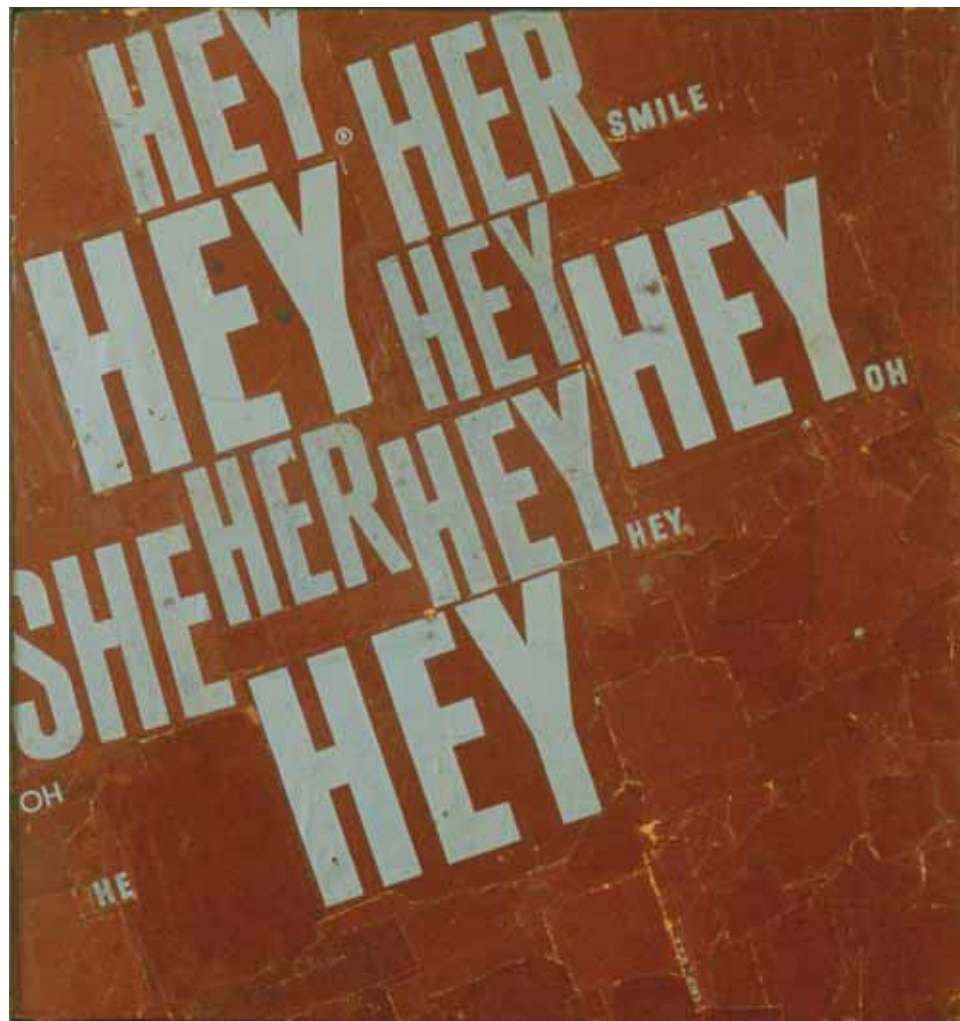
"Collage is so much like cooking!" Al Hansen declares in his *Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art*. In fact, as the 1965 book – and the rest of Hansen's life – reveals, collage was for Hansen so much like life. Taking the twentieth century's "collage aesthetic" not simply as a recipe for art but for life, Hansen turned his life into an *act* of art. Not a work of art (a late-19th century gesture), but an act of art, a neo-Bohemian process by which living one's life and producing one's artwork in thorough but witting integration served the art, the artist, and the audience at once, and made art and life more entertaining than entertainment per se. Through art, Hansen made life a sport in which everyone was, or at least could be, on the same team.

Given his dedication to such, er, discrete integration of art and life, Hansen was a lifelong devotee of the Happening. ("My goal now is to involve the ideas of all my favorite people – Artaud and John Cage and Ray Johnson – in a total theater project in which things which weren't possible before will be done.") And given his gift for graphic design, with which he supported his early art-life, the finely-wrought artwork was no less crucial a component of Hansen's Happening-life, and the Happening-life he prescribed for others, than were the extravagant gestures, messy environments, and non sequitur occurrences that comprised his oeuvre.

Hansen had style as a person and had a style as an artist, and there was a perfect confluence between the two. (In this respect, mirroring his friends Ray Johnson and Andy Warhol, the skirt-chasing Hansen was a metrosexual *avant la lettre*.) His collages didn't simply inhale the detritus of the urban street, they reconfigured it into lucid images and declarations. Whether turning Hershey bar wrappers into concrete poems or cigarette butts into erotic graffiti, Hansen gave the stuff on the ground the impact and coherence of the billboards in the air. You could call him a pocket Pop artist, recycling the discards of modern life in postwar New York the way Kurt Schwitters – his true spiritual grandfather – recycled the discards of inter-war Germany into the modern styles (expressionism, geometricism, dada) of his day.

Hansen's ubiquity was legendary. A veritable Zelig of the avant garde, he seemed to be everywhere at once, whether hanging at Warhol's Factory or doing odd jobs for Leo Castelli, popping up at European art fairs or at demonstrations with John and Yoko in New York or London, organizing proto-Fluxus performances in Greenwich Village jazz joints or punk bands in Los Angeles storefronts. (Yes, he helped his grandson Beck get his start, and gave him the model for his own famously eclectic style.) Hansen practiced his aesthetics of everything everywhere. "My milieu now is my needs," he wrote in his *Primer*, "and my fun, and my wants, and the things that seem to indicate needing to be done next." Still, as the works here demonstrate, Hansen's aesthetics embraced graphic order no less than conceptual and textural exuberance. If Hansen is a shooting star in this Constellation, he reminds us that even the most spectacular of comets – as, indeed, the entire universe – returns at regular intervals. His orbit was eccentric – just eccentric enough to cross all the others, and just regular enough to find and create new audiences. There was always method to Hansen's mania, a way of staying in the present by being *of*, not just *in*, the vortex. Living was happening.

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*No One Had Told Them There Was a Large Nudist Colony  
on the Other Side of the Island, 1967*  
Hershey wrappers on panel  
8½ x 8¼ inches  
Private collection