

FRIDAY, JULY 8, 1994 • 40 CENTS

## Meet My Pal, Mike

W. David Hancock created 'The Convention of Cartography,' which was performed in the basement of his Iowa City home for more than two years. The show, part of a trilogy by the playwright, plays through July 31 at the Alley Cat Gallery in Manhattan. Afterward, it moves to Norwich and Coventry, England.



**THE CONVENTION OF CARTOGRAPHY.** A production of the Foundry Theater, presented by W. David Hancock. Alley Cat Gallery, 117 1/2 W. 17th St., Manhattan, reservations required, 642-8141, through July 31.

By Jan Stuart  
STAFF WRITER

**Y**OU HAVE BEEN invited to dinner at the home of an artist you always suspected of being a little, oh, driven. Over cocktails, he strikes up an anecdote about an eccentric friend, a dead poet / artist, and before you know it he's passing around personal snapshots and originals of the guy's poems and objets d'art. And by the way, he says as the chicken is burning in the oven, I also just happen to have this video . . .

This, minus the martinis and the burned chicken, is "The Convention of Cartography," one of the most arresting pieces of show-and-tell I've seen since a second-grade schoolmate

brought her father's hacksaw to class. Our host is W. David Hancock, an unassuming artist from Iowa City who toils as a bank teller by day and devotes his off hours, with his wife, to curating the life and work of his late friend Mike.

The bearded subject, whom we come to know through a series of videotaped interviews made by Hancock months before Mike's death, is an American original: sly, ornery, mercurial, enamored of the lonesome road and the value of found objects. His life's labor (which he would leave in bus stops and highway underpasses for strangers to find) is screwy observational poetry about his travels through America as well as portable artworks made from cigar boxes, buttons, S & H Green Stamps and all the forlorn unwanted that make a home in your bottom bureau drawer.

In an intimate, home-like setting that only permits 20 audience members, Hancock relates the often difficult

## 'Cartography'

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alliance that began years back when he ran away from home to an aunt in Boise, Idaho. Hancock's descriptions of Mike and Mike's elusive wife, Ida, are self-effacing to a fault; he wants to leave the spotlight to Mike, who emerges in the interviews as unpredictable, not always likable and, in the case of one rather shocking revelation, potentially dangerous.

Once the video portion is over, Mr. and Mrs. Hancock take us into an adjoining room where they have set up a traveling museum containing the wealth of Mike's collected works, a treasure trove of flotsam and jetsam from old Esso maps to horseshoe-crab shells. The Hancocks hover, encouraging us to touch the motley goods and answering questions when they are not arguing over some biographical detail.

We are charmed as much by the wonderment and naïveté of the couple's monomania as we are by the dippiness of the collection. The Hancocks' devotional tone, combined with Mike's oddly sentimental agenda to reach out and touch strangers, is infectious; before long we find ourselves digging into our pockets to find some personal keepsake to add to the Mike memorabilia. I donated a color photo of my baby twin niece and nephew.

Much of what we glean about the mysterious Mike is at the discretion of his self-styled curator, who occasionally betrays a willful denial about facets of Mike's sensibility. Like his Jewishness, for example. Confounded by an oblique interview foray in which Mike mentions the trains to the camps, Hancock abruptly fast-forwards the videotape, saying, "I've been meaning to cut that out." Later, when I found an old passport of a Polish immigrant named Lipman in a drawer and asked Hancock whether there was any family connection, he responded, "He may have just found it somewhere. Some people think Mike is Jewish, but I don't know."

Hancock's selective annotation is a pungent reminder that any act of history-keeping is, by its subjective nature, tainted by the historian. At the same time, his guileless dedication to an oeuvre that some might label the Emperor's New Clothes prompts us to re-examine our conceptions of art. "The Convention of Cartography," in varying parts seminar, theater, traveling museum and love-in, is a tantalizing new wrinkle in the art of participation. ■

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