

The Drama Review

## Theatre Reports



### Urban Man on Exhibit in the London Zoo

*by Theodore Shank*

Among the animals exhibited at the London Zoo in Regents Park during a weekend in July 1985 was Urban Man. The specimen's name is Alberto Vidal, a Catalan from Spain. Vidal had already been on view in the zoos of other European and American cities, and this time he was being exhibited as part of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT).

From Friday night to Sunday evening, he lived in an open-air enclosure resembling those of other animals. There he was surrounded by the typical businessman accoutrement—desk, telephone, easy chair, television, dining table, wash basin and so forth. Dressed in a dark business suit, Vidal engaged in behavior typical of an urban businessman—reading a newspaper, running to catch a taxi, eating, making telephone calls, writing letters, exercising and so forth. The crowds for Urban Man were several times larger than those for any of the other animals. On a Sunday afternoon, he attracted at least 200 spectators at one time.

Urban Man acts as the spirit takes him, much as other animals do. There is no scenario, no attempt to structure the activities as they might be in the typical businessman's day. Vidal is opposed to such a structure because it would make the performance an illustrative pantomime, while he is interested in behavior. The only planned events are three meals brought to



**Photo 1—Urban Man (Alberto Vidal) relaxes in his “living room” under the gaze of curious spectators.**

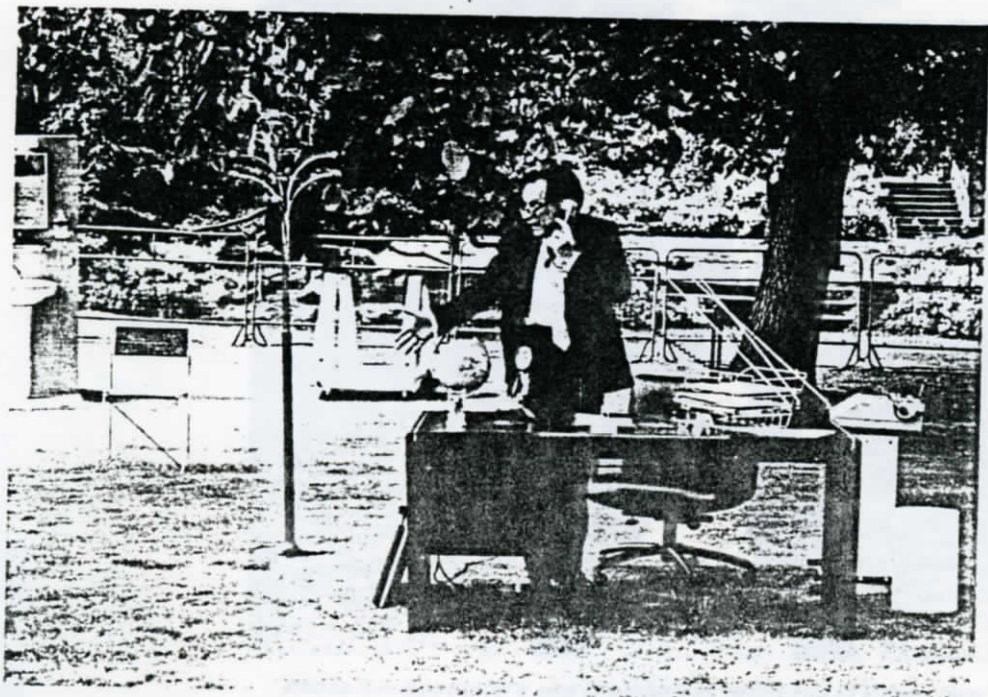
him on a plastic tray by a zoo attendant. He says that he does not control what he will do, only how he will do it. Everything is done in the character of Urban Man. To an important extent, the spectators control the direction of the performance through their reactions, to which Vidal responds.

Vidal's behavior is shaped by his observations of businessmen and animals. When he visited London in advance of his scheduled zoo appearance, he stayed at a Holiday Inn, a typical businessman's hotel. There he dressed as a businessman, observed the clientele and could feel what it is like living as a businessman. Such hotels, he says, are universal. They are everywhere there are businessmen, and they are much the same in every country. He also believes that Urban Man is universal. In every country, they dress and behave much the same.

Not only does he observe animals in the zoos where he performs, but he lives with farm animals at his home in a small Pyrenees village. When he is performing, he spends his nights sleeping in the zoo. There are no spectators, so he is not performing; nevertheless, it helps him to feel like an animal in a zoo.

His behavior in performance suggests that of an Urban Man with the brain of an animal. He says that he likes to think of the brain extending throughout the body—the coherent brain and body, the “thinking body.” He does not want to separate thinking from behaving, which acting sometimes does. He says he tries to *be* rather than to *represent*.

Vidal thinks of himself as a specimen being exhibited by the zoo authorities. They place objects in his enclosure that will awaken his memory and activate him. Like other animals, he at times simply stands motionless. Then he suddenly realizes, for example, that he is standing by a desk. This awakens in him his conditioning with respect to desks. He knows the thing to do—sit down and write a letter or make a phone call. His is a singular and specific focus—not a generalized taking in of his surroundings. Suddenly, like other zoo animals, he might run to the edge of his enclosure, turn and run back the other way. There is both the suggestion of animal behavior and that of a businessman running to catch a taxi.



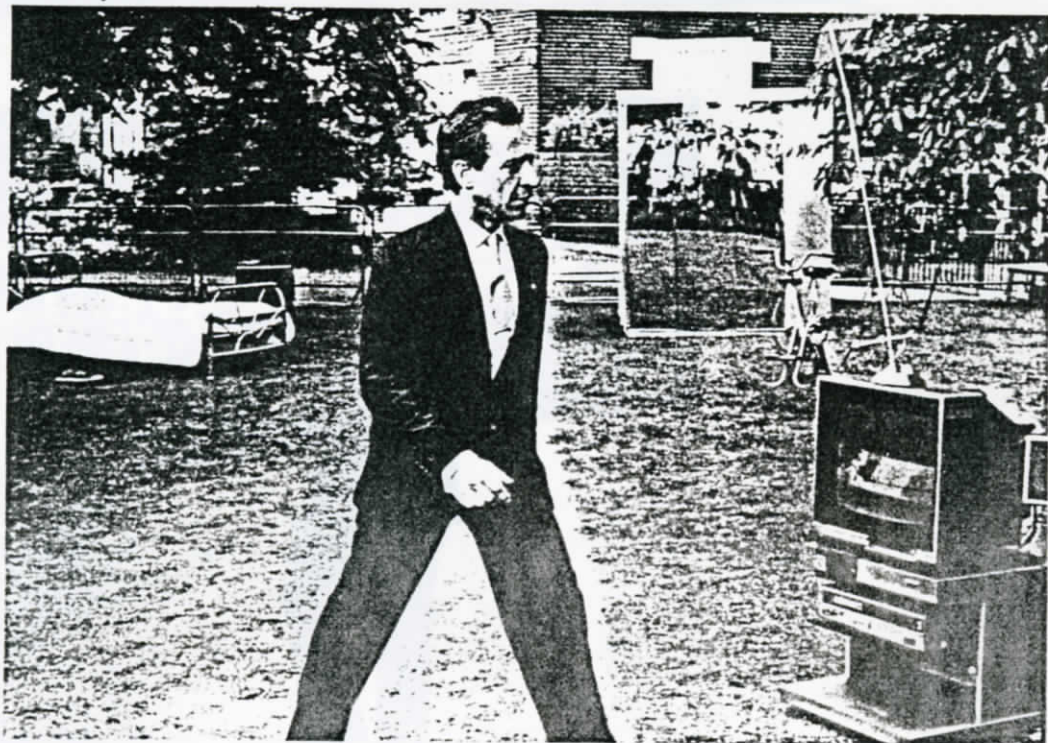
**Photo 2—After staying at a Holiday Inn in London, Vidal created a typically harried modern businessman.**

The spectators tend to react to Urban Man as if he were another animal in the zoo—a very special one. They observe his behavior in a focused way that rarely would happen on the street or in an office. They call to him, try to get his attention, attempt to make him react. Like other animals, he might merely turn and stare at the caller. He does not speak to the spectators, even though they speak to him. Instead he focuses upon them, trying "to reply with the energy of an answer." When a spectator offers him food, he takes it and retreats to his dining table, where he tastes it and decides whether to eat it or throw it in his garbage can. When someone offers him a card, he accepts it and gives his in return.

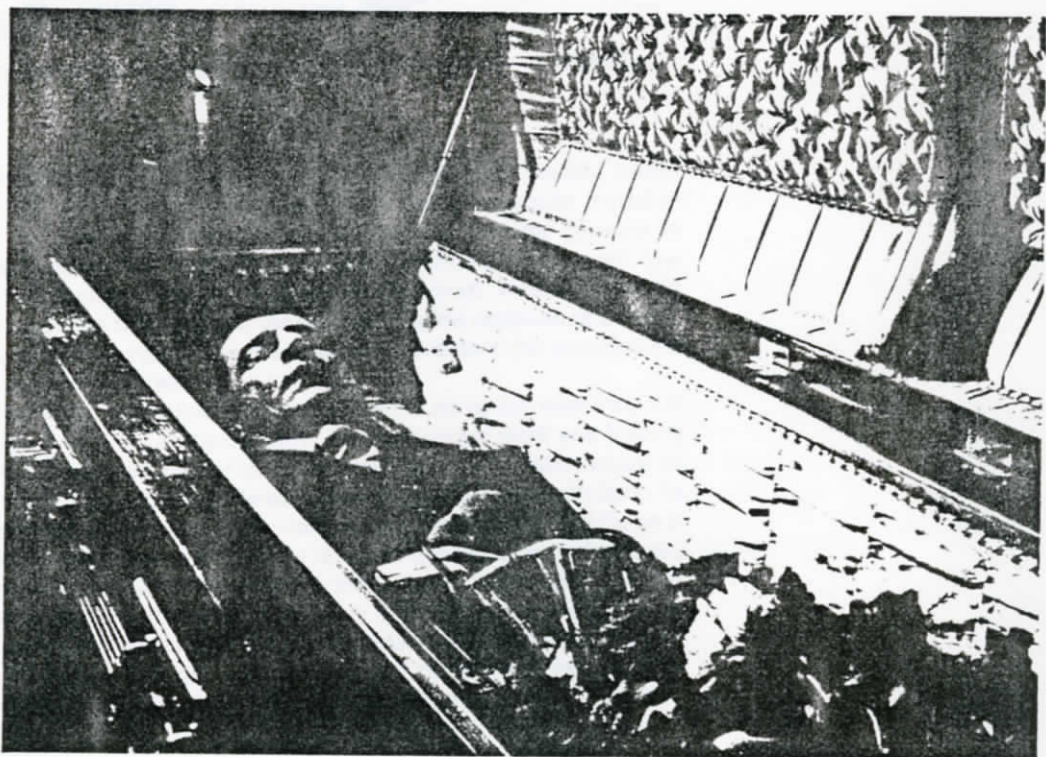
Parents and children stand looking at the Urban Man as they have been doing at the enclosures of other animals, and they relate to him in much the same way. One little boy pointed at Vidal sitting in his easy chair and shouted with excitement, "Look, he's sitting down." Another child was asked by her mother, "Do you know what that is?" The little girl, thrilled with having discovered a new animal, said, "No, Mommy, what is it?"

Vidal's initial idea for Urban Man was to have the spectators observe his actual life. They would come to his house in the morning and would follow him out into the street as he went about his business. This did not seem practical, however, because he lives in a rather remote village. The first performance was in a gallery as part of an art festival in 1983 at Sitges near Barcelona. On that occasion he was on display for 42 hours. Urban Man was first exhibited in a zoo in Barcelona, and it was then that he discovered that the spectators observed him as if he were an animal. As a result, he began behaving more like an animal.

He considers Urban Man the synthesis of many years of studying animal and human behavior and presenting the results in performance. As early as 1969 he did a work on movement, including the movement of a leopard. In 1974, *The Ritual* presented the rituals of daily life in 24 hours. In 1982, he organized his own funeral, conducted by professional undertakers with coffin, keening women, obituaries, a hearse and a procession of mourners. Vidal, of course, was the corpse. After the first performance of Urban Man, he presented a museum-like exhibit, *Cosmogony of Urban Man*, in which he is laid out immobile like an Egyptian



*Photo 3—Spectators see themselves reflected in Urban Man's dressing mirror.*



*Photo 4—In 1982 Vidal staged his own funeral.*



*Photo 5—“Although he refers to himself as a performance artist, Vidal’s objective is to be a popular entertainer.”*

mummy surrounded by his possessions—a package of cigarettes, lighter, eye glasses, calculator and mailbox. The idea had been suggested to him when he saw an Egyptian exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Kinesis* presented two life-sized photos of Vidal dressed as Urban Man placed side-by-side with the live Vidal sitting in between them in a similar pose. The only difference between the two photos is that one of the arms has moved. Vidal brings to life the movement of the arm between the two positions. As he says, it is the opposite of cinema, which puts together a series of still pictures to give the illusion of movement. He provides the real movement connecting two such pictures.

Vidal is concerned that potential spectators who read about the exhibition may think it is merely a gimmick that anyone could do. On the contrary, there is serious work and training behind it. When he was 19, Vidal attended the Le Coq school in Paris for two years, where he studied commedia dell’arte, masks and clowning. He subsequently collaborated with Dario Fo and was a member of his company for two and a half years. He has also researched Butoh in Japan, dance in Bali and flamenco in Spain. Although he refers to himself as a performance artist, Vidal’s objective is to be a popular entertainer. He thinks some avant-garde performance is too narrowly focused. He intends that his work be of broad interest, offering many levels of perception—from a popular immediate view to a deeper, more profound understanding. He estimates that during a two-day zoo stint, 10,000 people see him. Art, he believes, should be able to communicate to a broad range of spectators.